

The ‘re-turn’ to empire in IR: colonial knowledge communities and the construction of the idea of the Afghan polity, 1809–38

MARTIN J. BAYLY*

Abstract. This article seeks to add to the exploration and development of Imperial History’s contribution to the discipline of International Relations (IR). Focusing on British perceptions of Afghanistan in the period preceding the first Anglo-Afghan war the article considers colonial knowledge as a source of identity construction, but in a manner that avoids deploying anachronistic concepts, in this case that of the Afghan ‘state’. This approach, which draws on the insights brought to IR by historical sociology, shows that engaging with Imperial History within IR can encourage a more reflexive attitude to core disciplinary categories. This not only reveals alternative approaches to the construction of specific political communities but it also allows for a more historicist mode in the use of history by IR as a discipline. Furthermore, by moving away from material based purely on diplomatic history, Afghanistan’s imperial encounter can be recovered from the dominance of ‘Great Game’ narratives, offering an account that is more appreciative of the Afghanistan context.

Martin J. Bayly is a PhD candidate at the Department of War Studies, King’s College London, and a Teaching Fellow at the Defence Studies Department, King’s College London.

In January 2002, barely two months after Operation Enduring Freedom had toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the former soldier, diplomat, and now Conservative MP Rory Stewart walked across Afghanistan, following in the footsteps of the Mogul Emperor Babur the Great. The title he chose for the work that followed the journey was *The Places In Between*,¹ a reflection perhaps, of the enduring tendency to view Afghanistan as at the confluence of the ‘knowable’ – of civilisations, empires, nation-states, or societies – and yet paradoxically resembling a land of the ‘unknowable’, of ‘wild tribes’, nefarious actors; a domain of rumour, intrigue, and violence.² As a former history tutor at Balliol College Oxford, Stewart was certainly aware that by making his trip he was also following in the footsteps of a collection of nineteenth-

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¹ Rory Stewart, *The Places in Between* (London: Picador, 2005).

² Manan Ahmed, ‘Adam’s Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI:13 (2011); Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2011).

century explorers – themselves often scholars, soldiers, and diplomats – all seeking to uncover this mysterious location ‘in between’ the imperial interests of British India, and Imperial Russia.³ As with Stewart, these individuals produced works, and in some cases, provided advice for policymakers as they sought to devise an effective foreign policy on India’s north-west frontier.⁴

The significance of this nineteenth-century colonial quest for knowledge of Afghanistan, and its relevance to the political decisions that were taken, has often been overlooked as a result of the more dramatic story of Anglo-Russian rivalry over Central Asia; the so-called ‘Great Game’. Commonly this quest is simply portrayed as a story of the swashbuckling adventures of a nascent colonial intelligence community, combating the spread of Russian influence.⁵ But as Benjamin Hopkins has shown, this was ‘far from the only, nor even the most important’ story at this time.⁶ The problem here is not one of fact, but of emphasis.

In this article, I aim to make two main contributions. Firstly, I seek to add to the development, and the exploration of, imperial history’s contribution to the discipline of International Relations (IR). In particular the article considers colonial knowledge as a source of identity construction for the colonial state, and therefore providing a line of enquiry for contemporary IR theorists. But I seek to do so in a manner that avoids deploying anachronistic concepts, in this case that of the Afghan ‘state’.⁷ This approach, which draws on the insights brought to IR by historical sociology, shows that engaging with imperial history within IR can encourage a more reflexive attitude to core disciplinary categories. This not only offers insights into the construction of specific political communities but it also allows for a more historicist mode in the use of history by IR as a discipline. The need for this approach within IR is an argument frequently made, but less frequently carried out.⁸

Secondly, and to this end, I seek to contribute to the growing literature that seeks to recover Afghanistan’s imperial encounter.⁹ The common refrain that the British

³ In a documentary broadcast on BBC2 in 2012 Stewart described one of these men, Alexander Burnes, as the greatest diplomat Britain had ever seen. ‘Afghanistan: The Great Game – A Personal View by Rory Stewart’, *BBC2* (Broadcast 28 May 2012).

⁴ Stewart was also courted by Richard Holbrooke following the latter’s arrival in the post of ‘AfPak’ special envoy. Rory Stewart, ‘Midnight Moments: Exposing the truth and taking full responsibility for Afghanistan’, *Huffington Post* (20 December 2010), available at: {http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rory-stewart/post_1457_b_799063.html} accessed 19 October 2012. For a critique of Foreign Policy ‘expertise’ see Manan Ahmed, ‘Flying Blind: US foreign policy’s lack of expertise’, *The National* (4 March 2011), available at: {<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/flying-blind-us-foreign-policys-lack-of-expertise>} accessed 19 October 2012.

⁵ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game* (London: John Murray, 2006); John Ure, *Shooting Leave* (London: Constable, 2009).

⁶ Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 34. See also, Benjamin Hopkins, ‘The Myth of the “Great Game”: The Anglo-Sikh Alliance and Rivalry’, *University of Cambridge Centre of South Asian Studies Occasional Paper*, No. 5 (2004).

⁷ In this sense the article builds on Hopkins’ important contribution to the modern literature *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, in which he refers to the Afghan ‘proto-state’. This terminology has implications for approaches pertaining to the International Relations discipline and is worthy of further interrogation.

⁸ John M. Hobson, ‘What’s at stake in “bringing historical sociology back into international relations”? Transcending “chronofetishism” and “empocentrism” in international relations’, in Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson (eds), *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 3–41.

⁹ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2011); Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826–1863)* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997); Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War* (London: Hurst, 2010); Shah Mahmud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

knew nothing of Afghanistan prior to the First Anglo-Afghan war needs revision. But more importantly, the article seeks to provide an alternative narrative to the traditional focus on geopolitics and grand strategy – a bias which is itself a reflection of the tendency for international history to focus on diplomatic sources to the detriment of more local or 'on the ground' accounts.¹⁰ By drawing on a sociology of knowledge approach, the article charts the emergence of a set of criteria that provided a degree of legibility for policymakers, and in turn helped to order their policy prescriptions. Based on the observation that knowledge is in part a 'participation in the cultural resources of society'¹¹ this provides a more cultural basis for foreign policy decision-making, but one which is inherently tied up in the process of interaction: of knowledge 'becoming' so, rather than simply 'being'.¹²

The analysis focuses on the activities, correspondence, and texts of a select group of itinerant explorers, military men, archaeologists, adventurers, and quasi-official East India Company representatives. Whilst initially uncoordinated, these individuals, I argue, began to resemble a 'knowledge community' through their correspondence and through the pooling of their work by an increasingly interested policy elite. Ultimately this knowledge community would contribute to the decision to launch an invasion of Afghanistan in 1838 in order to depose the ruler Dost Muhammad Khan for the preferred former-King Shah Shuja ul-Mulk. This community therefore created the groundwork for the emergence of the idea of Afghanistan in the imperial mind, as well as the foundations for policy prescriptions, and would leave an indelible mark on British conceptualisations of the Afghan strategic space.

Imperial history, IR, and historical sociology

History and International Relations, it has been noted, have not always enjoyed an easy relationship.¹³ In the early 2000s there was a refocusing on this ongoing schism.¹⁴ On the one hand it was argued that such a debate would help to overcome certain ahistorical attitudes that had plagued IR throughout much of the Cold War period, tendencies that were in part a result of the transhistorical commitments inherent to the dominant rationalist and positivist theoretical approaches.¹⁵ In a good example of this critique, George Lawson noted IR's tendency to present history as 'scripture': 'the mining of the past in order to confirm suppositions about the present; the smoothing out of differences, varieties, and processes of change in the interests

¹⁰ Stephen H. Haber, David M. Kennedy, and Stephen D. Krasner, 'Brothers under the Skin: Diplomatic History and International Relations', *International Security*, 22:1 (1997), pp. 34–43.

¹¹ Nico Stehr and Volker Meja (eds), *Society and Knowledge* (2nd edn, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), p. 13.

¹² Stehr and Meja (eds), *Society and Knowledge*, p. 13. See also Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: The Penguin Press, 1967); Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

¹³ Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds), *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (London: The MIT Press, 2001); George Lawson, 'The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations', *The European Journal of International Relations*, 18:3 (2012), pp. 203–26; David Armitage, "'The Fifty Years' Rift: Intellectual History and International Relations', *Modern Intellectual History*, 1:1 (2004), pp. 97–109.

