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The Reporting of Edmond O'Donovan

Literary Journalism and the Great Game

Michael Foley

The inclusion of Edmond O'Donovan in any collection devoted to literary journalism more or less rests with one book, *The Merv Oasis, Travels and Adventures East of the Caspian During the Years 1879-80-81.* Published in London in 1882, it became an instant best seller and book of the year (*Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 2010). In length the book is 1,000 pages, in two volumes, including notes, maps and appendices. An abridged one volume version was published the following year.

The Merv Oasis told the story of O'Donovan's travel in the Caspian and Central Asia and especially his time when he was held by Turkomen[1] tribesmen at the oasis of Merv, now Mery, in Turkmenistan. It is a typical tale of its time, full of feats of daring-do, written by one of Victorian journalism's great adventurers.

It was, however, more than a one-off piece of writing, of interest now only to the historian of the 19th century. It was an important work in the development of journalism – of journalism being an impartial record of events. This idea eventually became the paradign of journalism as an objective pursuit of information and facts, presented to a public in a way that precluded any opinion from the journalist, the summary lead and the 'who, what, where when and how' of modern journalism.

The work's undeservered obscurity can be explained by O'Donovan's early death in North Africa, no less than the rapid devlopments in the political landscape of Central Asia. O'Donovan came from a tradition of journalism in Ireland that saw impartiality as a form of protection. For an Irish nationalist to take sides would have been dangerous; impartiality was itself subversive, in that it refused to accept the official line, that given out by the authorities in Dublin Castle. The great war correspondent, Irishman, William Howard Russell, famous for his remarkable reportage of the Crimea War for *The Times,* though not a nationalist, refused to take the official line from the General Staff, and so changed journalism fundamentally. O'Donovan, and many other Irish journalists, were of that same tradition. Their relationship with the metropolitan centre, in London, was always a colonial one, forcing them to view the world differently to their English colleagues.

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[1] The transliteration of the inhabitants of Turkmenistan is either Turkmen or Turkomen. O'Donovan favoured Turcomen. I have used O'Donovan's spelling when quoting, otherwise I have used Turkomen.

Most books written about Central Asia were written by fervent supporters of British imperialism amid debates about the protection of India from the perceived threat from the Russian empire. O'Donovan, like a number of other Irish journalists, was hostile to such arguements. This was evident after he died, when at least one writer speculated that at the time of his death, he was trying to get an interview with Britain's enemy, the Mahdi.

Irish Journalism and professionalism

Irish journalism by the time O'Donovan was leaving for Central Asia had already forged a sense of professionalism and had evolved ideas of impartiality that allowed nationalist journalists to work for unionist newspapers and vice versa. If it was otherwise in such a small media market, they would have little chance of professional advancement, or even earning a decent wage.

The veteran Fenian, John Devoy, recalled O'Donovan's brother and fellow journalist:

> While William O'Donovan, a Fenian, was writing Tory editorials for *The Irish Times*, Jack Adams, Atheist, was doing the Catholic articles in the *Freeman's Journal*… O'Donovan and Adams used to meet at supper in the Ship Tavern in Abbey Street and have a good laugh over their articles, of which they didn't believe a word. (Devoy 1929, p 369)

While Devoy's anecdote might reveal a certain cynicism, the quote does underline the idea of the impartial journalist, working as a professional, who was able to write as a professional for any newspaper, regardless of its politics.

O'Donovan was one of a number of Irishmen who became journalists in London who, importantly, worked as foreign correspondents. Included in this group was the famous war correspondent, William Howard Russell, born in Tallaght, Co Dublin, as well as James J. O'Kelly, Frank Power and James J. Bouchier.

For O'Donovan, being a professional journalist meant not only writing of the politics of the region, and the possible threat to British interests, but he also invoked its science, geography and ethnography. His own learning – especially his linguistic abilities – and background made him especially qualified to write about a region that already fascinated readers in Britain and beyond.

