

ELIE KEDOURIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

The Legend of the Great Game

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A PERSISTENT THEME IN THE WRITINGS of Elie Kedourie was his mistrust of large, seemingly attractive concepts or ideas, ideas which were lightly advanced and quietly incorporated into political or historical folklore without being subjected to the close and critical scrutiny which he rightly believed to be an obligation of statesman and historian alike. One such concept is that of the Great Game and it is my intention in this lecture to examine the historical ethnology of this famous phrase and to offer some comments on its significance and value.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at Christmas 1979 gave the phrase a new lease of life. The association of Russia and Afghanistan was irresistible and the upheaval was pronounced to be another round in the Great Game, understood to be a contest for mastery in Central Asia which had begun in the early nineteenth century. We were regaled with some strange geography and some curious history. Pakistan's Khyber Pass was awarded to Afghanistan, Dr Brydon rode inaccurately again and Roberts marched in the wrong direction at the wrong time. Subsequently, the term 'the Great Game' was applied to what was seen as a new contest between the USSR and the USA and to the struggle for control of oil resources in the region of the Caspian Sea.¹

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¹ *The Times*, 26 Nov. 1999, 7 Feb. 2000; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (2000). Dr William Brydon (1811–73), whose disconsolate arrival on horseback at Jalalabad is commemorated in the well known painting by Lady Butler, 'The Remnants of an Army', is commonly and wrongly said to have been the sole survivor of the 1842 retreat from Kabul during the first Anglo-Afghan war. Major General Sir Frederick Roberts, later Field Marshal Lord Roberts (1832–1914), accomplished his most famous march (from Kabul to Qandahar) in August 1880, during the course of the second Anglo-Afghan war.

In both its popular and its academic uses the term had two significances. The first and narrower sense referred to the alleged activities of secret British and Russian agents in Central Asia, agents sent to collect information of military or political value and perhaps to lay the foundations of political influence over the peoples of the region. In its second and broader sense it referred to the rivalry of Britain and Russia in Central Asia and embraced the question of the defence of British India against a possible invasion from the North West. The origin of the academic use of the term may be traced to a Raleigh Lecture given to the British Academy on 10 November 1926 by Professor H. W. C. Davis, entitled 'The Great Game in Asia (1800–1844)', which was an account of the events leading up to the first Anglo-Afghan war and of the war itself.² Davis had made his name as a diligent, austere historian of medieval England but he had turned his attention to modern history in 1914 and thereafter worked almost exclusively on the period from the late eighteenth century. His *Age of Grey and Peel* was a valuable work although, as it happened, overshadowed by the Namierite revolution in the study of that period. Interestingly enough, during the First World War he had served as vice-chairman of a government department (the War Trade Intelligence Department) concerned with enforcing the blockade and his duties had included sifting secret intelligence reports.³ Nothing, however, in the rest of his career—he became Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford in 1925—accounts for his choice of a subject which seems to be one which had simply captured his imagination, although lying in a field in which he was an amateur. But it was he who, more than anyone, gave the name to a concept which subsequently became the theme of many academic and popular works.⁴ He

² Raleigh Lecture, 10 Nov. 1926, *PBA*, xii (1926), pp. 179–226. Reprinted in *H. W. C. Davis: A Memoir and Selection of his Historical Papers*, ed. J. R. H. Feaver and Austin Lane-Poole (1933), pp. 164–202, to which references are made.

³ H. W. C. Davis, *History of the Blockade: Emergency Departments* (1920) (for official use only).

⁴ Academic works include J. L. Morrison, 'From Alexander Burnes to Frederick Roberts: A Survey of Imperial Frontier Policy', Raleigh Lecture 1936; Alastair Lamb, *Britain and Chinese Central Asia* (1960), p. vii; G. J. Alder, *British India's Northern Frontier* (1963), pp. xi–xii; David Gillard, *The Struggle for Asia 1828–1914* (1977), pp. 1–5; and the trilogy by Edward Ingram of which the first volume is entitled *The Beginning of the Great Game in Asia 1828–1834* (Oxford, 1979). More popular accounts include W. K. Fraser-Tytler, *Afghanistan* (1950), chapters 4 and 9; C. H. Ellis, *The Transcaspian Episode* (1963), pp. 11, 13; Michael Edwardes, *Playing the Great Game* (1975); Gerald Morgan, *Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia 1810–1895* (1981); Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: on Secret Service in High Asia* (1990); and Karl E. Meyer and Sharen Blair Bryssac, *Tournament of Shadows: the Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (Washington, DC, 1999).

defined the great game as 'a bid for political ascendancy in Western Asia'.⁵

Davis found the term 'great game' in a letter written at the end of July 1840 by a British political agent, Captain Arthur Conolly, to Major Henry Rawlinson, the newly appointed political agent at Qandahar, in which Conolly informed Rawlinson: 'You've a great game, a noble game before you.'⁶ The context makes his meaning clear: Conolly believed that Rawlinson, in his new post, had been given an opportunity to work for the regeneration or the advancement of the civilisation of Afghanistan. It was, therefore, a species of humanitarianism, not the frustration of the designs of Russia, which occupied Conolly's thinking. In another passage Conolly wrote to Rawlinson: 'if the British Government would only play the grand game, help Russia cordially to all that she has a right to expect—shake hands with Persia, etc.,—we shall play the noble part that the first Christian nations of the world ought to fill'.⁷ Again, the subject is altruism, not international rivalry, and certainly not espionage. Davis did not read Conolly's original letters; he took the references from J. W. Kaye's *Lives of Indian Officers* which, together with Kaye's *History of the War in Afghanistan*, he used extensively in his lecture.⁸ In these two works, and particularly in the second, Kaye was the first to exploit the possibilities of the term 'great game'.⁹ 'The Great Game in Central Asia' is one of the subtitles of a chapter of the *War in Afghanistan*, a section in which he dealt with British activities in Turkestan subsequent to the unsuccessful 1839 Russian expedition against Khiva. Within this chapter Kaye used the term several times, usually in quotation marks. But, in so far as this usage suggests that actors in the drama Kaye was describing also used this term, it is misleading. In all the documents concerned with the first Afghan war that I have examined, Conolly's use of the term is the single example which I have found. There is, however, a similar phrase used by the principal British agent in Afghanistan, the Envoy and Minister, Sir William Hay Macnaghten, in a letter written in the summer of 1840. Arguing for the annexation of Herat in western Afghanistan he remarked. 'we have a beautiful game on our hands'.¹⁰ Kaye thought little of Macnaghten's judgement. 'And so still was Macnaghten's cry for more

⁵ Feaver and Lane-Poole, *H. W. C. Davis*, p. 165.

