

# THE AFGHAN QUESTION

FROM 1841 TO 1878

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BY THE DUKE OF ARGYLL



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## PREFACE.

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I REPUBLISH in a separate form those Chapters of my recent work on the History of the Eastern Question which refer to the conduct of the Government towards the late Ameer of Afghanistan.

In doing so, I had been prepared to alter any part of the narrative which might be shown to be incorrect, and to retract or to modify accordingly any of the charges against the Ministry and its Agents in India, which, if that narrative be accurate, are certainly not over-stated. But, although I have seen many hostile observations, I have not seen any attempt at a reply. It has not been denied that we have shuffled with our obligations under the Treaty of 1857. It has not been denied that the Viceroy, under instructions from home, prepared a new Treaty with the Ameer, which was built up of "tricky saving clauses." It has not been denied that the same high functionary gave one account of the effect

of this Treaty when speaking of it to the Ameer, and a directly opposite account when speaking of it to the Government at home. It has not been denied that the Viceroy dictated the discreditable communication addressed to the late Noor Mohammed, by Captain Grey. It is not denied that in the final letter to Shere Ali, for which the Cabinet is responsible, we made at least two statements, in respect to our own motives and conduct, which were disingenuous, and at least two accusations, as regards the conduct and language of the Ameer, which were absolutely false. It seems to be considered by those who support the policy of the Government, that it is a matter of no consequence whether these things are true or not, provided we have gained some new security against our own recurring fits of nervous panic on the subject of the advances of Russia.

It is more than probable, however, that a course of action which has been characterised by such conduct, will turn out to be as injurious as it has been immoral. We have yet to see the final results of the Afghan war. We have indeed hunted our victim, Shere Ali, to the death. We have overrun, with the most perfect ease, a great

portion of his country. But our "scientific frontier" is not yet defined. The wild tribes of Afghanistan have not been yet reconciled to our dominion. The cost and waste of our operations are enormous. We are throwing that cost and waste on the heavily burdened shoulders of the people of India. The finances of our Eastern Empire are in a condition raising the most serious anxieties for the future. We have diverted to the purposes of a foreign war, which was the direct consequence of our policy in Europe, taxation which we had promised to devote to insurance against the effects of famine. So long as we are under the necessity of holding a country very poor, very wild, and very far from the base of our operations, there is no possibility of effecting those economies, or those wiser outlays, which are demanded by the most vital interests of the people of India. The Minister of Finance has been obliged to confess that the whole subject of his great charge has been thrown into confusion, and that the Government cannot now tell, even approximately, what income will be required to meet the necessities of the State.

The catastrophe in Zululand has diverted for a time the public mind from every other anxiety.

That catastrophe has indeed been brought about by acts of almost unparalleled rashness. But at least in the policy of the High Commissioner towards Chetwayo, there is nothing worse than rashness to be ashamed of. Sir Bartle Frere is probably right in holding that sooner or later the armed and disciplined savagery of the Zulus would have had to be met and broken. He undertook the task without authority, and with means almost ridiculously inadequate. But he has had high aims in view. He has violated no Treaties. He has not repudiated any solemn pledges. He has not pretended that, in his ultimatum to Chetwayo, he was offering to that Chief exactly what he himself had long desired. Sir Bartle Frere has been high-handed, and perhaps wrong-headed. But he has been so in the interests of civilisation, and of a distant future. He has been open and straightforward in all his dealings, and has done nothing to compromise the honour of the Crown, or the fair name and fame of England. The Government, indeed, has had a technical right to repudiate his action. But they did not arrest that action when they had time to do so, and we may be sure there would have been no such repudiation had his action been successful.

When the scare of Isandlana has passed away, we shall awake once more to the far more serious problems involved in our new policy on the Frontiers of India, and to the embarrassments which must be entailed upon us by a long course of conduct devoid of conscience and of principle alike in Europe and in Asia.

ARGYLL.

