

Publication History of Elphinstone's An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul

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Abstract: Mountstuart Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, is regarded as a seminal work in the study of Afghanistan and the surrounding areas. It is called Bible of Afghan Studies. After visiting the area on a diplomatic mission in 1809, British colonial administrator and scholar Elphinstone wrote the narrative. He finished compiling his mission notes and turned into his final report in 1810. These reports can be found in 88 volumes of notes, correspondence, and drawings found in the British Library. The report was converted into a book and was first published in English in 1815 in London titled as *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India: Comprising a View of the Afghan Nation, and a History of the Douranee Monarchy* by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Omre, Brown, and J. Murray. In 1819, its second edition was published. A third edition, consisting of two volumes that are typically bound together, was published in 1839 under the publisher Richard Bentley. In 1842, a revised edition was published. Similarly, in 1972 another edition was published by Oxford University Press with an introduction by Olaf Caroe. Besides London it was published in Austria in 1969; in Pakistan in 1992 and in India in 1998. The latest edition was published in 2011 by Cambridge University Press. The publication history of Elphinstone's work demonstrates its continued relevance, as it remains to have an impact on the study of Afghanistan's geopolitics and Central Asian history. This book provides an intriguing look into the early interactions between British India and the Afghan kingdom, and it is still considered a significant source in historical and political studies of Afghanistan. This article presents a brief overview of the publication of this book.

Keywords: Mountstuart Elphinstone, Kingdom of Caubul, Publication History, Afghanistan, Mission Report, Book History.

Introduction

Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1858) was born and grew up in Scotland. In 1796, he began working for the British government in India. He was well-versed in the history, culture, and policies of the Kingdom of Kabul (Afghanistan). He was sent to the court of the Kingdom of Kabul in 1809 as the first British envoy (Hanifi, 2019, p.41). This book *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (henceforth AKC) is the result of a diplomatic mission that Elphinstone as the first ambassador of the East India Company took to the Durrani Afghan court of Shah Shuja in Peshawar. Elphinstone's embassy in the Kingdom of Kubul not only signed the treaty (Nazir, 2024: 134) with Shah Shuja but also produced a wealth of information about Afghanistan's ecology, geography, as well as a number of political reports (Hanifi, 2019, p.6).

Elphinstone finished compiling his mission notes and turned in his final report in 1810. These reports

can be found in 88 volumes of notes, correspondence, and drawings found in the Elphinstone collection in the British Library. He was driven to keep going through the material he had learned from leading the diplomatic mission, and five years later, with the support of friends like James Mackintosh and William Erskine, he published the book which is titled as *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India: Comprising a View of the Afghan Nation, and the History of the Dooranee Monarchy*. It was first published in 1815 (Hanifi, 2019, p.5-6).

During his stay in Calcutta, Elphinstone organized and gathered the important data he had collected about the nations he had traveled to beyond the Indus and that even further north that he had never seen. Initially, however, he had meant for this material to come in the form of a government report alone. He was encouraged by Sir James Mackintosh to pursue a wider audience and share the fruits of his labor with the general public, he even started considering the prospects of publishing a book on his travel. When he left Bombay and traveled to the capital of Marhatta, he was still undecided about the matter. Elphinstone took a seat at Poonah and began writing a history of the Kingdom of Kabul. He was not one to be easily pleased, and at times he felt so unsatisfied with his work that he felt completely compelled to give up on the project. For this reason, he wrote carefully and diligently. After the book was completed, it was sent to Longman and Co., a renowned publishing house who agreed to publish it. They published it in the vogue of the day—a splendid quarto with a detailed map and colored engravings, published in that era (Kaye, 1867, P.258).

The news of Elphinstone's mission was published in the Calcutta newspaper, which is noted as follows: the report was prepared by a gentleman, to whom had been assigned the diplomatic mission to Afghanistan (Hanifi, 2019, p, p.xxxvi).

Time Spent

The British diplomatic mission to the Kingdom of Caubul in 1809 stayed in Peshawar for roughly four months in order to learn more about the peoples and culture of the so-called "Kingdom of Caubul" and its dependents. It took almost two years to complete the mission preparations, the time spent in Peshawar, and the time spent researching and writing after leaving Peshawar (Hanafi, 2019, p.47). Elphinstone could only visit the eastern portion and most information was collected at Peshawar from February to June 1809 (Khan, 2004, p.65).

Area Experts

Elphinstone's mission was accompanied by numerous expert officers including Mr. Richard Strachey, secretary, Mr. Fraser and Mr. Rt. Alexander, assistants in the civil service of the East India Company, Mr. Macwhirter, surgeon. Bengal Establishment, Captain Pitman of the 2nd Battalion, 6th Regiment, Bengal Native Infantry, was in charge of the escort. Among Surveyors were Lieutenant Macartney, 5th Regiment, Bengal Native Company and Lieutenant Tickell. Officers attached to the Escort were Captain Raper, 1st Battalion, 10 Regiment, Lieutenant Harris, Artillery, Lieutenant Cunningham, 2nd Battalion, 27th Regiment, Lieutenant Ross, 2nd Battalion, 6th Regiment, Lieutenant Irvine, 1st Battalion, 11th Regiment, Lieutenant Fitzgerald, 6th Regiment Native Cavalry, Lieutenant Jacob, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Regiment (Elphinstone, 1972, p.2).

All of the mission members spent the first part of the time gathering general information, but during the reminder, a detailed plan was developed and each member who participated was given a specific branch of the investigation. Lieutenant Macartney was given the geography assignment, and Captain Raper, who was already well-known to the public from his description of the Ganges' origins, helped him. Lieutenant Irvine handled the climate, soil, produce, and husbandry, while Mr. Richard Strachey handled the trade and income. Elphinstone was in charge of the administration and the people's etiquette, while Mr. Robert Alexander was in charge of the history (Elphinstone, 1972).

Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India; comprising A view of the Afghan Nation and a History of the Douranee Monarchy* was first published in 1815 in London by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Omre, Brown, and J. Murray as publishers. This magnificent quarto volume includes fourteen exquisite color plates that are so good that a reader is automatically tempted to take them out of the book to be hung and framed. It also includes an intriguing early map. In the preface of 1815 Elphinstone edition, Elphinstone uses a footnote to reference the maps by Macartney, Kinneir, and Arrowsmith. Here Elphinstone explains the overlapping coverage of some regions across the maps. He makes it clear that, as an admittedly novice map-maker, he deferred to others for cartographic expertise (Hanifi, 2019, p.28).

In 1819, its second edition was published in two volumes by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, and J. Murry. Due to the author's inability to oversee proofs while in India, both the first and even the second editions included printing errors. A third edition, consisting of two volumes that are typically bound together, was published in 1839 following Elphinstone's retirement under the publisher Richard Bentley. There are not any significant differences between the books other than the correction of typographical errors and a few author's notes appended with the knowledge, which has been gained over a quarter of a century. However, only four of the fourteen plates that are included in the original version are included in the third edition and the gorgeous large printing and margins of the previous quarto edition are absent (Elphinstone, 1972, p.xviii).

A two-volume, updated edition of the book *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* was published in 1839 and in 1842 by Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, London. The 1839 edition of AKC was reprinted in 1972 by Oxford University Press in Karachi, along with a new preface written by Olaf Caroe (1892–1981), last governor of the then North West Frontier Province (Hanifi, 2019, p.8). It is in two volumes. Volume One has 422 pages and Volume two has 465 pages. In the 1972 edition, Olaf Caero stated in the introduction that the books are identical save for the repair of typographical errors and the addition of a few author remarks (Elphinstone, 1972, p.xviii).

Elphinstone's book was also published in Austria in 1969, Pakistan in 1992 and in India in 1998. The Cambridge University Press published most recently in 2011 (Hanafi, 2019, p.19). Elphinstone states in the preface to the 1972 edition that he was engaged for a year while he traveled to the court of the King of Caubul, and that another year passed before the expedition was ultimately disbanded. The entire time frame was devoted to investigations into the Kingdom of Caubul that would likely be beneficial to the British authorities (Elphinstone, 1972). The 1969 edition, which was published in Austria, includes a brief biography of Elphinstone, a succinct summary of AKC that is objectively critical, and a helpful biography of works in Danish, French, German, Russian, and English that are about Kabul, Afghanistan, and the people who live there geographically and culturally (Hanifi, 2019, p.7).

The magnitude of the literary victory outweighs Elphinstone's mission failure to achieve a diplomatic and political victory. The book (AKC), which served as Elphinstone's literary debut, is in some ways a more recent and fluid narrative. He gave it the extremely long titles that were popular at the time. He titled it, "*An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India*" with numerous subtitles; if it had been titled *The Afghans*, to put it simply, it would have become more known and popular till the present day.

Translation in European Languages

In 1817, the French and German versions of *The Kingdom of Caubul* were published (Hanifi, 2019, p.19). The book and the hitherto mostly imagined geography it projected into colonial cognizance were valuable enough for other European countries with imperial pretensions to invest resources in translating it, which may be unsurprising given that it is an artifact of the British Empire (Hanifi, 2019, p.18).

