Review: *Sikunder Burnes, Master of the Great Game*, by Craig Murray, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2016, 437pp., 8pp b/w plates, 8pp col plates, Bibliography, Index, £25.00, ISBN 978-1-780-27317-4

As Craig Murray notes in his preface to this exhaustively-researched book, Alexander Burnes has more often been a subject of fiction than of biography. The hero of Philip Hensher's *The Mulberry Empire* (2002), he also figures prominently in the first of George Macdonald Fraser's *Flashman novels* (1969), but there is only one short biographical study (Lunt 1969). To historians of Afghanistan and of the so-called 'Great Game' between Britain and Russia in Central Asia in the long nineteenth-century he is a familiar, not to say legendary figure, even if opinion is divided as to whether he should be seen as sharing responsibility for the disasters of British policy in Afghanistan in 1839-41, or as a prophet whose warnings were not heeded. Together with his earlier trip to Bukhara in 1831-3, the published account of which first made his name with the British public (Burnes 1834), the sad story of the First Afghan War and Burnes's murder at the hands of a mob in Kabul is the best-known passage of his short but rich career. Murray's achievement is to move beyond these two episodes and give us a full and sympathetic picture of Burnes's life which is fully contextualized within both Scottish History and that of the East India Company.

Murray clearly feels a strong personal connection to his subject, writing 'I admit I identify with Burnes to a considerable degree. We were both East Coast Scots, from similar social backgrounds, who sought a living abroad primarily for economic reasons' (p.vii). The advantages of this are seen particularly in the early chapters on Burnes's childhood and family background in Montrose, where his father was Provost. Murray is extremely alive to the nuances of status in Scottish society, and brilliantly reconstructs the patronage networks that allowed the fifteen-year old Alexander (whom he refers to as 'Alex' throughout) to be appointed to a cadetship in the East India Company's Bombay army. He also argues convincingly for the importance of Scottish Freemasonry to the social networks and career advancement in India of Burnes and his brother James, an insight I have not seen elsewhere (pp.136-14). The disadvantages of Murray's closeness to his subject are seen in the numerous asides where he compares Burnes's position in Kabul with his own as British ambassador to Uzbekistan, from which he was dismissed in 2004 and which is the subject of a previous book (Murray 2006). He also frequently compares the East India Company's foreign policy in the 1830s with that of the Blair government during the 'War on Terror' and the run-up to the Iraq War. Without wanting to revisit these well-known controversies (my own view is that Murray's criticisms of Islam Karimov's regime in Uzbekistan were largely justified, but his use of his ambassadorial position to promote them was largely counterproductive) these analogies are ahistorical and distract from the serious research that has gone into this book. Referring to his protests to the British Foreign Office about the use of intelligence from the Uzbek regime which had been obtained though torture, Murray writes 'Burnes faced precisely the same pressures from precisely the same institution' (p.241) when he objected to Governor-General Auckland's plans to invade Afghanistan and install Shah Shuja on the throne. In fact it was the attitude of the East India Company's leadership that was decisive in provoking the First Afghan War, not that of the Foreign Office in London. Equally Murray's objections were as much moral as practical, while Burnes

opposed the invasion not because he thought the British had no right to interfere in the affairs of neighbouring states (he was an enthusiastic advocate of British imperial expansion) but because he thought Auckland was backing the wrong horse, and the British should be seeking to make Amir Dost Muhammad their client. Their responses were also different – rightly or wrongly, Murray defied the discipline of his service and went public with his criticisms, while Burnes agreed to collaborate with the invasion, and his opposition to it only became known after his death. This highlights the danger of this sort of comparison: the circumstances and contemporary mores were so different that anachronism is almost inevitable. Thankfully, most of the time Murray sticks to his task without these distractions.

It does seem a pity that Murray (or his publisher) felt the need to include the widely-discredited concept of the 'Great Game' in the book's title. Implying as it does the primacy of Great Power rivalry in understanding Central Asian history at this time, what Murray's research instead reveals is the huge importance and agency of local actors, something recent historians of this period of Afghan history have strongly argued for (Hopkins 2008, 34-47). Burnes spent most of his time interacting with Indian and Afghan rulers and elites, whose actions and attitudes were decisive both to the origins and the outcome of the British invasion of Afghanistan, and yet his single encounter with the Russian envoy Ivan Vitkevich is often allowed to overshadow this. I am also not convinced that what Murray refers to as the 'dodgy dossier' (the redacted Parliamentary Blue Book relating to the Afghan invasion, published in 1839) was as important as he suggests here in making Burnes a scapegoat for Auckland's Afghan policy (pp.270-4, 378-82). Alder's careful research on the subject suggests that the aim of the publication was to convince Parliament that there had been a genuine threat of Russian interference in Afghanistan, while simultaneously avoiding anything that might be actively offensive to the Russians, who were by then taking a more emollient stance. Given that Burnes believed the Russian threat to be real, and repeatedly urged this in his dispatches, his position on that point was not seriously misrepresented (Alder 1972). Overall I think it is fair to say that Murray's account of the First Afghan War, which occupies much of the second half of the book, does not add a great deal to existing scholarship (Norris 1967; Yapp 1980 307 – 462; Dalrymple 2013), though he does deepen our understanding of Burnes's role.

Overall though, the research which has gone into this book is extremely impressive. Burnes's voluminous unpublished correspondence, public and private, together with the many official reports and memoranda he authored far outweigh the published works by which he is still usually known (Burnes 1834 & 1842), and are divided between the India Office Library in London, the National Archives of India in Delhi and the National Library of Scotland: Murray makes exhaustive and skilful use of these. His meticulous reconstruction of Burnes's first independent diplomatic mission, surveying the Indus under the guise of delivering dray horses to the Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh, uses materials from the Maharashtra State Archives, while in the basement of the Bombay Asiatic Society's magnificent building he pulled off a real coup by rediscovering a 'lost' portrait of Burnes, which graces the cover of the book and will hopefully replace the plump, deliberately falsified image which Burnes used in his published works (pp.128-9). The picture of Burnes which emerges is full

and sympathetic, though not overly so. Murray successfully dispels the myth that it was Burnes's amorous adventures with Afghan women that provoked the Kabul rising in 1841 - he suggests instead, quite reasonably, that Burnes and his fellow officers had brought Kashmiri concubines with them (p.342). With so much crashing stupidity within the British leadership in Kabul at this time (notably Macnaghten, the resident, and Elphinstone, the military commander) Burnes inevitably shines by comparison. A brilliant linguist who easily made friends across cultural and religious boundaries, genuinely fascinated by and sympathetic to Central Asian and Islamic culture, with what proved to be an acute understanding of the weaknesses and faults of British policy, Burnes's main fault seems to have been the ambition that led him to go along with that policy against his better judgement. As he paid for that fault with his life, Murray's considered but admiring verdict on him seems fair.

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