

A
VERY
BRITISH
DISASTER

S. J. Butler

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A war for no wise purpose

A NOVEL BASED ON TRUE EVENTS

BROADCAST



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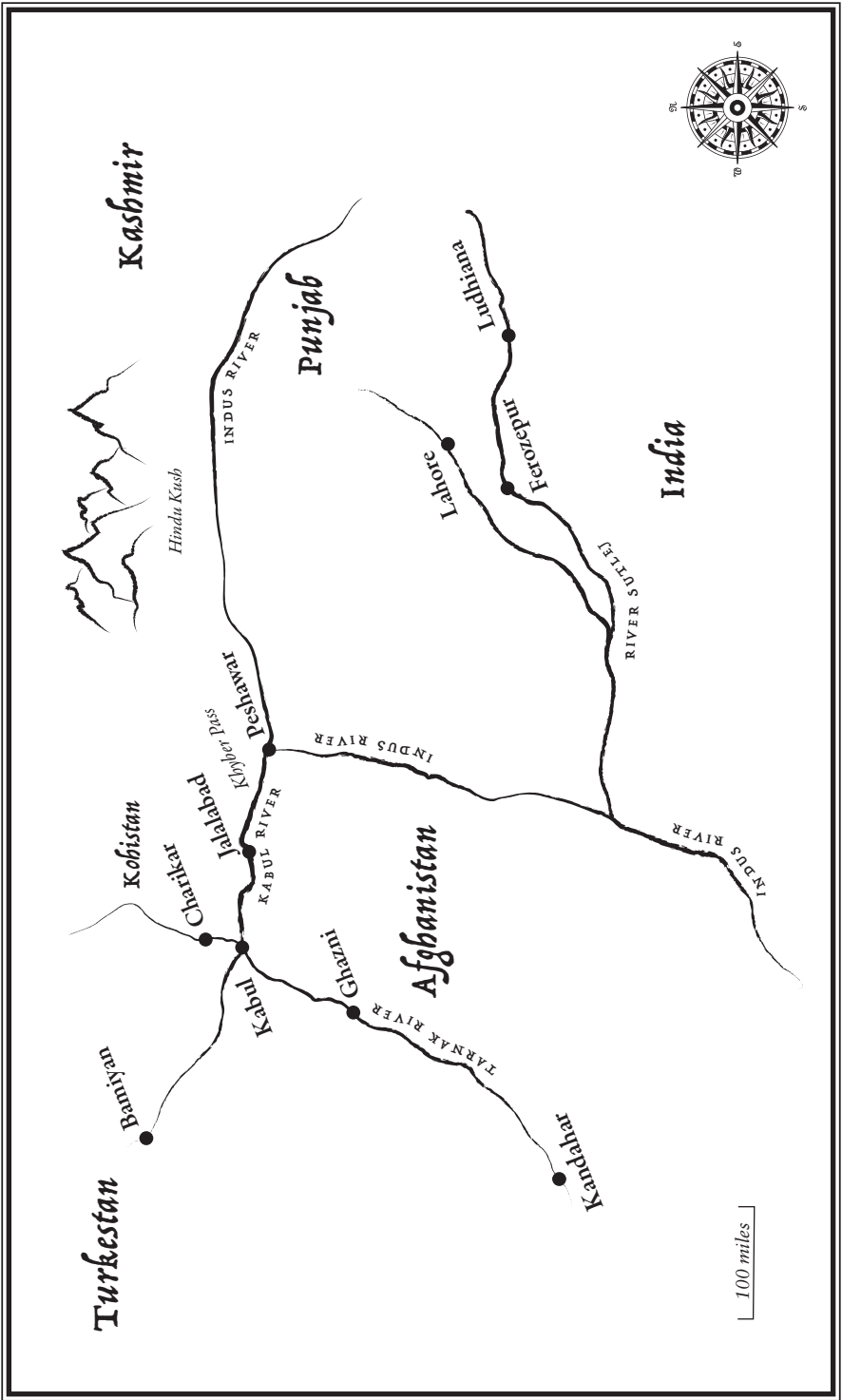
This is a work of fiction based on true events. Some names have been changed and some characters and events have been created for dramatic effect. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with those of the author.

To Sally, who always knew what to say.