⁶ Quoted J. W. Kaye, *Lives of Indian Officers*, 2 vols. (1867), ii, p. 101.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁸ J. W. Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, rev. edn., 3 vols. (1857).

⁹ Other uses of 'great game' in relation to Conolly in Kaye, *Lives*, ii, pp. 70, 97.

¹⁰ Kaye, *War*, ii, p. 56.

money and more bayonets, that he might play the “beautiful game” of knocking down and setting up kingdoms and principalities, with which it became us not to interfere, to the waste of the resources, and the sacrifice of the interests of those whom Providence had especially committed to our care,’ Kaye wrote.¹¹ Earlier, Kaye had been severely critical of Macnaghten’s grandiose plans for sending agents and even a military force into Turkestan and of the international diplomatic significance with which Macnaghten invested such a move. ‘It was indeed a great game on which Macnaghten was then intent—a game so vast that the subjugation of the Punjab and Nepal was regarded as a petty contribution to its success.’¹² In a later passage Kaye combined the two adjectives when he referred to ‘one dominant thought in Macnaghten’s mind, of the great and beautiful game that was to be played by the annexation of Herat and the coercion of the Sikhs’.¹³

Kaye had altered in two ways the sense of the phrase ‘the great game’ from the form in which Conolly had bequeathed it to him. First, he had given it a geographical association with Central Asia and, second, he had substituted for the noble, humanitarian associations it had enjoyed in Conolly’s usage an uneasy adventurist quality similar to that which ‘imperialism’ was to possess in liberal formulations of the 1870s. In his *Lives* and in his biographies of Tucker, Metcalfe, and Malcolm, Kaye employed the same term without the geographical associations to describe an earlier episode in British Indian history, namely the quest for paramountcy under Richard Wellesley and its completion under the Marquess of Hastings.¹⁴ So frequent is Kaye’s employment of the term, which on one occasion he puts in inverted commas, that one wonders if he encountered it in a contemporary document. A search through the obvious sources disclosed the term used by Arthur Wellesley in 1804. Referring to the possibility of a combined move against the Maratha leader, Holkar, Wellesley wrote to Colonel Murray, who commanded the East India Company forces in Gujerat. ‘You have now a great game on your hands.’¹⁵ It is possible that Kaye saw this letter in Gurwood’s collection and certainly he would have encountered the letter quoted by

¹¹ Kaye, *War*, ii, p. 56–7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Kaye, *Lives*, i, pp. 237, 260, 401, ii, p. 113. J. W. Kaye, *Life and Correspondence of Henry St George Tucker* (1854), p. 210; *Life and Correspondence of Lord Metcalfe*, 2 vols. (1854), i, p. 169; *Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm*, 2 vols. (1856), i, pp. 310, 315.

¹⁵ Arthur Wellesley to Colonel Murray, 2 May 1804, *The Dispatches of Field Marshal The Duke of Wellington*, ed. Lieut. Colonel John Gurwood (1837), vol. iii, pp. 297–8.

Peter Auber in his *Rise and Progress of the British Power in India*.¹⁶ But as Kaye gave no reference the matter remains one of speculation. In his biographies Kaye forebore to criticise his subjects, who were nearly all supporters of Wellesley and Hastings, and, with one exception, his uses of the term are neutral. The exception is the account of Lord Cornwallis in the *Lives* where he remarks ‘Lord Wellesley had been playing the great game with such success that he had brought our Indian Empire to the very verge of bankruptcy’.¹⁷ It would be unfair to argue from this one example that Kaye used the term always in disapproval. He admired Wellesley’s vision and achievement and regarded most of his wars as undesirable but necessary.

Reflecting on the employment of the term ‘great game’ by Kaye leads me to put forward some propositions. First, that the term is older than its use by Conolly in 1840. Second, that it came with associations of risk taking. Although I have made a small search I have not found the term used in English before 1804, but I would hypothesise that it was in use before that date and that it originated in gaming, either cards or dice.¹⁸ The French equivalent ‘le gros jeu’ can be found as early as 1585.¹⁹ In *Gil Blas* (1715) it is used to mean to take great risks.²⁰ In the form ‘le grand jeu’ it appears in connection with fortune telling, using tarot cards.²¹ Although the term has several other meanings the elements of risk, chance, and deception are common. The surrealist group which took the name ‘Le Grand Jeu’ in 1928 declared that the great game is a game of chance.²² In German ‘Grosspiel’ is used in the game of skat. In Russian ‘igrat po bolshoi’ means to play for high stakes. It is interesting to observe how the changing associations of the term altered its meaning. When cricket and chess were substituted for gaming, the great game took on the images of, respectively, either a chivalrous, rule bound game (at least in the days before bodyline and one day internationals) or a ruthless,

¹⁶ Peter Auber, *Rise and Progress of the British Power in India*, 2 vols. (1837), ii, p. 345.

¹⁷ Kaye, *Lives*, i, p. 122.

¹⁸ See *The Nicker Nicked; or, the Cheats of Gaming Discovered*, 3rd edn. (1669), where there is a reference to a sonnet written by ‘Lord Fitzgerald (a great Gamester) shortly before his death in 1580’.

¹⁹ Noël du Fail, *Contes et discours d’Eutrapel*, vol. i, p. 252.

²⁰ Alain René Lesage, *Gil Blas de Santillane*, vii, p. x.

