Thesis short title:

SIR JOHN MCNEILL AND THE PERSIAN CRISIS 1836-1839

Robert Hutchison
M A
History

SIR JOHN MCNEILL AND THE PERSIAN CRISIS

1836-1839

A Study in Independent Diplomacy

Robert Hutchison

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of History
McGill University
Montreal, Canada

April 1977

SIR JOHN MCNEILL AND THE PERSIAN CRISIS

1836-1839

A Study in Independent Diplomacy

Robert Hutchison

Abstract

John McNeill was British ambassador to Persia at a time when Mohammed Shah, with the support of the Russian envoy, marched on Herat with a view to incorporating it into Persian territory. Because of its implications on the security of British India, the onus was placed on John McNeill to dissuade him. Ultimately it required a show of force in the Persian Gulf to convince the Shah to raise the siege. However, McNeill's analysis of events made a profound contribution to the shaping of government attitudes in London and India and to the formulation of the ill-fated Afghan policy.

Department of History
McGill University, Montreal

M.A. Thesis
April 1977

SIR JOHN MCNEILL ET LA CRISE PERSANE

1836-1839

Une Etude de la Diplomatie Indépendante

Robert Hutchison

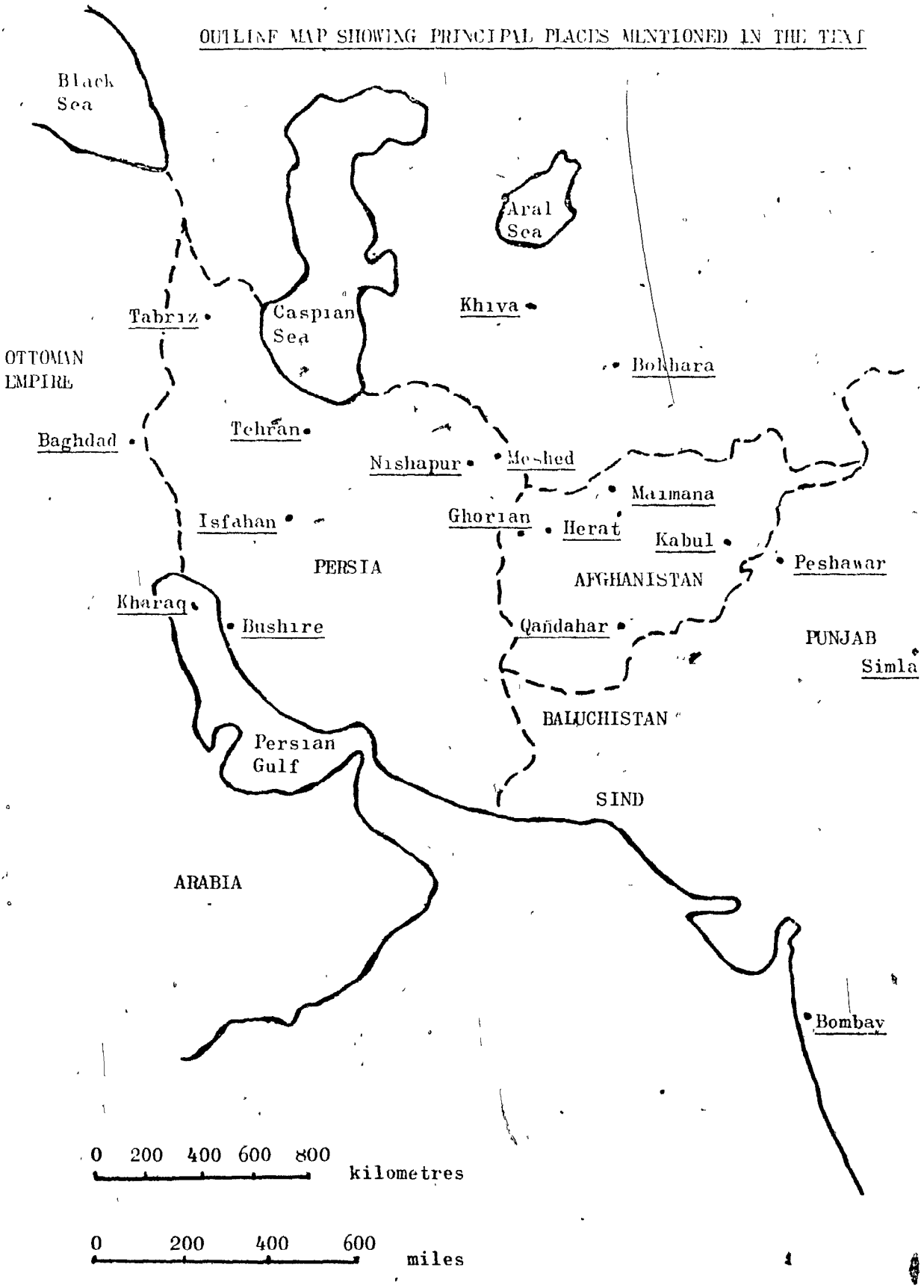
Résumé

John McNeill était l'ambassadeur britannique auprès de la Perse à l'époque où Mohammed Shah, avec l'appui de la Russie, s'achemina sur Hérat dans le but de l'incorporer au territoire persan. En raison des implications pour la sécurité de l'Inde anglaise, il incomba à John McNeill de le détourner. Une démonstration de la force dans le Golfe Persique était finalement nécessaire pour convaincre le Shah de lever le siège. Cependant, par son analyse des événements McNeill fit une contribution profonde au développement des attitudes gouvernementales à Londres et en Inde et à la formation de la politique malheureuse vis-à-vis de l'Afghanistan.

Département d' Histoire
Université McGill, Montréal

Thèse M.A.
avril 1977

OUTLINE MAP SHOWING PRINCIPAL PLACES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT



Preface

There have been many general books and articles considering the nature of nineteenth century imperialist rivalry. This study of John McNeill as ambassador in Persia between 1836 and 1839 endeavours to look at the work of an individual diplomat at an important period in terms of this rivalry, to assess the impact of his initiatives on the immediate crisis, and to consider the extent to which his suggestions as to the direction British policy should take affected the decisions of the governments in London and India.

Chapters One and Two are concerned with considering the background against which the crisis developed. Chapter One concentrates on the personality of the envoy himself: his early life, his experience in India and then in Persia under Henry Willock and John Campbell. In Chapter Two an attempt is made to outline the development of Russophobic sentiment in Britain from the beginning of the nineteenth century and continues with specific consideration of John McNeill's Russophobic sentiments. Chapter Three discusses Herat, the historical and political basis for the Shah's designs on the city, the complex web of Afghan and Persian politics of the period, and the inappropriateness of contemporary British and Indian government attitudes. Chapters Four, Five and Six deal in a chronological manner with the different stages of the actual crisis and John McNeill's response as can be gauged by his copious correspondence with Lord Palmerston and to a lesser extent Lord Auckland. Chapter Seven attempts to trace the denouement of the crisis both on a plane of Russo-British relations and in Persia itself.

The writer is indebted to Dr. David Gillard of the University of Glasgow for the stimulus he provided in his seminars on "Imperialism and International Rivalries in Asia" during the year 1972-73. Particularly in the general consideration of Russophobia in Chapter Two, the writer has drawn on many of the ideas he ventured. The writer must also express his thanks to Professor Hereward Senior of McGill University, by whom this study was suggested and under whose wise guidance it was carried to completion.

A Note on Spellings

In the narrative, the writer has endeavoured to standardise the transliteration into English of Persian and Afghan names and places, while retaining in quotations from nineteenth century sources the various spellings then prevalent.

Abbreviations

B.L.	British Library
F.O.	Foreign Office
H.M.C.	Historical Manuscripts Commission
P.R.O.	Public Record Office

Contents

Chapter One

Sir John McNeill was British ambassador to Persia at a time when anxieties about the growth of Russian power made the country a centre of tension for the British government. The mutual suspicion which characterised Russo-British relations throughout the nineteenth century made itself evident in many areas of the world, but nowhere was it to assume such an importance or indeed be sustained for such a long time as in Persia. Even if there were no actual conflict, the region remained a constant focal point for the two countries, and on several occasions the situation reached a critical level, when the intrigue and diplomatic manoeuvring became more intense, the threats more direct, and the prospect of hostilities breaking out more likely; and it was these circumstances which induced both countries to commit desperate political and military blunders. Particularly in the period before telegraphic communication, much of the responsibility for making the most far-reaching decisions during such times of crisis devolved on the local representatives. To look at the career of John McNeill during the late 1830s is to examine the achievements of one such man, but one of exceptional ability and accomplishment and possessed of a skill in diplomacy which has prompted a recent commentator to suggest that he "probably did more than any other man to save the British Empire in India."[1]

---

[1] J.A. Norris, The First Afghan War 1838-1842 (Cambridge:1967). p.137.

McNeill was well-suited to the post, belonging to a generation of unwitting empire-builders who saw their actions and policies dictated more by fear of the supposed expansionist designs of other countries than by any positive imperialist philosophy. He was in the vanguard of a group of intellectual adventurers concerned with the East who developed strong Russophobic sentiments and set about publicising them through pamphlets and articles in periodicals; his own principal work, Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East, was published in 1836. McNeill was not a career diplomat in the mould of people like Ponsonby or Stratford Canning: his education, social origins, and lack of connections, family or otherwise, all militated against that. Yet as well as the more conventional diplomatic talents, he had attributes which were of constant advantage in the unpredictable political climate of the Persia of the Qajar dynasty. He was by training a physician, and Persian society accorded considerable importance to doctors, who often held high offices of state and acted as the rulers' confidential advisors.[2] More generally, McNeill was the product of the Romantic age and during his years in Edinburgh became imbued with its spirit through a circle of friends, amongst whose number was J.G. Lockhart, Scott's biographer. He fulfilled such sentiments by immersing himself in Persian culture and the country's

---

[2] C. Elgood, "Persian Science", in The Legacy of Persia, ed. A.J. Arberry (Oxford: 1953), p.310.

customs and trying to understand the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and of the people in general: a task in which he was an acute observer. This was more than the mere chore of a representative required to gather information, as is shown for example in the way he directed his literary talents to the translation of the anecdotes of a Persian gentleman, which appeared in several issues of an Edinburgh periodical. [3]

Both in character and in location, McNeill's early life was somewhat distant from the exotic charms of the East. He was born on 12th August 1795 on the island of Collonsay, third son in the family of a Scottish laird. From Mrs. Macalister's account of her grandfather's life, [4] it can be gathered that a great importance was attached to education, and his mother, Hester McNeill, undertook the schooling of John and of her other sons until they were old enough to go to college. At the age of ten, McNeill was sent as a private pupil to the Reverend George Jardine, Professor of Logic at the University of Glasgow, and from 1807 to 1810 he attended the United College of the University of St. Andrews, studying Latin, Greek, Mathematics, Logic and Ethics. In the autumn of 1811, he entered the University of Edinburgh as a medical student and graduated on 19th July 1814. It remains unclear as to what influenced McNeill to choose medicine as a profession, but

---

[3] Meerza Ahmed Tubee, "Visits to the Haram", Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 15 (February 1824), 16 (June 1824), 18 (December 1925), 21 (March 1827), 22 (November 1827).

[4] Florence Macalister, Memoir of the Right Hon. Sir John McNeill, G.C.B. and of his second wife Elizabeth Wilson (London:1910).

as the third son of a landed but not especially affluent family, he would have been aware of the need to establish his financial security by his own endeavours. His impetuous and very youthful marriage to Innes Robinson in the same year as he received his degree from Edinburgh served to accentuate the possibility of an impecunious future. The marriage was disapproved of by his family and it led to two years of trouble and poverty which were only allayed when John's father succeeded in getting him a post in the East India Company through an acquaintance who was a director.

Service in the East India Company was by no means an unusual career for men to enter at this time and it continued to present one of the more attractive means of amassing a fortune within a relatively limited period. The attainment of some measure of financial comfort for himself and for his baby daughter - his wife died a few months after arriving in India - remained a powerful motivating factor for McNeill in his service in India and subsequently in Persia. This is evident from his correspondence, as when writing to Andrew Robinson, the brother of his late wife:

> My allowance will amount in all to not less than £500 per annum. A very small portion of that will be sufficient for my wants, and I shall hope to be able to put a little together for my little girl, in case any accident should befall myself, as well as to set aside a portion annually for the purpose of her education, etc., which I wish to be such as to give her no cause to lament hereafter that I was too poor or too parsimonious to let her enjoy the advantages which were enjoyed by those around her.[5]

---

[5] Macalister, p.23.

His mother too encouraged him moderately in this aim, stating in a letter in the New Year of 1820:

> In six years I hope to see you return as full of health and sport, as handsome, as gay, and as rich as will enable you to live like a gentleman, for more is quite unnecessary.[6]

McNeill's appointment came at a time of major British military activity in India. The Marquess of Hastings, the Governor-General, had determined that a policy of expansion was necessary to consolidate the East India Company's territorial position. In particular this aim had relevance in Central India, which had fallen into a state of chaos and anarchy, dominated by the Pindarees and the Mahratta chiefs with whom they were in league. Consequently McNeill was almost immediately placed on active service, being attached firstly to a field force at Baroda, and subsequently to the headquarters of the Goozerat Division under Major-General Sir Willian Keir. During these years, his competence went beyound that of assistant surgeon and he was involved in communicating and negotiating with local tribal chiefs and Arab mercenaries: activities indicative of his command of a wide range of languages. Late in 1819, McNeill accompanied an expedition intended to check the increasing amount of piracy in the Persian Gulf. He made a study of the subject in a paper entitled "General remarks on the habits and circumstances of the Arabian tribes, and of the mode of correcting the disorders incidental to the condition of society prevailing amongst them, and deduced as the result of present observation and retrospective enquiry." In this work he suggested the establishment

---

6 Macalister, p.25.

of a small permanent force at Bushire or on an island in the Gulf: this was a recommendation he was to repeat at a later juncture, although as a strategy in an altogether difference problem. He returned to India in 1820, but later in the same year was appointed to succeed Richard Sharp as Assistant Surgeon to the British mission at Tehran.

John McNeill arrived in Persia in January 1821. As Assistant Surgeon, he was expected, as he wrote in a letter to Andrew Robinson, to make his professional expertise available to members of the Shah's household if it were required. In this same letter, he made several comments on the country and its society, maintaining that Persia was interesting because of its connection with Greece and Rome and because of the continuity there had been in the type of person who had inhabited the land since the time of Herodotus. He goes on to propose that falsehood and villainy were not necessarily considered vices there, unlike with the Indians, who " with much weakness and much vice, are far more moral and more trustworthy than the Persians. Yet these men are in society so plausible, so polite, so witty and amusing, and have the power of putting on an air of candour and singleness so imposing, that for an hour's conversation, or even for a day, you cannot find a more pleasing companion than a Persian noble." [7]

---

7 Macalister, p.32.

Henry Willock was the British Chargé d'Affaires at Tehran and evidently recognised McNeill's political and diplomatic talents when he made him his temporary Assistant Chargé. In April 1822, Willock left for Britain after a quarrel with Fath Ali Shah, provoked by his stopping of the subsidy payments which had become customary after the 1812 and 1814 treaties. He asked McNeill to accompany him, aware of a possibly cool reception by the home government and in need of a second voice to give him support.

At this period, the British government did not attach much importance to its relations with Persia. Now that the French threat no longer seemed to be a factor in diplomatic strategy, the transferring of the responsibility for Persian matters to the Indian government was being considered. McNeill was involved in the discussions that took place on the subject in London, the outcome being that it was decided to send Willock back to Persia as an interim measure, while preparations were to be made to send a higher level mission from India a few months later. McNeill was also to return as Assistant Surgeon, with his position unaffected by any change in the mission's status. He left Britain again in July 1823 accompanied by his new wife, Elizabeth Wilson, whom he had married on New Year's Day of that year.

Much of McNeill's energy after his return to Persia was devoted to conciliating the adverse opinion to the proposed new mission held

by the Shah and his court, while at the same time trying to explain Persian objections to colleagues in India. In a letter to J.N.R. Campbell, who was to be second Assistant in the new mission, he argued that Persian government fears rested on the fact that this change of status might serve as a precedent to be used by other powers: in particular, the Russian government might respond by devolving responsibility for its relations with Persia on General Yermoloff, Governor of the Caucasus; he continued:

> You are well aware that whatever Persia may say of her confidence in her own strength, she still considers her connection with Britain as her best security against the aggressions of Russia, and the Persian Government is not ignorant that the more intimately it allies herself with European Courts, and the more that Persia is before the eyes of the European public, the more secure she may consider herself. She sees Turkey preserved by the jealousy of the European powers, and she seeks protection from a similar feeling. [8]

Whether it was a result of these shrewd arguments and the other objections Willock and McNeill raised or not, the mission waiting at Bombay was dissolved in July 1825, with only the envoy, Lieutenant Colonel Kinneir Macdonald, being retained to await further instructions. In the same year, McNeill became Acting Secretary, when George Willock, the Chargé's brother, left on a visit to India. It had become a growing ambition of McNeill to obtain a political post, either out of sheer fascination with the politics of the East or because he saw

---

[8] Macalister, p.53.

such an appointment as the best means of personal advancement. Being made Acting Secretary was hardly of great importance, but it was a first step in fulfilling his ambition and must have been particularly gratifying after being disappointed over the appointment to Bushire in the preceding year, when he had felt obliged to withdraw his application.

McNeill's non-political or professional activities were many and varied. He had many correspondents who asked him to perform a wide range of favours for them, such as sending specimens of coins, seeds, or minerals, or giving information whether for the publication of a travel book as with James Baillie Fraser, or for the enlightenment of prospective missionaries as with Joseph Wolff. It was also at this time that McNeill produced the "Visits to the Haram" of Mirza Ahmed Tubee (note 3). He planned a journey the intention of which was to gain information about the area of Eastern Persia and Afghanistan. His plan was to travel as a European physician in native dress, but the enterprise came to naught, although a similar journey was later undertaken by Alexander Burnes.

In July 1826, war broke out between Persia and Russia. Ever since the Treaty of Gulistan had brought to an end the previous Russo-Persion conflict of 1812, a state of tension had existed between the two countries, with many sporadic acts of aggression taking place which had not actually given way to a more general conflagration.

McNeill wrote an article for Blackwood's Magazine after the outbreak of the war, in which he tried by implication to show the mistakenness of the present policy of the British government by tracing the development of Russian contact with Persia and pointing out the risks to the British position in India if Russia were to dominate Persia completely. McNeill saw Russian aspirations there as stemming from the days of Peter the Great and his scheme to open trade with India. While giving a brief account of Russo-Persian relations in the eighteenth century as well as of early nineteenth century British and French diplomatic and military contacts with Persia, he deals at greater length with the period after the Treaty of Gulistan. He suggests that Persia was unlikely to renew war with a country that had succeeded in beating her, even when having to contend with a French invasion. McNeill further proposed that Russia recognised this and took advantage of it to build up her influence, particularly with the heir apparent, Abbas Mirza, reasoning that when the time came for him to succeed to the throne, Russia would aid him and have absolute authority in his government. In McNeill's view, the casus belli, which induced the Shah to march on Russia, was the Russian invasion of Gokcha together with the appeals the Shah had received from Moslems in Russian provinces bordering Persia as to their persecution. The British government had based their policy on a belief that the integrity of Persia was best

safeguarded by maintaining amicable relations with Russia, and this meant treating Persia as neutral ground: "It had the obvious advantage of being liberal, fair and just. But it had also the disadvantage of being most favourable to the party who should observe it with least exactness." [9]

McNeill was implicitly critical of the British government's passive role. He realised that Britain should be cautious about being drawn into the dispute, since the Persians knew it to be to their advantage to have the matter elevated to that of one between two European powers. Nevertheless he was hoping for a more positive attitude than one of luke-warm neutrality; but this was not to be forthcoming: Canning's entire strategy in dealing with the Greek question rested upon co-operation with Russia, and even after Navarino he clung to this position. Thus McNeill was out of step with his government's opinion and found it difficult to reconcile the noncommittal stance required of him to his own point of view. Together with Willock and subsequently Macdonald, his role was restricted to one of mediator, trying to get the hopelessly unco-ordinated and self-interested factions on the Persian side, that of the heir apparent, Abbas Mirza, and that of the Shah himself, to achieve some semblace of co-operation in fulfilling the peace terms imposed by Russia.

---

[9] "Persia", Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 21 (February 1827).

McNeill saw Persian independence and British influence there slipping away before his eyes, and he was certainly bitter at the British government's lack of positive policy during the war. With implicit praise for the endeavours of the British mission, he commented in a letter to Macdonald on 29th February 1828, six days after the signing of the Treaty of Turkmanchai:

> It is most gratifying to see and to feel how high we stand at this Court at a moment when the course pursued by our Government ought, on every reasonable calculation, to have left us without influence and almost without character. [10]

The subsequent British government insistence that the subsidy clauses of the Treaty of Tehran should be removed brought even greater criticism from McNeill; he wrote in a memorandum at a later date:

> There can be no doubt that the change thus effected in the Treaty, coupled with the circumstances under which it was effected, gave a shock to the influence of England in Persia which it has never recovered, diminished the confidence in the high moral feeling of the British Cabinet..... Since that time scarcely an interview has taken place between the British Envoy and the Persian Ministers in which the mutilation of the Treaty has not been a subject of comment and even reproach. [11]

The objectivity of such a sweeping retrospective judgement must be brought into question. McNeill, as a man on the spot, was likely to be committed to a particular point of view, in this case British

---

[10] Macalister, p.105. [11] Ibid., p.116.

perfidy in the face of Russian aggression, without taking into account its wider implications in both international relations and domestic politics, where budgetary problems and the fickleness of the electorate both had to be considered. Moreover, McNeill, in particular, was not politically disinterested. This is evident when he states unequivocally that "the war had originated in a violation of Persian territory by the Governor-General of Georgia." [12] Attributing the war uniquely to this might well have served a useful propaganda function in 1836 but was historically inaccurate. Rawlinson, himself well-known for anti-Russian sentiments, had to admit that "it was the mere consummation of a long course of preparation and design." [13] More recently it has been put foward that the war resulted from Abbas Mirza losing the control in maintaining a state of tension and keeping a precarious balance between peace and war, which he believed was in his own and Persia's interest, since crisis conditions supposedly favoured his extracting money from his father and from the British. [14]

There is a more fundamental consideration which helps to explain the British government's disinterest in Persian matters at the time,

---

[12] Sir John McNeill, The Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East, 3rd. edition (London:1854), p.81.

[13] Sir Henry Rawlinson, England and Russia in the East (London:1875), p.41.

[14] P.W. Avery, "An Enquiry into the Outbreak of the Second Russo-Persian War, 1826-28," in Iran and Islam, ed. C.E. Bosworth (Edinburgh:1971), pp.17-45.

as shown in the readiness to hand over responsibility for diplomatic relations to Bombay, in the reluctance to become involved in the war, and in the subsequent insistence on the removal of the subsidy clauses from the Treaty. British policy had in regard to Persia initially been formulated as a countermeasure to the threat to India posed by Napoleon. As this threat diminished, so did the British government's interest in Persia, and so the greater became its reluctance to fulfil the commitments made at a time of war with France. Its moves towards extricating itself from its Persian obligations would doubtless have gone unchallenged, if it had not been for the development of a new line of policy inspired by a new consciousness of the vulnerability of the Indian sub-continent, particularly with respect to Russia's supposed expansionist designs. It was of this policy that McNeill and his colleagues were pioneers, and many years of frustration were to elapse before some harmony in outlook between these pioneers and the central government was achieved.

In September 1828, Lord Ellenborough was appointed President of the Board of Control, and in a letter to David Wilson in 1830, McNeill writes:

> Lord Ellenborough seems to give all his attention to Oriental subjects, and to make his presidency of the Board of Control something more than a sinecure. I am glad to see that someone among the Ministers thinks it his duty to take charge of the national interests in the East. [15]

---

[15] Macalister, p.132.

If the appointment gave McNeill cause for optimism, in practical terms it was to be of little direct consequence either to him or the British mission in the immediate future, and by 1832 McNeill was talking of their being "so tossed about on political duty at a moment's warning." [16] Specifically, McNeill was referring to the change of mind that had taken place in Bombay over his own appointment to the residency at Bushire. Despite the considerable amount of diplomatic activity in which he had been involved and the deep interest he had taken in the politics of the area, McNeill as yet had not formally obtained a political post. He had applied for the residency post in 1824 but had withdrawn when he realised he was competing with his friend, David Wilson. In 1830, Wilson resigned and Sir John Malcolm, at that time the Governor of Bombay, appointed McNeill to succeed him. However, the new Governor, Lord Clare, altered the arrangements of his predecessor; and McNeill was given instead the job of First Assistant, which post was to be held in addition to his duties as Medical Officer. Clare was of the opinion that McNeill's services in the north of Persia could not be dispensed with, but McNeill was irritated at the change. He had already left for Bushire when news of the new appointment arrived and apart from his general reservations about the capricious manner in which diplomatic

---

16 Macalister, p.138.

appointments were being dealt with, he seemed mainly concerned about the loss of "superior pecuniary advantage". He made this known in a memorial to the Governor in Council which he prepared while returning from his abortive trip: he also regarded the decision as depriving him of "higher rank", "better opportunities of seeking distinction", and "greater personal comfort". [17] However on this occasion, it might be more appropriate to dismiss McNeill's objections and echo Lord Clare's sentiments, grateful that McNeill was spared such a diplomatic backwater. The position of envoy was also involved in the re-organisation. Sir John Macdonald had died on 11th June 1830 and a Major Stewart had been Malcolm's candidate for his successor. Instead, Lord Clare gave the post to Sir John Campbell, the reason given being that Stewart had refused to go because of a reduction in allowances. Behind all this manoeuvring, though, was a directive from the Court of Directors who had responded to a petition they had received complaining that Malcolm had been appointing too many military officers to posts ordinarily held by civilians.

One of the first problems presented by Campbell's appointment was the established ritual of needing to distribute presents to

---

17 Macalister; p.143.

the Shah and the higher court officials: something which McNeill described as "one of the greatest annoyances to be encountered by a new Envoy." [18] In keeping with the progressive playing down of relations with Persia, as well as a result of a general tightening up of the Company's budget, Campbell's salary was reduced as was his allowance for presents. McNeill was involved in trying to overcome the Shah's reluctance to receive the new envoy - a reluctance stemming from his resentment at the smallness of the presents. McNeill has pointed out that this was not merely a question of avarice: the reduction in gifts was for the Shah an indication that "the result of the last war had taken away much of his importance" and that the British government regarded Persia as a crippled power. He quotes the Shah as saying: "They do what they like now. They think the waters have closed over me." [19] This dispute was not allowed to become a bone of contention, and the Shah gave way after a few days, particularly after McNeill began to hint that the envoy might retire to Tabriz and inform the home government that access to the Persian court was only to be gained on the payment of money.

The somewhat defeatist attitude of Fath Ali Shah was to a great extent symptomatic of the condition of the country as a whole.

---

[18] Macalister, p.149. [19] Ibid., p.154.

The albeit tenuous control he had exercised on the country's internal affairs had given way to a situation of inter-tribal warfare and an almost complete breakdown of the notion of centralised authority. While this may partly be attributed to the disruption caused by defeat in the war against Russia as well as to the subsequent apparent willingness of the British government to abandon Persia to her fate, there was also the more obvious reason that the present Shah was growing old and was nearing the end of his reign. The instability that these death throes were producing followed a well-established pattern of Eastern political life, and the ominous reports of dissolution and anarchy were Western observations that were conditioned by a belief in the absolute necessity of continuity in government. Yet there was little altruism in the interest taken in the Persian political situation. The concern was for its repercussions on the relations between Russia and Britain, whose involvement comprised a diplomatic battle of moves and countermoves in trying to gain the greatest influence which would aid them in safeguarding or expanding their respective imperial positions. This was apparent when Abbas Mirza embarked on his Khorassan campaign in 1832. It offered him a means of achieving military glory which would help him to overcome any potential competition for succession to the throne posed by his brothers; and as he admitted to McNeill, his military reputation had been somewhat tarnished by his defeat by Russia.

However, this localised act of belligerency was to assume a very different complexion when elevated to the plane of Great Power politics. It was known that, apart from wishing to subjugate Khorassan, Abbas Mirza planned to attack Herat, to which Persia maintained a dynastic claim. For Russia, encouragement of this aim was a means of diverting Persian attention from the territory in the north-west of the country lost to Russia in the last war, and such encouragement would serve to maintain Russian influence at Tehran and might even informally extend it. It was precisely this possible extension of Russian influence on which British fears were nurtured, particularly among those such as McNeill already convinced of the Russian peril. McNeill was deputed into Khorassan on the orders of the Indian government with instructions to dissuade Abbas Mirza from his attack on Herat. In this he was successful, although another expedition was undertaken the following year by Abbas Mirza's son, Mohammed Mirza. On this occasion the siege was raised owing to Abbas Mirza's death and the need of his son to return to the capital to assume the position of heir apparent.

Sir Henry Rawlinson has described the Khorassan campaign as "the germ from whence sprung our own Afghan war." [20] More than any other single action, it sets in motion a sequence of events, of which

---

[20] Rawlinson, p.47 .

British intervention in Afghanistan might be seen as the culmination. At the very least, it served to reawaken Persian interest in conquering Herat - an ambition unlikely to be forgotten, when now on two occasions its attainment had been frustrated. Even so, on the level of Russo-British relations, the importance of such developments depended on the degree of significance attached to them by domestic public opinion and the government. The Khorassan campaign tended to strengthen McNeill's own conviction as to the immediate dangers of Russian influence in Persia and the threat posed to the security of India; but his view of what he supposed British reaction should be hardly corresponded to the increasingly sympathetic but yet passive attitudes of the home government, nor was it best served by what McNeill considered to be inept behaviour on the part of the envoy, Sir John Campbell. A diary entry of 1st May 1834, the same day as his wife and child left Tehran for Britain, is very revealing in this respect:

> My present position is irksome and disagreeable enough. I can neither stand aloof nor interfere with effect; I can neither direct the affairs of the Mission with advantage, nor can I disregard them. Surely the persons who, for private ends, appoint an unfit servant to a situation of trust and responsibility are guilty of a great crime..... It appears to me that I must decide on becoming an accuser, which I cannot persuade myself to be, or I must keep quiet and allow the interests entrusted to the Mission to be sacrificed, or I must retire, so as to induce enquiry. Of these three the last is most disinterested, and the most delicate course. [21]

---

[21] Macalister, pp.174-175.

