

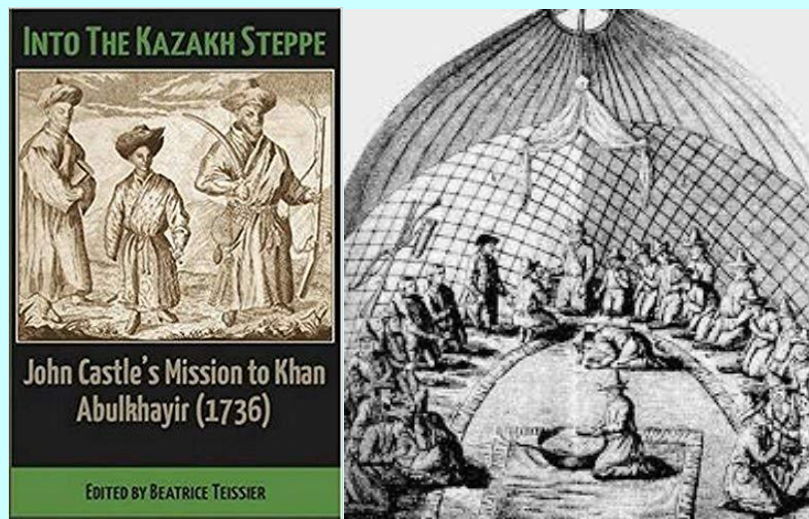
HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL LINKS OF GREAT BRITAIN AND KAZAKHSTAN

A paper delivered to the Forum of Kazakhstan Culture and Literature

By Nick Fielding

London, 7th November 2017

In 10 minutes I cannot say a lot about the historical and cultural links of Great Britain and Kazakhstan. But they stretch back further than many of you may think. The first person from these islands to observe the Kazakhs and to comment on their society was **John Castle**. Castle was sent as a Russian envoy to what is now north-western Kazakhstan, to the court of Khan Abulkhayir, the leader of the Junior *Juz* at that time.



Cover of John Castle's Journal and one of the plates

Castle was working on behalf of the Russian Tsar and attempting to gauge the atmosphere amongst the Kazakhs at a time when the Russians were facing problems with the Turks and the Bashkirs and had only just conducted the Orenburg Expedition (in 1734) - the first attempt to colonise the steppes. His journal¹

¹ *Into the Kazakh Steppe: John Castle's Mission to Khan Abulkhayir (1736)*, Edited by Beatrice Teissier, Signal Books, Oxford, 2014.

contains the first observations by an Englishman of not just the people, but their religion, customs and society. It contains 13 wonderful plates, showing yourts, the clothing of the Kazakhs, their short beards and moustaches, their animals and their country. These plates are unique.

Travellers within what is now modern Kazakhstan – as opposed to through Kazakhstan – were rare.

There were no trade links and little diplomatic contact, even through Afghanistan and the North West Frontier. British colonial powers were concerned about possible threats to Indian security, but their interest was in the immediate border area, not hundreds of miles to the north into areas not even controlled by the Russians.

Roderick Murchison, the great geographer and geologist – he was president of both the RGS and the Geological Society - travelled through the northern Kazakh steppe in the early 1840s, following in the footsteps of his hero, **Alexander von Humboldt**, who had done the same journey in 1829. Both men wrote about their journeys. Murchison's journey was published under the title *Murchison's Wanderings in Russia*.²



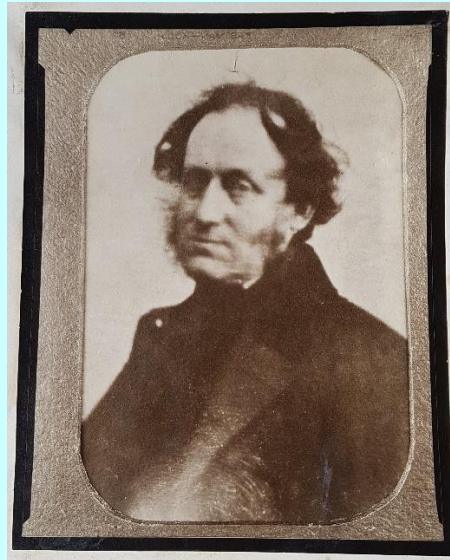
Sir Roderick Murchison

Alexander von Humboldt

And it was someone whom Murchison admired, **Thomas Witlam Atkinson**, who became perhaps the most important cultural visitor to Kazakhstan, particularly to the east and north-east of the country.