²¹ As in Balzac, *Le Cousin Pons* (Paris, 1847), pp. 127, 629. (This and the preceding two references were found in Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique*, etc.) An early nineteenth-century educational card game was entitled *Le grand jeu de la géographie*. See Catherine Perry Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards, etc.* (New York, 1966), p. 68. There may also have been a similar game in the seventeenth century.

²² *Le Grand Jeu*, vol. i, p. 38 (article by Roger Gilbert-Lecomte).

impersonal, cerebral contest fit to enter (as, indeed, it did) the pages of John Le Carré. It might be said that the term ‘great game’ began as an anathema and ended as a celebration. The third proposition is that Kaye left us two different models of the great game: one relates to an external struggle in Central Asia: the other to an internal contest for mastery within British India. This contrast will be considered later but at this point it is worth noting the only work I have found in which Kaye’s paramountcy meaning of the great game is employed.

This is a book published anonymously in 1875 under the title *The Great Game; a Plea for a British Imperial Policy*.²³ The writer was one William Thorburn, who may best be described as an ardent imperialist and a political Darwinist. Although Thorburn gave no source it seems highly probable that he took the phrase ‘the great game’ (which he employed in quotation marks) from Kaye’s writings on the period of Richard Wellesley and the search for paramountcy in India. He used the phrase only in the Wellesley context and certainly not in relation to Central Asia. His book took the form of a demand for the completion of Wellesley’s work in India by the annexation of the Indian states and of Afghanistan and Siam. India should then take its place in a vast scheme of federation of a greatly expanded empire, including China, the Middle East, and most of Africa. Britain’s rivals were the United States and France: her natural ally was Russia. ‘Let England and Russia make a covenant to divide Asia between them,’ he wrote.²⁴ And he concluded ‘we may with confidence look to him [Disraeli] as one both able and willing to play at Lord Wellesley’s Great Game on a larger stage, and make Britain not merely the Paramount Power of the Indian peninsula, but the Paramount Power of the shores of the Indian Ocean, and beyond all rivalry the First Power on the face of the earth.’²⁵

Before turning to larger questions it is necessary to examine the best known use of the term ‘great game’, albeit one unremarked by Davis, namely that by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*. It is often said that *Kim* is a novel about the conflict of Russian and British agents in Central Asia. This is not so. The episode of the clash with the Russian and the French agent (at the time of writing it was the Franco-Russian Alliance which was regarded as the principal international threat to Britain) is a relatively minor, slightly absurd incident in a book which is, first and foremost, a

²³ A British Subject, *The Great Game; a Plea for a British Imperial Policy* (1875).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

plotless, picaresque novel about India and, secondly, a study of the rival attractions of the life of adventure and the life of reflection. In the novel Kipling uses the term ‘the great game’ (more often simply ‘the game’) frequently, and it is worth exploring carefully what he meant by the phrase. First, it should be noted (as, indeed, early critics observed) that the term is used to signify secret intelligence work within and outside India. Lurgan Sahib reflects on ‘the Great Game that never ceases day and night throughout India’.²⁶ E.23 investigates a conspiracy between an Indian princely house and an unnamed dignitary presumed to be the Ottoman Caliph.²⁷ Second, apart from the use by Lurgan Sahib (which is unvoiced), the term is used in *Kim* almost exclusively by Indians or in Indian situations. It is used most frequently by the Pathan horse dealer, Mahbub Ali, by E.23, an Indian from the North West province, by the Bengali babu, Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, and by Kim himself, but only when he is dealing with Indians and speaking to them, presumably, in Hindustani. On one occasion we are told specifically, when Kim reflects on the great game, that he is thinking in Hindustani,²⁸ and on another occasion that Kim thought in the vernacular: ‘How can a man follow the Way or the Great Game when he is so always pestered by woman?’²⁹ It may be presumed that Kipling, who had little opinion of games, intended his readers to understand that the associations of the Great Game would be different in an Indian language from those it attracted in English. For Kipling, I would suggest, the Game is an abstract concept, one which ranks with other loaded and capitalised concepts such as the Law, the Road, the Wheel, the River, the Search and, of course, the Way, with which the Game is frequently juxtaposed. Above all the great game stands for life and action. In the words of the most perceptive critic of Kipling, Bonamy Dobrée, ‘man is playing a Great Game or “to be or not to be” in the face of an indifferent universe’.³⁰

²⁶ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (1901), p. 250.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 246–7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 321.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 366.

³⁰ From an article written in 1927. See Roger Lancelot Green (ed.), *Kipling: the Critical Heritage* (1971), p. 343. A similar view is expressed in Bonamy Dobrée, *Rudyard Kipling: Realist and Fabulist* (1967), p. 6. Other critics who have noted that Kim is not about the Anglo-Russian conflict in Central Asia include Edward Shanks, *Rudyard Kipling* (1940), p. 215, and Nirad Chaudhuri in an essay in John Gross (ed.), *Rudyard Kipling: the Man, his Work and his World* (1972), p. 29. Outside *Kim* the only reference that I have found by Kipling to the great game is in an address to students at McGill University in 1907, reprinted in *A Book of Words: ‘the great game of life’*. Quoted in Andrew Rutherford (ed.), *Kipling’s Mind and Art* (Stanford, 1964), p. 56.

At this point I should like to take stock. First, the term ‘great game’ is an old one which has been employed with a variety of meanings. In addition to those mentioned I have found it applied to war,³¹ politics,³² diplomacy,³³ geopolitics,³⁴ reform in the Ottoman Empire,³⁵ reconstruction in Great Britain,³⁶ the preservation of the American Union,³⁷ the control of South Africa,³⁸ the struggle for Arab independence,³⁹ business,⁴⁰ high finance,⁴¹ whist,⁴² chess,⁴³ football,⁴⁴ horse racing,⁴⁵ polo,⁴⁶ poaching,⁴⁷ cooking,⁴⁸ the games of jet ball and tri-tactics (whatever they might be),⁴⁹ and the order of unglata (large quadrupeds), sometimes

³¹ By William Tecumseh Sherman, 17 Sept. 1863: ‘this great game of war’, quoted Shelby Foote, *The Civil War*, 3 vols. (1991), ii, p. 781. E. B. Osborn, *The Muse in Arms* (1917), pp. vi–vii: ‘the greatest of all great games’.

