



Sir Alexander Burnes 1805 - 1841 'Bokhara Burnes'

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FORFARSHIRE MASONIC CELEBRITIES

SIR ALEXANDER BURNES



Sir Alexander Burnes

1805 to 1841

Killed at Kabul in 1841
along with his
Brother Lt Charles Burnes (1812 - 1841)
at the beginning of the 1st Anglo Afghan War



In the present number of ‘Good Words’ the following very interesting sketch of the life of the late Sir Alexander Burnes, a native of Montrose, and brother to Mr Adam Burnes, writer is given by Mr John William Kaye under the head of “Our Indian Heroes.” The article is introduced by referring to the brilliant career of the late Joseph Hume in India, the influence it exercised over the mind of young Burnes, and the intimacy which arose between Mr James



Burnes and Mr Hume. The father of Sir Alexander, we need not tell our local readers was Provost of Montrose, and was closely related to our national poet Robert Burns. After giving his sons (of whom he had four who lived to be adults) a good education, he availed himself of the intimacy which had arisen between him and Mr Hume, and solicited his influence on behalf of his two sons James and Alexander, the former (the eldest) being destined for medical service. Alexander was promised a cadetship in the East India Company’s Service as soon as he was old enough for the appointment.

When the young student was within a few weeks of the completion of his sixteenth year, he was sent up to London in a Dundee smack; and having arrived there on the 14th March 1821, he was on the following day introduced by Mr Hume to Mr Stanley Clerk a member of the Court of Directors, and was told that his name had been duly entered for a cadetship of infantry on the establishment of Bombay. He spent two months in London, studying under the well-known Oriental Professor, Dr Gilchrist, and watched over by Mr Joseph Hume who gave him good advice of all kinds, and acted as his banker; and then on the 16th May – his birthday – he attended at the India House, and formally took the oath of allegiance.

It was a matter of pleasant family arrangement that the eldest brother, James Burnes, who had been appointed an assistant surgeon on the Bombay establishment, should sail in the same vessel with Alexander; so they embarked together early in June on board the good ship “Sarah,” After an uneventful voyage, they arrived at their destination, and on the 21st October 1821, these two young Montrosians found themselves on the beach of Bombay, with very little money in their pockets, and with very slender interest to help themselves onward; but with stout hearts, clear heads, and that determination to make for themselves careers in the public service, which, in the days of the East India Company, carried so many members of our middle classes in India straight on to fortune and to fame.

The brothers were soon separated. On the 13th of November James Burnes was gazetted to do duty as assistant surgeon with the artillery at Matoongah. Alexander on the 19th recorded in his journal that he had “commenced his military career” and appeared on parade. From that day he made steady progress in his profession. He applied himself greatly to the cultivation of the native languages. He had continued on board ship the studies which he had commenced under Dr Gilchrist in London, and now he supplemented his literary pursuits by making and steadily adhering to the rule, to converse with his native servants only in Hindostanee; and on the 8th December he wrote in his journal, “Having migrated from my own country, and being rather of a curious and searching disposition. I have begun to gain as much information as possible concerning the manners, customs, laws and religion of this people. – a study not only amusing and interesting, but highly instructive; for what is it that makes a man, but a knowledge of men

and manners?” There was nothing which a man might not achieve in India,, who thus set himself to work in the right way. There was proof of this even then before the young “unposted ensign” He had carried out with him, as most young men carry out, letters of introduction to the Governor and other influential people of the Presidency. The governor at that time was Mr Mountstuart Elphinstone, whose kindness and affability of manner won the heart of the young soldier at once. “The Governor” he wrote home to his family at Montrose “received us with great politeness, and invited us to the most splendid fete I had ever beheld and did not behave in a ‘How do?’ manner, but was extremely affable and polite, which, among a part of a hundred, and for the most part generals and great men, was a great deal. A few weeks ago a grand public ball was given to Sir John Malcolm on his leaving India, to which I had the honour of receiving an invitation – but where it came from I know not. It was, if anything, grander than Mr Elphinstone’s fete, and held in a house built for the purpose, about the size of the old Council House at Montrose, illuminated with lamps from top to bottom.

