



ELPHINSTONE, MOUNTSTUART

ELPHINSTONE, MOUNTSTUART (1779-1859), author of an important description of Afghanistan. He was a British Indian official who rose to become governor of Bombay. He was the fourth son of the eleventh Baron Elphinstone, a minor Scottish peer of modest circumstances.

Elphinstone obtained a writership in the Bengal Civil Service, arrived in Calcutta in 1796, and was sent to Benares, where he served until 1800. In 1801 he was appointed assistant to the secretary to the Resident with the Peshwa, the head of the Maratha confederacy at Poona. With his knowledge of Persian and Hindi, Elphinstone was well placed to take a prominent part in the diplomatic transactions accompanying the wars of Lord Wellesley in 1802-5, which established British predominance in northern and central India. Elphinstone was subsequently made Resident with another Maratha ruler, the Bhonsla, at Nagpur (1804-7). In 1808 the threat of a French invasion of India led to the dispatch of diplomatic missions to states beyond the northwest frontier. Elphinstone solicited and in July 1808 was given charge of the mission to Afghanistan. The objects of the mission were cloudy. Elphinstone was to encourage the Afghans to resist the French, but for the time being he was not to offer more than money and weapons. The reason for the government's hesitation was that offers to Afghanistan depended upon the outcome of simultaneous negotiations with Persia; only when this latter initiative apparently failed was Elphinstone given permission, in December 1808, to



discuss a full offensive-defensive alliance with the Afghans. In March 1809, as fears of a French invasion declined, the British offers were drastically reduced. The Afghan ruler, Shah Šojā‘-al-Molk, wanted aid against his domestic enemies, but Elphinstone could not agree to this request. Indeed, Elphinstone himself never wanted to give more than a subsidy. In the end, a short treaty was arranged which provided for perpetual friendship and non-interference. Afghanistan promised not to allow French and Persian forces to enter India; Britain agreed to pay a subsidy of £30,000 to Afghanistan if the latter was attacked by France and Persia. The treaty was ratified by the governor-general on 17 June 1809, but by then it was a dead letter because Šojā‘-al-Molk’s power in Afghanistan had collapsed.

The principal outcome of Elphinstone’s mission was the collection of information about Afghanistan, mainly from Afghan informants because Elphinstone never went farther than Peshawar, then part of the Dorrānī empire. Much of this information was incorporated into Elphinstone’s notable work, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*. In 1811 Elphinstone was appointed resident with the Peshwa at Poona and played a major part in the Maratha wars of Lord Hastings (1817-18). He was present at the battle of Kirkee on 5 November 1817, which saw the overthrow of the Peshwa. Afterward, he was put in charge of settling the territories newly acquired by British India in the Deccan. In 1819, although only an East India Company (q.v.) servant, he received the unusual distinction of appointment as governor of the Bombay presidency. He served there until his retirement from the company service in 1827. His service coincided with a peaceful period in British Indian history and he devoted his attention to administration and especially to legal and educational reforms.

Elphinstone was much attracted to, although cautious about applying, the theories of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and he favored codification of Indian law. In recognition of his work in education, Elphinstone College was established by public subscription in 1834. Elphinstone’s governorship saw two expeditions to the Persian Gulf in 1819-20 and in 1821; the signing of the General Treaty of Peace with the Arab Tribes in January 1820; the establishment of British naval power in the Persian Gulf; the formation of the Persian Gulf squadron; and operations against maritime warfare, piracy, and the slave trade. Elphinstone was unsuccessful in his attempts to secure a permanent base for Britain in the Persian Gulf, and Qešm was evacuated in 1823. In 1834, during his retirement, Elphinstone twice refused the offer of



appointment as governor-general of India. He wrote a history of India dealing with the Hindu and Muslim periods. Although the work did not make a major contribution to knowledge about India, it was clearly written, especially the part on Hindu India, and became a successful textbook. Elphinstone also began an account of India during the British period but abandoned the project on grounds that he had nothing new to say and no special facility for writing. His manuscript, which covered the period down to 1765, was later published as *The Rise of the British Power in the East*. In his youth, Elphinstone espoused radical political opinions but became more conservative with age and experience, a trait emphasized by his respectful treatment of the Indian nobility in his settlement of the Deccan. He believed that British rule in India did not have a secure base and would not long endure, and he thought that Britain's aim should be to teach European values in the hope that British rule would be replaced by a stable government on European lines. Elphinstone was a keen classical scholar and by nature an introspective intellectual. He was subject to repeated fits of depression and worries about his health, and never married. He disliked the intellectual isolation of life in India.

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