McNeill decided to apply for leave and started out from Tehran on 26th September 1834. He travelled home via Constantinople where he met Lord Ponsonby, with whom he was able to discuss the issues relating to Persia and Turkey. As he was to make apparent in his pamphlet on Russia , McNeill believed that the problems of the two countries should be treated as one, since "if either fell into the hands of Russia, the other would not be maintained in independence" and he suggested that there should be close co-operation between the two missions, "labouring to one great end on some given principle." [22] He arrived in London late in November of that year, disappointed and disillusioned, but determined to make an apathetic British public aware of the supposed Russian menace.

---

22 Macalister, p.177.

Chapter Two

The complex web of Russo-British relations in the nineteenth century, in which McNeill played such a significant part, has come to be referred to as the Great Game in Asia, and this may be defined as the bid made by both powers there for political ascendancy.[1] To a great extent, describing it as a game can be justified inasmuch as it remained in the realms of diplomacy rather than entering those of actual hostilities; and even during the Crimean War, Persia and that part of Asia did not become a theatre of conflict. Yet it was not considered a game at the time, and the threat that one side saw posed by the other was treated as very real. While with the benefit of hindsight, the nature of the threat may be dismissed as something of a 'hit and miss' affair, as a consequence of a lack of any grand design by Russia and a somewhat confused response by Britain, contemporaries viewed the situation as more critical. In Britain it was believed that a clear pattern of Russian expansion could be discerned which sooner or later would threaten the integrity of India.

---

1 H.W.C. Davis, "The Great Game in Asia (1800-1844)," Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. 12 (1926). Professor Davis's lecture initiated the more recent discussion on the subject, but he in turn had borrowed the name from J.W. Kaye, the writer of History of the War in Afghanistan (London:1857-8) who in turn had taken it from the works of Arthur Conolly, explorer, traveller and writer of Journey to the North of India Overland from England, through Russia, Persia and Afghanistan (London: 1834).

The development of such sentiments, which might also be understood as the recognising of the supposed Russian threat, was gradual, but it gained greater momentum from about 1828 onwards. For Russia the threat took more the form of fear of the penetration of British commerce into markets traditionally regarded as a Russian preserve; but this threat was less well defined, and it is really only after the Crimean War that the strong sentiments expressed by the British pamphleteers of the 1830s are echoed in Russia. However even with this disparity in the degree to which each side felt threatened by the other, the belief in the existence of a threat became a self-fulfilling prophecy, since policies were formulated on such a premise and as a result were almost bound to bring about a further escalation of the existing tension.

McNeill's personal contribution, in his capacity as Secretary and First Assistant, to British diplomatic involvement in the area has already been noted. Specifically, the interest he took in the Russo-Persian War and the Herat expeditions had an important influence on the way he viewed the Russian presence there, and his observations/ and suggestions, in the form of correspondence, articles and memoranda, the latter often unsolicited, were to have their audience at Westminster. However, McNeill's presentation of the situation is inevitably somewhat narrow, conditioned by his understanding, or lack of it, of the events going on in his immediate vicinity and coloured by a 'man-on-the-spot' type of enthusiasm which was liable to detract from an overall objectivity.

Thus his view is insufficient to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of Russo-British relations, and to understand the genesis of the antagonism between the two countries, developments as far back as the turn of the century need to be considered.

The first twenty years of the nineteenth century represent the period in which Russia and Britain supplant China and France as the predominant powers in a Eurasian context. By coincidence, both countries took important steps with respect to their Asian empires within the span of the years 1798-1806. The Russians established themselves to the south of the Caucasus, coming face to face with the crumbling Persian Empire, while in India the British assumed a dominant rather than merely leading role in the sub-continent, capable of defeating not only one rival but a coalition of all of them. The Russian move beyond the Caucasus was scarcely noticed at the time because attention was focussed on European events. Since the Treaty of Karlowitz of 1699 and indeed before, Russia had been concerned more with Europe than with Asia. In Asia there had been neither a threat nor much of an opportunity to gain by expansion: the Chinese were not particularly interested in conquest and viewed the Russians with the same equanimity as the other 'barbarians', while the Russians had no real territorial ambitions in China or the Chinese sphere of influence.

At the same time, though, the source of Russia's greater consciousness of Asia was being provided by the continuing conflict with the Ottoman Empire. In 1676, the Russians and Turks became neighbours and this set in motion a series of wars continuing down to the twentieth century. Both 1768-74 and 1787-92 are periods when the Turks attempted to recover power and failed, with the result that Russia gained extensively around the Black Sea. It was during the course of the first war that the Russians crossed the Caucasus to loosen the hold of the Turks over the mountain people. A road was built and the Empress Catherine assumed a protectorate over Eastern Georgia. The Georgians saw the Russians as liberators, but the protectorate existed in name only - the Shah of Persia was able to sack Tiflis and massacre its inhabitants with impunity. In 1801 Alexander I annexed Georgia and commenced a policy of bringing the other national groups of the area under Russian control. The Russians were now firmly established across one of their 'natural' frontiers, and the appearance of a Russian military presence there with an ability to attack both Turks and Persians was an important development.

The British made a comparable move in that, although the same natural frontiers could not be said to exist, they attained a certain position of security which they might either accept or from which they might move towards greater control of the sub-continent. The majority view within the East India Company was to maintain the status quo, but

between 1798 and 1805 the post of Governor-General was held by Lord Wellesley, who was determined to make a bid for British hegemony in India. His appointment came at a time when it was apparent that Napoleon had designs on the conquest of India, and the French had established links with two formidable powers there: Mysore in the south, and the Mahrattas in the west and centre. In trying to achieve this hegemony, Wellesley annexed the territories of the Company's weaker neighbours; he used the device of the subsidiary treaty, by which an Indian ruler would pay the Company for troops to defend him against his internal and external enemies and in return would sign away his right to an independent foreign policy (Hyderabad's ruler was thus persuaded along with some of the weaker members of the Mahratta confederacy); and he waged war against Mysore and the stronger recalcitrant Mahratta chiefs, a task which was undertaken for him by Sir Arthur Wellesley. In 1799 Tipu Sultan of Mysore was killed defending his capital and a puppet ruler was put in his place. In 1803 Wellesley attacked the Mahrattas but found it more difficult to bring the war to a successful and rapid conclusion. Generally his methods were unpopular at home and were also proving costly: he was recalled in 1805 and the Mahratta war was wound up, yet by this date it was clear that Britain would seek to gain complete control of India.

These initiatives were to have significant long-term consequences

but their importance at the time was concealed by the French expansionist activities in Europe. Down to 1813, the question that dominated international politics was whether a division of the continent of Europe between France and Russia would be extended to a comparable division in Asia, with India and the Ottoman Empire as the principal spoils - this was talked of in 1807 at the negotiations at Tilsit. Particularly between 1807 and 1809, the situation looked rather menacing for Britain: not only were Russia and France in some sort of alliance, but there was also the possibility, albeit remote, of the two European powers coming into alliance with Turkey and Persia - something not entirely discounted in British government circles. The Turks had been impressed by Napoleon's victory over their traditional enemies, and similarly Persia admired the French victories and had tentative hopes that Napoleon might help in regaining Georgia. If all this was somewhat far-fetched, nevertheless a French mission was sent to Tehran to draw up plans for a French invasion of India, which was to be two-pronged: the one attack naval coming from Mauritius and Réunion, and the other attack overland from Tehran. This project came to nothing, but the prospect of its being revived at some future date remained a distinct possibility in British eyes, and Lord Minto, the new Governor-General, embarked on a diplomatic offensive intending to set up a system of alliances with Sind, Punjab and Afghanistan as well as sending a mission to Persia. The idea behind this was to shut the

Russians and French off from entry into India by having a series of friendly buffer states. It was relatively successful but proved unnecessary, although it was a useful exercise in establishing contacts which was to be developed later. As a response to the French naval threat, Minto sent expeditions to capture Mauritius and Réunion as well as the Dutch colonies of the Moluccas and Java.

If this period was essentially defensive from the British point of view, the years after 1813 saw the destruction of French power and the establishment of British power once and for all in India. The British in their naval invincibility and the Russians in their enormous manpower resources - which were theoretical rather than practical - proved to be by far the most powerful nations in Europe. The Russians acquired additional territory in Europe: specifically a 'tongue' in Poland which enabled them to threaten Berlin and Vienna. The British on the other hand acquired relatively little territory as a result of the French defeat but established a chain of bases which enabled them to defend their commercial empire. In retrospect, it is apparent that by the end of the second decade of the century, Russia and Britain were also the leading powers in Asia. Between 1813 and 1818, the Marquess of Hastings, the Governor-General, brought about a further strengthening of the British position in India, destroying in a series of 'light-hearted' skirmishes the power basis of the Pindarees and Mahrattas. By 1818 all even remotely effective opposition in the

sub-continent had been eliminated and by this time the borders of British India were contiguous with those of Punjab and Sind. Already, there was talk in some circles of a developing Russo-British antagonism leading to conflict. While the frontiers of the two empires were some 1500 miles apart at their nearest point, they were closer in political terms, separated by declining empires, weak principalities and nomadic tribes. Both could advance at these peoples' expense, and, if not, suspect the other of having such designs. The seeds of Russo-British rivalry were thus sown.

Such antagonism was still relatively remote in 1815. At this time both countries were allies against France, and in the period after Waterloo both governments continued to regard France as the principal potential danger. Two successive British Foreign Secretaries, Castlereagh and Canning, often disagreed as to the execution of policies, but their general interpretation of world politics was very much the same: they believed that France was the only state in the world capable of invading Britain and was the main threat both to the country itself and to its empire. Moreover, Europe was seen by both of them as the focal point of their policies: stability in Europe was the key to guaranteeing British security. The Russian view was not dissimilar, and the reasoning behind it, if not entirely the same, was at least compatible with that of the British, in that France was seen to pose the

greatest threat. The French had shown themselves capable of invading Russia, and more importantly from the Czar's point of view, they had carried into Eastern Europe a political structure and political ideas capable of undermining the Russian imperial position. France had been the centre of ideas hostile to czarist absolutism and the Russian government came to conclusions similar to those of the British, amounting to the desirability to maintain the status quo in Europe. Down to the death of Canning in 1827 the British and Russian governments looked at world politics in a like manner, giving Asia low priority as posing any serious threat, certainly not from one another.

An obvious example of this virtual entente came in 1826 with the outbreak of the Russo-Persian war. Britain had certain treaty obligations with the Shah, but the original treaty had had its force weakened considerably since it had been orginally conceived and Canning was able to make use of a technicality of the Persians being the aggressors to refuse aid. He went sofar as to dismiss the treaties with the Shah as foolish and took no account of the protestations of British representatives in Persia and in India which were in his opinion absurd.

It was clearly Canning's line of policy to work with rather than against the Russians and to discount any notion of a threat. Yet within a few years all this had changed and both political parties in Britain had come to regard Russia rather than France as posing the

greater threat. In explaining this there were essentially three elements: a succession of dramatic events which shook people's faith in the existing international order; the presence of new policy-makers at the top; and the availability of a rival interpretation of world politics which seemed to make sense of what was going on. These three elements formed the basis of the turnabout of informed British opinion and of the shift in the government's working speculation as to Russian policy.

The succession of dramatic events began with the 'untoward event' of Navarino which resulted in the complete destruction of the Turkish and Egyptian fleets. Immediately after, the Persians sued for peace with the Russians, and by the Treaty of Turkmanchai of February 1828, the Russian position in the west of Asia was considerably strengthened: a frontier was established on the River Araxes; the Russian naval monopoly of the Caspian Sea was confirmed; Erivan, a valuable base for any attack on Asia Minor, was annexed; and a commercial agreement was also concluded which gave Russian merchants, in theory at least, great privileges in the Persian market. Before the significance of this Russian victory could be appreciated, Russia attacked the Ottoman Empire, the Czar Nicholas being determined to settle once and for all the perpetual quarrelling with the Turks. It also made apparent a clear pattern of systematic Russian onslaught in Western Asia. By the Treaty of Adrianople, the Danube delta, a province of Georgia, and footholds on the Black Sea were handed over to Russia, but more important than these annexations the treaty also

provided for Russian involvement within the Ottoman Empire on behalf of the Christian minority, with autonomy being granted to Serbia and virtual condominium governments established in Moldavia and Wallachia.

At the same time as these developments, new political figures were coming to prominence in Britain. In January 1828, Wellington became Prime Minister. He had been uncertain over the way Britain's foreign policy was being conducted, and being anti-Russian, he believed he had inherited a situation which ought not to have come about. As Prime Minister he tended to be the moulder of his foreign policy, leaving Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary, the task of working out the details of its execution. Lord Ellenborough was another major figure concerned with foreign affairs. He became President of the Board of Control, having long been a critic of the Castlereagh and Canning tradition in foreign matters, and also being anti-Russian fearing a Russian overturning of the balance of power in Europe (rather than seeing the threat in an Asian context). The third man of importance in this sphere was of course Palmerston who achieved a position of prominence when Grey became Prime Minister in 1830. While in the political sense he was a Canningite, down to 1827 he had not shown much interest in foreign affairs and thus was like Wellington and Ellenborough open to new interpretations. Between 1827 and 1833 these three men were searching for a way to react to events in the Near East and Asia and gradually came to adopt a new outlook on British foreign affairs.

The basic proposition of what might be termed the new interpretation, ripe for political adoption, remained unchanged throughout the century: namely that Russia had embarked on a systematic expansion of its empire which would endanger British India. Such a theory did not necessarily replace the hostile attitude towards France, and initially at least it was more by way of complementing it. The idea dated back to the turn of the century with Napoleon's Egyptian campaign and his projected attack on India. In India Sir John Malcolm had been one of the principal expounders of this notion, going to Tehran in 1801 to sign a treaty and at that time being impressed by the Shah's fears of Russian expansionism. The alliance with Russia against Napoleon led to this idea dying away for a time, and the British in India became convinced that having reached the River Sutlej, they could defend their empire. If this was the view in Calcutta, in London it was totally irrelevant in government circles, although there was a revival in newspaper articles as to the threat from Russia generally. Sir Robert Wilson, with his experiences as a British observer and attaché in Russia, published a pamphlet about Russian political and military power. It caused quite a sensation going into five editions within the year and stimulating extensive newspaper debate and a flood of other works (leader writers did tend however to remain somewhat sceptical).

After 1815 there was a number of popular works - travelogues cum histories - resulting from the increased diplomatic activity which

had been part of the defence network against the Napoleonic threat: Elphinstone wrote on the Afghans and Kabul, Sir Henry Pottinger on Baluchistan, and Malcolm on Persia. These books gave the educated public a knowledge of areas beyond India into which the so-called alarmists were saying that the Russians would soon be penetrating. Public reaction remained relatively unmoved by these new views, but in 1828 and 1829 two works were published by Lieutenant-Colonel de Lacy Evans on Russia's power and on the practicability of a Russian invasion of India, both greatly influencing Wellington and Ellenborough.[2] The kind of picture of Russian policy that emerged, remained basically unaltered throughout the century and was subscribed to by most of this school of writers.

A first proposition, also accepted in Russia, was that all 'civilised' states tend to expand into the territory of 'barbaric' neighbours, and it was viewed at the time as almost a duty to undertake a mission of civilisation. Moreover there was a belief that once a country started expanding it could not stop, and from the point of view of prestige, it was undesirable to withdraw from an established position. A second proposition was that throughout history Russia had been expanding her frontiers and there was no reason for her to stop now.

---

[2] Sir George de Lacy Evans, On the Designs of Russia (London: 1828), On the Practicability of an Invasion of British India (London: 1829).

Since in Europe Russia's frontiers were contiguous with those of the other great powers, inevitably the direction of her expansionist activity would be Asia. As a result of this new direction, so the argument continues, Britain would have to face one or all of the following consequences: Russian tariff barriers shutting out British goods from previously accessible markets; an undermining of the British belief in their capacity to control India, since British prestige there was the basis of its power (its physical presence was still very small) and could be seriously damaged by the presence of a rival power in the guise of a potential liberator; the complete collapse of India if British resources were too greatly diverted by a Russian invasion.

However this school of thought would argue that India was much too valuable for Britain to take any chances: valuable through revenue, resources and a large army which could be used in expeditions to other parts of Asia (as by Minto during the Napoleonic threat). This wealth and power gave Britain a world position which, it is contended, it would otherwise not have had. To preserve it, Russian expansion needed to be contained, and the way to do this was to anticipate its government's actions and to extend British influence into those areas which were open to Russia: a buffer state policy.

The political consequences of these new ideas can be seen in their gradual adoption by two successive British governments. When Ellenborough became President of the Board of Control, he responded

quickly to the idea of a Russian threat but believed it to be of a long-term nature. On reading Evans's book, he changed his mind. Evans maintained that the sparsely populated, often hostile countryside which separated the Russians from India was no longer an obstacle to quick advance and he cited the Peninsular Campaign as an example of living off such an area. Evans reckoned that the Russians could transport fifteen thousand troops across the Caspian and advance up the Oxus River to Khiva and Bokhara. From Evans's assertions, Ellenborough concluded that speed was of the essence and it was necessary to gain information through the exploration of the Indus River, turning it into an avenue of commerce to facilitate the extension of British trade into the region of the Central Asian khanates, in the wake of which would come political influence. Ellenborough took his ideas to Wellington, whose reaction to the threat was somewhat less dramatic, but he did agree to a greater intelligence network to find out what the Russians were doing and to extend British influence by money and trade. The pretext adopted was the conveying of five dray-horses as a return gift to Ranjit Singh, the ruler of the Punjab, and Alexander Burnes was commissioned to undertake this. Thus a new policy to counteract a supposed Russian threat was launched, and while in retrospect it represents the beginning of a trend, political developments on the domestic front could just as easily have reversed it.

In November 1830, the Whig ministry of Earl Grey came to power and

it was more than probable that it would not interpret foreign affairs in quite the same light. Palmerston, who was given the Foreign Office portfolio, had very few preconceptions about foreign policy, with no interest in India and no inherent hostility towards Russia, while Grant was a less than spectacular replacement of Ellenborough. Had Russia remained inactive, it is likely that Wellington and Ellenborough would have been regarded as alarmists. Public opinion while interested was still sceptical - the war weariness was still a factor - and the diplomatic countering of Russia in Asia had been pursued secretly. Yet within two years of coming to office, Palmerston became as convinced as his predecessors of the threat that Russia posed.

It was the 1832-33 Mehemet Ali crisis that changed Palmerston's ideas. The rebellion against the Sultan, the occupation of Syria and the advance on Asia Minor made it look as if a new Ottoman Empire would emerge dominating the whole of the Levant and all routes to India. At first Palmerston was not worried: he thought in terms of the Empire's collapse being sufficiently momentous in the context of the balance of power in Europe to be settled by concert of the great powers, as with the Belgian question. However, in the spring and summer of 1832, he began to receive alarming reports from consuls in Egypt and Western Asia, and all these reports assumed a major threat to India from Russia. His meeting with Stratford Canning, the British ambassador at Constantinople, helped to convince him of the existence of a Russian threat in general terms, but like Ellenborough he initially saw no

urgency in it and believed it could be settled through co-operation with Russia rather than confrontation.

Palmerston was nevertheless unable to win over the Cabinet to the view that Turkey should be supported and the Turks turned to Russia for aid, and this in effect set in motion the train of events culminating in the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi signed on 8th July 1833. It was this treaty along with its secret annexe concerning the closing of the Dardanelles to foreign warships that finally persuaded Palmerston that the Russian threat was of a far more immediate nature. He suspected that the treaty represented a step on the way to the establishment of a Russian protectorate over the Turkish Empire. Russia was pursuing "a system of universal aggression on all sides" and as a consequence of this conviction, Palmerston began to panic, coming over to the viewpoint of Wellington and Ellenborough and espousing it if anything more stenuously than they had.

From the above it can be seen that at the time McNeill, seemingly exasperated at the lack of effectiveness of the British presence in Persia, had decided to take leave of absence to return to Britain to make his case, governmental circles had already undergone considerable change in outlook and at the very least were unlikely to be hostile to a new literary onslaught from the so-called Russophobes. The government also needed, more as a political necessity, public endorsement of any new direction in policy that it was contemplating,

and it was the sceptical but often fickle body of British public opinion that was to be the main objective of the persuasive tactics that Rawlinson thus describes:

> The Monthlies poured in a close and galling fire, supported by the light artillery of leaders in the daily journals, and by charges of cavalry in the shape of pamphlets and reports. The heavy Quarterlies, too, brought up their masses to sustain the onset and the mysterious "Portfolio", which was embodied for this particular campaign, proved in itself a very "Legion" of destructiveness. The public mind of England, that huge burly citadel of selfishness and unbelief, was fairly taken by assault.[3]

Three names tend to be associated with this "assault" on the British public, principally as a result of their co-operation in the production of the Portfolio discussed below: David Urquhart, Baillie Fraser, and McNeill himself. Of these, Urquhart was undoubtedly the most prolific, most extreme, and consequently perhaps the most notorious. Having begun his interest in the East as a Philhellene, his main concern came to be with the fate of Turkey, his attitude to that country having altered as a result of extensive travel. In a whole series of works including Turkey and its Resources (1833), England, France, Russia and Turkey (1836) and an account of his travels The Spirit of the East (1838), he tried to show that Turkey's viability as a country could best be guaranteed by a strengthening of its own institutions, which would allow for locally based government, rather than by the imposition of a centralised style of

---

[3] Rawlinson, p.53 .

government from outside. It was to this latter option that he saw Russian machinations in Turkey directed. Another theme of his argument was that Turkey, unlike Russia, accepted the practice of free trade and preferred direct to indirect taxation.

Urquhart concentrated most of his attention on Turkey, while McNeill might be said to have done the same for Persia. Both accepted the close inter-relationship of the two areas of concern, and McNeill especially endeavours to treat them as one when discussing the Russians' ambitions and their methods of realising them. This is apparent in The Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East which was published in the spring of 1836, the author supposedly anonymous. It is in the Preface of this work that McNeill introduces his "regular formula" for Russian penetration, which he sees to be as consistent in its application as was Russian ambition:

> For one hundred and sixty years Russia has steadily kept in view the objects of ambition in the East first contemplated by Peter I, and bequeathed by him to his successors. These were, to raise Russia upon the ruins of Turkey - to obtain exclusive possession of the Caspian and the Black Sea, with the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles - to extend her dominions beyond the Caucasus - to domineer in Persia with a view to open the road to India; and history perhaps furnishes no other example of equal pertinacity in prosecuting, 'per fas et nefas,' a predetermined course of aggrandizement....
>
> Not less remarkable than her pertinacity and caution has been the uniformity of the means by which her acquisitions have been obtained. The process has almost been reduced to a regular formula. - It invariably commences with disorganization, by means of corruption and secret agency, pushed to the extent of disorder and civil contention. Next in order comes military occupation to restore tranquillity; and in every instance the result has been protection, followed by incorporation. [4]

---

[4] McNeill, p.vi.

He goes on to list those areas to which this formula had already been applied: Poland, the two Kabardas, the Crimea, Georgia, Imeretia and Mingrelia, and in the main body of the text he traces the history of Russian designs on Turkey and Persia. In his final chapter before the conclusion he makes some significant remarks about the importance to Britain of maintaining an independent Persia. He restates in slightly different terms his understanding of Russian expansionist technique, seeing this as "a system of successive encroachments, no one of which has been of sufficient importance to interrupt her friendly relations with the great powers of Europe." This, McNeill explains, is achieved by keeping existing rulers and governments while gradually sapping away their power until the countries are ripe for annexation. Thus there is neither violence nor collision and "if there is no collision, there is no opportunity for other powers to interpose." McNeill suggests that the relationship between Turkey and Persia was such that the compromising of either country's independence by Russia would have an immediate bearing on the integrity of the other, with all its implications for British political and commercial interests in Europe and Asia.

In furthering the commercial aspect of the British interest in maintaining an independent Persia, McNeill argues that the British stake in the Persian market was large and was increasing, Persia having imported over £1½ million's worth of British manufactures

annually during the two previous years. This increase was at the expense of Russia and he concludes that British commerce could not long be maintained should Russia be in a position to control it.

The political implications of a Russian-dominated Persia were two-fold for McNeill. There was the physical threat of invasion of India by Russia, impracticable with the existing frontier, but with Persia's resources at Russia's disposal (which he goes on to describe as essentially military) together with a realignment of the border so that Herat became Russia's southern frontier, any "insuperable impediment" was effectively removed. There was also the disturbing influence Russia might have on Britain's ability to control India. An advance by Russia as far as Herat would mean the immediate presence on the borders of India of a power equal to that of Britain and this could well lead to an increased incidence of rebellions and difficulty in collecting taxes, and also:

> The minds of all men would be unsettled, and every disturbance in the northwestern provinces, every movement on the Indus or beyond it, would assume a new character, from the connexion it would or might have with the new and powerful neighbour, to whom all the disaffected would have recourse.[5]

Britain had had an efficient means of checking the ambition of Russia in being able to destroy her commerce and with it her nobility's wealth and her government's stability. This was true at the time of Napoleon and continued to be so, while Russia's

---

[5] McNeill, p.105

strength being exclusively military had not been able to be used to put pressure on Britain. However an advance by Russia to the borders of India would provide a countercheck which would place her on a more advantageous footing.

From these arguments, mostly unabashedly self-interested but with the occasional hint of altruism, McNeill concludes:

> Great Britain has, therefore, a manifest interest in protecting the independence of Persia; an interest of such magnitude and importance that she cannot permit it to be endangered without exposing India to evils from which every Government is bound, if possible, to protect its subjects, and without subjecting herself to a diminution of her influence in Europe, as well as of her power in Asia.[6]

In the Conclusion, McNeill makes one of his most interesting observations by way of an a priori justification of any remedial action that the British government might decide to take:

> The right of interference in the affairs of independent states is founded on this single principle, that, as self-preservation is the first duty, so it supersedes all other obligations.

From this he goes on to warn Russia in the following terms:

> The only nation in Europe that attempts to aggrandize itself at the expense of its neighbours is Russia. The only state whose prepond-erance and ambition threaten to disturb the general tranquillity is Russia. The only power that seeks to put down an existing government is Russia. All nations except Russia wish to maintain the independence of other countries - to preserve things as they are, and to build up rather than pull down - Russia alone threatens to overturn thrones, to subvert empires, and subdue nations hitherto independent....
>
> No other power in Europe has any interest in Turkey or Persia, except to preserve their independence, and to promote their prosperity and welfare. None of them dream of preparing in either of these countries the means of aggression: they only seek to prevent or repel the aggressions of Russia. If she will do nothing to give us security for the future, and only renews her protestations of innocence and moderation, she must expect us to take such measures as we may judge most efficacious to impede and arrest the course she has so perseveringly pursued.[7]

---

[6] McNeill, p.107. [7] Ibid., p.113 and pp.115-116.

It has been suggested that both in this latter, unequivocal warning to Russia and in the doctrine of just interference, the hand of Palmerston can be seen to be at work.[8] This has also been said of the publication of the Portfolio, but Palmerston's precise involvement in these attempts to stimulate public interest cannot be determined and certainly nothing was committed to writing.

The Portfolio was essentially the brainchild of Urquhart, although he was assisted by both Fraser and McNeill. It was set up as a magazine for those interested in diplomatic affairs but was really a vehicle for Russophobes to convey to the public what they saw as the unscrupulousness of Russian diplomacy. To this end it was successful, to a great extent as a result of the controversial nature of the material published. This was a mixed collection of Russian despatches found in Warsaw during the Polish Revolution in 1830, and it was in the making available of such confidential items that Palmerston's connivance might be suspected. Their impact was most damaging, exacerbated as it was by editorial annotations, and many such as Lord Durham who still refused to recognise the existence of a Russian threat felt constrained to dissociate themselves. Durham is noted as saying that "under cover of a few purloined papers of undoubted interest and admitted authenticity, a mass of absurd trash has been circulated."[9]

---

8 Norris, p.85.

9 Durham to Palmerston, cited in C.W. Crawley, "Anglo-Russian Relations 1815-1840," Cambridge Historical Journal, 3 (1929), p.63.

The spirit of the age was clearly one of Russophobia with its expression gaining greater vehemence through the early and middle years of the 1830s. Even when Urquhart's credibility began to wane, there were others to keep up the campaign of influencing British opinion.[10] In fact, it seems that there was but one dissenting voice: that of Richard Cobden. He rejected Urquhart's arguments in two publications: England, Ireland and America (1835) and Russia (1836). In these works he maintained that the Turks were savages and that if Russia chose to conquer them, it would weaken that country more than any other. He also saw Russia as far more advanced in matters of commercial policy than Turkey; and from the point of view of British interests, there was more to be feared from America than from any country to the East. Cobden's arguments present some strange contradictions and irrelevancies - notably if free trade was to be used as a yardstick of an advanced commercial policy, his placing of Russia above Turkey in this respect is hardly tenable.

