

Report on the London Conference on
Mountstuart Elphinstone and the Historical Foundations of Afghanistan Studies:
Reframing Colonial Knowledge of the Indo-Persian World in the Post-Colonial Era

As a result of the rivalries and expanding international interests of France, Russia and the United Kingdom the early decades of the 19th century saw a pivotal geopolitical change between Europe and Asia that would have consequences reaching far into the future: in order to ensure the security of its South Asian interests the U.K. dispatched a number of envoys, agents and spies into the vast area between northern India and the Ottoman and Russian Empires. The information gathered by these adventurers provided the basis for British policy for the next hundred years, down to the Great War of the 20th century. Their publications have served as major sources of historical data, especially for Afghanistan, Iran and the area that later became Pakistan. But we know little about the larger social context that conditioned their work. How can we understand today what they thought about the importance of what they were doing, or what motivated their interactions in the situations they found themselves in? They were all from a certain English class of that period. But what was it in their socialization, their education and their career objectives that prepared them for these adventures, to deal so well with social situations that were so new to them, and to ask the questions they asked. What might they have sought to find out that they did not think of?

The conference was held in London on November 6th and 7th, 2015, at the School of Oriental and African Studies the first day and at the British Library (which put on an exhibit for us of early 19th century publications relating to the subject matter of the Conference) the second day. The Conference was organized by Dr. Shah Mahmoud Hanifi of James Madison University under the auspices of his own University, the Council of American Overseas Research Centers and the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies.

There were eighteen presentations, all dealing with various aspects of the "collective intellectual legacy" of Mountstuart Elphinstone and other Britishers who in the first few decades of the 19th century were commissioned to establish relations with the courts of the Afghan Durrani Empire in Peshawar and the Qajar Iranian Empire in Tehran and to explore the region between the Indus River and the Western and Northern parts of the Iranian Plateau, which at this time were entirely unknown to Westerners. The reason this effort was launched at this time was that following Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 the British suspected him of planning an invasion of British India in collaboration with the Russians through Central Asia into Northwestern India (the only route into India that was not yet defended by the British), through territory that between 1870 and 1947 would become divided between the modern nation-states of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. This was the area between the cities of Punjab, such as Lahore, and the cities of Iran and Central Asia, such as Kerman, Isfahan, Mashhad and Bukhara. The borders were drawn between these countries by the British based on information, the foundations of which were contributed by Elphinstone and his peers.

I was asked to contribute a paper on the work of Lieutenant Henry Pottinger, whose brief was one of the most challenging. But he was well aware that he was one of a number of Englishmen of different social stations doing similar things. What we can learn about any one of these travelers throws additional light on the activities and significance of the work of the others, and helps us to understand the relationship between these countries and the West down to the present day. He wrote *Travels in Beloochistan and Sinde*, accompanied by a geographical and historical account of those countries (1816).

Between January and August 1810, Pottinger traveled by boat from Bombay to Sonmiani, and then on foot to Kalat. He was accompanied by Captain Charles Christie. But in Nushki they split. While Pottinger continued through territory that is now Pakistan into Iranian Baluchistan to Kerman and on to Esfahan, Christie went North to Herat and from there across the desert to meet up with Pottinger again in Esfahan. Christie's commission kept him in Iran, and since he was unfortunately killed two years later the only record we have of his travels is a brief appendix to Pottinger's book. Pottinger returned to Bombay.

From a historical point of view the most important thing we learn from these travels is that although the region has undergone extreme change in the last 50 years, between 1810 and the 1960s when I was doing ethnographic research in the same places they describe, there appears to have been little or no social change. The settlements, the occupations fitted the same descriptions, even the names of the leading figures were the same. This was commonly the effect of the colonial period in this part of the world, because it insulated local communities from the changes in the rest of the Islamic world.

Dr. Hanifi is now organising publication of the proceedings and also a follow-up meeting in the region.

Brian Spooner
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