

Caravans Revisited

“Afghanistan of today looks much like *Caravans* of four decades ago”
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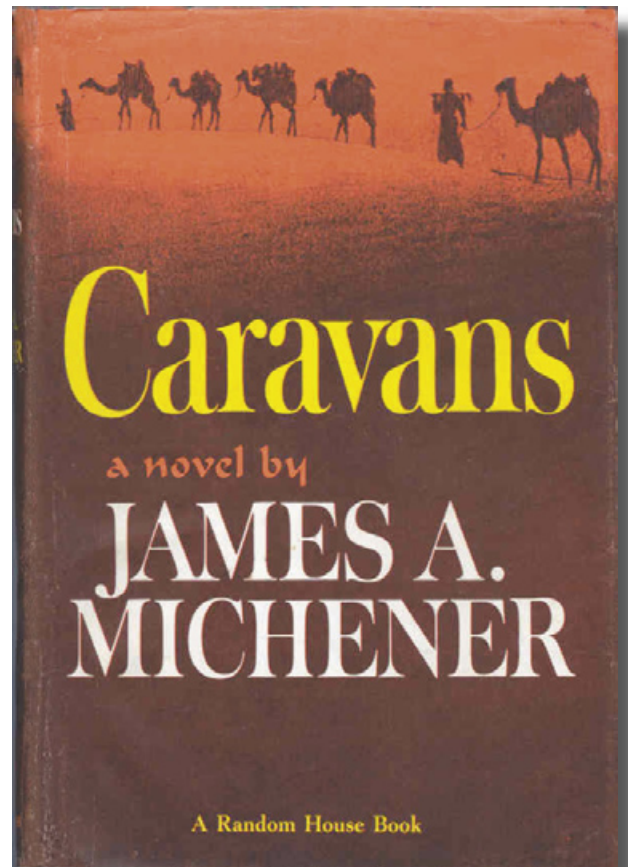
By G. L. Dybwad and Joy V. Bliss

Given the events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath, we reread Michener's *Caravans* [New York: Random House, 1963]. This fictionalized documentary is based on his experiences during 1952 and 1955 in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although it has been 40 years since the novel was published, there are striking similarities between his scenes and descriptions and those of recent news coverage. Based on these remarkable similarities, we feel *Caravans* is relevant today and deserves a reading, or rereading, as an insightful and entertaining novel created by one of the world's great writers of cultural clash and historical mystery and pageantry.

Michener's protagonist, Mark Miller, a young American embassy staffer in the capital, Kabul, is sent by the State Department in 1946 to find Ellen Jasper, a Pennsylvanian who rebelled against her parents and entered Afghanistan to marry an educated native, Nazrullah. The difficult but romantic hunt allows Michener to introduce us to the major cities of Afghanistan and the conditions and customs of the diverse peoples inhabiting the rugged land that varies from trackless deserts in the south to the craggy wild mountains of the Hindu Kush in the north. Through Miller, the reader is introduced to “Kabul, pronounced Cobble by all who have been there, Kaboul by those who have not, was shaped like a large capital U lying on its side, with the closed end to the east where the Kabul River flowed down to the Khyber Pass, and the open end to the west facing the Koh-I-Baba.” (page 12)

Many of Michener's descriptions parallel today's media coverage: primitive infrastructure, including roads inadequate for improved commerce (page 87); lack of clean water and sewage treatment posing public health hazards (pages 20 and 47-8); deforestation (page 185); women sequestered in their homes with little access to health care (page 86), the chaderi head-to-toe veil (called a berka today) required for women in public (pages 14 and 98); distrust of foreigners resulting in a lack of foreign investments (page 8); reliance on good horses and horsemanship (pages 25-6), including the gruesome ancient Mongol game of two mounted teams struggling for possession of a headless goat, reminiscent of western polo (pages 296-9); and those ever present mullahs who attempt to enforce confining social and religious rules—“Be careful,” he warned me. “The mullahs are dangerous these days.” (page 16)

Continuing the list of relevant parallels, of particular interest is Michener's description of the longstanding influence of Germany in Afghanistan. (pages 27 and 103) Dramatic continuing influence is evidenced by



the recent German offer to host the meeting that began the formal process of establishing a new Afghan government.

Also, in August of 2001, the Taliban in Kabul arrested eight aid workers from the German-based Shelter Now International organization; four aids were German. These young people illustrate Michener's description of how the mystery and adventure of Afghanistan have lured young foreigners to serve there over the decades. (pages 21 and 62)

Michener also tells us of the many tribes and clans making up Afghanistan and how they frequently fight each other when they are not battling external influences. (pages 288-9) He hints several times how neighboring Russia might exert a future external influence (pages 33, 82, and 96), a prophecy that came true about a decade after *Caravans* was published.

These continual conflicts keep the country poor, ravaged, and in turmoil. He wrote, "In Afghanistan almost every building bears jagged testimony to some outrage." (page 43) The men who survive are cunning, resourceful, daring and inured to hardship. (pages 52-3) Because of the dryness of the country, irrigation has long been practiced, using ancient tunnels and caves (pages 151-2), many of them still used today.

Also, in Michener's tale, Afghanistan is a good place for a foreign criminal to hide. The fictional Dr. Stiglitz from Munich (page 111) practices excellent medicine with very meager resources but cannot improve his position because the Afghan government knows he is a fugitive Nazi war criminal. In recent years, sanctioned by the Taliban government, terrorist Osama bin Laden also found a welcome haven in Afghanistan.

In recent film clips, we have seen bin Laden and his cohorts eating the tasty but unvarying traditional food that Michener describes. "The waiter, a man in an unbelievably tattered overcoat and green turban, brought me a chunk of nan, a kind of thick, crunchy tortilla made of coarse, nutritious flour and baked in slabs the size of snowshoes. It was, most of us thought, the best bread we had ever eaten, for it was baked in clay ovens over charcoal and tasted of the fields where the wheat had grown. The waiter also plopped down a large dish of pilau, a steaming mixture of barley, cracked wheat, onions, raisins, pine nuts, orange peel and shreds of roast lamb. On these two dishes, nan and pilau, I would exist during my entire trip, and I would never tire of either." (page 92)

These and many other parallels between today's events and Michener's *Caravans* indicate Afghanistan has changed little over the decades. Yet there are deviations from his observations. A major one is that he expresses hope for an educated Afghanistan (page 24-5), a hope that was lost during the oppressive Taliban rule. By Taliban law, gone were kites flying in the wind, embassies trying to normalize relations with the government, music and colorful festivals, and education for females. The Taliban's religious police was formed to ensure compliance with beard rules for men, no public laughter by women, and proper observance of stringent dress codes for both sexes. Hence, oppressive Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was even bleaker than the ruthless country Michener describes.

Given current events, *Caravans* remains thought provoking. "Was there ever a land so over-run by terror and devastation as Afghanistan?" (page 43)

The authors own The Book Stops Here in Albuquerque, NM. In 1995 they wrote and published a biography of Michener's youth with his help and contributions; the title is *James A. Michener : The Beginning Teacher*. The Book Stops Here can be contacted at www.bookstopshere.com, or by eMail at glidybwad@comcast.net.



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