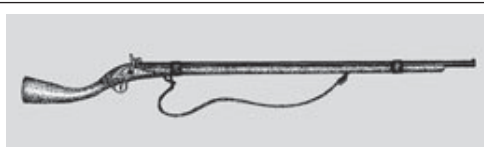


The Battle of Maiwand and Dr Watson

by Kerry Murphy

The campaign brought honours and promotion to many, but for me it had nothing but misfortune and disaster. I was removed from my brigade and attached to the Berkshires, with whom I served at the fatal battle of Maiwand. There I was struck on the shoulder by a Jezail bullet, which shattered the bone and grazed the subclavian artery. I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Murray, my orderly, who threw me across a pack-horse and succeeded in bringing me safely to the British lines.¹



The Afghan musket, or Jezail, had an 80-yard maximum effective range and a rate of fire of one shot per two minutes

.....
“How are you?” he said cordially, gripping my hand with a strength for which I should hardly have given him credit. “You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive”²

Dr Watson’s second paragraph in *A Study in Scarlet*, tells us briefly about his time in the British Army, and his near demise at the “fatal battle of Maiwand”. Apart from his ‘shifting’ jezail bullet wound, we do not hear of Afghanistan or Maiwand again in the Canon. At the time, 1887, this would not be surprising as Afghanistan was not part of the Empire and would not feature again in British military history until after the First World War. It is really only since the long standing NATO presence in Afghanistan starting 2001 that Afghanistan makes much of an appearance in the western English press. Once again, British troops find themselves in a war which seems unlikely to be winnable.



Maiwand is situated near Kandahar, in Helmand province of south eastern Afghanistan. The area is dominated by Pashtun tribes. The British invasion of Afghanistan in 1879 was part of a long campaign by successive British Governments to secure a presence in Afghanistan as a check on perceived Russian intentions on India. This British fear was the main cause of the First Afghan War in 1839-1842.³ Lord Lytton was the Viceroy for India and Disraeli the Prime Minister.

A Russian delegation visiting Kabul in July 1878 was viewed as a potential threat by the “forward school” Russophobes in the British

¹ *A Study in Scarlet*

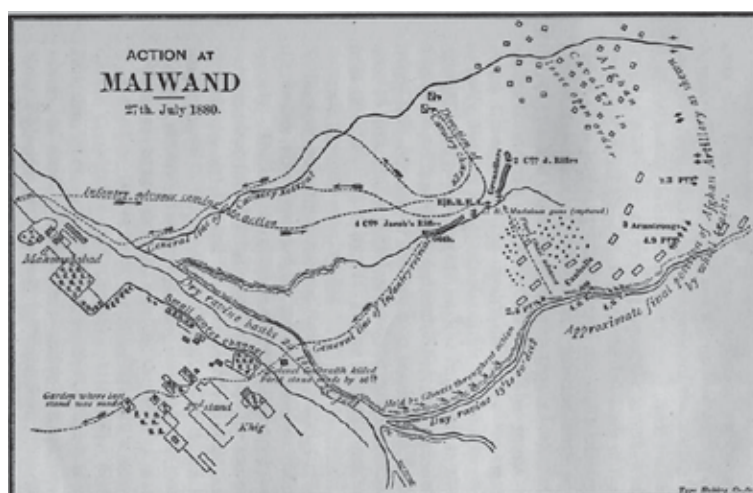
² *A Study in Scarlet*

³ For a good modern account of the period, see William Dalrymple’s *Return of a King* (Bloomsbury 2013)

Government, especially in India. The Afghan Emir Sher Ali was pressured by the British to allow a British presence in Kabul. By allowing the Russians a presence in Kabul, and refusing a British presence, Emir Sher Ali was perceived by the British as hostile. Lord Lytton's demand for a British delegation was refused and when the British delegation was turned away by Afghan border guards in November 1878, Lytton had his justification for war. The British invaded on 21 November 1878. The main cities of Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalbad and Khost were soon captured, the emir fled and later died in Mazar-e-Sharif in the north of Afghanistan. The British executed those who were rebellious against them and there were accounts of retribution against civilians.⁴ This not surprisingly did not endear them to the Afghans who responded to calls for a holy war or Jihad by joining nationalist opposition to the British.

A son of the Emir, Ayub Khan was in Herat province and he raised a force and marched towards Kandahar in June 1880. Estimates place the Afghan force at around 8-10,000 regulars and maybe 15,000 irregulars including Ghazis.⁵ The Ghazis (غزای) were warriors and the word is Arabic with an origin commonly referring to raiding parties. They were seen as brave warriors who would die for their religion, and is similar to Mujahid (one who struggles, or fights in the jihad). In the period of Soviet rule in Afghanistan, those Afghans opposed to the Soviets were called the 'Mujahadeen'.⁶ In the time of the Second Afghan War, they were seen as brave and fanatical irregular troops.