Online Publication

One of the two volumes published in 1819 was recirculated online through The Internet Archive in 2007 after being published on Google Books (Hanifi, 2019, p.19). This Google publication was made available online again through the Internet Archive (archive.org). *An Account*, in its whole, became part of the digital commons when the University of Nebraska–Omaha made both of the 1842 publication's volumes made available online in 2009.

The most important point to remember is that many of the English-language re-publications of this account have been contextualized by the ongoing imperial wars in Afghanistan even though each of these editions has its own special features and poses both general and particular questions about the motivations and methods of republication (Hanifi, 2019, p.151).

Translation in Oriental Languages

Numerous significant books written in western languages have been translated into Pashto. The first printed Pashto book is the translation of Bible into Pashto (Dina Khel, 2023a, p.34). It is noteworthy that Elphinstone's account was first translated into Pashto in 1981 and then in Persian in Mashad in 1997. The Pashto version of the book by Mohammad Hasan Kakar highlights the politics of translation in Afghanistan historically by routinely replacing the referent "Afghan" with the category of "Pashtun" throughout the text (Hanifi, 2019, P.19). The rapid diplomatic success of Mountstuart Elphinstone in 1809 was fleeting. However, his 1815 political and cultural analysis of Pashtun culture turned into a key work in the period's colonial knowledge building, leaving a remarkably significant literary impact (Hanifi, 2019, p.151). The 1967 reprint of *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* was translated into Persian by Mohammad Asef Fekrat and published in Mashad, Iran during 1997 (Hanifi, 2019, p.50).

Reviews

Several writers had evaluated Elphinstone's *Account* at various points in time. B.D. Hopkins claims that the French Encyclopedia was intentionally used as the basis for AKC. Reviews of the book that appeared in British publications soon after its publication provide insight into how *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* was received at that time. Overall, these evaluations are highly complementary of AKC and include largely positive remarks on Elphinstone. The evaluations generally credit Elphinstone for his objective, lively, and informative writing style as well as for offering a wealth of dependable, precise information to help the imperial audience overcome the *tabula rasa* that the Kabul Kingdom had previously represented (Anonymous, 1816, pp. 457-72). Usually, the evaluations contain lengthy, exact quotes from AKC. They frequently give special attention to the eighty-page introduction that explains the mission's geostrategic goal, organization, and structure (including how the British officers under Elphinstone's commanding authority divided up the intellectual and scientific work), the journal of the embassy from Delhi to Peshawar, and the meeting with Shah Shuja. The reviews appear to be the product of mostly anonymous journal editors and are not attributed (Anonymous, 1815, p. 398-437).

AKC's reviews provide some individual unfavorable remarks against Elphinstone, his book, and the East India Company in addition to these commonalities. Elphinstone's ease and regard for the Indian and Afghan civilizations are criticized in one assessment, which also compares and contrasts international explorations like Alexander von Humbolt's scientific trip in the Americas.

It is argued that Elphinstone's Orientalist tendencies prevented him from being "too steeped in eastern knowledge to be critical of the British in India," which prevented him from finally offering readers in Edinburgh a fully satisfactory story. Another critic criticizes the vague merging of political, cultural, and geographic referents, particularly the uneven application of the Durrani Monarchy, the Afghans, and the Kabul Kingdom categories or labels throughout Elphinstone's story. A third critique focuses on Elphinstone's account of Shah Shuja's obsession with a pair of silk stockings that the corporation gave him as a way to start a debate about less stringent trading regulations for traders doing business across

the British Empire (Anonymous, 1817, pp.1-18).

According to Ludwig's Review on Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, the British government in India launched a diplomatic and fact-finding mission that produced this superb account of Afghanistan in the early nineteenth century. As Russia, Britain, and France fought for land and expanded their political and military clout, Afghanistan and the rest of the Near and Middle East found themselves more and more entangled in the drama of European power politics. Mountstuart Elphinstone was dispatched to Kabul in order to make allies and persuade the Afghans to oppose French attempts of a similar nature in Persia. Elphinstone spent two years making "such inquiries regarding the Kingdom of Kabul" with the help of a team of about fourteen British officers and a sizable native retinue. The mission's individual members were tasked with covering topics like geography, climate, land, and husbandry; trade and revenue; history; government; and human etiquette. The outcome is an exceptionally thorough account of Afghanistan in the early nineteenth Century. The five books that make up the volume are further segmented. A geographical overview of the region is provided in Book I, which also discusses the climate, flora and wildlife, rivers, mountains, and political and natural divisions of the nation.

