

A Very British Disaster

A war for no wise purpose

By S. J. Butler

A NOVEL BASED ON TRUE EVENTS.

It's not difficult to imagine a war beginning for no wise purpose. But it's hard to fathom how the First Anglo-Afghan War, starting in 1839, came to be defined as the worst military humiliation ever suffered by a British army.

In *A Very British Disaster*, author S. J. Butler brings to life the bumbling leaders of Britain's first invasion of Afghanistan and its deadly ending three years later.

From the book's beginnings in British India, we witness the combative goings-on between the waspish and sharp-witted Emily Eden, her silly sister, Hetty, and their exalted brother George, the Governor-General of India and the instigator of the catastrophe.

In 1838, George Eden – Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India – was a single man who enjoyed few of the freedoms that usually go with the condition. His sister Emily kept house for him. That is, she decorated his table, saved him from the bottle, rode on his elephants, and hired and fired his servants. All with sisterly zeal, no doubt, but she was suspected of bending her brother's ear in the direction she wished it to go. She was a burra memsahib of the first order, and as waspish and pale as such a great lady ought to be. During Auckland's tours of the Punjab, she could always be found in an elephant's howdah, receiving the acclaim of local officials with a vice-regal wave of her hand. Oh, and sister Hetty was there, too, with her ugly poke bonnets, her shawls and her lapdogs. But she was such a dull stick that she was easily forgotten, poor thing.

And so the whole sorry business began. Lord Auckland believed the Russians were trying to talk the warrior king of Afghanistan, Dost Mohammed Khan, into allowing them passage through Afghanistan to India.

After much thought – and advice from his sister, who knew nothing about the Afghan people – Auckland came up with a plan. He would simply send an army to Kabul

to dethrone the Dost and replace him with the old and doddering Shah Shujah ... who would oblige his [British] friends by denying the Russians passage to India.

It was a decision that resulted in the deaths of thousands, until by the war's end there were just a handful of people left alive.

A Very British Disaster is their story of survival. Courageous hostages of the Afghan hero, Akbar Khan, were forced to endure the hostile conditions the country is still known for today. Unforgiving deserts, mountainous terrain and brutal winters coupled with the grinding misery of real hunger and the knowledge they could all be slain at any time.

'As someone who is not a military historian it was impossible for me to adequately describe the British retreat and the battles that occurred along the way,' says S. J. Butler. 'So I deliberately avoided that and focused instead on the hostages, what they were hearing from others, their interactions with Akbar Khan, and what Mackenzie and Lawrence witnessed as they followed the retreating army.'

Mackenzie dismounted. Tom Oliver's body lay in a shallow pit surrounded by a few small piles of overturned snow. It lay awkwardly, its legs resting on the edge of the pit, an arm bent beneath it, as if it had been roughly handled – as indeed it had been, stripped hurriedly after death. Sickened, Mackenzie gazed at the remains and shivered violently. The breath issuing from between his chapped lips turned to ice on his face and beard. He felt frozen, inside and out, and strangely aloof. It was hard to feel sorry for Oliver, who had escaped. Pity, surely, the wretched souls who were left behind.

Along with the pragmatic, self-deprecating Captain Mackenzie, a blue-eyed blond widower considered 'quite the catch' back in Bombay, the hostages included the stoic and forthright Lady Florentia Sale, and the well-meaning but dithering General Elphinstone, Commander-in-Chief of the Kabul force.

To interview or speak with S. J. Butler please contact media publicist Nicole Webb – Email: nicole@nicolewebbonline.com

A Very British Disaster is available at www.sjbutlerauthor.com.au and in Australia, the UK, Europe and the US through independent bookstores, online stores and eBook retailers. It may also be available in some libraries.

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The tribesmen had been elbowing each other out of the way for a better look, but now Mackenzie saw them fall silent and stare incredulously. He could almost read their thoughts: so this is the fearless commander of the British army, the brave and gallant swordsman who had invaded their land! It was a secret no longer; Elphy's frailty was laid bare, and the tribesmen were laughing at it.