To young Alexander Burnes the encouragements of the future were not greater than the consolations of the present “I like the country amazingly” he wrote to Montrose “and as yet am not at all desirous of a return to my own land.” But he added, for thoughts of home were still pulling at his heart “How dearly should I like to see little Charley or Cecelia trudging into my canvas abode – but Ah! That is far beyond probability. However I may yet see Charley in India for he seems a boy made for it.

Thoughts of active service soon began to stir his mind. There was a prospect of War with China, and the young soldier was eager to take part in it. “There has been a most dreadful disturbance”, he wrote to his parents, on the 30th April 1822 “between the powers of China and the East India Company within these few months; so all trade between these countries is now at a stop, and nothing seems more inevitable than war, for it is in everybody’s mouth, and every person is anxious to go. I hope I may be sent. If I am not sent along with my regiment, I shall certainly volunteer for if a man does not push on, he will never see service, and, of course, will never be an officer worth anything. What will the poor old maids of Montrose do for want of tea?” But the excitement passed away. There was no war. And so young Alexander Burnes fell back peacefully on his Oriental studies, and with such good success, that at the beginning of May, 1822, he went up for an examination in Hindostanee, and found that he had passed for an interpretership, “I was so delighted” he wrote in his journal, “That I could scarcely contain myself.”

A fortnight before (April 16, 1822) he had been posted to the 2nd Battalion of the 11th Regiment of Native Infantry, but as the interpretership of that regiment was not vacant, he applied without success, to be removed to another corps. Any disappointment however was soon removed by the necessities of action; for a few days afterwards his Regiment was ordered to Poonah, which a few years before had been the capital of Peishwah, and was still in the bloom of its historical associations.

At Poonah, he began the study of the Persian language, and passed the time pleasantly there between his studies and exciting sport: – In December the regiment quitted Poonah, en route for Surat. At Bombay, where they halted, Alexander Burnes again made a push for an interpretership, and this time with good success; for on the 17th January, 1823, his name appeared in General Orders, gazetted as interpreter of the 1st Extra Battalion, which happened to be posted at Surat. He was, with one exception, the only Ensign in the Bombay Army who held such an appointment. This was great promotion; but in the following year a brighter prospect still expanded before the young soldier. On the general reorganisation of the army, by which each Battalion was converted into a separate regiment, with a separate regimental staff,

Lieutenant Burnes, then little more than 18 years old, was offered the regimental adjutancy. The offer excited him greatly and he wrote: - Behold your son Alexander the most fortunate man on earth for his years! Behold him Lieutenant and Adjutant Burnes, of the 21st Regiment, on an allowance of five hundred to six hundred Rupees a month.” The appointment had been offered to him by his friend Colonel Campbell – “he did not think”, wrote Burnes to Montrose “that I would accept the situation, for my life in India had been so devoted to study, that he conceived – and correctly too – that I was aiming at some political situation soon undeceived him, by telling him that I found my abilities greatly turned to that direction, but that, nevertheless I was ready for anything else No man in his sound sense would refuse a situation of fifty or sixty guineas a month.”

From this time his progress was rapid – “I continued my study of the languages,” he wrote to an old schoolfellow in the West Indies, “and mastered the Persian, which brought me the notice of the government, and I was selected from the Army to be Persian interpreter to a field force of 8000 men, under orders to cross the Indus and attack the territory of Scinde which is situated at the delta of that great river. The force to which I was attached did not advance; the campaign terminated in 1826; but during its continuance I had, in the absence of other duty, devoted my time to surveying the geography, and produced a map of an unknown tract, for which the government rewarded me by an appointment to the department of the Quartermaster-General, the most enviable line in the service. It removed me for good and all, before I had been four years in the service, from every sort of regimental duty. I advanced in the department step by step, and was honoured by the approbation of my superiors. In 1828 they liased me to be Assistant Quartermaster-General of the Army and transferred me to headquarters at Bombay, on a salary of 1000 rupees a month. There I met Sir John Malcolm of whom you have heard. I knew him not, but I volunteered to explore the Indus from where it is joined by the Punjaub down to the ocean, and thus delighted the men in authority.