*What careless farewells we do say to our friends,
and with what bitter tears do we regret our carelessness.
The last brief words, the thoughtless goodbyes, are all we can ever say,
all they can ever hear.*

S. J. B.

AFGHANISTAN AND SURROUNDS, 1841-42



CHARACTERS

The Afghans

Akbar Khan	Barukzai chief and favourite son of Dost Mohammed Khan
Aminullah Khan	Head of the Yusufzai tribe
Dost Mohammed Khan	Ruler of Afghanistan, deposed by the British in 1839
Khan Sherin Khan	Chief of the Kuzzilbashis
Mir Masjidi	Hereditary sheikh from Kohistan
Mohammed Shah Khan	Akbar Khan's father-in-law
Musa Mohammed Khan	Keeper of the hostages at Shah Khan's fort near Tezin
Mustafa Khan	Kuzzilbashi keeper of a fort in the Bamiyan valley
Saleh Mohammed	Keeper of the hostages at Bamiyan
Sekunder Khan	Akbar Khan's cousin
Shah Shujah	Ruler of Afghanistan, deposed in 1809 by Dost Mohammed Khan, reinstated by the British in 1839
Zeman Khan	Advisor to Dost Mohammed and Shah Shujah, interim Shah

The British

Anderson, Millie	Wife of Captain William Anderson
Anderson, Captain William	Shah Shujah's service
Anderson children	Harry, 13; Charlie, 10; Lizzie, 8; Mary, 4; Georgie, 1
Boyd, Captain Francis	Sir William Macnaghten's staff
Boyd children	Jamie, 9; Hughie, 4; Celia, born April 1842
Boyd, Lottie	Wife of Captain Francis Boyd
Broadfoot, Captain George	Garrison engineer in Jalalabad
Burnes, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Alexander	British Resident in Kabul
Chambers, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert E.	Commander of the 5th Light Cavalry
Cotton, Major-General Sir Willoughby	Commander of the Bengal Army
Eden, Emily (Miss E.)	Lord Auckland's sister
Eden, George (Lord Auckland)	Governor-General of India from 1836 to 1842
Eden, Hetty (Miss H.)	Lord Auckland's sister
Elphinstone, Major-General William (Elphy)	Commander-in-Chief of the Kabul force
Eyre, Emily	Wife of Lieutenant Vincent Eyre
Eyre, Frederick (Freddie)	Son of Emily and Vincent Eyre, born January 1842

Eyre, Lieutenant Vincent	Commissary of Ordnance, Bengal Artillery
Lal, Mohun	Sir Alexander Burnes' Kashmiri secretary
Law, Edward (Lord Ellenborough)	Governor-General of India from 1842 to 1844
Lawrence, Captain George	Military Secretary to Sir William Macnaghten
Keane, Lieutenant-General Sir John	Commander of the Bombay Army
Macgregor, Captain George	Political Officer at Jalalabad
Mackenzie, Captain Colin	Assistant Political Agent
Macnaghten, Lady Fanny (Lady M.)	Wife of Sir William Macnaghten
Macnaghten, Sir William	British Envoy to Kabul
Metcalfe, Lucy	Wife of Lieutenant Metcalfe in Major-General Sale's army
Monteath, Colonel Thomas (Tom)	Commander of the 35th Native Infantry
Nott, Major-General William	Commander of the Kandahar force
Oliver, Colonel Thomas	Commander of the 5th Native Infantry
Pollock, Major-General George	Commander of the 'Army of Retribution'
Pottinger, Major Eldred	Bombay Artillery; Political Agent to Kohistan
Sale, Lady Florentia	Wife of Sir Robert Sale
Sale, Major-General Sir Robert	Commander of 13th Light Infantry and the garrison at Jalalabad

Shelton, Brigadier John	Commander of the 44th Regiment
Skinner, Captain James (Gentleman Jim)	Chief Commissariat Officer, 61st Native Infantry
Sturt, Alexandrina	Daughter of Sir Robert and Lady Sale, wife of Lieutenant John Sturt
Sturt, Lieutenant John	Son-in-law of Sir Robert and Lady Sale, gunner subaltern in charge of engineers and public works at Kabul

There is nothing sadder than the spectacle of a fine
army sacrificed by the imbecility of an incapable
general, and nothing more painful than to write of it.

Sir John William Kaye
History of the War in Afghanistan, 1851
Vol. II, Book V, Chapter VIII, p. 190

CHAPTER 1

In India, many years before you and I were born, a British gentleman would grow old before his time.

