

The Extraordinary Life of

Nancy Hatch Dupree

(1927–2017)

Nancy Hatch Dupree: My name is Nancy Hatch Dupree and I am working with the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University, which is a collection of documents related to Afghanistan.

Eva Meharry: Anyone who has been to Afghanistan in the past half century knows the name, Nancy Hatch Dupree. Nancy lived a colourful and fascinating life in Afghanistan: first as the wife of a CIA agent and then the wife of a renowned, Harvard-educated archaeologist, Louis Dupree, with whom she spent many years travelling to archaeological sites around the country in the 1960s-70s, writing articles and guidebooks, and socializing with Kabul elites. Nancy then lost nearly everything she loved when she and Louis were kicked out of Afghanistan in 1978 and he died in 1989. She then spent the next three decades fighting to protect the country's rich heritage, which was devastated by war, until she passed away in 2017.

I'm Eva Meharry, and in this podcast for the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University and the Afghanistan Society, I will take you through the extraordinary life of Nancy Hatch Dupree, my late mentor, by talking to some of the people who knew her best about her adventures, love, loss, and devotion to Afghan heritage.

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Eva Meharry: Nancy was born in New York in 1927 and then spent her earliest years in India while her father worked in agriculture for the State Department, where she learned to ride horses with the Maharajah's brother, before they moved to Mexico. She would later say that she felt like she "grew up on a stage set", and her later years would prove just the same.

Nancy returned to New York to study art at Barnard College and then Chinese art and culture during a master's at Columbia University, where she met and fell in love with fellow student, Alan Wolfe. After they were married, they travelled to Iraq, Pakistan, and then Afghanistan in 1962 for Alan's job with the CIA.

Sandra Cook: She was married to Alan Wolfe, the CIA agent, and she went to Afghanistan as his wife.

Eva Meharry: Here's Sandra Cook, the former co-chair of the Louis and Nancy Dupree Foundation, who explained how when Nancy arrived in Kabul, she didn't want to spend her time idly playing bridge with the other diplomatic wives.

Sandra Cook: And so she wrote this book. The ATO, the Afghan Tourist Organization, they were going to take this important group of visitors to Bamiyan, so they ask her if she would write a book about it, or a guide, and she said, "I will". And characteristic of Nancy she does incredible research.

So she did all this research and she wrote this book. And somebody said to her, "before you actually get that published for the visitors, you should take it to this guy, and he's a professor. He's doing anthropological work here in Afghanistan, and have him look at it and make sure it's okay".

And she thought, well, that's a good thing, I want to make sure it's factually correct. So she took it to Louis [Dupree] and he handed it back across the table to her, and he said, "well, there's nothing really original here".

And she said, "well, I'm not writing a PhD thesis, this is a tourist guide!"

And she stomped out of the room, and as she tells it, he says: "wait a minute. Come back here".

Well, they fell in love. They had this mad affair.

Eva Meharry: I next spoke to the archaeologist, Charles Kolb, who said he didn't know about the affair when he met Louis and his wife, Ann, and Nancy and her husband in Kabul.

Charles Kolb: Now by the time I met everybody in 1965, this was a foursome. They were always together doing things when they were in Kabul, going to parties, going to embassy functions. And what was transpiring I only found out about later.

Louis and I went to northern Afghanistan. And we were some of the first Americans allowed up there on permit, because it was within the Soviet jurisdiction and the south of Afghanistan was in American jurisdiction. So the Soviets built an airport for the Afghans in Mazar-i Sharif and the Americans countered by building the Kandahar airport in the south of Afghanistan. So it was that kind of play, again as part of the 'Great Game' actually of the British Raj and the Russian Empire.

At any rate, what was happening that I didn't know about is that Louis and Nancy began extramarital affairs. And, of course, Louis and I were up there in northern Afghanistan on the Balkh river, south of Mazar-i Sharif. We're pretty well isolated. We had started to run out of supplies, so we needed to send somebody back, and that was Louis. He went back to Kabul. And it was supposed to be a quick trip to get money out of the bank, and get supplies, and get the alcohol that was there at the Dupree's house, and bring it up to the area, the town of Aq Kupruk on the Balkh river. And so he's gone; he's supposed to be going down and coming back, a week tops. It turns out, he was gone for three weeks.

But what I did not know at the time is that the Duprees and the Wolfes had decided to be divorced. And that's what happened in January of the next year in 1966. Ultimately, Nancy and Louis got married in early February, and Ann and Alan got married just after they did. So it was basically two families switching houses and switching one another, because Annie was more interested in the diplomatic side and the State Department side of life, and going to parties and doing all these kinds of things. Whereas

Nancy and Louis were interested in the history and culture of Afghanistan. And that was the separating thing.



Louis and Nancy Dupree in Kabul. Courtesy of the Afghan Analysts Network.

