

(Un)knowing the Country: Empire & the Genesis of the Afghanistan Expertise Industry

In light of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Afghanistan is back in the news, and Afghanistan expertise is back in fashion. In this Long Read, Martin J. Bayly explores the imperial histories that sit behind these forms of expert knowledge, and what they might tell about contemporary foreign policy expertise.

August was a busy month for Afghanistan experts. As the foreign policy commentariat in London and Washington geared up for the twenty-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and all that followed, the Taliban were speedily making their way out of their rural hinterlands to take Afghanistan's major cities. One by one they fell. As commissioning editors and reporters scrambled to make copy deadlines and fill in the gaps in their knowledge, an army of Afghanistan experts re-emerged to speak knowledgeably on Afghanistan's 'tribal structures', and the complex relationship that the Taliban has with ISIS or Al Qaeda.

We've been here before. The past twenty years has seen brisk business for Afghanistan expertise. The pace quickened especially in 2009 as US President Barak Obama's surge brought the weight of the American military juggernaut behind a full-spectrum counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign in Afghanistan. In *Foreign Policy* magazine, a [special issue](#) adopted the front cover of the US Marine Corps' highly touted 'COIN' manual Field Manual (FM) 3-24 with contributions from the 'COINdinistas', [General David Petraeus](#) (later rising to become Director of the CIA, albeit briefly), and Lieutenant [Colonel John Nagl](#) among them. The transference of a foreign policy agenda from one operating arena to another was rarely more apparent. At the core of this lay what the Americans called the 'Human Terrain System'. HTS was an unlikely (though by no means unprecedented) alliance emerged between social scientists, anthropologists, area studies experts, and military units keen to gather 'cultural awareness' of their operating environment and fill the gaps in understanding of a military organization never designed to think deeply about who it was engaging with.

In some ways, the absence of expertise on the region is an historical puzzle. Writing in the 1960s, as he made his way across the southern provinces, the celebrated British historian of civilization, and former Chatham House director, [Arnold J. Toynbee](#) reflected that Afghanistan had been '[deluged by history and devastated by it](#)' (p. 131). For Toynbee, some study of Afghanistan – what he termed a 'civilisational roundabout' – was '[indispensible](#)' (p. 11) to the student of world affairs.

If this was the case then the message failed to percolate through to the US [Department of State](#) and [Department of Defense](#), or the UK [Foreign & Commonwealth Office](#) (now UK Foreign, Commonwealth, & Development Office). In 2010, [Major General Michael Flynn](#) (later rising to prominence in the Trump Administration) reported that because US military intelligence had focused its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, its intelligence apparatus 'still finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade'. In July 2010, of the 161 British diplomats in Afghanistan, [just three spoke fluent Dari or Pashto](#) — the two major languages spoken in Afghanistan. Academia fared little better. The [School of Oriental and African Studies](#) (SOAS) in London was the only British university teaching Pashto or Dari at the time, with no degree level Pashto available anywhere in the UK. Afghanistan studies was, according to Sir Adam Roberts, then-President of the British Academy, '[an orphan in academia](#)'.

A seductive logic lies behind these facts, and the signalling of the ignorance of post-imperial bureaucracy. In essence, it is the idea that if only knowledge of foreign places were more refined, disastrous foreign policy choices would be less frequent. [Rory Stewart](#), (later rising to compete with [Boris Johnson](#) to become the next British Prime Minister) made a similar observation in his account of his own Afghanistan travels, tellingly titled [The Places In Between](#). 'Colonial administrations may have been racist and exploitative', he wrote. 'But they did at least work seriously at the business of understanding the people they were governing. ... Post conflict experts have got the prestige without the effort or stigma of imperialism. Their implicit denial of the differences between cultures is the new mass brand of international intervention' (pp 271–72).

Did Rory Stewart have a point? Well, perhaps not.

European involvement in Afghan affairs, and attempts to ‘know the country’ stretch back to at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1808, the East India Company administrator [Mountstuart Elphinstone](#) (later rising to become Governor of Bombay), was the first British envoy to visit Afghanistan, at that time under the reign of [Shah Shuja](#) (r. 1803–10, 1839–42). The geostrategic rationale behind the mission was to expand Company influence in advance of a largely overplayed fear of growing Napoleonic influence from the West. But Elphinstone’s mission also sat within the nineteenth-century European quest for ‘scientific’ knowledge. This was the foundation upon which academic [Orientalism](#) was built – a discourse that [Edward Said](#) would later deconstruct as having justified imperialism in advance, through representing the oriental ‘other’ as preternaturally backward, superstitious, and without history.

Yet even Elphinstone was reluctant to fully immerse himself in Afghan culture and society, preferring instead the palatial surroundings of Peshawar; the winter capital of the declining Durrani kingdom, whilst his research assistants (normally ‘native agents’) fanned out across the country. This did not limit the impact of his work. The multi-volume [An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul](#) became, in historian Benjamin Hopkins’ words, a ‘[hegemonic text](#)’ of Afghanistan studies. It retains that influence today. Readily available in the expat bookshops of Islamabad it forms part of a wider oeuvre of ‘frontier’ literature whose reprint dates coincide with major international crises in the region.