The British responded to Ayub Khan's advance by sending a brigade from Kandahar under Brigadier General Burrows towards the Helmand River. The British force consisted of British and Indian troops, around 2,600 fighting troops and twelve pieces of artillery. There were also around 3,000 other personnel involved as cooks, water carriers, tailors, servants and stretcher bearers as well as transportation workers.



On 27 July 1880, the British, suffering shortages of water, and many not having breakfasted, formed up on the eastern side of the Helmand River. The temperature was around 1200 F (490 C). The 66th Foot, or Berkshires as Watson called them, were on the right of the British flank facing large numbers of Afghan troops and Ghazi irregulars. The battle started around 10:30 with an artillery exchange and then an advance by the Afghan forces.

The 66th, the Regiment to which Watson was attached, was on the British right flank and was to suffer extremely high casualties in the ensuing battle. The 66th were not aware of a ravine to their right and the Ghazis used this cover to attack the British. The British were outgunned by around thirty Afghan artillery, and an account by Major Hogg sets the scene:

We were exposed for three hours to the most horrific artillery fire...any army ever had to stand in this country in as much as it was all concentrated from the front and flanks on a small surface

⁴ Yorke, E, *Maiwand 1880*, (Spellmount 2013) pp77-82

⁵ The actual size of the Afghan force is unknown. This estimate is from Yorke, E, *Maiwand 1880*, (Spellmount 2013) p151

⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghazi_\(warrior\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghazi_(warrior))

An interesting story told by the Afghans, but hardly mentioned in British reports, was the story of an Afghan woman Malalai. The story is that she inspired the Afghan forces at an early stage in Battle. Afghan author Abdul Raouf Binava reports how Malalai tore off her veil and used it to rally tribesman. Such an act would be dramatic and radical today in Helmand Province, let alone in 1880. Binava states:

The Afghan army was near defeat from exhaustion and thirst and the Afghan flag had fallen from the hand of the bearer who had been wounded. At this very moment, a young Afghan woman named Malalai arrived and lifted the Pashtun national flag and shouted a *jandei* (ancient tribal poem):

*With a drop of my sweetheart's blood
Shed in defense of the Motherland
Will I put a beauty spot on my face
Such as would put to shame the rose in the garden.*

*If you come back alive from the Battle of Maiwand,
I swear, my sweetheart, that the rest of your days
You will live in shame. With a drop of my sweetheart's blood
Shed in defense of the Motherland*

*Will I put a beauty spot on my face
Such as would put to shame the rose in the garden.
If you come back alive from the Battle of Maiwand,
I swear, my sweetheart, that the rest of your days
You will live in shame.¹⁰*



Malalai medal

Malalai was then shot by a British soldier. Her efforts have made her a heroine in Afghanistan, rather like a Joan of Arc figure. Now there is a medal in memory of her for brave Afghan women.

Relief of Kandahar by General Roberts

General Roberts sent forces to help Kandahar and to attack the Afghan forces who commenced a siege of the town. In September 1880, Roberts defeated the Afghan forces at the Battle of Kandahar. In 1881, the new Prime Minister Gladstone ordered the evacuation of Kandahar and the British forces retreated to British India. It was 2006 before the British returned to Helmand.

Significantly, Hazara people suffered greatly after the defeat of the British in Maiwand. The Hazaras

¹⁰ Cited by Wagner, E, 'The Bones of the British lying in Maiwand Are Lonely', *Marine Corps University Journal*, Vol 3, Number 1, Spring 2012, pp35-66, at pp42-44, Wagner cites: Melody Ermachild Chavis, *Meena, Heroine of Afghanistan: Ye Martyr Who Founded RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's, 2003), 13. *ge jandei* (poem) is also the inscription on the Minar-i-Maiwand (commemorative monument) in Kabul.

supported the British and paid the penalty from the ruling Pashtu. The Hazaras are a Shia ethnic minority, whereas the Pashtun are Sunna. The Hazara speak Hazaraghi, which is similar to Dari or Persian, whereas the Pashtun spoke Pashtu, a very different language. Yorke notes:

News of the British defeat encouraged a wholesale merciless attack on their (Hazara) villages by rival tribes and, specifically by Ayub Khan's supporters. Their plight was witnessed during Roberts' relief march. Sir Montagu Gerard, stationed on 'flanking duty' graphically observed the terrible fate of several Hazara villages near Chardeh and in the Karabagh region:

Never did I see such a scene of desolation and the devastation was apparently of very recent date. There was the mark of fire and sword everywhere, not a rooftop left to a homestead, not the trace of a living creature and even the fruit trees were barked or cut down.¹¹

The Hazara are still facing persecution from Taliban groups in Afghanistan and the vast majority of Afghan refugees who arrive in Australia by boat are ethnic Hazaras.

