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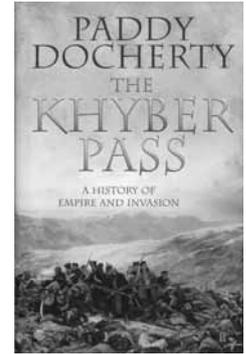


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## ***The Khyber Pass – a history of empire and invasion***

by Paddy Docherty

*Faber and Faber: London; 2007; 261 pp., ISBN 978-0-571-21977-3;  
RRP \$49.95 (hard back)*



As I begin to write this review<sup>1</sup>, Pakistan is again in crisis. Word has just filtered through of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, whom the West hoped would bring stability to that troubled, nuclear-armed country, now also the home-base of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Across the border in neighbouring Afghanistan, Australian troops are fighting to extend the effective remit the Western-backed government of Hamid Karzai into the Pashtun homelands that border Pakistan and the new Australian government has just announced that Australian forces will remain there “for the long haul”.

What to make of all this? An historic perspective certainly helps and this is where *The Khyber Pass* comes in. Paddy Docherty has written a concise history of central and south Asia from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the present day, focusing on the rise and fall of empires and the major battles, movements of peoples, and religious and cultural changes that have accompanied them. A slim volume attempting to cover 2500 years inevitably only skims across the surface of history. It is descriptive rather than interpretive, although there are significant insights into the role of religion in the rise of empires and *vice versa*, which still resonate today. While this lack of interpretation may disappoint historians, it makes the book readily accessible to the general reader seeking context for the current situation.

The Khyber Pass, itself, although geographically central to the story as the major route through the mountains separating south from central Asia, is really only incidental to the main narrative. Nevertheless, Docherty uses the romance of the Pass in the days of the British Raj to gain the reader’s interest initially and to maintain it throughout the historic journey. Several sections read like a “Boys’ Own” adventure. Indeed, as part of his graduate research in history, Docherty travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan in the winter of 2003 and made the journey through the Pass. His experiences add further spice to the narrative.

The book is written in 11 chapters each of which describes a discrete period of history and could be read as a standalone historic summary of the period, if desired. It commences with the rise of the Persian empire of Cyrus the Great and subsequently, Darius the Great, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, which expanded westward to interface with the Greeks, then eastward into central

Asia and eventually annexed north-west India (essentially the Indus valley). Through his employment of the symbolism of Zoroastrianism, Darius was merely the first of many subsequent rulers who would seek to use religion as an ally to his rule.

The Macedonian king, Alexander the Great, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC entered India through the Khyber Pass, defeated the Indian King, Porus, and annexed the Punjab. He was succeeded by the Mauryan Empire, one of the greatest dynasties in Indian history, which fostered Buddhism and exported it through the Khyber to central and east Asia. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Greeks and central Asian nomads followed; then the Kushans, originally from China; and, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the Sasanian Persians and White Huns, the latter fearsome fighters from central Asia. The first Muslims, Arabs, entered the Indus valley via the delta in 711 AD, extending the Mediterranean-Asian caliphate to north-west India. They, in turn, were successively replaced by Genghis Khan and Timur in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; then the Mughals, Muslims from central Asia, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; the Sikhs in the Punjab in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and finally the British Raj. The last chapter briefly summarises the recent history of Pakistan, touching on the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s in doing so.

The book is well-written in an easy-to-read style. It has two maps, one of the ancient era extending from Greece in the west to the Ganges delta in the east, and the other covering the same geographic area for the modern era. While these maps are helpful, they do not contain the detail necessary to a full understanding of the text and additional, more detailed maps would have been beneficial. The book concludes with a valuable bibliographic essay, including a guide to further reading on the topics covered, but it is not a complete listing of the works consulted in researching the book. Importantly, there are no references, footnotes or end notes. When historians make contentious assertions, one should be able to see the evidence on which they are based. Listings of general works consulted do not permit this. Sources can be cited appropriately without reducing readability. This lack of rigour notwithstanding, the narrative overall appears to provide a sound recitation of the relevant history within the limits of historic research. It is, without doubt, a good read and I commend it to anyone who wishes to view the present problems of the region in their historic context.

**David Leece**

<sup>1</sup>28 December 2007