¹⁴ See, for example, Michael Cox, Tim Booth, and Ken Dunne, 'Empires, Systems, and States: Great transformations in international politics', *Review of International Studies*, 27:1 (2001), pp. 1–15.

¹⁵ Christian Reus-Smit, 'Reading History through Constructivist Eyes', *Millennium*, 37:2 (2008), p. 395.

of methodological purity and theoretical rigidity; and the bracketing off of history behind an eternal “illusory present”.¹⁶ In short, IR was not just ahistorical, but also *ahistoricist*; reluctant to engage reflectively with categories such as ‘state’, ‘system’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘power’, and ‘empire’.¹⁷

As these scholars pointed out, a more historically sensitive IR would uncover the nuanced nature of such categories, demonstrating their historically contingent meanings, rather than black boxing them as essentialised, even reified categories. The coincidental rise of critical theory and constructivist approaches with their emphasis on linguistics, subjectivity, and the continual reproduction of social institutions offered a more questioning attitude to core categories and ontologies.¹⁸ Yet for some, this had only gone so far. As Colin Wight argued, ‘rather than embarking on new theoretical or empirical avenues, many scholars merely “poured the newly emerging patterns of thought into the old framework”’.¹⁹ The ‘cultural turn’ that constructivist approaches had carried into the field remained, for some, lacking in emancipatory spirit, tied as they often were to simple identity-based binary narratives of enemy/friend, or wedded to familiar (state-based) objects such as ideas of national strategic cultures. The prospect that constructivism – with its intellectual heritage deriving in part from critical theory – would offer a more historicist approach in IR’s engagement with history has in some respects fallen short of expectations.²⁰

This ‘historical turn’ (or ‘re-turn’ as Lawson rightly labels it)²¹ entailed a move away from IR’s preoccupation with diplomatic history, which was becoming increasingly marginalised within disciplinary history anyhow, and a turn towards social and cultural history. Some called for greater attention in particular to imperial history,²² a field that had itself undergone a ‘cultural turn’, yet one by which IR remained curiously unmoved. As Tarak Barkawi, one of the leading proponents of an ‘imperial turn’ pointed out, ‘[r]epeatedly, it would seem, IR was founded amidst empire, but discovered instead only a world of sovereign states and their collective action problems.’ As he notes, the failure of social science and IR to deal with questions of empire and imperialism left the discipline inadequate ‘to the experiences and histories of most of the peoples and places on the planet’.²³ For Barkawi and Laffey, engagement with imperial history offered a threefold benefit of escaping the ‘territorial trap’,²⁴ highlighting the importance of hierarchy in international relations, and engaging with international relations as ‘thick’ social, political, cultural, and military

¹⁶ George Lawson, ‘The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations’, *International Studies Review*, 8:3 (2006), p. 404. See also, Lawson, ‘The Eternal Divide?’.

¹⁷ John Hobson, George Lawson, and Justin Rosenberg, ‘Historical Sociology’, *LSE Research Online* (June 2010), available at: {<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28016>} accessed 18 July 2012.

¹⁸ Reus-Smit, ‘Reading History through Constructivist Eyes’.

¹⁹ Quoted in Daniel Jacobi, ‘On the “Construction” of Knowledge and the Knowledge of “Construction”’, *International Political Sociology*, 5:1 (2011), pp. 94–7.

²⁰ Lawson, ‘The Eternal Divide?’, pp. 209–10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²² Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations’, *Millennium*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 109–27; Robert Vitalis, ‘Birth of a discipline’, in David Long and Brian Schmidt (eds), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 159–82.

²³ Tarak Barkawi, ‘Empire and Order in International Relations and Security Studies’, in Robert A. Denemark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia, Vol. III* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 1360–79. See also David Long and Brian Schmidt (eds), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

²⁴ John Agnew, ‘The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 1:1 (1994), pp. 53–80.

exchange. Central to this was the proposal that histories of the European and non-European world were co-implicated in each other; that imperialism highlighted process of co-constitution in state identity.²⁵

This 'imperial turn' has yielded some fruitful returns. Jordan Branch has shown how the spread of the territorial state was not simply the exporting of Eurocentric constructs of sovereign authority, but rather a process of 'colonial reflection' whereby colonial officials unfamiliar with local spatialities of power and authority were forced to rely on a more intelligible 'scientific' approach through cartography – a method that was then imported back to Europe.²⁶ Edward Keene, through his reframing of Grotius's work has highlighted how the concept of 'divided sovereignty' – the idea that sovereignty could be shared by two powers – provided theoretical justification for imperialist ventures throughout the nineteenth century.²⁷ Meanwhile Gerry Simpson – although not focusing exclusively on empire – has nonetheless shown how during the nineteenth-century imperial entities were responsible for the construction of a legal framework that institutionalised a form of 'legal hegemony' and 'anti-pluralism'; one that mandated distinctions between 'Great Powers' and 'outlaw states', a distinction that he argues has left a legacy to this day.²⁸ Imperial history provides a reminder of the historical contingency of core categories whose ontological stability is often taken for granted. Equally, it shows that these categories were continually contested, not just within imperial political thought, but in the process of global exchange, of which imperialism was simply one variant. In short, the constitutive effects of imperial exchange are often overlooked by an IR discipline that remains analytically imprisoned by its own theory-driven orthodoxies.

The documenting of Afghanistan's imperial encounters provides good examples of the dangers of inadequate engagement with international history. Accounts often exhibit a 'continuist myth' by presenting Afghanistan as the perennial location for competition between great powers and as the 'graveyard of empires'. In addition, as Rob Johnson has argued, Afghanistan's history is frequently looted, or 'contested', in order to provide a policy science for today's challenges, drawing 'a legacy of half-understood and often misconceived ideas from a long period of colonial contact, and distant memories of the *Mujahideen* struggle against Soviet Occupation in the 1980s'.²⁹ An important outcome of both of these trends has been the suppression of what could be described as the 'Afghanistan context'. As Thomas Barfield eloquently puts it, '[a]ll the focus on war and visiting conquerors overshadows the country's own inhabitants, except as the rough warriors who served as speed bumps on the highway of conquest or more recently earned a reputation for making the place ungovernable. As a result, Afghanistan itself remains just the vague backdrop in a long-running international drama where others hold the speaking parts.'³⁰

²⁵ Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations', *Millennium*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 109–27; Martin Shaw, 'Post-Imperial and Quasi-Imperial: State and Empire in the Global Era', *Millennium*, 31:2 (2002), pp. 327–36.

²⁶ Jordan Branch, "'Colonial reflection" and territoriality: The peripheral origins of sovereign statehood', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 277–97.

²⁷ Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁸ Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁹ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, p. 2.

³⁰ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

In the case of the first Anglo-Afghan War, the status of Afghanistan is often suppressed for a wider concern with Anglo-Russian relations – the so-called ‘Great Game’ – an example of diplomatic history *par excellence*. The idea that the British were attempting to establish a ‘buffer state’ regularly fails to engage with what exactly was meant by a ‘state’ in this context. Meanwhile policy failures are often attributed to generic and theoretically reversible administrative or political blunders rather than dealt with on their own terms.³¹ The extent to which Afghanistan emerged in part as a figment of the British imagination, and the co-implication of local agents, including Afghans themselves in the crafting of their own nationality under the shadow of imperial power lacks attention. That this should be so not only highlights a lacuna in the historiography of this part of the world, but also offers insights in to the faint legacies that remain to this day concerning representations of Afghanistan itself, as well as representations of its political heritage – a heritage that is profoundly international.

As a way out of the inadequacies of IR’s engagement with imperial history in general, and as a contribution to the recovery of Afghanistan’s imperial encounter in particular, I propose closer attention to the knowledge community that emerged concerning policies on the East India Company’s north-west boundary in the lead up to the First Anglo-Afghan war. The reasoning here is that rather than assuming the Afghan state as an ontological prior, we can use a more localised approach, drawing on the sociology of knowledge, to uncover the calling into being of the Afghan polity as an actor; in this case, a process that was carried out by outsiders. Simply casting back over the archive in search of a nascent ‘state’ forms risks the charge of deploying an anachronism – in this case relocating a historically contingent social institution into a historical context in which such a category carried a different meaning.³² Avoiding this requires attention to the language used, and a more historically sensitive approach.