CANNES, *April*, 1879.

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## ERRATA.

Page 49, line 8 from bottom, *delete* "for many years."

„ 152, „ 12, *delete* "Secretary to the Government of the  
Punjab."

„ 212, „ 14 from bottom, *for* "On or about the same day,  
the 22nd of October," *read* "About a month  
later."

## APPENDIX.

(Page 52.)

*Extract from the Preface to "The Eastern Question."*

"LOOKING at the manner in which witnesses adverse to the Government have been treated when they have produced evidence of the truth, I think it possible that some objection may be taken to the use I have made in the following pages of Lord Mayo's letters to me when I was Secretary of State. I do not myself feel that any explanation on this matter is required, since the passages I have quoted are all of an essentially public character. But there are some points connected with this subject to which I am very glad to have an opportunity of directing public attention.

"In the Afghan branch of the Eastern Question it has been deemed important by the Government to make out, if they could, that Shere Ali had at one time been perfectly willing, if, indeed, he was not positively eager, to receive British officers as Political Agents or Residents in his Kingdom. This question has not really the importance which the Government have attached to it,—because it was their duty to think mainly, not of what that unfortunate Prince may or may not have been willing to do at a former time under unknown circumstances and conditions,—but of what he had a right to object to under the actual engagements made

with him by the representatives of the Crown in India. Nevertheless, the Government have shown a very great anxiety to prove that the Ameer had been willing to admit British officers as Residents in his Kingdom ; and this is so far well—inasmuch as it shows some consciousness that they had no right to force the measure upon him if he were not willing. In the whole of their dealings with Afghanistan, this is the only homage they have paid to virtue. But their method of proceeding has been singular. The only two witnesses of any value on whose evidence they have relied, have been Colonel Burne, who was Lord Mayo's Private Secretary, and Captain Grey, who was Persian Interpreter at the Umballa Conferences in 1869. Colonel Burne's evidence is given in the 'Afghan Correspondence' (I. 1878, No. 36, Enclosure 5, page 174). Of Colonel Burne's perfect good faith there can be no shadow of a doubt. But several circumstances are to be observed in respect to his testimony. In the first place, he is now at the head of the Foreign Department of the India Office, and concerned in all the policy towards Shere Ali which has led to the Afghan war. In the second place, he writes nine years after the events of which he speaks, and wholly, so far as appears, from personal recollection. In the third place, he speaks with extraordinary confidence, considering that other officers of the Government who were present at all the Conferences positively deny the accuracy of his impressions. In the fourth place, a portion of what he says in respect of Lord Mayo's opinions, appears to me to be distinctly at variance with the evidence of Lord Mayo's own letters to myself. In the fifth and last place, it is to be observed that the whole of his

evidence is founded on the knowledge he acquired as Private Secretary of Lord Mayo, 'in his full confidence, and carrying in his mind that Viceroy's private conversations.

"Now I am far from saying or implying that the Government had no right to use the information derivable from this source. But I do say that in a matter of the highest importance, involving the honour of the Crown, and the peace of India, they were bound to take every means in their power to test and to verify the personal recollections of Colonel Burne. To use evidence of this kind as a means of ascertaining truth, is one thing :—to use it as a means of justifying foregone conclusions, is a very different thing. The two methods of handling such evidence are very distinct. We know, on the evidence of Mr. Seton Karr, who was Foreign Secretary to the Government of India at the Umballa Conferences, who was present at them all, and who must have been in constant personal communication both with Lord Mayo and all other principal persons there, that his evidence was never asked by the Government, and that this evidence, if it had been asked for, would have been given against that of Colonel Burne. I venture to add, that the Government, knowing that I was Secretary of State during the whole of Lord Mayo's Viceroyalty, and in possession of all his letters, might have applied to me for access to them. The whole of them, without reserve, would have been at the disposal of the Government. But if the Government were at liberty to use, and to found important action upon, the private information of Lord Mayo's Private Secretary, speaking of Lord Mayo's private conversations, much more must I be at liberty to correct that evidence by

Lord Mayo's own written testimony, conveyed in the most authentic of all forms—letters written at the time.

