

## Lessons From The Past

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Yesterday as I was taking a short cut from Westport to Five head, about five miles east of Taunton, I happened to pass through the small village of Isle Brewers. The sunshine was bright, the magnificent weeping willows were still in leaf and the first fleeting views of flooding appeared in the fields alongside the river banks like vast mirrors. A tranquil scene&hellip; but what triggered my imagination was the sight of the church and suddenly I remembered the exploits of one Rev. Joseph Wolff after a series of bold and some would say foolhardy journeys, ended up here as vicar in the 1860&rsquo;s.

Afghanistan has always had its fare share of odd and entertaining western travellers and Rev Wolff was no exception. In fact he was one of the most eccentric which is why no doubt he ended up in Somerset.

But before I recount his adventures it is worth remembering one or two others that were his contemporaries. Some went native like Alexander Gardiner, who had a designed his own tartan uniform, from the plaid of the 79th Highland Infantry, awarded himself the title of Colonel and had a turban crowned with heron plumes to match his fine array of whiskers. For thirteen years he lived in the saddle. He had been to Gilgit and Yarkand before entering Afghanistan from the north, crossing the Oxus this time in Uzbek clothes and clutching a Koran. In 1823 he was captured by fifty horsemen and saved himself by offering his services as a mercenary for the dispossessed heir and guerrilla leader Habib Ullah fighting against his uncle Dost Mohammed. No doubt an earlier version of the Northern Alliance. He took for his wife a beautiful girl captured in a raid on a caravan. His family were later slaughtered and then spent his time exploring what is now Pakistan. He died in Srinagar in his bed in 1877 at the grand age of 91.

Other explorers were not so lucky. Take for instance the intrepid East India Company vet William Moorcroft who was searching Central Asia for stallions. His journeys took him to Ladakh and Western Tibet where he met the Hungarian scholar, Csoma da Koros. Csoma was looking for the origin of the Hungarian language but later died on his way to Tibet in Darjeeling but not before he had written the first Tibetan- English dictionary. Moorcroft then went to Peshawar past Kabul and over the main Hindu Kush range. Here they were held captive by Murad Beg the chief of Kunduz, for six months. Moorcroft had to ride secretly for 150 miles to another chief at Taliquan to buy his way out and persuade Murad Beg to let them go. This worked and so they progressed to Mazar-i-Sharif and then onto Bukhara where they bought 100 horses.. On their return they tried to give Murad Beg a wide berth but in August 1825 Moorcroft died of fever at Andhkoi in north Western Afghanistan. Joseph Wolff was sure that he had been poisoned.

Another colourful character was Colonel Sir Alexander &lsquo;Bokhara&rsquo; Burnes. Wolff met in 1832 in Kabul and they both dined with Dost Mohamed. Burnes reached Bokhara with his companion Dr. Gerard. Both were in disguise with gold coins and letters of introduction sewn into their cummerbunds. They were after all employed by the East India Company.

On his return to London Burne&rsquo;s book *Travels to Bukhara* was published and he became famous overnight. He was given a diploma by the Royal Asiatic society, the Royal Geographical Society awarded him a gold medal and the Athenaeum made him an instant member. In 1836 he was chosen to lead a diplomatic mission to Afghanistan. This took an odd route, which required rowing up the Indus into the Punjab, then overland to Kabul. The only problem was that a Russian backed Iranian army was at that moment making a nuisance of itself around Herat. Burnes made friends once more with Dost Mohamed, the ruler in Kabul. In 1838 Burnes was promoted to Colonel and given a knighthood, but it did not do him much good in the long run. In the wake of political machinations and trying to install their own puppet, Burnes&rsquo; house in Kabul was set on fire in all the occupants knifed as they tried to escape. This was 1841. His death was the signal for an uprising. It was this subsequent massacre of British forces which led to the demise of Dr Brydon arriving at Jellalabad on his parched horse in need of a pint of cider.

Rev Joseph Wolff was luckier than some of the other explorers, but his journey had its trials. Born the son of a Bohemian rabbi he converted to Christianity early in his life and adopted Christianity becoming a zealot. He took special pride in converting Jews. an up hill task, but one that he relished. First he wanted to be a Jesuit, then he tried the Catholic priesthood but he objected to papal infallibility. He then tried Protestantism, various German monasteries, an order of flagellants and as a last resort, England. He was taken on by the Society for Promoting Christianity amongst Jews, sent to Cambridge and then shipped him off round the Middle East for 5 years from Malta to Istanbul, Cairo to Tehran, Kurdistan to Lebanon. Upon his return he gained the attention that he so avidly sought and married Lady Georgiana Walpole. He set off for the Middle East once again seeking converts, preaching and debating at every opportunity. Lady Georgiana followed him and nursed him back to health after his coffee was poisoned in Jerusalem.

He recovered and then began his most interesting travels. I still have an original copy of his book beside me as I write. "Researches and Missionary Labours among Jews, Mohammedans and other sects" 1835 He went through Egypt Armenia, Iran, Khorassan, Turkestan, Bokhara, Balkh, Kabul, Kashmir, India, Abyssinia and Yemen. A remarkable journey but what happened to him in Afghanistan is worth relating. For he was captured in Doab and about to be put to death as an infidel. He talked his way out saying he was a wandering dervish took off his clothes and walked back to Kabul naked carrying his bible for 600 miles. A feat that Special Forces can only try and emulate when caught in a tight spot. He returned to Lady Georgiana slightly the worse for wear, but not before he had met Ranjit Singh in the Punjab. He returned via New York.

Undaunted, he returned to Bokhara in 1844. But he was getting older by the minute. After this trip and no doubt at the suggestion of Lady Georgiana and possibly with the help of the Pitts who lived near Curry Rivel, he took up the post of being vicar at Isle Brewers. He died in relative poverty and obscurity. He preferred to spend his money not on the subscription for the Royal Geographical Society but on coal for his parishioners who were no doubt flooded out every now and then. So Somerset has a strange link with Afghanistan. Maybe special forces should adopt some of Joseph Wolff's survival skills, they may just be needing them.

For more information and an excellent read try : "Where Men and Mountains Meet" by John Keay published by John Murray 1977