

Retracing the journey of 19th Century war photographer John Burke in Afghanistan, Simon Norfolk finds that the landscape of conflict is as little changed as the politics that helped shaped its course

Interview by Keith Wilson

As well as being one of the UK's most acclaimed landscape and documentary photographers, Simon Norfolk is one of the most vociferous. That's not to say he is naturally noisy, or that he shouts a lot. Nor does his cast iron condemnation of the war in Afghanistan set him apart from his fellow journalists (there are plenty of others in that chorus). What grabs your attention and stirs your own reasoning is the bluntness of the language he uses to make his point and the seeming lack of objectivity that many would ascribe as essential to his vocation.

Norfolk isn't interested in hiding his emotions or his politics; instead he makes his position very clear from the outset. Take this extract from the 17-minute video accompanying the recent Burke + Norfolk exhibition at the Tate Modern, London: 'For me, this war, this current war is a tragedy; it is an imperial game, a folly. This is the fourth Anglo-Afghan war as far as I'm concerned, and it's going as laughably, stupidly, misguidedly wrong as the previous three.'

His description of the current conflict as the 'fourth Anglo-Afghan war' (the other three were in 1848, 1878-80 and 1919), reveals part of the historical context that links Norfolk's latest images from Afghanistan to the rarely seen glass plates of John Burke, who was attached to the British Army during the war of 1878-80. An Irishman, Burke was the first photographer to take pictures in Afghanistan and left an unknown number of albums and prints for sale to the public, some of which are now in the possession of the National Media Museum in Bradford. It was here that one of the museum's



In conversation with
Simon Norfolk

Interview

librarians first introduced Simon Norfolk to this rarely seen archive. At the time, he was considering a return trip to Afghanistan, but was unsure of his purpose for making such a commitment. After looking at Burke's works he struck upon the idea of photographing the current conflict from the same locations as Burke and comparing the two images; in effect Burke and Norfolk would be seen as two photographers documenting the same theatre of war, but 130 years apart.

'I wanted to present this photography project as a partnership with John Burke, even though he's been dead for 111 years,' Norfolk explains in our telephone interview, 'so I learnt about him; the way he worked, the process he used – I even built an albumen darkroom.' Albumen is a printing process from the mid-19th Century whereby prints were made by coating paper with egg whites and silver for contact printing black & white negatives. In trying to make a print as Burke would have done, Norfolk described the

whipping of eggs and salt as 'more like making omelettes than photographs!' In four months of trying he made only one successful print using this method. Unsurprisingly, he stuck to modern technology and used a Phase One P45 digital medium format camera for the Burke + Norfolk project. In all, he made five trips to Afghanistan, the most recent in February of this year when he spent two weeks with British and American soldiers in Helmand province. Three of his earlier trips, in the summer of 2010, were to remote locations. 'The official purpose of these first visits was to undertake a series of workshops mentoring six Afghan photographers in the summer, but I was also using this as an opportunity to select my assistant. It was a long interview process!'

Fardin Waezi was the successful candidate, acting as Norfolk's driver, assistant, interpreter, guide and general fixer. For one seven-week period they travelled entirely alone. The experience left Norfolk feeling contemptuous of