O'Donvan was born in Dublin in 1844, one of six sons. His father was the well-known archaeologist, antiquarian and historian, John O'Donovan. Although the family had little money, enough was found to educate the boys, and Edmond was sent to the celebrated Jesuit School, Belvedere College. His early life was full of contradictions: he took the oath to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret oath-bound physical force nationalist organisation, but was also placed under the guardianship of under-secretary for Ireland, Sir Thomas Larcom, following his father's death.

The Fenian Oath

Like a number of his brothers he started studying medicine but, although he failed to graduate, he won a prize for chemistry. He was, for a time, an assistant librarian at

Trinity College. He was appointed by the IRB, the Centre- or chief- of a Fenian circle while at Trinity College, and travelled the country recruiting members. He wrote a book on the use of the rifle for the Fenians. He was also interested in heraldry, engineering, botany, the arts and sciences. He was also said to be a gifted linguist, and was especially interested in Arabic. And as was evident in the description of his travels in Central Asia, he spoke Tartar well enough. The journalist, John Augustus O'Shea, who met O'Donovan later in Paris said of him:

> In chemistry and military engineering he was an adept and bought or borrowed all the treatise he could find on the subjects; he had a fair acquaintance with heraldry, and more than a smattering of medicine; he could sketch, shoot, lecture, botanize quote Milton, handle conic sections, sleep on a table, and was master of minor accomplishments too numerous for my memory to retain. (O'Shea, 1885, p 80)

O'Shea also attests to his love of Arabic, citing his studying of it as his "passion". O'Shea says O'Donovan was an "ardent partisan of what are known as extreme Irish national politics, and had it forced upon him that it was more convenient to live out of British territory that within it." (O'Shea, 1885, pp78-9)

He was arrested in 1866, and imprisoned for six months in Limerick for possession of firearms. After his release he helped the failed Fenian rising of 1867. It was then he fled to Paris and joined his journalist brother, William.

He returned to Ireland and worked for the Irish nationalist candidate for the Westminster seat of Longford, John Martin, but when his candidate was defeated, he again fled Ireland, this time for the US, and then France. Coincidentally, others active in that campaign included some who became famous as journalists and politicians, A.M. Sullivan and James J. O'Kelly. He joined the French Foreign Legion at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War and was captured and became a prisoner of war. It was said that his charm worked to allow him the privelege of sending accounts to newspapers in London and Dublin. He had already sent some pieces to *The Irish Times* in the late 1860s.

Upon his release he re-engaged with Irish nationalist politics, becoming a Fenian organiser in Galway before being appointed the head of the Fenian movement in the North of England. However, by 1873, he was again working as a journalist and, this time, seriously. He went to Spain to cover the Carlist uprising and contributed to *The Times* and the Dublin *Freeman's Journal*. He covered the 1876 Bosnian Revolt against the Ottman Empire, and and Russian-Turkish war of 1877. He was now contributing to the *Times,* the *Standard* and the *Daily News* as a celebrated war correspondent.

Setting out to Central Asia

In 1879, he was sent by the *Daily News* to report on what became the Second Afghan War. He travelled via Georgia to Tiflis (present day Tblisi) and Baku on the Caspian Sea to Persia, and then crossed the desert to Merv, where he was held, first as a suspected Russian spy and then, when he persuaded the Turkoman tribespeople he was British (the Act of Union of 1800 meant Ireland was at this time an integral part of the United Kingdom), he was held in a sort of honourable captivity. Although he

could not leave Merv, he was appointed to the triumvirate that ruled the collection of Turcoman settlements that surrounded the oasis, and was given the title Khan.

