

Afghanistan 2001–2014: The Enduring Literature?

Peter Foot*

Do we have a problem with book publishers? Are we getting a reliable supply of material covering the ongoing war in Afghanistan – this far-too-long, post-9/11 conflict? That there are lots of books is not in doubt – but do they help chart a course for the future? Do they locate the conflict in ways that assist in defining its uniqueness from, or its commonality with, other experiences of violence? How might the available published work assist in the post-2014 phase of Afghanistan’s development and the necessary engagement of the international community—define that as you will—in that country’s future? The best of them appeared around 2011: ten years too late for decision makers, the result of a decade of reflection for the rest of us.

Let us step back a bit. The 1982 Falklands War generated a great deal of literature, but one among the very best books about it was written to mark the war’s thirtieth anniversary. Ian Gardiner’s *The Yompers: With 45 Commando in the Falklands War*, despite its combat-style title, is a wonderful series of insights into the nature of command, at every level: political context, experience of the “ordinary” soldier, mental and emotional resilience, blue-on-blue casualties (to speak of just the things one remembers without opening the book again).¹ What is interesting is that this book, had it been “guided” by some of the more enthusiastic literary agents out there, might easily have been limited to resembling the “Andy McNab” kind of account: big on sales, but limited in value.

Contrast that to the blurb for Sgt. David Bellavia’s recounting of his war in Iraq, *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War*: “Blood flows over my left hand and I lose my grip on his hair. His head snaps back against the floor. In an instant, his fists are pummeling me. I rock from his counterblows. He lands one on my injured jaw and the pain nearly blinds me. He connects with my nose, and blood and snot pour down my throat.”²

Military pornography, surely.³ That there is a market for this kind of thing is not in doubt. The problem is that it risks limiting the “lessons” we learn from the account, if any, to the lowest tactical level and very little else. During the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap had a global map for planning that reminded them of their vital links to Moscow and Beijing; President Lyndon Johnson pored over detailed tactical maps of Vietnam in making decisions about bombing transit routes, arms caches, and the like. Too much recent Western literature on Afghanistan risks the same narrowness.

* Peter Foot is Professor Emeritus of Defense Studies at the Canadian Forces College, Toronto and the Royal Military College, Kingston, Canada, as well as an Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, where he previously served as Academic Dean.

¹ Ian Gardiner, *The Yompers: With 45 Commando in the Falklands War* (London: Pen and Sword, 2012).

² Sgt. David Bellavia, with John Bruning, *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

³ A better book on Afghan combat aspects is Toby Harnden, *Dead Men Risen: The Welsh Guards and the Real Story of Britain’s War in Afghanistan* (London: Qercus, 2011).

Perhaps that is why studies that emphasize the importance of Afghan history are so often more rewarding than the more contemporary accounts. This, it has to be said, carries dangers as well. A country that, seemingly, takes so much pride in being “the graveyard of empires” can be acknowledged as being fiercely aware of its past but tragically blind to much besides, including its own future. Three examples make the point.

The first is William Dalrymple’s *Return of the King*, a masterful account of the British Empire’s first, disastrous attempt at playing The Great Game, from 1839–1842.⁴ The then non-existent threat from Imperial Russia to British supremacy in India was goaded into existence by British actions – not the last time that unintended consequences flowed from Great Power decisions. Dalrymple is brilliant in bringing to life the mid-nineteenth-century personalities involved: Afghan and British leaders in all their splendor, weakness, courage, failures, and opportunism. Every page quietly resonates to subsequent events, without anything being said. The self-limiting ability of Afghan peoples to unite—despite desperate domestic differences—in the face of external intrusion, is dramatically drawn. The short-term pride in defeating yet another would-be Alexander the Great trumps all other considerations. One is left, frankly, astonished.

The second is Edward Giradet’s *Killing the Cranes: A Reporter’s Journey Through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan*.⁵ This is a rare piece of observational analysis, as suggested by the subtitle, across the most recent thirty years of Afghanistan’s suffering. The settings for, and direct encounters with, the likes of Ahmad Shah Massoud, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Osama bin Laden tell the big story in miniatures. Reading the book, one wonders whether anyone actually knows how many billions of dollars have been spent in war and on development to so little effect. As Giradet concludes, interlopers may not have made things better, but “It is now up to the Pushtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others to come to terms with what they have done to their homeland and to agree on whether they want a nation or not.”

The third is Rodric Braithwaite’s *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979–1989*.⁶ Again, the unspoken weight of the narrative is forward-looking. Braithwaite, who was Great Britain’s ambassador to Moscow from 1988 to 1992, nowhere draws explicitly obvious or profound points of “policy relevance,” but both obvious and profound ones drench each page. One frequently puts down the book to exclaim: “How did we miss that?” The care that the Soviet leadership put into developing social welfare programs—not least women’s assistance—in all walks of life, cannot be denied. The sensitivities of long-term occupation and social transformation were deeply understood (putting Moscow Olympic boycotts into a different perspective entirely). The trepidation—about going in, staying, and leaving—felt by senior decision makers in Moscow bears respectful consideration, and Braithwaite’s book allows this most generously. No other

⁴ William Dalrymple, *Return of the King: The Battle for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵ Edward Giradet, *Killing the Cranes: A Reporter’s Journey Through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2011).

