

The Buddha and the Sahibs – The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion
by Charles Allen. John Murray 2002. £25.

Many of us who watched with horror the destruction by Taleban barbarity of the great statues of Buddha at Bamian in Afghanistan in 2001 were unaware that the first westerner to report their existence was a Lieutenant in the Bombay Native Infantry called Alexander Burnes in the nineteenth century.

Charles Allen, author of several splendid books about India, and particularly the British relationship with the sub-continent, turns his attention now to the role played by successive generations of British soldiers, historians and orientalists in the discovery of India's Buddhist heritage.

Allen, who writes as engagingly as ever about the colourful individuals with whom this story is replete, pieces together the work they did and clarifies the part they played in the revival of Buddhism, then as now under great pressure in India from the twin forces of Islam and Hinduism.

Anyone who remains proudly aware of the positive legacy of British rule in India will welcome this contribution to our awareness that while great events were being played out on a large canvas there were those working quietly away on the fringes whose own legacy was, in its way, just as significant.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh