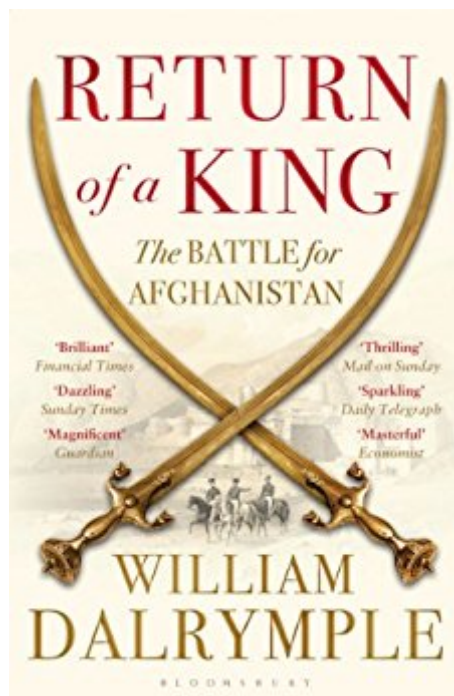




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Return Of A King: The Battle For Afghanistan



Synopsis

In the spring of 1839, the British invaded Afghanistan for the first time. Led by lancers in scarlet cloaks and plumed shakos, nearly 20,000 British and East India Company troops poured through the high mountain passes and re-established on the throne Shah Shuja ul-Mulk. On the way in, the British faced little resistance. But after two years of occupation, the Afghan people rose in answer to the call for jihad and the country exploded into violent rebellion. The First Anglo-Afghan War ended in Britain's greatest military humiliation of the nineteenth century: an entire army of the then most powerful nation in the world ambushed in retreat and utterly routed by poorly equipped tribesmen. Shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize 2013, *Return of a King* is the definitive analysis of the First Afghan War, told through the lives of unforgettable characters on all sides and using for the first time contemporary Afghan accounts of the conflict. Prize-winning and bestselling historian William Dalrymple's masterful retelling of Britain's greatest imperial disaster is a powerful and important parable of colonial ambition and cultural collision, folly and hubris, for our times.

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Customer Reviews

How I wish the history books of my youth were so well written as this. If someone handed you a book and said 'Here's a detailed analysis of the first Afgan war' you probably would not be very tempted

but, in truth, this book is like a who-dun-it. Sometimes I felt myself forgetting this a non-fiction work. The characters are so well described, the complex and parallel events are so well laid-out that this book is both entertaining and educational. Parallels to contemporary events are obvious. Maybe if Bush and Cheney had read this they would have handled things differently. I would certainly hope so.

This book is a must read for anyone who wants to gain more insight on Afghanistan, its history and the current situation. William Dalrymple for the first time has access to new source material and makes great use of it as he develops the book around the British East India's Company's attempt to install Shah Shuja as a puppet king. Dalrymple's explanation of the "Great Game" - Russia and Britain grappling with far away lands in a post-Napoleonic period, the characters he portrays, the mistakes that were made all serve to highlight the dilemma that faces politicians today. Indeed the current situation has many parallels, a ruler seen by his people as a Western puppet, fierce tribal loyalties, and a futile war which does nothing to help the Afghans or the region. In the end this is no oil-rich sultanate but poor mountainous country with little to offer its occupiers so they will go home, just like they did over 170 years ago. One's hope is that there is an orderly withdrawal not the shambles that the British retreat became!

Dalrymple reminds us of the too oft used phrase of American philosopher George Santana that those who go get history (or never even bothered to read it) are doomed to repeat it, this is an extremely well-written book wherein the characters and the character of Afghanistan come vividly to life. The parallels to our involvement in present day Afghanistan are disturbing; from the invasion purposes to the strategies to the routes of ingress to logistics to the battle to get out with the blame game lasting years...perhaps even to the present. This book should be required reading for every flag and general officer in every branch of service...and it should be read and reviewed by every attendee at all our War and Command & Staff Colleges. Absolutely nothing glamorous or romantic about this mis-adventure

It must be sobering for national leaders outside the region seeking influence in Central Asia to realize that the cultural divides between East and West remain basically unchanged over the centuries. The pervasive existence and importance of tribal and clan issues and codes, ethnic leadership, multiple religious communities and, in a modern version, the ideological certainties of outsiders, whether driven by financial considerations or concepts of pride, honor and "national

security needs" have not changed much since the 1830s. Intruders into the region over the decades have not learned much about local histories either. The British, Russians, Americans, Chinese---in the past and soon hereafter---, Persians (Iranians) and Indians tend to repeat each other's history as they grapple with the problems they created or faced in Afghanistan. That is the message of this carefully researched book. The early chapters are somewhat difficult to read and absorb, the cast of characters is large and the background to British--Asian policies complicated and simplified in the telling, but the reader will become quickly aware that strangers to the region seeking to impose their values and programs will be eventually be manipulated by local leaders and forces, even if they are technological superior to their "enemies" or rivals. This first-rate book should be read as a broad case study in the ignorance or hubris of foreign leaders and the many representatives of occupying powers who seek to dominate traditional societies.

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