Cobden was to remain an erratic voice in the wilderness, overwhelmed by the flood of Russophobic writings which provided the basis for the direction of political thinking, both in public and governmental circles, for the rest of the decade. Yet the validity of the speculations and conclusions of the many pamphleteers is in historical terms questionable and in no way was the degree of their

---

10 David Ross, a friend of Urquhart, brought out in 1836 Opinions of the European Press on the Eastern Question; Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine dealt with the perils to India; the Quarterly Review reacted favourably in its reviews of Urquhart's books.

accuracy and veracity commensurate with that of their impact. Armed with certain preconceived notions as to the nature of the Russian menace such as McNeill's formula for penetration, adventurers like Alexander Burnes, Arthur Conolly, Eldred Pottinger and James Abbott undertook the exploration of the remoter regions between Tehran and Peshawar to look for the substance of such fears. They usually found it and subsequently exaggerated it. Professor Davis warns that

> The investigators, quite unconsciously, were disposed to clutch at every scrap of evidence which corroborated the official theory, and to overlook the circumstances which should have inspired a prudent scepticism....They seldom brought themselves to the point of making a detached and impartial survey of the immensely complex phenomena of Asiatic politics...They seldom paused to consider the intrinsic worth of the alliances which Russian agents were negotiating, or the material difficulties which were bound to hamper and might well paralyse Russia's military plans.[11]

The exploits of these individuals tended to infect many decision-makers in India and in Britain with a romantic spirit that was oblivious to reality. Bentinck and Auckland in India and many in the home government were so affected. Thus it was only the relatively small manifestations of a Russian move towards aggrandisement that were seen as significant, the major drawbacks being taken little into account. Moreover the proposed remedies were just as removed from reality. British dominion in India ended at the Sutlej, and the Sind together with the territories of Ranjit Singh separated it from the frontier hillsand passes. The Indian government had the capacity neither militarily noradministratively to pursue

---

[11] Davis, p.238.

successfully the forward policy deemed necessary to support the machinations of the young adventurers. With hindsight it can be seen how disastrous the attempt proved to be. The fate of men such as Charles Stoddart and Arthur Conolly, victims of capricious torture and execution in Bokhara, reveal how little British prestige counted for when the Company's armies were not there to back it up.[12] In fact the role played by Pottinger in defending Herat against the Persian siege together with McNeill's diplomatic intervention is the only successful frontier exploit of the time, even if it was to serve as one of the precipitants of the Afghan débâcle.

It should be said that during the first half of the nineteenth century at least, the Russian government, in contrast to its more exuberant agents and foreign representatives, never seriously countenanced the prospect of conquering India. It was only after the Crimean War that men like Prince Baryatinskii, Viceroy of the Caucasus, Ignatiev, Director of the Asiatic Department, and Miliutin, Minister of War, began to reject the informal style of imperial expansion and advocated a more positive policy to counter what had now become the British menace. Yet most British observers misconstrued

---

12 This argument is developed in J.L. Morison, "From Alexander Burnes to Frederick Roberts - a Survey of Imperial Frontier Policy," Proceedings of the British Academy, 22 (1936), p.182.

this haphazard policy and saw in it something deliberate: in conversation with Pozzo di Borgo, the Russian ambassador, in 1838, Palmerston is noted as saying: "Now, of course, there can be no talk of a Russian expedition to India, but if it is desired to capture a fortress, the beginning is to surround it gradually from afar." [13] If the reservation which McNeill had expressed as to the unsettling effect on India's internal stability that the presence of a great power in Central Asia would have was legitimate, it was nevertheless the more direct though less plausible fear of actual invasion that influenced most statement and soldiers. By 1840, as a committed advocate of a forward policy, Palmerston was able to write:

> It seems pretty clear that sooner or later the Cossak and the Sepoy, the man from the Baltic and he from the British islands, will meet in the centre of Asia. It should be our business to take care that the meeting should be as far off from our Indian possessions as may be convenient and advantageous to us. But the meeting will not be avoided by our staying home to receive the visit.[14]

---

[13] Cited in Harold T. Cheshire, "The Expansion of Imperial Russia to the Indian Border," The Slavonic Review, 13 (1934).

[14] Palmerston to Hobhouse, 14 February 1840, cited in Philip Guedalla, Palmerston (London: 1926), p.225.

Chapter Three

Throughout history, Herat has rightly been known as one of the principal gateways to India and, as has been noted above, John McNeill in his pamphlet placed some emphasis on the strategic value of the town. He saw its occupation by Russia as making it necessary for Britain to enlarge its army in India, since it would no longer be possible to send out troops by sea as quickly as it would be for Russia to march them by land. He also believed a Russian advance as far as Herat would give that country control over the resources of Persia and, apart from the direct military threat thereby posed, this would be damaging in the psychological impact it would have on India, with the influence Russia would exert being able to disturb the whole system of government.[1] In the eyes of British observers, the town was to assume increasing importanceas the century progressed, and this may be attributed to its being a striking example of where an interaction of Great Power diplomatic manoeuvring and the local quasi-tribal balance of power politics took place.[2]

Herat was and had been a centre of population ever since the time

---

1 McNeill, pp.104-105.

2 This interest may be gauged by looking at entries in successive editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica: the 7th edition of 1842 does not mention the town; the 8th edition of 1853 has a couple of paragraphs; the 9th edition of 1880 devotes nearly three pages to it.

of early Zoroastrian settlers who had been attracted to its four hundred square miles of alluvial plain, the fertility of which was ensured by the irrigation provided from the Heri-Rud. The town's subsequent history is as complex as that of any city in the East, being inextricably tied up with almost every dynastic revolution, foreign invasion and civil war that had taken place since the time of Mohammed. Its importance derives from its position on the western flank of the Hindu Kush, having lines of communication in all directions to other major cities in western and central Asia. In particular, Herat guarded the road to Qandahar and India, but in doing so was vulnerable to attack from the north and west.[3] In 1837 its population was estimated to number some 70,000 but this had diminished to less than 7,000 by the end of the siege.

In 1833 when Alexander Burnes made his visit to Afghanistan, Herat was the only part of the country that remained in the hands of a descendant of Ahmad Shah. Ahmad Shah, a member of the Sadozai family, had ruled a united Afghanistan from 1747 to 1773 and might well be considered the founder of the more recent Afghan empire.

---

3 The Encyclopaedia Britannica (9th edition, 1880) cites General Ferrier among others as saying that as the line of wall is entirely without flanking, the place could not hold out for twenty days against a European army.

At his death, his dominions passed intact to his son, Timur Shah, but on the demise of the latter in 1793, hostilities broke out between his sons, and the rival Barakzai or Mohammedzai family was able to take advantage of the situation to establish control over Kabul, Qandahar and Peshawar.[4] Thus Herat became the last refuge of the Sadozai family, politically isolated from the rest of the country, although it should be added that those areas nominally under the rule of the Mohammedzais were far from united, with Sultan Mohammed Khan of Peshawar and Kohendil Khan of Qandahar at enmity with their brother Dost Mohammed at Kabul.

It is an important aspect of subsequent events that Herat was a separate political entity from the rest of Afghanistan at the time. Such a state of affairs had induced Prince Kamran, the ruler, to seek some form of attachment to Persia, and without Persia's sovereignty being directly acknowledged, it had become the practice for Kamran to pay occasional tribute to the Shah as often as the governor of Khorassan was strong enough to demand it. Yet plans for the actual conquest of Herat were nurtured principally by the Persian Crown Prince, Abbas Mirza, and it was only through his exerting of influence over his aged father that his plans came to fruition. In fact it is to be gathered from an article in the Quarterly Review that Fath Ali Shah opposed any such venture.[5] The writer states that when

---

[4] The complexities of Afghan history at this time are developed in W.K. Fraser-Tytler, Afghanistan (London: 1967), and also in the Annual Register 1839, chapter 13, pp.317-320.

[5] "Russia, Persia, and England," Quarterly Review, 64 (1839), p.147.

Hasan Ali Mirza as governor of Khorassan had been received into Herat, made an alliance of marriage with Prince Kamran, and then announced in a letter to Fath Ali Shah that he was in a position to seize the town and to retain it, the Shah had vetoed his plan and told him to evacuate the town. The Shah also disapproved of Abbas Mirza's proposal to attack Herat, being of the opinion, so it is related, that the advantages to be gained were questionable:

> He felt the difficulty of establishing his authority over a people of a hostile sect and nation. He feared that by extending his frontier in that direction, he should be placing it in contact with lawless tribes, who could neither be effectually subdued nor made to feel any responsibility for their conduct.....He felt convinced that the preservation of Herat to Persia, even should it be captured, would be more costly than profitable, and he urged Abbas Meerza to apply himself rather to the improvement of his own territories than to the conquest of other countries.[6]

The writer of this anonymous article evidently had an intimate knowledge of the contemporary Persian court and may well have been McNeill himself. In any case, it is difficult to gauge the degree to which such sentiments are those of the Shah rather than those of the author, but there was nevertheless an apparent divergence of views between Fath Ali Shah and Abbas Mirza, with the latter choosing ultimately to ignore his father's advice with the consequences already noted. It is also significant that Abbas Mirza's own son, Mohammed Mirza, who was to become the next Shah, was more influenced by the

---

6 "Russia, Persia, and England," p.148.

expansionist aspirations of his father than by the pacific inclinations of his grandfather. The 1833 expedition against Herat was under his command, and the fact that it failed and that an arrangement had to be entered into with Prince Kamran whereby his army might retire unmolested doubtless increased his resolve to march again on the town in the future. Commenting on the new Shah's attitude of mind on his accession to the throne on the death of his grandfather, the writer in the Quarterly Review suggests:

> He had been mortified by the failure of his first great military enterprise, and had scarcely established his authority in his own kingdom, when he intimated his intention to attempt again the subjugation of Herat.[7]

The local balance of power politics might seem sufficient to explain Persian interest in Herat, but the Russian dimension can hardly be dismissed as coincidental. It had been at the hands of the Russians that Abbas Mirza's military reputation had been dealt such a convincing blow in the war of 1826. It was a matter of honour that he try to redeem it in exploits elsewhere. If the northwest no longer offered possibilities owing to the Russian presence, the north-east with Khorassan and ultimately Herat as a goal for conquest offered the obvious alternative, especially when a tenuous historical claim could be established relating to events during the reign of Nadir Shah. Of course, Russia had every reason to encourage such

---

[7] "Russia, Persia, and England," p.148.

ambitions since it would divert attention away from her still vulnerable possessions in the north-west and would create an incidental disruptive effect on the British sense of security in India. Russian support was evident in the Khorassan campaign of 1832 where it has been said that the Shah made use of it to strengthen his weakened authority.[8] The writer in the Quarterly Review is more precise and suggests that Baron Ache, an officer in the Russian engineers, offered Abbas Mirza encouragement and military advice and assistance for his campaign and accompanied him into Khorassan.[9]

Sir Henry Rawlinson has said of the motivation of the new Shah, Mohammed Mirza:

> That Abbas Mirza was actuated by feeling of hostility to England in sending an army against the capital of Western Afghanistan, no one has ever pretended to assert. That imputation has been reserved for Mahomed Shah: yet if the lust for conquest, and the natural ambition of a military chief, were sufficient to account for the designs of the Prince Royal upon Herat - irrespective of the advice of Russia - at least the same allowance should be made for the temptation which must have assailed a leader, who, having been worsted on the first occasion of independent command, found himself shortly afterwards enabled to employ the resources of an empire to retrieve his failure.[10]

It is also related that when Mohammed Mirza returned to Tehran to assume the position of heir apparent, he swore a solemn oath that sooner or later he would retrace his steps eastward and wipe out his disgrace in Afghan blood. Thus the new Shah on his accession was

---

8 Cheshire, p.90.

9 "Russia, Persia, and England," p.149.

10 Rawlinson, pp.48-49.

persuaded to renew his campaign against Herat by sentiments of revenge and of a need to reassert his military prowess and self-esteem, while at the same time having the comforting knowledge that he could rely to a certain extent on Russian support. He was also served with the pretext that Price Kamran of Herat had failed to fulfil certain obligations: the razing of the fort of Ghorian on the frontier of Khorassan; the return of certain families to Persia; and the annual payment of ten thousand tomans. Additionally Kamran had allowed his vizier, Yar Mohammed Khan, to take a force into Khorassan, compel the chiefs of Khiva and Khafin to pay tribute, and carry away twelve thousand people to sell them into slavery.

The Russianshad little to lose by way of influence in giving the Persians support. Russia was "singularly placed" and "having sown the dragon's teeth in Khorassan, she was content to await the harvest, without attempting to force on a crisis, or to disturb in any way the natural course of events." [11] In supporting the Shah in his ambitious designs, the Russian envoy, Count Simonich, was of the opinion that either success or failure would be advantageous to Russia. If the Shah succeeded in annexing Herat to his dominions, Russia could, according to the Commercial Treaty, place a resident consular agent there, thereby extending the Russian sphere of influence and providing a legitimately

---

[11] Rawlinson, p.49.

established base whence such influence might penetrate even further. On the other hand, if the expedition failed, the effect would be to weaken the Shah and his government's control and consequently, it might be argued, it would increase Persia's dependence on Russia. In either case, as Count Simonich realised, the question of Herat had for the first time placed Russia and Persia in a common opposing position vis-à-vis Great Britain.

The British government was only just beginning to take a few hesitant steps away from its indifferent stance of abandoning Persia to its fate towards a more positive policy. However, it had much ground to regain as regards retrieving its influence at the Persian court. This had not been helped by the inconsistent course that the British and Indian governments had taken over representation in Persia. While the Foreign Office had assumed responsibility in 1809, for many years a compromise formula had been used so as not to offend Calcutta, whereby the ambassador or chargé d'affaires had been a nominee of the Company but with credentials from the Crown. From 1826 until 1835 though, the Company nominee had usually carried no credentials at all, this state of affairs reflecting perhaps the lowest point in terms of the British government's interest in the affairs of Persia. Despite this, Britain was able to act in concert with Russia in 1834 when their respective representatives in Tehran co-operated to ensure the peaceful accession of Fath Ali's grandson to the throne. Without

this co-operation, civil war in Persia could well have broken out. At the same time, in recognition of the situation, the India government sent a military mission which included Stoddart, Sheil, and Todd, but they were not well received and in any case relatively powerless. Sir H.L. Bethune, a military representative sent out from London, met with more success and was involved in the decisions of 1834. Yet still Mohammed Shah looked to Russia for support in his projects of aggrandisement.

Whatever its direction, British influence would seem to have counted for very little at the Court of the Shah. As has been seen, it was partly a result of inconsistent and uncertain policy on the part of successive governments, but even when there was less indifference, there was no way that British representatives could endorse the Shah's eastern expansionist policy; and this held true even when, as McNeill himself was prepared to admit, there was some justification for retaliatory action against Prince Kamran. The British had become convinced of the need to cultivate relations with the countries neighbouring India. In Afghanistan particularly, the establishment of a British sphere of influence would act as a sort of psychological buffer to Britain's sense of security in India. However at the same time, Britain was constrained from making such a policy fully effective by developments in Persia which were further complicated by the terms of the ninth article of the Treaty of 1814 which stipulated

"that if war should ensue between the Persian and Afghan governments, the English government shall take no part in it; nor shall it give any assistance to either party, except as a mediator, at the solicitation of both parties, for the purpose of producing peace." This no longer reflected practical politics, just as to rely on Persia to resist the approach to India of an invading army, which was the essence of the first article of the same treaty, was also unrealistic. As Henry Ellis was to observe somewhat astutely in a despatch sent to Palmerston soon after his arrival in Persia as Britain's new envoy:

> I feel quite assured that the British Government cannot permit the extension of the Persian Monarchy in the direction of Afghanistan, with a due regard to the internal tranquillity of India; that extension will, at once, bring Russian intrigue and influence to the very threshold of our empire; and as Persia will not or dare not place herself in a condition of close alliance with Great Britain, but rather defers to Russia, that our policy must be to consider her no longer an outwork for the defence of India, but as the first parallel, from whence an attack may be commenced or threatened.[12]

The successful coming to terms with the new political realities of the Persian situation was the dilemma posed for Britain and its representatives. It was a responsibility which was to devolve on Sir John McNeill during the years immediately following.

Sir John Campbell had been appointed envoy to Persia by Lord Clare in 1830 and continued to hold this office when McNeill applied

---

[12] Ellis to Palmerston, 15 January 1836, (P.R.O) F.O.539/2, folio 8. The phrase "but rather defers to Russia" was omitted in the published version.

for leave from his post as First Assistant in September 1834. While in general McNeill's reason for returning home can be attributed to dissatisfaction with British policy in Persia and to a desire to instil some awareness of the situation as he saw it into the British government and public, specifically he was finding it increasingly difficult to work with Campbell and he disapproved of his conduct of the office of envoy. For McNeill, Campbell was "a man for whose mental qualifications one could feel no deference and for his moral character no respect."[13] He goes on to make some fairly pointed remarks about the envoy's insulting behaviour and want of discretion and truthfulness which he believes had destroyed Persian confidence in the British mission and had reduced its influence to naught.

With the low ebb of British prestige, any ineptitude on the part of the envoy was bound to be used as an explanation. Possibly John McNeill was unwittingly using Campbell as a scapegoat on which to vent his overall frustration at the direction of British policy in Persia; and to be fair to Campbell, on the official side there is not the same insight into this alleged aspect of the man's character. His recall in 1835 should be understood more in the context of the British government's wish to put its dealings with Persia on a higher footing than that of Company representative. Before his recall, on Palmerston's instructions, Campbell had been negotiating with Fath Ali Shah a revision of the 1814 Treaty which would delete the article which

---

[13] Macalister, p.168.

related to Persian quarrels with Afghanistan. The progress Campbell made was to be of little consequence since the old Shah died in November 1834.

The death of Fath Ali gave the home government an opportunity to make a visible demonstration of its increased interest in Persian affairs by sending a special mission of condolence and congratulation to the new Shah which Henry Ellis was appointed to lead. The Duke of Wellington, Foreign Secretary in the shortlived Peel adminstration of 1834-35, proposed that McNeill should accompany Ellis as Secretary to the Embassy while being given dormant credentials as Minister Plenipotentiary. McNeill had previously refused this position but accepted it from the Duke. However the change of government in April 1835 also brought about a change in these decisions and the new Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, resolved that McNeill was not to go out with Ellis to Persia but to follow on later.

In an official letter, Palmerston instructed Ellis as to the line of approach he should take with the Persian government:

> You must not conceal the opinion entertained by His Majesty's Government, that however cautiously Russia may be acting at present, it is from her that the great danger to Persia must arise, and against her that the defensive arrangements of Persia should be directed.
>
> You will especially warn the Persian Government against being made the tool of Russian policy, by allowing themselves to be pushed on to make war against the Afghans.
>
> Russia has objects of her own to gain by exciting the Persian Government to quarrel with its Eastern neighbours. The attention of Persia is thus turned away from what is passing to the North and the West, and the intrigues by which Russia is paving her way to further encroachment upon Persia have a better chance of being carried on unobserved.[14]

---

[14] Palmerston to Ellis, 25 July 1835, (P.R.O) F.O. 539/2, folio 7
In the published version, direct references to Russia were suppressed in this passage.

It was unlikely that the Persians would interpret the situation in the same light as Palmerston, as Ellis was to find out when he arrived in Tehran on 3rd November. He found the Shah and his ministers in the midst of preparing for a new attack on Herat, with projects afoot for sending expeditions against Qandahar, the Baluchi and the Kurds. Moreover, in this the Russian representative and his advisers appeared only too eager to tender their support and make suggestions. When he was able to obtain an interview with the Persian ministers, Ellis learned that they believed that a large portion of Afghanistan including Herat and Qandahar belonged to the Shah. The British envoy was at pains to point out that the prosecution of such schemes would not be well received by Britain, but, as he reminded Palmerston, Prince Kamran had flouted the treaty he had previously entered into with the Shah, and his slaveraiding activities in Khorassan, which was nominally Persian territory, were to say the least extremely provocative. In trying to find a way to prevent the campaign against Herat taking place, Ellis suggested that he act as mediator and he offered to send a British officer to Herat to help bring about a peaceful settlement. At first the Shah's ministers seemed prepared to agree to this proposal, then they evaded taking any action on it and finally rejected it.

Sentiments of Persian nationalism were certainly rekindled under Mohammed Shah and the notion of recreating the empire of Nadir Shah had a pervasive influence at the Persian court. Nadir Shah had

undertaken a spectacular invasion of India shortly after his seizure of the Persian throne in 1736 and this had led to his being hailed in the West as "the second Alexander." In 1835 any such aspirations were made more complicated by the repercussions they would have on the plane of Great Power politics. No longer could the local balance of power be allowed to be upset solely by Persian military might and brilliant leadership, even if both were present. Russian and British interests had the effect of curtailing Persia's freedom of action. Yet such is not the impression to be initially gained and the comings and goings of diplomatic missions at the Persian court might well lead the casual observer to conclude that a Persian imperial renaissance was imminent.

One such mission was that of Uzeez Khan sent to Tehran by Kohendil Khan of Qandahar. He arrived while Ellis was making his initiative of mediation and offered an offensive and defensive alliance with the Shah in order that their countries might make a joint attack on Herat. This envoy is recorded as relating to Ellis that "the whole of Afghanistan, with the exception of Herat, was ready to come under the feudal supremacy of the king of Persia, who might with the aid of the Afghans, like Nadir Shah, push his conquests to New Delhi."[15] Such language was doubtless intended to flatter and tempt the Shah, and as Ellis was to learn, the motive was rather to have a strong ally against the Sikhs, whose power under Ranjit Singh

---

15 Annual Register 1839, p.322.

was growing, than to help the Persians fulfill their imperial dreams. Towards the end of 1835, a mission was sent by Dost Mohammed in Kabul with a similar offer to co-operate in an attack upon Herat while being given the protection of the Shah against the Sikhs. At the same time the Dost sent a mission with like objectives to St. Petersburg.

The somewhat daunting if remote prospect of an alliance of the amirs of Afghanistan with the Shah of Persia, backed by Russia, had to be treated seriously by Britain. The fact that its realisation was even conceivable reflected unfavourably on the wisdom of the policy that the Indian government had hitherto pursued in its relations with the nations contiguous to its borders. The alliance with Ranjit Singh unnecessarily alienated the rulers of Kabul and Qandahar. It is doubtful that these rulers were altogether sincere in the overtures they made to the Shah, but nevertheless they felt themselves forced into such a position out of fear of the strength of the Sikh Confederacy and, in Dost Mohammed's case, in the hope that an alignment with Persia would be instrumental in helping him to regain Peshawar. Moreover, even if it were merely a case of giving support to the strongest man in the region, the Indian government's policy was at fault. Ranjit Singh was an old man whose strength was failing and the control he exercised over the Sikh Confederacy was likely to give way to anarchy on his death; on the other hand, as Alexander Burnes was to observe, Dost Mohammed was younger

and was also "of undoubted ability, and has at heart high opinion of the British nation."[16] It was to become the main task of the Indian Government under the Governor-General, Lord Auckland, to prevent the mooted Perso-Afghan alliance becoming anything more than a topic of discussion, so that the Afghan states might be maintained intact as a buffer to India. The British retreat from Kabul is perhaps a fitting testament to Auckland's measure of success.

---

16 Burnes to Macnaghten, 2 June 1838, cited in Fraser-Tytler, p.98.

Chapter Four

Sir Henry Ellis's mission to the Persian court was in the nature of a reconnaissance. Its purpose had been to console and congratulate the new Shah, while at the same time affording the British government the opportunity to acquaint itself with the Persian situation in order to help it consider its course of action, now that representation there had been brought under the direct control of the Foreign Office. In this, the mission was not particularly successful. Of course, Russian predominance at the Court made it more difficult for a diplomatic success to result, such as the conclusion of a commercial treaty, for which Palmerston had entertained hopes, but it may also be argued that Ellis himself was not sufficiently forceful and was too ready to accept defeat. This is apparent from the tenor of his despatches in which he wrote that Persia was no use as a defence to India and was more likely to side with Britain's enemies. In any case, when Ellis left for London in May 1836, he was not anxious to return to Tehran, and there is no indication that Palmerston was eager to press for his reappointment.

The Foreign Secretary chose John McNeill to be Ellis's successor as envoy and minister plenipotentiary at the Persian court. It was hardly a surprising decision: McNeill had already held subordinate posts in Persia, and of those who had an intimate knowledge of the affairs of the area, he emerges as the strongest and most able personality. He had also demonstrated his dislike of Russia, this culminating in the

publication of his pamphlet which appeared shortly before his appointment was gazetted. It would be a mistake however to conclude that this work necessarily influenced Palmerston favourably when he made the appointment. Indeed McNeill himself had misgivings about certain aspectsof its argument, particularly those which emphasised the importance of Persia to India. He offered to have certain parts of it omitted from the published version, but in justifying the contents to Palmerston, he wrote:

> In respect to the Pamphlet I confess I feel some uneasiness lest if published in its present form it should be traced to me. When I first arrived in England and for a long time thereafter I found the Member of Parliament with whom I was acquainted and even the East India Directors little inclined to attend to Eastern affairs and almost totally ignorant of the importance of Persia.[1]

Palmerston too, receiving as he was such ominous despatches from Ellis, had reservations about the value of the pamphlet and thought that its publication might tend to detract from McNeill's authority; as he replied:

> I quite agree with you about the Pamphlet. The question is whether the good to be done by making known to the public here the information which that Pamphlet contains would be greater than the evil which might arise if the Russian Government had reason to suppose that you had written and published such a Pamphlet. Much of your power of being useful to us in Persia would be destroyed, if you were marked out by any such circumstance as an object for the peculiar enmity of Russia... To give your acts the greatest weight, they should appear to be the fulfilment of a duty and an obedience to the orders of your Government, and not the supererogatory works of individual animosity.[2]

---

1 McNeill to Palmerston, 20 February 1836, (H.M.C.) Broadlands 12889, GC/MA/40/1.

2 Palmerston to McNeill, 21 February 1836, (H.M.C.) Broadlands 12889. GC/MA/40/2-3.

It is significant that David Urquhart was appointed Secretary to Legation at Constantinople at this same time, when Palmerston was sufficiently alarmed at the prospects of Russian designs to experiment with appointing well-known Russophobes. This was before Lord Durham's Report on his visit to Russia which had the effect of reducing Palmerston's worries, as Durham suggested that the Russians were not stong enough to put into motion the designs with which they were attributed.

Prior to his departure, the new ambassador was given instructions as to his conduct at the Persian court. A draft of a despatch dated 2nd June, 1836 is contained in the Broadlands Papers. The Foreign Secretary told McNeill to communicate freely with the British ambassador at the Sublime Porte "in order to facilitate the adjustment of any differences which may exist between the Turkish and Persian Governments, ... to discourage any ambitious schemes of foreign conquest on the part of the Shah and to impress upon his mind the advantage which must result to Persia from the maintenance of friendly relations with neighbouring states, ... to point out to the Shah and his Ministers the expediency of discharging the debt, if any, which may be still due to Russia at the time of your arrival in Persia; and you will continually represent to them the importance of fulfilling with scrupulous fidelity the engagements which Persia has contracted by Treaty towards Russia, as the best and surest means of averting attempts at further encroachment on the part of that Power."

McNeill was also warned to take account of the 1814 Treaty as regards relations with Afghanistan but was authorised "to tender to the Shah the good offices of the British Mission for the adjustment of any points on which differences may arise between the two nations." The set of instructions also enters into details for the alteration of this Treaty which had been left uncompleted on the previous Shah's death. An article was to be proposed that "not only restores to Persia the moral support to be derived from a defensive alliance with England, but gives her also the right, under certain conditions, to claim the aid of Great Britain in repelling aggressions on the Persian Territory." On the subject of the Ninth article of the 1814 Treaty, the instructions stress the importance of the British government being relieved from the embarrassment caused by its stipulations, but McNeill was not to break off negotiations if the Persian government absolutely refused to expunge it. The envoy was also to endeavour to get the Persians to agree to a Commercial Treaty but was told to be flexible on articles "repugnant to the feelings of the Persian Government."[3]

A 'separate' despatch authorised McNeill to make presents to an amount not exceeding one thousand pounds to be distributed to Persian ministers on the conclusion of the Treaty.[4] Another tells the envoy:

> Should any Polish fugitives from the Caucasus and from Georgia make their escape to Persia during your residence in the Country, you will use your best endeavours, without however making yourself offensively prominent, to persuade the Persian Government not to surrender them to the Russian authorities, but to extend to them the protection which it has been in the habit of affording to Russian deserters.[5]

---

[3] Palmerston to McNeill, 2 June 1836, (H.M.C) Broadlands 12889, BD/PE/2. Mrs. Macalister presents a condensed version of these instructions in her Memoir, p.190 .

[4] Palmerston to McNeill, 2 June 1836, (H.M.C.) Broadlands 12889, BD/PE/3 .

[5] Palmerston to McNeill, 2 June 1836, (H.M.C.) Broadlands 12889, BD/PE/4 .

Thus briefed, John McNeill set out for Tehran on 5th June 1836, leaving his wife and child in Scotland and accompanied only by his nephew, Robert Wilson. The people who were to serve under him in the British mission were already in Persia: Colonel Sheil, Secretary to Legation; Dr. Riach, First Medical Officer; Dr. Bell, Surgeon; Captain Macdonald, Commander of the Escort; and Colonel Stoddart, Military Secretary. There were also a Persian secretary and treasurer. In a letter to Sir Harford Jones, a former envoy to Persia, McNeill struck a somewhat pessimistic note as to his expectations there:

> My fears are many and my hopes are few....I much fear that the grass of Sooltanieh and the two Oojans is destined to feed Cossack horses, and the wine of Shiraz to furnish for a Russian guard-house, even in our own time. You led the way, and a few have done their best to follow, even at a respectful distance; but the tide of events has flowed onwards with too strong a wave to be opposed by our unaided exertions, however zealous or devoted, and when the Russian trumpets sound to arms at Herat and Russian Te Deums are sung in St. Sophia's those who now pass away from the consideration of one at least, if not of both these probabilities, will look round for the means of remedying the calamity, and will not find them.[6]

It was nevertheless the consensus among those public figures informed on eastern matters that if anyone was to reassert British influence in Persia and to make the British presence there an effective counterbalance to that of Russia, that person would be McNeill. Lord Ponsonby, British ambassador at Constantinople, wrote: "If anybody can beat down the influence Russia seems to have gained over the Shah, it will be you." John Hobhouse, President of the Board of Control, said: "He

---

[6] Macalister, pp.188-9.

