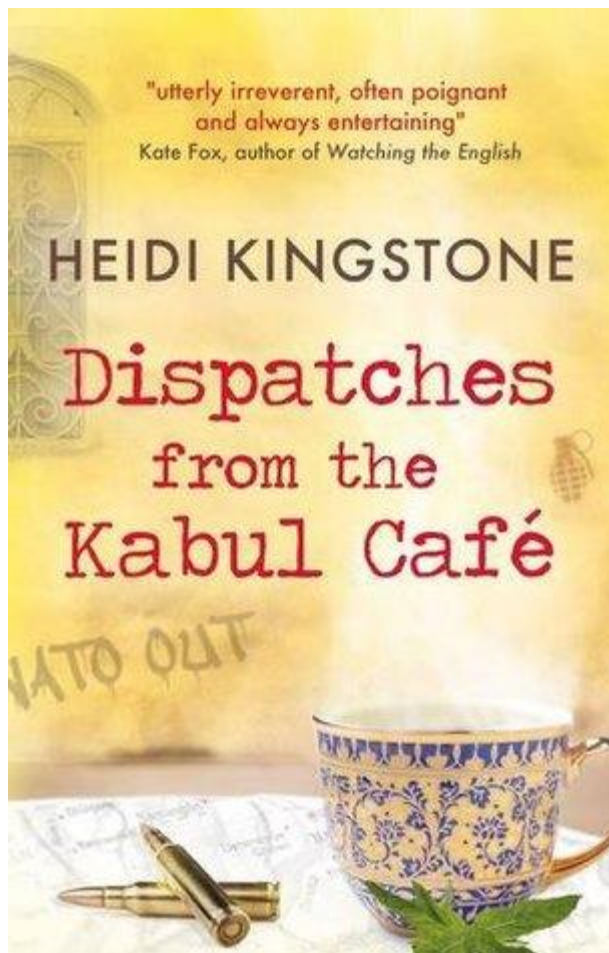




Heidi Kingstone

(Source: Wikipedia Commons)



Cover of Dispatches from the Kabul Café

By Heidi Kingstone

(Source: Wikipedia Commons)

“Dispatches from the Kabul Café” by Heidi Kingstone

Reviewed by British Defence writer Georgina Natzio

Finding Your Way Round Kabul

The following comments were stimulated by Heidi Kingstone’s “Dispatches from the Kabul Cafe.” Heidi is a Canadian journalist who spent four years in Afghanistan based in Kabul just getting around and alongside the folk you might expect to find there, civil, military heroic, sometimes suffering individuals, sharps and flats included.

The following quote on the cover is from Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan: “This wonderful cocktail of images and impressions is far more than the sum of its parts. For it offers a deep draught of the awful excitement of living on the edge of somebody else’s war.”

As I write in March 2019, my newspaper carries a brief report from a local UN official in southern Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, headed, "20 dead in floods after heavy rain." The official reckoned the flooding was the worst the region had seen for seven years; heavy snowfall continuing, with ten people, including children, missing. This event might perhaps be regarded as unusual for a hot dry climate, the different altitudes adding great variations and extremes, where the temperature could change 30° in a day.

The news set me thinking how a country or place - a district - gains a reputation. What do we envisage when Afghanistan comes up in report and conversation? For instance, first: A dangerous place, due to the presence of persistent conflicts, small- and large-scale; second: One that challenges topographically, harsh and mountainous valleys, large plain to south; third: A country where ferocity is no stranger, and fourth: A country of hard-working, enduring peoples - who appear to take stoicism in hardship to a truly higher level.

The region we know as Afghanistan today, apart from operations on the former British Empire's North West Frontier which gave young men their routes to manhood or extinction whichever way their luck went, has seen some serious wars in the not-all-that-distant past. To these are added recent conflicts still tormenting the population. Savage as their ancestors may have been in treating defeated enemies and, not least, internally through tribal rivalries, their own leaders, surely the modern citizens deserve better.

Sixty-one years ago, an account from a favourite resource, Everyman's Encyclopaedia (1958), of historical interest in itself, described a population made up of, "...very diverse elements, Pathans or Afghans proper in the eastern and southern provinces, Hazaras in the centre, a few Persians (Iranians) in the west, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens in the north." The dominant religion was Islam...the official languages, Pashtu and Persian. The literature was, in 1958, seen as mostly poetic, deriving from each language.

Why does international interest in Afghanistan continue? Centred on Afghanistan for well over a hundred years, this has the qualities of an irrational obsession. Maybe, it's received wisdom that Russia, for example, wary of neighbouring countries and regions has intermittently taken steps to acquire or influence them. Stability along borders, however, is obviously desirable, especially, as boundaries are no respecters of ancient kingdoms or tribal holdings. Myths and legends, collective memories, all contribute to local narratives in defiance of borders imposed by outsiders.