I started in the end of 1829 on this hazardous undertaking, and after I had got half through it, was recalled by Lord Bentick as it would have involved political difficulties at the moment. I did however, so much that I blush to sound my own praises. The substantial part of them is that they have removed me entirely to the diplomatic line as assistant to the resident in Cutch, which is a foreign state, in alliance with the British, close on the Indus. It is difficult to draw a parallel between European and Indian situations; but if one is to be made I am what is called Secretary of Legation and on the high road though I say it myself, to office, emolument and honour. I have now briefly sketched out my career. My pursuits are purely literary, and confined to investigating the antiquities of Asia and the wonders of this people. I have been tracing the magnanimous Alexander on his quixotic journey to these lands; and I shall set out at the end of 1830 to traverse further regions, which have been untrodden since the Greeks of Macedon followed their leader. Being an accredited agent of the government, I have their support in all these wanderings; so you see that I have hung the sword in the hall, and entered the cabinet as a civilian – My great ambition” he said is to travel. I am laying by a few spare rupees to feed my innocent wishes, and could I but have a companion like you, how doubly joyous would I roam among the ruins of the capitol, the relics of classical Athens, and the sombre grandeur of Egypt. These, and all the countries near them, are in my minds eye; I think I dream of them; and when I journey to my native land, my route will traverse them all. I purpose landing at Bernice, on the Red Sea, and following the Nile in its course across from classic to sacred lands, across the plains of Syria and about Mount Sinai; thence by Asia Minor, to the Hellespoint and Greece, Italy and merry France; and last of all, to my native Scotia. I have enough of the good things of this life to start on this projected tour, when my ten years of service are out – that is on October 1831.

But it was ordained by Providence that his journeyings should be in a quite different direction. In the early part of 1830, a despatch arrived at Bombay from the Board of Control inclosing a letter of compliment from the President Lord Ellinborough, to Runjeet Singh, the great ruler of the Punjab, together with a batch of horses that were to be forwarded to his highness as a present from the King of England. It was necessary that the letter and the horses should be forwarded to Lahore under the charge of a British Officer, Sir John Malcolm was at this time Governor of Bombay. He was full of enterprise and enthusiasm; he himself had been a great traveller; and he was the one of all others to appreciate the achievements and to sympathise with the aspirations of such a man as Alexander Burnes. He accordingly recommended the young Bombay Lieutenant for this important duty, and the Supreme Government readily indorsed the recommendation. But although the man had been chosen, and chosen wisely, there was much discussion respecting the manner of the mission and its accomplishments, and very considerable official delay. "It is part of Sir John Malcolm's plan for the prosecution of my journey," wrote Burnes to the family in Montrose in September 1830, "that I quit Bombay before the Government make any arrangements for my voyage up the Indus to Lahore."