(McNeill) goes with advantage and powers that none ever had before him, and I believe he is the man to make use of them." [7]

The problem of most immediate and lasting relevance for McNeill on his mission was that of the Shah's designs on Herat and its wider implications, and it had figured as a specific item of Palmerston's instructions. However as McNeill was to intimate in a despatch to Palmerston from Turkmanchai, the Shah had actually marched on Herat "encouraged, if not instigated, to undertake this expedition by the Russian Minister at his Court, and by direct communications from the Emperor of Russia."[8] The venture was not successful. A cholera epidemic spread among the Shah's troops in Khorassan and this delayed the army's advance. The situation was made worse by an ensuing shortage of supplies and by the predatory attacks of Turkomen tribesmen. This resulted in the Persian army being thrown into a state of complete disorganisation and, having reached only Asterabad, the Shah was compelled to return to Tehran and to dismiss what remained of his army, the only person opposing this decision being Count Simonich, the Russian minister.

McNeill arrived in Tehran towards the end of September, having previously met the retiring envoy, Henry Ellis, at Bayazede just inside

---

7 Macalister, p.189.

8 McNeill to Palmerston, 12 September 1836, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 19.

Turkish territory. Once in the capital, he was confronted with the choice of whether or not to join the Shah at his camp and to make known his opposition to the campaign. The Persian Prime Minister had sent a message discouraging him by suggesting that the Shah was unwilling to give the envoy the trouble of going to the camp, as he was about to return to Tehran. Other reports however were just as adamant that the Shah was determined to proceed to Herat, and it is doubtful that McNeill resolved to remain in the capital on the strength of the advice of the Persian minister. Rather he based his decision of the despatches sent by Colonel Stoddart who had accompanied the Shah on his expedition. It was from Stoddart that the bleak picture of the army's condition and the expectation that the Shah would return to the capital for the winter was ascertained. For McNeill this was fortuitous, since it meant that he would be able to avoid a display of opposition and would have time to re-establish a certain level of intimacy with the Shah before embarking upon the subject of Herat. Mohammed Shah returned from his "discomfiture" in Khorassan at the beginning of December 1836, and McNeill was able to present his credentials at his first audience on the 11th of that month.

From the British point of view, the most significant aspect of the ill-fated 1836 expedition to Herat was the role played by the Russian minister. Stoddart's reports to McNeill and those of McNeill to Palmerston indicate that Count Simonich was a persistent advocate of the Shah's carrying on a winter campaign, even when factors such as the

deplorable state of the army demonstrably militated against it. Such an enterprise would have been extremely hazardous even had the army been well prepared and of high morale. This conduct on the part of the Russian envoy gave Palmerston the opportunity to try to gain from Count Nesselrode, the Russian Foreign Minister, a commitment one way or the other as to whether Simonich had been acting in accordance with his government's instructions. If Nesselrode's reply was in the affirmative, Durham was to tell him that "these military expeditions of the Shah are in the highest degree unwise and injurious," while if Nesselrode disavowed his envoy's actions, which Palmerston believed he would, Durham was to press for his recall by conveying the British government's hope that "the Russian Cabinet will put a stop to a course of conduct so much at variance with its own declared policy, and so adverse to the best interests of an ally for whom the Russian Government professes friendship and goodwill."[9]

Nesselrode responded in neither vein exactly. He agreed that if Simonich had acted in such a manner, it was contrary to his instructions, but went on to maintain that McNeill had been misinformed. He also stated, according to Durham, that "he entirely agreed with the English Government as to the folly and impolicy of the course pursued by the Persian Monarch."[10] In further discussion with Nesselrode and with Rodofinikin, Head of the Eastern Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Durham became convinced that Simonich would be recalled, but this did not happen in the immediate future. McNeill did not waver from his belief in the Russian minister's complicity, and when Palmerston told him of

---

9 Palmerston to Durham, 16 January 1837, (P.R.O) F.O.539/2, folio 5.

10 Durham to Palmerston, 24 February 1837, Ibid., folio 5.

Nesselrode's observation as to his being misinformed, McNeill replied that the accuracy of the information that the Russian minister had urged the Shah to undertake a winter campaign against Herat "has been fully confirmed by the concurring testimony of all the Persians with whom I have conversed on the subject, including the Prime Minister," and also that "the views on which the Russian minister acted last year, are by no means new to his Government."[11] This whole episode ended in a sort of stalemate or at least was superseded by more pressing affairs. The only satisfaction that Palmerston might have been able to derive from it was that he got Nesselrode to agree that it was in Russia's interest to turn the Shah's attention to more pacific pursuits. Yet such a moral victory was, as will be seen, to count for very little in the harsh reality of international power politics: for two years subsequent to Durham's remonstrances, Simonich continued to promote the very object which his government had apparently instructed him to discourage.

The death of Fath Ali and the accession of Mohammed Shah had brought with it many changes in the political set-up of the Persian government, as McNeill had observed on his return to the country. The men of influence at the court of the old Shah had all been dismissed, and one even, the Qaim Maqam, had been put to death. Under Mohammed Shah,

---

[11] McNeill to Palmerston, 1 June 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/2, folio 31.

an entirely new group of counsellors held power, amongst whose numbers were Hadji Mirza Aghasi, the Prime Minister and former tutor of the young Shah, and Mirza Masud, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Both these officials inclined towards a pro-Russian policy, and as McNeill commented of Russian influence in general at a later date:

> Nothing has struck me more forcibly since my return to Persia than the evidence I everywhere find of the increase of Russian influence over the Government since I was formerly here, and the almost unaccountable decline of our own.[12]

There was one person who provided some link with the past and this was the Taj ud Dowleh, who had been the favourite wife of Fath Ali. McNeill had described her as a woman of strong sense, acute perceptions and great prudence, who did not interfere much in public matters, but when she did, it was always with effect. Nevertheless whatever her relationship had been with the old Shah and his regime, it was unlikely that she was now in a position to exert any influence, and if anything it was a question of her seeking McNeill's aid and protection against the possibility of her being forced to remarry.

In the Asian dimension of Britain's international dealings, McNeill held a central position, not only geographically but in political terms as well. It was a post from which a strong and effective representative could influence policymaking in both London and Calcutta, turning the mission in Tehran into "a strategic half-way house"[13] between the two

---

[12] Macalister, p.193.

[13] Norris, p.107.

centres of government. The envoy was a hub for the correspondence of a network of British officials and political agents throughout the western part of Asia, and he was able to collate, analyse and report on the material thereby collected. Apart from being in constant touch with Ponsonby in Constantinople, Auckland in Calcutta, and Palmerston in London, McNeill corresponded frequently with Alexander Burnes and his assistant, Captain Leech, whose activities were concentrated on the nations bordering the River Indus; with Lieutenant Eldred Pottinger at Herat; with Colonel Hennell in Bushire; and with Dr. MacKenzie in Baghdad. He also sent members of his own staff on journeys either to liaise with other British officials or to indulge in some informal espionage: in early 1838 when events at Herat became very critical indeed, Colonel Sheil was sent to England "because things have become so complicated that I despaired of making them intelligible by writing";[14] Colonel Stoddart was appointed to accompany the Shah on his expedition to Herat as he had done in 1836; Captain D'Arcy Todd travelled in Gilan ostensibly for pleasure, and subsequently he was sent to Simla to explain matters to Lord Auckland; Colonel Rawlinson was stationed in Kermanshah and then at Qandahar and sent reports from both places; Dr. Riach and Colonel Macintosh both took trips into Russian territory, for reasons of health so it was said, but really it was to collect

---

14 Macalister, p.196.

information. Traders, missionaries, and other travellers could also be relied upon to recount their observations.

McNeill spent his first few months in office analysing the situation in Afghanistan as he saw it, and his deliberations found expression in a memorandum which he submitted to the Governor-General in India and of which he sent a copy to Palmerston.[15] In it he outlined the relative positions of the two ruling families and the power they wielded over the country: that of the Sadozai family, the descendants of Ahmad Shah, was confined to Herat, while the usurping Barakzais held both Kabul and Qandahar. He suggests that an undoubted ascendancy in the country was still maintained by the Durrani tribe to whom both families owed their origins.[16] The Barakzais had failed to conciliate these people and attach them to their cause, and so the Sadozais could rely on them for support more as a consequence of their prejudices than of any positive affections. For this reason the Barakzai leaders had come to depend for their power on outside influences, the Persian settlers or Kuzzilbashis, who according to McNeill were the substance of Dost Mohammed's military strength. Being Shiah Moslems they

---

15 McNeill to Macnaghten, 22 January 1837, (P.R.O)F.O.539/2, folios 23-6.

16 The two main tribes of Afghanistan were the Ghilzais and the Abdalis. Among the Abdalis, the leading sections were the Populzais and the Barakzais, of which the most important families were the descendants of Sado and Mohammed respectively - thus Sadozais and Mohammedzais or Barakzais. Ahmad Shah, the leader of the Sadozais, on his election as first King of the Afghans, assumed the name Dur-i-Durran, or Prince of Pearls, whence the Abdali tribe became generally known as the Durrani. (Fraser-Tytler, pp.61-2).

maintained a religious affinity with Persia, and as a result of this and family connections, they were anxious that Dost Mohammed form an alliance with that country, and they saw this as a means of confirming their own influence over him and their authority over the Afghans. Their influence was great, but it was not only based on their strength: the Dost was personally inclined towards them because he was related to the tribe through his mother, and also he was flattered by their display of seeming devotion. He also responded to their influence because of pressures from the Sikhs and out of fear that a member of the Sadozai family, either from Herat or India, might unite the Durranis against him.

Turning to Herat, McNeill comments that the town had gained strength primarily from its government establishing connections with the surrounding chiefs. He also noted that its defences had been strengthened; the influential Shiahs had either been obliged to leave or been deprived of their property; the "irregular horse" had been converted into infantry, there now being two foot soldiers instead of one horseman; the Government was able to exercise complete control over the town and taxes had been levied on the wealthier inhabitants to provide for its defence. Not all the measures taken, though, were of an entirely defensive nature: McNeill had received reports of an army of twelve thousand men under Yar Mohammed Khan, the chief minister of Prince Kamran, moving out of the city in preparation for an expedition against Qandahar, but he suspected the objective was rather the re-establishment of Kamran's

authority in Seistan after the Herat government nominee there had been expelled by the Qandaharis the year before.

McNeill endeavours to remain impartial in discussing the relative merits and demerits of the Sadozai and Barakzai families, but he does emphasise the need for Britain to align itself with one or the other in an effort to bring about the union of Afghanistan under one chief which he sees as being an object of primary importance to the security of India.

It was at the time that McNeill had been composing his memorandum that there was a renewed flurry of diplomatic activity at the Persian Court with the arrival of accredited envoys from both the chiefs of Kabul and Qandahar. Dost Mohammed sought the assistance of the Shah in his continuing struggle against the Sikhs, variously described in his address to the Shah as "detestable", "faithless", "wicked infidels", and "diabolical". As can be gathered, the Kabul leader was very ready to appeal to any sentiments the Shah had of Islamic solidarity against the unbeliever and he also referred to his country's dependence on Persia:

> As the noblest of cities, Kandahar, and the capital Cabool.... form part of the Persian territory, and are among the Kingdoms of the King of Kings, the misery or welfare of those Dominions cannot be separated from the interests of the Persian Government.[17]

Both these aspects the Shah somewhat inconclusively acknowledged. For Kohendil Khan the chief object of sending a mission to Tehran was to arrange to join the Shah in a combined attack on Herat so as to

---

[17] Dost Mohammed to Mohammed Shah, (P.R.O)F.O.539/2, folio 27.

destroy the power of Prince Kamran whom the Qandahar chief saw as the greatest danger to his own security. This was of course considerably closer to the Shah's own immediate interests than the problems of Dost Mohammed and the Shah readily issued a firman acknowledging Kohendil Khan's allegiance and stating:

> As the conquering standards will, with the aid of God, speedily march towards the territories of Khorassan and Herat, it is necessary that your Excellency should be in readiness with your troops in the vicinity of Herat. After the arrival of the fortunate army, you will join the auspicious stirrup, and participate in the enjoyment of our Royal favor.[18]

There can be little doubt that these submissions on the part of the Afghan chiefs, even if their sincerity can be held suspect, offered the Shah the prospect of establishing his own supremacy over the whole of Afghanistan and in immediate terms it offered further encouragement to him in achieving the subjugation of Herat.

In a letter to Palmerston, McNeill related that he had complained to the Persian Prime Minister, Hadji Mirza Aghasi, that the Foreign Minister, Mirza Masud, had taken the envoy from Qandahar to visit the Russian minister at his residence, while at the same time telling him not to visit the British minister. Hadji Mirza Aghasi professed ignorance of the matter, and McNeill nevertheless still found the opportunity to speak with both Afghan agents. His object was to try to dissuade them from forming any attachment to the Shah. He suggested to the Kabul envoy that the Governor-General in India would receive in a friendly manner any

---

[18] "Translation of the Copy of a Firman from His Majesty Mahommed Shah to the Chief of Kandahar," (P.R.O)F.O.539/2, folio 28.

approaches Dost Mohammed might choose to make, on the condition that he did not ally himself with any foreign power which posed a threat to India's security. If he flouted this advice, McNeill warned that the Dost "must be prepared to see us take such a course in regard to him as may be dictated by the necessity of protecting our interests." [19]

Thus at the level of local politics, Kabul and Qandahar can be seento be turning to Persia for assistance; and in a similar manner Persia looked to Russia. Of course this latter relationship could not have quite the same quasi-feudal overtones and Russia could not so blatantly advertise such common ground and interests, but similar ends were served perhaps rather by subtle manipulation than crude open diplomacy. Dost Mohammed recognised this relationship, and by sending a representative to St. Petersburg as well as to Tehran, he was implicity treating the policies of the two countries as one. This was further confirmed when Mohammed Shah despatched an envoy to Qandahar and Kabul with presents and communications not only from himself but also from the Russian minister at his court.

McNeill realised what was happening: a community of interests was developing between Persia and Russia which would sooner or later place Persia in open opposition to Britain and British interests. He felt that within an exclusively Persian context he was relatively powerless to raise any obstacle to this trend, and at this juncture at least he dismissed the use of threats and intimidation as ineffectual and harmful.

---

19 McNeill to Palmerston, 20 February 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/2, folio 26.

Instead, as has been mentioned, he suggested that the bringing about of Afghan unity as a bulwark of any British resistance to Persia and Russia was the most expedient course. This was the view from Tehran, but what there seemed obvious was not yet so appreciated in Calcutta, where other considerations had to be reckoned with. Auckland was reluctant to take any initiative which might damage the alliance with the Sikhs, particularly when in his view, the alternative ally was "weak and distant and little to be depended upon."[20] He was under no illusion as to the futility of trying to promote direct co-operation and conciliation between the Sikhs and the Afghans, but he hoped that in time the civilising effects of commerce along the Indus Valley would achieve that end. However in this respect time was important, but with the speed at which the present crisis was developing, such a long-term aspiration could not merit serious attention.

Such proposals as the Indian government had to make regarding means to frustrate Persian expansionist designs were not well received by McNeill. Instructions sent to him in November 1836 arrived in February of the following year, shortly after McNeill had reported to Palmerston on the subject of the Afghan agents. Auckland's secretary, William Macnaghten, wrote:

> The political interests of Great Britain and British India are even more concerned than their commercial interests in the exemption of the countries between India and Persia from foreign aggression from the westward. There is too much reason to apprehend that Persia under its present Sovereign has evinced an unprecedented degree of subserviency

---

[20] Auckland to McNeill, 24 February 1837, (B.L.) Add.MS. Auckland 37690, folios 31-6.

to Russian counsels and the lately contemplated expedition against Herat, in particular, if it was not prompted, was, as is well known, strenuously urged on the attention of the Persian Government by the Russian Ambassador.

McNeill was told to "use your best exertions to dissuade the Persian Government from prosecuting their hostile intentions against Herat," and was urged to impress upon the Shah "the detriment which his interest must sustain, were the sincere and cordial friendship which has so long subsisted between the British and Persian Nations to sustain any diminution."[21] He was also to offer British mediation in the dispute and if this were accepted, to depute a British officer to Herat to assist in negotiations with Prince Kamran. If the Shah chose to ignore the envoy's advice, to avoid any ambiguity in the British position, McNeill was to consider withdrawing British officers not only engaged in the expedition but from the whole of Khorassan and the neighbouring Persian provinces.

McNeill did not see the situation in quite such a clearcut manner as officials in India. He suspected that the Indian government's motive for giving such instructions was concerned with some way of marking its friendly feelings towards the Afghans. As he explained to Palmerston, he felt that if the Shah were to march on Herat that year, which he hoped he would not do, "any remonstrances I could offer would be insufficient to deter the Shah from prosecuting what he regards as a just war." The British minister believed that the Herat government had

---

21 Macnaghten to McNeill, 21 November 1836, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1 folios 3-4 .

been the aggressor and that the Shah was fully justified in wishing to make war on Prince Kamran. The measures proposed by the Indian government would alienate the Shah without producing the desired effect, for which it would be necessary to go further and "to insure success in the object for which we resort to threats, by convincing the Persian Government that we are prepared to act as well as to threaten."[22] McNeill was prepared at all times to promote British interests, even when, as in this instance, they were at variance with what he considered to be a legitimate course of action on the part of the Shah. In doing this, however, he was unwilling to follow blindly instructions which he deemed ill-conceived or inconsistent with the policy guidelines Palmerston had given him. If, as was generally agreed, the security of India was bound up with keeping Herat out of Persian hands, McNeill would make a break with Persia to attain this, but he thought that it was pointless to take the half-hearted measure of withdrawing British officers, if the British did not back this up by giving more direct support to Herat, doubtless meaning a military presence. The result of such a move would be to leave the town at the mercy of the Persians (and Russians) without even the hope of the moderating influence a British representative might bring to bear on the Persians. It was in this way that he interpreted the implications of his acting in accordance with the instructions from Calcutta, and it was for this reason that he chose to ignore them and quietly to shelve them.

---

[22] McNeill to Palmerston, 24 February 1837, (P.R.O)F.O.539/1, folio 3.

McNeill's attitude towards the Shah's designs was to change substantially in June of 1837, and this was to have its bearing on how he considered British policy in the area should be conducted: and indeed just as his changing notions were leading him to demand in the following year increasingly vigorous action, the British and Indian governments seemed to develop more and more caution. Throughout the spring of 1837 preparations for a renewed attack on Herat had been in progress. McNeill recounts to Palmerston that he had protested to the Persian Prime Minister, Hadji Mirza Aghasi, about his not having been informed as to the Shah's movements: the reply he had received had been evasive. It is also to be gathered from a letter McNeill received from Macnaghten that the British officers had been dismissed from the camp of the Shah. The rest of this letter was in effect a continuation of the instructions sent on 21st November of the previous year and its tenor was more conciliatory. Macnaghten conceded that "as those officers could not take part in the attempt upon Herat, the King had a fair right to remove them from the army." However he goes on to say that the Governor-General "must view with umbrage and displeasure schemes of interference and conquest on our western frontier" and suggests that McNeill's advice and influence should be directed towards dissuading this.[23] Once again though, and this time from the opposite points of view, there was a divergence between McNeill's line

---

[23] Macnaghten to McNeill, 10 April 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/2, folio 33.

of thought and that of the Indian government. In February he had argued that the Shah had legitimate grounds for his quarrel with Herat, and all that he as the British representative could strive for was to persuade the Shah to use negotiation rather than war in achieving a settlement. Now, four months later, the Shah would have been placed in a very advantageous position if he were to accept the negotiated terms, but still he preferred war, from which McNeill could only conclude that the Shah had further ulterior motices for mounting an expedition against Herat.

What made this situation apparent was the arrival at the Persian capital of an envoy from Prince Kamran of Herat with instructions to negotiate a peace settlement. The envoy put himself in contact with McNeill whom he asked to be a mediator in the discussions, since he saw this as the only way of bringing pressure on the Persian government to act in good faith - the Shah and his ministers had refused to ratify a treaty which the Ausef-ud-Dowleh had previously concluded when apparently vested with the full authority of the Persian government. McNeill obtained from the envoy a list of the propositions for a settlement, which he submitted to the Persian Prime Minister. By this, the Herat government undertook to stop its raids into Persian territory and taking prisoners; to provide the Shah with troops for his campaigns against the Turkomens; to pay a monetary tribute every Nouruz; to protect merchants; to give hostages for two years; and to keep an agent at the Persian Court. In return, the Herat government

asked that the Shah treat Prince Kamran as a brother and that the Persian government agree not to interfere in the succession arrangements of the Herat royal house nor in other internal matters of that state. From the ensuing discussion and exchanges of letters between McNeill and the Persian Prime Minister, it was soon to become apparent that the question at issue was that of the sovereignty of Herat, which the Shah claimed for himself and which Kamran was unwilling to relinquish. For McNeill this was precisely the question in which he thought the British government should be most interested:

> I regarded it as of the utmost importance to our security in India, that Herat should not become dependent on Persia, in such a manner that it should follow the fate of this Country, or become available to any Power which might obtain a control over the Councils of the Shah.[24]

Thus the projected war had changed in McNeill's eyes from being a just one to being an unjust one. He told the Persian government that if Kamran or his envoy were persuaded to concede the Herat Prince's subjection to Persia, he could take no further part in the discussions. He recommended very seriously the acceptance of the peace terms, and if they were rejected and military operations were undertaken, he could only suppose that the Persian government contemplated projects very difference from its avowed objects of the security of its

---

[24] McNeill to Palmerston, 30 June 1837, (P.R.O)F.O.539/1, folios 5-7.

subjects and the tranquillity of its eastern provinces. He suggested that as a means of removing every excuse of mutual distrust the British government might be engaged to "use its endeavours to get the terms fulfilled by both parties."[25] Yet these representations were without effect: the conditions ended in being rejected and it is evident from a memorandum which the Persian Prime Minister sent to McNeill, commenting upon the peace proposals, that the Shah would acquiesce in nothing short of the actual possession of Herat.[26]

Shortly after having reported the situation to Palmerston, McNeill wrote to Auckland to ask him to deliver a remonstrance to the Persian government. He suggested that "as this, however, is a question which people at home will hardly deal with, I must look to your Lordship for instructions respecting it. It is a question, in fact, between the Government of India and that of Persia, in which no Foreign Power has a right to interfere, and which his Majesty's Government will, therefore, in all probability, hand over entirely to your Lordship." [27] It is doubtful whether McNeill was being altogether candid when he wrote this but the reasoning behind it can

---

25 McNeill to Palmerston, 30 June 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folios 5-7.

26 "Translation of a Memorandum by Hajee Meerza Aghassee, Prime Minister, in answer to certain Propositions of Futteh Mahomed Khan, Agent from Herat," (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 8.

27 McNeill to Auckland, 4 July 1837, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/2, folio 45.

be understood: he was hoping that the Shah might be sufficiently intimidated by a remonstrance from the Indian government, while the matter would appear as one solely between Persia and India. This would prevent Russia from being given grounds for a quarrel in the European sphere and the pretence of perfect harmony between Palmerston and Nesselrode and their respective governments could be continued to serve diplomatic ends elsewhere. As it was, Auckland chose not to respond to this suggestion and wrote back in the following terms:

> I can have no objection to your using towards the Government of Persia the strongest language of remonstrance upon the waste of all the resources, which should be husbanded for useful purposes, and their application to the fomenting of intrigues and the disturbance of tranquillity upon the Indian frontier; but you must be able to take a much better measure of the effect of such a remonstrance, and particularly in regard to your own position, than I can.

Auckland went on to tell McNeill that while British influence in Persia had been weak on his arrival, he thought that since then it had much improved: sufficiently, in fact, to allow McNeill to speak to the Shah in the frankest terms of the measures which on the one hand could strengthen and on the other could dissolve the Perso-British alliance, but ever anxious not to be drawn into premature or precipitate action, Auckland counselled caution:

> If the game of Persia is not one of the veriest fraud, and you confidently feel yourself to be gaining in strength, you might be wrong in too immediately or too harshly taking this step, and it may be better for a time to play with events. [28]

---

[28] Auckland to McNeill, 15 September 1837, (B.L.) Add.MS.Auckland 37692, folios 3-6. Printed version in (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 45.

It was while McNeill was waiting for this inconclusive reply that, on 23rd July, the Shah commenced his march towards Herat.

The Shah's decision to set out left McNeill helpless from the point of view of a diplomatic initiative. All he could do to show his disapproval of this line of conduct on the part of the Persian government was to refuse to join the Shah when the latter left the town. Nevertheless this small demonstration of "disapprobation" by McNeill was noticed, as Colonel Sheil, who was instructed to accompany the expedition, was able to report:

> The Shah expresses his hope that you were not disgusted with his beginning the journey; he declared, "Saheb, I do not tell a lie... God knows, Saheb, that the only thought I have in this journey is to put a stop to the taking away into slavery of the people." [29]

A month after this departure, McNeill remained optimistic that the various differences could still be resolved to Britain's advantage. He did not see any probability in the Shah achieving anything that year and remained hopeful that the envoy from Prince Kamran could persuade his government to renew the proposals which the Shah had rejected "and in that case I think there is a fair change that matters may yet be permanently arranged." As for the Commercial Treaty, he told Palmerston that he thought the outstanding issue to be so trivial - it related to the question of commercial agents having a flag - that "though the Shah's obstinacy may cause delay, I do not think it

---

[29] Stoddart to McNeill, 23 July 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 34. The published version replaces "disgusted" with "displeased".

reasonable to presume that he will not ultimately give way." He continued: "If I could see the Herat business and this commercial Treaty settled, I should feel that the only points on which we clash with this Government had been removed and for the future we should have little to do but to give it all the support we can." [30]

The envoy still remained vigilant as to Russian moves. In the same letter he comments on the threat posed to Turkish security by the construction of new fortifications on the frontiers of Kars: "They cannot be intended for defence only - they are too extensive for that and Russia would hardly incur so large an expense without some prospect of ultimate advantage and profit." McNeill observed that this new fortification now completed a strong line of forts to defend the Russian frontiers and "in like manner a complete line of places of arms in the event of an invasion of Turkey." [31]

Despite the ominous tenor of Russian intentions generally, the Russian envoy in Tehran, Count Simonich, was at this period unusually cautious and eager to make an outward display of solidarity with the British minister. McNeill had had the opportunity of speaking to him on the subject of the Shah's expedition shortly before it actually took place and Simonich informed him that he had tried to dissuade the Shah from proceeding in person against Herat. The Count also tried to justify the encouragement he had given the Shah in his previous attempt on

---

[30] McNeill to Palmerston, 31 August 1837, (H.M.C/) Broadlands 12889, GC/MA/48.

[31] Ibid.

Herat; McNeill, writing to Palmerston, explains that although Simonich had been instructed by his government not to urge the Shah to undertake the expedition, he had felt it advisable to do so:

> The Shah having just come to the Throne, he had been of opinion, that any brilliant achievement, such as he might have effected last year had the army been properly conducted, would have tended to consolidate the Shah's power: that this year, however, he was of a different opinion.[32]

Simonich adopted a similar rather defensive stance when writing to his government. From a despatch passed on to the British representative at St. Petersburg, it is to be understood that not only did he make strenuous efforts to dissuade the Shah from undertaking the expedition and decide not to accompany him since this would be construed as Russian endorsement of the enterprise, but also he states that if he could have induced the Shah to remain in Tehran until the autumn, the differences with Prince Kamran might well have been settled by negotiation, and he adds:

> Si Sa Majesté n'a pu me convaincre de la nécessité de faire la guerre à Kamran, elle me prouva du moins qu'elle était inébranlable de sa résolution.... Je me suis décidé à ne pas accompagner Sa Majesté, et je me flatte del'espoir que j'ai agi dans cette occasion dans le sens que me preservent mes Instructions, et à l'entière approbation du Ministère Impérial.[33]

Thus the Russian Minister admits that the Shah had been unable to convince him of the necessity of making war on Herat. It is somewhat confusing to have this show of apparent co-operation by the Russian minister. If it is to be accepted at its face value, it would indicate

---

[32] McNeill to Palmerston, 30 June 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/2, folio 33.

[33] Simonich to Rodofinikin, 23 July 1837, Sub-Inclosure in Parliamentary Papers, No.51.

that the Shah, in marching on Herat, was defying the express will of the two most powerful countries in both Europe and Asia, and this was unlikely. Rather its purpose was, by deliberate fabrication, to give the British government a renewed assurance that the cabinet in St. Petersburg was acting in accordance with the language it had held to Lord Durham on his visit, and that government had forced its representative in Persia to behave in a like manner in the short term so as to give the impression of acting in concert with the British. As such it cannot be seen as a realistic reflection of Russian intentions in the area, which were more evident in the secret diplomacy that was being conducted at the same time and details of which Colonel Stoddart was to report back to McNeill.

By 14th October, the Shah's army had progressed no further than the vicinity of Nishapur - half way between the capital and Persia's frontier with Herat - and it was on this date that Colonel Stoddart wrote to McNeill:

> Captain Vicovitch, alias Omar Beg, a Soonee, of the Russian Service, an Aide-de-Camp of the General at Orenburg, speaks Turkish and Persian well, arrived here from Tehran and Resht on the 10th instant. He is gone on a mission to Cabool; his instructions and letters, as usual with Chargés, written by Count Nesselrode.[34]

Adding to this report, McNeill was able to tell Palmerston that Captain Vitkievitch had everywhere announced that he had been sent to intimate

---

[34] Stoddart to McNeill, 14 October 1837, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 9.

that a large Russian force had arrived at Asterabad and was to co-operate with the Shah's army against Herat; also Count Simonich had never mentioned in his conversations with McNeill Captain Vitkievitch's name nor the intercourse between Russia and Kabul. He further commented:

> I cannot help regarding this Russian mission to Cabool as an immediate stride towards obtaining an influence on the countries bordering upon India, and however its ostensible objects, on which I have no information to offer, may be disguised, I cannot doubt that the effect of the establishment of a Russian agent at Cabool must be seriously detrimental to British interests in India and in the Punjaub.[35]

Apart from its obvious import, this information reveals the full duplicity and deception involved in Russian diplomacy. Such open assurances and protestations as were made had to be treated with some circumspection in the light of this second tier of intrigue that was being carried out.

