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Wilfrid Blunt

The



Golden Road to Samarkand

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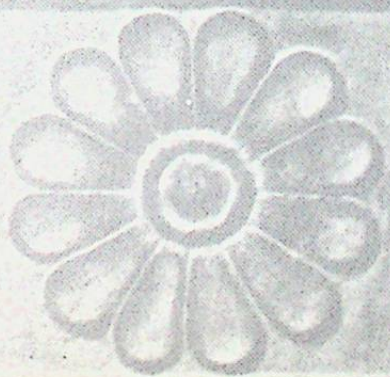
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To the memory of
GEORGE FREDERIC WATTS, O.M., R.A.
and MARY SETON WATTS
in deep gratitude

*'Emperors and kings, dukes and marquises,
counts, knights, and townsfolk, and all
people who wish to know the various races
of men and the peculiarities of the various
regions of the world, take this book and
have it read to you....'*

The opening words of the Prologue to Marco Polo's
Description of the World – lifted, in fact, *verbatim* by
Rustichello of Pisa, Marco Polo's amanuensis, from one of
his own romances.



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Special mention must be made of the truly royal treatment that I received at the hands of Professor Hamid Suleyman, Director of the Alisher Navoi Institute in Tashkent, who, together with his wife and assembled staff, greeted me on the steps of his delightful museum with an enormous bunch of red roses, continued to shower me with valuable gifts of books and medals, and finally arranged certain facilities for me in Samarkand (directors of Western European Museums please copy); I only regret that communication with Professor Suleyman, through a mildly French-speaking Uzbek interpretress, was somewhat restricted.

W.J.W.B.

Contents

	Foreword	9
	Prologue: Samarkand	11
ONE	Alexander the Great: An Invader from the West	17
TWO	Hsuan-tsang: A Pilgrim from the East	30
THREE	Mahomet and Kutayba, the Sword of Islam	55
FOUR	Jenghiz Khan: The Mongols in Central Asia	67
FIVE	The Princes of Christendom: Panic in the West	86
SIX	William of Rubruck: A Friar from the West	94
SEVEN	The Polos and Ibn Battuta: Four Intrepid Travellers	117
EIGHT	Tamerlane: His Triumph and Death	138
NINE	Timurid Princes and the Fifteenth-century Renaissance	164
TEN	Babur: A Soldier of Sensibility	179
ELEVEN	Anthony Jenkinson: An Englishman reaches Central Asia	202
TWELVE	Dr Joseph Wolff, the 'Grand Derveesh of Englistaun'	218
THIRTEEN	Aurel Stein and the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas	235
	Epilogue: Samarkand Today	255
	General Maps	264
	Bibliography	268
	Notes on the Illustrations	271
	Index	274

Color Plates

- The Shab-Zinda, Samarkand* 13
Ruins of Persepolis 14-15
Sikander and the dying Dara 16
Hsuan-tsang 41
A Uighur prince and two princesses 42-3
A goddess and a celestial musician 44
Mahomet's ascent into paradise 57
The mosque at Medina 58
Temuchin proclaimed as Jenghiz Khan 83
Jenghiz Khan enthroned with Bortei 84
Jenghiz Khan in Bukhara 97
A battle between Mongols and Hungarians 98-9
Two aspects of the Gobi Desert 100
Kubilai Khan and the Polos 125
The three Polos setting out from Venice 126-7
A detail from the Catalan Atlas of 1375 128
Tilework on the Shab-Zinda 141
Building a palace for one of Babram Gur's wives 142
The Bibi Khanum Mosque, Samarkand 155
Herat and Urganj besieged by Tamerlane's armies 156-7
The Gur-i-Mir, Samarkand 158
The infant Shah Rukh brought to Tamerlane 171
Ulugh Beg dispensing justice in Khurasan 172
Babur reading 185
Babur making the Garden of Fidelity at Kabul 186-7
Gazargah, near Herat 188
A 16th-century map of Central Asia 213
The Golden dome, Meshed 214-15
Apotheosis of War and Celebration 216
Vaisnavana with attendants 241
Two kings of Stell 242-3
Buddha on the Vulture Peak 244

Foreword

There are few things more irritating to an author than to find himself accused, by a reviewer or a reader, of failing to write the kind of book he had no intention of writing; it is therefore perhaps expedient for me – indeed, since the advent of the Trade Descriptions Act perhaps even necessary for me – to explain to what extent the title and sub-title of this book describe its contents.

A book is none the worse for having a golden title; but *The Golden Road to Samarkand* is not simply about Samarkand and the ways thither, whether from north, south, east or west. Nor does it attempt to be a history of Central Asia, a subject of unbelievable complexity which, in my opinion, cannot be written for general consumption. Open almost any such history – Skrine and Ross's classic *The Heart of Asia*, for example – and sooner or later (probably sooner) you will be confronted by something such as the following:

About the year A.H. 870 (1465) a number of these Uzbegs, discontented with their Khān, Abū-l-Khayr, migrated into Moghūlistan, with the Sultans Girāy and Jānibeg, of the line of Jūji. Isan Bughā, the then Khān of Moghūlistan, or Jatah, received them hospitably, and allotted them some territories on the River Chū, to the west of his own domains. These emigrants were subsequently known as the Uzbeg-Kazāks, or simply Kazāks. . . .

This, in any quantity, is indigestible pabulum for all but the specialist. Yet there must be many people who would like to be given some account of this romantic part of the world, provided that it comes to them in palatable form. But the attempt to prepare such a meal has shown me how difficult it is, and I fear that in places the meat may turn out to be tough.

What I have done is as follows. I have chosen a number of men associated with that rather ill-defined territory that we call Central Asia – conquerors, travellers, merchants, patrons, priests, pilgrims and archaeologists – and written essays about them in which I have sometimes also dealt with parts of their careers not strictly relevant; but more than once I have felt obliged, reluctantly, to leave my hero to continue alone on his journey when he strays too far or for too long outside the heart of the Continent. Or if you prefer it, the book may be considered as a series of tableaux, selected to suit a personal taste yet in the hope that they