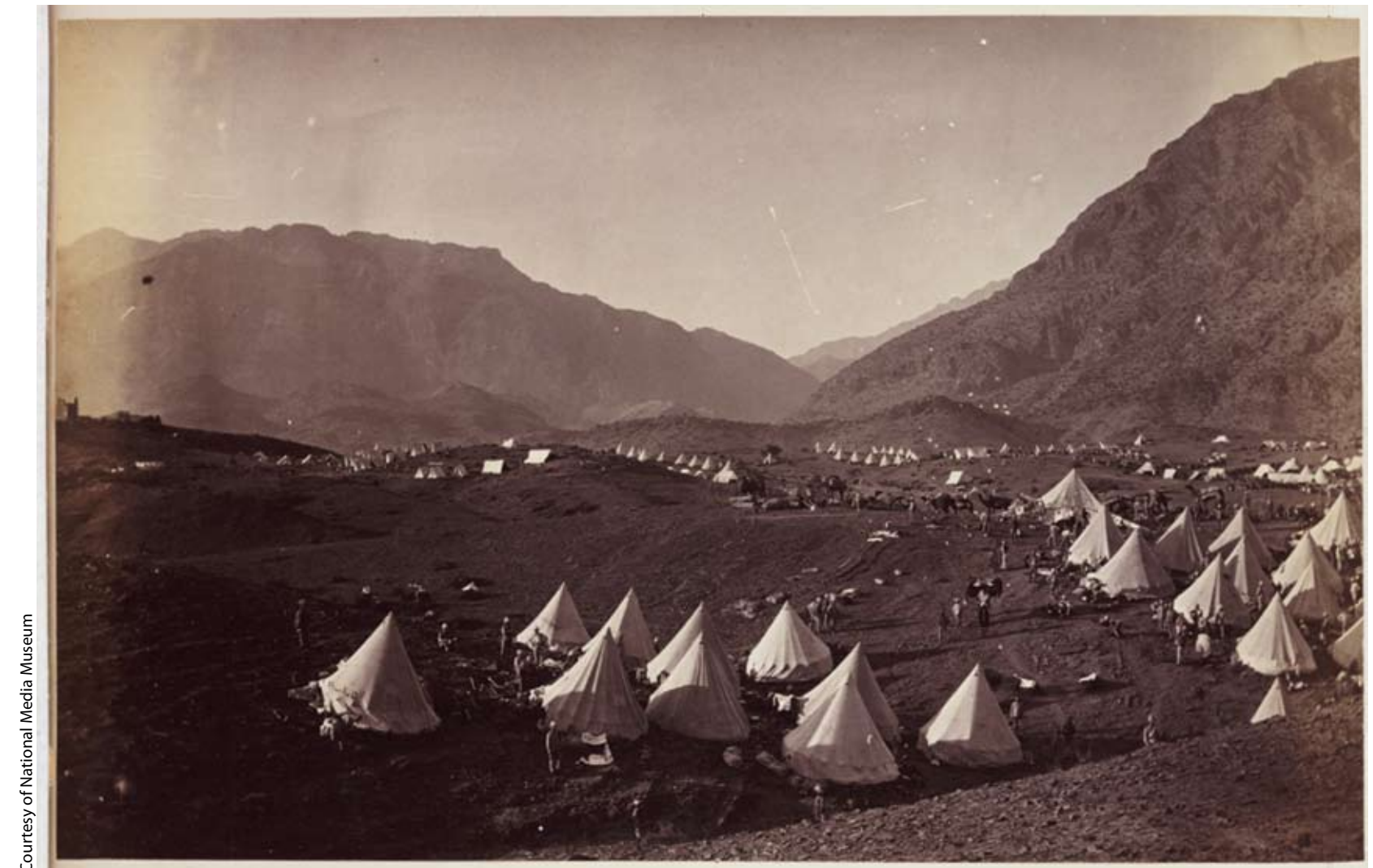
other Western photographers, who were staying in fortified hotels in Kabul and travelling in armoured vehicles with assigned security groups. 'It was hairy and on a few occasions it was downright dangerous,' he declares in the video, 'but it's possible to do it and I would say that if you call yourself a journalist you're obliged to do it, rather than come to Afghanistan, live inside some armoured compound in a five-star hotel and then tell me that you're reporting from Afghanistan. You're not, you're reporting from an armoured compound, a Westernised armoured compound in a five-star hotel.'

He clearly doesn't feel the same distaste for John Burke. In fact, he speaks with a respect bordering on reverence for this son of Wicklow who left Ireland to join the British Army in India, where he trained as a military apothecary. 'He taught me how to shoot group portraits,' Norfolk enthuses. 'No-one takes group portraits any more, except at weddings, and everyone just looks at the camera. Burke had everyone looking



Courtesy of National Media Museum

Courtesy of Wilson Centre for Photography



in a different direction. That moving of the gaze creates a motion and rhythm that I love.'

This admiration resulted in Norfolk departing from colour when it came to making portraits. He chose to recreate the compositional style of Burke's group portraits in black & white and studied the collodian wet plate process of the Victorian era. As an orthochromatic medium, it is sensitive only to the red light of the spectrum, so blue subjects such as the sky record as white,

while red objects turn out dark. Afghans have a lot of red in their skin pigment and their complexions in Burke's photographs appear to be much darker than the reality; by contrast, the faces of British troops in these pictures look even paler. For Norfolk, this chemical characteristic reinforced the racist overtones of what was a white imperial British occupation of a dark-skinned Afghan's homeland. More than a century after Burke's era, he felt the risk of

PRECEDING PAGES A Shia cemetery on the flanks of Kohe Asmai
OPPOSITE PAGE Construction machinery, from Jalalabad Road, Kabul
TOP LEFT Landholders and labourers, by John Burke
TOP RIGHT A de-mining team from the Mine Detection Centre in Kabul, with a member of the German police who is mentoring them
ABOVE Shergai Heights looking towards Ali Musjid. Camp of Third Brigade. Enemy's defences in distance, by John Burke



ABOVE Nonsensical property development, Karte Char Chateh, Kabul
OPPOSITE PAGE Empty shipping containers, Camp Leatherneck US marine base, Helmand

being in a parallel situation with his camera when photographing the Afghan people.