The fact is that the British rarely, if ever, referred to the concept of the Afghan ‘state’. Indeed, the lack of Afghan ‘stishness’ provided in part a justification for the First Anglo-Afghan War. The polity they envisaged was a conceptually heterogeneous entity. It encompassed ethnographic definitions based around British taxonomies of the tribal groups they had documented, and principal lineages within these. But it was also a geographic expression, delineated by highland and lowland groups, bounded by geographic features such as the Hindu Kush, and combining principal population centres: specifically Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat. Finally, patterns of authority were also multiple and often appeared in competition, thereby complicating a simple presumption of any single sovereign authority. Alongside the expressions of ‘King’, ‘Sirdar’, ‘Khan’, and ‘tribe’ was the practice of the assigning of land tenures in return for military service, which provided a more measurable form of authority. The ambiguous status of non-Afghan groups, including diasporic merchant communities (Hindus, Armenians, Jews), and nomadic groups added to the confusion. And finally there was the less frequently noted role of Islam. The Afghan polity could therefore be described as an essentially contested concept, however, the knowledge

³¹ Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan*, p. 38.

³² On the relevance of contextualism to IR see Duncan Bell, ‘The Cambridge School and World Politics’, *The Global Site* (2001), available at: {<http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/press/103bell.htm>} accessed 19 October 2012.

community that formed around the definition of Afghanistan, and the concomitant growth of imperial policy interest forced a policy of 'closure' around this concept.³³

Although the purpose of this article is not to innovate within the well-developed literature on the sociology of knowledge, it is necessary to begin with a brief outline of how I conceive this approach to be helpful in building the argument. Firstly, notwithstanding the considerable philosophical debate over what 'knowledge' really is, for the purposes of this article, and borrowing from Peter Burke, I understand knowledge to mean information that has been "'cooked", processed or systematized by thought'.³⁴ Noting Durkheim's dictum that first one must understand social facts as things, Berger and Luckmann's seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality*, gives the practical suggestion that 'common-sense "knowledge" rather than "ideas" must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge'.³⁵ Whilst this article reflects these sentiments, the role of 'thought' in the systematisation of information, does make it necessary to refer to deeper intellectual currents – often in the form that could be loosely referred to as 'ideas' – in order to contextualise that which passes for knowledge. In this sense, knowledge can be described as partly culturally contingent.³⁶

Secondly, and related to this point, the forms of knowledge referred to in this article are not conceived of as resembling a purely intellectual or academic exercise. Colonial knowledge in particular provides capacities for action as a *via-media* between ideas and action.³⁷ As Nicholas Dirks has pointed out concerning Bernard Cohn's work: 'The colonial state [can be] seen as a theater for state experimentation, where historiography, documentation, certification, and representation were all state modalities that transformed knowledge into power.'³⁸ Indeed, Cohn's 'investigative modalities': particularly those described as the 'observational/travel'; 'survey'; and 'historiographic' mode, provide a helpful backdrop in terms of contextualising colonial knowledge practices at this time.³⁹ Although Afghanistan was never directly colonised, through a growth in colonial knowledge, the country was rendered more legible – albeit partially – for policymakers. The representations that were included within the repertoire of this knowledge order were not necessarily recorded for the *purposes* of manipulation, yet through an implicit and sometimes explicit value attachment, they carried at least the *potential* for manipulation, should it be required, converting un-annexed territory into a more familiar 'realm of possibility'.⁴⁰ Indeed, as James C. Scott has highlighted, such quests for legibility can be seen as a general inclination of states, not just the colonial state, showing that such a process *in itself* can lead to a tenuous reflection of reality by default. As he argues:

³³ On the concept of 'closure' and the sociology of knowledge see Jan Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁴ Where 'information' refers to that which 'is relatively "raw", specific and practical'. Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, pp. 11–12.

³⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, pp. 27, 30.

³⁶ Nico Stehr and Volker Meja (eds), *Society and Knowledge* (2nd edn, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), p. 13.

³⁷ Stehr and Meja (eds), *Society and Knowledge*.

³⁸ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. xi. (Quoting the foreword by Nicholas Dirks).

³⁹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

⁴⁰ Robert A. Stafford, 'Scientific Exploration and Empire', in Andrew Porter and Alaine Low (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 311; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality. This very simplification, in turn, makes the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision more legible and hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation. Combined with similar observations, an overall, aggregate synoptic view of a selective reality is achieved, making possible a high degree of schematic knowledge, control, and manipulation.⁴¹

The knowledge community leading up to the First Anglo-Afghan War resembles a proto-knowledge order that provided the foundations for this later enduring aggregate synoptic view of Afghanistan.

Thirdly, despite the apparent and actual projection of culturally-rooted, intellectual trends, and representations onto the Afghan space, this form of knowledge capture and sequestering should not be misinterpreted as a one-way process from metropole to periphery, or as an imperialist imposition of Eurocentric categories onto a non-European space. This was certainly part of the story, but as more recent work (at least since the late 1990s) on this aspect of imperial history has shown has shown, imperial expansion, including practices of knowledge procurement, also involved exchange and interaction both within and between imperial territories, peripheries, and elsewhere.⁴² An important aspect of British knowledge on Afghanistan was accordingly derived in part from their experience elsewhere in South Asia and Persia.⁴³ Moreover, their reliance on local informants, including Afghan agents, as well as members of diasporic communities within Kabul and elsewhere presented a picture that derived from more than a purely Eurocentric bias.⁴⁴

Information, information, information: the emergence of a colonial knowledge community

The Afghanistan 'knowledge community' in the early stages, and right up to the first Anglo-Afghan war was a highly select group. Only 25 European visitors to Afghanistan are documented in the archives prior to 1838.⁴⁵ Of particular relevance were those who filled an official capacity subsequent to their journeys. Three individuals stand out: Firstly, Mountstuart Elphinstone, who was the first envoy to the Court of Kabul in 1809, later becoming the Governor of Bombay.⁴⁶ Key to Elphinstone's

⁴¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 11.

⁴² Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Peter Burroughs, 'Imperial Institutions and the Government of Empire', in Andre Porter and Alaine Low (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century*, pp. 170–97; Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ This process of centre-periphery exchange was visible in the construction of Afghan national identity prior to the arrival of the British. Nile Green has recently shown how Mughal-era diasporic networks had already fostered a sense of 'Afghan' identity amongst Pashtun elites prior to the advance of British influence in the region. Nile Green, 'Tribe, Diaspora, and Statehood in Afghan History', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67:1 (2001), pp. 171–211. I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for bringing this article to my attention.

⁴⁵ Martin J. Bayly, *Imagining Afghanistan: British Foreign Policy and the Afghan Polity, 1808–1878*, unpublished PhD thesis (King's College London, 2013).

⁴⁶ Mountstuart Elphinstone should not be confused with his relative General William Elphinstone who led the disastrous retreat from Kabul during the First Anglo Afghan War.

influence was his 1815 two-volume published text, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, which was the most significant outcome of his 1809 mission.⁴⁷ A second key figure was Charles Masson, a deserter from the Bengal Army,⁴⁸ who later became a newswriter and agent of the British in Kabul from 1834–8. Finally, Alexander Burnes, whose two trips under the auspices of the East India Company (EIC) led to his appointment as envoy to Kabul during the First Anglo-Afghan War. Alongside this core group we can also identify a more peripheral group of actors including Henry Pottinger, whose 1810 trip skirting the southern and western reaches of Afghanistan was followed later with a posting as political agent at Hyderabad during the 1830s;⁴⁹ William Moorcroft, who in 1819 set off across Kashmir through Kabul and to Balkh; and finally Claude Wade, who recruited Masson, and as Political Agent in Ludhiana filled an important role processing and filtering intelligence reports.⁵⁰

There was an entrepreneurial spirit to these ventures, with funding often being lobbied for, and frequently sourced from well-connected company officials rather than being centrally administered. Even where 'official' support was gained, the Government of India generally paid only a passing interest in the results. This was especially so with regard to the earlier trips. In the case of Charles Masson, his official duties only began in 1834, a role he took up as a plea bargain in return for exoneration for his earlier desertion. This picture began to change in the 1830s as the EIC looked to expand their activities to India's north-western regions. Noting a shortfall in knowledge the President of the EIC Board of Control Lord Ellenborough declared in 1829 of India's north-west regions '[w]hat we ought to have is *Information*. The first, the second, and the third thing a government ought always to have is *Information*.'⁵¹

In the second half of the 1830s the influence of knowledgeable individuals therefore became increasingly apparent. John Kaye records that this interest coincided with the Governor Generalship of Lord Auckland in 1835, when the works of these adventurers began 'to be seen on the breakfast-tables of our Indian statesmen, or in their hands as they were driven to Council'.⁵² Indeed, Alexander Burnes's published work of 1834 caught this wave of private and public interest. Burnes was courted by the London elites, including cabinet ministers and the foreign secretary. He even enjoyed an audience with the King and Princess Victoria.⁵³

⁴⁷ Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India* [in two volumes] (2nd edn, London: Richard Bentley, 1819).