In these days we know every foot of the ground and such a journey as Burnes was about to undertake belongs only to the regions of common-place; but when Burnes at that time wrote about the "noble prospects that awaited him in being selected for a delicate and hazardous duty," he by no means exaggerated the fact. He was emphatically the Pioneer, and he had to cut and clear his way through the briary difficulties and obstructions which have long since disappeared. He was not merely sent upon a complimentary mission to the ruler of the Punjab; he was directed also to explore the countries on the lower Indus, and to this end he was entrusted with presents to the Ameers of Sind. But the Ameers were mistrustful of our designs. They believed that Burnes had come to spy the nakedness of the land. With all the clearness of prophecy, they saw that for the English to explore their country, was some day for them to take it. So they threw all sorts of impediments in the way of Burnes' advance. "We quitted Cutch," he wrote to Sir John Malcolm, "on the 20th of January 1831, and encountered every imaginable difficulty and opposition from the Ameers of Sind. The first drove us forcibly out of the country. On a second attempt they starved us out. But I was not even then prepared to give up hopes, and I ultimately gained the objects of pursuit by protracted negotiations, and voyaged safely and successfully to Lahore." After once he had entered the Punjab his journey, indeed, was quite an ovation. "My reception in this country," he wrote his mother, on the last day of July, "has been such as was to be expected from a Prince he had so high an honour conferred on him as to receive presents from our gracious Sovereign. Immediately that I had reached his frontier, he sent a guard of horsemen as an honorary escort and announced my arrival by a salute of eleven guns from the wall of the fortresses I passed. But what is this to the Chief of Bahwulpore, lower down, who came all the way to Cutch to meet me, and with whom I had an interview announced by eighty guns." The mission which had reached Lahore on the 18th July, quitted it on the 14th August; and Burnes proceeded to Simlah, to give an account of his embassy in person to the Governor-General, who was then with his secretaries residing in that pleasant and salubrious retreat.

Lord William Bentinck received the young traveller with characteristic kindness, and listened with the deepest interest to the account of his adventures. He listened to the account not only of what the young Bombay Lieutenant had done but also of what he desired to do. Before he had started out on the journey, Burnes had cherished, in his heart the project of still grander exploration – the exploration which was eventually to achieve for him fame and fortune. "I have a vast ambition," he wrote from the banks of the Jhelum to the "old folks at home," "to cross the Indus and Indian Caucasus and pass by the route of Balkh, Bokhara, and Samarkand, to the Arabian and Caspian Seas, to Persia, and thence to return by sea to Bombay. All this depends upon circumstances; but I suspect that the magnates of this Empire will wish to have the results

of my present journey before I embark on another.” He was right . But having communicated the results of the journey, he found the cabinet at Simlah well prepared to encourage another enterprise of the same character on a grander scale. “The home Government,” he wrote to his sister, on the 23rd September 1831, “have got frightened by the designs of Russia, and desired that some intelligent officer should be sent to acquire information in the countries bordering on the ‘Oxus’ and the ‘Caspian’; and I, knowing nothing of this, come forward and volunteer precisely for what they want, Lord Bentinck jumps at it, invites me to come and talk personally, and gives me comfort in a letter that “I quit Lohianah,” he said a few weeks later, “on the 1st of January 1832, and proceed by Lahore to Attock, ??, Bamei?, Balkh, Bokhara, and Khiva, to the Caspian Sea, and from thence to Astracan. If I can but conceal my designs from officers of the Russian Government, I shall pass through the territories to England and visit my paternal roof in the Butts (Bow Butts, Montrose).

After a few more weeks of pleasant sojourning with a few days before Christmas, and on the 3rd of January 1832 crossed the British frontier, and shook off Western civilisation. I was accompanied by a young assistant surgeon named Gera who had already earned for himself a name by his exploration of the Himalayahs, and by two native attaches – one, Mahomed Ali, in the capacity of a surveyor; the other a young Cashmeree Mahomedan, educated at Delhi, named **MOHAN LAL**, who accompanied him as ‘moonshee’, or secretary. Traversing again the country of the five rivers and making diverse pleasant and profitable explorations “in the footsteps of Alexander the Great.” In the middle of March the travellers forded the Indus, near Attock, took leave of their Sikh friends and became guests of the Afghans. There were at that time no jealousies, no resentments, between the two nations, and the little knowledge that they had of us derived from the fading knowledge and recollections of Mr Elphinstone’s mission was all finding favour; and we in our turn believed them to be a cheery simple-minded, kind-hearted and hospitable people. Along the whole line of country, from Peshawur to Caubul which cannot now be even named amongst us without a shudder, the English travellers were welcomed as friends. From the Afghan capitol Burnes, wrote, on the 10th May 1832, to his mother – “My journey has been more prosperous than my most sanguine expectations could have anticipated; and instead of jealousy and suspicion, we have hitherto been caressed and feasted by the chiefs of the country. I thought Peshawur, a delightful place, till I came to Caboul (Kabul); truly this is paradise.” His first animal spirits rose beneath the genial influences of the buoyant bracing climate of Afghanistan. How happy he was at that time – how full of heart and hope – may be gathered from such of his letters as reached his friends. With what a fine gust of youthful enthusiasm, writing to the family in Montrose, which his heart, untravailed, was ever fondly turning he describes his travel-life on this new scene of adventure.