In the hot season he rose at four in the morning, got dressed in his best, then paraded on the esplanade, searching for a wife among the recent arrivals from Home. At eight he went back to his bungalow, changed into a pair of loose Turkish trousers, took a few puffs of his hookah and promptly fell asleep. At ten he breakfasted on rice, fried fish, eggs and coffee, then rode a sedan chair to work. He took *tiffin* at three and slept again until six. At twilight, if he was a young man in Bombay, he smoked cigars with his friends and ogled the passing ladies, who, having laid on their couches all day, had begun showing signs of an evening animation. Come nightfall, he ate supper in somebody's dining room, feasting on lobster, poultry, punch and claret, before joining the ladies for whist and dancing. At midnight, supported by his servants, he retired drunkenly to bed, then rose at four o'clock, and so on.

This was hardly a recipe for good health or a long life. But it happened that one Captain Colin Mackenzie had married early and, though widowed at thirty-one, had by then acquired more promising habits than many of his bachelor friends. He was well looking, which is to say, he was considered quite a catch. In a land where overheated British gentlemen often drank themselves into a permanent stupor, Mackenzie in his early thirties was a splendid vigorous article. Blue eyes, an athletic build and pale golden curls made for perfection itself, yet he was unaware of the impact of his tall frame on the hearts of the adoring Bombay ladies, and a year after his wife's death he remained unattached. This, in turn, made him even more intriguing. In a place where gentlemen were ten a penny and ladies were scarce, there was nothing more appealing than a gentleman who wouldn't be caught.

And so during the idle Bombay summer of 1838, Mackenzie was pursued from the Corinthian columns of the Governor's palace to the vast, shady verandas of the well-to-do; and from beaches spoiled by human defecation

to temple courtyards, where honest Hindu depictions heightened the ambitions of forward young females. At the Assembly Balls, Mackenzie's red jacket and white breeches displayed his figure to great advantage. Nodding and bowing until his head ached, he was introduced to 'Miss Amelia this' and 'Mrs Henry that' and carried so many fat and bejewelled fingers to his lips that he often lost his appetite for supper. His name was forged on dance cards and he was obliged to stand up or else face the fury of a dozen designing mammas.

It was all very flattering, but Mackenzie was too newly widowed to rejoice in it. Which was why, when he heard that the Governor-General, encamped at Ferozepur in northern India, was contemplating an expedition into Afghanistan, he quickly put his hand up to be counted.

When Colin Mackenzie arrived in India he was a lad of nineteen, about 5 feet 10½, slender, agile, but very strong, broad-chested, perfectly made (so that fifty years after his friend Vincent Eyre spoke of his ‘Adonis-like form’), looking much younger than his age, with perfect features, blue eyes, and a superabundance of the most beautiful pale gold curls, like those of a young child.

Helen Douglas Mackenzie
Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier's Life, 1884
p. 14

CHAPTER 2

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.

When Lord Auckland became Governor-General of India in 1836, he inherited many political headaches, the most nagging of which was the Russian Menace. He believed the Russians were trying to talk the warrior king of Afghanistan, Dost Mohammed Khan, into allowing them passage through Afghanistan to India. The two countries met at the North-West Frontier (twelve hundred miles north of Bombay and turn left), while on the other side of Afghanistan was the Russian-ruled territory of Turkestan.¹ 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, whom the Dost had usurped nearly thirty years earlier.

Before the Dost had ousted him in 1809, Shah Shujah had signed a treaty of friendship with the British. At the time it had seemed like a good idea, but on the day of Shujah's defeat, when the Dost stood before him with his beard bristling and his eyes blazing, Shujah wasn't so sure. Luckily

1 Pakistan as we know it did not exist at that time. It became an independent country in 1947, following the partition of India.

his opponent was prepared to be generous, and Shujah escaped with his eyes and, more importantly, his head. Before the Dost's good humour evaporated, Shujah made quickly for British charity in the Punjab, where he lived in exile for the next three decades with nine wives, one hundred horses and at least as many concubines. But in his heart of hearts, he still coveted Kabul. Auckland knew this, and he also knew that Shujah was more likely than the Dost to aid him in the matter of Russia, and so that was the plan: dethrone the Dost and replace him with Shah Shujah, who would oblige his friends by denying the Russians passage to India.

This was the state of play when Mackenzie began his overland journey from Bombay to Ferozepur at the end of the rainy season in 1838.