The context of the book, is the Great Game, a term usually attributed to Arthur Connelly, an intelligence office with a regiment of the East India Company in the early 19th century and then popularized by Kipling in his novel, *Kim*, in 1901. (Hopkirk, 1991, p1) The Great Game can be dated from 1813 to 1907, from the Russian-Persian Treaty to the Anglo-Russian Convention. It was a period of Russian expansion into Central Asia, at a time when the British feared that this expansion of the Russian Empire would threaten the "jewel in the crown" of the British Empire, India. It was a period when young men looking for adventure would, disguised as Turkoman nomads, Armenian horse dealers, or Azeri traders, seek to spy on the Russians and their allies, to map the mountains and deserts, and to make alliances with the tribal peoples of the region. For much of the time it was a sort of cold war, but it led to British defeats in two Afghan Wars, as well as to the Crimea War, and Russia's involvement in the Balkans. It led to squabbles over Tibet and Persia and to Russia seeking a warm water port, while subduing the Turkoman tribes who had been attacking Russian caravans, taking hostages and even enslaving Russians. The Great Game took place in a region of great mystery and romance and dominated British 19th century foreign policy, and so was of huge interest to readers of British newspapers. For these reasons, O'Donovan was in Central Asia. In his work, *Famous War Correspondents*, F. Lauriston Bullard wrote:

> The world, and especially the English world, wanted to know what the mysterious Russians were doing in the interior of Asia, and just how the movements of their columns related to the military policies and the political purposes of the two nations. These things O'Donovan was determined to know as much about as it was possible to learn, and he had a well-grounded conviction that Merv was one of the ultimate points of the Russian movement, so Merv became forthwith an objective of his own. (Bullard, 1914, p 234)

The Merv Oasis opens with O'Donovan making it clear as to his purpose: "In narrating what I have to say about the place (Merv) and its people, I have, as far as is possible, sought to confine myself to what I actually saw and heard among them." He added that he had "carefully abstained from quoting the recollections and opinions of other writers." (O'Donovan, 1882, vol. 1 preface)

The narrative begins as he journeys from the Black Sea to Tiflis (Tblisi) and on to Baku. The Merv Oasis is not travel writing in any romantic sense, or in the sense of an author suggesting others might follow him. His account of the journey in a troika to Baku in present day Azerbaijan is one of unrelenting gloom. The troika is uncomfortable and the "country one traverses is indescribably dreary, rotting forest growth and stagnant overflow of the river being the main characteristics." (ODonovan, 1882, vol. 1, p3)

Once O'Donovan arrived in Baku, the tone changes completely and remains so for the rest of the work. By arriving on the shores of the Caspian Sea, his work has begun in earnest and now he writes as a scholar journalist, or as a social scientist. In Baku, he

describes in detail the dress of the numerous ethnic groups with ethnographic detail, at times reading like an anthropologist's field report.

> There is the Jew with his black cloth cap, somber robe, and long staff; the Armenian, with sleek black silk tunic, flat-peaked cap of the same colour, and belt of massive pieces of carved enameled solver; the Georgian, vested almost like the Circassian, with silver mounted cartridge tubes in horizontal rows on either breast, and guardless Caucasian sabre, the richly-mounted hilt entering with the blade up to the pommel in the leather sheath… (O'Donovan, 1882, vol. 1, p30)

He continued describing the clothing worn by the Russians, Germans, Swedes, Persians, Poles and Tartars, along with the costumes worn by the different religious sects found in Baku at the time.

Drilling for Oil in Baku

His account of the oil drilling close to Baku, which, of course, is still carried on, is a treatise on engineering. He gives details of how the oil is refined and taken from the earth and describes what today we might see as ecological devastation.

> The surrounding district is almost entirely destitute of vegetation…The odour of petroleum pervades the entire locality, and the ground is black with waste liquid and natural infiltration (*ibid*. p 33)

His interests in science and engineering led him to describe in detail how oil is taken from the earth:

> Boring for naphtha is conducted much as the same as that for coal. An iron bit, gouge-shaped, is fitted to a boring bar eight or ten feet in length, which is successively fitted to other length, as the depth of the piercing increases (*ibid*. p 33)

O'Donovan continued for a further three pages of exacting technical detail, and his audience would have been fascinated as to how this new fuel was extracted. However much O'Donovan wanted to educate his readers in science and technology, the journalist in him also sought the odd and unusual, and there in the middle of the "black naphtha mud", he stumbles on the ruins of a pre-Muslim fire temple, where he met the last priest "the last of his race, who still lingers beside his unfrequented altars". (*ibid*. p 38)

He tells his readers of the fortifications and walls surrounding towns and villages, as if writing a report for military intelligence. He describes, as only the son of an antiquarian and scholar could, the archaeological remains he finds.

