

# “The Dark Defile” by Diana Preston

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Britain has long turned military defeats into narratives of national self-redemption like “The Dunkirk Spirit” or, failing that, epics of personal courage and endurance followed by ultimate victory. “[The Dark Defile](#),” by [Diana Preston](#), a British writer of popular histories, is one of the latter. It focuses on the catastrophic British retreat from Kabul in 1842, marked by a last stand against overwhelming odds.

With the United States and Britain cutting their military commitments to Afghanistan, the story of how disengagement can become disaster is uncomfortably topical. In Afghanistan, things turn bad more quickly and with fewer stopping points than almost anywhere else.

The book’s action takes place in Afghanistan, but that is not its subject. The Kipling-quotation title conveys its British focus. Afghanistan is never a dark defile to Afghans; however war-torn or dysfunctional, it’s home. The book is about Englishmen (and some redoubtable Englishwomen) at the center of the fiasco that historians call the First Anglo-Afghan War. They failed to sustain a pro-British king in Kabul, then fought, fled and, finally, faced the lethal realities of defeat.

Some of these stalwarts, plus a few of the Indians who had composed the bulk of the British presence in Afghanistan, survived and recorded the dramatic story in contemporaneous documents,

memoirs and histories that Preston used as sources (archaic Victorian spellings and all).

“The Dark Defile” offers drama and excitement. And imbecility. Lots of imbecility. The [Duke of Wellington](#), Britain’s greatest general, recognized this as he surveyed the wreckage from his office in Whitehall: “There must have been either the grossest treachery, or the most inconceivable imbecility, and very likely a mixture of both.” In addition, there was tremendous but doomed heroism, equally tremendous cowardice, and blundering leadership — a formula for political failure, military disaster and compelling storytelling alike. No wonder [George MacDonald Fraser](#) picked the First Anglo-Afghan War as the backdrop for his first novel about a matchless literary character: Harry Flashman, soldier, scoundrel and survivor.

Even without Flashman, “The Dark Defile” goes to Kabul with some memorable characters. Sir Alexander Burnes, a Scottish Afghanistan expert, saw his recommendations overturned by a chain of command consisting of local incompetents and distant fossils. He consoled himself with Muslim ladies in a manner that soon had outraged Kabulis sharpening their knives. Lady Florentia Sale, spouse of one of the few competent British generals, provided clear-eyed diary entries even after her soldier son-in-law died in her arms during the retreat. Mohan Lal, an Indian intelligence agent, covertly observed the disaster and then saw Britain’s returning Army of Retribution (its name representing Victorian truth-in-advertising) burn out Kabul’s hostile and friendly Afghans alike.

These sources were never under oath. Then as now, letters, memoirs and official accounts all merit skeptical reading.

Few understood that this was also an Afghan civil war. Outside the fortification walls and the musket smoke, there was a nation taking

shape, though two more Anglo-Afghan wars were required for it to finally emerge. Afghan voices (and history) are not part of Preston's story. Nor is much attention paid to the lives of those who did not get to write their memoirs, the doomed British privates and Indian sepoy, or to how early Victorian Britain made war. American readers less familiar with the Victorian worldview or the British past would appreciate more background explanation. There are annoying errors of detail in the story (and maps) that should have been corrected. For example, Preston confuses shuras (councils) with jirgas (assemblies). The book pays more attention to the colorful main characters than to the story's setting, background or supporting cast.

While it is tempting to look for tomorrow's policy lessons in "The Dark Defile," other recent books such as Thomas Barfield's "Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History" and David Loyn's "In Afghanistan" provide more useful two-sided history and analysis. But, in addition to being vivid popular history, "The Dark Defile" shows, through the eyes of those that experienced it, the human cost of both self-deluding political decision-making in distant capitals and of military failure in Afghanistan. The retreat from Kabul as narrated by Preston is a powerful metaphor: propelled by shortsighted policies and ignorance, never escaping the darkness, yet never reaching the light.

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