It might come as a surprise for some WIW readers, as it did to this one, to learn of recurrent internal contests of supreme power in Afghanistan with outsiders, the British included, backing their candidate. Hitherto, successful competitors tended to complicate matters by attempting to play off the Russians against the British, or vice versa. Partly, I now suspect, that this was probably in an effort to persuade the Great Powers to leave Afghanistan alone, or achieve diplomatic gain from them. It went something like this:

In 1863, for example, Sher Ali began his rule with a period of strife during which Kabul was, so the Encyclopaedia's account goes, lost to rebel forces only being regained in 1868. The British at the time exercised a policy of non-interference in Afghan affairs, but this was abandoned in 1876 on the appointment of a new Viceroy of India who advocated a 'forward policy' to guard against the threat to India, thought at the time to be implicit in Russia's continued advance in central Asia (the Great Game). Thus, the British did not much like Sher Ali's involvement with the Russian government, nor did they like his refusal to agree to British demands which resulted in the Second Afghan War in 1878. Subsequently this led to the occupation of Kabul, Kandahar, and the Kurram Valley. Sher Ali fled, eventually dying in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Occupation of Afghanistan seems likely to continue but the British decided to opt instead, for backing a new candidate for the throne, Abdurrahmann. He pacified and strengthened the country (no small task), kept the Russians at bay maintaining friendly relations with Britain, creating the desired buffer State. His son, succeeding him, was less enamoured of the British. Habibullah was nonetheless committed to acceptance of British control of Afghan foreign relations in exchange for an annual subsidy of the order of £160,000, and permission to import munitions through India. Habibullah remained faithful to the obligations he had undertaken on behalf of his country and

“...preserved Afghan neutrality during the First World War, in spite of German blandishments.”

The Amir Habibullah Khan was assassinated in 1919. His brother Nasrullah seized power but was deposed by Amanullah, Habibullah's third son. Amanullah's troops crossed the Indian frontier in May 1919 but, so this Everyman's Encyclopaedia account goes, they were speedily repelled by British troops who advanced to Dakka, thereby compelling the Amir to conclude peace in August. This was accompanied by recognition of Afghan independence. In 1921 a treaty was signed at Kabul by which Great Britain recognised the internal and external independence of Afghanistan, and Afghanistan accepted the then existing frontier with India. Subject, apparently, to slight adjustment near the Khyber. Following mutual agreement to exchange diplomatic representatives, including consular officers at Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and other towns, Afghanistan was, by the same treaty, permitted to import war materials as might be necessary for her defence, free of duty. In 1923 a trade convention was concluded. (In 1958 it was estimated that exports and imports between India and Afghanistan had an average annual value of approximately £1,000,000.)

Back in 1928, King Amanullah and his Queen made a State visit to Europe, visiting Italy, France, Great Britain and the USSR. Welcomed everywhere, they were showered with presents, “...mainly with the object of securing concessions in Afghanistan and of furthering divers political interests. Amanullah manifested considerable diplomacy in promising much yet doing little, his dominant idea being to westernise his kingdom and to give most, no doubt, to the country which [enabled him to achieve his ambition].” He also concluded treaties with Turkey and Persia [Iran] by which all parties agreed to adopt a conciliatory attitude to each other in the event of disputes.

Returning home, a number of reforms were made by the King. Afghan students were sent to Europe to study modern methods of army administration, military training, political science, and engineering, while a comprehensive programme of public works including railways, telegraphic communications, and an aeroplane service was planned at, according to the Everyman account, enormous expense for so poor a State.

“But,” the 1958 account continues, “perhaps the most striking reform was the emancipation of women through the zeal of Queen Surayyeh, who being a woman of Damascus, was not slow to appreciate the backward state of the women of her royal consort's country.” European dress was also adopted by the King's Council. The King abolished titles of nobility and the curtailment of religious leaders' powers, combined with a bold attempt to introduce Cabinet government. The removal of the veil in public and the education of girls, however, soon inflamed public opinion to danger point. The direct cause of the revolt which followed the King's westernising of the country, nevertheless, was the royal order to all tribesmen to become naturalised citizens of Afghanistan. After this under the leadership of the Shinwari tribe, supported by the incensed Muslim priesthood, armed rebels were soon mustering for a

general attack. More entangled instability followed, involving flight of the King and his wife, abdications and rescinded abdications, murder of a successor, another flight of a rebel ruler, and out of this maelstrom emerged Nadir Khan former war minister under Amanullah who was elected King, recognised by the British Government. However, under his father's rule a new fundamental law had declared Afghanistan completely independent, abolished slavery and forced labour, while education was made compulsory.