Eva Meharry: Louis and Nancy Dupree then became the ‘it couple’ of Kabul. Here’s Whitney Azoy, the anthropologist and former diplomat, who talks about his time at the Duprees’ notorious ‘five o’clock follies’, after-work drinks, which were held at their home in Kabul in the 1960s–70s. It was an exciting time to be in Afghanistan: visitors were flocking there along the so-called ‘hippie trail’, archaeological exploration was flourishing, and political ideas were being hotly debated amidst the Cold War; especially in 1973, when King Zahir Shah was overthrown in a bloodless coup by his cousin and former Prime Minister, Daoud, who formed a republic.

Whitney Azoy: He had this ‘five o’clock follies’. He and Nancy did later on, whereby anybody could come. It was the only open bar in Kabul. Anybody could come and anybody did, including the Afghans, including the Afghan government officials. And you’d go there and there’d be this bar, you know. And when I first came to Kabul I was a diplomat, so it was easy to get a drink, but for a lot of people it wasn’t. And you’d go there and you’d get a drink. And you’d get another drink. And you’d start talking. Everybody would start talking. It was terrific. There’d be all these girls, you know, and you’d have a great time. And Louis and Nancy would keep stirring this stuff and listening. And they’d close the show, and they’d sit down and write what they heard. And they’d refine those notes in the morning, and then five o’clock in the afternoon, began it all over again.

I don't think that anyone – no one since my first time there in the early 1970s –, I don't think that anyone ever had the social reach of Louis and Nancy Dupree in Afghanistan. They knew the king, they knew Daoud, they knew members of the Communist underground, which wasn't very Communist and wasn't very underground, but they knew all sorts of people.



Louis and Nancy Dupree in Kabul. Courtesy of the Afghan Analysts Network.

Marvin Weinbaum: Well, you know, it was a transition here, because I would have seen them on both ends of the transition from the kingdom [of King Zahir Shah] (1933–1973) to Daoud's Republic (1973–1978).

Eva Meharry: Here's Marvin Weinbaum, Scholar-in-Residence at the Middle East Institute.

Marvin Weinbaum: And I thought the Friday meetings were really an effort to bring together the Afghan intellectuals with the foreign community. Now there weren't a lot of people there, perhaps at any one point in time, 15 or 20 at the very most. I got to meet Afghans who I never would have otherwise met, who were all friends of Louis. He was publishing up a storm in those days. He was writing for the American University Field Staff, which he was a member of. And they stationed people all around. So Nancy and Louis – although Louis was the person of name –, they were the people there for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and they were living in Kabul. And that lasted until the Communists came and then threw Louis into prison for a little while.

Eva Meharry: Ten years ago I interviewed Nancy, where she talked about their transition to Pakistan after President Daoud's Republic was overthrown by the Communists in 1978 and the Soviets then

invaded Afghanistan in 1979. She stayed in Pakistan to work with the thousands of refugees fleeing the violent fighting between the Communist forces and Mujahideen resistance forces while Louis travelled back and forth across the border with the Mujahideen.

Nancy Hatch Dupree: During the Taraki regime (1978–1979) we were thrown out. My husband was put in jail. Then we were living in Peshawar. He was coming back with the Mujahideen [to Afghanistan]. I didn't come with the Mujahideen. I thought it was not fair, because again, the Afghan character, they respect an old lady and think if there was a helicopter coming, he would, he would stay in order to help me. And that was endangering his life and I had no right to do that, so... My husband, he was like a goat, he would go with the Mujahideen. They could find shelter. So he was covering the Mujahideen and I was going to the refugees in Peshawar.

Eva Meharry: I spoke to the author, Ahmed Rashid, about Nancy's time during the 1980s in Pakistan and the political situation there, including the Arab fighters who came to join the Mujahideen resistance against the Soviets, most notably the future leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden.

Ahmed Rashid: Nancy was very much a fixture in Peshawar and was immensely popular amongst everyone: the Afghans, the foreign expats. Remember at that time, all the aid that was going to the Afghan people was going into Peshawar, so all the aid agencies were there, the UN was there. And then every major country in the West wanted reports about how the war was going against the Soviets and all, so all the diplomats were there.

It was also very dangerous, because people were being assassinated in Peshawar. And then of course, you know, by 1986, the Arabs had arrived in force. They weren't particularly threatening at that time, but it was very interesting to try and find out what they were up to. And it was very difficult to meet the Arabs, particularly obviously bin Laden, who was there. But they came to play a very dominant role in the politics of Peshawar.

So, you know, Nancy was basically collecting and archiving all the material that she had collected over the years in Kabul; and, of course, all of this was to reemerge later on when she moved her whole archive to Kabul University.

