

Lady Florentia Sale, A Journal of the First Afghan War. Edited by Patrick Macrory.
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; xxiii + 186 pp, £8.99).

The events in Afghanistan (not to mention Iraq) have re-kindled public interest in the various disasters which befell earlier 'western' efforts at central Asia regime change. Few, if any, of the recent spate of books about 19th and 20th century Afghan wars can compare with the eye-witness sharpness of this diary of an early Victorian lady. The version edited by the late Sir Patrick Macrory, which OUP now makes available in paperback with a new introduction by Jane Robinson, first appeared in 1969. Macrory's own narrative of the events described in the journal had appeared three years earlier; that too has been recently re-issued.¹ Lady Sale's journal itself was originally published (almost inevitably, by John Murray) in 1843, just two years after the events she describes.

Florentia Sale – 'the grenadier in petticoats' – came from an old East India Company (EIC) family. In 1808 she married Robert Sale, whom Macrory (in another, collaborative, take on the débacle of the first Afghan war) describes as a 'bluff and hearty down to earth fighting soldier of ... little imagination'² surprisingly, Sale's hobby turns out to have been gardening, which he pursued even in the unpromising soil and hostile surroundings of the Kabul cantonments.

Those responsible for man-management in today's army might look askance at Macrory's uncritical partiality for 'Fighting Bob' Sale; the latter's method of dealing with the threat of insubordination in his regiment was to ride onto the parade ground and order a volley to be fired with blank: 'As the roar of the muskets dies harmlessly away [his] voice could be heard shouting triumphantly "Ah, its not my fault if you don't shoot me!"; this, combined with savage floggings, says Macrory's Introduction, brought the regiment to a proper stage of discipline and the men became 'mere babies', adding (without much sign of authentication) that the rank and file 'felt a genuine affection' for Sale.

The Sales travelled to Mauritius, Burma, then back to India with their five children (seven others died in infancy or childhood). In 1840 Sale was appointed second in command of the grandly titled 'Army of the Indus', an amalgam of British and native ('Hindoostani') troops from royal and EIC regiments. This force was despatched in 1840 by Lord Auckland, the ill-advised Governor General of India; Wellington (perhaps the Colin Powell of his day) warned that the enterprise would mean a 'perennial march' into Afghanistan. The aim was to take Kabul and replace the existing ruler, Dost Mohammed, with Shah Soojah, a scion of the original Afghan royal house.

A year after successfully ‘defeating’ the Afghan forces and duly installing Shah Soojah, Auckland and his advisers, driven partly at least by considerations of economy, decreed that Afghanistan was secure and Sale’s brigade was ordered back to Jalalabad, leaving Florentia, her daughter, son-in-law and their servants in Kabul. Responsibility for the safety of the weakened garrison, together with the British and Indian civilians, was uneasily shared between the political envoy, Macnaghten, General Elphinstone, an indecisive valetudinarian, and Elphinstone’s surly deputy, Brigadier Shelton, a one-armed veteran of the Peninsular wars; one of Shelton’s more endearing habits was apparently to wrap himself up in his sleeping bag during councils of war.

As Jane Robinson’s Foreword points out, Shah Soojah faced an insoluble dilemma: ‘so long as British troops remained in the land he would be despised and hated ... as the puppet of foreigners ... yet if the British left him, he was lost.’ It is a dilemma which has a familiar ring about it, as has the questionable loyalty and effectiveness of the locally recruited troops ostensibly under Soojah’s own command. One recent military history strikes a further chord when it suggests that the British in Kabul ‘did not see themselves as conquerors, but merely as allies of the Afghan state.’³

After Sale’s departure, Afghan insurgents started to attack the poorly sited and ill-defended British cantonments; as another 20th century (American) military history puts it, ‘The British were rapidly learning what it meant to be an alien invader of a central Asian country far from their bases.’⁴ The first part of Florentia’s journal records the vacillations of the British commanders and the hazardous existence of the civilian families in Kabul during this period.

As the wife of a general, Lady Sale was well equipped and shrewd enough to judge the effects of Elphinstone’s indecision and the pessimism of Shelton, whom she (and others) scornfully labelled a ‘croaker.’ She got inside information from her son-in-law, Captain Sturt, whose job superintending the garrison’s engineering works meant he picked up gossip and hints of trouble via the local labourers. Where (yet another) recent military historian reckons the long-barrelled *jezail* was ‘of doubtful accuracy’,⁵ Lady Sale saw at first hand how it could out-perform the British musket.

With winter closing in, no food or fuel to be had, under daily attack by the Afghans, and with Sale’s brigade now stuck at Jalalabad and unable to help, it was agreed that the whole British contingent, consisting of 4,300 soldiers and 12,000 camp followers, would march out together towards India; the Afghan warlords (not a term familiar to Lady Sale) promised safe conduct to Jalalabad. The sick and wounded were left behind, most of them subsequently killed.

From the start of the retreat, the column was harassed by mounted Afghan *Jezeilchis*. Discipline collapsed and the enormous train of camp followers constantly hampered whatever counter-attacks the British tried to mount. Each day hundreds of fighting men and thousands of the servants, women and children, were killed by the rebel snipers or died from cold and hunger.

During the retreat, Lady Sale and her daughter, along with other officers' wives and their children were effectively taken hostage by one of the Afghan chieftains, as were Elphinstone, Shelton and a number of other officers.⁶ The second part of Florentia's journal reveals the considerable fortitude with which she and the others faced captivity, first in a mud-walled compound, then – as the arrival of a British relief column became ever more likely – on the move before eventually being freed by an advance guard from Jalalabad some ten months after the insurrection began.

Other than the party of hostages (several of whom, including Sturt and Elphinstone, died in captivity), of the 15,000 troops, their families, servants and camp followers who set out from Kabul, only one – Dr. William Brydon – survived to reach safety at Jalalabad. Brydon's own laconic account of the retreat (which seems not to have been published at the time) forms an appendix to Lady Sale's journal, and she acknowledges his help in filling out the story of that part of the retreat which she herself had not witnessed.

Under daily shell and musket fire while still in Kabul, then subject to the traumas of captivity, the fact that Lady Sale was able to produce a journal at all is remarkable enough: imprisoned in three small rooms in the Afghan warlord's compound, luxuries such as table, chair, and bedding were commonly lacking; pages of the journal had to be kept concealed in her clothing and later smuggled out in instalments as part of the correspondence which the hostages were eventually allowed to carry on with Sale in Jalalabad.

It is no criticism, therefore, to say that the published text shows signs of addition and polishing: what look like sentences jotted down in the heat of the moment will sometime jump out from the middle of longer bits of narrative. Under Afghan attack in Kabul ('I had taken up my post of observation, as usual, on the top of the house ... where, by keeping behind the chimneys, I escaped the bullets that continually whizzed past me') Lady Sale accurately sums up the weakness of the British position, deploring both the vacillation of the commanders and the buck-passing of military and civil leaders.

Once the retreat from Kabul begins, she sees clearly that the mass of camp followers fatally hampers the efforts of the soldiers to repel the Afghan insurgents. On the other

hand, when the Afghan expedition was being planned it did not seem to have struck her (or anyone in authority) that the vast array of servants (the Sale household alone numbered around 40) might prove a fatal impediment to the ‘Army of the Indus.’

The journal naturally shows a fierce loyalty towards Sale, Sturt and others who showed some fight, but Florentia spends less time (as does Macrory) than we might today think correct on sympathising with the dire existence of these camp followers. While the European hostages certainly had a most unpleasant time, sleeping on the floor, eating greasy Afghan mutton pilaff and being able to wash only once a week, those Indians disabled by frost bite, or for whom rations were no longer available, were simply stripped of their clothing and possessions and pushed outside the prison compound. A similar fate befell the servants and their families left by the wayside during the retreat itself, Lady Sale noting, during the hostages’ final escape, signs of cannibalism among the few wretched survivors living in mountain caves.

Florentia Sale’s journal makes her sound matter of fact, even accommodating, about her Afghan captors’ motives and actions. By contrast, Sir John Kaye’s three-volume history of the first Afghan war, published 14 years after the event, and referred to as ‘definitive’ by both Macrory and the relevant volume of the *Oxford History of England*,⁷ now seems florid and opinionated (Kaye admits he took ‘not even the humblest part in’ the war’s ‘stirring scenes’).

Where Kaye deplores the fact that ‘the nice sensibilities of delicate English ladies were outraged by the appearance of nauseous vermin’ in the hostages’ bedding,⁸ Lady Sale points out that the shelter, food, hygiene and so on enjoyed by the hostages differed hardly at all from the way of life natural to the impoverished Afghan ‘chiefs’ and their families; the unwanted livestock the hostages carried with them during their nine month captivity were, Lady Sale assures her readers, jokily referred to as ‘infantry’ (lice) and ‘light cavalry’ (fleas). An Afghan servant is acquired to do the ladies’ washing, but Lady Sale herself has to hang it out to dry on the roof of the prison compound: ‘we dispense with starch and ironing ... in our present situation.’

About her own safety, Florentia Sale was clearly as little troubled as was ‘Fighting Bob’ about his (he was noted throughout the army not only for leading from the front, but for invariably getting wounded in the process). To add to the misery of the hostages, a number of earthquakes shook that part of Afghanistan: ‘Earthquakes in the usual number,’ reads the journal entry for 26 March, 1842. She makes light of her own wound, inflicted during the early part of the retreat by a musket ball, which has to be cut out (without anaesthetic, of course) from her wrist in the early days of her captivity. One of

the other eye-witness accounts, that of Lieutenant Eyre (a fellow hostage who eventually became a general) follows Florentia in describing her 'slight wound', provoking the following pencilled marginal note from a knowledgeable and contemporary reader, General Charles James Napier, the conqueror of Sind,

It entered her *elbow* and was cut out at *her wrist*, a 'slight wound.' God forgive me but with the exception of the women you were all a set of sons of bitches and you who pretend to record facts call this a slight wound! The devil you do! Had you half as bad a one – you would have walked out of the action in no time I'll warrant.⁹

But Eyre too could write thoughtfully (again, the words have a familiar ring to present ears) about the background to the campaign: 'A fearfully severe lesson was necessary to remove the veil from the eyes of those who, drawing their conclusions from their wishes, *would* consider Afghanistan as a settled country.'¹⁰

Patrick Macrory, who originally brought this remarkable journal back into the public eye in the 1960s, was born in Ulster in 1911. After Cheltenham College and Trinity (Oxford) he trained as a barrister, became director of a number of companies (including Merchant Ivory Productions), and served on public bodies from the Northern Ireland Development Council to the Location of Offices Bureau (LOB); he was knighted in 1972 and died in 1993.

Son of a colonel and grand-son of a general, Macrory served throughout the Second World War and his fascination with the first Afghan war looks like that of the knowledgeable but uncomplicated critical military man. On the other hand, for Jane Robinson, Lady Florentia Sale is the obvious attraction, one of the 'angels of Albion' who lived (and frequently died) in the most remote and inhospitable parts of Empire and recorded their experiences. Robinson has published a number of books about these women, the journals they wrote, their domestic arrangements and, notably, the food – exotic or noxious – which they prepared and ate. A thumbnail sketch of Lady Sale features in one of those anthologies;¹¹ anyone reading that ought to feel the urge to go out and invest in this paperback edition of her journal.

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NOTES:

¹ P. Macrory, *Signal Catastrophe* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966), re-published as *Kabul Catastrophe* (London: Prion, 2002).

² G. Pottinger and P. Macrory, *The Ten-Rupee Jezail, Figures in the First Afghan War* (Norwich: Michael Russell, 1993), p. 121.

³ T. A. Heathcote, *The Afghan Wars 1839–1919* (London: Osprey, 1980), p. 54.

⁴ J. H. Walker, *Beyond the Khyber Pass: the Road to British Disaster in the First Afghan War* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 161; the author, a retired US diplomat and CIA inspector general, praised Lady Sales' 'sharp eyes and acute ears and [her] good grasp of military matters' (p. 161).

⁵ E. O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars, 1839–1992* (London: Brassey's, 1993), p. 5. The un-sporting Afghans, of course, used a rest to support the long barrel.

⁶ Although confined in most cramped conditions, it was usually found possible to billet the 9 'ladies', 14 children and 20 'gentlemen' (i.e. officers) separately from the 17 other ranks and 2 wives. Typically, no count was ever made of the (Indian) servants and their families in the party.

⁷ Sir L. Woodward, *The Age of Reform* (Oxford: OUP, 1962), p. 649.

⁸ J. W. Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan* (London: Richard Bentley, 1857), ii, p. 221.

⁹ See V. Eyre, *Military Operations at Cabul* (London: John Murray, 1843). Napier's marginalia now appear as an appendix to J. A. Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838–1842* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967).

¹⁰ Eyre, *Military Operations* (1843), p. 18. Original emphasis.

¹¹ J. Robinson, *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers* (Oxford: OUP, 1990); see also Robinson, *Parrot Pie for Breakfast: An Anthology of Women Pioneers* (Oxford: OUP, 1999)