Afghanistan is a country that has long been considered almost impossible to conquer, and that first futile war was as costly and catastrophic as the invasions that have followed.

'Damn you, Elphinstone!' [Auckland] rasped. 'Damn you for a decrepit old fool! Dear Lord, I should have – I should have chosen Nott.' Miss E. flew through the conservatory in time to hear him, and to misunderstand his last words. 'Dearest brother! Chosen not to do what?' 'Chosen not to send Elphinstone to Kabul, that's what!' Auckland groaned. Rising to his feet, he glared at her, then looked away and shook his head. 'In all conscience,' he muttered, 'I cannot lay the blame at your door. As Governor-General I should have known better than to heed my sister's advice.' Miss E. gasped. Her brother sighed and spoke again, more evenly. 'My dear Em, I'm sorry.' He took her arm and ushered her back towards the double-storey building. 'But there, what's said is said. An unwise decision was made and I must own it. Now fifteen thousand folk have suffered for it – died for it ...' He drew a ragged breath. 'All those good men!'

But amongst the accounts of great loss, S. J. Butler weaves in unexpected humour in the shape of Miss H. and her incontinent pug, the pompous and deluded Envoy, Sir William Macnaghten, and the clownish exploits of the brave but injury-prone Fighting Bob Sale. As a result, she creates an enthralling narrative of ordinary people who find themselves in an extraordinary situation.

About the Author

S. J. Butler was born in London, England, and grew up writing poetry in the Essex countryside. She always loved writing. By age ten she was turning out science fiction stories with a readership of one – herself; and around age 15 found she had a talent for writing angst-filled poetry in dark places on a cheap blue typewriter.

After leaving school she turned down a place at university and instead bought a ticket to Australia for £75, courtesy of the Australian Government. She planned to hang out in Australia for two years before returning to England and uni. But she met and married her husband in Australia shortly after arriving in Australia and the return trip didn't eventuate. After raising three children, working in the fields of education and human resources management, and sitting in more cold basketball stadiums than she cares to remember, S. J. Butler graduated from university in her fifties but her dream was always to become a published author. *A Very British Disaster* is the realisation of that dream.

She lives with her husband and their couch-buddy, Rusty, near Canberra.

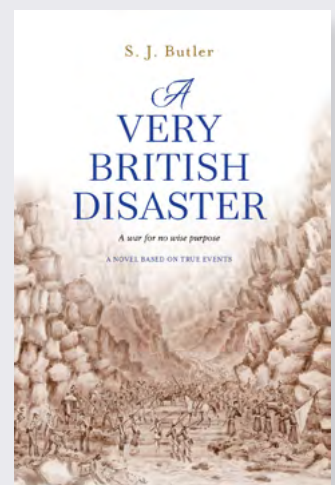
The debut author's interest in the First Anglo-Afghan War was sparked many years ago while reading Scottish writer George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman*, where the notorious Harry Flashman was appointed to General Elphinstone's staff in Afghanistan.

'I had always wanted to write a book and now an idea for one began to emerge. On page 254 of my copy of Flashman, GMF refers readers to one or two accounts of the First Afghan War, but in particular to 'Patrick Macrory's admirably clear account, Signal Catastrophe'. Macrory, in turn, refers his readers to other sources, including Helen Douglas Mackenzie's Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier's Life, and Lady Sale's A Journal of the Disasters in Affghanistan. These three books were where it all started,' says S. J. Butler, 'but one book led to another and soon I was reading volumes of contemporaneous accounts, unearthed from the National Library of Australia and other sources.'

Interspersed between the chapters of *A Very British Disaster* are compelling and poignant quotes from these historical accounts - words of the actual individuals involved in the First Anglo-Afghan War.

'I used the quotes for various reasons. Some were bridges between chapters and some added a degree of realism,' S. J. Butler says. 'But I used a number of them simply for their emotive imagery and just because they were so ...well, quotable.'

A Very British Disaster is an exquisitely written story of folly, incompetence, and arrogance, but also of endurance, desperate hope, and survival against impossible odds.



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