⁴⁸ Masson's real name was in fact James Lewis. 'Charles Masson' was a pseudonym invented in order to cover for his desertion. Gordon Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1986); Bijan Omrani, 'Charles Masson of Afghanistan: Deserter, Scholar, Spy', *Asian Affairs*, 39:2 (2008).

⁴⁹ Henry Pottinger's nephew, Lieutenant Eldred Pottinger, also played a prominent role later on in the defence of Herat during the Persian siege of 1837.

⁵⁰ Claude Wade also used his position as a conduit for intelligence reports from Kabul to the governor general to warp the information contained within them in a manner that was more favourable to his preferred candidate for the throne, Shah Shuja. J. A. Norris, *The First Afghan War 1838–1842* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), p. 139; William Dalrymple, *Return of a King* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 65.

⁵¹ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, p. 18.

⁵² John William Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, Volume I* (London: Richard Bentley, 1857).

⁵³ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, Volume I*, p. 179. See also, India Office Records (hereafter IOR), Masson Papers, Mss Eur E.161/633, Correspondence III, 3, enclosure 2; Mss Eur E.161/6-7 (microfilm), 6a, Pottinger to Masson, 27 July 1834. Burnes's movements during his second commercial mission to Kabul in 1837 were closely followed in the *Delhi Gazette* for the consumption of the British settlers in Delhi. IOR (microfilm), *Delhi Gazette*, 1837–8, SM 52.

Whilst attention grew, the individuals working on this area were demonstrating more coherence as a knowledge community. In the early 1830s, Elphinstone and Burnes began a correspondence that continued until Burnes's death in the Kabul uprising of 1841.⁵⁴ Indeed it is clear in the works of Burnes in particular, that he owed an intellectual debt to his mentor, and even carried with him on his first trip to Kabul and Bokhara a copy of his *Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*.⁵⁵ The published works of previous travelers were clearly consumed by their successors, with many accounts referring to the exploits of previous explorers; the names of Elphinstone and Moorcroft often arising, as well as other itinerant individuals. Due to the fact that his survey utilised local agents as an information source, Elphinstone's trail blazing also left a legacy of contacts with whom the British were able to engage, and the exploits of *feringhi* (foreigners) left a lasting impression on local actors.⁵⁶ The most significant of those who Elphinstone met was Shah Shuja himself whose exile from the Afghan throne during the 1820s and 1830s was funded under a British pension.

Charles Masson and Henry Pottinger were also in regular contact throughout the 1830s due to Pottinger's initial financial support of Masson's archaeological work in and around Kabul.⁵⁷ Pottinger's familiarity with Masson led to his being introduced to Claude Wade, Political Agent at Ludhiana, who negotiated his recruitment as an agent. In 1837 Burnes finally met with Masson in Kabul at the end of Burnes's commercial mission up the Indus; a trip that in itself had produced a wealth of information that was sent back to the governor general.⁵⁸

Between this core group of actors, we see in the archives therefore, the emergence not just of a knowledge community, but increasingly a policy community. Whilst the transition between these two cognitive realms is necessary to understanding how knowledge of Afghanistan guided policy, it is to the content of this knowledge that we turn to next.

Knowing Afghanistan as a political community

Whilst it is important not to create an undue sense of commonality between the works of the early European explorers of Afghanistan there are nonetheless some similarities. The works of Elphinstone, Masson, and Burnes, were located in the stylistic modalities of colonial knowledge.⁵⁹ Accordingly, the material recorded in these accounts was voluminous. This style was not simply an extreme form of empiricism, but was rooted in a wider intellectual *milieu* of colonial knowledge practice. Inspired by the works of Adam Smith surveyors sought to identify the interrelationships between all aspects of man's life within society: economic, political, cultural,

⁵⁴ See IOR, Elphinstone Papers, Mss Eur F88/81, pp. 85, 91, 105, 111.

⁵⁵ Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara, Volume I* (London: John Murray, 1834), p. 162. Masson also requested a copy from Pottinger in 1833: IOR, Masson Papers, 20876 Mss Eur E.161/6-7/1a (microfilm).

⁵⁶ One of these agents, Mullah Najib hosted Burnes on his later trip through Peshawar. Najib was at the time on a British pension. Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara, Volume I*, p. 105.

⁵⁷ Omrani, 'Charles Masson of Afghanistan'. Masson's correspondence with Pottinger and Wade is in the Masson Papers, IOR Mss Eur.E.161/631-632.

⁵⁸ IOR/V/27/270/7, 'Reports and Papers, Political, Geographical, and Commercial. Submitted to Government, by Sir Alexander Burnes; Lieutenant Leech; Doctor Lord; and Lieutenant Wood'.

⁵⁹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

and social. The object was to ascertain at what stage of development the society could be said to exist at (hunting; pastoral; agricultural; or commercial), and necessitated a wealth of collected data, including historical trajectories.⁶⁰ These methods created a generic set of interpretations by which it was proposed 'Asiatics' could be judged.⁶¹ This led to the related intellectual tradition of 'philosophical' or 'conjectural' history which suggested that through the accumulation of a wealth of data, it was possible to reconstruct the development of societies, and what is more, identify affinities with societies elsewhere.⁶² As such, the imagined polity and society of Afghanistan was in part a reflection of intellectual fashions, and in part the importation of familiar models of South Asian (and Persian) societal development. Moreover, this had the effect of infusing colonial histories of foreign territories with imported notions of legitimacy. Through conjectural history the development of a political community was often viewed through these accounts as the history of the rise of one elite group over another. When it came to interacting with these communities the British were therefore crafting their own structures of significance, interpreted through their own culturally located intellectual understandings.

Despite these similarities important differences between these works should be acknowledged. Personalities mattered in this sense. Whilst the rather formal encyclopedic style of Elphinstone betrayed his more academic approach, the travelogues of Burnes and Masson reflected their more pioneering spirit. These later adventurers were also located within a changing cultural context that included the expansion of printing culture and public knowledge in Britain itself. Burnes in particular typified a romantic era of European exploration that included the voyages of Charles Darwin and, later on, David Livingstone in Africa. This public thirst for adventure gave prominence to the heroic deeds of those who had travelled to distant lands. Differences in style also resulted from institutional contexts. Alongside their published travel accounts Burnes and Masson's official works betrayed the bureaucratising and professionalising trends that had shaped the East India Company throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Elphinstone's *Account* was by far the most comprehensive and complete of these works and his status as the foremost colonial expert on Afghan matters had a strong influence on subsequent works. For Hopkins, this influence amounted to what he terms the 'Elphinstonian episteme', one that 'definitively delineated the universe of the knowable regarding Afghanistan. All subsequent information, recorded and archived for the colonial state, would have to be fit into this episteme in order to be transformed into knowledge.'⁶³ This knowledge order was both enabling and constraining; whilst it allowed the British a structure of legibility it also limited the flexibility of their observations.

I. Bounding Afghanistan

If as Benedict Anderson has argued, the nation is an 'imagined community', then we should not be surprised at multiple, competing definitions of Afghan nationhood.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Jane Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism: from Robertson to James Mill', *The Historical Journal*, 25:1 (1982), pp. 43–69.

⁶¹ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁶² Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism'.

⁶³ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, p. 17.

