

THE EDINBURGH REVIEW AND THE AFFGHAN WAR

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The Edinburgh review and the Affghan war by D. Urquhart

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D. URQUHART

**THE EDINBURGH
REVIEW AND THE
AFFGHAN WAR**

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EDINBURGH REVIEW

AND THE

AFFGHAN WAR.

LETTERS RE-PRINTED FROM THE MORNING HERALD.



"THOU SHALT DO NO MURDER."

"Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord: and shall not my soul be avenged ON SUCH A NATION AS THIS."—*Jer.* v. 9.

BY

D. URQUHART, ESQ.

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1843.

REPORT OF THE COLONIAL SOCIETY
ON
THE AFFGHAN WAR.

In the press, and immediately to appear,

BY THE SAME AUTHOR,
AN APPEAL AGAINST FACTION
TO THOSE WHOM IT CONCERNS.

LETTER I.

DISASTER OF CABOOL AND POPULARITY OF SHAH SHOOJAH.

SIR,—The *Edinburgh Review* has opportunely lit upon the metropolis in a flight of sprightly wings "of saffron and of blue." No. 154 appeared in January, No. 155 appears in February! It is for no trifling purpose that the calculating sages of the north thus disturb the routine of periodical parturition; it is in no minor cause that they, thus unlooked for, burst into the arena all armour and offence.

The present number appears as the vehicle of a simulated attack upon the Government, and upon Lord Ellenborough, thereby to serve as a defence for Lord Auckland, Lord Palmerston, and Sir John Hobhouse.

The number of the *Edinburgh Review* which appeared in due course in January was silent on the great question of the day, and the great glory or crime of the party it represents. Thus did the whig reviewers lull into security their unwary opponents, while in silence preparing this projectile to drop and explode at the very moment of the debate, and leave no time for refutation or reply. The mere form and circumstance would lead to the inference that it was a case prepared *maled fide*; but whether it be an attempt consciously made to arrest the course of justice, or whether it be proposed through a desire, honest, but misguided, to screen the innocent, this article must equally appear a defence the most questionable and suspicious. The accused if not guilty, must be the first to demand, and the most instant to require the fullest investigation; and they would reject officious defence, as unworthy of them, and unsuited to the charge.

If honest men, they are assailed for labours which entitle them to the gratitude of the country they have served. It is their duty to establish their claims to gratitude as well as to rebut accusations which, if unfounded, are the most atrocious that malignity could invent.

The article in the *Edinburgh Review* assumes to have triumphantly disposed of the allegations brought against the late Government by Sir Robert Peel, and—myself. That which I have charged against the late Government is not that which has been charged against them by Sir Robert Peel. The present whig defence has not ventured to grapple with one single statement of mine, and it is perfectly gratuitously, in respect to the subject matter, that my name is coupled with that of Sir Robert Peel.

But by this coupling of the two names the double object may be sought, 1st, of assuming that I have been replied to, and 2ndly, of endeavouring to shame Sir Robert Peel out of the position of assault upon the late Government, lest he should be placing himself by the side of a man whose allegations were too extravagant for public complacency and too grave for parliamentary etiquette.

In replying, therefore, to this article it is not in my own defence that I come forward, nor can I presume to defend Sir Robert Peel. In so far as he has gone his positions are clear and indestructible, and in that which he has failed to do, it cannot be for me to defend him. This defence, therefore, must consist in taking up the weapons which are paraded, in order to show that these weapons are not formed of materials that can inflict wounds upon real bodies—that they are phantom shafts, cast to exhibit before an audience the semblance of a contest, and to confuse and bewilder the antagonists against whom they are discharged.

The article in the *Edinburgh Review* is another attempt to put the innocent men in the place of the criminal before the bar of public opinion, and thereby to prevent the criminal from being brought before the bar of national justice.

About the middle of the second page occurs the first intelligible statement. The reviewer denies that the disasters in Afghanistan can be chargeable upon "the men who had viewed the establishment of a friendly dynasty in Afghanistan as being the least dangerous and costly means by which the designs of foreign powers upon British India would be defeated."