² *Murchison's Wanderings in Russia*, Michael Collie and John Diemer (eds), British Geological Survey Occasional Publication, No.2, London 2014.

Atkinson's two books, *Oriental and Western Siberia* (1858) and *Travels in the Regions of the Upper and Lower Amoor* (1860), provide a fascinating insight into the Kazakh steppe at the moment that Russia was cementing its hold on this vast new region and changing it forever.



The only known photograph of Thomas Witlam Atkinson

He gives us authentic accounts of the way of life - and some of the politics. He does not look down on the subjects of his interest, but portrays most of them with tenderness – others are described precisely *because* they were brigands or thieves, to emphasize their notoriety.

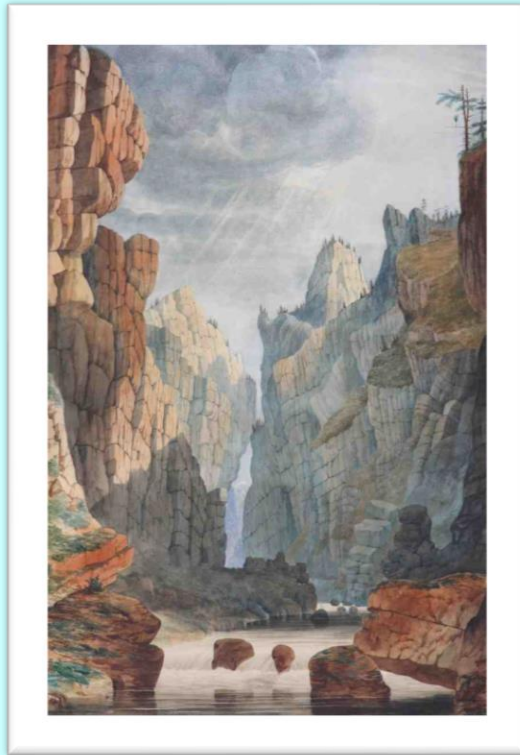
Not only does Atkinson provide us with words, but he also paints superb pictures of the Kazakh steppe, the Djungar Alatau and the Altai. They had never been portrayed by outsiders before. His books and diaries remain as remarkable records to a remarkable man – and woman.



Atkinson's self-portrait



Atkinson's portrait of Sultan Souk



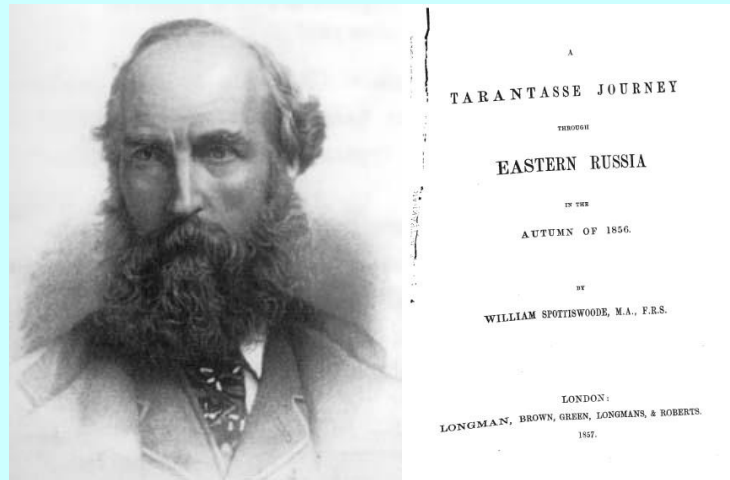
The Acsou River by Atkinson

I cannot forget Thomas' wife **Lucy Atkinson**, whose own book, *Recollections of Tartar Steppes and their Inhabitants* (1863), adds to the picture created by Thomas. She tells many wonderful stories that give insights into life at that time.



