As reviewed by Madeleine Moon MP

If you want to understand how we came to the current impasse and difficulties ISAF forces are facing in Afghanistan then Ann Jones' description of life in Kabul between 2002 and 2005 is a good place to start. The book chronicles the hope with which the American forces were greeted in 2002 through to the exhaustion as reconstruction and development fail to take place; attention shifts to Iraq and the Talban re-emerge as a powerful force.

Ann gives the back history to Afghanistan, its times of peace and affluence and attempts to change and modernise this deeply traditional male dominated society. She neatly lays out British failure to establish control and the use of Afghanistan to fight proxy wars by Pakistan, Russia and the US. The terrible impact of years of war are starkly set out in figures. In 1979 the population of Afghanistan was 16 million. When the US quit in 1992, over two million Afghans had been killed, 600,000 to two million maimed, one and a half million driven insane, two million were internal refuges while six million had fled to Pakistan or Iran. All of this before the mujadaden civil war, the rise of the Taliban and the invasion of 2002.

Grim facts cascade from Ann's record of her life in Afghanistan. The lives of women and girls are starkly set out with the routine use of rape, confinement, beatings, murder and sale as their lot in life from the moment of birth. In 2001 Physicians for Human Rights reported that 70% of Afghan women suffered from major depressions, nearly two thirds were suicidal and 16% had attempted suicide. The granting of equal rights and duties before the law to men and women by the 2004 constitution is shown to be sham. The Chief Justice setting out the three privileges accorded to women lists them as, praying, obeying the husband and restraining from bad acts. It is estimated that 95% of Afghan women are subject to violence, living their lives only at the pleasure and command of men.

Education is seen as the way to improve the lives and opportunities of the people of developing countries. Afghanistan's education system was described by the UN as the worst in the world but sadly the NGO and military investment in education by 2005 has made little impact on literacy and numeracy. Donor aid for education fails as 80-90% of aid goes into US contractors and sub-contractors US bank accounts leaving only 10-20% spent in Afghanistan. Action Aid paint a rosier picture estimating that only 60% of aid is phantom, spent on accounting, technical assistance and international experts.

Below the statistics and evidence of failure are the human stories which make this an enjoyable read. Ann paints a picture of people struggling to make a life in the midst of chaos and the clashing to two cultures. The description of the holiday journey taken to Mazir-i-Sharif through the Salang tunnel sums up the chaos, the unpredictability and the everyday dangers of life in Afghanistan while highlighting the difficulty of moving goods south to meet the voracious needs of a military campaign.

With her class of women students Ann celebrates International Women's Day and goes through a list of rights for women. The right of a woman to make choices is one the woman struggle to comprehend. The description of life inside the Kabul women's prison is as cold and stark as the reasons behind the women's imprisonment. The women live a life of Catch 22, they are guilty because they are in the prison, they are in the prison because they are guilty. Afghanistan has many laws but not one against rape. Rape is described as a subsection of adultery. A woman who is raped is imprisoned and charged with adultery and investigated to see if she consented to the rape. Compensation can be given for crimes often in the form of fat sheep, new copies of the Koran and women as second or third wives or for household labour.

The invading military forces and the NGO's are mostly painted in a negative light. They drive up the cost of housing for ordinary Afghans, seduce professionals away from jobs to act as guides and interpreters, create chaos in the streets and ignore the views and opinions of Afghans when planning aid and development. I smiled at the joke that when men are put in charge of an aid project they think first of concrete.

This is a book about survival and failure between 2002-2005. The personal stories of survival within the chaos of war, invasion and a society which discounts the lives of 50% of its population are riveting. The failure is of the west to understand the world it has entered. There is a lack of engagement with the population, peace, infrastructure and governance but corruption, promotion of warlords and the vacuum into which the Taliban re-emerged funded by drugs.

Ann's account of her years in Afghanistan paints a picture of wasted opportunity, wasted money and wasted talent as the focus moves to Iraq. We are now five years on from Ann's departure from Afghanistan. Recently in the voting lobby I spoke to a colleague who had just returned from Afghanistan and he talked of visiting a northern town which was orderly, growing in affluence and where he had visited a factory where men and women worked together. I hope he is right.

Kabul in winter, by Ann Jones is published by Picador