Review: Sir T. Holdich's 'The Indian Borderland': Review

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Reneville's 'Voyages' (vol. i. p. 94) and in the English translation of some of them (London, 1703).

The vitality of Daniel's chart is extraordinary, in view of the fact that it was utterly surpassed in accuracy and completeness by Edge's map, which was published by Purchas in 1625, and in Pelham's 'God's Power and Providence' in 1631, both works that obtained a wide circulation. Moreover, Edge's map was not forgotten. It was reproduced in numerous editions, and with various degrees of inaccuracy.* It was the one that gradually grew to better accuracy under the hands of Pieter Goos (c. 1666) and the Van Keulens, and was finally revised by the Captains Giles and Rep after 1707. But while that process of development was going on, Daniel's chart kept being reissued with little or no modification and by some of the publishers who were simultaneously issuing revised versions of Edge's!

SIR T. HOLDICH'S 'THE INDIAN BORDERLAND.'—REVIEW.†

By Sir GEORGE S. ROBERTSON, K.C.S.I.

THIS is a good book. It is well written, well arranged, well balanced. It abounds in graphic narration, in picturesque details, and is so full of information of every conceivable kind about the north-west frontier country of India, that a careful student of its chapters, even if he were never to stir out of London, might set up as an average expert, only with more than an average expert's knowledge, of the borderland so vividly painted. If, in addition, this careful student were to follow out the broad paths and the by-roads, which Sir Thomas Holdich has only the space to indicate by finger-posts, he might soon qualify as one who really knew his subject. After long days spent in actual survey work and in local study of this Indian frontier—from 1878 to his retirement a year or two ago—the author, in his statements of opinion concerning the great questions of the time, maintains always a high standpoint and a comprehensive outlook. Therefore his judgments, clear and simple, are invariably thoughtful and suggestive, however unable one may be to see eye to eye with him in all things. And what a romantic life that of this Indian survey officer has been! His pages are as full of adventure as a book for boys. Perils of all kinds are set down with the true natural touch—perils by flood, perils by cold, perils by sun flare and drought, most of all perils from

* In the following: Sir Robert Dudley's 'Dell' Arcano del Mare' (Florence, 1630); W. Blaeu's Atlas, c. 1660, and other editions; H. Hexham's Atlas, 1636; 'Pascaert,' by Johannes van Loon, c. 1660; 'Spitzberga,' by G. Valk et P. Schenk, no date; 'Pascaarte . . . van Europa,' W. P., and J. Blaeu (Amsterdam, 1677).

† 'The Indian Borderland: being a Personal Narrative of Twenty Years.' By Sir T. H. Holdich, K.C.I.E. Methuen & Co. 1901.

the fierce instincts of wild tribesmen. For instance, there is a particularly vivid account of the ascent of the Shuidar peak and the march down again. The climb was not without incident, but the return journey, with the rattle of ambushed musketry and a thunderstorm bursting out together, the battle-cry of the Sikhs surprising the surprisers, and the general picture of havoc and anger, is not readily to be forgotten. Again, the blizzard, accompanied with a mud cataclysm on the Chashma Sabz, is told in a way to make one shiver. At the same time there are everywhere beautiful descriptions of changing lights and atmospheric effects, a keen eye for colour, a love of flowers, a delight in beauty for its own sake. The poetry of those vast, silent, melancholy districts has sunk very deeply into the heart of the soldier-author. One's imagination is excited and gratified by the brilliant translation into words of the glories of a wonderful salt-mine on the island of Kishm; while the lovely night picture of a throbbing steamer, spars and masts illumined, disclosing the hidden radiance of a glowing silver sea which dims even the bright stars to ineffectual fires, rises in the mind again and again.

The great permanent value of Sir Thomas Holdich's book is in its geography, especially its political geography, and for the sane and lucid conclusions which he builds upon unchangeable geographical facts. Its value in these directions can hardly be overestimated. The chapters on the Russo-Afghan Boundary Commission are remarkable, even when all are praiseworthy. Every one interested in that melancholy delimitation of the Afghan and Russian frontiers must read them. Never was a humiliating national episode so agreeably told. The charm of the descriptions, and the pleasant little digressions into humorous memories and picturesque incidents, turn a depressing, humbling story actually into something delightful to listen to. Greater praise it is impossible to give. Beluchistan and the Persian gulf are written of with full knowledge and excellent judiciousness. The "Durand Boundary" is very good indeed. Sir Thomas Holdich is also at his best in that portion of the book dealing with the Pamirs—lucid explanations, impressive presentments of facts, and a narrative style full of interest, strongly attractive. Concerning the Kunar valley and Kafiristan, the constricting surveillance of the Afghan escort hampered Sir Richard Udny's commission in every way, and its effects are reflected in Sir Thomas Holdich's pages. Here alone does he seem to be somewhat hasty and superficial at times. Of Makran and its important delimitation to the west, in conjunction with Persian officials, we are told very entertainingly. Even that uncomfortable country and its terrible wind suggest only pleasant and cheerful thoughts in the memory of the stout-hearted sapper. The chapters dealing with the great frontier uprising in 1887 will not permit themselves to be merely glanced over; they compel attention. In a very fitting manner they wind up these

valuable experiences; the record ends, as it began, in war and adventure. We learn that the fault of native Indian plane-tablers is, they will not retreat fast enough when danger hovers near and the bullets begin to drop around them; they grow too absorbed in their work, they stay too long. But we at least get in return a brave picture of professional enthusiasm and devotion to duty. These characteristics, it may be added, of the Indian Survey Department, in all its grades, shine between the lines of this delightful book from cover to cover.

There are a few blemishes of minor importance which might well be removed in the next edition. It seems, too, almost a pity to introduce a new spelling for the long-accepted word Kafiristan. A pedantic critic might object to the statement on page 378 that when Nadir Shah was assassinated, "one Ahmad Khan, of the Saddozai section of the Abdali clan, *a Durani*, was one of the first" to hear of it. At that time, of course, there were no Duranis. Later, at Kandahar, Ahmad Khan himself altered the name of his tribe from Abdali to Durani (*Dur-i-Duran*, "Pearl of Pearls"), the result, it is said, of a vision. On page 256, a Chitrali prince of renown, Ghulam Dast-i-Gir, so called in honour of the great Pir Dast-i-Gir (is not his shrine at Baghdad?), is twice called by the impossible single name of Dastagird. The statement is made in the chapter upon Kafiristan that "no European has ever had dealings with any but the Kafirs of Kamdesh and the Bashgal valley. By implication that seems to turn the writer of this review into an American, as he certainly passed troublous days in the Viron or Presun valley, and had personal dealings with Kti, Kulam, Wai, and Ramgul Kafirs besides. Finally, there is some want of correspondency in the spelling of words in the book and in the map, the spelling of Merv and Ormarah, for example, as well as a few other instances showing the necessity for revision.

In conclusion, it may be said that on his own ground, as an admirable survey officer, as a scientific soldier, as an accomplished observer possessed of insight, humour, and sympathy, and as a peculiarly lucid, graphic, and eloquent writer, Sir Thomas Holdich is unequalled by any other authority on questions relating to the north-west frontier of India. His careful conclusions on the various railway projects through Afghanistan and Persia are based on immutable physical conditions; they seem to me to be convincing. Every one inclined to talk vaguely about railways across the Pamirs to India, or along the eastern shores of the Persian gulf, will find room for pause and reflection after reading these interesting pages. This is not the place to discuss the author's views on political questions, where, naturally, there is room for wide divergence of opinion. Numerous illustrations add greatly to the value of a book which no one will put down without regret, or without turning back to re-read some of its striking passages.