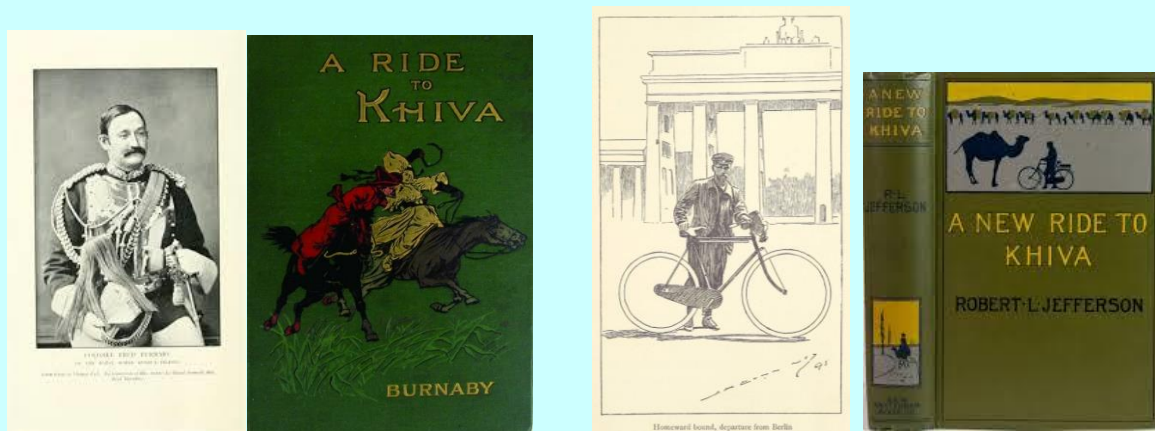
Thomas Atkinson's portrait of Lucy

Following the Atkinsons there was a sprinkling of British authors who visited Kazakhstan. **William Spottiswoode** came as far as Astrakhan and Orenberg in 1856, writing up his journey in *A Tarantasse Journey Through Southern Russia* (1857).



William Spottiswoode and the title page of his book

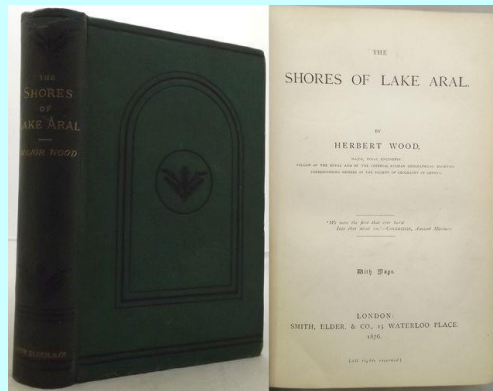
In 1858 **Captain Fred Burnaby** made his famous '*Ride to Khiva*', travelling in part across north-west Kazakhstan. Then 40 years later, in 1898, the indefatigable pioneer cyclist **Robert L Jefferson**, rode from London to Khiva on a bicycle, also cutting across the north-west of present-day Kazakhstan and providing an interesting account of his journey, published as *A New Ride to Khiva*.



Capt Burnaby and his book, along with Robert L Jefferson's book

Captain Fred Burnaby and the cover of his book

Major Herbert Wood wrote *The Shores of Lake Aral* in 1876. Two years earlier he had been given permission to accompany an expedition by the Imperial Russian Geographical Society to the Aral Sea and Amu Darya river. His book is full of fascinating insights.



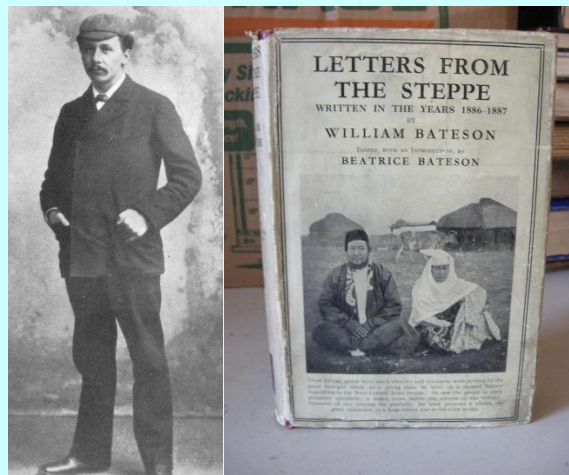
The cover and title page of Major Herbert Wood's book

