

# From Kabul to Kandahar 1833-1933 (Part One)

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## ● Introduction

This exhibition of photographs and maps of Afghanistan are a selection of a more extensive collection at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

Most of the photographs shown are from four photographic albums held by the Society. The photographers were members of the British army who travelled to the area from the 1830s onwards. The images reveal the strategic importance of this area by recording cities, architecture and peoples. They also reveal the interactions between the British colonial officers, Afghan royalty, diplomats and local officials.

This exhibition has been created in partnership with the Afghan Association of London (Harrow) and its supplementary school, and Brondesbury College for Boys (Brent) in 2006. Many of the photographs have been specifically selected by members of these communities. The photographs have been grouped in themes with contemporary comments provided by community members (shown in bold text) alongside historic commentary taken from journals by British officials and travellers of the 19th and early 20th centuries.



Panorama taken from Karez Hill embracing Chilzina and the Murcha Pass,  
by B Simpson, 1881

*“Whenever I think of Afghanistan, as I do quite often, my mind conjures up before me a picture of a country as I saw it last autumn... a broad stretch of land rises in a gentle slope to meet the hills. Overhead the sky is painted in gorgeous colours by the approaching sunset. In the calm of twilight, the valley, the trees, the distant villages and mountains floating in a sea of hazy mist present a scene of dream-like beauty... the hush of the evening is broken by the call to prayer.”* Dr Muhammad Iqbal, *Afghanistan - A Brief Survey*, 1933

## ● Geography and Politics

The history of Afghanistan is a long and complex one. It has been, and continues to be, a centre of political, social and economic struggles and is often called *char-su*, the 'crossroads of Asia'; a place where different civilizations have met and forged new cultures. Influences can be traced from Persia to the west, Central Asia to the north and India to the southeast.

Three distinct historical periods have made their mark on Afghanistan. The Ancient Period is characterized by the Kushan dynasty, an empire that stretched from Tajikistan to Northern India between the 1st and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. The Medieval Period brought with it the Islamic dynasty, and from 962 to 1187 AD the Ghaznavids established a capital at Ghazni. The third, Modern Period started with the unification of ethnic groups and regions in Afghanistan by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747. His chosen capital was Kandahar.

Many rulers have sought to control the region and boundaries have shifted over the years. It was during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901) that many of Afghanistan's present boundaries were negotiated. In 1893, the Amir, and the Foreign Secretary of the Colonial Government of India, Sir Mortimer Durand, agreed to identify a 2,450-kilometer (1,519 miles) long border dividing Afghanistan and British India. The Durand Line as it became known was a poorly marked boundary that intentionally cut through Pashtun tribal areas and villages. The British wanted to reduce the threat that these groups posed by splitting them. The line caused disputes between the governments of Afghanistan and British India, and later between Afghanistan and Pakistan.



Ramsay taking a photograph, Helmand Valley, South western Afghanistan by T R J Ward, 1903



Boundary Pillar no.70 by T R J Ward, 1921

Abdur Rahman's son Habibullah reigned from 1901-1919 and in 1904 a boundary commission established the border between Iran and Afghanistan accepted by both countries. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 divided Afghanistan into areas of Russian and British influence.

### The 'Great Game' and the Anglo-Afghan Wars

The 'Great Game' refers to the strategic conflict between Tsarist Russia and Britain between 1813 to 1907. Both nations desired control of Central Asia, and engaged in a series of wars to establish supremacy.

Three major Anglo-Afghan wars occurred over a 70 year span, 1839–42, 1878–80 and 1919. From its base in India, Britain sought to extend its control over neighbouring Afghanistan and to oppose growing Russian influence in the region.

The British never succeeded in achieving overall control of Afghanistan but remained influential in Afghan foreign affairs. The last month-long war of 1919 resulted in complete Afghan independence.

### Afghan Rulers

The rulers of Afghanistan had the unenviable task of governing and bringing together ethnic groups that had historically been at odds with each other. The mountainous and difficult terrain also hampered communication and control. The first Amir (King) to unite groups and establish the modern kingdom of Afghanistan was Ahmad Khan Durrani in 1747.

In spite of political pressures, boundary disputes and diplomatic upheavals, between 1833 and 1933 individual Afghan rulers each contributed towards building a more united nation.