We travel from hence in ten days with a caravan, and shall reach Bokhara by the 1st of July – if the road from Bokhara to the Caspian is interrupted by war, of which there is a chance, I shall be obliged to pass into Persia and in that event must bid farewell to the hope of seeing you, as I must return to India. The countries north of the Oxus are at present in a tranquil state, and I do not despair of reaching Istamboul (sic) [Istanbul] in safety. They may seize me and sell me for a slave, but no one will attack me for my riches. Never was there a more humble being seen. I have no tent, no chair or table, no bed, and my clothes altogether amounting to the value of one pound sterling. You would disown your son if you saw him. My dress is purely Asiatic , and since I came into Caboul, has been changed to the lowest orders of the people. My head is shaved of its brown locks and my beard dyed black, it grieves – as the Persian poets have it – for

the departed beauty of youth. I now eat my meals with my hands, and greasy digits they are, though I must say in justification, that I wash before and after meals. I frequently sleep under a tree, but if a villager will take compassion upon me I enter his house. I never conceal that I am a European, and I have as yet found the character advantageous to my comfort. I might assume all the habits and religion of the Mahomedans since I can now speak Persian as my own language but I should have less liberty and less enjoyment I an assumed garb. The people know me by the name of Secunder, which is the Persian for Alexander, and a magnanimous name it is. With all my assumed poverty. I have a bag of ducats around my waist and bills for as much money as I choose to draw. I gird my loins and tie on my sword on all occasions, though I freely admit I would make more use of silver and gold than of cold steel. When I go into a company, I put my hand on my heart, and say with all humility to the master of the house. "Peace be unto Thee," according to custom, and then I squat myself down on the ground. This familiarity has given me an insight into the character of the people which I never otherwise could have acquired. I tell them about steam engines, armies, ships, medicine, and all the wonders of Europe, and in return they enlighten me regarding the customs of their country, its history, state, factions, trade & etc. I all the time appearing indifferent and conversing thereon 'pour passer le temps.' The people of this country are kind hearted and hospitable; they have no prejudices against a Christian and none against our nation. When they ask if I eat pork, I of course shudder and say that only outcasts who commit such ravages. God forgive me! For I am fond of bacon, and my mouth waters as I write the word. I wish I had some of it for breakfast, to which I am now about to sit down. At present I am living with a most amiable man, a Nawab, named Juhbur Khan, brother to the chief of Caubul and he feeds me and my companion daily. They understand gastronomy pretty well. Our breakfast consists of pillaw (rice and meat) vegetables, stews and preserves, and finishes with fruit, of which there is yet abundance, though it is ten months old. Apples, Pears, quinces, and even melons are preserved, and for the grapes they are delicious. They are kept in small boxes in cotton and are preserved throughout the year. Our fare, you see is not so bad as our garb, and like a Holy friar, we have sackcloth outside, but better things to line the inside. We have however no sack or good wine, for I am too much of a politician to drink wine in a Mahomedian country. I am well mounted on a good horse, in case I should find it necessary to take to my heels. My whole baggage goes on one mule, over which my servant sits supercargo and with all this long enumeration of my condition, and the entire sacrifice of all comforts of civilised life, I never was in better spirits and never less under the influence of ???. I cannot tell you how my heart leaps to see all the trees and plants of my native land growing around me in this country.