In 1882 the extraordinary traveller and bible distributor Henry Lansdell set out on a journey through what he called Turkistan, or Russian Central Asia. He left Omsk and headed south-east towards Semipalatinsk and Ust-Kamenogorsk, visiting Lake Zaizan and travelling as far east as Kuldja, before heading To Altyn Emel, the Ili Valley, Vierny (now Almaty) and then on to Ferghana, Samarkand, Bokhara, Khiva and finally Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea. He writes with authority on the history of the region in his two-volume book *Russian Central Asia* (1885).



Henry Lansdell and the cover of his two-volume book

In 1886 and 1887 **William Bateson** made an extraordinary journey across northern Kazakhstan, including Lake Balkhash and Lake Zaisan. His aim was to record the minute fossil snails he found, as part of a study to demonstrate Darwin's Theory of Evolution. His book *Letters from the Steppe* written in the years 1886-1887 is composed of his letters home from this lonely journey and was not published until 1928.



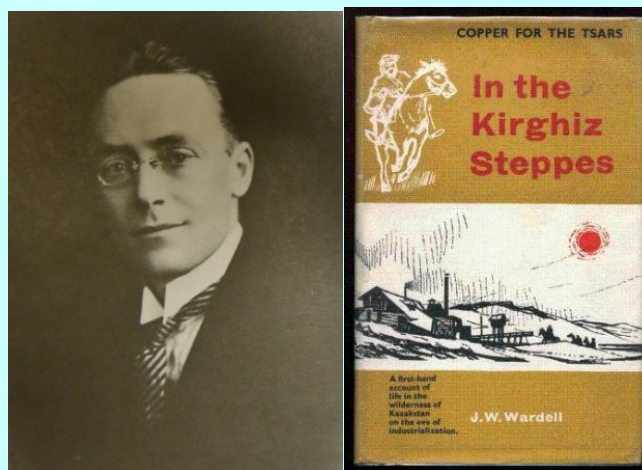
William Bateson and the cover of his book

Samuel Turner wrote *Siberia: Travel and Exploration* in 1905, which describes his visit to the Altai Mountains and an unsuccessful attempt to climb Mt Belukha.



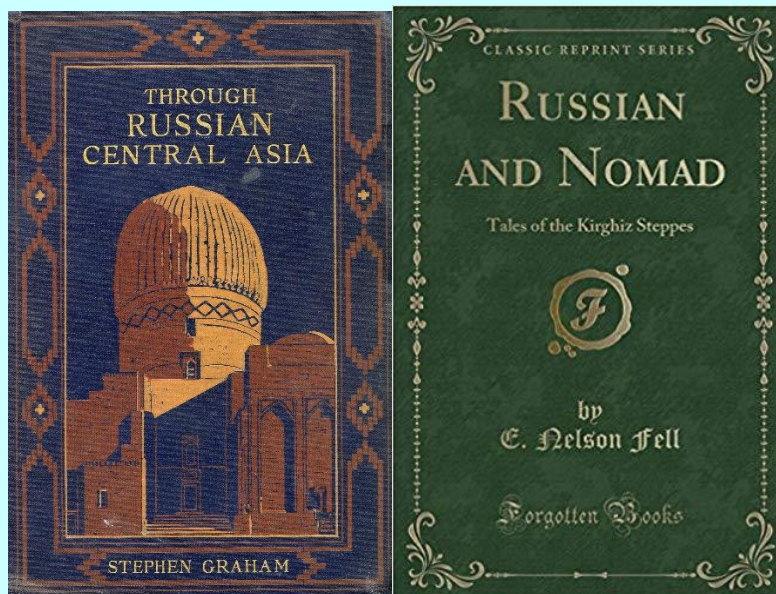
Samuel Turner and the cover of his book

John Wilford Wardell, worked at a copper mine in Pavoldar and Karakalinsk in the Kazakh steppe before the 1WW. His book, *In the Kirghiz Steppes*, published in 1961, offers “a first-hand account of the Kazakh tribesmen, who are descendants of the fierce hordes of Genghis Khan, just emerging from a twelfth-century way of life to bridge the centuries and become the labour force of a communist society.”