Despite assuring his readers he would only give some opinions on future political possibilities and an "appreciation of the present and coming military situation", he could not help but describe the "absurd head-dress" worn by Turkomen women on major occasions. (*ibid*. p 210)

Entering Merv

His travels were difficult. First he travelled with the Russian forces. He became ill, returned to Baku, and then set out again. He became ill again and was laid low for three months. He travelled across deserts, avoiding marauders, spies and rapacious officials, describing how he finally entered Merv:

> I might have passed for anything. I wore an enormous tiara of grayish-black sheepskin, eighteen inches in height. Over my shoulders was a drenched leopard skin, beneath which could be seen my travel-stained, much worn overcoat. My legs were caparisoned in long black boots, armed with great steel spurs, appendages utterly unknown in Turkestan. A sabre and revolving carbine completed my outfit. Some people may wonder why I did not assume a style of dress more in keeping with the custom of the country. I had considered this matter carefully before deciding upon the irrevocable step toward Merv. I could speak Jagatai Tartar fairly well, and my sun-tanned countenance and passably lengthy beard offered no extraordinary contrast to that of an inhabitant, but my accent, and a thousand other little circumstances, not to speak of the indiscretion of my servants, would have been enough infallibly to betray me. (O'Donovan, 1882,Vol 2 p 237)

A note for the Sociologists

At the start of the second volume, when traveling towards Merv from Meshed, he notes how the Teké tribesmen travel with the women mounted and the men "trudge gaily on foot musket at back". This is the very opposite custom that "prevails among the Sclavs of Herzegovina and Montenegro. There burthens (sic) of all kinds are packed on the wife's back, while the husband marches in front armed with pistols, daggers and yataghan and decked out in the finery which Westerns consider is the particular appanage of the fair sex." He adds: "I make this remark for the benefit of the sociologist, and in no invidious sense" (O'Donovan 1882 vol 2 p17). On the following page is a description of tarantulas, and while he describes the danger of the spider's venomous bite, it is not in relation to the danger to himself, but more that of an etymologist doing field work.

He never romantises the lives of the people he meets but describes the people of central Asia and their difficult and hard lives. Describing a group of young girls who he notes, while Muslim, are not covered and have no problems sitting a few feet from him and talking about him:

> Some of the girls were very pretty but the women of 25 or 30-years, though formerly evidently good-looking all bore that weary, half sad, half cross expression which mars even the best features – a result of their hard and toilsome life .(O'Donovan, 1882, vol 2 page 27)

The same young girls, he notes, were willing to look upon and be looked at by a man, and an infidel man at that. They looked at him as if he was "an odd inanimate object...They freely comment on my personal appearance, and some of the remarks were the reverse of flattering." (*ibid,* vol. 2 p 28)

His style is witty, ironic and understated. When trying to convince the Turkomans that he was not a Russian spy, he had great difficulty explaining what he was as "the

Turocomans have not a clearly defined notion of the functions of a peripatetic literary man." (*ibid.* vol. 2, p116)

He expresses surprise at the degree of religious tolerance in Merv, in that the seven Jewish families are able to live without being "annoyed or incommoded on account of his religion". However, he held it was indifference to religion rather than liberality that was the reason. Of Merv's Muslim, he declared that they would "draw tears to the eyes of the Wahabees (the strict, fundamentalist, Saudi Arabian sect)….Opium smoking and arrack drinking are the common and wide-spread vices. In fact the Mervli are Mussulmans in very little more than name". (*ibid.* vol. 2 p 130)

He finally convinced the Turkomans that he was not a Russian spy and a letter to that effect arrived from the British Consular Agent at Meshed. Part of his persuasion involved giving "candid" advice as to their military shortcomings, should the Russians arrive, as was assumed.

Now that he was no longer held captive, he was allowed to travel around the oasis, though not leave. He describes his objective…

> To make as perfect a survey as possible of the Merv district, to become fairly acquainted with the manners customs, and government of the people and their general tone of mind, and then get out of the place as quickly as possible. (*ibid*. vol. 2 p155).