The results of McNeill's first few months as ambassador might give the impression that his record was one of relative failure. Even if he had been able to establish a closer working rapport with the Shah and his ministers than had hitherto existed, he still had not succeeded in stopping the Shah from marching on Herat. The reasons for this lie mostly in forces beyond McNeill's direct control, but he himself unnecessarily weakened his own position by being initially too sympathetic to the Shah's cause in the quarrel with Herat. The moral

---

35 McNeill to Palmerston, 30 October 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folio 9.

issues of the matter should not have been permitted to interfere with the question of the defence of the Empire - at least, this is the case, if criticisms are to be levelled from a nineteenth century point of view. Not only did the quarrel or its potential outcome run counter to British interests and thus create a dichotomy in McNeill's own stance, but it was also somewhat naive of the envoy to apply western notions of legality to a question of tribal power politics, the repercussions of which were being made all the more significant by Russian manipulation. When he began to realise this in June 1837, it was too late for there to be any effect on the Shah. Nevertheless the degree to which this vacillating weakened the British position should not be overestimated. The envoy was still relatively powerless, receiving as he did at this point little support or encouragement from either London or Calcutta. Palmerston was beginning to take a far more conciliatory line with Russia now that Durham's report on his visit there had dispelled some of the fears kindled by the more ardent Russophobes. He was unwilling to create what might appear as a British-instigated diplomatic incident in Persia. Auckland too could not be relied upon for wholehearted support, his attentions necessarily taken up with matters nearer to the Indian border. However, McNeill took full advantage of the limited range of persuasive and threatening tactics at his disposal and it is to his credit that he never threatened sanctions, such as

military force, which were beyond his power to fulfil. His efforts should be judged against the backdrop of a Russian influence which was difficult to measure and a growing recklessness on the part of the Persian king, who became less and less receptive to reasoned argument, inspired as he was by a spirit of revenge and a thirst for military glory.

Chapter Five

In his dealing with the critical events of 1838, John McNeill was to make his greatest contribution to the history of British diplomacy and may be judged to have reached the highest point in terms of his personal achievement. His first few months in office might have revealed a certain measure of hesitancy and inconsistency, but these shortcomings were not on the whole damaging to the British position in Persia, which in any case had been at a fairly low ebb at the time of McNeill's arrival. Of a more significant nature, there can be seen to be developing in McNeill's handling of his relations with London and Calcutta characteristics which were to be used to such effect in 1838. He had already demonstrated his independent approach by tactfully ignoring what he considered to be inept instructions from Auckland, and later he had tried to guide British and Indian government policy towards Persia when he asked Auckland to deliver a remonstrance, hoping thereby to keep Perso-British relations to an exclusively Asiatic context. Auckland had chosen not to comply with this request at the time it was put forward, but it is evident from the Simla Manifesto of October 1838 that he was prepared to use McNeill's ploy, when he emphasised the Asiatic nature of the various related crises which prompted that virtual declaration of war. Now in 1838, McNeill was to fulfil the role of mediator par

excellence, and by the lucid manner in which he kept both Palmerston and Auckland briefed, including in such information both advice and subtle warnings, he was to bring a profound influence to bear on the shaping of policy in both London and India.

The winter of 1837 was destined to be a somewhat disconcerting one for McNeill in Tehran. The Shah had collected together an army of forty thousand men and eighty pieces of artillery and was advancing towards the city of Herat: he had proclaimed publicly his intention to annex it, had revived tenuous ancient claims to sovereignty over the rest of Afghanistan, and had even announced that both Qandahar and Kabul had offered their allegiance and were therefore dependencies of Persia. He was receiving encouragement and pecuniary assistance from Count Simonich, and was instrumental in promoting Russian contact with Afghanistan and recommending Captain Vitkievitch, a Russian agent, to the Afghan chiefs. McNeill reports to Palmerston that he had learnt from good authority that Count Simonich had told the Persian government that the letters Vitkievitch was bearing were by way of reply and recommended Dost Mohammed to seek Persian protection against the Sikhs, while stating that Russia could not interfere in the affairs of the country. It confirmed McNeill's conjecture that Persia and Russia had been acting for some time in concert in Afghanistan, and he continues:

It is reported and believed at Tehran, that the Russian Minister has announced the intention of his Government, if the Shah should succeed in taking Herat, to release Persia from the engagement to pay the balance of the debt due by her to Russia, and the reason assigned for this act of grace is, that the Emperor desires to contribute that amount towards defraying the expenses of the campaign.....

I also learn from good authority, that Prince Kamran Meerza at Tabreez was publicly informed by Hoosein Khan, on his return from the royal camp, that the Russian Minister had lent the Shah fifty thousand tomauns to enable him to proceed on this campaign. [1]

The release of Persia from her debt obligation to Russia had been, it will be remembered, one of the objects Palmerston had instructed McNeill to bring about, but he could hardly have anticipated such circumstances or conditions as those suggested by the Russian minister.

It was becoming obvious that there existed a contest, with the Persians and Russians on one side and the Herati Afghans and the British on the other; and Britain could not look upon the success of the Shah's designs " in any other light than that of an approximation of the influence of a more formidable power to the frontier of British India."[2] British remonstrances had been set at naught at the Persian court, and the Shah's ministers had been disparaging towards Britain and contemptuous of its power in India, even to the extent of indulging in threats to march on Delhi and retrace the steps of Nadir Shah. As if the remarks and actions of the Persian government were insufficient to establish the gulf of misunderstanding between the British mission and the court, two incidents were to take place which served to accentuate it.

---

1 McNeill to Palmerston, 16 December 1837, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/2, folio 12.

2 Annual Register, 1839, p.329.

The one involved a member of the British residency in Bushire. A certain Mr. Gerald, the apothecary attached to the residency, was apparently insulted by a Syud, or local dervish, and took it upon himself to retaliate by hitting the man. As a result of this, the dervish affected to be dying, and Sheikh Nassir and the Persian authorities in Bushire took the opportunity to capitalise upon this. A demand was made for the surrender of the apothecary for trial before the town qadi, and when this was refused allusions were made to the assault on the Russian mission in Tehran in 1829, when all but one of the Russians were massacred. The residency was threatened with a general attack from all 'the faithful', unless Gerald was given up; but Dr. Mackenzie, the acting assistant in charge of the residency, refused to comply with this demand. Subsequently an attempt was made to obtain monetary compensation, but again Mackenzie had no intention of acceding. The incident was an isolated one, the reason for which Mackenzie in a despatch to McNeill confessed he was at a loss to understand; he continued:

> That there was any serious intention actually entertained of attacking the Residency I do not believe, but I would respectfully submit, that if these malicious personages are to be allowed to manifest their bigotted aversion whenever they may feel disposed, and Sheikh Nassir, to lend himself as the easy medium of expressing their sentiments with entire impunity, I fear much trouble is likely to result.[3]

---

3 Mackenzie to McNeill, 27 December 1837, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/1, folio 16.

McNeill commented to Palmerston:

> I confess I am inclined to believe that the language held by Sheikh Nassir is but an echo of that which has been held by Hajee Meerza Aghassee, and that the Persian Government is deliberately disposed to try the effects of these insulting attempts at intimidation under the erroneous impression that whatever may be the language held by individuals employed here, the British Government will submit to much indignity rather than hazard the loss of the alliance with Persia, by resorting to strong measures to obtain redress, and to support the independence of its agents.[4]

The Bushire disturbance was symptomatic of the general malaise in Perso-British relations, but the other incident was of a far more serious nature. It was directly concerned with the continuing crisis over Herat, was deliberate in its intention, and was seemingly undertaken at the instigation of General Berowski, one of the Russian military advisers to the Shah. Mohammed Ali Beg, a confidential messenger, who had been in the employ of the British mission for thirty years, was seized by a party of Persian horsemen and dragged to their camp. He was returning from Herat carrying documents from members of the Herat government authorising McNeill to conclude a peace arrangement with the Persian government on the terms that has been proposed by the Herat envoy, Fath Mohammed Khan, in June 1837; and he also bore a letter for McNeill from Lieutenant Eldred Pottinger, who had been travelling in Afghanistan on the orders of Lord Auckland and who had now arrived in Herat. When brought to the camp, despite the vehement protests of

---

[4] McNeill to Palmerston, 31 January 1838, (P.R.O)F.O.539/1, folio 15. (Omitted from published version.)

Colonel Stoddart to the Persian Prime Minister, the messenger was stripped and the letter from Lieutenant Pottinger taken from him, although it was subsequently returned unopened. Colonel Stoddart was himself insulted by a Persian officer of the rank of Brigadier. McNeill commented that in a country such as Persia where the insecurity of property and person resembled a state of society present in feudal Europe, it was the obligation of a superior to protect his dependent, and thus any insult to a dependent was an insult to his superior as well. From this, he could only conclude that the public infliction of such indignities on a messenger of the British mission must be construed as a grave insult to the British government as well as to himself:

> I have little doubt that the object of the whole proceeding was to exhibit to the Afghans and to the Persian army an apparent contempt for the English, with a view to diminish the moral effect which might have been produced on either party by the general belief that we were opposed to the conquest of Herat by the Persians.[5]

McNeill demanded an apology from the Persian Government for its conduct, and asked that the Brigadier responsible for the incident, Hadji Khan, be dismissed and not reinstated until the British government had forgiven him. The envoy regarded such demands as moderate, and if they were not complied with, he felt that this would

---

5 McNeill to Palmerston, 25 November 1837, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 10.

constitute sufficient justification for him to suspend his official dealings with the government and await further instructions from Palmerston. In his opinion, if reparations were not exacted, it would be quite impossible to carry on public business in a creditable manner; and he hinted that the use of force might be appropriate in such circumstances when he stated that "I think there are means, involving neither expense nor further embarrassment, by which it might most advantageously be exacted. Colonel Sheil will have the honour to explain to your Lordship what the means are to which I allude."[6] McNeill was alluding to a military cum naval expedition to the Persian Gulf and in a subsequent despatch he went on to explain his fears and hence his reasons for sending Colonel Sheil to London:

> The Shah has openly expressed a belief that the possession of Herat would give him such a hold upon England, that she would no longer be able to deny him anything he might demand, or that the possession of Herat would give him the power to disturb us in India, or to give a passage to our enemies, whenever he should think proper to do so. In the event of his success, I therefore consider it of importance to have the means of checking, in some degree, the arrogance to which such a result must necessarily give birth in the minds of the Shah and his ministers.[7]

It becomes somewhat confusing as to whether McNeill proposed remedial action over the specific incident concerning his messenger or

---

6 McNeill to Palmerston, 25 November 1837, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 11.

7 McNeill to Palmerston, 27 November 1837, ibid.

over the wider matter of the Shah's eastern designs. He was rightly indignant at the Persian government's conduct but was perhaps being overzealous in his quest for a just settlement. In the short term at least, a rupture of relations would be far more damaging to British hopes of mediation than any effect it might produce on the Persian side. Palmerston counselled caution when replying to McNeill's despatches early in 1838. While he left it to McNeill to adopt the course most conducive to British interests, he reminded him always to "bear in mind that the object of Her Majesty's Government is not to seek an occasion for a rupture with Persia; but to prevent such a rupture, if it is possible to do so consistently with national honour."[8] Not knowing the result of McNeill's application to the Shah for reparation, Palmerston was reluctant to give his ambassador precise instructions and he was at pains to give him as much freedom of action as was possible. That he was uncertain as to how McNeill would have to act is evident from a later despatch replying on the subject of the incident in Bushire. He instructed McNeill "to state to the Persian Ministers, that Her Majesty's Government demand and expect protection for the Resident at Bushire, and will hold the Persian Government responsible for his safety," but significantly he added the proviso "if you should be still in Persia when you receive this despatch."[9]

---

8 Palmerston to McNeill, 16 March 1838,(P.R.O.)F.0.539/1, folio 15.

9 Palmerston to McNeill, 14 April 1838 (P.R.0)F.0.539/1, folio 16.

McNeill decided against making a stand on either issue at the time. He could not afford to lose sight of the more pressing matter of the actual besieging of Herat, and breaking off of diplomatic relations would be of little help in serving British interests there. The insult to the mission was serious but not critical and the just settlement would have to wait. The reply he received to his demands over the insult to his messenger was evasive, but the Persian case was not altogether an unreasonable one. Mirza Ali, the Deputy Foreign Minister, justified his government's actions on the grounds that holding any communication with Herat was a violation of Britain's neutrality, which, in the event of war between Persia and Afghanistan, it was bound by treaty to observe; and also that the messenger was a Persian subject and therefore the Shah was entitled to treat him as he saw fit. McNeill refuted such arguments at length and repeated his demand for redress, also telling Stoddart to use every endeavour to make the Persian government comply; but three months has elapsed, the initial sense of indignance had worn off, and there were more critical matters at hand.

McNeill was confident that the Persians would not take Herat in the present campaign, although he admitted that it was always difficult to predict the result with certainty in such contests between irregular armies. If the Shah was obliged to retreat after an unsuccessful siege, he concluded that "the consequences must tend very materially to weaken the Shah's government at home, and to shake his authority in several provinces."[10] McNeill would have viewed this with

---

[10] McNeill to Palmerston, 30 October 1837,(P.R.O)F.O.539/2, folio 41.

mixed feelings, since a weakened central government would be all the more vulnerable to further Russian influence in its affairs, which was after all precisely what the Russians wanted. By November McNeill was able to give his predictions greater substance when reporting on the state of the Persians army:

> The intelligence I have received of the condition of the Persian army is very unfavourable; no discipline was maintained, the troops fear their enemy, yet no precautions are taken against surprise, and it is the opinion of Colonel Stoddart that the Shah and his whole camp are at the mercy of fifty horsemen. The price of provisions in the camp being five or six times the prices at Meshed and Nishapore, which are only four of five caravan stages in the rear, indicates actual scarcity, and the army had still to perform nine marches through a country which does not afford one day's supply, before it could arrive at Herat.[11]

The cold weather also seemed to be a significant factor and was causing suffering among the men, while the horses were weak from exposure, fatigue, and lack of forage. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the army from capturing the fortress at Ghorian, which capitulated to the Shah on 15th November after a siege lasting ten days. Ghorian was a frontier fortress of Herat territory in the direction of Persia and some forty miles from the city itself. Many Persians and Afghans considered it stronger than Herat itself and its relatively easy conquest must have been a spur to the Shah's confidence in his military capacity. From there the Persian army advanced to Herat, and the siege of the city was commenced.

---

[11] McNeill to Palmerston, 27 November 1837, (P.R.O)F.O.539/2, folios 41-42.

The Quarterly Review described the siege in the following somewhat romanticised vein:

> A memorable siege, in which the Afghans displayed qualities more resembling the antique heroism of Greece and Rome than the military character of modern Asiatics, and the Persian troops also gave proof of the eminent fitness of the men for all operations of war which require courage, endurance, and intelligence combined.[12]

By the time McNeill wrote his important despatch of 23rd February 1838 to Palmerston, the Shah's army had been besieging Herat for some three months. The city was holding out, but against daunting odds, which tended to temper McNeill's cautious optimism, but which increased his belief in its strategic importance. The winter had been mild with no snow, which was a factor in the Shah's favour. His army had been able to obtain provisions by sending foraging parties into the districts around Herat; and the ability to obtain these supplies had been greatly helped by the sending of a division north eastwards in the direction of Maimana, the effect of which was to prevent the powerful tribes there marching to the relief of Herat or disturbing the army's line of supply. The Shah was thus holding his position, but on the other hand he was not making much progress militarily against the city itself. Herat was still able to maintain communication with the surrounding country, and provisions were plentiful in the city, cheaper in fact than in the Persian Camp. Moreover

---

12 "Russia, Persia, and England," p.172 .

the Persian trenches were attacked every night with considerable effect, while a counter-attack had failed miserably. The Persians had also used up most of their heavy ammunition and the Afghans had succeeded in making good the breaches in their fortifications which earlier sustained bombardment had inflicted. The casualty rate amounted to some thirty men killed daily on the Persian side compared with an average of one on the Afghan side. The Shah was determined to persevere, but, realising that his present force was inadequate to the task, he had sent orders to provincial governors to collect and send reinforcements. He had also sent orders for further ammunition, but both these items required two or more months to procure.

In McNeill's view, the defence of Herat had been very creditable to its inhabitants, and the fact that the Shah's siege could be withstood despite all the advantages to the Persian side enhanced the city's value in his estimation. He had always regarded the city as occupying an important position as far as the security of India was concerned, but now he was able to add:

> I was not prepared to look on it as so strong and defensible a place, or as one so capable of being made a barrier to the advance of any hostile Power; and I feel that, if Herat should fall into the hands of any such Power, it would be an evil greater than I had hitherto believed it would be.[13]

The fact that a Persian army of forty thousand men was able to feed

---

13 McNeill to Palmerston, 23 February 1838,(P.R.O)F.O.539/1, folio 16.

itself for such a long period, despite previous efforts of the Herat government to destroy or carry off the available crops was proof that a hostile army could move through the area without suffering from want; and this too, McNeill argues, gave great added significance to the position of Herat and to the influence the power that held it could exercise over the future security of India. McNeill believed that it was of the highest importance to preserve the independence of Herat or at least to prevent its being brought under Persian suzerainty since success there would inevitably lead the Shah further into Afghanistan where he would come into more open opposition to British influence and power. Thus if Britain interfered directly now and forced the Shah to accept the equitable terms offered by the Herat government, further progress into Afghanistan would be arrested, future struggle for hegemony in that country could be avoided, and there would be a greater possibility of Britain being able to preserve its alliance with Persia. Such interference would cause irritation, but less than would be produced by the need for subsequent interference to protect Qandahar, if Herat were to fall. The most obvious impediment, as McNeill saw it, to such action was the stipulation of the ninth article of the Treaty of Tehran, but he continued:

> It can hardly be argued that this Article binds us to permit the unjust and wanton destruction by Persia of the most valuable defences of India, while the Shah appears to be acting in concert with, and promoting the influence in those countries of that very Power, whose exclusion from them has become the chief object of the alliance with His Persian Majesty.[14]

---

14 McNeill to Palmerston, 23 February 1838, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 17.

So far, McNeill had discussed the situation and offered in the broadest possible terms a remedy, while producing a plausible justification for Britain's ignoring the ninth article of the 1814 treaty. He had yet to suggest the exact form "this one act of interference" would take, or how indeed it would be effected; and he had had little guidance by way of comprehensive instructions from either Palmerston or Auckland. The seige looked as if it might go on for many months, so the opportunity for effective action still presented itself, a plan for which McNeill put forward to the Foreign Secretary:

> If I were instructed to proceed to the Shah's camp, and distinctly announce to His Majesty, that we could not permit him to prosecute a war which was injurious to our interests; and that if he should determine to persevere, we should aid the Government of Herat, I am of opinion that he would feel the necessity of accepting an equitable treaty.

If the siege was not proceeding well, such a remonstrance could furnish the Shah with a pretext for abandoning the enterprise; but if there was a prospect of immediate success, it would doubtless fail to deter him, and in this case McNeill warned that "it might be necessary to go further and to inform him that even if he should take Herat, he would not be permitted to retain it."[15]

McNeill was not being very specific in his intentions, but the lack of definite instructions placed him in a difficult position.

---

15 McNeill to Palmerston, 23 February 1838, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 17.

The tenor of his despatch was a departure from that of those hitherto: he clearly felt that the British interests in India and in Persia itself could no longer be defended by polite notes of protest, and the time had come for him to remonstrate personally with the Shah, fully backed by an Indian government that would be prepared to use force as an ultimate sanction. He wrote to Colonel Sheil:

> My opinion is that Lord Auckland must now take a decided course, and declare that he who is not with us is against us, and shall be treated accordingly. If the Shah should take Herat, we shall not have a moment to lose, and the stakes will in my opinion be the highest we have yet played for. We must be secure in Afghanistan able to check and punish intrigues carried on there against our peace in India, able to exclude foreign agents and emissaries from all that country, or our security in India will be greatly diminished, and our expenses there very largely increased.[16]

This was written towards the beginning of February and McNeill was still officially guided by Auckland's letter of 15th September of the previous year, in which the Governor-General had been characteristically cautious although he had promised to write more explicitly in a few weeks or months. This he did on 27th January and the letter reveals remarkable complacency on the part of Auckland. He explained to McNeill that he had decided against delivering a formal remonstrance to the Shah, partly because of what he saw as the inhibiting factor posed by the ninth article of the 1814 treaty,

---

16 Extract in Sheil to Palmerston, 13 April 1838,(B.L.) Add.MS. Broughton 36469, folios 5-8 .

partly because he felt that the Shah would ignore the remonstrance anyway; and so "it would be best to leave you quite free to act upon your own excellent judgement and upon the instructions which you may have received from home." Speaking of the actual military progress of the Persians, Auckland told the envoy that he had been surprised and disappointed by the quick advance of the army and the easy fall of Ghoriam, but he avoided committing himself as to the action to be taken should the Persians meet with success at Herat, in which event "an opening will be given to new entanglements and to new speculations with which we must deal as best we may, though until they come nearer to us we shall have but little power of directly controlling them."[17] Thus Auckland was leaving matters to McNeill, while reminding him of the British position under the 1814 treaty. Palmerston too did not feel inclined to issue specific instructions, although both were to have reappraised their working speculations quite dramatically by the early summer.

On 8th March, McNeill wrote to Palmerston - he had written to Auckland the day before - to inform him that he had decided to go to the Shah's camp"to endeavour by every means in my power to induce his Majesty to conclude a Treaty with Shah Kamran, and to raise the

---

17 Auckland to McNeill, 27 January 1838, (B.L.) Add.MS. Auckland 37692, folios 106-109.

siege of Herat." He had not as yet received Auckland's letter of 27th January but had managed to gain some impression of its content from Lieutenant Leech who had acquainted him with the letter's existence and with the information that the Governor-General had told him in the letter to "mediate between the Shah and the Government of Herat; that his Lordship required that the integrity of Herat should be preserved, and proposed to withdraw the Shah from Herat by Treaty or otherwise." In other words, McNeill was proposing to put the defence of British interests in India above being bound to the now somewhat meaningless terms of the 1814 treaty. He confessed to Palmerston that he did not feel confident of success, "unless some demonstration of force should be made to alarm the Shah," but thought that there was a prospect of persuading the Shah to withdraw sufficiently promising to justify the attempt.[18] Two days later, he left Tehran.

It was to be expected that McNeill's departure would not go unopposed and shortly after his leaving Tehran, he received a letter from Mirza Masud, the Foreign Minister, maintaining that the British minister's presence near Herat might produce greater confidence and resistance on the part of the besieged and this would be injurious to Persian interests. McNeill left the note unanswered but believed it

---

[18] McNeill to Palmerston, 8 March 1838,(P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 23.

to have been instigated by Count Simonich, who, as far as he was aware at the time, had decided against proceeding to Herat. McNeill had told Palmerston that he hoped to arrive at the Shah's camp on the 5th or 6th April and he was writing despatches from there to the Foreign Secretary and to the Governor-General on the 11th. He was now able at first hand to witness the military operations and concluded that the Persian army was making little progress, although if the Shah was able to keep up the present blockade indefinitely, the town must ultimately fall. Yet to do this, the Shah required supplies for his troops, and those of the surrounding countryside were nearly exhausted. As a result, the Persian troops were suffering great privations and their powers of endurance were beginning to fail. Arrangements for the regular supply of a considerable amount of provisions had to be made if the enterprise was not to be abandoned, and, McNeill believed, it was success or failure in this respect on which the fate of Herat appeared to depend.

In his despatch of 11th April to Palmerston, McNeill enclosed a copy of a draft of the proposed treaty between the Shah and the Chief of Qandahar, guaranteed by the Russian ambassador at Tehran, the object of which was to unite Qandahar and Herat under Kohendil Khan, the ruler of Qandahar, and make the state nominally subject to Persia. McNeill saw this as a mere front for the extension of Russian influence into Afghanistan: the terms of the treaty made the state a protegée of

Russia, in that they gave Russia the authority to interfere directly in the affairs of Qandahar and to compel Persia to defend the country against Britain or any other supposedly hostile nation. All this served to confirm McNeill's belief in the importance of preventing the fall of Herat. If this happened, it would destroy Britain's position in Afghanistan. The news he had received from Alexander Burnes in Kabul corroborated such sentiments - Captain Vitkievitch was still there and the outcome of his negotiations there depended on the result of the Shah's enterprise against Herat. McNeill reiterated his conviction that Britain need no longer feel bound to act according to the exact terms of the 1814 treaty, and referring, perhaps slightly bitterly, to what he had gathered to be the Indian Government's attitude, he concluded:

> Yet I apprehend that the Indian Government is deterred only by a scrupulous regard to good faith, from taking active measures to secure the integrity, if not the independence of Herat. I trust, however, that there may yet be time to take a more decided course; and I do not hesitate to repeat my conviction that if our only object were to preserve as long as possible the alliance of Persia that object could best be effected by preventing her from taking Herat.[19]

The day after sending this, McNeill sent a copy of his despatch to Auckland to London for Palmerston's information, and in this an even more explicit account of his views and intentions is to be found. McNeill's reception at the Shah's camp was far from warm. At Ghorian he had received a note from the Deputy Foreign Minister telling him that it was the Shah's wish that he did not advance beyond there. McNeill did not comply,

---

19 McNeill to Palmerston, 11 April 1838,(P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 26.

but it was evident on his arrival at the camp that his acquaintances among the Persian Court had been forbidden to communicate with him. The ambassador was however able to insist on an audience of the Shah in order to present his credentials from the new Queen, and this was granted. On the day he was writing this despatch to Auckland, he had called on the Prime Minister to discover the sort of impression his interview with the Shah had made. He gathered that it had been not altogether unfavourable and the initial irritation caused by his defying the Shah's wishes by coming at all had been overcome. Still he saw as one of the great obstacles to his success the expected arrival at the camp of the Russian minister, Count Simonich. He believed that the Russian envoy would unquestionably do all he could to prevent a treaty being concluded with Herat in which he himself was not mediator.

On the whole McNeill was of the opinion that a display or at least a demonstration of actual force would be necessary to induce the Shah to desist from the enterprise against Herat: "two or three thousand good irregular horse, and a few guns, and an enterprising commander would be sufficient." McNeill was granted a second interview with the Shah on 13th April, and on this occasion he intended to point out to the Persian government that their proceedings in Afghanistan were a flagrant violation of the spirit of a treaty intended to give security to India and destructive of the whole object of the alliance. Thus the British government would be fully justified "in declaring the Treaty at an end,

and in taking such active measures as it may find necessary to protect itself against the evils which Persia, for the furtherance of her own unjust ends, is bringing upon us." If the Shah were to persevere in the siege, the British government might have to remove the Persian army by force, if necessary, as a measure of self-defence.[20]

McNeill went on to tell Auckland of a report he had received that among other things stated that Dost Mohammed of Kabul had allowed passage through his territories for British and Sikh troops, and a combined force was actually on the march. In his present belligerent mood, this was wishful thinking, and the report proved to be unfounded, but McNeill's subsequent comments, being a development of his previously mentioned notion of the possible need of force to remove the Persian army, merit attention. He considered a small force sufficient to cut off the Shah's communications and supplies and thereby force him after a time to raise the siege. However, a stronger body would serve the purpose of establishing British influence in Persia and all Central Asia, and it would convince the governments of these countries that they were within Britain's reach, of which they were hitherto unaware. He told Auckland that the Persian government did not realise that the distance between Herat and Tabriz, whence a large portion of the Shah's army had marched, was equal to the distance from Herat to the India frontier, and that it failed to conceive the possibility of seeing British troops advance

---

[20] McNeill to Auckland, 11 April 1838, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 25.

in the direction of Herat; he continued:

When I look to the conclusive evidence of concert between Persia and Russia in their proceedings in Afghanistan, which has transpired, and to the probable consequences of the success of these proceedings to the security and to the internal tranquillity of British India, I have no hesitation in expressing my personal opinion, that notwithstanding the terms of the Treaty the British Government would be fully justified in taking up arms to protect its own interests in this quarter.

