

# Foreign correspondent's Afghanistan memoir recalls her experiences in war-torn country

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Foreign correspondent Heidi Kingstone has spent much of her career pursuing stories in politically charged and war-torn countries.

Her recent memoir and first book, however, is not so much journalistic as it is what Kingstone called an “impressionistic and atmospheric” account of the period she spent living and working in Afghanistan, from 2007 to 2011.

*Dispatches from the Kabul Café* (2014) touches on the complex politics of the region during the final years of the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan, but is essentially a collection of vignettes illuminating Kingstone's personal impressions of, and experiences in, Afghanistan, as well as those recalled to her by fellow western expats and a few Afghan locals.

The stories include one about a single Afghan woman whose life is shattered following an affair with a British man, one about a young British doctor killed bringing medical supplies to a remote community in northern Afghanistan, and one about Kingstone's brief relationship with a mercenary.

Initially hired to do a stint in communications for an American public relations firm, Kingstone stayed on in Afghanistan long after the contract ended, mostly freelancing for western publications.

Born in Montreal, raised in Toronto and based out of London, England, Kingstone has previously travelled in and reported out of Iraq and Africa, and has had work published in the *National Post* and the *Jerusalem Post*, as well as publications in South Africa and the United Kingdom.

In *Dispatches*, she evokes Afghanistan's rich culture and raw natural beauty alongside the good intentions, misguided notions and carousing of the tight-knit circle of journalists, NGO workers, diplomats and mercenaries she belongs to in Kabul.

At one point, she describes Afghanistan in 2005, after the Taliban had left, as a time when “the gold rush [was] in full swing,” referring to the expat community's partying, extramarital affairs and “get rich quick” schemes.

But ultimately, the book's colourful characters – the people Kingstone met and befriended in Afghanistan – are, despite their obvious weaknesses, sympathetically drawn, shown to be motivated by a thirst for adventure as well as hopes for a democratic Afghanistan.

“I think in the old days, when people went to places like this, they were running away from things. And sure, some of the mercenaries were there to make money and some people might've been there to run away from bad marriages and bad jobs,” Kingstone said in an interview with *The CJN*.

“But I would say this was also a situation that attracted a lot of capable people.”



Canadian journalist Heidi Kingstone's new memoir explores her time in the final years of NATO's Afghanistan. MICHAEL FREEMAN PHOTO

In addition to capturing the social dynamics of her Kabul posse, the book is pebbled with Kingstone's expressions of ambivalence about NATO's presence and intervention in the country and the West's erroneous assumptions about certain cultural elements.

“Yes, it was heady times,” she said. “You were there knowing things were going wrong. You could see the corruption... You could see the frustration of the Afghans who, after decades of war, were exhausted. Clearly, we got things wrong. But the

book isn't an exposé of that. I was trying to capture this really remarkable time...and all the things that went into that, the good and the not so good stuff.”

She writes, in the beginning of *Dispatches*, that she initially went to Afghanistan to try to help change the way women there were treated, but left feeling disillusioned.

She writes that the West upholds the myth that, “Afghan women are all sisters, united under the burka, under the shared mantle of oppression. As if they are different from us, rather than just like us. As if there is no rivalry.”

Kingstone maintained that, since living in Kabul, her perception of Afghan women and their place in society is more nuanced; she's learned that some of them want to wear the burqa, or the hijab, that they may not all wish to go to school.

Ultimately, Kingstone said, it's difficult to answer whether the NATO mission in Afghanistan was a failure.

“I think it's a complicated question... The mission kept changing. If we went in to bring democracy, peace and good governance, did it fail? I think probably it did. But we also had unrealistic goals and an unrealistic time frame.”

Still, to be a journalist living in Afghanistan during that time, to be able to tell the stories of the country's locals and its expats, was an undeniably incredible experience, she said, stressing, “Afghanistan was a place where everything came alive.” ■

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