The volume is divided into five books-major chapters, which are again subdivided. Book I, gives a geographical summary of the area, describes the mountains, rivers, the natural and the political division of the country, and the climate, flora and fauna and mineral resources.

In Book II, the local population is described, along with details on their history and origins, government divisions, and social customs including marriages, burials, education, and religion. It describes the Afghans' traditional views, manners, habits, and personalities. Individual tribes and ethnic groups in Afghanistan are described in detail in Books III and IV. The administrative, military, and religious institutions of Kabul's government are all examined in Book V.

The historical overview of Afghanistan since Ahmad Shah established the state in 1747 is shown in Appendix A-E. Appendix C discusses Kafiristan, Badakhshan, and Kashkar—places whose names were scarcely known in Europe at the time. A 350-word Pushto vocabulary is one item in the Appendix. The book by Elphinstone is a classic. After being out of print for a long time, the Akademische Druck-u Verlagsanstalt deserves praise for releasing a stunning reissue complete with maps, color graphics, and Alfred Janata's introductory note (1974, p.221-222).

In International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (1977), Hasan Kakar had made a few comments on Professor's Ludwig's review of Mountstuart Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, in the April 1974 issue of International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. In his review, Professor Adamec says that in order to counteract a French influence in the Persian court, the British in India in 1808 sent a mission of their own under Elphinstone 'to Kabul'. Professor Adamec also says that the Kingdom of Kabul at that time included the present area of Afghanistan as well as Kashmir and the Punjab. This mission he adds resulted in the Elphinstone's comprehensive description of Afghanistan in the early nineteenth century.

Kakar is of the opinion that all this is incorrect as a closer look at Elphinstone's book itself will show that: (1) Elphinstone went no further than Peshawar (Vol. I, p. 72, London, 1839), then the winter capital of the Afghan kings, where he met with Shah Shuja (2) By then, almost the whole of Punjab was held by the Sikhs. (3) Elphinstone's book is not only a description of Afghanistan in the early 19th Century but of the Sadozai period from 1747 onward.

Hasan Kakar claims that all of this is untrue because a deeper examination of Elphinstone's book itself reveals that: (1) Elphinstone met with Shah Shuja in Peshawar, which was the Afghan monarchs' winter capital at the time (Vol. I, p. 72, London, 1839) (2). By that time, the Sikhs controlled nearly all of Punjab. (3) Elphinstone's work covers both the Sadozai era beginning in 1747 and Afghanistan in the early 19th century. However, these adjustments are more important than they seem. An outstanding

resource on eastern and central Afghanistan is the book, which is appropriately referred to as "a classic" and is the most thorough and impartial work on the Sadozai period ever authored by a Western scholar. It is true that Elphinstone worked for two years to make the necessary inquiries, but he was in Peshawar from March to June 1809 rather than in Kabul as Professor Adamec suggests (1977, p.411).

Hasan Kakar's 1974 assessment of Mountstuart Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* [1977] was addressed by Ludwiq. He apologizes if he gave the impression that Elphinstone visited Kabul; in fact, he visited the Kingdom of Kabul and met Shah Shuja in Peshawar. He cited Elphinstone when discussing his decision to incorporate Kashmir into the Kingdom of Kabul: "The current kingdom of Kabul extends from the west of Heraut in longitude to the eastern boundaries of Cashmeer in longitude."

Elphinstone grounds his argument on the fact that money was created in the name of Afghan monarchs and Khootba is read. Adamec therefore came to the conclusion that Kakar is incorrect and Elphinstone and he are correct (August, 1979, p. 426).

Elphinstone's "Kingdom of Kabul 1815" by was reviewed by Dr. Muhammad Anwar in 2004. He points out that Elphinstone's story takes up 111 pages in the book's first volume. A summary of Afghan history, genealogy, customs, society, administration, and geography follows, all of which are based on previously published sources or gathered by informed people in Peshawar. The English writers praised the work for good cause, and it was considered a classic at the time. He spent five years writing this piece, drawing inspiration from previously published works, his own travels, and those who knew the region and its people. The work was first published in 1815 and then again in 1819, 1839, and 1972, respectively. He claims that there are numerous printing faults in every edition. The spellings of locations, people, and areas are the most noticeable in the book. Over time, all of these have gained gazette spelling, but the previous form persisted throughout the book without even a glossary or corrections. Little descriptive attention is given to Peshawar, where the mission resided for about six months. The author pays little attention to any of its well-known monuments, gates, bazaars, melas, or the way of life that has been practiced for centuries (2004, p. 67-68).

Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register (1816) Volume 1 has published a Book Review on *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, Longman and Co. London 1815 has mentioned that In Peshawar, Elphinstone and his expert companions on Afghanistan made personal inquiries and sent emissaries to various parts of Afghanistan, while in Bombay, Elphinstone alone renewed his investigations with the assistance of those Afghans who had recently gone there. The arrival of these Afghans at Bombay is an allusion to the subsequent civil wars in Afghanistan as a result of which Shah Shuja was overthrown, and the first Anglo-Afghan treaty with Elphinstone had signed with the Shah was made null and void (p.49-65).

In 1817, the Open Court Publishing Company published a thorough review of *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* in volume 83 of *The Monthly Review*, LXXXIII (May 1817). It mentions that the British government in Calcutta in 1808 entertained the view that Napoleon had plans to invade Hindustan by land and attempt to conquer that rich and significant region of the Oriental dominions. This view was primarily influenced by the French General Gardanne's embassy in Persia.

The court of Kabul held a high position among these independent sovereignties; due to its haughty nature, it was suspected of undervaluing the European nations. Therefore, it was considered necessary to sound the dispositions and conciliate the cooperation of those ruling princes of the East, through whose territories the troops of the modern Alexander were to march. The British government decided that a mission should be furnished in a grand and significant manner. The main preparations for its equipping were done in Delhi, and so the guided procession started, which was less a negotiating or exploration mission and more a triumphal formality. Elphinstone was put in charge of it as an emissary to the King of Kubul, and he provides an engaging account of his views and progress in this elegantly

bound volume.

Distinct responsibilities or concerns were delegated to various mission personnel; one person gathered and exemplified literary documents, another botanized, one mineralogized, and one took sketches. Following the initial account of the embassy's journey, all of these distinct contributions of remembered or recorded remarks have been combined into a common stock, categorized under the proper headings, and refined into a standard geographical description of the nation. A unique commendation is due to Mr. Macartney's superb map.

Afghanistan's geographical description is the title of the first section of this official study. In addition to defining the country's circumstances and borders (Dinakhel, 2023b), an account of its mountains—including one of its peaks—is provided. is 20,500 feet above sea level, according to a measurement made by Lieutenant Macartney.

The rivers, which have more of the characteristics of torrents and are primarily fordable for the majority of the year due to their sharply sloping surface, are given their own chapter. Afghanistan's political and natural divisions are covered in the fourth chapter, while the climate is covered in the fifth. It seems that the height of the soil is correlated with the coldness of the weather everywhere. Animals, vegetables, and minerals are covered in Chapter VI.

The majority of European trees are common, although dates and camels both thrive in spite of the cold. There is an abundance of salt, lead, and salt petre. The first volume describes the origins and early history of the Afghan population, while the second book provides a basic overview of them. Here, they are derived from the Ghore mountains and are thought to have been hooked to the religion of Boodh before they converted to the Mohammanan faith. The third chapter covers marriages, women's status, moral constraint, and related subjects. The education, language, and literature of the Afghan people—the Pashto language—are covered in Chapter IV. The nation's religious factions and superstitions, which are not all that different from those of other Muslims, are discussed in the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter attributes the country's hospitality and rapacity to the flaws in the Pashtunwali law, which permits private redress of injustices and promotes familial confederacy for these ends. This is a well-written text that adds significantly to our understanding of the far-flung Asian nations. It is rare for geography to have such a thorough, valuable, and elegant addition to its record. It is still used by the government of Calcutta and London (p.1-18).

It should be noted that despite AKC's publication in French and German in 1817, as well as in 1819, 1839, and 1842 in English, none of those versions seem to have benefited from a book review. Nonetheless, an English reprint of the 1839 edition was examined in 1969 (Hanifi, 2019, p.7).

Conclusion

Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* is the result of his diplomatic mission to the Kingdom Kabul, demonstrates Britain's imperial mindset. Elphinstone's work, which was first published in 1815, is still a crucial resource for comprehending Afghanistan's political and cultural environment. The work has undergone multiple editions, reprints, and translations over the years, solidifying its status as a foundational text in South Asian studies and British imperial history. Elphinstone's observations are still discussed by academics today, who emphasize their significance as a record of history as well as a window into the changing British experience. The numerous republications, reprintings, and translations of the book address its circulation. Every one of these versions has distinct elements and particular queries concerning the reasons and processes of republication. The most important point to remember is that many of the English-language republications of this account have been contextualized by the ongoing imperial wars in Afghanistan even though each of these editions has its own special features and poses both general and particular questions about the motivations and methods of republication.

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