³² Edward Law, Lord Ellenborough, *A Political Diary*, ed. Lord Colchester, 2 vols. (1881), ii, 60 (30 June 1829): ‘If we play the great game, striking at the mass, we must succeed’; Hamilton Drummond, *The Great Game* (1918); Frank R. Kent, *The Great Game of Politics* (1923), p. 29; Sir Edward Clarke, *The Story of My Life* (1923), p. 213: ‘the great game of politics’.

³³ Andrew Sinclair, *The Other Victoria: the Princess Royal and the Great Game of Europe* (1981), p. 2.

³⁴ Paul F. Thomas, *Can the great game really be deconstructed? A geopolitical challenge for philosophers and warriors* (Kingston, Ontario, 1996).

³⁵ Stratford de Redcliffe to Palmerston, 5 Apr. 1851, quoted Harold Temperley, *England and the Near East: the Crimea* (1936), p. 242: ‘the great game of improvement is altogether up for the present’.

³⁶ John Buchan, *A Prince of the Captivity* (1933, repr. 1996), p. 116.

³⁷ By Abraham Lincoln, 1 Feb. 1865, quoted Foote, *Civil War*, iii, p. 749: ‘the fitting if not indispensable adjunct to the consummation of the great game we are playing’.

³⁸ By Lord Milner, 1899/1900, quoted Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Imperial Century, 1815–1914* (1976), p. 307: ‘the great game between ourselves and the Transvaal for the mastery of South Africa’.

³⁹ By T. E. Lawrence (1918) in T. E. Lawrence, *Secret Despatches from Arabia*, ed. Malcolm Brown (1991), p. 183: ‘The dice of the great game between us and the rest, for Arab suffrage after the war . . .’

⁴⁰ T. George Frederick, *The Great Game of Business* (1920), pp. v, ix, 7, 8, 96.

⁴¹ H. C. Bailey, *The Great Game* (1939), pp. 156, 189, 219, 262, 279.

⁴² Major-General A. W. Dragon, *Intellectual Whist: Conversations, Discussions and Anecdotes on the Great Game* (1899).

⁴³ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871, repr. 1962), p. 25: ‘It’s a great game of chess that’s being played—all over the world . . .’

⁴⁴ Sydney Horler, *The Great Game* (1935) (originally published under the title *McPhee*).

⁴⁵ Edward Spencer, *The Great Game: and how it is played* (1900), pp. 2, 6, 10, 13, 30, 226.

⁴⁶ Cyril Falls, *Rudyard Kipling* (1915), p. 140.

⁴⁷ Harold Wyman, *The Great Game: the Life and Times of a Welsh Poacher* (1993).

⁴⁸ Robert J. Courtine, *Le grand jeu de la cuisine* (Paris, 1980).

⁴⁹ William Pett, *Rules and Regulations of the Great Game of Jetball* (1914). Anon., *Tri-tactics: the Great Game of Tactics on Land, Sea and in the Air* (1933). (Possibly a successor to *The Great Game: the Dover Patrol or Naval Tactics*, 1929.) Sadly, the British Library copies of these intriguing works were all destroyed in the Second World War.

known as 'big game'.⁵⁰ Second, the use of the term in what is now its most familiar meaning of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia is fairly recent and became common only after the Second World War. It was not wholly unknown before that period, but it was rare. It is used, for example, by Maud Diver (who took it from Kaye) in certain novels published between 1908 and 1913⁵¹ but it is not used with this meaning by John Buchan, whose character, Sandy Arbuthnot, would seem to be the beau ideal of what most readers would think of as a Great Gamesman, and who employed gaming metaphors more frequently than any other image. Indeed, in the four Richard Hannay novels I found only one use of the phrase and then it was to denote straightforward soldiering as contrasted with espionage.⁵² The attempt by various writers to trace the phrase back in its current meaning through Kipling to Kaye has given it a spurious pedigree and suggested that the concept is much older than in fact it is.

Well, you may think, this is all very well and even mildly interesting, but what does it matter? If the reality of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, of the action and counteraction of secret agents existed, of what consequence is it that the convenient term by which we know the phenomenon best did not exist, at least with that meaning, until recently? My reply is that the patterns of our historical comprehension are shaped by the terms in which we think of events, that Anglo-Russian rivalry did not exist to the extent which has been suggested and which the use of the term has fostered, and that the consequence of presenting a picture of continuous Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia from the early nineteenth century has been to distort our understanding of the problems of the defence of British India, of the relation between British and British Indian foreign and defence policy, and even of the nature of British rule in India.

It is time to discuss the question of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia and the defence of British India. The phenomenon of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia may first be discerned in the late 1820s. The British response led eventually to the first Anglo-Afghan war. During the debates of the years 1829 to 1842 most of the arguments of subsequent years were first deployed: whether to stand on the existing

⁵⁰ References are too numerous to list: the earliest I have found is 1892.

⁵¹ Maud Diver, *The Great Amulet* (1908), p. 366; *The Hero of Herat* (1912), pp. 162, 163 (note also the reference to 'that great international game of chess, which has gone on at intervals for more than a hundred years', p. 77); *The Judgement of the Sword* (1913), p. 530. In these last two works the source is certainly Kaye.