Life in Merv was not easy. He writes of fierce winds and dust and grit getting into every crevice of his tent. His tent, he described as a "much patronized peep-show". People crowded into the tent just to watch him, sleep, eat or write; the crowds at times becoming so great that his tent toppled over.

It appears that he was held as a sort of talisman. The Russians had captured the fortified town of Geok-Tepe, which was the great stronghold of the Teke Turkomen. The Russians, under the command of General Skobelev took the town and massacred about 8,000 soldiers and civilians after the Russian's had achieved victory. O'Donovan reported on the fall of Geok-Tepe, an event that led to a huge outcry in Europe because of the subsequent massacre. Even the Russian authorities were not immune from the shock and General Skobelev was more or less exiled to Minsk, where he died.

Russian Spy

However, the Russians did not attack Merv, and the people of Merv assumed that the great Irishman was somehow responsible for that. Having initially assumed he was a Russian spy, when he managed to convince them he was not, they assumed the power of the British meant the Russians were fearful of attacking because of his presence. Consequently, he was held prisoner in order to protect the oasis, and then made a member of the ruling triumvirate in order to cement some sort of link to the British.

O'Donovan might have lived amongst the Turkoman for four months but despite his attempts at remaining the disinterested observer, and receiving great honour from them, he clearly had little affection for his host/captors.

> To say that both temper and patience have been severely tried during my stay at Merv would be to convey but a very inadequate idea of the physical and moral annoyance I have undergone from the crooked-mindedness and rudeness of these wretched Turcomans. Their craving after the smallest sums of money and their general greed surpass my worst experiences in other part of the world. I would rather live in a remote Chinese province, or among dwarf savages of the Malay Archipelago, than at Merv. Their power to inflict annoyance and their obtuseness to any sense of delicacy makes them a most undesirable race to live among. (*ibid.* vol. 2, p393)

Having outlined the Turkoman habit of crowding into his dwelling, forcing him to give food and drink (as Turkoman hospitality dictates) and not being able to work on his notes, he concedes, possibly remembering his role was to give as impartial view of the Turkoman as possible:

> I lay a certain emphasis upon these peculiarities of the Turcomans, for, as I have already remarked in these pages noone could be more generous to the penniless fakir or poor traveller crossing their territory. It is only when someone having the reputation of being wealthy comes among them that all their convetous instincts come to the fore. (*ibid.*vol 2 p403)

Upon his release from Merv, O'Donovan travelled to Constantinople, a journey lasting four months. At one time he was so sick he was carried on a sort of hammock between two horses to Tehran. At Constantinople, he wrote a dispatch to the *Daily News* in London, in the form of a letter. It was reprinted in a number of newspapers, including the *New York Times*. In it, he told of how some of his previous letters had been intercepted and the messengers killed. However, the new postal service at Teheran had kept fragments of these letters in which he narrated how he came to be elevated to the position of Khan and his appointment as a member of the ruling triumvirate, which was, he said, "at once a compromise and a diplomatic tribute to Western ideas, with which the chieftains had reason to believe they would shortly be iminately connected." (*New York Times*, 3 January 1882)

In his accounts, he emphasised how his position within Merv/Turkoman society was a 'curious one'.

> My arrival was simultaneous with the cessation of the Russian advance; their sudden halt at Askabad coincided with my appearance in the oasis. The people of Merv had persuaded themselves that my advent had some connection with this much-desired event. It gradually grew upon the public mind that because I had come to Merv therefore the Russians had not imvaded them, and having but just ceased to be a prisoner suspected of being a spy, I was, though a member of their governing body, scarcely less a prisoner, and jealously guarded as a palladium against invasion. (*New York Times*, *ibid*)

He warned the assembled chiefs that if raids against caravans and attacks against their neighbours continued, the people of Merv would suffer a similar fate as other Turkoman tribes, including that which befell the people of Geok-Tepe. He suggested that instead of raiding caravans and selling Russian slaves, Merv should recall what it had one been, known all along the Silk Route as Queen of the World, and it should

base its income on legitimate taxes on goods in transit. The alternative was useless and destined to failure. His "historic harangue' or his "inaugural address" which, he said, was received with greater favour than "I had dared to anticipate".