Sandra Cook: So she went to Afghanistan with Alan Wolfe; she married Louis; they were there til the Russians invaded; they fled to Pakistan. They were there for a long time, and then they came back to the United States and he took up a professorship at Duke University. And then he died. And finally after some time, friends of hers urged her to go back to Peshawar, because she was just grieving and in no man's land, to go back to Peshawar and pick up on some of the work Louis had started – that Louis and she had started – in collecting materials about Afghanistan. This is the archive that eventually became ACKU [the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University].

Marvin Weinbaum: She was kind of in the background, and it's not until after Louis' death I think that she really stepped out, from what I can see, on her own. Well, what choice did she have? But she certainly wanted to carry on his legacy in every conceivable way. But her really genuine love for the Afghans was

just always evident and, as we know, she dedicated those years that we're talking about, thirty years that she outlived Louis. And I think that's the most interesting part of her story.

Eva Meharry: After Nancy returned to Pakistan in the wake of Louis' death in 1989, she continued to build her archival collection. But in 1992 her attention turned to the preservation of the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul, which she knew particularly well from writing a guidebook for it in 1974.

After the Soviets had withdrawn from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan Communist government had held on to power for several more years against the Mujahideen resistance fighters, until 1992 when the government collapsed. The Mujahideen factions then broke out into civil war and the museum ended up on the frontline of the fighting during the early 1990s.

At the time, Ahmed Rashid reported on the condition of the museum.

Ahmed Rashid: It was a very desperate situation in Afghanistan at that time. The civil war had been going on. There had been fighting literally outside the Kabul museum. There had been destruction by both the Taliban and Dostum's forces, the Uzbek forces. And there were real fears that, you know, the whole museum would be looted, robbed, or destroyed.

The local Afghan staff played an incredible role, along with the UN, to try and negotiate their independence from the fighting, and not to be held hostage by anyone, and to preserve what was there already.

Eva Meharry: I sat down with the former Director of the National Museum of Afghanistan, Omara Khan Massoudi, to talk about efforts to protect the museum during the civil war. We met at the Serena Hotel, formerly known as the Kabul Hotel, where Mr. Massoudi had helped store artefacts from the museum for safekeeping during the conflict. His colleague translated for him.

Omara Khan Massoudi (translated by Hamidullah Arefi): So when they got the permission to visit the National Museum, there were some journalists at that time with them and the ICRC representatives, so they visited, but they found the National Museum in a very bad situation at that time. Especially the upper floor was totally burned and the depot or the storages that they used to keep the artefacts there, those were broken, and most of the artefacts were looted. So there was a limited number of artefacts that were burned, but they lost most of the documentary and inventory cards for the artefacts, which was on the second floor and got burned at that time.

So after two days, Nancy, in a very harsh winter, came to Kabul and visited the National Museum staff, and they were trying to protect the remaining artefacts from demolition and from destruction. After two days of work and consultation, they were trying to establish a Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH).

So everyone knew at that time that it was a very big risk going to the west of Kabul at that time, especially during the war. But Nancy, because of the love that she had for the Afghan culture and interest that she had, she was coming to Kabul at a time when there were no hotels, no accommodation, the whole

city was at war, but she had interest for the culture, especially the artefacts of the National Museum, to preserve them.



Nancy Hatch Dupree at the destroyed National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul. Courtesy of Nancy Hatch Dupree.

Eva Meharry: I spoke to Jolyon Leslie, who worked for the UN in Kabul at the time and was a founding member of SPACH, the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, about Nancy's role in the organization.

Jolyon Leslie: We had this kind of brainwave, together with Carla Grissmann, we decided to set up an organization. And it was kind of slightly a Janus-faced one, the organization, because, on the one hand, we had to speak to impressionable diplomats in Islamabad, particularly where the power was, because everybody was offshore. And those of us in the field who were actually much more viscerally involved and much operationally involved had to somehow reconcile the kind of diplomatic side.

The government had fallen. There was nothing very much to replace it. So it filled a gap, because it wasn't Afghans speaking for themselves necessarily. Although there were, I think we all made an effort to try and make sure there was an Afghan voice, it just wasn't an expat coterie. And as a result of the war and the lack of control over the country, particularly key sites like Herat and Djam and others, and to some extent Balkh, the lid was a little bit off the pot. It didn't always happen, but quite often the Mujahideen then plundered. Many of these sites had been plundered before anyway, but it was particularly intrusive and destructive until, well, for you know more or less a decade actually that it was kind of open season.

Nancy being in Peshawar, she actually had a very privileged position, because she was able to see – first of all, she had a very good network –, but she was also able to see objects passing through, which was much easier to see in Peshawar, because the dealers were more concentrated there. And I think she probably had a very good network of Afghans who went and scouted out pieces.

So there was both a political vacuum, but also a technical vacuum. And SPACH tried to fill the latter by actually going out and visiting places, trying to raise awareness about issues and flag wave about, being essentially also like a fire alarm, to say, “we need to be careful, we need to be careful”. So I think there was a practical side of it and then it evolved, because we had a, you know, as it were, a sovereign counterpart and did some more practical work, more implementation focused on the museum. And I think a lot of the key players who had been heavy weight diplomats in Kabul, had moved on as individuals, and they were passionate in their different ways. And that gave us a lot more impetus, thanks to Nancy's extraordinary skills of wooing ambassadors and getting them engaged.

Eva Meharry: So that was Nancy's main role then was it, working with the ambassadors and getting support for it?

Jolyon Leslie: Yeah, and actually drawing on in a very direct way, as Nancy always was, you know, talking facts and basically saying, “I remember because I went there with Louis in the 1960s”. And that was very, very useful, because I would always defer to her and say, “well, yes, I've been to that site, but I was only there five minutes ago or, you know, three months ago, what's the deeper story”. And she was very, very useful at digging that up.

Eva Meharry: In 1994, the Taliban movement emerged, which was based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, to challenge the warring Mujahideen factions and restore order to the country based on their religious views. After the Taliban captured the capital in 1996, they continued to fight the Mujahideen forces in the Bamiyan region in central Afghanistan. There, a Taliban commander threatened to destroy the famed Bamiyan Buddhas in 1997 and carried out an attack the following year, damaging the small Buddha statue, despite reassurances from the Taliban leadership that the statues would be protected.

Here's the journalist, Kathy Gannon, about Nancy's efforts to find out about the condition of the Buddhist statues in Afghanistan.

Kathy Gannon: The Kabul airport was closed and we had to fly into Ghazni and we took a bus. It was the Taliban time and we took a bus up to Kabul. And so it was Nancy and I in the front of the bus. And despite the fact that everybody said, “no you can’t sit at the front of the bus”, well, Nancy and I looked at each other and said, “of course we’re going to sit at the front of the bus”.

And Nancy was coming, and had been coming, but she was trying to get to Bamiyan. This was long before the Buddhas [were destroyed in 2001]. I want to say 1999 because there was no issue of travelling to see the Buddhas and there was no issue with – she also went to Ghazni, there was a sleeping Buddhas there that the Italians, I think, had done some help restoring. And I think she spent maybe two or three weeks there then.

Jolyon Leslie: I was then in charge of the UN in Kabul and we had a kind of a brainstorming about how to deal with the looming issue of the Bamiyan Buddhas, because it was kind of on the radar. And she was very, very useful in terms of kind of guiding me about sitting down and saying, the UN needs to be careful not to politicize this. The international community risks drawing too much attention to the risks to give, as it were, a trump card to the hardline factions, so they might turn around and say, you know, as a demonstration of their power, this is what we’re going to do. And that was something that was quite helpful, because it was something that was in my mind’s eye, but to have her huge historical perspective in terms of tactics...

Eva Meharry: Despite protests by SPACH and the international community, in March 2001 the Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan Buddha statues and other pre-Islamic statues across the country, including at the National Museum. Two decades of conflict had devastated the country and its cultural heritage.

Following the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001 by NATO-led forces in response to September 11th, as the international community began to support nation building in Afghanistan, Nancy was keenly aware of the many challenges facing the preservation of the country’s heritage. In an interview with Jolyon Leslie shortly before she passed away, Nancy reflected on some of these issues in the post-2001 era.

Nancy Hatch Dupree: History has been taught so badly [to students in Afghanistan], dates and people; and no illustrations, bad paper, you know, not a textbook that you want to pick up. And then when they went into as refugees, in Iran they got Iranian history and they got Arab history, no Afghan. And in Pakistan they got Pakistani and Arab, no Afghan. So they came back here and they had no sense of belonging.

Now, Kabul is a jazzy place and for a while they were quite happy to be back, because it was, you know, a lot going on. But then it became rather ephemeral and they felt that they didn’t belong here. And so many of the young people are trying desperately to get out of here, which is a loss to the work. And they say it’s because there’s no jobs, which is unfortunately true. And also the security is so bad.

But it’s more than that. They just don’t have a sense of belonging. They don’t know their past. They don’t know their history. They don’t know about their heritage. They don’t know how rich their history is. They have not a single clue.



Nancy in the rose garden at the National Museum of Afghanistan. Courtesy of Joël van Houdt.

Eva Meharry: Nancy was never short of ideas about how to tackle the many challenges facing Afghanistan's heritage and education of the younger generation. Here's Laura Tedesco, US Cultural Attaché, on one of these ideas.

Laura Tedesco: I remember asking Nancy, just give us your ideas, what would be some useful things to do in the culture sector. And this was concurrent with the security situation really starting to decline, like 2013, 2014, 2015. And Nancy had the brilliant idea of creating a kind of museum on wheels and somehow creating a curriculum around what's in the National Museum about Afghanistan's much more diverse heritage than is taught officially in the school curriculums and introducing young students like middle school and high school aged students to some topics that they may not have been exposed to.

Gil Stein: We have a number of grants that we've been doing, but one of the most significant ones is something called the Mobile Museum Outreach Project.

Eva Meharry: Here's Gil Stein, archaeologist from the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

Gil Stein: And it turns out that Nancy was the animating force behind this. I'll say the irresistible, animating force behind that, that she single-handedly convinced the State Department to fund a project where the whole idea was to educate Afghan high school students about the cultural heritage of Afghanistan and especially to bring the National Museum out to the people. Because it's obviously a free museum for Afghans and it is the treasure house of basically the most important objects that encapsulate or tell the story of the development of civilizations in Afghanistan is in that museum, and it's incredibly

important stuff that most people in the world don't even know about. But a big part of the problem is that Afghans can't even get to the museum. If you're outside of Kabul and you're a high school student, it's not like some kid in America being able to do a school trip to visit the Smithsonian.

So what we did was we made 3D replicas of artefacts from the museum and then we developed an in school program with Afghan instructors. And we reached something like 90 schools, basically the entire Kabul school district. We did programs in every school. And then we went out to all the major cities in Afghanistan, and they loved it.



Mobile Museum Outreach Project. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

Laura Tedesco: And by all accounts, it's been quite well-received. You know, it's interactive, there's these 3D replicas of artefacts that students get to handle and feel the texture of – they're not actually artefacts they're just facsimiles. You know when you can handle something, and hold something and feel the size of it in your hand and the texture of it, it brings something to life in a way, in a kind of pedagogical way, that's not typical for the typical Afghan pedagogy, which is much less interactive.

So I would say that it was based on Nancy's idea that it was one of the most successful cultural preservation projects that the US Embassy ever supported, and it wasn't millions of dollars. It began as a modest idea, which is so classic for Nancy. I mean she was able to get at the heart of issues so efficiently. So it started as a very modest idea and the impact was I think quite powerful.



Mobile Museum Outreach Project. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

Nancy Hatch Dupree: Preservation of information. Now this is very important, because it's not very well developed here. And that's one of the reasons for ACKU, my center. I'm collecting the things that everybody is working on, all the research that's being done now. Because usually what happens with these big agencies, they bring a reporter or a consultant, pay them big money, and they write a report, and they circulate it for a short time, and then it disappears. We collect, or try to collect, all the reporting that's being generated by the NGOs, by the bilateral governments, by the UN agencies – anything that describes what is going on, what is the situation here. And the reason we do this is because I'm convinced that if you give the people of Afghanistan access to the information they need, that they themselves will do 80% of all this very expensive development.

Eva Meharry: I've come to the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU) to talk to the Director, Waheed Wafa, who's carrying on Nancy's work.

So we're here during Covid, but I've been here in the past where this place is absolutely buzzing. Can you just talk a little bit about what people come here to do?

Waheed Wafa: You know to be honest, the [center](#) is a place that every second that we are talking, somebody is in it that we don't know. Currently, we see around 250,000 people are going to all these platforms that we have. But during the summer, you see hundreds of students all around. She was right when she and I were fundraising for the remaining part of this building, she was telling a donor I can't remember, look, one day I will invite you to a beautiful place that will have a flow of young, bright, and beautiful people there, and you can't find a space. And that was true. When we launched this building, the next day, hundreds of students were around us – I mean, still, if you come during the summer or spring,

despite this Covid, despite all the violence in this country. So this iconic building is a place for pictures outside. Hundreds of students are outside while dozens are inside working. But her legacy is getting very strong by this digitization project that people are visiting this center online every day.

Eva Meharry: After speaking to Waheed, I've come to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul to interview former President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, who I've been told formed a close friendship with Nancy.

I've read that you were quite involved in ACKU, inviting [Nancy] to bring her documents back and also helping with funding for the building. Would you like to tell us a bit about why you wanted to get involved?

President Hamid Karzai: Yes, yes. From childhood, especially from my teenage years in the regular household talks, I used to hear the elders of the family, my uncles and others who were at the university at that time or who were in the foreign service at that time, talk about her, about Louis Dupree and Nancy Dupree, and what they were doing. Of course, as teenagers you just hear without much curiosity into things. So, there was that familiarity about the couple who worked in Afghanistan, and who did a lot on Afghan archaeology and the riches of our museums, and all of that.

So that familiarity was there, and also when we were in the resistance in Peshawar, I did very often come across her work, that she was busy there and she was working. This was after her husband passed away as well. She remained lovingly committed to Afghanistan and the good causes of our heritage, and of our archaeological sites and our national monuments. So when I, when we all arrived in Afghanistan, when I became the head of the government during my time in office, one of the most pleasant experiences of my time in office was getting together with her, talking about things, listening to her, to tell us things.

And when she came up with the idea of the resource center at the Kabul University, I was so happy. And at the stroke of a second, I said, "right, we will find you the funds". And we did that. And she picked a good site there, nice building, quite good. So, it was in many ways, in very profound ways, a tremendous honour to have known her, to have worked with her, to have been in a very, very minutely small way, part of her initiatives for Afghanistan. I'm glad talking to you about all this and this grand lady of the country.



Then-President Hamid Karzai at the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University with Nancy Hatch Dupree. Courtesy of President Hamid Karzai's Press Office.

Eva Meharry: It is interesting that you bring up hearing about her. So many people that I have spoken to always want to tell stories about Nancy.

President Hamid Karzai: So many people have stories about Nancy.

Eva Meharry: Yes, Nancy was a great storyteller and lived a particularly colourful life. Do you have any particular story with Nancy that you like to tell?

President Hamid Karzai: Well, lots of stories. She treated us like youngsters. That was great! She would come into the office, sit down, and tell me, “do this and do this, and why haven’t you done this. You’ve not been a good boy!” That was great! That was very, very nice.



Then-President Hamid Karzai speaking to Nancy Hatch Dupree during a visit to the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University. Courtesy of President Hamid Karzai's Press Office.

Eva Meharry: Do you think that helped make her effective at what she, I mean she accomplished quite a lot...

President Hamid Karzai: She accomplished a lot. Look at the dedication that she had for our country, for our culture, for not only for culture and the relics of Afghanistan, but also for the future generations. During the Taliban when the schools were closed, she opened up a sort of library and material for children and the education of children. So it was, she did all she could, with all the endeavours that a human being can afford to keep us a living cultural society.

Eva Meharry: President Karzai was far from the only political figure Nancy persuaded to support her causes. Here's Sandra Cook again, talking about Nancy's talent for swaying people.

Sandra Cook: We wanted to raise some money in the United States. [The Dupree Foundation](#) was specifically formed to raise money in the United States and we had 501(c)(3), so anybody who donated could take a tax deduction. So we set up this thing for her on Capitol Hill, and it could have been in the Senate building, but somebody set up Richard Holbrooke to come to this affair, and there were really important people there. I mean he was just one of all these people who came to hear her talk: people from the army, all the services, people from Capitol Hill, senators, et cetera.

So she gave her talk and there she is, this little bird, you know, giving her talk, and she talked about ACKU, and she said, so we did this, we collected this archive. And then she said, "but that was not

enough, we wanted to do more for the Afghan people! So we started writing these books”. And she talked about the [ABLE program](#), and she said, “but even that was not enough”, and everything.

And she gave this endearing little talk and after she spoke, Richard Holbrooke, he walked up to the podium and he said, “we have got to do something here”. And we managed to raise \$2 Million from USAID through his influence.

Eva Meharry: What would you say Nancy’s legacy is in Afghanistan? How do you want people to remember her?

President Hamid Karzai: She is remembered very fondly, she is remembered lovingly, lovingly by those who are aware of her work, generally. But the educated lot of the country and those who lived at that time, all know her, without exception, without exception. So she is a household name in the country, very, very much. And one that we don’t consider her anymore an American, we consider her an Afghan. We are proud of her being from this soil and we treat her as one of our greatest.

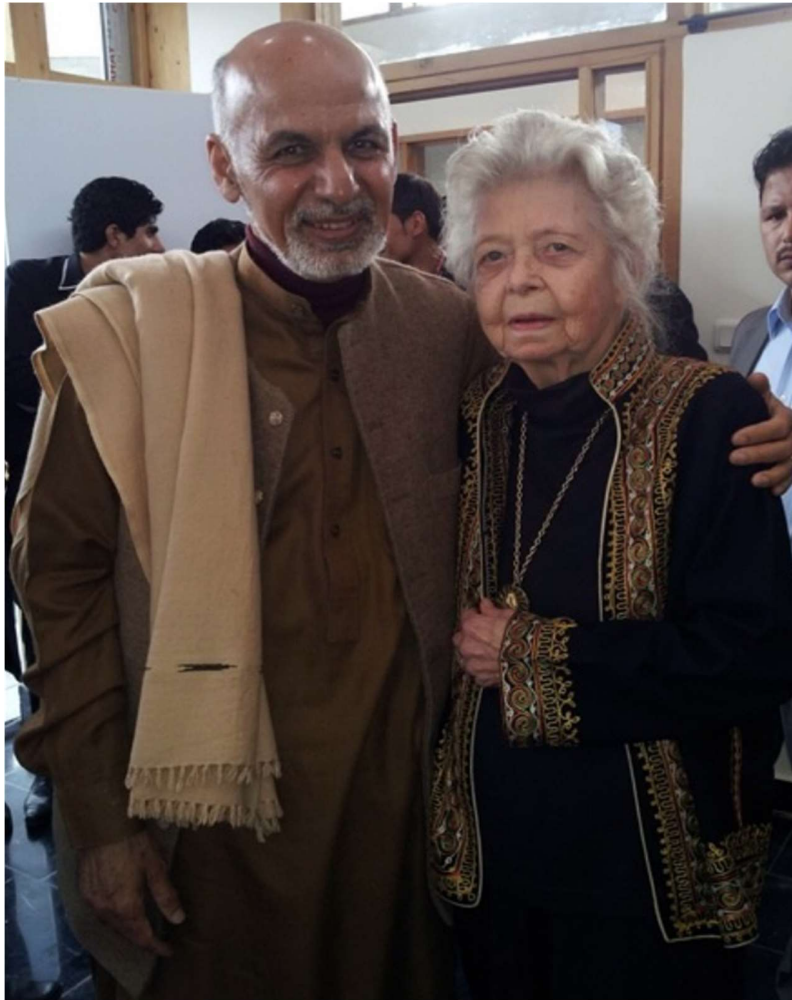
Ahmed Rashid: As far as educated Afghans are concerned, I mean, she will never be forgotten.

Eva Meharry: Here’s Ahmed Rashid again.

Ahmed Rashid: Because she restored their dignity, their history, their pride in their own country and their people by, you know, keeping such voluminous archives, which are now available in Kabul University.

The problem now is that remember Kabul University was a shooting ground at the time of the civil war, and it could become once again, because the Taliban considered it a major threat, because it produced educated people who were specialists et cetera. And we could see again fighting around Kabul University and the looting of various things in Kabul. And of course now there’s an American Afghan University in Kabul also, which has been attacked. And we’ve seen professors being kidnapped from there, we’ve seen people being killed there. So, it’s not that much has changed. The disrespect that the Taliban had for education in the ‘90s is once again being repeated.

And really, I mean, Nancy’s legacy is giving the Afghans a sense of their own history and pride. And she was dealing with not just the old, the archaeological remains that were so historic, so many civilizations had passed through Kabul and Afghanistan, but how that would create modern Afghans who were part of the global community.



Nancy Hatch Dupree with President Ashraf Ghani. Courtesy of Gil Stein.

Eva Meharry: Here's Ambassador Neumann, one of the "Ambys" as Nancy used to like to call ambassadors, who served in Afghanistan from 2005–2007.

Ambassador Ronald Neumann: You have these targeted assassinations now at the whole intellectual strata of Afghanistan and, so I think, that first and foremost the need of course will be for Afghan women to be the lead, the exemplars. But somebody like Nancy who believed in Afghanistan and believed in women, I think, is at least a kind of example that's still awfully, awfully useful today.

She was, and I hope still will be, such a beacon to Afghan women of what women can achieve in Afghanistan. And you have, as I'm sure you know from being there, an incredible number of really dynamic, impressive women.

Eva Meharry: Here's Kathy Gannon again.

Kathy Gannon: I think for Nancy, Afghanistan was both a love letter to Louis, it was a continuation of her passion for Louis, but it was also her real passion for Afghanistan, and for the next generation, for

each next generation. I mean this is something she would most recently say, “even I remember in the ‘90s and the early 2000s, the new generation just doesn’t know, they don’t know their heritage, they don’t know the real depth of their culture”. And for her this was just one of the most important reasons for what she did, trying to educate and preserve for each successive generation, the real treasures that were there in Afghanistan and was theirs to take pride in.

And I remember her saying that in one of our last conversations, “I want to finish this, because I want them to take pride in this. This is where their pride should stem from”. And she was really passionate about it.

And I know the center is such a gift of Nancy’s to Afghanistan and to successive generations. So, yeah, pretty remarkable.



Visiting Bagh-i Bala Palace, built by Emir Abdur Rahman Khan in the 1890s as a summer palace, with Waheed Wafa in December 2020. Louis and Nancy married at the palace, which was then open as an up-scale restaurant, in 1966. Photograph by Eva Meharry.

Eva Meharry: On my last morning in Kabul, I went with Waheed Wafa to Bagh-i Bala to visit Louis’ and Nancy’s memorial. The palace was a fitting place: built by the Afghan emir in the 1890s, it had been home to the royal ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’ that would one day form the National Museum, before the palace was transformed into a high-end restaurant where Louis and Nancy were married.