“As regards the purport and the value of Captain Grey's evidence, I have analysed it at the proper place, in the following work. But there is one circumstance in connexion with that evidence which is another illustration of the rash and inconsiderate use which the Government has been making of testimony of this kind. Captain Grey, from his position of Persian Interpreter at Umballa, was necessarily in frequent and confidential communication with Noor Mohammed Khan, the favourite Minister and friend of Shere Ali. Now Noor Mohammed being evidently a very able man, and comparatively well acquainted with Europeans, was naturally much considered by all officers of the Indian Government as the best source of information on the policy of the Afghan State, and on the personal feelings and desires of his master. In the course of confidential conversations, wholly private and unofficial, such a Minister is induced to say many things which he would only say in perfect reliance that they would be considered as confidential in the strictest sense of that word. In fact, Noor Mohammed did frequently give information to our Officers and Agents, which it would have been the highest breach of confidence on their part to repeat in such a manner as to render it possible that the sayings of his Minister should get round to the Ameer. Yet this is the very breach of confidence which, in heated pursuit of their object, the Government appear to have committed in regard to the evidence of Captain Grey. At the Peshawur Conference, shortly before his death, among the other just complaints which Noor Mohammed had to make against the conduct of

Lord Lytton and of his Government, this was one—that the letter from Captain Grey of October 13th, 1876, quoting Noor Mohammed as having been willing to advise or consent to the reception of British officers as Residents in Afghanistan, had been sent to him under circumstances which brought it before the Cabul Durbar. ‘It was laid before the Durbar,’ said Noor Mohammed to his friend, Dr. Bellew, on the 28th of January, 1877, ‘and I was at once pointed out as the encourager of the Government in this design. It was as much as an order for my death.’\* Of the unjustifiable character of this letter, in other respects, I have spoken in the text. I refer here only to the breach of confidence involved in its quotations of the most private conversations of the Minister of the Ameer.

“There was another circumstance connected with the Afghan question which has, in my opinion, imposed it upon me absolutely as a public duty, that I should explain Lord Mayo’s engagements at Umballa, as he explained them to me. That circumstance is that one of the most serious misrepresentations made on behalf of the Government on this subject has been founded on a single passage in one of his private letters to me, which Lord Mayo has himself quoted in a public Despatch. The case is rather a curious one, and deserves special notice.

“It will be seen that the first public Despatch of April 3rd, 1869,† in which Lord Mayo reported the proceedings at Umballa, is a very meagre one. The more detailed despatch which followed on the 1st of

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\* Afghan Corresp., I., 1878, No. 36, Enclos. 34, p. 195.

† Ibid., No. 17, p. 88.

July,\* was drawn forth from him by my Despatch of the 14th of May,† in which I had stated the objections which the Cabinet felt to one passage in his letter to the Ameer. In that second Despatch, a much fuller account is given. But one of the principal paragraphs (No. 22),‡ namely, that in which the Viceroy summed up the result of his negotiations, expressly refers to, and quotes the summing-up with which he had in the meantime supplied me in a private letter.

“In that private letter Lord Mayo had classified the main points of the final arrangement on the principle of giving one list of the proposals which had been decided in the negative, and another list of the proposals which had been decided in the affirmative. It is, of course, an incident of all classifications of this kind—or, indeed, of any kind—that they place together things which are congruous only in some one or two particulars, and may be quite incongruous in every other. This inconvenience was somewhat increased, in the present case, by the heading or title which he attached to the two lists. The proposals which had been negatived were called ‘What the Ameer is not to have.’ The proposals which had been affirmed were called ‘What the Ameer is to have.’