When Burnes and his companions quitted Caubul, the Nawab Jubbur Khan, who had hospitably entertained, and who had endeavoured to persuade them to protract their sojourn with him, made every possible arrangement for the continuance of their journey in safety and comfort and bid them "God speed" with a heavy heart. "I do not think," said Burnes, "I ever took leave of an Asiatic with more regrets than I left this worthy man. He seemed to live for every one but himself;" He was known afterwards among our people by the name of "the good Nawab;" and the humanity of his nature was conspicuous to the last.

Having quitted Caubul, the English travellers made their way to the foot of the Hindoo-Koosh, or Indian Caucasus, and traversed that stupendous mountain range to Koondooz, Kooloom, and Balkh. This was the route explored by those unfortunate travellers Moorcroft and Trebeck of whom Burnes now found many traces, and whose sad history he was enabled to verify and authenticate. It was a relief for the young Englishman to find themselves in the territory of the King of Bokhara, whose evil reputation had not been then established. "As we were now in the territories of a king," he naively recorded in the history of his journey, "we could tell him our opinions, though it had, perhaps been more prudent to keep them to ourselves."

After a sojourn of three days at Balkh, which had many interesting and some painful associations, for it had been the capitol of the ancient Bactrian kingdom, but a little way beyond its walls was the grave of Moorcroft. Burnes and his companions made their way to the city of Bokhara, which they reached on the 27th of June. There they resided for a space of nearly four weeks – receiving from the people all possible kindness and hospitality. “Secunder,” said he to Burnes on his departure, “I have sent for you to ask if anyone has molested you in this city, or taken money from you in my name and if you leave us contented. “I replied that we had been treated as honoured guests, that our luggage had not even been opened, nor our property taxed, and that I should ever remember with the deepest sense of gratitude and many kindnesses that had been shown to us in the Holy Bokhara.

I quitted this worthy man with a full heart, and with sincere wishes (which I still feel) for the prosperity of this country.” The vizier gave authoritative instructions to the conductors of the caravan with which Burnes was to travel, and to a Toorkoman chief who was to accompany it with an escort, to guard the lives and properties of the Feringhees, declaring that he would root them from the face of the earth, if any accident should befall the travellers; and the King of Bokhara gave them also a firman of protection bearing the royal seal. It is instructive to consider all this with the light of after events to help us to a right understanding of its significance.

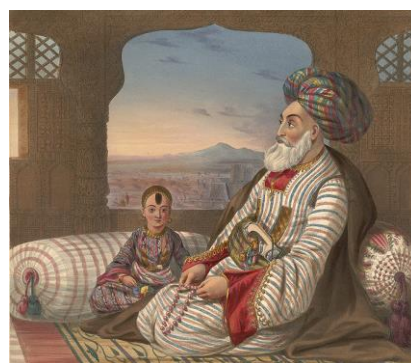
From Bokhara the route of the travellers lay across the great Toorkoman desert to Merve and Meshed, thence to Astrabad and the shores of the Caspian; thence to Tehran, the capitol of the dominions of the shah of Persia, from which point he moved down to the Persian Gulf, took ship there to Bombay and afterwards proceeded to Calcutta. The story has been told by himself, and is too well known to need to be repeated.

After he had given an account of his journey to the Governor-General, he was sent home to communicate to the authorities the information he had obtained. On the 4th of November 1833 he landed in England, where he met with a splendid reception, becoming the guest of the King, the greatest statesmen, and the learned in the land. At this time he wrote his well known book, which was a great success.