The Amirs of Afghanistan had to maintain a balance between traditional cultural and political loyalties, and the European influence on many aspects of Afghan life. When not dealing with internal conflicts, many sought to modernize industry, education, and transport. King Amanullah (1919-1929) who travelled to Europe is known for his zeal for modernization



Abdur Rahman Khan, Amir from 1880-1901



Amir Habibullah Khan, Amir from 1901-1919  
(first son of Abdur Rahman Khan)

As was Islamic custom, Afghan rulers often took more than one wife. This had an impact on the question of ascendancy to the throne on the passing of an Amir or King. Brothers often fought with each other and close cousins, and leadership changed hands frequently over a short period of time. The main rulers of the period are listed below:

- 1826 – 1838 Amir Dost Mohammad
- 1839 – 1842 Shah Shuja
- 1843 – 1862 Amir Dost Mohammed reinstated as Amir
- 1863 – 1879 Amir Sher Ali (*son of Dost Mohammad*)
- 1879 – 1880 Amir Mohammad Yaqub
- 1880 – 1901 Amir Abdur Rahman
- 1901 – 1919 Amir Habibullah Khan (*son of Abdur Rahman*)
- 1919 – 1929 King Amanullah (*son of Amir Habibullah*)
- 1929 – 1933 King Mohammad Nadir

# ● Recording Afghanistan

## Photographers and Artists

Many of the photographs and lithographs found in the Society's collections were originally commissioned for military and strategic purposes. Others were published for sale, as there was a demand for photographs of "the turbulent Afghan Empire" as noted by the author and artist James Atkinson in 1842. The photographs reveal the interests of the powerful British elite. Their visual record of Afghanistan was determined by their particular way of seeing this country, which was greatly influenced by the Anglo-Afghan encounter. For British photographers in the late 19th century, the Afghan landscape presented itself as one marked by religious buildings, tribal peoples, and bounded by mountains. This particular perspective is replicated in many of the landscape photographs taken by various British photographers.



Sketches of Afghanistan by James Atkinson, 1842



Artillery square showing main bastion of citadel, B.Simpson, 1881

In 1842 a series of lithographs by James Atkinson were published to complement his book *The Expedition into Afghanistan: Notes and Sketches descriptive of the country contained in the personal narrative during the campaign of 1839 and 1840, up to the surrender of Dost Mahomed Khan*. Atkinson was Superintending Surgeon of the Army of the Indus, Bengal Establishment.

The photographs of Kandahar are from an album by Benjamin Simpson in 1881 - the period after the Second Anglo-Afghan war. He was first commissioned by the Indian Medical Service of Bengal in 1853 and became Surgeon-General in 1885. His photographs were published by Bourne and Shepherd studios (Simla, Calcutta and Bombay) and made available for sale in a 'Catalogue of 76 views'. Additional photographs which he took were also published in 'Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal'.

Other albums include photographs by Thomas R J Ward in the 1920s, who took photographs of boundary pillars marking new roads and borders. Beatrice de Cardi was another traveller who followed the route from Kabul to Kandahar in search of prehistoric material during the 1930s and 40s.



Excerpts from creative writing from Brondesbury College for Boys in response to 'Pathan man':

*The air smells of fear  
As the cold dust passes by  
Fear is always there  
M Mohamud*

*The odour of sweat  
On a hard working mans clothes  
From the scorching sun  
A Shirafkan*

*The near death Bedouin  
Making his way through life  
Begging for his life  
N Khan*

*The state of war does not affect him. He is deep in his thoughts as he sees the sun set slowly.  
He wishes he was up there flying with the birds and eagles, so he can fly away up to the clouds and heavens. He wants to feel the clouds, to see his country from high above, his beloved country.  
A Al-Ahmad*

*The wind blows against his face with the chirps of the birds filling his ears.  
He reflects on his wife cooking, knowing the value of something only when it is gone." Anon*

*In the distance I see children playing as though they were in the gardens of heaven, but I am then shaken back to reality by the smell of gunpowder and sounds of bombs in the distance.  
As I stand here, in my rough clothes and gun in hand, I remember the peaceful days. The days when I was a normal leader with a peaceful country.  
The days when I had no fears, no deaths.  
I wish it was back.  
N Khan*