⁵² John Buchan, *Greenmantle* (1916), p. 13.

frontier or move forward into Central Asia; whether to try to form buffer states or to eschew dealings with Central Asia and rely on British power alone; whether to fight in Central Asia or in some other part of the world; whether to oppose Russia or to seek agreement with her. The experience of the first Anglo-Afghan war tipped the balance of the debate in favour of avoiding dealings with Central Asia and of seeking agreement with Russia. No urgency was felt, however, until the 1860s, when the advance of Russia in Turkestan revived the debate. There then developed what are conventionally known as the backward and forward schools of thought about the appropriate way to defend India. (The expressions were apparently coined by that colourful speaker, Mountstuart Grant Duff, in 1877.)⁵³ The backward school still wished to avoid any movement beyond the British frontier: the forward school favoured advancing British outposts, placing British and Indian agents in Central Asia to collect intelligence, and endeavouring to establish buffer states in Iran and Afghanistan. Neither of these views excluded the possibility of an agreement with Russia and indeed such was the solution which was pursued slowly, unsteadily, and successfully from 1867 until 1907. Agreement was reached first on the desirability of a neutral zone (the original suggestion of a buffer zone being lost in negotiation); secondly, that the neutral zone (in which British influence should predominate) should be Afghanistan; thirdly, that the borders of northern Afghanistan should be demarcated; and, lastly, that remaining differences between Britain and Russia in Asia should be composed through the general agreement of 1907 covering Iran, Afghanistan, and Tibet.

The backward and forward schools shared most of their assumptions. Few on either side believed that a Russian invasion was likely and indeed all the evidence from Russia shows that no invasion was planned: both sides believed that the principal danger was one of internal disaffection within British India and that the approach of Russia would exacerbate the existing danger, force Britain to maintain a larger garrison and make India unprofitable to hold. Nearly all commentators employed the familiar metaphors of the powder magazine and the volcano.⁵⁴ This view also coincided with Russian views: all the expeditions towards the Indian frontier which were contemplated had as their purpose not invasion but

⁵³ In a debate in the House of Commons, 8 Aug. 1877. See Captain W. J. Eastwick, *Lord Lytton and the Afghan War* (1879), p. 27.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Sir Henry Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East* (1875), pp. 147, 199–200, 287, 289; The Duke of Argyll, *The Eastern Question*, 2 vols. (1879), ii, 272; John Martineau, *Life and Correspondence of Sir Bartle Frere*, 2 vols. (1895), i, p. 491–8.

the inflaming of internal unrest, forcing Britain to increase the garrison and reducing Britain's power to defy Russia in Europe.⁵⁵ The forward school hoped to reduce the danger by advancing and so keeping Russia further from the Indian frontier—a few hotheads contemplated a British protectorate in Turkestan and some thought of raising the cry of Panislamism against Russia;⁵⁶ the backward school thought that such an effort would be beyond the resources of British India, that an appeal to Panislamism could well rebound on British interests, and that it was better to spend money on good government in the modest hope of diminishing the hostility to British rule which prevailed. While both sides wanted an agreement neither side thought that Russia would keep an agreement if circumstances dictated a different course; the forward school professed greater scepticism but the differences were not great. Neither side believed that British India could be defended from its own resources alone and both looked to Britain for support either through the despatch of troop reinforcements or through British action against Russia in other parts of the world: the Black Sea, the Baltic, or the Far East or all of them. How far either side believed that Britain would jeopardise her interests in Europe or in other parts of the world for the sake of India is uncertain. But as the nineteenth century wore on it became clearer that there was little that Britain could do to injure Russia in Europe.⁵⁷ Only with the support of Austria and the Ottomans could anything be attempted against Russia in the Black Sea and not even then in the face of a Franco-Russian alliance; only with German help could anything be achieved in the Baltic; and only through the Japanese alliance could Russia be checked in the Far East.

The more one contemplates the matter the more evident it is that the problem was not one of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia but of

⁵⁵ Rawlinson, *England and Russia*, p. 288; Captain F. Trench, *The Russo-Indian Question* (1869), p. 151; Charles Marvin, *Reconnoitring Central Asia*, 3rd edn. (1886), p. 260, and *The Russians at the Gates of Herat* (1885), p. 153. *Russia's March towards India*, by an Indian Officer, 2 vols. (1894), provides a summary of Russian plans. Two War Office studies are *Analysis of General Kuropatkin's Scheme for the Invasion of India*, 1886 and *Russia's Power to Concentrate Troops in Central Asia*, 1888. See also Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism: the Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860–1914* (Leamington Spa, 1987), pp. 94–6, and Milan Hauser, *What is Asia to Us?* (Boston, MA, 1990), pp. 79–82.

⁵⁶ These included the Hon. G. C. Napier, Col. Valentine Baker and Lieut. Col. C. M. MacGregor. Arminius Vambery, *The Coming Struggle for India* (1885), pp. 140–2, advocated the use of Panislamism; he was not the first.

⁵⁷ See Barbara Jelavich, 'British Means of Offence against Russia in the Nineteenth Century' *Russian History*, 1 (1974), pp. 119–35; Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of National Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, 1988), pp. 216–17.

Anglo-Russian rivalry in Europe. The scenario envisaged was one of a diplomatic crisis in Europe, probably over the fate of Constantinople, threatening to bring about war between Britain and Russia; of a Russian army mustered on the Afghan border; and of an uprising in India calling for an increase in the British garrison. The model for this scenario was, of course, the Eastern Crisis of 1877–8. Disraeli summoned Indian troops to Malta as a demonstration of his power to use the resources of India and talked largely about India's power to help Britain's cause by operations in Central Asia; Kaufmann, the Russian governor of Turkestan, sent a mission to Kabul, mobilised a force and advanced towards the Afghan frontier and demonstrated that Russia could more than neutralise the power of India.⁵⁸ The riposte of the Viceroy, Lord Lytton, which was the second Anglo-Afghan war, revealed the weakness of the British Indian position. Not until 1918, when Russia had been temporarily removed from the game, did Britain try again in Central Asia, and once more found that the game was not worth the candle. The occasion did provide, however, the solitary episode of an Anglo-Russian military clash—scuffle would be a better description—in Central Asia, at Dushakh on 13 August 1918.