Afghanistan's instability was fuelled by royal, familial and tribal rivalries traded on by would-be international borders. Even so, Afghanistan was omitted to the League of Nations in 1934, mainly at the instance of Russia and Turkey. Then, in July 1937 a mutual non-aggression pact was signed with Iran, Iraq, Turkey and in 1938 the Afghan Air Force much expanded. Work began on the building of military aerodromes at Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Jalalabad. Plans for the industrialisation of the country began the following year, already cotton and other textile factories had been opened, while in 1958 it was observed that efforts were being made to exploit the almost untapped mineral resources in the north of the country. In 1946 Afghanistan was accepted for membership of the United Nations. By 1955, Afghanistan-British relations were described as good, while Soviet leaders paid a goodwill visit which resulted in a series of agreements on the provision of Soviet technical aid.

Thus it can be seen that Afghanistan's peoples had endured life in a veritable cauldron of instabilities against a background of attempts to bring a dignified character to the State all undoubtedly leaching down to rivalries at local level, with freeloaders, regular military and diplomatic individuals, local farmers, shopkeepers, tribal and religious leaders wives, mothers and others, all carrying on with a life which became for some, and for many sporadically extremely difficult.

When Heidi Kingstone, a Canadian journalist, went there in 2007 Afghans had seen the Russians and driven them away, and had done their best to drive away the ensuing Americans. Her Memoir, published in paperback in 2015 opens with a useful timeline for events following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, following which external and internal striving for influence in the country resumed. In 1996 the Taliban took control of Kabul. Also included in Heidi's preliminary pages is an excellent map, reproduced from the annals of the Lonely Planet in 2015. By the time Heidi arrived, NATO had been engaged there for six years, attempting to bring peace, stability and reconstruction to the country. She has given us an account of not only her experiences but also has applied hard thinking to the whole enterprise of intervention.

The corruption, for example, which Heidi discovered to be so endemic has clearly hindered genuine progress towards a fair and stable existence for many, saving those who embraced said corruption, of course. She writes how the lives and loves of all the individuals she met were affected by the unstable background of an Afghan society labouring under internal repressions and external ongoing conflict.

Nonetheless, Heidi writes in 2013 with humour and insight into the cultural differences she found during her time in Afghanistan between the European and trans-Atlantic journalists themselves, or between each and the Afghans. Among several descriptions of female life in the country, she describes the social living conditions of one woman friend in detail, reflecting restrictions re-laid onto women since the earlier reforms. Returning to Afghanistan aged twelve, her friend when aged ten, had written a poem, "A Girl with no Borders," about a child, Heidi noted;

“...who had no restrictions in her life, no borders to separate her from her family, her land, her thoughts, her freedom and the world... there were a few well known female role models and some female leaders throughout Afghanistan’s history, but not many. There was also no obvious way to have influence in the male networks where deals were brokered.”

Heidi, on the other hand, observing her fellow incomers, journalist; aid workers, “shadow” fighters, illustrates that it isn’t only the well-intentioned who find themselves in a country in turmoil, but those such as mercenaries, as they used to be called, or there who, gaining from nefarious activities take advantage of anarchic situations. The instability of insurgency clouds Afghans’ willingness to lead peaceful, productive lives, yet they continue to try. Former warlords lie in wait for each other, and still there is not enough critical mass, Heidi writes, to enforce change.

Her view at the time of her book’s publication in 2015 is borne out by a description in The Economist magazine of January 31, 2019 in which it was noted that ‘...American [and Allied] forces were deemed to be no closer to defeating the Taliban, that repressive Islamist militia that ruled most of the country before 2001, than they were a decade ago... conflict has reached something of a stalemate, but a bloody one, with some 10,000 police and soldiers, 3,400 civilians and an unknown number of insurgents killed in 2017... Since then, the authorities have stopped releasing data on military casualties - not presumably because things have got better.’

“After seventeen years of fighting,” The Economist’s account continues, “America and the Taliban may be ready to lay down their arms. The adversaries have agreed in principle on a framework for ending their war. Envisaged is America withdrawing troops in return for assurances that Afghanistan will never again become a haven for international terrorists.” We can but hope.

Heidi’s is a memoir of considerable subtlety. It’s title, “Dispatches from the Kabul Cafe,” has an eye-catching claim on attention. Yet beneath the author’s apparently superficial assessments; admissions of lack of perception until forced to consider matters in greater detail, a clearer sight of the realities filters thought-provokingly through. Heidi Kingstone’s account of her time and the people she met in Afghanistan is one not to be missed.