

The Last Mughal:

The fall of a dynasty: Delhi, 1857

William Dalrymple | Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006

Dalrymple is a Scot and an impressive scholar of Islamic history and culture. His early travel writing – *From the Holy Mountain, In Xanadu and City of Djinn*s – was often both humorous and erudite. *The White Mughals*, published in 2002, was a fascinating and delightful insight into a different breed of Englishman – a more tolerant late eighteenth century variety. The tone of *The Last Mughal* is more serious, appropriate to its sombre subject matter.

The Indian mutiny of 1857 has been much written about. But what Dalrymple has produced is a study which focuses on the wanton destruction of Delhi itself, the decline and brutal extinction of the Mughal empire and the British religious and cultural imperialism which brought it all about.

Until 1857 Delhi was, and had been for 332 years, a great Mughal city, a centre of Islamic culture and refinement, and a tolerant and pluralistic society where Hindus and Muslims lived peacefully together. The Mughal emperor was Bahadur Shah Zafar, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan and of Akbar. He was a sensitive unheroic man, a poet, a calligrapher and a creator of gardens.

The mid-Victorian era British were at their imperialist worst in 1857. Senior officers and officials were frequently imbued with an intolerant Christian evangelicalism and most lacked cultural sensitivity. The British reaction to the mutinous events of 1857 in Meerut, Cawnpore and Delhi brought down upon their heads, and those of Hindus and Muslims, a religious war of terrible violence and depravity. By 1858, Delhi was physically destroyed and the Muslims were driven out never again to flourish in the city as they once did.

The primary origins of the war were prosaic and are well known – the cartridges for the new Enfield rifles coated in grease made from a mixture of cow fat (offensive to the majority of sepoys who were high caste and vegetarian Hindus) and pig fat (an unclean animal to both Hindus and Muslims); the rumours that this was part of wider East India Company conspiracy to break the sepoys' caste and racial purity before embarking on a project of mass conversion to Christianity; the 300 mutinous sepoys

and cavalymen from Meerut who rode into Delhi killing Christians and declaring Zafar to be their leader.

Soon tens of thousands of jihadis and mujahadeen flocked to Delhi from all over to fight the Christian enemies. Innocent women, children and civilians were slaughtered. The fanatical axe wielding jihadis took a solemn oath that they would fight and if necessary die, but never retreat. Zafar found himself the leader of an uprising that he suspected from the start was doomed. He was right of course but he could not have anticipated the degree of retribution which was later exacted.

This is a massive work of scholarship, the product of four years' collaboration. Dalrymple has had access to a vast amount of primary material in Persian and Urdu, virtually unused since 1857, or at least since it was rediscovered and catalogued by the National Archives of India in 1921. This is not to say that the book is in the least heavy going. It fairly races along. Salman Rushdie is right to say that Dalrymple is that rarity, a scholar of history who can really write.

What painfully emerges from Dalrymple's study of British administrators, company officials, missionaries and armed forces, is a prevailing and profound contempt for Indian Muslim and Mughal culture coupled with a frightening propensity to exact violent revenge. And revenge there was, of a scale that half a century earlier Wellington would neither have countenanced nor contemplated. When word reached England, Disraeli told the House of Commons: 'I protest against meeting atrocities with atrocities'. On the other hand, the foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston (whom Florence Nightingale thought was pure humbug) called for Delhi to be deleted from the map and that 'every civil building connected with the Mohammedan tradition should be levelled to the ground without regard to antiquarian veneration or artistic predilections'. It was not until April 1858 that Chief Commissioner Sir John Lawrence was able to report that he had 'stopped the different civil officers hanging at their own will and pleasure'.

The trial of the Mughal Emperor was chaotic and the outcome was predictable. The prosecuting officer, Major Harriott, alleged that Zafar was the evil genius behind an international Muslim conspiracy stretching from Constantinople, Mecca and Iran to the walls of the Red Fort. His intent, declared the prosecutor, was to subvert the British Empire. The judges retired for only a few minutes before unanimously declaring Zafar guilty of all and every part of the charges. The unsatisfactory legal process reminds one of J J Spigelman's recent quip that military justice bears as much relationship to justice as military music bears to music.

After the British reprisals, almost nothing remained of the Mughal civilisation in Delhi. The members of the royal family who were not executed were reduced to wandering India destitute and homeless. Zafar was deported to Rangoon and buried in an unmarked grave. With the loss of the Mughal Court went much of the city's reputation as a centre of culture and learning. Its libraries were looted, its precious manuscripts lost. The madrasas were almost all closed. A permanent shift of power from Muslim elite to Hindu financiers and merchants was brought about. Hindus and Muslims grew apart and religious intolerance increased. What started in 1857 became irretrievable and permanent at Partition in 1947.

Dalrymple has written an engrossing book with a different emphasis to much of the literature on the subject which has preceded it. It is not merely a major contribution, it is also timely. Dalrymple is justified in concluding with Edmund Burke's celebrated words that those who fail to learn from history are always destined to repeat it. He is alive to worrying parallels with some recent events – the influence of Christian fundamentalism, the readiness to characterise armed resistance to invasion and occupation as 'evil', the inability to recognise the damaging effect of one's own foreign policy and the haste with which opponents are labelled as fanatics. But there is nothing didactic about Dalrymple's exposition. It is subtly and sensitively constructed.

Reviewed by M A Pembroke