O'Donovan, a flamboyant figure in his personal life, ends his remarksable story in a sober and understanted manner:

> How I got to Odessa and thence to Constantinople scarcely enters into the scope of these volumes. I got to the shores of the Bosphorus on November 1881, nearly four months after I had left Kouchid Khan Kala (on the edge of the Merv oasis) and the Turcomans; and close on three years since I started from Trebizond on my way eastward. (O'Donovan, *op cit.* 1882, vol. 2, p 475)

Returns to London

On his return to London, the *Daily News* gave him £1,000, which he dontated to the Fenian movement. He was also treated as a celebrity explorer. Among other public appearances was a talk to the Royal Geographical Society in March 1882. He told the Society that he wanted to dispel a delusion, namely, "that Merv is a great Asiatic city, the possession of which would make the fortune of the possessor at the present time. There is no such city as Merv. Merv is only a geographic expression". (*Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, Vol. IV 1882). In this address, he described it as a place where half a million Tekke-Turkomnas eke out an existence by farming, plunder and thievery. It was at a place, he said, where the River Murghab, flowing from the Afghan moutains, loses itself in the desert before it reachs the Oxus and where the Tekke-Turkomans think they can oppose the onward approach of the Russians. "(*ibid.)*. He described the ruins of ancient Merv, a city that had a history going back to Alexander the Great, and presented his audience with some artifacts which were evidence of the former greatness of Merv.

He was away for nearly four years, which included nearly six months in Merv. Even though his book somewhat underplays it, it was a time of great hardship. He was often ill and near death. He lived with disease, insects, huge danger and the fear of the unknown. As he said himself in his letter to the *Daily News*: "When one has fallen among barbarians one must abide by he consequences". He never forgot why he was in Central Asia, and continued to take notes, map the area, talk to the people and generally act as a good reporter throughout the entire time.

The two volumes were synopsised and then republished as a one volume work. The old Fenian, John Devoy, in his memoir, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* recalled how:

> His brother William told me that Edmund wrote it in an extremely short space of time working day and night with a wet towel around his head to enable him to remain awake. (Devoy, 1929, p 370)

With the Madhi in Africa

Almost immediately, he set out again, this time to North Africa. In May 1882, O'Donovan travelled with Colonel Hicks Pasha's forces of British officers and Egyptians soldiers, brought together to put down a Sudanese uprising led by the Madhi, a religious leader, known among his followers as the Prophet of God. O'Donovan had planned to write a book about his experiences in North Africa. He

arrived in Egypt and crossed the desert, and eventually reached Khartoum where he joined the Egyptian army.

He travelled with Hick Pasha's army as it marched to Omdurman. While it might have been assumed the ragged army of the Madhi would have been the underdogs, they were extremely brave and well armed. In writing for his newspaper, O'Donovan described the scorching heat, and dying camels, and the fast diminishing water supply. The army of Hicks Pasha were trapped in a rocky defile and ambushed by the Sudanese. The Anglo/Egyptian army were short of water and due to the terrain, was unable to use much of its armaments. Finally, they ran out of cartridges and a bayonet charge was ordered. When Hicks Pasha's army was wiped out, it was assumed O'Donovan died.

The Death of O'Donovan

According to Dr Richard Hayes, writing in *Studies* in 1947, a legend grew up among O'Donovan's friends that he escaped and reached the Mahdi's camp and was killed fighting against the Anglo Egyptian forces, who eventually put down the Mahdi. This was a fanciful notion fuelled by the fact that many Irish nationalists favoured the forces of the Mahdi against the Anglo Egpytian forces as being an imperial force of evil. The newspaper, the *United Ireland* wrote following O'Donovan's death:

> Woe, however, to ireland that he (the Mahdi) had not known that one gallant adventurer in the file of the Englishman hated the Saxon with a hatred that not even a Mahdi could surpass. (quoted in Hayes, 'A Famous irish War Correspondent' in *Studies; an Irish Quarterly Review*, March 1947, p 47)

All that was written about him following his death portrayed a man who was both a dreamer, and a man of action, an enthusiast and an intellectual. He was also given an unusual honour for a member of the Fenian, commemorated with a plaque in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral, in the heart of the empire.