⁶⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

Nigel Allan identifies three. Firstly, the genealogical definition referring to the five major Pakhtun/Pashtun tribal groups living in and around the Peshawar vale; secondly, a wider genealogical definition referring to *all* Pakhtun/Pashtun groups; finally, the territorial definition which takes ‘Afghan’ as meaning anyone who lives within the territorial limits of the modern Afghan state.⁶⁵ Elphinstone, facing this ambiguity, noted that the diversity in Afghan society, government, and bodily practice made it difficult ‘to select those great features, which all possess in common, and which give a marked national character to the whole of the Afghauns [*sic*]’.⁶⁶ Despite this, it was the first of these definitions that he preferred, an observation described by Hopkins as the ‘Pashtunization’ of Afghanistan.⁶⁷ Elphinstone’s observation on the origins of the Afghan nation was based in part on scriptural accounts documenting the history of the Afghan people and written in Persian,⁶⁸ but it was equally clear that he saw the Afghan polity, in a territorial sense, as a multinational entity. The Afghans co-existed alongside Persians (including Tajiks), Balochi, ‘Tatars’, ‘Indians’, and other ‘miscellaneous tribes’.⁶⁹

A related challenge facing explorers concerned where the borders of the Afghan polity lay. In part this was the projection of culturally contingent understandings of national space.⁷⁰ In addition, cartographic practice was now a mainstay of Imperial administrative practice – an expression of a supposedly scientific approach to understanding the territories the British found on their frontiers, but also a familiar language that allowed the British to converse over territories in which spatial patterns of authority were unfamiliar to them.⁷¹ This certainly applied in Afghanistan, an area whose social formations ‘thrived on territorial flexibility, defining space relationally’, and where ‘[d]istance, especially in regards to authority, was judged not in terms of *farsangs*,⁷² but in a genealogical idiom.’⁷³ The cartography was further complicated by the fact that Shah Shuja’s authority was shrinking at the time. ‘The Kingdom of Kabul’ was in a process of flux as competing groups sought political power. Elphinstone’s approach to overcoming this ambiguity was to adopt ‘the test made use of by the Asiatics themselves’ defining ‘the King’s sovereignty as extending over all the countries in which the *Khootba*⁷⁴ is read and the money coined in his name’.⁷⁵ This definition, which ignored alternative foundations of authority, created an artificially expanded cartography of Afghanistan’s territory shown in Figure 1.⁷⁶

⁶⁵ Nigel Allan, ‘Defining Place and People in Afghanistan’, *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, 42:8 (2001), p. 548.

⁶⁶ Elphinstone, *Account, Vol. I*, p. 238.

⁶⁷ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, p. 23.

⁶⁸ This included consultation of the genealogical histories of the founding father of the Afghan nation, Qais Abdur Rashid. Elphinstone, *Account, Vol. I*, pp. 253, 398.

⁶⁹ Elphinstone, *Account, Vol. I*, p. 138.

⁷⁰ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

⁷¹ Branch, ‘“Colonial Reflection” and territoriality’.

⁷² A Persian unit of measurement based on how far a man can walk in one day.

⁷³ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, p. 25.

⁷⁴ As per the original: ‘The *Khootba* is part of the Mahommedan service, in which the king of the country is prayed for. Inserting a prince’s name in the *Khootba*, and inscribing it on the current coin, are reckoned in the East the most certain acknowledgement of sovereignty.’ Elphinstone, *Account, Vol. I*, p. 138.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁷⁶ As a rough guide, the modern territorial state of Afghanistan is bounded on its north, south, east, and west, by Bulkh (Balkh), Caubul (Kabul), Candahar (Kandahar), and Farrah (Farah), respectively. Additional important population centres include Heraut (Herat) in the north-west, and Peshawar (Peshawar) to the east of Kabul, on the present day border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

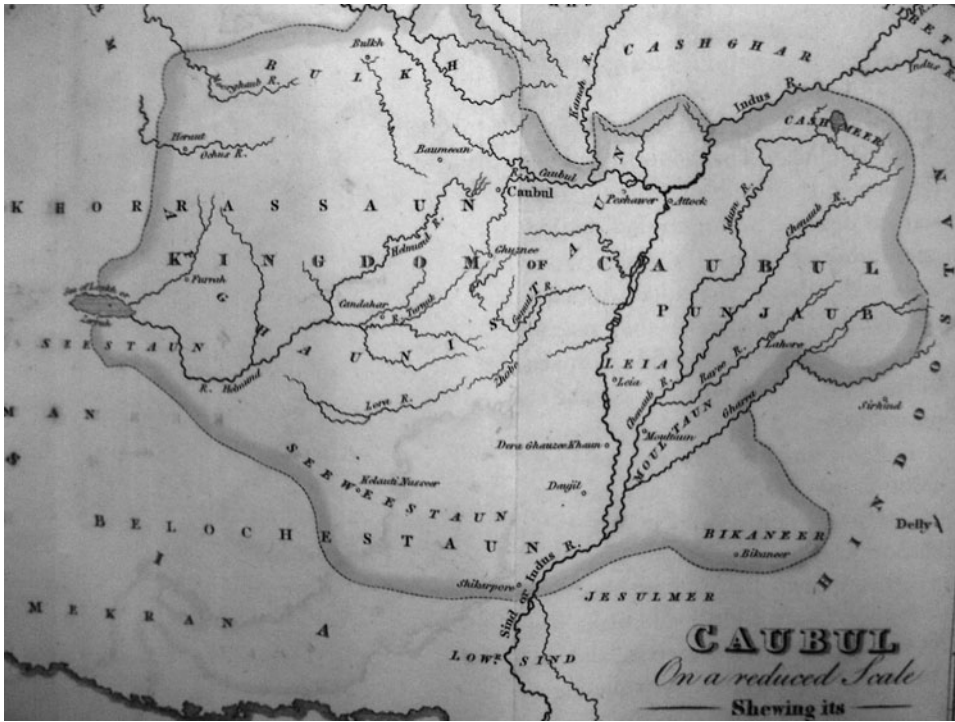


Figure 1. Map Taken from Elphinstone's Account labelled 'Caubul On a Reduced Scale, Shewing [sic] its Relative Situation to the Neighbouring Countries'

Such cartographic representations of the region appear to demonstrate a failure on the part of the British to comprehend the reality of facts on the ground, but in truth the British were well aware of the ambiguity of territory in the region. The frontier of the British Empire did not end with a line on the map, but rather faded out as influence became more tenuous, and knowledge more sparse. Indeed British diplomatic and commercial engagement in the region, including the oversight of treaty negotiations, and mediation between warring parties can be seen as a partly a process of formalising and apportioning territorial limits and possessions. This was a process that was also underway in India, which itself remained territorially and politically ill-defined. In the areas inhabited by 'Afghans' however, British involvement was far more limited, and thus contributed to a sense of unease with what 'Afghanistan' meant in territorial terms. In effect, this territorial ambiguity was the manifestation of competing notions of sovereignty between colonial and Afghan understandings, an ambiguity that disturbs the more rigid understandings of sovereignty familiar to IR. This ambiguity was clear in the forms of political authority that Elphinstone identified.

II. Authority, state, and tribe

For Elphinstone, royal authority in Afghanistan was the hereditary preserve of the Saddozai subtribe of the Durrani tribal federation. He identified the principal function of the government apparatus to be that of deriving revenue, the main source of which was from land tenure, with the main expenses of the court being the payment of the army, the household, the court establishment, and the clergy.⁷⁷ In order to reduce the tax burden on affiliated tribes, and therefore bolster the legitimacy of the King, revenue was drawn largely from non-Afghan constituencies such as Hindus and the territories of Peshawar and Kashmir – the loss of these two territories under Shah Shuja and Dost Muhammad Khan respectively, would put pressure on both rulers. The army was drawn mainly from Durrani rulers who were obliged to provide troops in return for their land grants (*Tiyuls*). In this sense, as Elphinstone summarised, '[t]he King's object with the Afghaun [*sic*] tribes is, to get men from the western, and money from the eastern.'⁷⁸ But in assessing the authority of the King over the country as a whole, Elphinstone witnessed a tension between Royal authority, and the rule of the 'tribes', an observation that highlights the sense of sovereign ambiguity that prevails in his account.

Elphinstone's *Account* is perhaps most influential in the delineations he drew between these independent tribal 'republics'. At the centre of this was the authority ascribed to what Elphinstone perceived as the royal clan of the Saddozai, a subtribe of the Popalzai tribe which was itself part of the wider Durrani federation. For Elphinstone, the Durrani were the Afghan political class, 'the greatest, bravest, and most civilized in the nation'.⁷⁹ Durrani clan leaders formed the court nobility deriving 'command and influence from the King's authority',⁸⁰ and the patronage he disbursed.

But this regal elite coexisted within the Afghan territory with a panoply of semi-autonomous tribal units. Whereas the colonial construct elsewhere in India had led the British to view 'tribals' as outsiders somehow cut off from Hindu and Muslim society,⁸¹ Afghanistan presented a community based almost entirely on this concept to which the British had attached a value judgment. Rather than seeing this pluralism as a source of weakness however, Elphinstone praised the 'high spirited republicanism' of the Afghan political community – a healthy tension in which military support from the periphery was exchanged in return for non-interference by the ruling elite. This, he argued, ensured defence against 'tyrants' and paradoxically guarded against a collective descent into ruin across the entire country. The 'tribes' thus presented an alternative conceptual lens through which to view the Afghan polity.