⁶ Rodric Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979–1989* (London: Profile Books, 2011).

Western former ambassador to Moscow has written with such deep geopolitical appreciation of Soviet policy agonies. By extension, the implied “lessons” for others coming after the Soviet withdrawal—a remarkably dignified event, all things considered, and one that we would do well to emulate in 2014, given the ghost of a chance—thunder across the consciousness. To be fair, Braithwaite has had remarkable subsequent access to Soviet decision making, and discovered far more than we could have possibly known in either December 1979 or October 2001.

Still, the messages are not so different from Dalrymple’s analysis of the nineteenth century: “Don’t invade Afghanistan.” Covering the reasons why such a conclusion is probably inescapable, a number of studies are enormously helpful. These are enquiries that seek to look at the serial conflicts in Afghanistan through Afghan lenses, not Western ones. Peter Tomsen’s *The Wars of Afghanistan* is an excellent American attempt.⁷ Its sense of balance is clear from an observation towards the end of the book: “The Bush administration had achieved a military victory in Afghanistan but was in the middle of a long-term policy failure.” As a diplomat, Tomsen knows this, and knows the people who know it. His long book ends with policy recommendations that are interesting but do not appear to have been followed by his successors in linking with the Mujahadins’ successors or the minority Pashtuns in power in Kabul.

Slightly more narrow, but definitely more focused, is Andrew Wegener’s Australian Army study, *A Complex and Changing Dynamic: Afghan Responses to Foreign Intervention 1878–2006*.⁸ The conclusion seems, now, axiomatic: “[A] genuine understanding of the target society, and of the objectives and tools of the intervention, is essential for success.” No such understanding can be said to have underpinned George W. Bush’s decision to select air power in October 2001 as the primary means of carrying out the first stages of the United States’ campaign against the Taliban regime. Wegener’s analysis goes a long way to providing a level of understanding that was sadly not then available to decision makers in Washington. Interestingly, his conclusions hew closely to those of Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899–1905. Churchill, too, was not far away from the same point: “Khan assails Khan, valley against valley, but all unite against the foreigner.” Curzon’s position is clearly made by Sherard Cowper-Coles in his professional memoir, *Cables from Kabul*.⁹ Support local leadership—tribal *maliks* and elders, via a network of political agents—to take essential responsibility for regional and local security matters. For Curzon, Kabul was never seriously considered for the role as the provider of national security in a deeply divided country. Wegener emphasizes the centrality of “micro-societies” in Afghanistan. The state, as he says, “has never controlled or governed society; it has never possessed the institutions or resources capa-

⁷ Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

⁸ Andrew Wegener, *A Complex and Changing Dynamic: Afghan Responses to Foreign Intervention 1878–2006* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2007).

⁹ Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West’s Afghanistan Campaign* (London: HarperPress, 2011).

ble of doing so.” Indeed, from timeless Afghan history, as the saying has it, the leader who captures Kabul loses Afghanistan.¹⁰

The post-Bonn assumptions about building a strong central government based in Kabul run entirely counter to Afghanistan’s known history. How did we get into this situation, when the literature advising otherwise has been available for a century or more? Britain’s three imperial Afghan Wars have been a joke, corrective, or counter-example for a century, depending on one’s point of view. Are books a waste of time for policy makers? Is the pressure to support immediate political objectives so over-riding as to contradict common sense? Have those who write policy-relevant stuff, in the expectation of being of assistance, just been wasting their time? Or have they ignored history? Maybe technology is the answer: we live in a new world of long-reach, casualty-light, and devastating effectiveness that differs so completely from previous historical conditions that the “lessons” of the past are ignorable, irrelevant, or not applicable. One can “get” 9/11 fully; one can understand the need to “do something” afterwards about Afghanistan, host of Osama bin Laden. But not having any idea what is to replace people and structures after the Taliban have been bombed out of their offices does not constitute strategic vision. The critique of the intelligence services is strong, and the willful refusal to understand Afghanistan looks astonishing in retrospect. Perhaps there was nothing conveniently available on the Internet.

It is therefore a relief to find—if far too late to have helped decision makers in 2001—a raft of books that really go the heart of the matter. Astri Suhrke’s *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* is one such.¹¹ She brilliantly outlines how failures occurred, even as one despairs that the principals involved are less well informed than she. Her book is well worth the read for any future nation-building exercise. Rob Johnson’s *The Afghan Way of War* is simultaneously deeply depressing and wonderfully illuminating: who else has the courage to put a final chapter together, ending with a Pashtun poem exalting a father’s death to his son, entitled “Lessons Learned?”¹² We are in deeply mysterious places when we travel through this cultural landscape. Our secular societies in Europe and North America simply lack the social, intellectual, spiritual, or cultural equipment necessary to fully comprehend the contours of Afghan society. No wonder we blunder about all over the place. Belatedly recruiting anthropologists to the cause simply does not cut it.