As to Russia's reaction and the lengths that country might be prepared to go, McNeill conjectured that it would not hazard a misunderstanding with Britain for the sake of putting the Shah in possession of Herat; he continued:

Whatever length she might be prepared to go to forward the Shah's views, she would undoubtedly be prepared to go much further, if the Shah were in possession of Herat. It appears to me also that any decided measures, which your Lordship might deem it advisable to adopt now, would decide the question before Russia could possibly act, even were she prepared to do so, which I am satisfied she is not.[21]

Both the communications to Palmerston and more especially to Auckland contained as candid language as McNeill had hitherto used in any of his despatches. The Shah was doubtless dispirited at his lack of progress in the campaign, and McNeill may well have felt that more direct threatening tactics against the Persian government might have their effect, hoping in fact that blatant intimidation might succeed where normal diplomatic intercourse had failed. Moreover he realised that he had to do this quickly, since any position of influence he might have begun to attain would shortly disappear: he had learnt that Count Simonich had left Tehran for the Shah's camp some twelve days after his own departure

---

21 McNeill to Auckland, 11 April 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folios 25-26.

and when he arrived his presence there would have the effect of negating McNeill's efforts to induce the Shah to accept his offer of mediation. It would be reasonable to suppose that Simonich's decision was a direct consequence of McNeill's own departure, but it is to be gathered from information Palmerston received from the British consul at Tabriz that the Russian ambassador was in fact acting on orders he had received from St. Petersburg, and the time factor would not have enabled the Russian government already to have been acquainted with McNeill's recent initiative. The reason behind these orders must at present remain a mystery, but whatever it was, Simonich's arrival at the camp must be seen as significantly weakening McNeill's bargaining position. The British envoy himself realised this but attributed Simonich's departure for the Camp to his own initiative:

> I learn that Count Simonich on hearing of my intention to go to Camp immediately decided on proceeding at the same time. His object no doubt is to have a share in any negotiations that may ensue and I feel that his presence there will be a source of continual embarrassment to me by upholding the unreasonable pretensions of Persia.[22]

Nevertheless, before the arrival of Count Simonich, McNeill had begun to make some progress in trying to bring about an end to the siege by negotiation. He had succeeded in persuading the Shah to allow a British officer, Major Todd, to enter Herat to ascertain that government's attitude towards a settlement, and if it was favourable to bring back with him a representative empowered to make a binding agreement. The letter of reply that Major Todd brought back from the Herat vizier, Yar Mohammed Khan, entrusted to McNeill the negotiating of any arrangement he might consider advisable, provided that Britain should undertake to

---

22 McNeill to Palmerston, 10 March 1838,(H.M.C.) Broadlands 12889, GC/MA/50.

guarantee Persian observance of any resulting treaty. The Shah was at this juncture relatively well disposed towards a negotiated settlement and no longer insisted that his placing of a Persian garrison in the town or his assessing and appropriating of the country's revenues were preconditions of peace. He too wished the British government to be a guarantor of the treaty and still required that Kamran should renounce the title of Shah and that his vizier should come to wait upon him at his camp. However, Major Todd was of the opinion that these latter points could well be resolved if McNeill himself were allowed to enter the town to discuss the matter with the Herat government. The British officer then reported the results of his visit to the Persian Prime Minister and later the Shah summoned McNeill and proposed concluding an immediate settlement provided Kamran himself came to wait upon him in camp and that he give written acknowledgement that Herat was Persian territory. McNeill replied, as he told Palmerston, "that the people of Herat were now fighting for their independence, and that I saw no prospect of their being induced to agree to a proposal which went to sacrifice it."[23] It seems that the Shah had ordered his troops to prepare for a general assault that night, but McNeill prevailed upon him to call a truce while he himself went into the town to put forward the Shah's proposition to the Herat government.

---

23 McNeill to Palmerston, 12 May 1838,(P.R.O.)F.0.539/1, folio 27.

McNeill described his approach to the town in the following account to Baillie Fraser:

> It was about nine o'clock at night when I got to the quarters of the Persian officers commanding in the trenches opposite the south-east angle of the town. Everything had been prepared for an assault; the Persian troops were in good spirits, and high in their hopes of victory and plunder, and in anticipation of that uncontrolled exercise of arbitrary power, even for a few hours, which, I expect, has an attraction for the soldier as strong as, and quite independent of, the gratifications it may enable him to procure. High above our heads were the lofty towers of Herat, with each flaming light blazing like a comet. The balls from the battlements came sharp and frequent, whistling by; the hooshar bash of the Afghans repeated from post to post was not the cry of the drowsy sentinel, but the quick stern warning of men who were looking for the first rush of the enemy. In the Afghan trenches opposite to us was my friend, Futteh Mohammed Khan who had been Envoy in Persia...

McNeill passed into the Afghan trenches, the truce was announced and "the night which had been destined for carnage became one of relaxation and enjoyment."[24] On entering the town, he was received by Yar Mohammed Khan and spent most of the night in conversation with him. A draft of a treaty was agreed by which the Herat government conceded all the Shah's demands other than those which prejudiced the country's independent status.[25] However, before leaving the town, McNeill heard of the arrival of Count Simonich at the Persian camp and realised that the Russian minister would use all his influence to thwart any negotiations

---

[24] Macalister, pp. 213-214.

[25] Draft Treaty and Kamran's demands are given in the Appendix.

and encourage the Shah to prosecute the siege.

The timing of Simonich's arrival on the morning of 20th April could not have been more importunate for McNeill, and on returning to the camp, he noticed a change in the Shah's manner now "peremptory and abrupt."[26] The Shah rejected the proposed treaty and insisted that his suzerainty over Herat be acknowledged, commanding, as McNeill related to the Herat vizier, that "either the whole people of Herat shall make their submission and acknowledge themselves my subjects, or I will take possession of the fortress by force of arms, and make them obedient and submissive."[27] McNeill rejected this demand of the Shah, and shortly afterwards, the Shah, using the pretext that the Heratis were taking advantage of the truce to repair the breaches in the town's defences, ordered that firing recommence. McNeill reported that Simonich was proffering advice and money for the Persian troops, as well as putting an officer of the Etat-Major at the disposal of the Shah to help in the constructing of batteries and other offensive operations against the town.

Despite this, McNeill felt it desirable to keep open the channels of negotiation and wrote to Yar Mohammed Khan stating the Shah's objections to the proposed treaty. He also wrote two strongly worded official notes to the Persian Prime Minister, and following

---

26 McNeill to Palmerston, 12 May 1838,(P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folio 28.

27 McNeill to Yar Mohammed Khan, Inclosure in ibid., folio 30.

on their delivery and the inconclusive replies, he withdrew himself from all personal communication with the Shah and his government. Ten days of this self-imposed isolation elapsed before he received a note from the Prime Minister inviting him to take part in further discussion. At this meeting McNeill was assured that the Persian government had no other object than to obtain security for Persian territory and subjects together with the restitution of prisoners, for all of which the draft treaty had provided. Thus it appeared that now the Persians were willing to agree to the treaty with some slight modifications, provided that Britain would guarantee its fulfillment and observance. McNeill was reluctant to take upon himself such responsibility without specific instructions but nevertheless agreed to, since it was a means of preserving Herat's independence and thereby, as McNeill saw it, Britain's influence in the countries between Persia and the Indus, objectives of both the British and Indian governments. Also McNeill "had every reason to believe that the Russian Minister would not have hesitated to make his own Government the guarantee of this Treaty, as he had made it for that with Kandahar, and thus to acquire for it a new right of interference in the affairs of both countries."[28] However when McNeill suggested his going once more into the town of Herat to get that government's ratification of the treaty, the Persian government was once again hesitant and raised various complications in order to stall him. The Shah then went on to try to get more favourable terms by annexing new

---

28 McNeill to Palmerston, 12 May 1838, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 28.

conditions to the already agreed treaty: financial indemnity for the losses and privations his army had sustained. McNeill attributed this further change in the Shah's views to the arrival of a messenger from Qandahar with letters from Kohendil Khan promising the Shah aid against Herat. The messenger also assured the Persians that Dost Mohammed of Kabul did not intend to make an attempt to relieve Herat. Thus McNeill concludes:

> Relieved from the serious apprehensions he had entertained on this subject, and bribed and urged on by the Russian Minister with so much eagerness that the Shah feared it would give umbrage to the Russian Government, if he desisted till Herat should have been taken, it would not be wonderful if he should decide on prosecuting the siege.[29]

It was inevitable, as McNeill himself realised, that Simonich's presence at the camp would all but destroy any hopes McNeill had entertained of mediating successfully. The rest of April and May was thus characterised by a struggle for influence over the Shah between the two representatives. While McNeill's being there was undoubtedly an inhibiting factor in Simonich's ability fully to apply the unofficial expansionist policy of his government, and although at times it did appear that McNeill was making some headway with the Shah, especially in conversation, nevertheless the Russian minister always ultimately held the trump card, in that he could play on Mohammed Shah's thirst for military glory. Despite this, McNeill persisted in trying to

---

29 McNeill to Palmerston, 12 May 1838, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folio 29. Reference to "bribed" was omitted from the published version.

persuade the Shah to raise the siege. On 14th May he reported to Palmerston that the proposed commercial treaty, which had been one of the less prominent objectives of his mission, had been agreed to by the Shah, and the latter had even promised to issue to firman or royal edict acknowledging Mr. Bonham as commercial agent in Tabriz. Yet as was becoming apparent, the Shah's spoken undertakings often bore little relation to the written ones of the government, and McNeill was to bring up the question of the commercial treaty again in his memorandum of a couple of days' later. He also told Palmerston that he had been unable to obtain redress for the ill-treatment of the messenger or for the threatening behaviour against the residency in Bushire. Furthermore, orders had been given prohibiting people in the camp from visiting him, and rumours discreditable to the British were being deliberately circulated:

> To such an extent has the system of annoyance been carried, that I sometimes doubt whether I am justified in submitting to it any longer; but I await your Lordship's replies to the letters carried to England by Colonel Sheil before I venture to decide.[30]

By the 17th of the month, McNeill had received Palmerston's despatch of 12th February which said little more than that his conduct hitherto had been approved of. It must, however, have been a fillip to McNeill's flagging morale. At an audience on 16th May, McNeill

---

30 McNeill to Palmerston, 14 May 1838,(P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folio 34.

delivered a memorandum to the Shah in which he set out the conditions necessary for the continuance of Britain's amicable relations with Persia. The concluding of an equitable arrangement with the government of Herat figured most prominently in these conditions, but McNeill was also concerned to receive redress for the incidents against his messenger and in Bushire, by which he might hope to restore some of the British mission's rapidly diminishing prestige. Thus he additionally demanded the punishment of those responsible for the attack on the messenger, the abandonment by the Persian government of its claim to punish the Persian servants of the mission without reference to the envoy, and the removal from office for the Governor of Bushire and the punishment of those responsible for the threats and insults to the British residency there; he also included in his memorandum as a condition the conclusion of a commercial agreement which would place the British commercial agents on the same footing as consuls of other powers.[31] By the end of the audience, after much argument on McNeill's part, the British minister was able to gather that the Shah would abandon his claims to sovereignty over Herat and would accept the treaty that had been proposed, provided that he could be furnished with a reason which would enable him to withdraw with honour, and suggested that one such reason would be if he were under the threat of being attacked by Britain. McNeill replied that he was at liberty to tell his subjects whatever he thought

---

31 Inclosure in McNeill to Palmerston, 17 May 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1,

fit, but that there was no better reason than the fear of losing Britain's friendship. At a further meeting of the two, the Shah was to return to the notion that he should be threatened by the British in order to have an honourable pretext, and he wanted this in writing, to which McNeill agreed.

As was now to be expected, the success McNeill might be seen to have derived was short-lived. Firstly, there was a dispute about the content and even the physical size of the threatening letter, and on 19th May the British envoy received a letter from the Deputy Foreign Minister which was a somewhat garbled but studied evasion of McNeill's demands and which seemed to indicate that the Persian government wanted a large sum of money as its price for abandoning the campaign against Herat. McNeill replied that nothing was to be gained from pursuing such a course and at an audience ten days later on 30th May, he pointed out to the Shah how the written communications of his ministers were so totally at variance with what he had agreed to in conversation. The Shah replied that he agreed to McNeill's demands and that a letter would be written accordingly, but when on 1st June McNeill received this letter, it again did not accord with the Shah's spoken words. While some concessions were made to the other points in McNeill's memorandum, the letter asserted the Shah's right to prosecute his campaign against Herat and treated as an impingement on his independence the terms of the letter McNeill had given him as the honourable pretext

for concluding an agreement - terms which had at first been objected to as not sufficiently explicit and unequivocal, and which were now being labelled as contrary to the tenor of McNeill's previous representations as to the advantages and benefits to be derived from complying with the British government's wishes. As McNeill doubtless correctly surmised when commenting on the affair to Palmerston:

> This letter bore strong internal evidence of being a translation into the Persian from some European language; and from this fact, as well as from the manner in which the subject of Herat was treated, and from other circumstances, I could not doubt that my letter to the Shah had been communicated to the Russian Minister, and that this the second answer to that letter, had either been prepared altogether by His Excellency, or at least partly from a Draft in French furnished by the Russian mission.[32]

It was hardly surprising that the British minister was becoming somewhat exasperated at his present standing and at the way he and his deeds were being manipulated. Apart from the complete fickleness in the attitude of the Persian government to the proposed treaty, the threatening letter McNeill had furnished in good faith had been turned against him albeit skilfully to reflect unfavourably on his actions. Moreover most of the members of the court were prohibited from having any contact with him, and the British mission in general was falling into a discreditable position by submitting to the slights and disrespects so meekly. Hitherto McNeill had been at pains to avoid breaking with the Persian government but was now determined to bring

---

[32] McNeill to Palmerston, 25 June 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/1, folio 37.

the matter to a head. Consequently he requested that a mehmendar be appointed to conduct him to the frontier, hoping that this request would jolt the Shah and his ministers into a more accommodating attitude. McNeill too was prepared to make concessions in the interests of harmony, and he by now realised that with Simonich's presence it was futile on his part to insist as a condition of his staying the concluding of an equitable arrangement with Herat: after all this was the subject most difficult to resolve and the reason for his being at the camp in the first place. So he produced a further memorandum repeating his demand for redress of the outstanding grievances as well as the matter of the commercial treaty, but leaving out all reference to a settlement with Herat. From the Persian reaction, it became obvious to McNeill that the government was now going to try to lay the whole weight of the discussion on the commercial treaty so as to divert attention from the other issues at hand. So again, McNeill diluted his conditions further and told the Deputy Foreign Minister that he would not insist on the immediate conclusion of this treaty as a condition of remaining, but would make this dependent solely on the Persian government's compliance with his demands for reparation for the outstanding issues. The answer to this letter was an unequivocal denial that any indignity had been offered, and if there had been, it was up to McNeill to prove it.

It was obvious that the Persian government was not in any way prepared to be the least accommodating over McNeill's demands, and for

McNeill there was no point in his remaining in the Shah's camp, if he was merely to suffer further indignities. On 6th June he restated his request for a mehmendar, and although none was provided before his departure, he struck his flag the following day and set out for Meshed and Tehran.

Chapter Six

The Herat crisis as it is to be seen following McNeill from Tehran to the Shah's camp and from there on the dispiriting journey towards the Turkish frontier gives a rather sad testimony to British prestige and influence in Persia. The British minister took it as a personal failure that he had not succeeded in persuading the Shah to raise the siege, but such criticism levelled in the context of historical appraisal is unfair. As has been shown, McNeill was constantly striving to make fresh overtures to the Shah and his government to bring about a settlement, provided that Herat's independence was not compromised and provided that he received at least minimal redress for the incidents relating to the Bushire residency and to his own messenger. It was failure to receive a satisfactory response regarding these latter affairs which finally made it obvious to him that the Shah, being sufficiently confident of the support of the Russian minister, had no intention of meeting his least request.

However McNeill's strenuous but ultimately vain efforts in this respect were only part of his overall contribution to political developments at this period. The role of "middleman" between London and India and the effects on political thinking that it was producing in both these places were also extremely important and arguably of greater consequence in the longer term. It will be remembered that one of the problems with which McNeill had to cope was how he should act when not given precise instructions from either Palmerston or Auckland.

Both men could have intended this so as to give the man on the spot as free a hand as possible; yet conversely the device could be used to repudiate his actions if political expedience elsewhere demanded it, and the excuse could be offered that he was exceeding his instructions. Such a fate was not to befall McNeill, although it was in similar circumstances that his Russian counterpart, Count Simonich, was ultimately displaced: in this case it was also a question of the tacit repudiation of an unofficial line of policy rather than just the actions of a single man. It is perhaps somewhat callous to see this consideration as motivating Palmerston, and it would be fairer to attribute his reluctance to instruct his ambassador precisely to a realisation that the inevitable two month time lag in communicating such instructions would have doubtless rendered them no longer relevant by the time they arrived; and besides which, the Foreign Secretary placed great trust in McNeill's judgement and realised that the envoy was far better acquainted with the intricacies of the situation than he could ever hope to be. Consequently he generally restricted his replies to expressions of approval of the envoy's conduct. This should not, however, allow it to be assumed that there was a lack of interest on Palmerston's part, even if at times he felt that there were matters in Europe of a more pressing nature. Palmerston had a world view of politics and relations with Russia were important, irrespective of where they actually took place. It is evident that McNeill's letters and despatches were closely scrutinised by

Palmerston and his cabinet colleagues, particularly John Cam Hobhouse, President of the Board of Control, and their deliberations were ultimately, perhaps in McNeill's view somewhat belatedly, to be given expression in decisive action.

On 3rd February 1838, Palmerston received McNeill's report of the fall of Ghorian, sent early in December of the previous year, and three days later he received the despatch in which McNeill gave the account of the insult to his messenger. On 12th of the same month, the Foreign Secretary intimated to his envoy the government's approval of his conduct but said that he delayed sending further instructions until the answer from the Persian government to McNeill's demand for redress was known. By the middle of March, Palmerston had learnt from a copy of Auckland's reply to McNeill's request for a remonstrance to be delivered to the Persian government, which McNeill had enclosed with one of his despatches, that the Governor-General was as yet unwilling to have the Indian government committed directly in Persian affairs and was relying on McNeill's judgement. Palmerston decided to act likewise and wrote accordingly on 16th March.

In addition to the trust that Palmerston placed in McNeill's judgement, this unwillingness to give specific instructions also stemmed partly from a certain complacency which McNeill until only recently had encouraged in the tenor of his despatches, and partly from the knowledge that any suggestion of positive action would be received unfavourably by most of his colleagues, other than Sir John Hobhouse.

However this did not mean that Palmerston and Hobhouse did not foresee the possibly imminent occasion when a more direct approach would be required. At the beginning of April, Palmerston received information from the British ambassador in St. Petersburg that Russia was planning a military expedition from Orenburg to Bokhara, and on 7th April he wrote to McNeill asking him to find out further information about this proposed expedition and commenting:

> It will not escape your observation, that this intended expedition affords some confirmation of the reports which you have made in your despatches Nos. 88, 89, and 105, of the objects of Captain Vikovich's Mission to Cabool, and that an extensive operation in the countries near Bokhara may possibly be contemplated by the Russian Government, for which they are desirous to obtain the co-operation of the Ruler of Cabool: or it may be, that the object of the Russian expedition is to co-operate with the Persian forces in an attack on Khiva....[1]

Also in April, Lieutenant-Colonel Justin Sheil, Secretary to Legation at Tehran, returned to London on leave. He had clearly been briefed by McNeill to try to stir up as much concern as possible for the situation in Persia among the members of the government. As has been seen, in a letter to Sheil, McNeill expressed dissatisfaction with Auckland's instructions and made a plea for decisive action. In this same letter, of which Sheil forwarded extracts to Palmerston annotated with his own comments, McNeill emphasised the ease with which the Shah had fed "40,000 mouths" and continued:

---

[1] Palmerston to McNeill, 7 April 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2,folio 48. The published version (P.P.no.67) leaves out all reference to this.

Furiah is I find a country abounding in grain, and there remains no longer any doubt on my mind that an army of 50-60 or 70,000 men might be marched to Kandahar, or even to Caubul, and if to Caubul also to India, without any difficulty on the store of supplies. This I confess I was not prepared for. I did not believe that so large a force could be supplied for so long a time at Herat. It is true that this is a year of more than ordinary abundance, but it must be admitted that it is by no means impossible to move a large force thro' Persia to Herat. This is an important consideration, which I am the more desirous to attract attention to, as I have perhaps done something to give currency to the opposite opinion. [2]

In a separate memorandum, Sheil commented that the government should not await knowing the outcome of McNeill's demand for redress before acting. He was of the opinion that such expedients as breaking off diplomatic relations were insufficient to curtail the drastic decline of British prestige in Persia, and that the Persian government would only be impressed by a show of strength. Echoing McNeill's sentiments, he recommended the occupation of the island of Kharaq and suggested that it should be retained until satisfaction had been obtained from the Shah. He also advocated the occupation of Bushire and even proposed that their permanent retention would be strategically and commercially desirable: " The mouths of the Euphrates would then be under our command, and Bagdad, the south of Persia, and Arabia would be under our influence." [3]

---

2 Sheil to Palmerston, 13 April 1838, (B.L.) Add.MS. Broughton 36469, folios 5-8.

3 Memorandum by Sheil, 12 March 1838, cited in J.B. Kelly, Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795-1880, (Oxford:1968), p.293.

In Sheil's view, the only objection that might be raised to such a line of action would be that Russia might feel at liberty to make corresponding territorial acquisitions in the north, while the Shah might feel himself driven to make a closer alliance with Russia. Such eventualities, though, he considered less important than the damaging effects of a passive policy.

As yet Palmerston was not prepared to be won over to a more agressive approach to the crisis in Persia. He passed the letter on to Hobhouse whose opinion was less reserved than that of his leader. He believed that it was the attitude of other members of the Cabinet that was holding Palmerston back from taking a more positive stance; in his reply, he told him this quite bluntly:

> I should press upon you the expediency of coming to some determination respecting not only our relations with Persia, but also our diplomatic operations in the Afghan states, were it not that I know too well how much you are occupied by matters much nearer home, and were I not equally well aware of the disinclination of the Cabinet to consider any subject merely connected with our Indian Empire. I am however fully persuaded that the time will shortly arrive when you will have to speak to the Shah in very different language from that which has hitherto been held to him; if not to make some demonstration to convince him that, if he knows the way to India, we can show him a road leading from Bushire to Ispahan.

The changing tenor of McNeill's communications had not gone unnoticed by Hobhouse; and he was critical of this newly discovered sense of urgency:

I am rather surprised his discovery of the real obstacles or facilities of a march from the Persian frontier, through the Afghan states to the Indies, should have been made at so late a period. How can we at home be expected to be well informed enough to direct, when those on the spot or near the scene of action, are ignorant of facts on the knowledge of which alone any safe judgement can be formed? Here is a man who has passed his best days in Persia and India, and for many years has been employed in procuring intelligence, who says "I formerly told you that the march from Persia to India would be very difficult. I now tell you it is comparatively easy." This is the sense of McNeill's confession.[4]

He followed this up by writing to Auckland privately saying: "I presume you could occupy Bushire, and, if requisite, get up an insurrection in the neighbouring provinces without much difficulty." [5] However, officially he acquiesced in Palmerston's cautiousness and in a communication to Auckland from the Secret Committee told him that great care had to be taken to avoid giving grounds for a controversy over this issue with Russia and that until the outcome of McNeill's approach to the Shah was known and a more detailed knowledge of the situation at Herat was available, "it would be premature to come to any decision upon the affairs of Afghanistan." [6]

On 14th May, Palmerston received a large number of despatches from McNeill up to and including that of 8th March in which the envoy had announced his imminent departure from Tehran for the Shah's camp at Herat. He immediately sent McNeill a copy of Hobhouse's official

---

4 Hobhouse to Palmerston, 14 April 1838,(B.L.) Add. MS. Broughton 36469, folios 11-13.

5 Hobhouse to Auckland, 14 April 1838,cited in Kelly, p.294.

6 Secret Committee to Auckland, 10 May 1838, cited in Norris, p.162.

report to Auckland, intending doubtless thereby to indicate to McNeill the cautious outlook of the Cabinet without directly hampering his freedom of action, which he confirmed by intimating to McNeill the government's approval of his journey to Herat. However, within a week, Palmerston was again writing, in a considerably less restrained vein. The report Palmerston had received from St. Petersburg as to Russian activity in Central Asia had been confirmed by information sent by the consul-general in Odessa. He wrote to McNeill and instructed him to depute a confidential person into Bokhara to observe Russian activity there and to urge the ruler there to release Russians taken as slaves so as to deprive Russia of any pretext for armed interference. He suggested that while pleas on the grounds of humanity were likely to go unheeded, the desire to prevent a Russian expedition from invading the country should mean that an agent would have no great difficulty in persuading the ruler to release the Russian slaves.

> The case would, however, be different if, not content with that, the Russian commander should require an engagement in the shape of a Treaty, that the practice of carrying Russian subjects into captivity should for ever be renounced by the authorities of Bokhara.... The Russian Government will doubtless be eager to entangle the Ruler of Bokhara in engagements which that Government is prepared to see violated, in order to ground on any such violation a right to interfere by force of arms in Bokhara. [7]

---

[7] Palmerston to McNeill, 18 May 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 53. (Not in published version.)

Palmerston goes on to say that the agent, while not committing the British government to any obligation, must dissuade the ruler of Bokhara from entering into any such engagement while emphasising how important it was from the point of view of the safety of his country to prevent effectively the taking of Russian slaves, so as to deprive Russia of a pretext for attacking him.

Palmerston considered that this added dimension to the situation offered McNeill further arguments which could be advanced confidentially to the Shah, if his present relations with the Court allowed it. In another despatch of the same day, he suggested that McNeill might argue that although the Shah might resent the defiance of his authority by the Turkomens and Uzbegs, "it is very questionable whether the satisfaction which His Majesty would derive by avenging himself for the wrongs which he may have suffered, and by releasing his subjects from captivity, would not be more than counterbalanced by the certain evil which would result to Persia by the overthrow of the bulwark which now protects it against Russian encroachment in one quarter, and by having Persia placed in immediate contact with his ambitious ally." Palmerston told McNeill to recommend negotiation rather than force of arms since the latter needed recourse to the co-operation of Russia:

> You may remind the Shah of the fatal effects which have always followed the friendship and co-operation of Russia in the East. You may point out to His Majesty the incessant encroachments of Russia in every direction; and you may instance, with caution, so as not to betray the

source from which your information is derived, the course by which Russia is seeking to obtain a paramount influence on the shores of the Caspian, with the unquestionable intention of ultimately extending her influence and her rule from Asterabad to the interior of Persia and of Central Asia.

McNeill was to warn the Shah against being enticed by prospects of overrunning Afghanistan and even passing the Indus, since while it might be consistent with Russian policy to assist in these schemes at the time and even to allow the Shah and his immediate descendants nominally to rule such areas, experience of the past proved that once Russia got a footing in Persia, she would retain it and " the day will come when Russia having been allowed, by the indiscretion of the Persian Government, to consolidate her power, will finally overthrow the dynasty of the Shah." [8]

Palmerston was increasingly beginning to fear that success by the Shah at Herat could well be followed by a joint Russo-Persian expedition into the trans-Oxus territories. In such circumstances arguments were not enough and it prompted him three days after writing these two despatches to instruct McNeill to deliver an ultimatum to the Shah:

---

8 Palmerston to McNeill, 18 May 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 53. (Not in published version.)

You are instructed to proceed to the Shah; and to declare to him explicitly that the British Government cannot view with indifference his project of conquering Afghanistan.

That the British Government has reason to believe that this project has been conceived in concert with Russia; and that Russia has even supplied pecuniary means to assist in its execution; but, be that as it may, in any case must look upon this enterprise as undertaken in a spirit of hostility towards British India, and as being wholly incompatible with the spirit and intention of the Alliance which has been established between Persia and Great Britain. That, consequently, if this project be persevered in, the friendly relations which up to this time have so happily subsisted between Great Britain and Persia, must necessarily cease; and that Great Britain must take such steps as she may think best calculated to provide for the security of the possessions of the British Crown. [9]

Still Palmerston was threatening rather than acting, but he evidently foresaw the possibility of the latter, when he went on to tell McNeill to inform the Governor-General in India of the result of any communication with the Shah that resulted from his despatch.

By 16th June, Palmerston was able to tell his envoy in Persia that the Russian expedition into Central Asia had been postponed, but any feeling that this news in any way alleviated the urgency of the situation would have been dismissed on receipt of further despatches from McNeill two days later. In these McNeill enclosed the draft treaty between Kohendil Khan of Qandahar and the Persian Shah, under Russian guarantee, as well as a copy of the letter McNeill had sent to Auckland the same day, by which it was to be seen that he was already at the point of delivering an ultimatum to the Shah along the lines that Palmerston

---

9 Palmerston to McNeill, 21 May 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/1, folio 24.

was to propose. Palmerston referred these to Hobhouse immediately, writing:

This is what the Americans call "important if true"; but make Strangeways shew you a despatch of I think 11th April from McNeil in the Shah's camp before Herat, which came this morning, and of which I have desired that you may have a copy. That despatch gives a very different account, and states the complete investment of the place, the determination of the Shah to take it; the failure of a negotiation between him and Kamran; and an offer of the Russian Minister in Persia to guarantee a Treaty of defensive alliance between Persia and the Affghans - Defensive against any attack by the British. It seems to me that we ought now to strike; non est jam lenitati locus; severitatem Res ipsa postulat. [10]

Hobhouse needed no convincing. He had been keeping Auckland informed of the home government's dealings with McNeill and had sent him a copy of Palmerston's despatch of 21st May. He was still eager for some sort of British military presence in southern Persia and felt the issue decided by news received in Britain from Alexandria early in June - news which alarmed the government. Apparently all Najd had submitted to Mehemet Ali, and the Egyptian Viceroy had announced his intention of declaring independence from the Porte and establishing his own dynasty in Egypt and Syria. Hobhouse wrote to Auckland on 9th June:

We must take part with the Sultan.... I cannot help thinking that the necessity which this contemplated declaration of independence by Mahomet Ali might create, would justify also the occupation of Karrack. The Viceroy of Egypt will, doubtless, follow up his declaration by an attack on the Pachalic of Bagdad; and we shall want a position for British troops in the Gulph of Persia, which may be found conveniently at Karrack. True that place belongs to the Shah, but, considering his conduct, there is no need of much delicacy. We might occupy it first, and offer to buy it afterwards; and in the meantime, that step, so decisive, might assist McNeill in his negotiations at Herat. [11]

---

10 Palmerston to Hobhouse, 18 June 1838, (B.L.) Add. MS. Broughton 46915, folios 89-90.

11 Hobhouse to Auckland, 9 June 1838, cited in Kelly, p.294.

Auckland himself had already made up his mind to act by this time. On 1st May, Macnaghten wrote on behalf of the Governor-General to McNeill, telling him that it had occurred to Auckland that it might prove of very essential aid to his negotiations were as many cruisers as could be spared, together with a regiment of Native infantry, despatched to the Persian Gulf, "to hold themselves in readiness for any service on which your Excellency might deem it expedient under the orders of Her Majesty's Government, or the general authority which you may possess from it, to employ them with a view to the maintenance of our interests in Persia." [12] He wrote to the Secretary to Sir Robert Grant, the Governor of Bombay, the same day enclosing a copy of the letter he had sent to McNeill and requesting that the Bombay government comply with its contents. Such an initiative was a remarkable departure from the hesitancy characteristic of Auckland's conduct earlier in the year when, it will be remembered, he tended to share Palmerston's complacency in his attitudes towards Herat, as shown in his reluctance to issue McNeill with precise instructions and his refusal to deliver a direct remonstrance from the Indian government to the Shah. By the end of April, though, the picture had sufficiently altered for the Governor-General to start to reappraise his position: Burne's mission to Kabul to win the support of Dost Mohammed had ended in failure; and he had received McNeill's letter of 7th March in which the envoy had told him of his planned departure for

---

12 Macnaghten to McNeill, 1 May 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 76.

the Shah's camp. Auckland confided privately to Hobhouse that he had little hope that McNeill would succeed, and saw a complete rupture of negotiations as inevitable, if the Shah "should yet be buoyed up with hopes of conquest." In anticipation of this eventuality he told Hobhouse of his plan to send a steamer and a naval force to the Persian Gulf.[13] However it is evident that as yet, Auckland viewed this despatch of a force to the Gulf primarily as a means of assisting McNeill in any hasty departure from Persia, rather than as a lever in his negotiations. Writing to Hobhouse at the beginning of June, he says:

> McNeill's last confidential letter to me led me to request Sir Robert Grant to send an armed steamer or one or more cruisers to Bushire, not to make conquests but to bring away the British Embassy and Officers in the event of an absolute rupture with Persia such as at that time seemed to be most probable.[14]

Even with this limited objective in mind, Auckland had still issued the orders reluctantly, although by the middle of June, he was seemingly prepared to see this objective widened somewhat in its scope:

> I do not quite like this expedition, for I always dislike small armaments, for indefinite objects..... It is possible, however, that this demonstration, small as it is, may enable McNeill with advantage to hold a higher tone than he has done, and his letters to me had expressed a strong wish that something of the kind should be done.[15]

It is difficult to see how Auckland's ideas were evolving from his correspondence, because they tended to be disguised by his

---

13 Auckland to Hobhouse, 3 May 1838, (B.L.) Add.MS.Broughton 36473, folios 243-248.

14 Auckland to Hobhouse, 3 June 1838, (B.L.) Add.MS.Broughton 36473, folios 249-258.

15 Auckland to Hobhouse, 17 June 1838, (B.L.) Add.MS.Broughton 36473, folios 262-267.

circumspect manner of trying to avoid shouldering any responsibility. It can be seen from his letters to Hobhouse that he was anxious to put the onus of responsibility for the expedition on to John McNeill, as well as to express his reservations, not about the object but about the method. He wrote in a similar vein to Sir Robert Grant, adding that he had heard nothing from McNeill since 7th March, nothing from Herat since 23rd March and had had no instructions from the home government on Persian affairs except what could be collected from private letters: "All this embarrasses me, for in the absence of information and instructions it is not easy for me to take a decided step, and yet I may be forced to take one for in the pressure of events I cannot stand still." [16] Auckland was of the opinion that the most effective means of forcing a Persian retreat from Herat and ensuring against the possibility of future danger from that direction was to intervene in Afghanistan, and he was already giving this notion serious consideration by the beginning of May. Despite the set-back at Kabul, the ratification of an alliance with Ranjit Singh, by which a British Resident was to be placed at Hyderabad, had given Auckland a basis of contact with Sind which had the potential of subsequently being expanded into a British military presence there; and this made military action beyond the Indus more feasible than it has been hitherto.