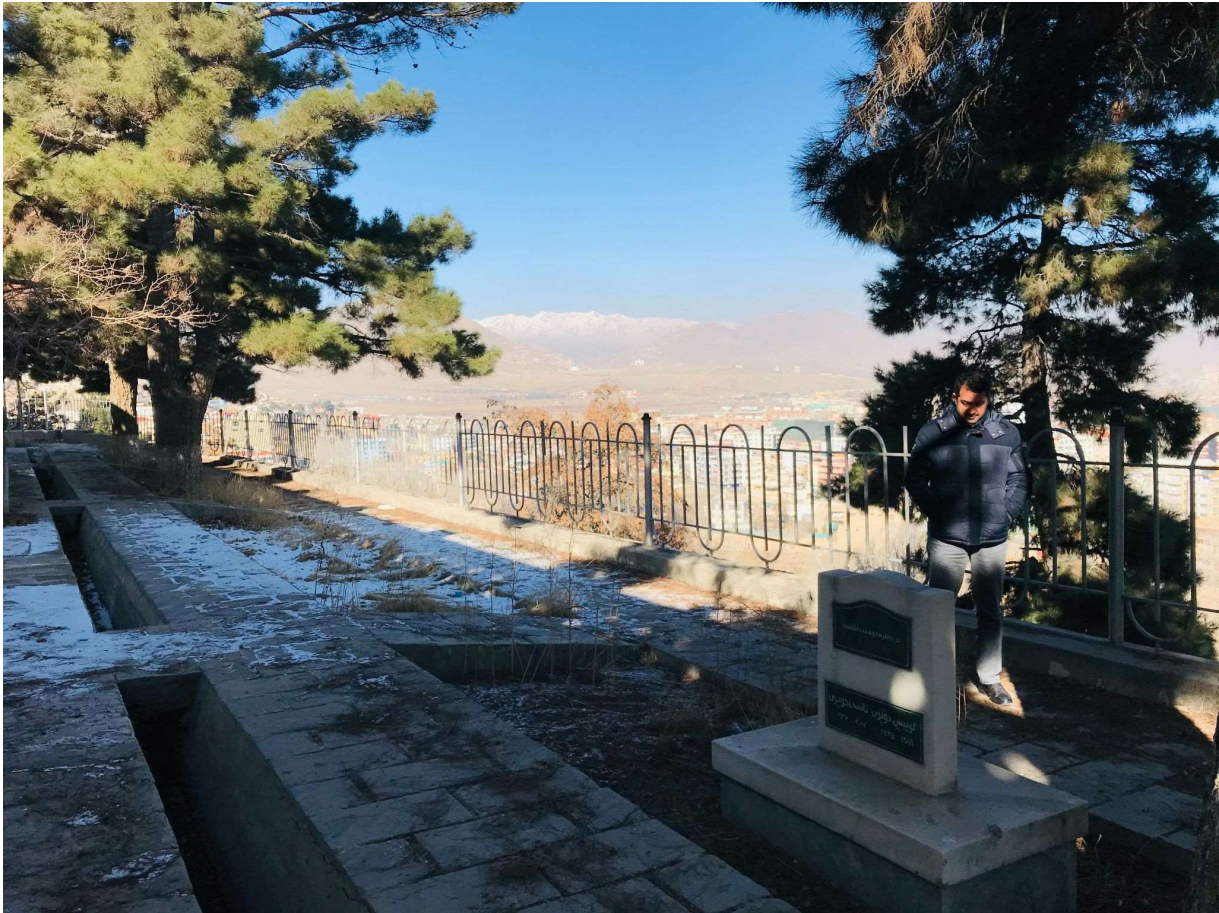
Waheed Wafa: This is actually a stone that and a place that Nancy brought the ashes of Louis. But it was very secret. Few people knew about it. I’m a little bit also scared of the security of this stone, although it’s just a stone. When Nancy died, we put her name also beside Louis Dupree. This side is the Farsi, “در

”خاطره دوست داشته“، and on the other side is English, “In Loving Memory, Nancy Hatch Dupree, 1927–2017, and Louis Dupree, 1925–1989”. It was done by Nancy herself.

Eva Meharry: Why did Nancy decide to put him here?

Waheed Wafa: I think because they married here in this palace, this small restaurant. And she loved the place and the view. Probably also Louis also loved the place. Louis Dupree and Nancy both loved a kind of flower that you can find around here. I don’t know the name in English, but it’s *arghawan*, ارغوان [Judas tree]. And most probably about the time that Nancy put this stone here, so these trees were smaller and you can see everywhere from here.

And as I told you, she was saying, “hey, Louis has got a beautiful view”.



Waheed Wafa standing in front of Louis and Nancy Dupree’s memorial at Bagh-i Bala palace where Louis’ ashes were scattered and where it is hoped one day Nancy can be buried and reunited with Louis. Nancy is currently buried in the United States. Photograph by Eva Meharry.

Eva Meharry: And it is, it’s an amazing view of this part of the city, isn’t it?

Waheed Wafa: It is, yeah, you can see most parts of the city: the north part and also the east part of the city.

Eva Meharry: And with the snow covered mountain tops...

Waheed Wafa: Yeah. I think she's happy with that.

Nancy Hatch Dupree: Out of this, we must seek some leadership. You must look to the young people. Find a direction, find a leader to lead us in that direction.

J. Eva Meharry completed her PhD Thesis, 'Politics of the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism and Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 1919–2001', at the University of Cambridge. She has worked off and on in Afghanistan since 2009, when she first worked with Nancy Hatch Dupree on a project for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture about the history of the National Museum of Afghanistan.

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