In the defence of a Government, which on behalf of a nation has taken up arms and appealed to the GOD OF BATTLES, the first thing that has to be asserted, and the only thing that has to be considered, and through which the whole question must be decided, is *the cause* of war. But in the present case, they come forward with no statement of wrongs or of dangers—they come forward only with an insinuation of what *their object* may have been. The assertion is, that the least of the dangers that had to be incurred, and the cheapest of the means that had to be employed, was to set up a certain dynasty in a certain country, and that because of *there being* certain unstated designs of certain *other* unnamed powers! The establishment of a certain dynasty in Afghanistan was, "*upon the whole*, the least dangerous, the least costly of the means" by which those foreign nameless designs upon India could be defeated. What then is the position of India now when the attempt has failed! The cheapest and easiest of these means are the lives of 15,000 British subjects, and nearly 20 millions of pounds sterling! How enormous then must have been the dangers? These are expended, and in vain. You asserted one chief at Cabool to be hostile, and you leave as the result of the expenditure every man woman, and child, your foe from the Ural to the Indus. If India

was endangered in 1838, what must, in 1843, that danger be, which has not been grappled with, after the frightful augmentation it has received from our attempt and failure? The reviewer, for whom these designs must have been reality, must be now writhing under the sense of the most fearful insecurity of our rule in India, if not, then was the original pretence of danger false. He tells us that "this eventful chapter in the history of British India has *finally closed*;" that in the enjoyment of "perfect tranquillity," of "glorious achievements," there is now "a fair field for the consideration of past attempts, and a temper favourable for a calm judgment upon them." Here then, the reviewer is in direct contradiction with himself on that point, upon which every thing else hinges. He is so in a manner which cannot be explained by fallacies of any description. He asserts that they did a certain thing in order that a certain danger might be prevented. The thing is not effected. He then speaks of the danger as having passed away. The danger then was a fiction.

He goes on to say "the grand fallacy, of which the most unparing use has been made by those who sought to damage the administration of Lord Auckland, has been to confound the disasters of Cabool, and the retreat from that city, with the policy of the original advance beyond the Indus." Whoever confounded the one with the other? Has this nation been severe in judging or careful to set down in equity? Has there been a man in the House of Commons holding them responsible for either act or failure? Has the nation visited upon them vengeance for disaster? Have their opponents called them to account for their policy? They have neither been held accountable for the one, nor questioned for the other. It is upon General Elphinstone,—it is upon Sir William Macnaghten,—it is upon the subordinates,—it is upon the military men or politicals in India,—it is upon mere details that attention has been fixed in as far as attention has been at all excited; and no judgment has been falsified in respect to the policy of the Affghan war because of the disaster at Cabool, for this simple reason, that no judgment at all has been intelligibly pronounced. This is, however, assumed as the pretext for rushing into details about the force employed in one year and another, about the acts of Generals Pollock and Nott, the narrative of Lieut. Eyre, the character and qualifications of Sir Alexander Burnes, Col. Dennie, Sir Robert Sale,—about insurrections, cantonments, commissariat, sepoyas, bala hissars, entrenched camps, until the reviewer succeeds in constructing a labyrinth through which he leads his bewildered reader far away from the designs of the foreign power that menaced India and the able and wonderful measures by the failure of which those designs have been so triumphantly defeated.

From the pages of military details that follow, there is but one word that I should select for comment, and that is the word "*insurrection*," constantly used to designate the acts of the Affghans. Did we not march an army into their country, take by force of