Keen consumers of Elphinstone’s work were later European explorers, among them [Alexander Burnes](#). Lionised by the likes of Rory Stewart, Burnes was drawn to the region by the growing appetite for ‘useful knowledge’ on the trading prospects offered by the Indus river region. A key objective of the Court of Directors, and their state backers, the British Crown, was to establish the [Indus](#) as a trading entrepot in order to draw influence away from the Russian-controlled Central Asian trading hubs of [Nizhny Novgorod](#) and elsewhere. Having surveyed the river, Burnes continued on to Kabul with two European co-travellers. Together [they produced a catalogue of policy reports](#) on the commercial potential of [Kabul](#), [Kandahar](#), and Herat. Burnes would later rise to become a prominent advisor to the Governor General in India ([George Eden](#), 1st Earl of Auckland, was Governor General of India from 1836–42) on the Company’s Afghanistan policy (subsequently becoming the Company’s representative in Kabul). Having failed to secure trading terms with the new Afghan Amir, [Dost Muhammad Khan](#) (r. 1826–63), the British invaded Afghanistan on the pretext of a Russian threat. But what sat behind this justification was the Elphinstonian idea that Afghanistan was a ‘tribal republic’. This ‘tribalisation’ of Afghanistan — as Hopkins puts it — created what James C. Scott later termed a ‘[state simplification](#)’. Eliding the complexities of Afghan political history, and encouraged by their intermediaries in exile including the deposed Shah Shuja, the British settled on the comforting narrative that Dost Muhammad Khan, of the Barakzai sub-tribe, was a usurper to the historical continuity of the [Saddozai](#) royal lineage — the tribe to which Elphinstone’s former host belonged. The policy of regime change the British pursued was built upon this logic.

As we are frequently reminded, the invasion of 1838 ended in bloody failure with the retreat of 1842 and the subsequent brutalising of the Afghan population by a returning ‘Army of Retribution’ later that year. The tone was thereby set for Anglo-Afghan relations in the ensuing decades, at least until the [Second Anglo-Afghan War](#) of 1878. Since 2001, the story of the First Anglo-Afghan war has been retold countless times through a catalogue of books that resembles almost a genre in itself. We might term it Afghan ‘disaster-lit’. Frequently these works carry the paraphernalia of imperial nostalgia: for instance, a nod to [Rudyard Kipling](#) (who himself never visited Afghanistan), often through a misattributed mention of the ‘Great Game’, that was only ever marginal to the novel [Kim](#). Or we are reminded that Afghanistan is the ‘graveyard of empires’, a sobriquet that succeeds in being both historically inaccurate and Orientalist (in the Saidian sense) at the same time. The cornerstone of this literature is the notion that Afghanistan is beyond help.

But when attention is turned to the period following 1842, a more resonant story emerges. In light of their ignominious defeat, Afghanistan became subsumed in British accounts under a powerful imaginative geography that cast the country as perpetually violent. This was partly a function of the information system through which knowledge was filtered to the British in India. An improvised system of frontier officers drawing upon mobile groups: traders, holy men and deserters, tended to elevate instances of what C. A. Bayly termed '[information panics](#)', often feeding the narrative that Afghanistan was doomed to periodic bouts of civil war and state collapse. Implicit in this was what [Nivi Manchanda](#) has recently termed the 'politics of disavowal', one which absolved regional players, and the British in particular, of any role in this process. There is not a huge leap to be made to the narratives surrounding Afghanistan today. Embedded in the rhetorical style of the Afghanistan expert is not just a story of endless repeating cycles of invasion, renewal and collapse, but a deeper Orientalism that justifies the representation of Afghanistan as preternaturally prone to internecine 'tribal' conflict.

In *The Places in Between*, Stewart gives voice to the 'rush to the intimate' that [Derek Gregory](#) spoke about in his depiction of the culturalist persuasions of twenty-first century counterinsurgency. The cascade of Persian greetings that often accompany encounters on Stewart's trip could be lifted straight from the travel accounts of Elphinstone, Burnes or any number of other explorers. Yet the closing sections of his book hint that his cultural awareness was perhaps more finely tuned to his own community of Westerners residing in Afghanistan at the time, than it was to the highlanders of the Hazarajat.

Stewart's dismissal of the aid and development sector's intellectual bankruptcy highlights a more historically mobile evolution in the genesis of expert knowledge on Afghanistan. It is a development captured in the observation made by [Hamid Dabashi](#), a disciple of Edward Said, that the knowledge that sustained the notion of the '[East as a career](#)', need not be historically static. It was rooted in a particular moment in the imperial lifecycle, and to be contextualised within the institutional architecture — what Said called the 'corporate body' — that produced it. As Dabashi clarifies in [Can Non-Europeans Think?](#) (2015):

This is 'fast knowledge' produced on the model of 'fast food', with plastic cups, plastic knives, plastic forks, bad nutrition, false satisfaction. The US invades Afghanistan and these think tanks produce a knowledge conducive to that project; then the US leads another invasion of Iraq and these think tanks begin producing knowledge about Iraq, with little or no connection with what they had said about Afghanistan, or what they might say about Iran. There is little or no epistemic consistency among the three — for these forms of knowledge are produced under duress (with tight deadlines) and are entirely disposable. You throw them out after one use. (p. 18)

As we pick over the wreckage of the international community's precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, we might at least spend some time thinking and reflecting on the way the west has presumed to 'know' the people and the country, and how this knowing has come about. Imperial resonances resurface once more as the discourse of a violent geography re-emerges in an attempt — partly at least, surely — to satisfy a narcissistic urge to atone for these failures and the misery they have heaped upon the Afghan people. Distancing ourselves from Afghanistan (and, implicitly, Afghans) is much easier when it is cast as necessarily violent, never mind the horrors of American prison camps, and the sheer firepower of western weaponry that has been left behind. With such echoes of imperial failure reverberating it is tempting to recall [Marx's](#) aphorism that history repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce. It is fair to say both are evident in recent events. But as [Priya Satia](#) has observed in [Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East](#) (2008, p. 337), this was not meant to be taken literally. Rather — for Marx — history progresses as a dialectic, and the conditions of possibility that allow this to happen are as much epistemological as they are material. They relate to how we know, and how we fail to know.

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