'I am extremely nervous about white people photographing people who are black,' he says. 'It comes with a lot of baggage because so many images from the Imperial period are appallingly racist.' Nevertheless, his group portraits not only mimic Burke's in composition and the 'moving of the gaze', but also manage to replicate the orthochromatic effect by using only the red channels of his digital files.

Simon Norfolk doesn't shoot like a typical photo journalist in a war zone, embedded with troops on the frontline, shutter set to continuous, firing off a burst of frames with a handheld digital SLR. His approach is more akin to the way Burke worked, using a larger format camera mounted on a tripod, composing carefully and waiting for the light. This method of working is more akin to a landscape photographer. 'Most landscape photographers don't use their best accessory – it's their backside. They need to spend more time waiting

and watching the light. I don't shoot anything when I walk straight up. I go with a compass, digital map, notebook, and I'll make a list of what to shoot, the location and the time of day. It's not photography, it's gathering, because when I go back to the location of each shoot I know what the light's going to be like, I know where the shadows will fall, I know how exactly it's going to be, so one by one I gather the pictures in.'

Most of his colour images from Kabul and Helmand are photographed in either a pre-dawn or post-sunset light that he describes as 'a much bluer, more melancholy light' to convey his bitter disappointment with the current ten-year-long conflict. These are not images of death, carnage or smoking destruction; instead there is a solemnity about every composition, whether a snow-covered Shia cemetery in Kabul, or a stark corner of a US military base stacked high with containers. Norfolk was captivated by the scale of the expenditure by US and British forces in Afghanistan and the logistics and

infrastructure supporting their presence. 'There is loads of money pouring in but the locals aren't seeing it,' he says. 'Some of the military barracks were the best I have seen anywhere. It's all being spent on brand new military bases, police stations, airports, security posts, torture centres and accommodation for foreigners.'

He was amazed by the difference in Kabul since his first visit in 2001, when he photographed the impact of the American invasion that followed the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. 'I was surprised. I thought it would all be rubble still, but it was far from it,' he reflects, 'I didn't know there was a shopping mall in the middle of Kabul. Why don't Western photographers show this?' He also photographed the 'blingy, crass architecture' popping up in the hills around Kabul, primarily homes of wealthy government officials, enforcers, smugglers and drug barons, feeding off bribes and funding from the West. 'It's creating a hollow economy,' he explains. 'I was astonished by this bizarre donut

economy. As soon as the soldiers go, the money goes, too, and it will collapse.'

And yet, for all the surreal juxtapositions of massive military bases in the middle of a barren Helmand plain and faux Disney architecture emerging from the rubble of Kabul, there is a simple understated beauty about Norfolk's compositions that holds your gaze and occupies your mind more than the politics and casualties of war that has defined this new landscape of Afghanistan. But don't be fooled. Simon Norfolk did not travel to Afghanistan for the sole purpose of making beautiful images. As he enunciates in the video, the purpose of his photographs is to articulate his anger about the war and its impact on Afghanistan.

'By making the pictures very beautiful you're almost tricked into coming inside that photograph's space for a while, engaging with it and being in conversation with the photograph. Then by surprise you might find that you've listened to a whole load of my arguments, which

you probably wouldn't have bothered to listen to if I hadn't seduced you into that space, into that dialogue. If I thought I could get across the points I want to make without beauty, then I would dump beauty tomorrow.'

In this regard, his motives are very different to that of Burke, whose main goal was to make a living by selling prints. It is this contrast of purpose, as well as the contrast of eras and their working methods that make this 'manufactured' collaboration so riveting. And yet when you compare their photographs, you can't fail to notice that never has history repeated itself so badly as in the wars of Afghanistan. If John Burke was alive today, he would probably come to the same conclusion as Simon Norfolk. ■

GET THE BOOK! Simon Norfolk's superb new book, *Burke + Norfolk*, covering his journeys in the footsteps of John Burke, is available now. (Dewi Lewis, hardback, £40, ISBN 9781907893117). To see more of his work go to www.simonnorfolk.com.