arms but without the forms of war; their strong places, and beat them in the field? Did we not march into that country with their hereditary political and religious foes the Sikhs? Did we not then establish a government by means illegal and unjust, and having the external characters of foreign domination and of religious persecution? Had we or have we not done these things! Is the reply doubtful? No. We did these things. Then we are the offenders—the Affghans the aggrieved. There was no incentive that could have been aroused in the human breast, whether supplied by motives of honour, of patriotism, or of faith, which did not impose upon the Affghans the duty of sacrificing their lives to destroy a despotism such as this. And it is to the men who have in the first instance, through unmerited respect for us, submitted to our approach, and who afterwards exposed their lives to regain their rights and their independence, that the word “insurrection” is applied by *Britons*. It is in the columns of the *Edinburgh Review*, the assessor heretofore of the rights not of nations only against foreign rule, but of people's liberties against internal despotism, that the withering epithet is applied of rebellion to patriotism, and of insurrection to independence. Nor is this surprising. It is but the corrupt fruit of the corrupt tree that we have planted. England, hitherto the assessor of the rights of nations, has become herself the invader, the spoiler, the oppressor, the destroyer. England, whose station and strength have been acquired in Europe by preventing others from interfering in the affairs of their neighbours, imposing monarchs or principles upon unwilling people, now has not only done this herself, but has taken the setting-up of a despot and the overthrowing of a people's rights as a pretext for cloaking from herself and from others an unjust, a bootless, and an injurious war. Are whig principles composed of lawless war, interference in the affairs of foreign states, setting up of despots? No. Why then does the *Edinburgh Review* defend such things? It is that certain men having done that which is evil endeavour to make their acts be regarded as a part of a system, as a “policy,” to be *naturally* assailed by their political opponents, and *necessarily* adopted by their political supporters. Thus in factions times may guilt disguise itself under the livery of faction, and make use of its instruments, its organs, and its hirelings.

Thus the reviewer speaks of those who denounce these crimes as being influenced by the “malevolence of party.” Would to God that the charge were true. Would to God that party feelings and party objects were still available as a means for arresting guilt. Would that there were a faction in England that had for its watchword the rights of nations or the honour of England. Would that there was a party in England who could be termed “malevolent” in the pursuit of justice, and “reckless” in the denunciation of crime! But, alas! the organs of both parties have been equally at the disposal of designing men.

Where was it that appeared the first defence of the late Government? In the *Quarterly Review*! That review was used, when the documents were first presented to Parliament, to pervert judgment—this (the *Edinburgh*)—when, for the first time, the subject comes before the House of Commons—is used to forestall discussion.

But let us examine the position which the Reviewer labours to make out, that the disasters at Cabool were not to be charged upon the Indian Government, or upon the Ministry in England. He says, "Had the policy which dictated the occupation of Afghanistan been as wickedly ambitious as was ever exemplified in the case of any conqueror from Nimrod to Napoleon," it would be unjust that the Governor-General "should be responsible for the incapacity and mismanagement which could have led to the destruction of such a *corps d'armes* as he had placed at Cabool." Who but the Governor-General of India and the Government at home could be held responsible for disasters declared by the Reviewer himself to have been brought about by a series of acts the most infatuated? The selection of fit men is as much a duty in high offices of State as the adoption of just measures. If men unqualified are appointed—if instructions insufficient are given—if it be not only that some order is incomplete, or that some agent is inefficient—but if it be that all the agents are unqualified, and all the orders absurd, all the measures disastrous, and treasure and lives, and station and character are sacrificed—surely responsibility lies somewhere, and it must lie there where power has been confided. What means *responsibility*, if not liability to censure or to punishment for the misuse of the power that has been entrusted, not for the advantage of a man, but for the benefit of a people? But so fully has the Reviewer measured the sense of this nation, that it is he himself that exposes these grounds of accusation, converting them into a justification of the men who have brought these disasters upon us. Nor is this all. Upon the exposure of this chain of fatuity and mismanagement he rests the charge which he brings against whoever impugns the conduct of the late Government of factious objects, and malevolent intentions.

The Reviewer then proceeds to defend his friends by a novel process. The colour is darkened on the one, in order that the shade may be brightened upon the other. The weights are transferred from one part of the scale to another, to make out the load to be less. The Government at home is not to be responsible for sending out a Governor-General unfit to select agents; but it is to be responsible for having compelled Lord Auckland to select unfit ones. This may appear very dangerous ground to those who do not understand its real object. Lord Auckland is the victim in England, after being the instrument in India. He must be prevented now from being a witness, and perhaps an accuser. He has to be contaminated and crushed by being