When Burnes returned to Bombay, he was ordered to rejoin his old appointment as assistant to the Resident in the Persian Gulf; but his services were soon demanded by the government in a more independent position. **LORD AUCKLAND** had proceeded to India as Governor-General. He had met Burnes at Bowood, had been pleased with his conversation, and had formed the highest opinion of the energy and ability of the young subaltern. When, therefore, under the evil influence of other men’s designs, the ‘Great Game’ in Central Asia began to take shape in his mind, he recognised at once, the fact, that Burnes must be one of the chief players. So the Cutch assistant was placed under the orders of the Supreme Government, and directed to hold himself in readiness to undertake what was described at the time, and is still known in history, as a commercial mission to Caubul. Commerce, in the vocabulary of the East, is only another name for conquest. By commerce, the East India Company had become the sovereigns of the great Indian peninsula; and this commercial mission was the cloak of grave political designs. Very soon the cloak was thrown aside as an incumbrance, and instead of directing his energies to the opening of the navigation of the Indus, Alexander Burnes gave up his mind to the great work of checkmating Russia in the East.



There had been a revolution, or a succession of revolutions, in Afghanistan. The Suddozye King, Shah Soojah, whom Elphinstone had met at Peshawur, was now a pensioner in the British Dominions, and the Barukze chief, **DOST MAHOMED**, was dominant in Caubul. It was now our policy to secure his good offices, and it was the duty of Alexander Burnes to accomplish this great object. Left to himself, he would have done it. He, who knew best Dost Mahomed, had most faith in him. The Ameer was eager for the British alliance, and nothing was easier than to secure his friendship. But whilst Burnes was striving to accomplish this great object at Caubul, other counsels were prevailing at Simla – that great hotbed of intrigue on the Himalayan hills – where the Governor-General and his secretaries were ??? *Large section of text obscured*..... That which for more than two years during the greater part of 1839, and all through 1840 and 1841 – he occupied at the Court of Caubul. If at that time, he had not been sometimes irritable and sometimes desponding, he would have been more or less than a man.



He had been taught to believe that **MACNAUGHTON** had been sent only for a little space into Afghanistan, to be soon removed to a higher office, and then he himself would be placed in the supreme direction of affairs. But month after month – nay, year after year – passed, and there was no change; and Burnes began to write somewhat bitterly of the good faith of the Governor-General, and to contrast his conduct with the soft words of the man, who had spoken so kindly and encouragingly to him on “the couch at Bowood.” At last in the Autumn of 1841, news came that Macnaughton had been appointed Governor of Bombay; but even then, there were reports that some other officer would be sent up from the Provinces to occupy his seat. It was a period of distressing doubt and anxiety to the expectant minister. The arrival of every post was looked for with feverish anxiety; but his heart sickened with hope deferred.

The anniversary of his arrival in India came round. Twenty years had passed since he had first set foot on the strand of Bombay. Seldom altogether free from superstitions and presentiments, he entered upon the 31st October 1841, with a vivid impression that it would bring forth something upon which his whole future life would turn. “Ay? What will this day bring forth?” he wrote in his journal, “the anniversary of my twenty years’ service in India. It will make or Mar me, I suppose. Before the sun sets I shall know whether I go to Europe or succeed Mcnaughten.” But the day passed and the momentous question was not settled. Then November dawned, and neither Burnes nor Macnaughten received the desired letters from Calcutta – only vague newspaper reports which added new fuel to the doubt and anxieties of the expectant envoy. “I suppose that I shall get tired of censure in time.” This was his last entry. There was no more either of praise or of censure to agitate him in this world.



Already was the city of Caubul seething with insurrection, and the house of Sir Alexander Burnes was in the city perilously exposed to attack. His Afghan servants told him that he was in danger, and exhorted him to withdraw to the cantonments. He said that he had done the Afghans no injury; why then should they injure him? He could not think that that any real danger threatened him, and he retired to rest at night with little fear of the results of the morrow. But

with the morrow came the phantoms of new troubles; plainly the storm was rising. First one, then another, with more or less authority, came to warn him that there was “death in the pot.” It was no longer possible to look with incredulity upon the signs and symptoms around him. The streets were alive with insurgents. An excited crowd was gathering around his house. Still there may be time to secure safety by flight. But he scorned to quit his post; he believed that he could quell the tumult and so he rejected the advice that might have saved him.

