



Jules Stewart, *On Afghanistan's Plain. The Story of Britain's Afghan Wars*. I.B. Tauris, 2011, hardback, 256pp, illus, maps, index. £18.99.

Ten years have passed since the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in the wake of the 11 September attacks on New York and Washington. Operation Enduring Freedom denied the Al-Qaeda terrorists who had carried out these acts of mass murder the use of Afghanistan as a base and swept their hosts, the Taliban, from power. All manner of rash promises about establishing stability and democracy and concentrating on reconstruction have followed. In the five years since John Reid, then British Defence Secretary, made his infamous, if often misquoted, remark that “*we would be perfectly happy to leave in three years' time without firing one shot*” millions of rounds have been expended and thousands of lives lost. Afghanistan has long been a graveyard for political aspirations and military reputations.

The publication of Jules Stewart's book *On Afghanistan's Plains, The Story of Britain's Afghan Wars* is therefore timely. Stewart, a veteran journalist who has written four books on the history of the British on the North-West Frontier of India and in Afghanistan, says that when he “*began researching the history of Britain's three Afghan wars, it was not with the intention of drawing parallels with the current foreign political and military embroilment in that country.*” But one cannot help suspecting that he and his publishers had one eye on the tenth anniversary of the current Afghan conflict. The fact that the foreword is written by General Sir David Richards, Chief of the Defence Staff in the UK, who commanded the Allied forces in southern Afghanistan from 2006 to 2008, is a bit of a giveaway. A very on-message foreword it is too, with lots of stuff about learning lessons and not abandoning Afghanistan to its fate “*without finishing the job*”.

One wishes that the interventionist politicians and over-optimistic generals who committed the West to the latest Afghan war a decade ago had taken the trouble to read a history such as this. Stewart does not come up with any startling revelations in this extremely readable book, the story of Britain's involvement in Afghanistan is an oft-told tale, but what he does do is present it as a coherent narrative. He concentrates on the three wars which Britain fought in Afghanistan in 1839-42, 1878-80 and 1919 but also fills in the history that linked them.

The first conflict saw Britain, paranoid about a supposed Russian threat to India, invade Afghanistan and place a sympathetic ruler, Shah Shuja, on the throne. The British then returned to India, leaving a garrison behind which was inevitably resented by the Afghans. They rose up, slaughtered the British political agent in Kabul and his aides, and besieged the garrison. An agreement to provide ‘safe passage’ to the British army fairly predictably resulted in the gradual massacre of virtually all the 4,500 troops and 12,000 camp followers as they limped towards India. The British sent in an army to exact bloody revenge the following year, rescuing prisoners and blowing up Kabul's bazaar before heading back through the Khyber Pass to India.

In 1878 Britain again went to war against Afghanistan after the latter refused to accept a British diplomatic mission. After occupying much of the country, the mission was duly installed in Kabul and the British left. The Afghans once again rose up and murdered the British representatives, prompting another invasion led by the ruthlessly efficient Major



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General Sir Frederick Roberts who established himself in the pantheon of Victorian military heroes by winning a series of victories. Abandoning the provocative policy of maintaining a mission in Kabul, but gaining control of Afghanistan's foreign policy, the British then left. The Afghans won back the right to conduct their own foreign relations after the Third Afghan War in 1919, a brief and somewhat bizarre conflict which saw the British use the fledgling RAF to considerable effect.

My very brief potted history hardly does justice to a complex and fascinating story permeated throughout by stupidity, duplicity, bravery and immense powers of endurance. Amid all the fools and knaves there were genuine heroes and heroines, not least the formidable Lady Florentia Sale, who wrote a much-acclaimed diary of her experiences as a captive during the First Afghan War. Although much of the book is based on secondary sources, Stewart has a journalist's talent for emphasising the main threads of the story and has strong views on the military competence or otherwise of the principal players. One area where the book falls short, however, is that the maps are inadequate.

Stewart's great strength is that, having written a series of books on the region, he has a good understanding of what makes the Afghans tick. He concludes that while the British usually won on the battlefield – with the occasional exception such as Maiwand – these wars could not really be classified as victories. “The British were outfoxed at every turn by the Afghans, a people with centuries of experience in suffering any manner of hardship to protect their independence and traditions,” he writes. Stewart believes, quite rightly, that: “*The notion of a permanent, or even long-term, occupation of the country is an illusion. The armies of every foreign conqueror throughout history have come to grief on Afghan soil.*” He also points out that the Western view of Afghanistan as a nation state is not shared by most Afghans. It is actually a conglomerate of martial tribes dominated by the Pashtuns, the most warlike of them all.

“*One of the most amusing features of a tribal polo match is that the onlookers will invariably cheer the winning team,*” he writes. “*This principle can be transposed to the battlefield.*” With the West having announced its intention to cease combat operations in December 2014 in the optimistic hope that the Afghan Army will be able to fight a war on its own, one cannot help feeling that the cheering may gradually move towards the end of the polo field where the Taliban is waiting patiently.

Will Bennett