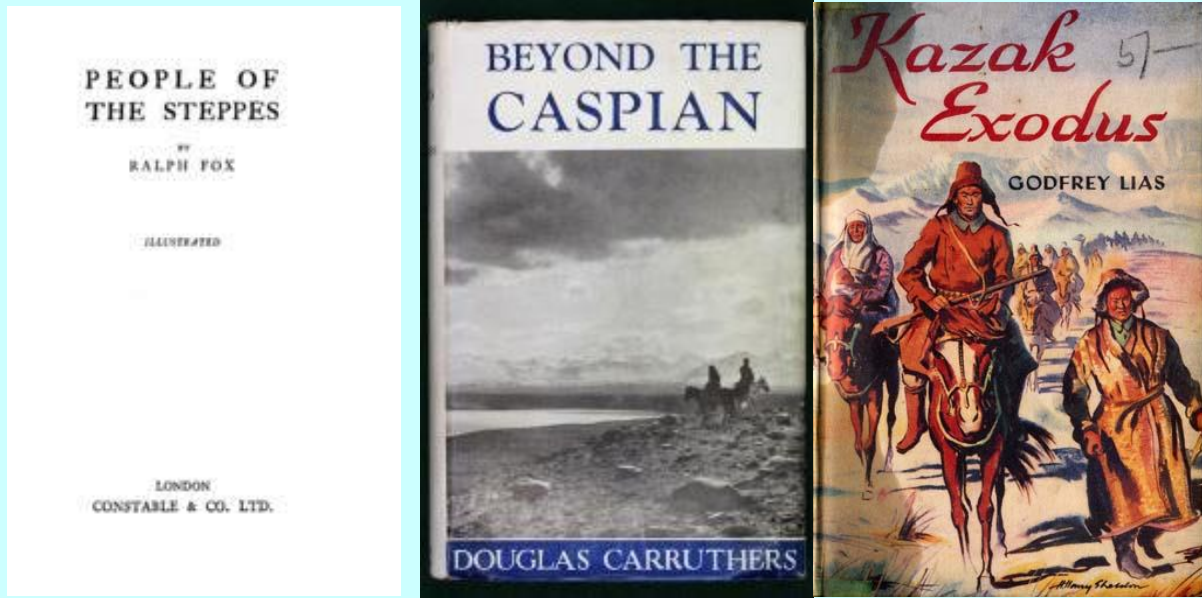


John Wilford Wardell and the cover of his book

A few more titles followed: *Through Russian Central Asia* (1916) by **Stephen Graham**, which describes a remarkable pedestrian journey from Khabarovsk on the Caspian via Tashkent then north to Orenburg; *Russian and Nomad* (1916), by **Edward Nelson Fell** whose journey took him south to Pavlodar and then further south to Bayan Aoul and Lake Balkhash. He even goes hunting with eagles; And then, following the Russian Revolution, not much more until the collapse of the Soviet Union. There are a few exceptions: *People of the Steppe* (1925), by Ralph Fox, which describes efforts by British supporters of the Bolsheviks to prevent famine in the Kazakh steppes; *Beyond the Caspian* (1949) by **Douglas Carruthers**; and *Kazak Exodus* (1956) by Godfrey Lias, which describes the epic trek by 20,000 Kirei Kazakhs from their homelands in Xinjiang to Kashmir and then, for some of them, onwards to a new home in Turkey.



Books by Stephen Graham and Edward Nelson Fell



What have I learned from looking at the writings of our predecessors who travelled from these islands to the Kazakh Steppe? We have been witnesses to many remarkable moments in the history of the Kazakhs, right from the dawn of the modern era, through until today. Castle's words, the Atkinsons' words and pictures, the simple but remarkable insights of William Bateson – all these show an intimate connection. By uncovering it and celebrating it, we will ensure it continues.