The Illustrated London News lamented the death of "this intrepid traveller and enterprising journalist, whose achievements in Central Asia lately won a high degree of public admiration". It praised the *Daily News* for the quality of its special war correspondents, who had "procured a vast amount of interesting descriptive information from remote regions previously deemed innacessible .... The London newspaper press should be proud of the exploits of such gallant servants as this adventurous Irishman, whose fate will be deplored not less than that of the British and German military officers, unfortunately doomed to perish in this ill-advised Soudan expedition." (*The Illustrated London News*, 1 December 1883)

After he returned from Merv, and eventual disapearance in North Africa, events moved quickly in Central Asia. In 1882 the Rusians insinuated themselves into Merv, with the promise of trade. The rulers of Merv, were now split in their attitude to Russia, partially as a result of O'Donovan leaving the oasis, and not returning. The British had not the heart for a conflict in Central Asia given its involvement in a protracted conflict in Sudan.

The taking of Merv

The quiet capitulation of Merv to the Russians was, according to Peter Hopkirk's work *The Great Game*, as much a 'triumph for the Russophobes as it was for the Russians, for it was precisely as they had forcast.' (Hopkirk, 1991, p 415) The Russophobes were now convinced nothing stood in the way of the Russians, that they could now cross the Afghan frontier and move from Merv to Herat and Kandahar and onto the Indus, and so attack India. Not alone that, but the Russians were now building a railway across Transcapia to Merv, which some believed would aid the movement of troops to the Afghan border.

The taking of Merv to some extent made O'Donovan's work of journalism, ethnography and adventure somewhat redundant. The trend was now for polemical works of political analysis, mainly warning of nefarious Russian intentions. Books entitled *The Russian Advance towards India* or *Reconnoitring Central Asia* were pouring off the presses, decrying the intentions of the Russians and the vulnerability of the jewel of the Empire, India. As Hopkirk says "1885 was destined to be vintage year for Great Game Literature". (*ibid.* 418). A journalist, working for the *Globe* newspaper, Charles Marvin, wrote a number of books (three in one year alone), all warning of the threat to India. Marvin was critical of Liberal policy and he had no interest in affecting an impartial tone. According to Hopkirk, Marvin's line was that successive British Government's had brought the problems on themselves with their "spineless and vacillating policies towards St Petersburg". (quoted in Hopkirk, 1991 p419)

As Hopkirk pointed out, the plethora of polemical works, written in the aftermath of the fall of Merv, were written by men who knew little of the region and had never set foot in it.

There was a serious threat of a war between Russia and Britain in 1887 as the Russians attempted to move stealthily towards Herat in Afghanistan, but the British Government did face them down, and a final frontier with Afghanistan was agreed. If the Russians got more than the British might have preferred, at least they never attacked India, nor crossed the newly agreed Afghan border for nearly 100 years.

And what of Merv? In 1901 a small article appeared in in the *New York Times*, in which the writer reminded his readers that the oasis of Merv had once been a household word in England, thanks to O'Donovan, and the posibility of war between Britain and Russia:

> Now the whole oasis of Merv, one of the most fertile spots in the whole world, is as Russian as Riga, and when you say Merv in Central Asia you mean a long, low, neat, stone railway station, lit by a score of bright lamps in a row, where the train changes engines, while in a busy telegraph office a dozen operators site before their clicking instruments; and if you are a Russian officer or official you mean also a brand new town where a pestilent malarial fever is sure to catch you sooner or later, and very likely to kill you. (*New York Times*, 24 February 1901)

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Biography

Michael Foley is a lecturer in journalism at the Dublin Instutite of Technology and a former journalist at *The Irish Times*. He was he founding chair of the Newpaper and Periodical History Forum of Ireland. His research interests include media history, media ethics and journalism in transitional democracies, especially Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where he has worked as a consultant in journalism education.