By the time of Masson's arrival in Afghanistan in 1827, this 'high spirited republicanism' had given way to internal disorder. The twin effects of a civil war between the Saddozai, and the Mohammadzai clan of the Barakzai tribe, and the expansionist moves of Ranjit Singh's Sikh Kingdom in the Punjab, had left the rule of Dost Muhammad Khan constrained to the immediate areas surrounding Kabul, and had cut off important sources of external revenue. In the eyes of the British, this disorder had opened up the state (to the extent that this could be defined) for pretenders to the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸¹ Christopher A. Bayly, 'Knowing the Country', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27:1 (1993), pp. 3–43.

throne. Masson, operating in the ethnographic mode elaborated by Elphinstone, wrote 'if united under a capable chief', the Ghilzai tribe, (who inhabited the area between Kandahar and Ghazni) 'might . . . in the present state of the country, become the most powerful'.⁸²

Burnes's account concurred, claiming that the 'royal house of Cabool' no longer existed 'as an ostensible part of the government' with the different chiefs ruling independently of one another.⁸³ Power, he claimed, was now fragmented between the population centres of Kabul, Kandahar, Peshawar, and Herat, with Peshawar effectively a dependency of the Sikhs, and Herat the last remaining outpost of the fallen Sadozai dynasty.

Faced with multiple challengers for authority, including from within his own family, Dost Muhammad Khan had opted to consolidate his rule in the territories surrounding Kabul through a campaign of pacification and revenue collection – a process documented in Masson's narrative. He had also shifted the foundations of his authority by issuing public expressions of his adherence to the Islamic scripture of the *Sunna*. The purpose was twofold: firstly, this call to faith enabled his constituency base to grow, taking advantage of the military role of the *Ghazi* (religious fighters) drawn from the hills overlooking the Indus. Secondly, it allowed a move away from the genealogical foundations of the previous Sadozai claim to royal privilege. Indeed Dost Muhammad Khan was able to bridge the *Sunni/Shi'a* divide that Masson had noted as a growing schism within the Afghan political community through his maternal *Shi'a* descent. This growing role of religion in political affairs was noted by the British who were apt to view unfolding events as examples of 'fanaticism'.

In contrast to Elphinstone's survey-based, top-down, elite-driven concept of Afghan political authority, based on a unitary conception of co-dependent tribal entities, Masson presents a more fluid impression of rule. The outcome is the representation of Dost Muhammad Khan as *primus inter pares*, negotiating a balancing act between the co-opting of potentially useful community leaders, whilst keeping them at a sufficient level of political power that they wouldn't pose a threat to his rule. This was the demonstration of a negotiated process of rule that Elphinstone had hinted at in his *Account*, but he was perhaps less exposed to it in practice through his engagement with mainly courtly elites and their cohorts – a group he referred to as 'the great'. Burnes and Masson on the other hand were both courted by competing elites, giving them a more fragile impression of Afghan rulership.⁸⁴

The cumulative knowledge base upon which British conceptions of Afghanistan were based was therefore conceptually coherent but factually fractured. Observers such as Masson and Burnes found their observations frequently evaded a simple description. On the one hand this state of affairs reflected the ongoing ructions within the Afghan political classes at the time of their visits, but in a wider sense it also represented the uncertainties of what was a process of transculturation. The formation of the Afghanistan knowledge community was not simply a process of information gathering, but was also a process in which political conceptual criteria were

⁸² Charles Masson, *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan, and the Panjab, Vol. II* (London: Richard Bentley, 1842), p. 204.

⁸³ Burnes, *Travels, Vol. III*, p. 250.

⁸⁴ Burnes, for example, was courted by Sirdar Sultan Muhammad Khan of Peshawar; Masson by Haji Khan, chief of Bamiyan (north-west of Kabul) and one of Dost Muhammad Khan's principal advisers. Burnes, *Travels, Vol. III*, p. 255; Masson, *Narrative, Vol II*, p. 360.

transferred into an Afghan political universe, including notions of territory and sovereign authority. This was bound to generate uncertainties as colonial and Afghan understandings entered a process of dialogue. Increasingly however, policy imperatives drove a process of closure over the ambiguity that inhered within this construct.

Knowing Afghanistan at the contact zones: a policy science for the powerful

As previously discussed, the 1830s saw a growing policy interest in affairs concerning the north-west of India. Not only did this prompt a greater demand for knowledge but it also increasingly attached such knowledge to policy prescriptions. The institutional structure within which this process took place can be understood by reference to what Ulrike Hillemann terms ‘contact zones’: sites for the transference of information, knowledge, concepts, and ideas between the periphery and the metropole, and back again.⁸⁵ Three sites were central to the picture that the British were beginning to build up. Firstly, London, the Cabinet, and the Court of Directors of the East India Company (EIC); secondly Calcutta, and the office of the governor general; and thirdly the Punjab, and the political officers. Important to this understanding is that in London the EIC was reaching the twilight years of its role in determining political concerns in India. Despite the appearance of metropolitan centralism (The Prime Minister still retained the power to declare war, for example), British India was beginning to craft a distinct foreign policy for itself, one that would be more cognisant of regional realities, rather simply used as a tool for balancing what were essentially European geopolitical concerns.⁸⁶ This in turn meant that the post of the governor general was beginning to enjoy a more exalted position in the British colonial policymaking hierarchy; in addition the office of the governor general was increasingly overseeing the collection of political, military, and diplomatic intelligence.⁸⁷ Whilst this had the effect of decentralising the bureaucratic process away from institutions of the EIC, it also had the effect of recentralising knowledge procurement within the circle of the governor general’s advisors. The growing activities of the political agents in the north-west were in part a reflection of this and their engagement with figures such as Charles Masson had the effect of officialising what had previously been a more entrepreneurial and open-ended knowledge community.

Driving this at the metropole was an intellectual and policy climate that since the late 1820s had exhibited signs of growing ‘Russophobia’. Two works by Colonel De Lacy Evans – *On the Designs of Russia* (1828), and *Practicability of an Invasion of British India* (1829) – had captured the imagination of a public wary of Russian moves against the Ottoman Empire, and copies were duly sent to the British representatives in Persia and Bombay.⁸⁸ In Calcutta however, the assessment of the *nature* of this threat differed: the impact of ‘rumour’ amongst the local population was considered more dangerous. Believing that their position in India owed much to the

⁸⁵ Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

⁸⁶ As the president of the Board of Control Lord Ellenborough proposed in late 1829, ‘the Indian Government should be authorized to act as an Asiatic power, ignoring the effect of its actions on Britain and Europe, if the Russians moved towards Kabul’. Norris, *The First Afghan War*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 144–5.

⁸⁸ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, p. 30.

perception of their superior military power the British worried constantly about any threat to this fragile edifice, particularly at the frontiers of their territory. As Lord Ellenborough, one of the more paranoid policy makers noted in 1830: 'We dread ... not so much actual invasion by Russia, as the moral effect which would be produced amongst our own subjects and among the Princes with whom we are allied, by the continued apprehension of that event.'⁸⁹

The principal method of counteracting Russian influence had been the steady expansion of trade and these efforts centred on the Indus River. It was envisaged, that by establishing an '*entrepôt*' of trade on the river, the benefits would emanate along commercial networks that worked their way westward through the Gomal Pass towards Herat, and northwards through the Bolan and Khyber passes, to Kabul and beyond. It was also hoped that this trading hub would present an alternative to the Russian-controlled trade fair of Niznii Novgorod the north, attracting merchants from Central Asia and thereby reducing the commercial influence of Russia. This was more than simply trade 'following the flag'. Commercial enterprise was very much the 'idiom of British governmentality' at this time.⁹⁰ The exploits of Colonel Chesney in Mesopotamia provided a model for the project and the unsuitability of the Euphrates and Tigris meant the possibility of steamboats being transferred southwards; a new technology which it was hoped would benefit communications, trade, and security across the British territories.⁹¹ To this end, in 1837 Alexander Burnes and three EIC officials were sent on a second surveying mission to assess the commercial viability of the Indus River and the prospects of trade with Kabul. Burnes's second trip satisfied the dual purposes of a commercial urge, and a desire for accurate political intelligence. The result was a far more policy-driven development of existing knowledge, the output of which went directly to the governor general, who as late as 1837 was lamenting the 'haze of confusion' that existed beyond Lahore.⁹²

The perception of a fractured Barakzai polity in the north-west had encouraged a spirit of cautious engagement with Afghan affairs through much of the 1830s and the wisdom of commercial enterprise was not without controversy.⁹³ Dost Muhammad Khan faced not only external threats from the Sikhs, but internal threats too from his Barakzai brothers at Kandahar and Peshawar. Aside from a brief alliance with Kabul during Shah Shuja's failed attempt to reclaim his throne in 1833–4, Kandahar was autonomous, whilst Peshawar – although ruled by Dost Muhammad Khan's brother – was perceived to be firmly under the yoke of Sikh power. Moreover, Kandahar's geographic position left it vulnerable in British eyes to Persia, which was at the time laying siege to Herat. In a nineteenth-century variant on 'domino theory', it was feared that should Herat fall, Kandahar would be forced to align with the Persians; and that in this scenario, the Persian community, including Persian

⁸⁹ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, p. 31.

