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## An obituary in *The Economist* rekindles old memories

The few select who have earned the honor of an obituary in *The Economist* do not usually intersect with the circle of persons with whom I have shaken hands. Major Geoffrey Langlands, whose passing at the biblical age of 101 years this magazine recently reported, is an exception to this rule. His obituary has rekindled old memories of a single encounter in rather bizarre circumstances, in an area that dominant history often depicts as on the edge of the civilized world, but which has its own strength, charm and logic.

From late 1987 to late 1989 I served with the International Committee of the Red Cross in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I was based in Peshawar, with the better half of my time as an itinerant delegate in the tribal agencies of the North West Frontier and, on the other side of the Durand Line, Mujahedin-controlled areas of the internationalized Afghan civil war. It was my first mission. After a few months, the assignment of tribal agencies among delegates was reshuffled; I lost North and gained South Waziristan.



In the process of hand-over, I traveled from North to South taking a road that the ICRC had rarely used, directly through the highlands of the Waziristans, instead of re-descending to the Indus River plain. Our first-aid post physician in the North, himself raised in the area, pointed out that I might want to meet a rare species of former colonial officer, by then the principal of a boys' college in a far-flung region of lush green valley floors and uncounted mountains, some tree-studded, others knife-sharp and barren.

The doctor accompanied me, another expatriate, whose name and function I no longer recall, one or two field officers and the drivers in two Landcruisers, on what I remember as a grey, cool and windy early springtime morning. Word had not been sent ahead of our coming – phone service was basically non-existent; thus our request, made at the gate of Razmak Cadet College shortly before lunchtime, to see the principal was an imposition.

Major Langlands received us in his office in a gracious manner. With the benefit of his picture in *The Economist*, I fancy that, thirty years ago, he looked basically the same - spindly, with white hair, rimmed glasses, and a countenance and diction that expressed discipline, rigorous work and an ascetic lifestyle. What I do remember, strongly, is that the major, at the ring of a bell, walked his guests and a group of senior staff from his office to the mess hall in a kind of triangular formation, with him being the undoubted leader. We crossed a clean, graveled courtyard – if it had any trees, they were not remarkable enough to remember – and entered the equally clean, spartanly furnished hall. The guests were honored to sit on both sides of the long table, close to the major, who was the one seated at its narrow head side. Somebody said grace, thanking a generic God. A simple, nutritious meal of meat, rice and vegetables, in the bland British style was served.

I had hoped to pick our hosts' brains to learn more of the local history – after all we were in the North West Frontier, a turbulent place about which a young Winston Churchill had written (in 1897), in a perspective that nowadays makes us cringe:

*"I take every opportunity and have accompanied solitary patrols into virgin valleys and ridden through villages and forts full of armed men – looking furious – but without any adventure occurring. It is a strange war. One moment people are your friends and the next they are shooting. The value of life is so little that they do not bear any grudge for being shot at."*

But Major Langlands did not bear questions shot at him. He considered the brief outline of college history that he had given in his office sufficient and conclusive; historic interpretation beyond its gates was not in his line. I understood that the price of the meal was to answer *his* questions about the Red Cross activities, in a clear voice so that also those seated further down might benefit. The major remained an educator also during meal times and vis-à-vis his staff.

As a rookie delegate, I limited myself to rather boilerplate institutional PR, laced with factoids about the ICRC hospitals in Peshawar and Quetta, the first aid posts in the agencies and our cooperation with the Pakistani Red Crescent in matters like prosthetic rehabilitation of war amputees. I hoped the doctor would interject some local color, but he kept as mum as all of Langlands' underlings. I doubt that any one left the table any wiser than before, and I would not begrudge the major if behind his unfailing politeness he summed up our visit as a waste of time and meat.

We thanked him and shook hands outside, at a moment when the sun had long dissolved the last remnants of the morning fog. As we were driving away, I pondered the strange contrast with an earlier scene in the day. The college was an austere body, walled like the many forts that had secured British rule over the tribes, and after independence has been securing the army's. It was no longer breathing the same spirit as in Churchill's era, and if "the Pashtuns had to be dealt with", then it was with respect, algebra and the English language, all of which Major Langlands himself taught the boys. But austere it was, and perhaps it was this that resonated, to an extent, with the Wazirs, whose lives were still austere with poverty, illness and violence, receiving scorn and keeping pride.