From this brief dismissive and, perhaps, controversial summary of the defence problems of British India I wish to select three points for closer consideration. The first of these is the matter of intelligence. In his Raleigh lecture H. W. C. Davis made much of the way in which information about Central Asia was collected by Britain. Many years later, Gerald Morgan examined Davis's claims and concluded that they were all unfounded and that the information obtained by the devices listed by Davis was of little value.⁵⁹ Substantially, Morgan was correct and the Great Game in the sense of intelligence gathering hardly existed. After the embarrassment of Bukhara in 1842, when two British representatives were executed without Britain being able to do anything about it, Britain actively discouraged officers from travelling in Turkestan. After the murder of Macnaghten in 1841 and of Cavagnari in 1879 Britain did not press on a reluctant Amir a demand for British agents in Afghanistan and contented herself in Kabul with an Indian Muslim officer whose access to information was severely limited. So poor was British Indian information

⁵⁸ Disraeli to Queen Victoria, 22 July 1877, in W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, 6 vols. (1910–20), vi, p. 155.

⁵⁹ Gerald Morgan, 'Myth and Reality in the Great Game', *Asian Affairs*, 60 (Feb. 1973). The role of the Pundits of the Indian Survey is examined in Derek Waller, *The Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1990).

about Central Asia that most useful information about events in Turkestan came from the Russian Geographical Society and Russian newspapers translated in St Petersburg and London, to which were added the contributions of a few private travellers, journalists, and the American consul in Turkestan, Eugene Schuyler. (It should be remarked that much Russian intelligence about India came from a study of British newspapers and periodicals, although Russians also regularly intercepted confidential British telegrams.⁶⁰) Indifferent as War Office intelligence collection and analysis was before the 1890s (despite a promising start in the 1870s), it was a good deal better than that of the Indian army, which concentrated chiefly on tactical intelligence relating to the North West Frontier.⁶¹ The results of this limitation can be seen in the Central Asia Gazetteers produced by the Quarter Master General's Department under the direction of C. M. MacGregor in the 1870s. Those volumes dealing with the North West Frontier are full of information, that concerned with Afghanistan is compiled especially from material collected during the first Anglo-Afghan war (supplemented in later editions by material from the second Anglo-Afghan war and the Afghan boundary commission), and those concerned with Turkestan are thin indeed. As for the Foreign Office's secret service it provided nothing at all, being concerned almost exclusively during the nineteenth century with ramifications of the Irish question. Perhaps the greatest failing in British intelligence was not to perceive Russia's weakness, especially her financial weakness, her constant worries about her European frontier, her internal crises and her preoccupation with internal security. It was weakness, not strength which led Russia to threaten Britain in Central Asia; she could not afford to divert troops from Europe where she wished to reduce the number of her enemies.⁶² As a consequence of the poor quality of intelligence work the scope for speculation was considerable and this element found its way into the second matter to be considered.

That is the relationship between British and British Indian defence problems, a question which has attracted much attention in recent years, at least in so far as it became a major topic to Arthur Balfour and the Committee of Imperial Defence. Between 1903 and 1905 the Committee devoted half of its meetings to Indian defence.⁶³ Until the second Afghan

⁶⁰ For the information contained in the final clause I am indebted to Mrs Barbara Emerson.

⁶¹ Thomas G. Fergusson, *British Military Intelligence, 1870–1914* (1984), pp. 168–9, 190.

⁶² Geyer, *Russian Imperialism*, p. 333; Bruce W. Menning, *Bayonets Before Bullets: the Imperial Russian Army 1861–1914* (Bloomington, 1992), pp. 116, 240.

⁶³ N. d'Ombra, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peace Time Britain, 1902–1914* (1973), p. 62.

war there had not seemed to be a major problem. The duties of the Army in India (which consisted of British regiments supplied by the War Office and paid for by India, together with the Indian Army itself, which was composed of Indian troops with British officers) were to maintain control of India and to supply, when required, a small field force for use against Asian or African enemies. Before 1857 the only serious friction between the British and the British Indian governments had arisen over the withdrawal of British regiments for service elsewhere, for example in the Crimea, so weakening dangerously, in the eyes of the Indian government, the British component of the garrison of British India. After the Indian Mutiny the proportion of British to Indian troops was increased to between one third and one half and the same ratio was maintained in subsequent years, although the total size of the Army in India fell during the 1860s and early 1870s due to financial pressure. In effect, the size of the Army in India was determined by the number of British troops the Government of India could afford. The army was increased to provide for a larger field force during the second Afghan war and for the first time, in connection with responsibilities assumed for the defence of Afghanistan, the possibility was seriously considered that it might be necessary to occupy an advanced position in Afghanistan and risk a clash with Russian forces. This circumstance required a reassessment of troop requirements.

An early example of this process of reassessment is a book by Demetrius C. Boulger, a prominent writer on Asian affairs and editor of the *Asiatic Quarterly Review*. The book is *England and Russia in Central Asia*, which was published in 1879 during the second Anglo-Afghan war and, like all Boulger's writings, it was a plea for a forward policy. It is, incidentally, of interest as including the first use that I have discovered of the phrase 'the great game' in the sense of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia.⁶⁴ Boulger took the phrase from Kaye's *History of the Afghan War* but changed its meaning to give it the sense it afterwards acquired. Boulger's book was one of the more important contributions to the lively contemporary debate about British policy in Central Asia. In it he argued that Anglo-Russian differences were irreconcilable because Russia coveted India: Russian soldiers and the government of Turkestan were intent on the invasion and conquest of British India.⁶⁵ On its own

⁶⁴ Demetrius C. Boulger, *England and Russia in Central Asia*, 2 vols. (1879), i, p. 185, ii, pp. 172, 229.