[E]ven junior subalterns advanced to war with as many as forty servants apiece. A whole retinue of grooms, cooks, bearers, dhobis and sweepers straggled along behind their sahibs. One regiment allocated two camels for the carriage of cigars for the officers' mess, while jams, pickles, potted fish, hermetically-sealed meats, plate, glass, crockery, wax candles and table linen were all, it seemed, thought necessary for 'the efficiency of the corps'. Many young officers ... 'would as soon have thought of leaving behind them their swords and double-barrelled pistols as march without their dressing-cases, their perfumes, Windsor soap and eau-de-Cologne.'

Few thought this was unreasonable.

Patrick Macrory
Signal Catastrophe, 1967
pp 85-86

CHAPTER 3

*The Governor-General's camp at Ferozepur, northern India
October 1838*

Mackenzie reached Lord Auckland's camp in mid-October, when a pale autumn sun was at its half-hearted zenith. A vast city of tents and pennants crowded the plain beside the River Sutlej. The camp was a metropolis, with the Governor-General's canvas labyrinth at its centre and the regimental tents in a suburban sprawl around it. Streets had been marked out at intervals, camp fires lit, and downwind a place had been set aside for nightsoil.

It was almost midnight before Mackenzie's campsite was assigned, his tents put up, and he and the men of his household fed. All that remained was for him to crawl into bed; indeed, his servant had already begun tugging at his boots. So his feelings upon the arrival of an orderly carrying a gilt-edged card bearing the following words can be imagined:

*The Governor-General
requests your company at your earliest convenience.*

Lord Auckland was known for keeping late hours, and Mackenzie was acutely aware that a gilt-edged 'at your earliest convenience' really meant 'straight away'. Muttering an oath, he threw on his jacket, re-buttoned his boots, cast a forlorn glance at the bed in the corner, and set off on foot through the makeshift streets. As he neared his destination, a grandfather clock recessed into the canopied opening of a canvas wall chimed the hour, and a lantern-bearing orderly, dressed in the olive-green Eden livery, stepped from the shadows and peered at him anxiously.

'Capt'n Mackenzie, sir?' asked the young man. 'Praise be! The old dragon's been howling your name this last quarter hour. Make haste, sir,

make haste! It don't do to keep the old menace waiting. *Make haste!*' He darted off along a passage, without stopping to answer any questions.

Mackenzie was amazed. Dragon? Old menace? He'd never heard the Governor-General described thus. What could the fellow mean by it? But he wasn't about to find out by standing still so he strode off, his long legs gaining on the shorter ones of his guide, along a series of damp, canvas-covered tunnels where the smell of stale water wafted upwards like the bouquet of old boots. Afterwards, he couldn't exactly say what he'd hoped to see on entering the Governor-General's private sitting room; the great man himself, perhaps, or a group of stout and military gentlemen pouring over maps and plans. What he hadn't anticipated were two pale, middle-aged women sitting statue-like on either side of a mahogany table, with some tea things spread out on a damask tablecloth.

'Beg pardon,' said Mackenzie, bowing slightly and retreating towards the door. 'I received an invitation from his lordship, the Governor-General. I fear I've been misdirected –'

'You have not!' snapped the elder of the two women. 'The invitation was mine. I act for my brother in these things. You are late.' She waved him to an empty chair at the table.

Mackenzie took his seat with a show of good humour. Which was more than could be said for Miss Emily Eden.

'Well, this is a fine how d'ye do, Captain Mackenzie!' she expostulated, with an angry snap of her fan. 'Is it your habit to keep worthy folk waiting or are you merely careless of the time? Such laxity is insupportable, sir, *insupp-ortable*. I *insist* on promptitude and punctuality. Upon my soul, sir, a gentleman who aspires to his majority *must* be attentive to these things.' She shook her finger at the teapot and delivered a final thrust. 'And now, you see, the tea is grown cold!'

Mackenzie knew Miss Eden's reputation and wasn't fazed. By all accounts she was often angry, for she hated India and longed to be at Home. But after a few more wounding remarks her tone softened a little. At her signal, a turbaned servant appeared and silently replaced the tea, then vanished. While this was going on, Mackenzie studied his surroundings. The room was furnished in the feminine style: coloured lamps dangled from the roof

brackets, china shepherdesses simpered in the cabinet, brass flower-bowls filled the tables and several framed sketches adorned the walls.

‘I see you are admiring my drawings.’ Miss E. favoured him with a thin smile. ‘I confess I’m something of an artist. I’m especially fond of taking likenesses, although I cannot make as much of them as some people.’ She softened further on learning that Mackenzie had never beheld better pencil sketches in his life. ‘I understand you are newly arrived from Bombay, Captain. I trust you had a tolerable journey?’