Hours earlier, we had climbed the switchback road that led us up to the higher parts of Razmak valley. At a point that offered a spectacular view of the meandering river far, far down, we stopped. On a promontory halfway up, a red patchwork shimmered through the swiftly dancing fog. Nomads had pitched their camp, spreading out dozens of rugs and shiny kitchenware on the ground. These bright squares, with their glittering attachments, gave the same impression as moons and stars racing through holes in clouds do. Barely could we make out human silhouettes moving alongside – turbaned men, starkly dressed women, a whirlwind of children. Camels tied to shrubs, goats in makeshift corrals. Tents. Life, unwalled, moving with the water, the land, the seasons.



Did Major Langlands notice the nomads? I believe he did. He must have decided that he served them better by teaching boys behind walls algebra and English. We may not understand his calculus, and had we asked him about it, it might have resented our questions as intrusive. Or, rather, he might have pointed out that our Landcruisers were equally walling in, and, if need be, his horsemanship in the army would serve him better with the tribes than our motorized impositions would ever serve us.

*January 2019, almost thirty-one years later. May you rest in peace, Major Langlands.*



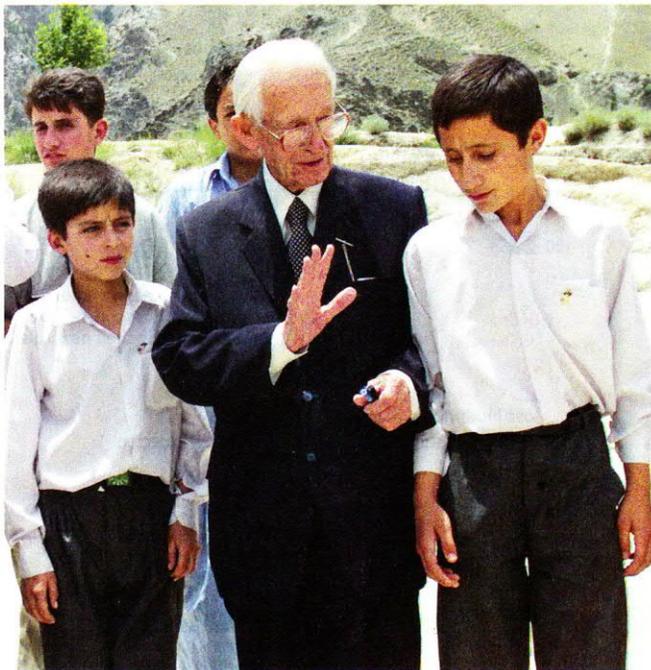
Source: Obituary Geoffrey Langlands, The Economist, January 19<sup>th</sup> 2019, p.86.

Photo credits:

Razmak Valley:

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&source=images&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiy2Oq6ml\\_gAhVvh-AKHWYMDyYQjRx6BAgBEAU&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.shughal.com%2F15-pictures-that-show-the-real-south-north-waziristan%2F&psig=AOvVaw0SbSiP8oKW9iPKocMPsrll&ust=1548720711383634](https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&source=images&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiy2Oq6ml_gAhVvh-AKHWYMDyYQjRx6BAgBEAU&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.shughal.com%2F15-pictures-that-show-the-real-south-north-waziristan%2F&psig=AOvVaw0SbSiP8oKW9iPKocMPsrll&ust=1548720711383634) .

Nomads: By Shabbir Bhutta. <http://socioeconomicpakistan.blogspot.com/2016/11/nomads-wana-south-waziristan-fata.html> .



## The last Britisher

**Major Geoffrey Langlands, teacher of British ways to Pakistan, died on January 2nd, aged 101**

AS A MAN of simple habits, Geoffrey Langlands liked to start his days in a time-honoured way. The reassuring tones of the BBC news at 5am. A hearty bowl of Quaker Oats. Two eggs, lightly done in a poacher from Selfridges. A cup or two of Lipton's tea. A brief glance at the paper and then, in dark suit and tie or well-pressed navy blazer, a brisk stroll to the main school building. There he would be greeted by beaming pupils chorus "Good morning, Sir!"—to which he would reply, in a voice crisped by King's College, Taunton and six years of officer training, "Good morning!"

The scene might be any public school in Britain; but appearances were deceptive. Breakfast was prepared by a servant. The paper was usually some days old. That walk to school wound down a rocky track high in the Hindu Kush, overlooking a staggering green view of the Chitral Valley; the cricket pitch was often above the clouds. In his office the electric light shone dim and intermittent, and there was no heating, even in winter snows. The school uniform was grey trousers and white shirts for the boys, but the girls wore white hijabs. In short, the major was a long way from Croydon, where his teaching career had started.

