

North-West Frontier: People and Events 1839 - 1947

Author: Arthur Swinson

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Reviewed by: Asma Gul* & Tazeen Gul**

The book is comprised of fifteen chapters with an epilogue, bibliography and an index. The writer Arthur Swinson (1915-70) was a British Army officer, served in India during Second World War on the East Indian Front of Kohima. The writer's military career can be judged in the book by his elaborate narrations of military campaign, army tactics, military terminology, equipment of wars and army units etc.

The book is written in the narration form. It is the story of Frontier region of British India. The writer does not only focus on the British N.W.F.P Province, but the whole belt of the Frontier region which include the area of present day Pakistan i.e. Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan also. It is an interesting and informative story of the most fascinating area of the world during one of its most fascinating period. The book contains nearly all the topics pertaining to the history of N.W.F.P during British rule, so it could be useful text for the students of history.

The book begins with very interesting account of the geography of the region, its people and their characteristics. The description of river Indus from its source to Arabian Sea, its basin and defensive position is well elaborated. The topography of the region, the Pakhtun, their origin, their virtues and vices, love for violence, Pakhtun wali. The accounts of travelers is well written. The history of Durrani Empire is also briefly traced.

Throughout the book the writer followed the Great man Theory in his narration. He even dedicated the names chapters to them like, Lord Auckland has a plan, the poet in Simla, England finds a Hero. He discussed the personalities of many British civil and military officers in very exalted language. Some of them are Lord Auckland, Alexander Burns, Macnahten, Cavagnari, Charls Napier, John Jacob, Sandemenn, and John Lawlerance and so on.

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The style of writer in describing the regions is an excellent one. He cinematographically narrates the scene of the marching of armies, explains the battle fields, the panorama of areas in such way that reader feels his presence in the area. The route of journey of the Army of First Afghan war, the retreat of Army from Kabul to Jalalabad. During second Afghan war the route from Kabul to Qandhar, the way from Qandhar to Gazi, the description of Khyber pass, the region of Balochistan and Sindh are very well explained.

The language of the book is eloquent and literary. Especially while discussing personalities is poetic one. The writer so mesmerizes his reader that the latter feels part of the scene. The miserable retreat of the First Afghan War army moves the reader so much that he begins to hate the Afghans and so feel happy for the recapture of Kabul and desire for heavy penalty against Afghans. Also during the Second Afghan War for the army of Roberts, the story of Mollie Ellis is described in awesome way. The court and story of Maharaja Ranjit Singh develop contempt for him.

In the book the British are in the foreground. It seems that the writer has consulted only Anglican sources and wrote for them. He has very discriminatory attitude towards native people and events. He seems to have no sympathy or respect for them. They are supposed barbarians, fanatics and fools. The religious dignitaries are contemptuously mentioned termed as Mad mullah and others. To him local rule or customs reveals oppression and cruelties, while British rule stands for relief and justice.

In the book, not only the politics of South Asia is discussed but the international scenario also. The British-Russo-Persian relations are well explained and its impact on the region also. The renowned policies of governments like the Great Game, the Russophobe, the Scientific Frontier, Forward policy, Modified Forward policy, Masterly Inactivity etc all are explained in the book.

It seems that the writer is well aware of the Afghan nation and their country. Afghan neither forget nor forgive; the statement is well judged. His analysis at the end of the book about Afghanistan came true. The super powers of past might not have repeated the same mistakes as was committed by the British during Afghan war, if the analysis of the writer was well judged.

In the last chapter, the development of political events are hastily reviewed along the tribal one. The epilogue discuss the region after the establishment of Pakistan. Here the writer's style is little bit changed. He pays respect to the Government of Pakistan and its policies.

The photographs and other illustrations dating from the period covered are well chosen. In short, the book once started compels its reader to read it to the end due to its magnetic impact.