

BOOKS REV

CENTRAL ASIA

A History of Afghanistan. By Sir Percy Sykes, 2 vols. (Macmillan, 50s.)

Here is an outstanding work of Oriental scholarship, about a fascinating land, by one of the very few men qualified to write it. Some in Europe and America, perhaps in Asia too, think of Afghanistan (if at all) as a region unimportant, barbaric, remote. Such ignorance is a curious consequence of the modern world's (and especially the English-speaking world's) evolution through sea-power. In truth, Afghanistan possesses a history quite as diversely rich, and contemporary problems at least as influential, as any country of equal population and size. Until recent centuries, mankind's destiny was fashioned at the centre of the great land-masses, rather than at their watery margins. Those inner regions are still potentially capable of deciding the course of great affairs. Air-power may modify geographical habits as profoundly as did sea-power.

A HIGH AUTHORITY

As soldier, explorer, and diplomat, Sir Percy Sykes, in 30 years' service to the British Crown, acquired wide practical knowledge of Central Asia. This, with unusual enterprise, he supplemented by incessant reading and research. His *History of Persia*, (1915) a standard work, was written before his retirement—a feat few other busy officials could emulate. Later editions worthily amplified it. Other historical books and articles and works of travel have since flowed from his pen, notably *Through Deserts and Oases of Central Asia*, (1920); a biography of *Sir Mortimer Durand* (1926); a learned *History of Exploration* (1934); and the entrancing *Quest of Cathay* (1936).

Until this present book was begun, no comprehensive history of Afghanistan in English had been attempted. That, in retrospect, seems astonishing. The literature bearing upon the country is extensive, and happenings in the Central Asian uplands have always affected India. Eleven years ago Sir George MacMunn published a likeably vigorous sketch of events in Afghanistan from Darius's to Amanullah's time. This is perhaps the best-known modern work on the subject, but it was frankly not designed for the enlightenment of scholars.

COLOUR AND BREADTH

Sir Percy Sykes paints upon a huge canvas. Asia is bigger than Europe, and Afghanistan bigger than Switzerland, the European country most comparable to it, that is to say a mountainous inland region inhabited by people differing sharply from one another in language and culture and racial origins. Such lands are conspicuously not self-contained. To trace their histories primarily by reference to happenings upon their own soil is impracticable, and Afghanistan diverges from her European counterpart in having been the route for many of the greatest migrations of mankind, the pathway followed alike by religious faiths, by devastating conquerors, and by novel forms of civilization seeking beneficent expansion.

These volumes, accordingly, unfold before our eyes a coloured Oriental tapestry of fantastic intricacy and breadth. Dim, half fabulous figures fleetingly appear, Prester John, Zoroaster, Sennacherib, The Old Man of the Mountain, Prithvi Raj of Delhi, King Solomon; or those delightfully real travellers Hsuang-tsang, Ibn Bhattuta, and Marco Polo; world-shaking victors too, Alexander and Chenghiz Khan and Tamerlane; learned men and religious teachers and artists, Firdausi the poet, Buddha, or the Prophet of Islam; many stately well-established monarchs, Augustus, Peter the Great, Cyrus, Akbar; finally a rather incongruously colourless succession of modern soldiers and administrators, Auckland and Curzon, Roberts and Elphinstone and Nott. Vivid accounts abound of deliberate hideous cruelty in those wide uplands, of magnanimity and friendship and treachery and almost superhuman courage. ~~reliable~~ chapters in volume I are those on Alexander and the subsequent Seleucid Dynasty; on the Mongol cataclysm; on Tamerlane; and on Afghanistan under the Moghuls. A random sequence of names plucked from the index illustrates this history's huge scope in time and space: Benderski (Russian Survey officer), Benedict Goës (Jesuit emissary sent by Akbar to China), Bengal, Beni Temin (a Yemen tribe), Berenice (daughter of Ptolemy Philadelphus), Berowski, Bessus (Satrap of Bactria), Bevan (Edwyn R.); or, alternatively and more quaintly, Browne (Sir Sam), Brussa, Brutus, Brydon, Buddha.

SOME CRITICISMS

The book is not perfect. None of such magnitude could be. The author has a lively eye for historical drama, for landscape, and for human detail; apt and vigorous prose is used in describing these, but the quality of the writing is uneven. In some parts reiteration of "to resume... to continue this account... it remains to add that... to conclude... to return to" becomes irritating. There are heavily diffuse passages, and some of slipshod construction, especially in the concluding chapters. The work indeed tails off. Some misprints (II, pp. 323, 332, 333) may be attributable to publishing difficulties in war-time; also minor chronological errors (II, p. 267). But Sir Percy is in general a happier and more illuminating guide in the fields of pure history than of recent or contemporary interpretation. His experience of Afghanistan has been less intimate than of Persia; therein may be sought the cause. But that hardly explains in full the decrease of objectivity as the story emerges from past into present; focussing capacity seems to weaken. May this be due to retention from sheer habit of official spectacles? The profusion of energetic epithets employed in criticizing the Red Shirts (p. 323), or in analysis of the Rawalpindi negotiations (p. 284), is suggestive. As modern times are reached, the author's criterion of judgment, unconsciously perhaps, appears in some instances simply to be whether a particular occurrence benefited British Imperial interests. That is intelligible, but not scientific.

A GREAT ACHIEVEMENT

Nonetheless the second volume is as a whole scarcely less crowded with good matter than the first. Especially

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valuable is the exciting chapter about the Turko-German mission to Afghanistan during the 1914-18 war. Sir Percy was personally concerned with this very awkward business, and the historic contrasts thrown up by it are nowadays startling, for Britain then was fighting in Russia's company against her present friend Turkey. The able chapters on the First Anglo-Afghan war may become the standard commentary on that tragically mishandled affair. There is an illuminating section upon Czarist Russia's advances in Central Asia between 1840 and 1880. The Third Afghan war is authoritatively treated, and in this and the four subsequent chapters the difficult subject of ex-King Amanullah's character and policies receive on the whole fair treatment. The present régime in Afghanistan is discussed rather sketchily but with very evident sympathy and goodwill. The second volume has as frontispiece an excellent photograph of the handsome young King Zahir Shah. The book is sumptuously produced; illustrations, maps, appendices, bibliography and index are of the highest quality. By all applicable tests *A History of Afghanistan* is a work of first-class importance, fit crown for a career of distinction in the diverse spheres of academic study and public service.

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N.B.—Lot No. 9 is tenanted and it will be sold with tenants.
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R. Sinha,
Chief Valuer & Surveyor
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