---

16 Auckland to Grant, 15 June 1838, (B.L.) Add.MS. Auckland 37693, folios 44-45.

Such were the factors which influenced Auckland when on 12th May he prepared a memorandum on the situation as he saw it in Afghanistan. He accounted for his previous less urgent approach as resulting from a belief that McNeill would succeed in dissuading the Shah from marching on Herat - again conceivably transferring to someone else's shoulders any possible blame. Also he saw the influence of the Shah's attack on Herat as partly accounting for Dost Mohammed's rejection of British approaches: Vitkievitch's mission and the "restless and unaccommodating" nature of the Dost's character were also seen by Auckland as contributing factors. What may principally be gathered from this memorandum is that Auckland explained his change in attitude to his growing fear of a Russian presence in Afghanistan through Persian acquisition of authority and influence in that country. Whatever the result of the siege of Herat, Auckland saw Indian security as best safeguarded by some form of action beyond the Indus. If Herat survived the siege with its independence maintained, Britain would be able to help develop the country's defences, but this still left the problem of Qandahar and more particularly Kabul unresolved, Dost Mohammed having shown himself to be "so disaffected and ambitious, that with him, at least, we could form no satisfactory connection." In short the present ruler of Kabul was for Auckland too unreliable a figure to occupy so important a position strategically to India where "it is of the first importance to the tranquillity of our territories that we should have assured friends." Auckland, however, was more prepared to plan for the contingency that Herat would fall:

> One thing is to my mind very certain, that we ought not to suffer Persian and Russian influence quietly to fix themselves along our entire western frontier, and that it is, in fairness, open to us to take the high ground with Persia of her whole demeanour having lately been estranged and unfriendly to the British nation; of her schemes in Affghanistan (sic) being in the universal belief combined with designs of aggression upon India; and of her advance, therefore, in the mere lust of conquest to a position which would enable her to take up a threatening attitude towards our Indian possessions, being a measure not merely of attack on the Affghan independence, with which we might be restricted by treaty from interfering, but one injurious, in intention and in effect, to ourselves, which we are warranted in repelling by all means in our power. [17]

It is obvious from this memorandum that Auckland like Palmerston was being influenced by reports he was receiving from McNeill. It will also be seen that Auckland had decided that some measure of intervention in Afghanistan was necessary: either Britain could aid Kabul and Qandahar, as they were presently constituted, although this would have the disadvantage of helping those whose inclinations were less against the Persians than against the Sikhs; or Britain could permit and encourage "the advance of Runjit Singh's armies upon Cabul, under counsel and restriction, and as a subsidiary to his advance to organise the expedition headed by Shah Shoojah." [18] This latter course was seen by Auckland as most expedient if Herat were to resist the Persians successfully and even more so were the town to fall.

---

[17] Minute of 12 May 1838, cited in Norris, p.168.

[18] Ibid.

As he was modifying his reason for ordering the Gulf expedition during the months of May and June, so he was becoming less and less inhibited about an expedition into Afghanistan. At this stage he did not contemplate actual military intervention by the British or Indian armies, but he was clearly beginning no longer to feel bound by the 1814 treaty with Persia:

> I am well determined that none of the considerations towards that Country (Persia) which would have withheld some months ago shall withold me now. All I want is a clear field of action before me and a fair prospect of success, and no exertion shall be wanting on my part to ensure it. [19]

Both in London and in Simla, a line of policy that would ultimately lead to the ordering of British troops into Afghanistan was gaining increasing favour and momentum. By August, Palmerston was writing to his envoy in Persia in the following almost casually bellicose manner:

> We approve of the Bombay expedition to the Persian Gulf, but rather fear that it may not be sufficient for the purpose of stopping or bringing back the Schah and we shall probably be obliged to make war against Persia in Affghanistan, by marching an army in conjunction with Runjeet Singh to reestablish the Affghan monarchy and drive the Persians out of Herat and Ghourian..... But we must not let the Russians wound us deeply by using the Persian Hand and Weapon to strike the blow.[20]

A full consideration of the origins of the Afghan War and the complex web of relationships between British India and its neighbours beyond the Indus does not come within the scope of the present work, but what should be noted here is the role the Shah's ambitions towards Herat

---

[19] Auckland to Hobhouse, 10 July 1838, (B.L.) Add. MS. Auckland 37693, folios 89-93.

[20] Palmerston to McNeill, 10 August 1838, (H.M.C.) Broadlands 12889, GC/MA/70.

and John McNeill's reports, analyses and recommendations in relation to the crisis there played as factors in the development of the British and Indian governments' Afghan policy, its culmination in Auckland's Simla Manifesto, and the subsequent military débâcle.

oOo

McNeill left the Shah's camp on 7th June 1838. Unknown to him as he drew up his significant despatches from Meshed on 25th June, there had been a new spurt of activity by the Shah and his army. Herat had been under siege by his army for some six months and little if any progress militarily had been made. Ultimately the inhabitants of the town would have been forced to surrender out of sheer starvation, but it was becoming increasingly questionable whether the Persian army would remain intact long enough to witness and take advantage of such an outcome. The Shah realised this, as did the Russian representatives at his camp who were also aware that, having successfully persuaded the Shah to reject McNeill's approaches, the onus was now on them to come up with some positive contribution to the improvement of the Shah's precarious military position. The result of this was the formulation of a plan of attack, apparently under the aegis of Count Simonich. On 24th June the artillery made an attack with the intention of creating a breach in the town's defences through which the infantry could advance. Yet as McNeill later reports, the assault was repulsed, with the loss

of some 1700 to 1800 men on the Persian side, amongst whose numbers was General Berowski, the Polish commander of a battalion of Russian deserters. By the end of this fateful Sunday, it may well be presumed that the Shah had realised that he would never succeed in overpowering the town, and it was more a question of saving face than of hoping for victory that kept him from raising the siege immediately and instead continuing it through the summer. Militarily, though, 24th June was a significant turning-point, as it was in terms of the prestige of the Russian minister at the Persian court - a fact, of which Simonich himself was well aware.

Neither the British nor Indian governments realised this at the time, and the fears of Russian and Persian penetration physically and influentially into Central Asia and Afghanistan were far from allayed; nor indeed had McNeill heard of this new attack when he wrote to Palmerston from Meshed the following day. In fact he wrote two communications to the Foreign Secretary: one was a despatch proper, which has already been referred to, and in which he elaborately detailed his dealings with the Shah and the sequence of events which led up to his decision to leave the camp, and enclosed copies of the exchange of notes which had taken place; the other, which he copied to Auckland, was really intended to be a private letter but is of great value as an indication of what McNeill was thinking. In any case, Palmerston had

no hesitation in publishing at least part of it along with other correspondence relating to Persia in 1839.

It is evident that McNeill was indignant at the way he had been treated by the Persian government. He explained that the reasons for his departing were that government's refusal to meet his demands and its treating the British mission as a proscribed body. McNeill did not know what the Persian government was planning to do next, since having "sheltered itself behind an audacious denial of notorious facts," it had been made difficult for it to grant the reparation demand at some point in the future. Nevertheless McNeill felt that some public act of reparation was necessary to "prove to the people of Persia and of Central Asia, that we are not with impunity to be bearded and insulted." He reiterated his belief that the arresting of the extension of Persian and Russian influence had to be made at Herat:

> I cannot divest myself of the conviction that if we do not seize the present opportunity to check the advance of Persia, and to close the door against her on the side of Affghanistan, we must prepare, at no distant time, to encounter both Persia and Russia in that country. Russia is now pressing on in these countries with an eagerness which of itself might serve to convince us that she has some extensive and important plans in contemplation; and Count Simonich's announcement of an expedition to Khiva and Bokhara, coupled with the proposition that Persia should prosecute her views of conquest in Affghanistan, and that these two powers should ultimately adjust their frontier on that side, taken in connexion with the Russian Mission to Cabool and its objects, and also with the Kandahar Treaty, certainly presents a sufficiently extensive outline, which is to be filled in hereafter. and a sufficiently alarming prospect for India.

To "save Herat, and secure it" was McNeill's recommendation and:

In that case, even if Russia should reduce Khiva, though it would no doubt be a great evil, we should still be in a strong and very tenable position, which would enable us to oppose Russian influence by our own in Bokhara, to cause Russia much uneasiness, and even to make her position precarious in Khiva; to influence the whole of the nomad tribes of the Oxus and its tributaries, and of the Jejend and Moorghab as far as Merve; and perhaps even to force Persia to balance between us and Russia.

Here is an example of the somewhat dubious double standard of morality which nineteenth century British imperialism tended to espouse: Russian expansionist designs were to be labelled "evil" while similar British moves were to be justified in terms of securing hitherto acquired imperial possessions. McNeill pointed implicitly to the advantage of acting preemptively:

But if she (Russia) gets a military footing in Khiva before we shall have rescued and secured Herat, we must then, as it appears to me, retire on the line of the Indus, and send out ten or fifteen thousand more European troops to India. But even after having taken this costly precaution, our position there will be most precarious when Russia and Persia are on the opposite bank of the river, intriguing with all the discontented far and near, and tampering with the Sikhs and Scindians, with the easiest and best pass into Scinde at their command.[21]

McNeill also made much of the physical nature of the countryside that separated the frontiers of India from those of Georgia and he told Palmerston that he believed that neither physical obstacles nor lack of supplies would pose a problem for a large army "of even a hundred thousand men" marching from Georgia to Qandahar or to the Indus.

---

21 McNeill to Palmerston, 25 June 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folios 40-41.

He pointed to the manner in which the Persian army had subsisted for nearly seven months almost exclusively on the supplies of the countryside round Herat and Ghorian as an example of the productivity of the soil and the advantage it would afford to an invading army.

McNeill might with some justification be accused of overstating his case in this letter and exaggerating the consequences of British inaction as well as the ease with which Russia might possibly penetrate to the Indus. Still he believed that it was "a most hazardous policy to allow Persia to act as the pioneer of Russia" and told Palmerston that he would urge Lord Auckland by every argument he could find to " take a decided course, and to save Herat, even by attacking Persia, if that should be necessary." He proposed the occupation of Bushire and southern Persia and saw this as the most effective way of frightening the Shah into raising the siege. This was primarily because such an expedition could be undertaken speedily and good communications could be maintained between Bombay and the Persian Gulf. He told Palmerston that he preferred such a move to one overland through Afghanistan:

> In the midst of the mortification I have felt at the turn affairs have taken at the Shah's court, the greatest consolation I feel is, that the state of things which the obstinate perversity of the Persians has brought about may enable the British Government to act with more freedom and less compunction on the side of Affghanistan, where the Governor-General could easily put in motion such means as would force the Shah to raise the siege almost immediately. But as these means, when once put in motion, are not easily controlled, I apprehend it would in every respect be more advantageous to employ British troops in the south of Persia. [22]

---

[22] McNeill to Palmerston, 25 June 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folios 40-41.

McNeill also told Palmerston of the rumour that had been circulating that there existed a secret arrangement for Persia to exchange Herat for some territory which Persia had previously lost to Russia on the west shore of the Caspian beyond the River Arras. In the concluding paragraph he expressed the hope that Colonel Sheil was already on his way out from London bringing him leave of absence to go home:

> The heat of the weather, and the coldness of my reception in camp, and this journeying in the sun, have reduced me considerably, so that my health is too precarious to be trusted to. [23]

At the beginning of July, McNeill heard of Auckland's decision to send a small naval force to occupy the island of Kharaq in the Persian Gulf. Subsequently he received official confirmation of this as well as of the failure of Burne's mission to Kabul. As a result of the confirmation, he sent orders to the British Resident in Bushire to the effect that if the force was big enough and the situation warranted it, the force was to occupy Bushire as well. On 10th July, McNeill received Palmerston's despatch of 21st May, in which as has been noted, the Foreign Secretary authorised the envoy to deliver an ultimatum to the Shah. McNeill took it upon himself to send Colonel Stoddart back to the Shah's camp with a more strongly worded message than Palmerston had doubtless envisaged. He told the Shah that his enterprise was looked upon by the British government as undertaken in a spirit of hostility towards British India and as being totally incompatible with the spirit and intention of the Perso-British alliance; the present occupation of Herat territory was looked upon as a hostile demonstration against Britain and he hoped

---

[23] McNeill to Palmerston, 25 June 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folios 40-41.

that the Shah would avert the "inevitable consequences" by withdrawing his army. He also restated his demand for reparation for the violence to his messenger, and told the Shah of the occupation of the island of Kharaq, continuing, "the measures your Majesty may adopt in consequence of this representation will decide the future movements and proceeding of that armament." [24] Along with this note McNeill sent a copy of the draft of a treaty between the Shah and the Herat government similar to the one he had proposed after having visited the town. Also according to Palmerston's wish, he told Stoddart that he was to prepare to go on to Bokhara after having completed his mission at Herat. As McNeill told Palmerston afterwards, he had strengthened the force of Palmerston's ultimatum because he felt that when the instructions had been drafted, the British government had been unaware of certain developments:

> Her Majesty's Government, when these instructions were written, had not yet becomeacquainted with the Treaty, negotiated under the mediation and guarantee of Russia, between Persia and Kandahar; nor with the nature of the proposition, made by the Shah to the Herat Government, reported in my despatch, No. 31, from Meshed (25th June); nor with the language I had already ventured to hold with the Shah; nor with the circumstances which had forced me to leave the Shah's camp; nor with the failure of the negotiations at Cabool and Kandahar, and the return of Captain Burnes to India; nor with the arrival of the troops from India at Karrack. [25]

---

[24] Inclosure in McNeill to Palmerston, 31 July 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/1, folio 42.

[25] McNeill to Palmerston, 31 July 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/1, folio 42.

This explanation formed part of a bundle of despatches that McNeill prepared for Palmerston at the end of July and the beginning of August. In another he told him of the failure of the Persian attack of 24th June on Herat and also reported that the Kharaq expedition had caused a sensation all over Persia, the numbers involved having tended to be magnified and the impression being gained that his own departure from Persia would be the signal for the force's advance. Having arrived back at Tehran he had found the Persian authorities there together with the merchants and the entire population anxious to dissuade him from leaving Persia and expressing disapprobation of the Persian government; he continued:

> It appears to me, that if the Shah should disregard the solemn warning he has now received, and the military demonstration which which has now been made on his coast, there will remain no other means of protecting ourselves than to march a force into his country, and if necessary even to his Capital. Five or six thousand men could at any time, as I believe, and certainly at this moment march from the coast to the Capital without difficulty, and in the absence of the Shah at Herat, without opposition. [26]

McNeill feared that the effect of the treaty with Qandahar, of which he sent a copy to Palmerston, coupled to the fall of Herat, would be to raise up a powerful principality in Afghanistan, nominally subject to Persia, but which would always have to look to Russia for protection and make that country "indisputable mistress of the destinies, political and commercial, of all Central Asia." [27] It was this fear that

---

26 McNeill to Palmerston, 3 August 1838,(P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 82.

27 McNeill to Palmerston, 1 August 1838,(P.R.O.) F.O. 539/1, folio 43.

led him to propose such measures, although the element of pique which he must have felt towards the Shah and his government over their treatment of him while at the camp should not be entirely discounted.

McNeill had written to Lord Auckland from Meshed, stating his case possibly more forcibly and saying that a "decided course" was required to secure Herat. He now enclosed a copy of that despatch to Palmerston:

> Herat is at the moment entirely at our disposal, and if it is saved, we have only to dictate the terms on which we desire to connect ourselves with it, and having done so, to strengthen it by any means that may be thought desirable. It is a position of immense importance; jutting out like a bold promontory into the ocean of Central Asia, it commands every thing around it, and it is a position of the greatest political and military importance to any one who may possess it.[28]

McNeill was uncertain as to how the message delivered by Colonel Stoddart would be received by the Shah, and realised that for the Shah the obvious military setback suffered at Herat could well be outweighed by the prospects offered by the Qandahar Treaty, and the success of Captain Vitkievitch's mission to Kabul coupled to Burne's withdrawal from there, and that of Leech from Qandahar. In any case he hoped to have an answer to the demands he had made before having crossed the frontier into Turkey.

---

[28] McNeill to Auckland, 25 June 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/2, folio 84.

Chapter Seven

Colonel Stoddart arrived at the Persian camp before Herat with McNeill's ultimatum on 11th August, delivered it to the Shah the following day, and on the 14th was summoned by the Shah to be told that the Persians were prepared to yield. The Shah is reported as saying "We consent to the whole of the demands of the British government. We will not go to war. Were it not for the sake of their friendship, we should not return from before Herat. Had we known that our coming here might risk the loss of their friendship, we certainly would not have come at all." [1] The Shah's capitulation coupled to this somewhat disingenuous assurance did not lead McNeill to advocate any lessening of Britain's defensive strategy. Although he thought it might appear unjust and ungenerous to express any doubts as to the good faith of the Persian government on this occasion, he told Palmerston that after the repeated violations of promises made to him at the Camp, he felt it his duty to doubt and continued:

> I trust that the Government of India, with the knowledge it possesses of what passed in camp while I was there, and the evidence it now has of the effect produced by strong measures, will not be deterred by the promises of the Shah or his ministers, from prosecuting with vigour the only course which, as it appears to me, can retrieve our position or re-establish our influence in Central Asia. [2]

---

1 Stoddart to McNeill, 12 August 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folio 45.

2 McNeill to Palmerston, 11 September 1838, ibid., folios 44-45.

In a postscript to a letter to McNeill of 9th September, Stoddart wrote "The Shah has mounted his horse "Ameeriy" and is gone." [3] By the time the envoy wrote to Palmerston on 6th October he was able to tell him that the Persian army had marched from before Herat and that his latest information indicated that the Persian army was at least fifty miles from Herat on the Persian side of Ghorian. At the same time as delivering his optimistic news, McNeill stressed the need for immediate measures to secure and strengthen Herat's position and to convince the defenders of that city and through them all the inhabitants of Central Asia "that England is not unmindful of the allies who may suffer serious losses in defending their common interests, and that she is ready to acknowledge the sacrifices, and reward the valour and constancy by which she has gained so much."[4]

By now John McNeill had passed from the centre of the stage in negotiations with the Persian government and in his despatches to Palmerston was mostly concerned with passing on information he had received from Colonel Stoddart as to the progress the latter was making in his discussions with the Shah. McNeill had resolved not to proceed to Tehran to meet the Shah unless satisfactory reparation was offered for the insult to his messenger. In his despatch of 6th October, he tells Palmerston that although Colonel Stoddart had indicated in his

---

3 Stoddart to McNeill, 9 September 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O.539/1, folios 43-46.

4 McNeill to Palmerston, 6 October 1838, ibid.

letters of 25th, 26th and 27th August that reparation would be granted, inferring even that the official concerned, Hadji Khan, had been dismissed, his more recent letters had made no mention of it. So because of this inconclusive state of affairs, McNeill decided to send Colonel Sheil to meet the Shah to arrange this matter, while he himself would proceed slowly to the capital "hoping the Shah, having fulfilled his promise respecting his return from Herat, will not permit the renewal of official and friendly intercourse between himself and the British Government to be interrupted, by delaying to make a concession so much inferior in importance to that which he has already made." [5]

McNeill was not however to get the satisfaction he required. He had previously been told by the Prince Governor of Azerbaijan that Hadji Khan had been dismissed after being tried on no less than seventeen charges of which his conduct towards McNeill's messenger had been the principal and most important. Colonel Sheil did not receive such assurances at the Court. Mohammed Shah was in no mood to redeem the promises made to Colonel Stoddart and he despatched his own envoy to Europe to put the Persian case to European governments and particularly to the British. The Persian government refused to give an apology, and while Hadji Khan had been deprived of his rank, the Persian government continued to maintain that his guilt had not been

---

5 McNeill to Palmerston, 6 October 1838, (P.R.O.)F.O.539/1, folios 45-46.

proved and his offence against the British mission had not been among the charges on which he was tried and dismissed. Moreover McNeill had not been given a reply to his demand that the Persian government should state whether or not Khoorrookh, Subzar and Furrah were in Persian hands. The evasive and unco-operative nature of the government's dealings with Colonel Sheil convinced McNeill that he could not with propriety resume his official duties at the Court and he resolved to return to Tabriz. Unless there was good reason for him to take a different course, he intended to remove the mission into Turkey and to send the officers of the British detachment to Baghdad to await the instructions of the government in London.

In a private letter of 3rd December 1838, McNeill told Palmerston that the tone assumed by the Persian government left little doubt that it was prepared to break completely with Britain and, intending to act on its treaty with Qandahar, it was preparing for renewed hostilities. As for the Russian position in all this, McNeill was unable to venture an opinion as to whether any assistance had been promised, although he knew no specific commitment had been made. He realised that his own position with the Shah and his government was very low and believed that such was the strength of the bad feeling towards him that it might well prove to be an impediment to a future reconciliation between Persia and Britain. In any case he doubted that he would be instrumental in bringing that reconciliation about:

I am therefore of opinion that I shall be taking the course most likely to be advantageous to the public service, and least likely to be embarrassing to Her Majesty's Government, when I avail myself of the opportunity now offered to me to take advantage of my leave of absence, and return to England, leaving it to be decided by future events, and by the views of Government, whether or not I should come back to Persia. [6]

The ambassador left Persia for home on 2nd January 1839. Another slight at the mission had taken place when a Frenchman in the Persian service, Major-General Semino, had attempted to seize a house adjoining the garden of the British residence in Tehran which the Shah had previously placed at the disposal of Major Todd. General Semino maintained that he had been given the authorisation of the Persian government, and while the government disavowed all knowledge and ultimately forced him to leave the property, this petty affair was symptomatic of the increasing breakdown in communication between the British mission and an angry Shah and his government. Perhaps it formed part of a subtle strategy to bring about a complete rupture but McNeill had already made that decision, and Colonel Sheil together with members of the mission removed to Erzerum in Turkey whence he continued to act as Chargé d'Affaires. This left Captain Hennell at the residency in Bushire as the only remaining official British representative on Persian soil and as such an obvious butt of Persian disapprobation. Already in November 1838

---

6 Macalister, p.235.

there had been an attack on the Residency sarraf or broker, and there was to be increasing friction during the first months of 1839 including the placing of an embargo on grain exports from the mainland to the British garrison on Kharaq. At the end of March this friction culminated in the refusal of the Governer of Bushire, Mirza Asad, to give an assurance that the Residency landing-stage might be used for the embarkation of Sir Frederick Maitland, the acting Governor of Bombay, who was on a visit. Again this might be seen as somewhat trivial, but it did not stop a tense confrontation, in which at least one Persian soldier was killed. In any case it precipitated the immediate withdrawal of the Residency staff to Kharaq.

It is perhaps not entirely fair to blame events in Bushire on the Persian government in Tehran, as the Shah's grip on provincial governors had weakened somewhat in the aftermath of the Herat campaign. Sheil did however protest over the attack on the sarraf from Erzerum but met with little satisfaction. As for subsequent events, Persian unpleasantness on the mainland at Bushire has to be set against British occupation of Kharaq, and the proximity of this was bound to lead to heated tempers.

As Mr. McNeill returned home via Constantinople and Moscow, his impression of his mission may well have been one of dashed hopes and unfulfilled opportunities. British prestige at the Persian court

was even lower than when he arrived in September 1836, the Commercial Treaty had not been concluded, and even his part in persuading the Shah to raise the siege of Herat could well be viewed as a temporising measure, postponing the problem rather than solving it once and for all: McNeill saw a renewed war in alliance with Qandahar and backed by Russia as inevitable. As for the envoy's health, it had been broken, his hair whitened by two and a half years of anxiety, and a fall from a sledge near Moscow did little to improve his delicate physical state. Future events were not quite to take the course McNeill anticipated and feared, and in no small measure exactly because his own role, not as a negotiator with the Shah but as the reporter and interpreter of events for the governments in London and India, had primed these decision-makers to a greater awareness of the political situation in Central Asia. As a consequence of McNeill's man-on-the-spot exposition and analysis of events, the directions of policies could be altered, new initiatives formulated, and what the envoy saw as inevitable prevented.

oOo

The picture of the Herat crisis as it has been discussed in the foregoing chapters has been derived from the correspondence of British officials to British governments in London and India.

While there is no reason to doubt the overall objectivity of these reports, it has to be remembered that there is an "us and them" situation, where the Russians may be portrayed as the creeping aggressors, the Persians and Afghans as wily natives whose virtue was the usefulness of their countries to the defence of India, and whose vice was their and their countries' usefulness to the Russians in expanding their sphere of influence. Russian expansion was to be condemned on moral grounds, while British initiatives were to be justified on pragmatic ones. Thus because the Persian government could at present be identified with the Russian cause, the opinion British correspondents were likely to hold of their actions was fairly low, and this does tend to present a somewhat distorted overall presentation of the crisis. From the Persian point of view, it is understandable that they wished to discredit John McNeill by sending their own emissary to the British government; it is understandable that they regarded Britain and her representatives as enemies since they had wished to thwart Mohammed Shah's attempt to retrieve what he considered part of his dominions; it is understandable in the light of this that the Persian government should lack an accommodating spirit, should subject Mr. McNeill and his mission to insults and slights, and should, in the belief that it was overwhelming British pressure that had turned a glorious victory into a humiliating defeat, be unwilling

to conclude any sort of arrangement. In a way it is admirable and indicative of the Persian government's political maturity that it should act with such restraint in its dealings with the British envoy. After all, it was less than a decade before that General Griboedov and all but one of the Russian mission were massacred, and in 1822 Henry Willock had been threatened with decapitation in his dispute with Fath Ali Shah over British subsidies. A respect for diplomatic immunity had never been a strong characteristic of the Persian government.

A nineteenth century Persian historian relates the Herat campaign from a different although not necessarily conflicting viewpoint.[7] This account has little concern for the wider implications of the crisis on the plane of Great Power politics, although is evidently aware of such implications when venturing an explanation of what was considered the meddling of the British minister:

> He considered the following problems: If the city of Herat is incorporated in the Persian empire, the inhabitants of Kabol and Kandahar will without hesitation submit to the orders of the Persian shah, and the frontiers of the Persian empire will border on India. The Indians will turn to the Persian empire; they will show contempt for the English agents and expel them from India.[8]

---

7 Hasan-e Fasa'i, Farsnama-ye Naseri, published in Tehran ca. 1896 and translated into English by Heribert Busse under the title History of Persia under Qajar Rule (New York: 1972). References are to this latter edition.