⁹⁰ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, p. 38.

⁹¹ The findings of a Select Committee on Steam Communications were reported in the *Delhi Gazette*, IOR (Microfilm) SM52, January 1837. See also, IOR, Broughton Papers, Add MS 36473, pp. 64, 80, 85–6, 188.

⁹² IOR, Broughton Papers, Add MS 36473, p. 120. For the reports see IOR/V/27/270/7, 'Reports and Papers, Political, Geographical, and Commercial. Submitted to Government, by Sir Alexander Burnes; Lieutenant Leech; Doctor Lord; and Lieutenant Wood'.

⁹³ Henry St George Tucker, who was Chairman of the Company Board at the time, declined to support this second mission 'feeling perfectly assured that it must soon degenerate into a political agency, and that we should as a necessary consequence be involved in all the entanglement of Afghan politics'. Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, Volume I*, p. 181.

elements of the military – the *Qizilbash*⁹⁴ – in Kabul would be encouraged into insurrection against Dost Muhammad Khan. Behind Persia, it was believed, lay Russian support.

This regional threat complex is significant. On the one hand it shows the manner in which quasi-causal stories were beginning to emerge, but more significantly for our purposes here, it demonstrates the ways in which the British were socialising their own geopolitical fears into their knowledge-based lexicon of regional politics. The perception of threat heightened certain features of the Afghan polity, as the British imagined it, including inter-Barakzai feuds. Dost Muhammad Khan's maternal *Shi'a* descent thereby became a threat, as Burnes argued, because it potentially aligned him with the *Shi'a* state of Persia.⁹⁵ The significance of this was not lost on Governor-General Auckland who in June 1838 described Dost Muhammad Khan as 'a *kuzilbash* [*sic*] to the Westward'.⁹⁶ It is notable that those aspects of Elphinstone's argument that drop out include the positive tension between centre and periphery that had previously held together the rule of Shah Shuja. British preconceptions also entailed a revised view of the political geography. Herat became viewed as the bastion of defence against Persian expansionism, despite the schism that existed by virtue of the ruler of Herat being a Saddozai and therefore outside of the ruling family of Dost Muhammad Khan.

Sovereign competence: Dost Muhammad Khan and Shah Shuja

Having shifted his foundations for sovereign legitimacy from royal lineage to Islam, Dost Muhammad Khan came under particular scrutiny in his capacity to govern. Burnes noted that shrinking land revenue had been balanced by closer sovereign oversight of the trading customs house and an increased, but not overbearing commercial tax. Within Kabul, his esteem was judged as high. Despite this however, Burnes lamented the continual frittering away of this revenue on costly military campaigns. The Afghan-Sikh battle of Jamrud in early 1837 had underlined this point, and as Burnes argued 'a diminution of [Dost Mohammed Khan's] enemies will have the same effect as an actual increase to his resources'.⁹⁷ The outcome of this was uncertain however. Burnes noted that even if Afghan-Sikh rivalry could be negotiated through an agreement over Peshawar (and this was considered unlikely), the 'Mahomedan tribes inhabiting the mountains of Eastern Afghanistan . . . who now regard the Ruler of Cabool as the Champion of Islam, might then view him simply as an ambitious ruler seeking for personal aggrandizement'.⁹⁸ In addition, the call to faith had alienated the *Shi'a* community of the Persian *Qizilbash* who bolstered his authority. Dost Muhammad Khan's shift in the foundations of his legitimacy was therefore not only unfamiliar to the British, but – based on their increasingly nucleated view of the Afghan political community – ultimately unsustainable.

⁹⁴ The *Qizilbash* were a Persian unit of the Afghan army that functioned as the personal bodyguards of the ruler of Kabul, having been originally established under the rule of Ahmad Shah (r.1747–72). The *Qizilbash* are to be distinguished from the ethnic Hazara community inhabiting the central highlands of the Hindu Kush who were also of the *Shi'a* sect of Islam and accordingly were viewed by the British as potentially aligning with Persia in the event of a Persian invasion.

⁹⁵ IOR/V/27/270/7, p. 10.

⁹⁶ IOR, Broughton Papers, Add MS 36473, p. 262.

⁹⁷ IOR/V/27/270/7, p. 15.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The British retained an ideal-type image of the Afghan polity under the former Sadozai monarchy – and this was sustained by the intellectual heritage of Elphinstone. Moreover, Shah Shuja's exile in the Punjab had allowed a regular channel of communication between himself and the governor general, which he used to encourage the British of his continued popularity with vast swathes of the Afghan political community, as well as to encourage a perception of the illegitimacy of the Barakzai.⁹⁹ This impression was particularly strong at Calcutta. The appeal, to the British, of a return to Sadozai rule was not just a result of the intellectual legacy of Elphinstone's concept of traditional authority, or in Shuja's continued assertions of his legitimacy, but also in a sense of security that the British derived from the concept of a unitary political formation. By September 1837, the Governor General Lord Auckland was referring to the 'triple power' of Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ For the British, Afghanistan increasingly resembled a fragmented polity amidst a sea of predatory tribal chieftaincies, monarchies, and states. Shah Shuja offered a sovereign order that cohered with the outdated official vision of a stable Afghan polity.

In March 1838, the secretary to the Governor-General, William Hay Macnaghten, wrote to Burnes and Masson asking for proposed measures to 'counteract' the policy of Dost Muhammad Khan. Both replied with the suggestion that a British backed venture led by Shah Shuja with limited British financial and military support would achieve British ends. Burnes opined that British policy should be to make Kabul 'as strong as we can make it and not weaken it by divided power . . . we should consolidate the Afghan power west of the Indus and have a King and not a collection of Chiefs'. He added: "'*Divide et impera*" is a temporising creed at any time and if the Afghans are united we . . . bid defiance to Persia and instead of distant relations we have every thing under our own eye and a steadily progressing influence all along the Indus.'¹⁰¹ Masson concurred: 'In aiding the restoration of Shah Sujah', he proposed, 'the British Government would consult the feelings of the Afghan nation, among which his popularity is great, and who even wonder that the Government has not before done it. If he avowedly advanced under British auspices, his success would be prompt and certain, little or no blood would be shed – he would be joined by all who are discontented with the Barrakzai [*sic*] rule . . . Even the Powerful Kazzalbash [*sic*] faction at Kabul would acknowledge the Shah, for they have no other object in promoting and abetting the designs of Persia, than to rid themselves of Dost Mahomed Khan.' Masson further argued that the strength of this proposal lay in the potential it had to unite Kabul with Herat, which remained the last outpost of Sadozai rule under Shah Kamran.¹⁰²

At the time Macnaghten made his request of Masson and Burnes he was on his way to meet with Ranjit Singh to discuss the possible options with regards to dealing with Dost Muhammad Khan. The Anglo-Sikh alliance was judged more important than placating the needs of the Barakzai ruler of Afghanistan, and during the

⁹⁹ IOR/L/PS/20/MEMO1/15/3, pp. 4–5, 7. Shah Shuja also made three attempts to regain his throne, each of which failed. The first attempt via Kashmir in 1815, an aborted attempt in 1818, and then again 1834. The latter two had been followed by British officials and in the case of the 1834 expedition, supported by British financing. Despite this there was a reluctance to become more involved in these efforts and what was seen as an opaque political contest. Dalrymple, *Return of a King*, pp. 36–8, 45–6, 66–73.

¹⁰⁰ IOR, Broughton Papers, Add MS 36473, p. 188.

¹⁰¹ IOR, Elphinstone Papers, Mss Eur F88/105, pp. 46–9.

¹⁰² IOR, Broughton Papers, Add MS 36473, pp. 370–7.

summer months the Governor-General and his cohorts developed the plans for a military invasion of Afghanistan that would replace Dost Muhammad Khan with Shah Shuja. At this point, the advice of the knowledge community became subsumed by the policy, but the framing they provided had nonetheless, guided that policy. At this moment, the knowledge formed by the Afghanistan knowledge community was marking a final shift from the ‘embodied knowledge’ that had been the mainstay of the early Company state, to the more official, or ‘institutional knowledge’ of the colonial state.¹⁰³ This entailed a more fixed conceptual order, as the ambiguities of the works of the early European explorers were ironed out for reasons of policy expediency.

It remains to be said that of Elphinstone, Masson, and Burnes, none agreed with the eventual policy path chosen. Masson and Burnes both claimed that their advice had been misinterpreted, and that they had only proposed a light financial and military backing to Shah Shuja, in order to tip the balance of threat in his favour, and win over prevaricating groups within Afghanistan’s political community.¹⁰⁴ Masson resigned from Government service in 1840 after being wrongfully detained as a spy for the Afghans in Quetta. In 1839 Elphinstone wrote to Burnes, who was by that time an envoy at Kabul, to offer his opinions on the policy. ‘I have no doubt you will take Candahar and Cabul and set up Shuja but for maintaining him, in a poor, cold, strong and remote country, among a turbulent people like the Afghans, I own it seems to me to be hopeless.’¹⁰⁵ Masson was even more outspoken. ‘It is to be hoped’, he wrote, ‘that the good sense of the British nation will never again permit such expeditions as the one beyond the Indus, to be concerted with levity, and to be conducted with recklessness.’¹⁰⁶ Such comments are priceless for those who seek to draw a line between the contemporary era and the past. But as Priya Satia has urged, Marx’s famous dictum that ‘history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce’, was not meant to be taken literally. Rather, history develops dialectically, and the conditions of possibility that allow this to happen are as much epistemological as they are material.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

In the lead up to the First Anglo-Afghan War, the British may have seen a nation in Afghanistan, but it was a faint construct, contested both locally and regionally, and deriving more from a need to categorise a heterogeneous community than from any sense of the term ‘nation’ in its contemporary meaning. Moreover, the British did not yet see a state, and where they did, it was only as the crumbling ruins of the former Sadozai regime – a direct consequence of the impact of Elphinstone’s work. Knowledge of Afghanistan did not *cause* the Anglo-Afghan War of 1838–42, but insufficient

¹⁰³ For this distinction see Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 144.

¹⁰⁴ Masson, *Narrative*, Vol. 1, pp. vi–viii. Burnes made a similar argument in response to a letter from Elphinstone disputing the wisdom of the invasion. In his words, ‘I never doubted we could place the Shah on the throne but that I viewed the Army as far too large – Indeed the passing of so many British troops into Afghanistan has been the prime cause of Shah Shooja’s partial unpopularity.’ IOR, Elphinstone Papers, Mss Eur F88/111, p. 81.

¹⁰⁵ IOR, Elphinstone Papers, Mss Eur F88/111, p. 28.

¹⁰⁶ Masson, *Narrative*, Vol. 1, p. xi.

¹⁰⁷ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, p. 337.

attention to the construction of the idea of the Afghan polity in the minds of the British has overlooked this important conditioning factor in the decision to go to war. As Christine Noelle puts it, '[w]hile greater themes like "imperialism" ... point to the origins of British action, they fail to account for the manner in which the British attempted to extend their influence in Afghanistan.'¹⁰⁸ In short, knowledge of Afghanistan made the war imaginable in the first place.

This article has sought to demonstrate the value of attention to colonial knowledge, which hitherto has received little attention within the IR discipline, despite the 'imperial turn' of the past decade. Colonial knowledge can be viewed as a 'register' of imperial international thought,¹⁰⁹ highlighting how core categories familiar to IR, including the state, sovereignty, and territoriality, can be viewed as emergent phenomena, rather than as pre-social, essentialised categories. From an IR perspective, colonial knowledge provides not just a site for the construction of state identity by an external actor, but a site for dialogue between competing idioms of political order – in this case a British conception and an Afghan conception – albeit a dialogue dominated by the categories of the former over the latter.

The development of what has been termed a 'knowledge community' on Afghanistan was a manifestation of an evolving approach to the collection and use of colonial knowledge more widely by the colonial state. In the case of Afghanistan, the use of this knowledge in framing the policies that led to the First Anglo-Afghan War, shut down the latitude and fluidity that was previously apparent in existing understandings of the Afghan polity, including competing sovereign orders, and the vaguaries of Afghanistan's territorial reach. The knowledge community provided two principal ways through which the British could 'imagine' Afghanistan. On the one hand it provided evidence for a fractured, acephalous polity, at war with itself, unbounded, volatile and inadequately led by a 'chief', who had usurped the legitimate ruling dynasty and now threatened neighbouring powers in order to compensate for his own internal weakened rulership. This picture was heightened by the contrasting features of the polities – even 'states' – surrounding Afghanistan that were apparently more bounded, stable, unified, monarchical authorities with whom the British could more easily conduct diplomatic and commercial exchanges. The difficulties that the British faced in scrutinising and categorising Afghanistan – 'a country which', as Burnes described it, 'seemed as it were not' – meant that the territory became more of a locational concept, continually contested in the imperial mind.¹¹⁰ The march to war in 1838 forced a process of closure over this definition. The second contribution made by the knowledge community was in providing an alternative scenario: reinstating the deposed Sadozai authority, under Shah Shuja, who could rectify the failings of the collapsed polity the British now believed they were seeing beyond the Indus river.

Ultimately the knowledge community that grew up around the policy problem of British India's north-west provided the sources for justifying a policy of conquest, and left an intellectual legacy that outlasted its relevance. The failure of the project to consolidate British presence in Afghanistan led to a sustained period of exclusion

¹⁰⁸ Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁹ Duncan Bell, 'Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought', *The Historical Journal*, 49:1 (2006), p. 283.

¹¹⁰ IOR, Broughton Papers, Mss Eur F213/89, 'Observations on the restored Government of Shah Shooja', 4 July 1840.

as Afghanistan settled into the colonial imagination as the epitome of a *terra incognita*, a true ‘outlaw state’.¹¹¹ The closest contact that the British had with the Afghans during this period was through the tribes of the North West Frontier and a tenuous system of ‘native informants’. The form of administration here mirrored the sense of exclusion that the British felt towards the territories to the north and west: not seeking to ‘integrate, civilize and modernize’, but rather to ‘contain, conserve and traditionalize’, drawing ‘deeply upon the well of colonial memory’, thereby preserving the works of Elphinstone, *et al.*¹¹² Indeed Elphinstone’s work, being the most complete of its kind, had the effect of freezing in time British conceptualisations of the Afghan territories long after its relevance had expired. As late as 1887, over seventy years on from the first publication of Elphinstone’s *Account*, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* was still citing it as a key text.¹¹³ Of Masson’s works, the famous nineteenth-century geographer Sir Thomas Holdich wrote, ‘the most amazing feature of Masson’s tales of travel is that in all essential features we knew little more about the country of the Afghans after the second war with Afghanistan than he could have told us before the first’.¹¹⁴ Colonial knowledge on Afghanistan has cast a long shadow.

Rescuing Afghanistan’s imperial encounter from the oblivion of great power diplomatic history demands closer attention to the sunken histories of this period. Imperial histories have for some time moved on from the sterile categories of official practice and instead embraced social, cultural, and intellectual history to thicken their narratives and to give voice to the voiceless. Whilst the ‘imperial turn’ in IR has created space for the incorporation of such work into the discipline, there is much left to explore. In arguing for greater attention to colonial knowledge in particular this article has sought to conduct IR in the imperial mode, in a way that does not do damage to either the history, or to the insights that IR can bring to the table. Doing so requires shedding traditional disciplinary adherence to unchanging conceptual baggage.

¹¹¹ Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*.

¹¹² Hopkins and Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, p. 63.

¹¹³ ‘In the Heart of Afghanistan’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, January (1887), p. 81.

¹¹⁴ The Second Anglo-Afghan War took place between 1878–80. Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, p. 41.