⁶⁵ Boulger, *England and Russia*, i, 102, ii, 366. Boulger did not change his views: in his *India in the Nineteenth Century* (1901), p. 359, he declared that 'the Russian danger is the portentous fact which overshadows the present century'.

the Russian army in Turkestan was not formidable but, reinforced from the Caucasus and European Russia, it represented a real threat which could best be countered by British support for Iran, and, through Iran, for the Turkmen town of Merv.⁶⁶ There was nothing very new in this part of Boulger's book which can be regarded as an updating of the forward case first set out comprehensively in Henry Rawlinson's *England and Russia in the East*; nor was there anything new in his argument for a forward policy on the North West Frontier, the occupation of Qandahar and the garrisoning of Herat. What is of greater interest is the section in the second volume in which he discussed British India's powers to resist Russia. After describing the internal enemies of British India, in particular the threat from the armies of the Indian states and the dangers of what he calls 'Muhammadan fanaticism', and the troops required to safeguard British rule against these enemies, he calculated that British India could supply a disposable field force of a maximum of 60,000 troops of which about one quarter would be British.⁶⁷ He expected that in a crisis another 50,000 troops might be obtained from England. Such a force would still be insufficient to counter the danger so he recommended abolishing the armies of Indian states and eventually annexing the states themselves in order to diminish the internal threat.⁶⁸

Three points in this are worth emphasising. First, Boulger confirmed the view that the major duty of the Army in India was to defend India against internal enemies. He may, indeed, have seen some of the replies to the general inquiry made in 1879 as to the strength of the internal danger and the troops required to counter it. Second, he endorsed the opinion, common from 1870 onwards (when it was raised by Lord Napier of Magdala), that the principal threat came from the armies of Indian states, estimated at over 300,000 men with substantial artillery. It is often claimed that, from the time of the Indian Mutiny onwards, the princes were Britain's friends and allies, an impression inculcated by Lee-Warner's well-known book on the subject, but this assertion is mistaken.⁶⁹ Discussion of defence problems in that period begin with the threat from the Indian states and the British Indian garrison was primarily to defend

⁶⁶ Boulger, *England and Russia*, i, 134–5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ii, 59, 79–80.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, ii, 88, 90, 103.

⁶⁹ Sir William Lee-Warner, *The Native States of India* (1910). Perhaps even more surprising is the unadulterated optimism of G. B. Malleson, *The Native States of India* (1875), p. 7: 'Never were loyalty and good feeling more widely spread amongst the native princes of India than at the present moment.'

against this threat. Third, we should note Boulger's conclusion that the disposable field force was insufficient and that another 50,000 British troops must be brought out from Britain in a crisis.⁷⁰ Hitherto, it had been generally supposed that reinforcements from England might be brought out in the event of an internal irruption but not in the case of external attack.

In 1884 a much more elaborate, confidential assessment was produced by Sir C. M. MacGregor, entitled *The Defence of India: a Strategical Study*. MacGregor argued that Russia could mount an invasion of India and examined the means of defence, marshalling an immense amount of information to show that the needs of internal defence left but some 40,000 troops available for use against the attacker, and of these there were only 6 battalions of British infantry and one regiment of British cavalry.⁷¹ He went on to argue that internal discontent would increase and, therefore, the size of the British garrison must increase, as Russia approached nearer to India, from 55,000 British troops with the existing frontier to 70,000 if Russia took Herat, 100,000 if Russia controlled Kabul and Qandahar; while 125,000 British troops would be required to hold India if Russian influence reached the existing British frontier.⁷² Under the conditions of an actual Russian attack the total force (British and Indian, garrison and field force) required would rise under certain circumstances to 600,000.⁷³ The arithmetic was alarming and some of the measures which MacGregor proposed to alleviate the problem were apocalyptic, including diplomacy ('I look on an alliance with Germany, Austria and Turkey as absolutely essential to the defence of India'), involving ultimately the construction of a vast coalition to break up the Russian empire.⁷⁴

Although MacGregor got into trouble for his views, the question of Indian defence was now, through the demand (soon made official) for a commitment by London to reinforce the British troops in India in case of a Russian advance, inextricably bound up with the general question of the defence of Britain and with the contemporary debate over the allocation

⁷⁰ An invasion novel, A. Dekhnewallah, *The Great Russian Invasion of India* (1879), envisaged a massive British conscript army being sent to India.

⁷¹ Major-General Sir C. M. MacGregor, *The Defence of India: a Strategical Study* (Simla, 1884), pp. 99–100.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117. The same argument is made in Josef Popowski, *The Rival Powers in Central Asia* (Westminster, 1893), pp. 204–22. The link with the diplomatic approaches to Germany by Joseph Chamberlain and others is evident.

of resources between the British army and the Royal Navy. Reinforcements for India implied an increase of army strength but also required an increase of naval strength to eliminate threats to the troops en route to India. If the Navy could not guarantee to protect these troops the garrison of India must be increased.⁷⁵ And the advocates of different solutions to the problems of British defence could each find some support in the Indian problem: Selborne could find a role for his beloved militia; Roberts, an argument for national service; Balfour, reinforcement for his commitment to a long service, professional army. Only Fisher could see no benefit from the Indian factor, which threatened to dilute his concentration on the defence of Home waters, so he ignored the Committee of Imperial Defence.⁷⁶ But most participants could use the Indian argument in the strategic debate. Meanwhile, the Government of India continued to examine its needs and, with each fresh examination, its demands rose, reaching nearly 150,000 British troop reinforcements in the first year of a struggle with Russia and, it was predicted, up to half a million in the event of a protracted contest.⁷⁷ There must also be some suspicion about the honesty of the Indian government's contribution to the debate. The demands for troops often seemed to be based on little more than guess work, the Indian government could hardly have thought that Britain would meet its demands, and the question of who would pay for the troops was never solved; the Indian government said it could pay for only 5,200 additional troops. Kitchener's motives were mixed: he linked the question of external defence with the costs of his expensive reorganisation of the Indian army and with his private battle to eliminate the military member from the Viceroy's executive council, and he terrified the Cabinet with the prospect that he would resign over the issue and take his grievances to the public.⁷⁸ The Committee of Imperial Defence, a talking shop without executive powers, boycotted by the Navy, and regarded as misguided by the Foreign Office and by influential men in the War Office who regarded Germany as the real enemy, made the problem worse by taking it seriously. Eventually, it became plain that Britain could not afford to defend India at this price and that India was a source of weakness.

⁷⁵ Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, p. 239.

⁷⁶ Rhodri Williams, *Defending the Empire* (1991), p. 40.

⁷⁷ Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, pp. 247–8. On the defence debate see also, John Gooch, *The Plans of War* (1974), esp. pp. 198–237 which contains an account of Sir George Clarke's critique of Kitchener's plans.