That the city was in a state of insurrection was certain; but it appeared that a prompt and vigorous demonstration on the part of the British troops in cantonments might quell the tumult; so he wrote to Macnaughton for support and to some friendly Afghan chiefs for assistance. It was then too late. Before any succour could arrive, the crowd before his house had begun to rage furiously, and it was plain that the insurgents were thirsting for the blood of the English officers. From a gallery which ran along the upper part of the house, Burnes attended by his brother Charles, and his friend William Broadfoot, addressed himself to the excited mob. They yelled out their execration and defiance in reply, and it was plain that no expostulations or entreaties could turn them aside from their purpose. The enemy had begun to fire upon them, and, hopeless as retaliation and resistance might be, there seemed to be nothing left to the English officers but to sell their lives as dearly as they could. Broadfoot was soon shot dead. Then the insurgents set fire to Burnes’ stables, rushed into his garden and summoned him to come down. All hope and succour from the cantonments had now gone. Still he might purchase his own and his brother’s safety by appealing to the natural avarice of the Afghans. He offered them large sums of money if they would suffer him to escape. Still they called upon him to leave off firing and to come down to the garden. At last he consented, and the brothers, conducted by a Cashmeer Mussulman, who had sworn to protect them, went down to the garden; but no sooner were they in the presence of the mob than their guide cried out, “here is Secunder Burnes!” and straight away the insurgents fell upon them and slew them.

And so on the 2nd of November 1841, fell Alexander Burnes, butchered by an Afghan mob. He was only thirty-six years of age. That he was a remarkable man and had done remarkable things is not to be doubted. He was sustained, from first to last, by that grand amalgam of the romantic and practical, of which Henry Lawrence spoke as the best security for a successful career. He was eager, impulsive and enthusiastic; but he had a sufficiency of good strong practical sense to keep him from running into any excesses. He had courage of a high order; sagacity, penetration, and remarkable quickness of observation. I am inclined to think that, if his life had been spared, he would have attained to much higher distinction, for all that he lacked to qualify him for offices of large responsibilities was a greater soberness of judgement, which years would almost certainly have brought. As it was, few men have achieved, at so early an age, so much distinction, by the force of their own personal character, as was achieved by Alexander Burnes.



*Montrose Standard and Angus and
Mearns Register – 3rd March 1865*

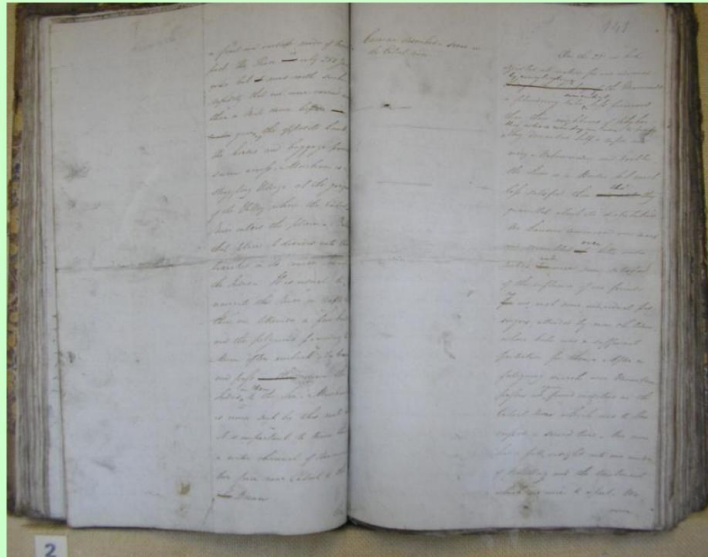
Bokhara Burnes

Killed at Kabul 1841



Displayed in
Montrose Museum

Travels into Bokhara
an account of a journey from India
to Kabul, Tartary and Persia
by Sir Alexander Burnes of Montrose



Sir Alexander's Journals and papers now held in Montrose Museum



Provost Burnes's House at the top of Bow Butts where the Family grew up.