This particular school, renamed Langlands School and College in 2006 in his honour, was the third English-language school in which he had taught British values, as well as mathematics, in Pakistan over six decades. The end of the war had found him training officers in the sub-continent, under orders not to leave his post; so he stayed, shifting to Pakistan after Partition in 1947 to help build the new country's army and, from 1953, to educate its future leaders. At Aitchison College in Lahore, "the Eton of Pakistan", as he liked to call it, he taught the often idle sons of the rich, some of whom became prime minister. (He vividly recalled Imran Khan, the present one, as a star cricketer even at 13, but an inattentive boy.) From 1979 he was headmaster of Razmek Cadet College, a school inside an ancient fort in lawless Waziristan. And then to

Chitral, remotest of all, the last outpost of British India in a region known only for poverty. Yet under him the local public school grew from 80 to 900 pupils, many winning scholarships to the best universities. For even if Pakistan was getting worse and worse, he meant to make his own little bits of it better and better.

He did so by instilling in the young the virtues of hard work, fair play and, above all, discipline. At Aitchison, during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, he was exasperated when the college cooks could not be drilled into a decent Home Guard, but took refuge under the banyan trees when Indian planes roared over. And he was shocked, in Waziristan, by the warlords' indiscipline. In 1988 one of them kidnapped him—but then laid on rather a good dinner in his village, took a group photograph and even handed him a gun, inviting him to target practice. An utter shambles. Partition itself had been dreadfully handled, of course. It could have been done so much better. The Pakistani government, despite his efforts, seemed in chronic chaos, and ministers often advised him to leave.

That, of course, he ignored. He had a job to do. His work, besides drumming in algebra and calculus, was making pupils stand in line, backs straight, for assembly, stressing punctuality, inculcating ideas of duty and service, ensuring fair treatment for rich and poor, boys and girls (whom he expected, like the boys, to go to university). And testing them. At Aitchison he took teenage pupils, including young Khan, on 250-mile treks through the mountains, where they often found their bony teacher, in school cap, owlsh glasses and Aertex shirt, effortlessly overtaking them.

Discipline was also the core of his private life, especially at Chitral. A tot of whisky only on Saturday evenings. Baked beans on toast for supper, and travel down the steep zigzagging roads in an open lorry like everyone else. A shabby book-filled bungalow to live in, on pay of £50 a week. With the magical peaks all round him, he did not want more. He never had, finding his own happiness wherever he ended up. Until his army days, which started when he signed up, instantly, in 1939, he was a solitary boy. At 12 he had been orphaned. He set his own rules then and a motto, "Be good, do good", to live by. As a master he was firm but kind, and did not often raise his voice to parade-ground volume. He hectorated only when approaching leaders for money for his schools, baldly telling Benazir Bhutto, Pervez Musharraf or Nawaz Sharif: "Now, what I want from you is a million rupees." Mr Musharraf gave him 50m, about \$14,000: the basis of an endowment for Chitral that might have worked better if so many ragged pupils had not been let off the fees.

### His chosen ground

In advanced old age he let himself down once, trying to use his influential former pupils, including the provincial chief minister and the Pakistani interior minister, to frustrate the plans of his successor at Chitral. He relented quickly. But it was hard to leave a place where he had managed everything, including setting out the chairs at cricket matches, and hard to accept a woman from Chelsea as head, when he had hoped a seasoned British army officer would take over. Battle-hardened Britishness was, as he saw it, the great quality he brought to all his schools. Prolonging it after the end of the Raj was, however, tricky.

It was also a Britishness that had become detached, in many ways, from Britain. He acknowledged that and, after all, he was detached himself. He never went back, even to see John, his twin brother, in Blackpool. Obviously he no longer knew the place, and almost no one there knew him. To Britain he had done his duty in the war; to Pakistan he had made a contribution, to the best of his abilities, which he wished to see through. So this country, with all its tumult and frustrations, was his home and chosen burial ground. And in far away Chitral he could still insist, even to himself, on doing things the British way. Reading last year's *Spectators* in the evenings, by a fitfully fading bulb; or taking a constitutional, with properly shined shoes and walking cane, among the towering Himalayan rocks. ■