Maiwand was a significant defeat of the British. They retreated from Afghanistan in 1881 and the imagined Russian threat remained just that. For Victorian Britain, 'Maiwand' was one of those tragic battles in the Empire where gallant British redcoats died valiantly against an overwhelming enemy. If it were not for Dr Watson's account, few English speakers would ever have heard of Maiwand. It would only be known to those with an esoteric interest in British colonial wars and Kipling's poems.

*There was thirty dead an' wounded on the ground we wouldn't keep -
No, there wasn't more than twenty when the front began to go;
But, Christ! along the line o' flight they cut us up like sheep,
An' that was all we gained by doing so.*

*I 'eard the knives be'ind me, but I dursn't face my man,
Nor I don't know where I went to, 'cause I didn't 'alt to see,
Till I 'eard a beggar squealin' out for quarter as 'e ran,
An' I thought I knew the voice an' - it was me!*

*We was 'idin' under bedsteads more than 'arf a march away;
We was lyin' up like rabbits all about the countryside;
An' the major cursed 'is Maker 'cause 'e lived to see that day'
An' the colonel broke 'is sword acrost, an' cried.*

An Afghan victory still remembered

For the Afghans, especially the Pashtuns, Maiwand was a famous victory. Whilst the battle was forgotten by most English speaking westerners, apart from Sherlockians, the Afghans remember it as a famous victory and it features in popular culture. Frank Ledwidge recounts the story of historian David Loyn who said the Taliban have a song/poem:

my lover in the battle of Mawiwand, I will make a coffin for you from the tresses of my hair.¹²

¹¹ Yorke *Op.Cit.*, pp 133-134

¹² Ledwidge, F, *Losing Small Wars – British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan*, (Yale 2011) p63.

Another Taliban song states:

*We will remind them of Maiwand, and we will reach Washington, We are the soldiers of Islam and we are happy to be martyred.*¹³

US Marine lieutenant colonel Erich Wagner tells of how Sayed Jumma Agaha, a Taliban advocate was reported in 2006 as saying:

*“We do not want the British guns here. They should remember what happened the last time they came to Maiwand.”*¹⁴

Apparently when the British Parachute Regiment arrived in Gereshk (around 30 km from Maiwand) in May 2006, their commander met with local Afghan officials. Wagner notes:

*It took the Afghans just 10 minutes to bring up the Battle of Maiwand. Then-Major General Richard P Mills, US Marine Corps, Commander ISAF Regional Command Southwest, remembered that Afghans would constantly remind him of their previous victory ‘in the Maiwand War’ and how they and their forefathers were responsible for making Afghanistan ‘the graveyard of Empires’.*¹⁵

The modern Afghan army has one unit called 215th Maiwand Corps.¹⁶ An Afghan National Army (ANA) military operation in June 2007 in Andar District in Ghazni Province was called Operation Maiwand.¹⁷ Wagner reports that at the site of the Battle today, there is a pillar with a dome and crescent and 400 graves of Afghan soldiers from the battle.

Maiwand is used by the Taliban as a recruiting tool – “Fighting the British feels like unfinished business for many of us.”¹⁸ The Taliban viewed the return of the British as an attempt to avenge their defeat at Maiwand back in 1881. In reality, it seemed the British and US forces were fairly unaware of the Battle of Maiwand and its significance for Afghans, over a century later.

Even the efforts of Malalai are still spoken of and a major maternity hospital in Kabul is named after her. A prominent Afghan female politician is Malalai Joya. For the Afghans, Maiwand is not forgotten.



Monument to the 66th at Reading

Doctor Watson

What of Doctor Watson? The 66th have a rather grand monument in Forbury Park, Reading, to the officers and men of the regiment who ‘gave their lives for their country,’ in the Battle of Maiwand. Curiously, no Dr Watson, or his servant Murray, feature on the list of names of those who served at Maiwand. Not a subject that can be tackled here but has been a cause of interest amongst Sherlockians. Another point of interest is what duties were expected of the Army Surgeon.

A Royal Warrant of 1873 provided that surgeons would sign on for ten years in a service that was not the best paid or comfortable

¹³ Yorke *Op.Cit.*, p148

¹⁴ Wagner, *Op.Cit.*, p.40

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.42

¹⁶ Yorke *Op.Cit.*, p.149. And Wagner *Op.Cit.*, p.42

¹⁷ Wagner, E, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.55

for a doctor.¹⁹ Initial training was at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley and Watson would have had the rank of Lieutenant. At Netley, he would have had two 'soldier servants' but would be expected to pay them. Initial training was for around four months, mainly in surgery. Some duties were to be aware of feigned diseases, used to avoid unpleasant duties. In India, there was concern about sunstroke, malaria, dysentery and cholera. Various remedies were proposed for these ailments, not always effective. Travel to Bombay on a troopship would take around 28 days and then Dr Watson would have reported for duty.