“It was inevitable that on this principle of classification Lord Mayo should include in the same list, things which the Ameer was “not to have” as a boon, and things which he was “not to have” as a burden. The benefits which he had hoped for, but which had been refused him, and the demands on our side from which he was to be relieved—all came naturally and

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\* *Ibid.*, No. 19, p. 92.

† *Ibid.*, No. 18, p. 91.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

necessarily under the same category. In this way, quite naturally and quite consistently, Lord Mayo included in the things the Ameer was 'not to have,' all of the following miscellaneous items: (1) no Treaty, (2) no fixed subsidy, (3) no European troops, officers, or Residents, (4) no domestic pledges. Some of these are things which he wanted to get; others, are things which he particularly wanted to avoid. He wanted to have an unconditional Treaty, offensive and defensive. He wanted to have a fixed subsidy. He wanted to have a dynastic guarantee. He would have liked sometimes to get the loan of English officers to drill his troops, or to construct his forts—provided they retired the moment they had done this work for him. On the other hand, officers 'resident' in his country as Political Agents of the British Government were his abhorrence. Yet all these things are classified by Lord Mayo, quite correctly, as equally belonging to the list of proposals which had been considered, or thought of, and had been decided in the negative.

"Advantage has been taken of this by some supporters of the Government, and apparently by the Under-Secretary of State for India, in the late debates of the House of Commons, to argue that all the items in this list were equally things which the Ameer wanted 'to have:' thus representing Shere Ali as consumed by a desire to have British officers as Residents in his cities. This is by no means an unnatural mistake for any one to make who had no independent knowledge of the subject, and who derived all he knew of it from reading by itself the particular paragraph of Lord Mayo's Despatch to which I have referred. But it seems to me to be a mistake wholly inexcusable on



the part of any official of the Indian Department, because not even the personal recollections of Colonel Burne and of Captain Grey go the length of representing the Ameer as desirous of having British officers resident as Political Agents in his cities. The utmost length to which their evidence goes, even if it were wholly uncontradicted, is that Shere Ali would have submitted to the residence of British officers in certain cities, as the price of benefits which he could not otherwise secure.

“But unjustified as this contention is, even on the unsupported testimony of these two officers, and unjustified also even on the 22nd paragraph of Lord Mayo’s Despatch of July 1st, it is at once refuted by Lord Mayo’s letter to me, quoted in the text, of the 3rd of June, 1869. That letter was expressly written to warn me against misapprehensions prevalent on the subject of his engagements with the Ameer. In this letter there was no possibility of mistake. The list he gives is a list of the ‘pledges given by him’ to the Ameer. The first pledge was that of non-interference in his affairs. The second pledge was that ‘we would support his independence.’ The third pledge was ‘that we would not force European officers, or Residents, upon him, against his wish.’

“This is the pledge, given on the honour of the Crown, which has been violated by the present Government. They have attempted to force Resident Officers upon the Ameer against his will, by threats of our displeasure, and by threats—still more discreditable—that if he did not comply, we should hold ourselves free from all the verbal and written engagements of Lord Lawrence, of Lord Mayo, and of Lord Northbrook.

“ It had been my intention to close this work with the Treaty of Berlin. A purely Indian War would not naturally have fallen within its scope. But the Afghan War of 1878 was not an Indian War in its origin. The cost and the burden of it are to be thrown on the people of India, although that cost is the price of a divided Bulgaria, and of a ‘real military frontier’ for a phantom Turkey. It is a mere sequel of the policy of the Government on the Turkish Question in Europe and in Asia. I have, therefore, been compelled to deal with it. In doing so, I have been compelled to deal with transactions which, as it seems to me, can only be read with a sense of humiliation by every man who values the honour of his country. If this be so, no ‘overwhelming majorities’ in Parliament, and no successful campaigns against half-barbarous tribes, can compensate the country for the guilt into which it has been led, or protect the Government from the censure of posterity.

“ ARGYLL.

“ CANNES, *January*, 1879.”

BY THE DUKE OF ARGYLL.

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