⁷⁸ Balfour to Curzon, 3 Nov. 1904, quoted in Peter King, *The Viceroy's Fall: How Kitchener Destroyed Curzon* (1986), p. 128.

Japan could not be persuaded to defend India, the strategic assumptions which underpinned the Indian argument were severely questioned, and the 1907 agreement with Russia and the new defence commitment to France laid the debate about Indian defence to rest. In retrospect one can see that the twenty-five years of debate about the defence of India from Russia had little substance behind it and the debate took place largely because the institutions to promote it had come into existence at that time and because it suited the interests of many individuals and groups to carry it on. But in terms of the argument of this lecture it was of importance because it left a lasting impression of the central importance of the external enemy of British India and provided sustenance for the legend of the Great Game.

Earlier in this lecture it was remarked that two models of the Great Game are derived from J. W. Kaye. One, which is linked to Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, he bequeathed to us inadvertently. It was to find its most appreciative supporters in Britain. The second model, which was concerned with internal control in India, was that which always represented the reality in British India. It is clear in MacGregor's analysis and in subsequent appreciations that the most important element in the debate about the defence of India, although it was disguised by the character of the debate, was not the external enemy but the internal threat. What caused the shortage of troops and what multiplied the need for reinforcements were the needs of the garrison of British India. In its innocence the British government had supposed that a defensive posture in India would require fewer troops than an offensive disposition but it was to discover that, following the MacGregor logic by which the danger from the internal enemy increased as the enemy approached, the reverse was the case.⁷⁹ Even Kitchener, who denounced the preoccupation of British India with the internal enemy and carried through a reorganisation of troop dispositions to allow for a greater concentration in the North West, discovered that he could not afford to cut the garrison by more than a very few men. His disposable field force was little, if at all, larger than that planned by his predecessors.⁸⁰ The primary task of the Army in India remained what it had always been: to support or replace the civil power in case of internal disturbances. That civil power, of course, was primarily the police.

⁷⁹ Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, p. 241.

⁸⁰ In 1904 Kitchener estimated that when reorganisation was completed only c.34,000 troops would be available for an Afghan field force.

Strategic discussion has a tendency to gentrification. Foreign armies are more interesting than domestic enemies and soldiers more interesting than policemen. Attention focuses on the more glamorous, more socially esteemed. How few books are written about what one may call imperial plumbing and yet there were more policemen than soldiers in British India and it was on policemen that the Raj ultimately rested.⁸¹ The pre-Mutiny Bengal army had been well adapted for the task of fighting the armies of Indian states but it was ill fitted to maintain internal security within British India. Well before 1857 police battalions and irregular forces were being used increasingly for constabulary duties. By 1857 the Bengal army was obsolete and, in many ways, the 1857 Mutiny was a blessing, or, at least, a great convenience, for it provided the excuse to destroy the Bengal Army and replace it in part with a police force which became increasingly skilful at countering internal threats to British rule. In the first place the police kept control of ordinary crime: the prestige of the Raj was its greatest defence against the internal enemy and that prestige depended especially on its ability to maintain law and order. Moreover, it was believed that subversion was most dangerous if it enlisted ordinary criminals and produced anarchy. Secondly, the police developed, in the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a remarkable ability to deal with industrial, communal, and political crime, with terrorism and subversion. An elaborate machinery for collecting information about subversive movements at the district, provincial, and central levels was developed and with it the capacity to react to threats to British authority. I remarked earlier that in matters of foreign political and military intelligence British India was far behind Britain: in matters of domestic intelligence the reverse was the case. These important developments in the capabilities of the police have been concealed by the focus on the meaningless, contemporary strategic debate. And when the Raj was run down it was the Indian Police which was the last to be Indianised, after the ICS and the Indian Army, the two services commonly regarded as the main pillars of the Raj.

In conclusion I confess to a deepening unhappiness with analyses of empire which rest heavily on a strategic inspiration. Reading the history

⁸¹ Some honourable exceptions should be mentioned: J. C. Curry, *The Indian Police* (1932); Sir Percival Griffiths, *To Guard My People* (1971); A. Gupta, *Crime and Police in India* (to 1861) (Agra, 1974); and *The Police in British India, 1861–1947* (Delhi, 1979); David Arnold, *Police Power and Colonial Rule: Madras 1859–1947* (Delhi, 1986); D. H. Bayley, *The Police and Political Development in India* (Princeton, 1969); and C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996).

of the British empire in India and in the Middle East one is struck by both the prominence and the unreality of strategic debates, a feature which has not diminished in the Middle East since that empire came to an end. And yet, if one examines the crucial decisions in Egypt, one observes that at each of the major turning points of 1919, 1921, 1935, and 1946 the decisive factor was a statement by the police about public order. Similarly, in 1946–7 there is no contrast more striking than the incongruity of the vain discussions about Middle Eastern strategy and defence against the USSR and the reality of the collapse of public order in Palestine when the security forces lost real control. In being too concerned with the process of, and the motives for the acquisition of empire, with the international and strategic aspects of empire, with the matter of the withdrawal from imperial authority, and with the effects of British rule on the recipients of empire, we have somehow neglected the key element in how empires run, namely the police.

I called this lecture ‘The Legend of the Great Game’ because for me the term stands as shorthand for a mistaken, strategic view of empire. Davis’s lecture was very much a celebration of the role of the junior officer; in some ways it reminds one of Maud Diver’s series of novels of the Indian frontier which also constitute a panegyric to the British subaltern. These works, and much similar writing, convey powerful and lasting images. We should look at some alternative images: not Kim but the policeman, Strickland, who features in *Kim* and in several short stories by Kipling and who is the true master of what Kipling understood to be the great game of policing the Raj.⁸² And instead of Maud Diver’s Desmond VC I would propose as the archetypal figure of the British Indian empire, Ronald Merrick, the sinister policeman who dominates Paul Scott’s *Raj Quartet*.

⁸² ‘Mr Kipling’s conviction is that this is the sort of man to pervade India for us and that Strickland is worth a thousand, self-conceited civilians.’ Edmund Goss, 1891, in Green, *Kipling*, p. 115.