



CRISIS: A porter pushes a wheelbarrow carrying an ill Afghan national as he and his relatives enter Pakistan through a border crossing point in Chaman, Pakistan
PICTURE: Jafar Khan/AP

Disastrous intervention in Afghanistan is history repeating

"I NCREASINGLY, we live in a world where nothing makes any sense. Events come and go like waves of a fever, leaving us confused and uncertain. Those in power tell stories to help us make sense of the complexity of reality. But those stories are increasingly unconvincing and hollow."

So go the opening lines of Adam Curtis's documentary on Afghanistan, *Bitter Lake*.

The 2015 documentary, still available to view on BBC iPlayer, takes a strong nerve to watch. The film itself is anything but linear, as is Curtis's style. Scenes jump queasily from dam-building in Helmand province in late 1940s, to young Afghan women in an English class trying to hide their faces with their textbooks, to American Marines boasting of being "born killers" and fatally shooting a "bunch of people" against orders, to an odd *Blue Peter* segment on Afghan hounds.

At times the film feels uncomfortably invasive, the camera zooming in so close to the faces of unnamed Afghans that you can almost count their pores.

Maybe that is Curtis's point. The viewer often feels like a voyeur as the documentary attempts to weave competing threads and partly explain the origins of the 2001 post-9/11 invasion which became the US's longest war.

Afghanistan is at the centre of the world, at the meeting point of central and south Asia. Various attempts by the British Empire, US, Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia, amongst others, to control or influence it have ended in disaster.

Bordered by Pakistan to the east, Iran to the West, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, and China to the northeast, the 'graveyard of empires' has been a battleground for interfering foreign powers for centuries.

The great historian William

Claire
SIMPSON



Dalrymple's book *Return of a King* traces the first Anglo-Afghan War between 1839 and 1842 - the greatest disaster in British military history.

Britain's attempts to reinstall a ruler in Kabul who they believed would be favourable to their interests and counter Russia's influence ended in a violent rebellion. Around 18,000 troops from the East India Company marched into Afghanistan - only one came out.

The war went so badly that Britain ended up getting drawn into two more.

The second Anglo-Afghan War between 1878 and 1880 ended in Britain selecting a new Afghan ruler. A couple of decades later, the third Anglo-Afghan War saw Britain recognise Afghanistan as an independent nation.

The Soviet-Afghan war, sparked by a 1978

coup by Afghanistan's communist party, saw the Soviets on one side and the Mujahideen, backed by everyone from the US, UK, China and Arab monarchies in the Gulf on the other. That war eventually helped contribute to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Even interventions which, on the face of it, aimed to improve life in the country, caused devastation. Curtis notes that massive dams built as part of the then King of Afghanistan's modernisation project in the late 1940s and 1950s, backed by the US, had the effect of raising the level of the water table and bringing salt to the surface. In this new soil, opium poppies thrived. Now Afghanistan is by far the biggest producer of opium in the world. According to the US military, 90 per cent of the world's heroin is made from opium grown in the country. The trade earns the Taliban an estimated \$200m a year.

History keeps repeating itself. In 1963 British prime minister Harold Macmillan told his successor, Alec Douglas-Home: "My dear boy, as long as you don't invade Afghanistan you'll be absolutely fine". Yet in the intervening years that lesson got lost. If Tony Blair and George W Bush had listened to Macmillan's warning they might have thought twice about invading the country.

But that knowledge will come as no comfort to the millions of Afghans who have good cause to fear Taliban rule. Women's basic rights are already being denied. For all the Taliban's claims that women will be "allowed" to be educated up to university level, reports on the ground suggest that the opposite is true.

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Yet still western powers intervene and, when their wars fail, leave the most vulnerable people behind.

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ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 23 1921

RIC Man's Inquest

THE City Coroner, Dr James Graham, JP, opened an inquest at the Mater Hospital, Belfast into the death of Constable Timothy Galvin (27) on the 8th July in Union Street two days previously. An RIC witness stated that the deceased had come from Haulbowline, County Cork to Glenravel Street barracks. He was a very quiet, inoffensive young man.

A civilian witness said that on 6th July he had been speaking to deceased and Constable Conway at the corner of Union Street and Little Donegall Street. Suddenly four or more men shouted to the two policemen: 'Up with them' and several shots were fired.

Fate of 'Sinn Féin' Clergyman Decreed

THE decision of the Presbyterian Church authorities in the case of the Rev Dr JAH Irwin, minister of Killead [County Antrim] has been announced. It will be remembered that the keenest controversy was aroused in Church circles and political quarters over the activities of the rev. gentleman in America where he delivered many addresses and accomplished a splendid service to the cause of Ireland by refuting the slanders spread by a deputation of Protestant clergy and politicians who crossed to the US in the latter part of 1919.

The vendetta was carried on with the utmost vigour, even to the extent of making an effort to have him removed from the charge of his congregation. There has been a keen division of opinion among the members on the subject, a large body of his parishioners standing steadfastly by their minister.

A [Presbyterian Church] Commission went down to Killead and held a thorough investigation. It included the Moderator, Rev Dr Lowe and Rev JB Armour of Ballymoney and concluded: 'Dr Irwin discharges the duties of the ministry at Killead with fidelity and efficiency. They strongly disapprove of his political activities in America, but in as much as he now recognises that these were injudicious having regard to the feeling in the congregation, the Commission would strongly appeal to minister and people to cultivate a spirit of forbearance and Christian charity and work together harmoniously...'

CONSTABLE Galvin, a native of Co Limerick, was shot dead by the IRA on the eve of the truce. At the same time, Rev James Irwin (1874-1954) of Killead, who had accompanied President de Valera in the US in support of an Irish republic in 1920, received only a mild rebuke from his church. An extensive farmer and popular pastor, Irwin lived in Dunore House, a fine residence. He had recently been courtmartialled and sentenced to two years' imprisonment, only to be released suddenly. He was a lifelong friend of de Valera.

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