

A NEW LOOK AT THE NORTH WEST FRONTIER

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As a result of the rivalries and expanding international interests of France, Russia and the United Kingdom, the early decades of the 19th century saw a pivotal geopolitical change between Europe and Asia that would have consequences reaching far into the future: in order to ensure the security of its South Asian interests the U.K. dispatched a number of envoys, agents and spies into the vast area between northern India and the Ottoman and Russian Empires. The information gathered by these adventurers provided the basis for British policy for the next hundred years, down to the Great War of the 20th century. Their publications have served as major sources of historical data, especially for Afghanistan, Iran and the area that later became Pakistan. But little work has been done on how their larger social context conditioned their work. How can we understand today what they thought about the importance of what they were doing, or what motivated their interactions in the situations they found themselves in? They were all from a certain English class of that period. But what was it in their socialization, their education and their career objectives that prepared them for these adventures, to deal in the way they did with such unfamiliar social situations, and to ask the questions they asked. What should they have asked that they did not think of?

I will focus here on the adventures of Lieutenant Henry Pottinger, whose brief was one of the most challenging. But he was well aware that he was one of a number of Englishmen of different social stations doing similar things. What we learn about any one of them will throw additional light on the activities and significance of the work of the others, and help us to understand the relationship between these countries and the West as it has evolved down to the present day.