‘Thank you, ma’am, quite unremarkable.’

‘My brother and I have recently returned from Simla.² It’s a beautiful spot. I believe it’s the only place in India that is worth the trouble of getting to.’

‘You’re not a traveller, ma’am?’

‘Indeed I am, sir,’ she replied tartly, pouring the tea, ‘but not in these hideous parts. I’m here only to oblige my brother, who would otherwise be *excessively* ill attended. Paris, Venice, Rome – the truly great assemblies, hotels of the best sort – *that* is what I call travelling, not this knocking around in tents. Indeed,’ she said with a sigh, ‘I find tent life *excessively* trying, *most* open-airish and unsafe. One’s servants live on top of one, and one always feels spied upon. But then, as a military gentleman I expect you are used to it.’ Miss E. looked down her nose. ‘My brother told me that you were widowed last year, Captain. Please accept our condolences.’

‘You are all goodness, ma’am.’

‘My brother and I make it our business to learn as much as we can about our Indian officers, and I’m especially sympathetic at the moment. Only last month our poor dear Chance passed away and I was *quite* inconsolable for days. Hetty!’ she hissed at her sister, who was absently sipping her tea, ‘you are *particularly* dull today. *Do* sit up and take notice. I was telling Captain Mackenzie about poor dear Chance.’

‘Oh, yes, poor Chance. Dearest dog.’ A flicker of emotion passed over the face of Miss H.

Balancing a tray of pastries, Miss E. seemed to be pondering the act of launching it at her sister, but instead offered it to Mackenzie. ‘Permit me to

2 A district in northern India with a relatively cool climate. During most of the 1800s it was used by high-ranking British officials as a refuge from the heat of the Indian plains.

recommend the fruit tarts, Captain, they're made from the sweetest apricots in the Punjab. My brother adores them. Do try one. Have you any children?

'Thank you, ma'am. Three daughters.'

'Three! And what are their ages?'

'The eldest is not yet six years old.'

'Poor motherless sprites. And their names?'

'Adeline, Mary and Rosa. Adeline is named for her mother.'

'Oh, my word. Are they in India?'

'No, ma'am. They're in the care of my brother's family in Kent.'

'How very wise. I've seen how pale and wan British children become in this country. Why, the roses are quite driven from their cheeks. I believe the practice of sending our young breed Home to be educated is an excellent thing. The heat is all very well for native children. *They* are not required to grow into active gentlemen, *they* will not bear the burden of command. But our young warriors are a different matter! I can't help thinking that this climate is *not good* for young constitutions. I know it is not good for mine. I have never been truly *well* since I set foot in this – Hetty! I wish you would stop staring at the Captain in that horrid way.'

Miss H. tittered. 'But, sister, his skin is so smooth and unblemished, and he seems so, well, classical, really. I –'

'I know that, I can see that. For heaven's sake, why do you remark on it?'

'Oh, sister, do you not recall? Is he not the image of the statue we saw in the temple at Corinth ... or was it Crete? The statue of ... Oh, dear, who was it? I'm sure his name began with a "P" ... or was it an "A"? Adonis ... Artemis. No, no, that was his sister. Anyway, it was the figure of a very handsome young god with nothing on, just like Captain Macken – Oh!' She gave a little scream. 'Excuse me, Captain, I don't mean to say ... Of course, *you* are wearing a uniform ... but I dare say you are quite as handsome without it ... Eh! I beg your ... but surely you recall the statue, sister, for you remarked how very –'

'Be silent, Hetty! What utter nonsense. You know very well that the statue was the Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican City. It is renowned,' she added, with a sniff and a guarded glance at Mackenzie, 'for its manly beauty.' She took a sip of her tea before continuing. 'I must apologise for my sister's forwardness, Captain, she doesn't usually behave so. I fear the Indian sun

has affected her brain. My word, three times a papa already and so young. Why, you cannot be above four or five-and-twenty.'

'I'm thirty-two, ma'am.'

'Good gracious, thirty-two and still so well favoured. Who would have thought it?' Perspiration darkened the neck of Miss E.'s gown. She closed her eyes and fluttered her fan. The silent servant reappeared and bowed, indicating the end of the interview, and Mackenzie was conducted from the women's presence even more rapidly than he'd arrived there.