A work that gets closest to filling the gap between Afghan realities and an external appreciation is Fernando Gentilini’s *Afghan Lessons: Culture, Diplomacy, and Coun-*

¹⁰ An intriguing counter-possibility is provided in Lucy Morgan Edwards, *The Afghan Solution: The Inside Story of Abdul Haq, the CIA and How Western Hubris Lost Afghanistan* (London: Bactria, 2011). Edwards powerfully argues for a real but lost opportunity to topple the Taliban, without invasions and all the rest that have extended Afghans’ tragic experience of war into a third successive decade.

¹¹ Astri Suhrke, *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2011).

¹² Rob Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: Culture and Pragmatism – a Critical History* (London: Hurst, 2011).

terinsurgency.¹³ An Italian diplomat serving as NATO's main civilian representative in Afghanistan, Gentilini works hard to get alongside his hosts in Kabul and throughout the wider country. His many encounters have a revealing freshness: "I saw a fighting dog with a human foot between its jaws and a gang of screaming kids trying to drag the foot from the dog as if it were the most natural thing in the world."

Gentilini sets out to be well prepared; he actively looks for books to take with him to assist him in his mission. Maybe his fate is to be the same as the rest of us: "[R]eading was a flawed pleasure ... the country where travelers could immerse themselves in the tracks of the first Greek colonizers or of a snow leopard, was one I would never see. Because the Afghanistan of our times, the one I had before my eyes, was one that seemed to have been chewed up and spat out as a mushy mess."

Trying to make sense of that mess for the future, looking toward the planned withdrawal by December 2014, is the study from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, edited by Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman.¹⁴ It is worth reading if only for the hefty "Strategic Geography" section of excellent maps with illuminating commentaries. The regional powers that will play a bigger role in Afghanistan after 2014, whether they like it or not—Pakistan, India, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, and Russia—are all given proper, interdependent analysis. The impact on Afghanistan of the rivalries between Pakistan and India, and between Iran and Saudi Arabia, is likely to characterize developments for a long time to come. As for the United States, the study draws the obvious conclusion: in a war-weary, fractious, highly partisan domestic context, the ability, readiness, and willingness of the United States to continue its engagement in Afghanistan has to be assessed negatively.

In many ways, Gentilini's evocations of his experiences become metaphors for so much more. His book ends with him waiting for a flight out of Kabul:

The last text message on my Afghan cell phone ... was like a slap in the face: "Why did you promise to help me and then let me down?"

There was no name and I didn't recognize the number, but I did have an idea who might have sent it.

The fact of the matter is that you should never promise anything, especially in a place like Kabul, where nothing depends just on you. Nevertheless, a promise is sometimes the easiest way out. I didn't have the guts to reply or call back. I just prayed that the flight would be called on time and that it would be over as quickly as possible.

Afghan anger, nameless suspicion, searing self-criticism, honest professional insight, desperation to leave. It all sounds so familiar from the past, and is likely to be repeated again. That is what the books all say.

¹³ Fernando Gentilini, *Afghan Lessons: Culture, Diplomacy and Counterinsurgency* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2013).

¹⁴ Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, eds., *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011).

Bibliography

- Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond* In *Adelphi Series*. Vol. 425–26. International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012.
- Bellavia, David, and John Bruning. *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007.
- Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979–1989*. London: Profile Books, 2011.
- Cowper-Coles, Sherard. *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign*. London: HarperPress, 2011.
- Dalrymple, William. *Return of the King: The Battle for Afghanistan*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Edwards, Lucy Morgan. *The Afghan Solution: The Inside Story of Abdul Haq, the CIA and How Western Hubris Lost Afghanistan*. London: Bactria, 2011.
- Gardiner, Ian. *The Yompers: With 45 Commando in the Falklands War*. London: Pen and Sword, 2012.
- Gentilini, Fernando. *Afghan Lessons: Culture, Diplomacy and Counterinsurgency*. Washington: Brookings Institution, 2013.
- Giradet, Edward. *Killing the Cranes: A Reporter's Journey Through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2011.
- Harnden, Toby. *Dead Men Risen: The Welsh Guards and the Real Story of Britain's War in Afghanistan*. London: Qercus, 2011.
- Johnson, Rob. *The Afghan Way of War: Culture and Pragmatism – a Critical History*. London: Hurst, 2011.
- Suhrke, Astri. *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst, 2011.
- Tomsen, Peter. *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011.
- Wegener, Andrew. *A Complex and Changing Dynamic: Afghan Responses to Foreign Intervention 1878–2006*. Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2007.