Pathan woman by R B Holmes, 1919-1920

*"The trousers are totally Afghan and the burkha. This type of jewellery was usually worn between India and Afghanistan and Pakistan because of free trade and the culture was quite similar also, and they were imported from there, like bangles and jewellery. We had a close relationship with India. If the clothing is from there, it doesn't mean that the girl is not Afghan. But you can see that everything she is wearing comes from Afghanistan."  
Wahida, Afghan Association of London, 2006*

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## Writers

The photographs in the online exhibition have been annotated and referenced using accounts from mainly British explorers and officials who visited the region. Many of the writings are of a personal nature, recounting incidents and journeys which broadly reflect the writer's own values and attitudes towards the Afghans.

Charles Masson, an army deserter, but later an archaeologist and agent to the Government of India in Kabul (1834 – 36), and London barrister G T Vigne were two of the first British men to have recorded their observations of this region during the period of the reign of Amir Dost Mohammed in the 1830s.

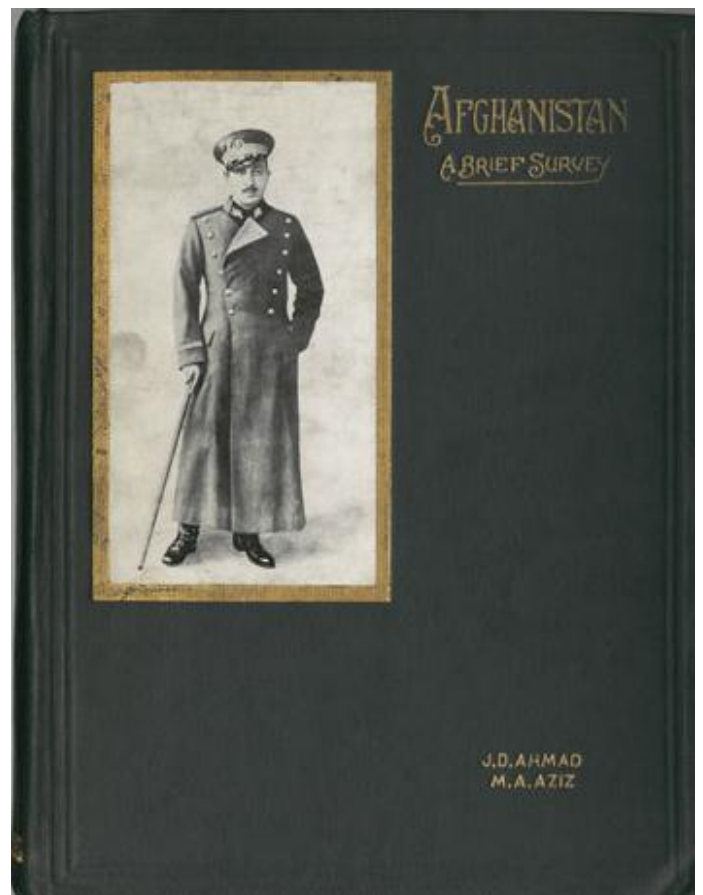
Later memoirs include the book *At the Court of the Amir* by John Alfred Gray who served as the surgeon and physician to Amir Abdur Rahman from 1885-1889. *Leaves from an Afghan scrapbook: the experiences of an English official and his wife in Kabul* by Ernest and Annie Thornton, published in 1910 were a British couple at the court of Amir Habbibullah Khan who reigned from 1901-1919. Ernest Thornton a leather-maker from Leeds was invited to establish and manage the Amir's tannery.

A later account published in 1936 by the Afghans Jamal-Ud-Din Ahmad and Muhammad Abdul Aziz entitled *A Brief Survey of Afghanistan*, covers the geography, politics and history of Afghanistan. Ahmad was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He wrote,

*“Indeed, of the recent books on Afghanistan, it may be safely stated, that, with very few exceptions, they are highly interesting, colourful and entertaining, and in places quite amusing, but they are rarely accurate.”*



Dr John a Gray, author *At the Court of the Amir*, and his Armenian Interpreter by Van der Wyde, 1895



Cover of book, *Afghanistan A Brief Survey* By Jamal Ud-din Ahmad & Muhammed Abdul Aziz, 1936