Whilst not fighting, duties would involve checking for illnesses and making sure disease did not spread amongst the troops. Helen Simpson wrote in "Medical Career and Capacities of Dr. John H. Watson" in Bell's 'Baker Street Studies' (1934) about the medical career in the Army as being the unattractive place for doctors to work. She refers to "A Manual Practical Hygiene" by E. A. Parkes (1887). Parkes notes:

*Experience has showed in hundreds of campaigns that there is a large amount of sickness. The almost universality of this proves that, with every care, the conditions of war are unfavourable to health. (!) The strenuous exertions, the broken rest, the exposure to cold and wet, the scanty, ill-cooked, or unwholesome food, the bad water, and the foul and overcrowded camps and tents, account for the amount of disease.*²⁰

Parkes then lists the chief causes of sickness and mortality and the list includes:

- Diseases arising from improper and insufficient food
- Malarious disease
- Spotted typhus
- Contagious dysentery
- Enteric and perhaps other fevers
- Cholera in India
- Ophthalmia
- Venereal diseases

After further discussion of disease and the duties of the medical officer, there is reference to those wounded in battle who "should be treated in the field or intermediate hospitals, and then return to duty." There is some discussion about sieges –

The sanitary duties during sieges are often difficult – probably an understatement.

Medical treatments available in battle were few and would mainly have involved dressing wounds. In the time, given the heat, it is possible that men fainted due to the heat and lack of water. Little could be done with artillery and gunfire going off around you. Given the many diseases and illnesses, and practical problems of treating wounded in battle, one can suppose that the medicinal brandy in a hip flask was very much in demand.

Assuming Watson was evacuated with the wounded, there is some speculation about whether he went to Kanadahar, which then endured a siege until General Robert's victory in September 1881, or elsewhere. Mr Ernest B Zesler wrote about this in the October 1955 and April 1959 *BSI Journal* and he was strongly of the view that Watson was evacuated to another place, Khelat-i-Ghilzai, away from

¹⁹ Details of army medical service are well covered by Healy, Dr Tim, *From Netley to Maiwand, an account of the army career of Dr John H Watson MD*,

²⁰ <http://www.archive.org/stream/amanualpractica00chaugoog#page/n696/mode/1up> pp656-657

Kandahar. This is possible as he does not tell us of the deprivations in Kandahar during the siege.²¹

Watson gets to Peshawar, a major frontier town in British India, not in Pakistan. Later he returns to Britain on the *Orentes*, leaves the army and meets Mr Holmes in the laboratory at St Bartholomew's Hospital – and his life changed forever. Maybe, without the wound at Maiwand, Watson may have continued in military service and he would never have met Mr Sherlock Holmes. What a sad thing that would have been.



²¹ Zeisler, Ernest B, "The Road from Maiwand", *BSI Journal* October 1955 pp220-225, and 'A Final Word about Maiwand', *BSI Journal* April 1959 pp103-110



Every issue of the *Strand Magazine* from 1891 to 1922 is available online at <http://tinyurl.com/kcwxtl>. Scanned in original form, complete with illustrations, each file on the site consists of one half-yearly volume. They can be read

online or downloaded in pdf, epub or Kindle format.

For those unable to visit the *Sherlock Holmes Museum* in London, an online tour of the museum is available on YouTube at: <http://tinyurl.com/mkgcvbk>

Mapbox is a service that allows users to make their own interactive maps. One of its tutorials uses locations from 'The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans': <http://tinyurl.com/lkaapri>

Scott Monty's *Baker Street Blog* has merged with the *I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere* website (the last official post to the blog was on 28 August). *I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere* was founded as a podcast in 2005, and now includes current news and information about Sherlock Holmes in popular culture. www.tinyurl.com/ktsqppy.

Passenger Ron Ritter has started a blog and (e)mailing list to discuss the life and work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The blog is at <http://tinyurl.com/k43obw6> and can be read without registering, but if you want to join and post messages you will need to sign up for a free WordPress account. You can join the mailing list (it needs a Yahoo ID) at: <http://tinyurl.com/knfzjzj>

Spoiler: Attendees at Comic-Con in San Diego were treated to an amusing video in which *Sherlock's* Benedict Cumberbatch revealed how Sherlock survived the fall from the roof of Bart's Hospital at the end of the second season. The curious can watch the video at: www.tinyurl.com/p3wehot.

Although there is no screening date yet, there is a short teaser available online for the new *Russian Sherlock Holmes* series: <http://tinyurl.com/m96yfd2>

The website of the *Hungarian Sherlock Holmes* fan club includes a step-by-step video demonstration of how to draw Sherlock Holmes: <http://tinyurl.com/mvqcpmu>.