



BURNES, ALEXANDER

BURNES, ALEXANDER (1805-41), the fourth son of James Burnes, a Scottish lawyer, educated at Montrose Academy and appointed ensign in the Bombay Army in 1821. Burnes had a natural aptitude for languages, acquired a good knowledge of Hindustani and Persian, and qualified as an interpreter, in which capacity he served in Kutch in 1825. In the same year he transferred to the army staff, rising to become assistant quarter master general in 1828. In the following year he entered the political service as assistant to the Resident in Kutch, Henry Pottinger. In 1831, as an early step in a plan to expand British influence in central Asia, Burnes led a mission up the river Indus, through Sind to Lahore. Immediately afterwards he submitted a proposal, which was accepted, to conduct an exploratory mission to Afghanistan, Turkestan, and Iran. His account of this mission, carried out in 1832, was published in 1834 under the title *Travels into Bukhara . . .* At that time he was in London, acclaimed as a great explorer and awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society. Returning to Kutch in 1835, he conducted a second mission to Sind and in 1836 was chosen for a commercial mission to Kabul. Because of the conflict between Dōst Moḥammad, ruler of Kabul, and Ranjit Singh of Lahore and because of the Iranian attack on Herat in 1837 Burnes's mission developed a political character, and he strove to find a compromise to settle the Sikh-Afghan dispute and also to unite the Afghan states against Iran. He failed and left Kabul in 1838 although he was knighted for his exertions. It was then decided that Britain should replace the Bārakzay rulers of Kabul and Qandahār with the former Sadōzay ruler of Afghanistan, Shah Šojāʿ-al-Molk, and Burnes accompanied the expedition to Afghanistan in 1839 as assistant to



the envoy and minister, William Hay Macnaghten, leading missions to Upper Sind and Kalat. From 1839 until 1841 Burnes served in Kabul as deputy to Macnaghten and was engaged in collecting intelligence relating to Turkestan and assembling information concerning trade. Burnes was critical of the policy pursued in Afghanistan during these years and set out his views in a memorandum in 1840. His hopes of succeeding Macnaghten muted his criticisms, however. He was killed in the uprising in Kabul on 2 November 1841. Burnes was a clever, occasionally brilliant man, fond of reading and a gifted writer and conversationalist. His great weakness was his ambition.

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