8 Ibid., p.256.

The writer of this account treats the crisis as a dispute between Persia and Kamran and suggests that McNeill was the unwanted interloper who upset a dispute that otherwise would have been settled in a traditional chivalric manner. He is at pains to point out the military supremacy of the Persian side and the willingness of Herat to surrender had not McNeill gone into the town on the understanding that he would reassure Kamran and bring him before the Shah, but then proceeded to encourage Kamran to defend the town promising him subsidies, troops and war materials. Such a view is a legitimate interpretation of events. The writer mentions that in late April of 1838 there was a famine in the town and Yar Mohammed Khan expelled some twelve thousand people for whom the Shah made provision to have them fed, given money and sent to Khorassan. Again Kamran was at the point of surrendering and again McNeill interposed, sending someone to tell him never to surrender and advising the Shah to raise the siege and return to Tehran:

> The Shah was astonished at this proposal and said that McNeill was an inexperienced ambassador and did not know the requirements of religion and state and that no attention was to be paid to him.[9]

The account tells of the British ambassador being allowed to enter the town again on the same understanding as before; but he then proceeded to offer Kamran ten thousand tomans and to assure him that if he would withstand the siege for another two months, he would be left alone, since the Shah's attention would be diverted by the arrival of British battleships off the coast of Fars. While it is clear from

---

9 Hasan-e Fasa'i, pp.257-258.

McNeill's letters to Lord Palmerston that he wished to enter the city again, there is no record that he actually did so. The Persian writer states that when McNeill returned, he repeated his warning that there was no hope of capturing Herat, which angered the Shah enough for him to order the envoy to leave the camp. Again the latter's own account of his departure is different.

The chronicler admits to the failure of the assault on the town of 24th June and sees the news of the arrival of British warships in the Gulf and the reported threat of the British officer in charge that "we shall change the friendship between Persia and England to enmity" as precipitating the Shah's decision to raise the siege. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the failure of the assault and the Shah's reason for withdrawing are fairly reported and agree with British accounts, while a matter of a more trivial nature and less crucial to the Shah's prestige, the departure of the British envoy from the camp, is reported differently: arguably the accuracy of McNeill's own account could be called into question.

Mention has been made of the degree of political maturity the Persian government displayed in its relations with Britain during the crisis. Additionally, despite the failure of the expedition and the economic and political pressures thereby placed on the Shah's ability to hold his country together, a slide by Persia towards disintegration into autonomous principalities or appanages of Russia and Britain was resisted. This compares favourably with the state of affairs towards the end of the reign of the previous Shah when in the wake of military

defeat by Russia and the provisions of the Treaty of Turkmanchai and in anticipation of the accession struggle, there was considerable internal restlessness, which only strong concerted action by Russia and Britain on the Shah's death prevented from turning into anarchy. Although this time there was some unrest amongst provincial governors, as in Bushire, on the whole the cohesion of the state was maintained and this was to a great extent due to the personality of the Prime Minister, Hadji Mirza Aghasi. He was the power behind the throne of a weak monarch and realised that a subtle play-off of the two Great Powers in their vying for influence could be to Persia's advantage both politically and economically. It will be noted that at this juncture the insults and slights offered to Britain were but pinpricks and the attitude while unco-operative was never fundamentally hostile. It was a question of having an awareness of the prevailing climate of relations between the two great powers, acting in accordance with this climate, but never pushing too far, in case Britain or Russia put caution aside and acted on emotion. For Persia in the late 1830s, this approach was still in its infancy, although the opportunist yet flexible response to the developments of the Herat expedition perhaps exemplify it: it was after all the British who were initially upset by the turn of events, and both great powers were to suffer military setbacks in pursuance of their interests, while Persia could quietly

profit from the attention paid to her. In fact it has been suggested that as a consequence of Russian and British commercial attention, the Persian aristocracy gained new profit-motivated preoccupations, which diverted their attention away from creating internal disruption and paved the way for a measure of internal stability which was to last until towards the end of the century.[10]

The raising of the siege by no means brought about an immediate defusing of the tension between Britain and Russia. The episode and reactions to it had merely served to confirm mutual suspicions, and fear of war was strong on both sides. After all, Russia had been seen to support an alliance between Persia and the rulers of Qandahar and Kabul, and there was nothing to suggest that the threat thereby posed to the security of India had disappeared with the Shah's retreat westwards. He continued to garrison the frontier fortress of Ghorian and his aspirations had only had their fulfillment postponed rather than thwarted. For Russia, British retaliation was just as ominous: the island of Kharaq had been seized and it was now common knowledge that Lord Auckland was organising an expedition to overthrew the two Afghan rulers and set up a puppet ruler in their place.

If both sides were to have given full endorsement to their expressed positions, a military clash in Asia would have seemed inevitable. As it was Russia made the first move to conciliate Britain

---

10 Peter Avery, Modern Iran (London: 1965), p.46.

by disavowing the actions of her agents. In a note of 1st November 1838, Nesselroade told his ambassador in London, Count Pozzo di Borgo, to deny any aggressive intention on the part of Russia in Asia and to urge Palmerston to evacuate Kharaq and renew relations with the Persian government.[11] Count Simonich was recalled and his successor, A.O. Duhamel, was instructed to break off all relations with Kabul and Qandahar, convince the Shah that he would receive no aid from Russia, and persuade him to seek a settlement with Britain. He was also to arrange for the repatriation of the battalion of Russian and Polish deserters, who had been the only Europeans fighting for the Shah.[12]

Palmerston was not as receptive to these conciliatory gestures as the Russian government might have hoped, and he had already decided on Britain's course of action. As he had written to his ambassador in Russia, the Marquess of Clanricarde:

> It is evident that the Shah's expedition against Herat was part of a scheme planned some time ago for extending Persian and therefore Russian influence all over Afghanistan.... But Auckland has been told to take Afghanistan in hand and make it a British dependency and there is no doubt of his being able to accomplish that object.

---

11 Nesselrode to Pozzo di Borgo, 1 November 1838, Parliamentary Papers, No. 110.

12 A.O. Duhamel, Autobiographia, cited in Philip E. Mosely, "Russian Policy in Asia (1838-9)," The Slavonic Review, 14 (1936). Mr. Mosely points out that once in Tehran, Duhamel became convinced that Simonich and Vitkievitch had not exceeded their instructions in following an aggressive policy, and while fulfilling his government's instructions, he advocated a more militant stance by Russia in Asia.

We have long declined to meddle with the Afghans and have purposely left them independent, but if the Russians try to make them Russian we must take care that they become British.

Palmerston told Clanricarde that he did not believe that Russia wanted to go to war but "to push on to the extreme point of encroachment and aggression to which she may be allowed to go without war."[13] The assurances that Nesselrode gave in his Note confirmed Palmerston in his belief that Russia feared above all a war with Britain, but he viewed Russia's concern over the British presence in Kharaq with a certain amount of cynicism. He wrote to Hobhouse:

> The Russians seem touchy about Karrack, for Pozzo dwelt much upon it in conversation. I suppose they see the advantage it would give us. Pozzo said of course you will evacuate it, for, you know, you can take it again whenever you like it; from whence I infer, that, as soon as we are out of it, they mean to persuade the Shah to fortify it, so as to prevent us taking it again.[14]

Although the siege of Herat had been adandoned and although the Russian government was making pacific overtures and offering assurances, Palmerston had no intention of giving up Kharaq at this stage nor the expedition to Afghanistan. The decision concerning the latter was taken in India but fully approved in London. John McNeill's appeal for continued vigilance and for the vigorous pursuit of a course to retrieve Britain's position and "reestablish our influence in Central Asia" had had a profound effect in shaping the Foreign Secretary's intransigent attitude.

---

13 Palmerston to Clanricarde, 26 October 1838, cited in C.K. Webster, The Foreign Policy of Palmerston 1830-1841 (London: 1951), p. 746.

14 Palmerston to Hobhouse, 14 November 1838, cited in Kelly, pp. 300-301.

As far as Russia was concerned, the ambassador in London had already appreciated that Britain's Afghan policy had been irrevocably formulated, and he foresaw dire consequences for Russia's position in Central Asia. He attributed the British government's seeming reluctance to use Russia's good offices in reaching a settlement with Persia and the delay in renewing direct contacts as indicative of a desire to maintain the pretext of a quarrel with Persia, so that once Afghanistan had been conquered, Persia too would be ripe for occupation. Pozzo had understood from Lord Melbourne that Britain intended to have her Indian frontiers adjoin those of Russia. Even if he had misconstrued this, John McNeill had returned to London advocating quite strenuously the policy to which he had alluded in his despatches: the occupation of Persia. It is hardly surprising therefore that the Russian envoy felt justified in raising the alarm. However Nesselrode was not impressed by these alarmist notions and it was his views that were ultimately to hold sway. Even so, Czar Nicholas is quoted as saying to him:

> I agree with you, my dear friend, but it is a good thing to be on our guard, and if madness, for such it is, drove England to wish to measure herself against our troops in the deserts of Persia, I hope in God, and in the bravery of our troops, to make her repent of it. [15]

Already on 24th March 1839, despite the opposition of Count Nesselrode and the Minister of War, Chernyshev, the government in St. Petersburg had given approval to the projected expedition of General Perovsky to capture Khiva. Significantly though, the

---

[15] Cited in Mosely, p.673.

the campaign was to be delayed until Britain had undertaken her Afghan project. It was thought that the delay would make the expedition appear as a deliberate response, and one of which Britain, by virtue of her own actions, would hardly be in a position to demand an explanation. Count Nesselrode was nevertheless of the opinion that it would be unwise to do more than undertake the Khivan expedition as a show of Russian prestige, and he succeeded in dissuading the Czar and other members of the St. Petersburg Cabinet from their belligerent mood by drawing up two memoranda, one an analysis of the recently published British Correspondence Relating to the Affairs of Persia and Afghanistan, the other accentuating the difficulties of aiding Persia and Afghanistan against Britain. Nesselrode believed that a contest with Britain would be damaging to the Russian position at the Porte, where control of the Straits had been wrested from Turkey by the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi in 1833. Militarily, Russia's theoretical might was huge, but practical estimates of troops available for service on the Turkish and Persian borders were not more than eighty thousand. By concentrating these troops on a campaign in Central Asia, the Porte might be placed in a position to throw off Russian domination.[16]

Palmerston too had no wish to upset the precarious balance of interests in the Near East by too aggressive a stance in Central Asia, especially when a crisis between the Sultan and Mehemet Ali was developing. Thus he had no intention of acceding to alarmist views and

---

16 Mr. Mosely in the previously cited article reproduces these two important memoranda.

countenancing a direct attack on Persia. Just as he had labelled Russia's policy as pushing to a point of aggression just short of war, so too the Afghan expedition could be evaluated in the same light. Yet out of all this mutual suspicion, a policy of reconciliation was ultimately born, as exemplified in the Brunnow mission to London in September 1839.

It was apparent to the Foreign Secretary that the contest for political and commercial influence had to continue, and the British position in Persia in this pacific struggle was not helped by a rupture in relations. However he was in no hurry to heal this rift with several outstanding matters requiring to be settled: there were the questions of the attack on McNeill's courier and the renewed unrest in Bushire; and more importantly Palmerston wanted the Shah to conclude a commercial treaty, abandon once and for all his designs on Afghanistan, and withdraw his garrison from Ghorian. When he heard that an envoy of the Shah was on his way to Britain, he was initially unwilling to receive him, but then met him unofficially. The envoy, Husain Khan, endeavoured to justify the Shah's reason for attacking Herat and blamed McNeill for the way in which the crisis subsequently developed. This was to be expected but he also expressed the Persian government's concern at the continued occupation of Kharaq. This proved to be Palmerston's bargaining weapon in gaining the objectives

he required, but it was not until early 1842 that the British government was sufficiently assured of the Persian government's good faith to instruct Auckland to order the evacuation of Kharaq, despite the latter's hesitation.

John McNeill had arrived back in Tehran in October 1841 to a seemingly cordial reception by the Shah, who eagerly concluded the commercial agreement. However, despite the signing of the treaty, the unequivocal apology tendered for the attack on the courier, and the firman for the protection of the British mission's servants, the Shah's designs upon Herat remained. Auckland had wanted to retain Kharaq as a means of keeping the Shah in check. The wisdom of his attitude may be better appreciated after the massacre of the British mission at Kabul and the retreat to the Indian frontier. This collapse of Britain's Afghan policy was to lead to a souring of relations with Persia and served to revive the Shah's temporarily dormant ambitions. What was different at this juncture was that there was no support forthcoming from Russia or her agents. The discomfiture at Khiva coupled to a desire to maintain cordial relations with Britain was sufficient to still the hawks in the Russian government for the time being.

The Persian envoy, Husain Khan, had attempted to discredit John McNeill in the eyes of the British government, but approval of the latter's conduct during the Herat crisis was signified by his being created a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. It was as

Sir John McNeill he had returned to Persia to conclude the commercial treaty, but in August 1842 he was relieved by Colonel Sheil and returned home. In revised French and English editions of his Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East published in 1854, he dealt with events subsequent to 1836 and continued to stress the importance of Persia and Turkey remaining autonomous states.

It is the role of Sir John as a diplomat that has been examined here but he was also to show an intense interest in social problems, both domestic and military. In 1845 he was appointed chairman of the board supervising the new Scottish Poor Law: a position he held until 1868; and together with Colonel Alexander Tulloch, he was responsible for investigating the arrangements and management of the commissariat department in the Crimea in 1855. Their controversial report was laid before parliament the following year, and although the army exonerated those criticised in the report, McNeill was later to make some bitter comments on the "levity" with which the matter was treated.

McNeill always retained his interest and indeed fascination for the affairs of the East. He was a founder member of the Royal Asiatic Society and was associated with it for over sixty years. It is perhaps appropriate that when he died at Cannes in May 1883, he was the last survivor of that original membership.

Appendix

"Translation of a Draft of a Treaty agreed to by the Government of Herat, and proposed to the Persian Government by His Excellency Mr. McNeill.

"Stipulations which His Highness Kamran Meerza will engage to perform.

I. Hostilities and plunder shall cease, and the capture and selling of slaves shall entirely be put a stop to.

II. The subjects and dependents of the Shah-in-Shah of Iran shall in no way be annoyed, and no attempt shall be made to injure them, and no disturbance shall be created on the frontier of Khorassan.

III. Every possible endeavour shall be used to prevent the Turcomans or others from plundering in the territory of the Shah-in-Shah of Iran, and in the event of these tribes offending, should the Shah-in-Shah of Iran desire to chastise and punish them, this Government shall furnish troops to the extent of its ability to co-operate with the troops of the Shah-in-Shah of Persia, for the chastisement of the abovementioned tribes.

IV. Whatever number of slaves may be in bondage with the Affghans of Herat and its dependencies, all that are within reach, or that they may be able to restore, shall be restored.

V. Whatever persons of the Affghans may have joined the Shah-in-Shah of Iran, shall not in any way be molested or injured.

VI. Hereafter Prince Kamran shall not give himself the title of Shah, but shall content himself with that of Shahzadeh.

VII. Merchants from all parts who shall enter the territory of Herat and its dependencies, shall be in every respect protected, and shall not be molested in life or property.

VIII. The tribe of Hazareh shall not be restored, but this Government shall do all in its power to remove them to their former abodes in

the Persian territory.

"Demands of His Highness Kamran Meerza.

I. His Majesty the Shâh-in-Shah of Iran shall treat Prince Kamran as one of his own brothers.

II. The Ministers of the Persian Government shall in no possible way interfere in the internal affairs of the dominions in possession of Prince Kamran; but these affairs shall be left under the entire control of the Ministers of the Government of Herat, that they may be able to fulfil their engagement.

III. Ghorian shall be given over to Sheer Mahommed Khan, and Sheer Mahommed Khan himself shall at all times remain with the Shah-in-Shah of Iran.

IV. The Shah-in-Shah of Iran shall not send troops to the territories in possession of Prince Kamran, and shall prohibit his governors, and soldiers, and subjects, from plundering." [1]

---

[1] The translation of the stipulations and demands was undertaken by D'Arcy Todd and a copy was sent to Palmerston by McNeill as an inclosure in his letter of 12 May 1838, (P.R.O.) F.O. 539/1, folio 29.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Synopsis

1. Introduction

Two sets of papers in the British Library proved valuable for this work. In the Auckland Papers, the writer was able to draw on material contained in four of the several bound volumes marked 'Private Letter Books' which contain copies of letters the Governor-General sent to members of the Cabinet in London, particularly John Cam Hobhouse, President of the Board of Control, to John McNeill, and to his own subordinates in India. Hobhouse's own correspondence, the Broughton Papers, was also useful, containing letters received and copies of some despatched. The correspondence was very helpful for the period around Colonel Sheil's visit to London in April 1838. Both collections are arguably peripheral to the central role of John McNeill but contribute to an understanding of the fumbling for a coherent British policy towards Persia and Afghanistan.

The Broadlands Papers, deposited with the Historical Manuscripts Commission, were another interesting but by no means extensive manuscript

source. One folder (BD/PE) contains fifteen items, all of them drafts by Foreign Office staff of despatches to McNeill which have been amended or added to by the Foreign Secretary. A series of letters outline Palmerston's instructions to his envoy, while most of the later despatches subsequently appear in the printed Correspondence. A further two folders classified under General Correspondence (GC/MA/39-62 and GC/MA/63-72) contain private correspondence between the Foreign Secretary and John McNeill and include copies of a "Memoir on Koordistan" dated 20th October 1835 and a "Memorandum on the Question of affording aid to Persia..." of March 1836 by Mr. McNeill. It should be noted that, while valuable, the correspondence between Palmerston and McNeill contained in the Broadlands Papers is scant and the manuscript originals of most of the copious exchanges in the printed Correspondence must be sought elsewhere.

The printed Correspondence proved to be the single most valuable source for this work. The writer made extensive use of the version Palmerston had prepared for the Cabinet, in two parts, labelled "Private and Confidential. Correspondence relating to the Affairs of Persia and Affghanistan. Printed solely for the use of the Cabinet." The copies used were at the Public Record Office under the classifications F.O. 539/1 and F.O. 539/2. The former is endorsed "Viscount Palmerston's copy" and is extensively annotated in pencil, with phrases and sentences scored through and "omit" written in the margin. The reason for these endorsements lies in the fact that after his Cabinet colleagues had had an opportunity to examine the exchanges between Palmerston and McNeill virtually in their

entirety, the Foreign Secretary decided to publish the correspondence in order to vindicate government policy in Afghanistan. However against this, he needed to balance Russian anger if that country were to appear in too unfavourable a light, thus he edited the Cabinet version extensively, omitting many references to Russia, and in some ways by default, allowing the role of Count Simonich to be exaggerated. This version appeared in 1839 under the title Correspondence relating to the Affairs of Persia and Affghanistan.

The writer was unable to locate Sir John's diaries and letters and had to content himself with those printed in the Memoir of Sir John McNeill written by his granddaughter, Florence Macalister. Access to McNeill's private papers, if they still exist, would clearly have been preferable, but Mrs. Macalister's account affords an adequate although selective and affectionate portrait. The nineteenth century practice of anonymity in the many periodicals presents a problem in attributing articles to McNeill, but there is no doubt as to his authorship of the "Visits to the Haram" in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine during the 1820s and the article on Persia in the same periodical in 1827. His pamphlet Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East is an extremely well-reasoned presentation of the Russophobe case and provides an invaluable insight into his likely attitudes in the initial stages of his term as ambassador. There are many articles of the period of considerable interest including one under the title of "Russia, Persia, and England" in the Quarterly Review in 1839, which was by way of an extended review of the recently published Correspondence. The Annual Register of 1839 carried a short chapter of similar content.

Sir John Kaye's History of the War in Afghanistan was for many years the definitive work on the first Afghan war, although the fact that it was written little more than a decade after the event might tend to detract from its objectivity. J.A. Norris's The First Afghan War retains this pro-British bias but provides a fresh account greatly helped by the application of modern historical techniques. If at times his many lines of argument become somewhat obfuscated by the sheer weight of scholarship, his treatment of McNeill, arguably a fringe character to the central issue, is very thorough and the writer found his ideas and references immensely helpful. J.B. Kelly in Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795-1880 gave valuable guidance to the Persian Gulf dimension of the crisis, and Sir W. Ker Fraser-Tytler's Afghanistan was essential reading for gaining a general understanding to the background of Afghan history.

Sir Henry Rawlinsons's England and Russia and the East is an important contribution to the later debate in Victorian Britain on the significance of Russian expansion. Russo-British relatives in general are well covered in C.W. Crawley's article "Anglo-Russian Relations 1815-1840", while Philip Mosely's articles and monograph on Russia's Asiatic policy in the 1830s help to clear up the question as to whether there was a Russian threat to India. Writing in the 1930s, Mosely was able to drew on material in Russian archives at present unavailable to western scholars. British policy is elucidated in John H. Gleason's The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain, and H.W.C. Davis's Raleigh Lecture "The Great Game in Asia, 1800-1844" is a seminal work in the discussion of the

origins of Russo-British rivalry and on the British agents used to counter Russian influence in Central Asia. One of the more recent contributions to the continuing debate is "Russian Imperialism Reconsidered" by Emanuel Sarkisyanz. Mr. Sarakisyanz stresses the paradox that the rival's imperialist expansion is judged morally while one's own is judged pragmatically, and he points to McNeill as saying "self-preservation is the first duty." This essay appears in a useful collection entitled Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution under the editorship of Taras Hunczak.

An unexpected source of information was A Medical History of Persia by Cyril Elgood. Several chapters are devoted to British medical influence from the late eighteenth century onwards and Sir John's role as a physician is developed against the backdrop of the political and diplomatic events.

2. Papers in Manuscript

BRITISH LIBRARY (B.L.) ADD. MSS.

Auckland 37690, 37692, 37693 and 37694.

Broughton 36469, 36473 and 46913.

HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS COMMISSION (H.M.C.)

Broadlands 12889 GC/MA/39-62, GC/MA/63-72 and BD/PE/1-15.

3. Printed Papers

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE (P.R.O.)

Correspondence relating to the Affairs of Persia and Affghanistan. Printed Solely for the Use of the Cabinet. F.O. 539/1 and 539/2.

PUBLISHED

Correspondence relating to the Affairs of Persia and Affghanistan. An edited version of the Correspondence in the Public Record Office, published as a single volume in 1839, and as part of the Parliamentary Papers 1839, XL.

4. Contemporary Books, Pamphlets and Articles

Annual Register, 1839.

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine.

"Visits to the Haram," by Meerza Ahmed Tubee. 15 (February 1824), 16 (June 1824), 18 (December 1825), 21 (March 1827), 22 (November 1827).

"Persia." 21 (February 1827).

"Invasion of India." 22 (September 1827).

"Foreign Policy." 38 (August 1835).

"Foreign Policy and Foreign Commerce." 39 (February 1836).

"Persia, Afghanistan and India." 45 (1839).

Burnes, Sir Alexander. Travels into Bokhara. 3 volumes. London: 1834.

Burnes, Sir Alexander. Cabool: Being a Personal Narrative of a Visit to that City. London: 1842.

Conolly, Arthur. Journey to the North of India Overland from England, through Russia, Persia and Afghanistan. London: 1834.

Evans, George de Lacy. On the Designs of Russia. London: 1828.

Evans, George de Lacy. On the Practicability of an Invasion of British India. London: 1829.

Fraser, James Baillie. A Winter's Journey (Tatar) from Constantinople to Tehran - with travels through various parts of Persia. 2 volumes. London: 1838.

McNeill, John. The Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East. 3rd. edition. London: 1854.

Quarterly Review.

Review of Arthur Conolly, Journey to the North of India.... 52 (1834).

Review of Alexander Burnes, Travels into Bokhara. 52 (1834).

"Russia, Persia, and England." 64 (1839).

"Foreign Policy." 67 (1840).

Sheil, Justin. "Notes on a Journey from Tabriz...." Journal of the Royal Geographical Society, 8 (1838).

Urquhart, David. The Edinburgh Review and the Afghan War. London: 1843.

Wolff, Joseph. A Mission to Bokhara. 7th. edition. Edinburgh: 1852. (Reprinted 1969).

5. Other nineteenth century and early twentieth century works

Curzon, George N. Russia in Central Asia in 1889 and the Anglo-Russian Question. London: 1889.

Curzon, George N. Persia and the Persian Question. 2 volumes. London: 1892. (Reprinted 1966).

Dictionary of National Biography. 22 volumes. London: 1908-1909.

Encyclopaedia Britannica. 8th. edition (1853). 9th. edition (1880).

Kaye, Sir J.W. History of the War in Afghanistan. 3 volumes. London: 1857-1858.

Krausse, Alexis. Russia in Asia (1558-1899). New York: 1899.

Lane-Poole, Stanley. Life of Stratford Canning, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe. 2 volumes. London: 1888.

Macalister, Florence. Memoir of the Right Hon. Sir John McNeill. GCB and of his second wife Elizabeth Wilson. London: 1910.

Markham, Clements R. A General Sketch of the History of Persia. London: 1874.

Rawlinson, Sir Henry. England and Russia in the East. London: 1875.

Sheil, Lady M.L. Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia. London: 1856.

Watson, Robert Grant. A History of Persia from the beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the Year 1858.... London: 1866.

Wolff, Sir Henry Drummond. Rambling Recollections. 2 volumes. London: 1908.

6. Later Books and Articles

Adamec, Ludwig W. (ed.): Herat and Northwestern Afghanistan. Graz, Austria: 1975.

Arberry, A.J. (ed.) The Legacy of Persia. Oxford: 1953.

Avery, Peter W. "An Enquiry into the Outbreak of the Second Russo-Persian War, 1826-28." Iran and Islam. ed. C.E. Bosworth. Edinburgh: 1971.

Avery, Peter W. Modern Iran. London: 1965.

Bearce, George D. British Attitudes towards India, 1784-1858. Oxford: 1961.

Bilgrami, Asghar H. Afghanistan and British India 1793-1907. New Delhi: 1972.

Bolsover, G.H. "Aspects of Russian Foreign Policy, 1815-1914." Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier. ed. Richard Pares and A.J.P. Taylor. London: 1956.

Bolsover, G.H. "David Urquhart and the Eastern Question, 1833-37: a study in publicity and diplomacy." Journal of Modern History, 8 (1936).

Bolsover, G.H. "Lord Ponsonby and the Eastern Question (1833-1839)." The Slavonic Review, 13 (1934).

Bourne, Kenneth. The Foreign Policy of Victorian England 1830-1902. Oxford: 1970.

Busse, Heribert. History of Persia under Qajar Rule. New York: 1972. Translated from Persian of Hasan-e Fasa'i, Farsnama ye Naseri (1896).

Cheshire, Harold T. "The Expansion of Imperial Russia to the Indian Border." The Slavonic Review, 13 (1934).

Crawley, C.W. "Anglo-Russian Relations 1815-1840." Cambridge Historical Journal, 3 (1929).

Davis, H.W.C. "The 'Great Game in Asia (1800-1844)." Proceedings of the British Academy, 12 (1926).

Dodwell, H.H. (ed.) The Cambridge History of the British Empire. Volume IV: British India. 1497-1858. Cambridge: 1929.

Edwardes, Michael. Playing the Great Game. London: 1975.

Elgood, Cyril. A Medical History of Persia and the Eastern Caliphate from the Earliest Times until the Year A.D. 1932. Cambridge: 1951.

Fraser-Tytler, W. Ker. Afghanistan, A Study of Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia. 3rd. edition. London: 1967.

Fredericks, Pierce G. The Sepoy and the Cossack. London: 1972.

Gleason, John. The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain. Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1950.

Graham, Gerald S. Great Britain in the Indian Ocean 1810-1850. Oxford: 1967.

Guedalla, Philip. Palmerston. London: 1926.

Habberton, William. Anglo-Russian Relations Concerning Afghanistan 1837-1907. Urbana, Illinois: 1937.

Hunczak, Taras. (ed.) Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution. New Brunswick, New Jersey: 1974.

Hurewitz, J.C. Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East - A Documentary Record: 1535-1914. Princeton, New Jersey: 1956.

Huttenback, Robert. British Relations with Sind 1799-1843, An Anatomy of Imperialism. Berkeley, California: 1962.

Imlah, Albert H. Lord Ellenborough. Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1939.

Kazemzadeh, Firuz. Russia and Britain in Persia 1864-1914. New Haven, Connecticut: 1968.

Kelly, J.B. Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795-1880. Oxford: 1968.

Morison, J.L. "From Alexander Burnes to Frederick Roberts - a Survey of Imperial Frontier Policy." Proceedings of the British Academy, 22 (1936).

Mosely, Philip E. Russian Diplomacy and the Opening of the Eastern Question in 1838 and 1839. Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1934.

Mosely, Philip E. "Russian Policy in Asia (1838-9)." The Slavonic Review, 14 (1936).

Mosely, Philip E. "Russia's Asiatic Policy in 1838." Essays in the History of Modern Europe. ed. Donald C. McKay. New York: 1936.

New, Chester W. Life of Lord Durham. London: 1929.

Norris, J.A. The First Afghan War 1838-1842. Cambridge: 1967.

Seton-Watson, Hugh. The Russian Empire 1801-1917. Oxford: 1967.

Sykes, Sir Percy. A History of Persia. 2 volumes. London: 1930.

Sykes, Sir Percy. A History of Afghanistan. 2 volumes. London: 1940.

Thornton, A.P. For the File on Empire. London: 1968.

Thornton, A.P. The Imperial Idea and its Enemies - A Study in British Power. London: 1959.

Ward, Sir A.W. and Gooch, G.P. The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy. 2 volumes. Cambridge: 1939.

Webster, C.K. The Foreign Policy of Palmerston 1830-1841. 2 volumes. London: 1951.

Webster, C.K. "Urquhart, Ponsonby and Palmerston." English Historical Review, 62 (1947).

Wilson, Sir Arnold. The Persian Gulf. Oxford: 1928.

Woodward, Sir Llewellyn. The Age of Reform, 1815-1870. Oxford: 1962.

7. Unpublished Theses

Anick, Norman. The Embassy of Lord Ponsonby to Constantinople, 1833-1841. Ph.D. McGill University, 1970.

Kellett, Anthony. Sir Henry Harding and the Crisis in the Punjab, 1844-48. M.A. McGill University, 1972.

McMullen, Mary E. British Public Opinion and the Origins of the Crimean War: The Impact of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy 1830-1854. M.A. McGill University, 1972.

Senior, Hereward. The Activities of David Urquhart in British Diplomacy and Politics, 1830-1844. M.A. McGill University, 1951.