

Butcher & Bolt – Two Hundred Years of Foreign Engagement in Afghanistan by David Loyn.  
Hutchinson 2008.

I first heard David Loyn (Dave as he was then) as a tennis correspondent for LBC radio many years ago, but for the last two and a half decades he has been a distinguished foreign correspondent for the BBC reporting from many parts of the world.

Over the last 15 years Loyn has frequently been in Afghanistan, often at crucial moments in that benighted country's recent history, indeed he was the only foreign reporter to be with the Taliban when they captured Kabul in 1996.

Butcher and Bolt is a history of Afghanistan over the last 200 years, during which time the country has been both a monarchy and a republic. The book is divided into five parts, covering the following historic periods: 1808-1842, 1842-1880, 1880-1933, 1973-1994, 1994-2008. The chapters are bestridden by amirs and warlords, religious fanatics and communists, adventurers and soldiers, princes and commoners; they are Afghans and Tajiks, Arabs and Russians, Britons and Pakistanis. Each has sought to bend the country and its people to their will, and, by and large they have failed and made matters much worse than they were before.

The title of the book is drawn from the cold, some might say cynical, approach of the British army towards Afghanistan and its people, and its inherent cruelty is matched and superseded by the country that emerges from its pages, an unremittingly hard place with an unforgiving and vicious people living by a life code that blends the strictest Islamic principles with ancient tribal traditions.

Loyn is clearly a very gifted historian, as well as a fine reporter, for he makes the story of Afghanistan as well as its major historical players come alive, and on concluding the book and understanding the contemptuous way in which the country has been treated over the centuries by colonial occupiers playing bigger games, it is much easier to understand why it is in the state it is, and why its problems seem so impossible to solve conclusively.

Butcher and Bolt is essential reading for anyone who genuinely wants to understand the reasons why Afghanistan figures so large in current global geo-politics, as well as being a fascinating insight into one of the hardest countries and peoples on earth.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh