Inevitable Revolutions

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THE LAST MUGHAL: The Fall of a Dynasty: Delhi, 1857.
By William Dalrymple.
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M. Forster's A Passage to India ends with a poignant exchange between Aziz, a young Muslim doctor, and Fielding, a Briton sympathetic to Indians. Though Aziz is acquitted of the false charge of molesting a British woman, he is deeply wounded by the experience and wants nothing to do with the colonial race. Fielding, an old friend, seeks him out and asks why they cannot be friends again.

But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices. "No, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there."

This is how the novel ended, written in 1924 against the backdrop of the first mass nationalist upsurge against British rule. Gandhi, who led the movement, was a product of the Indian encounter with Western culture. He trained as a barrister in London and spent more than two decades in South Africa, developing his doctrine of nonviolent struggle in campaigning for Indian rights. Western ideas deeply influenced his political philosophy, and he maintained lifelong friendships with a number of Europeans. But anticolonialism formed the bedrock of his relationship with the West. Despite good intentions, there could be no friendship in the abstract. You could not simply wish away empire when it formed the setting in which the members of colonizing and colonized cultures met.

Historians of empire have always understood this chasm in human relationships created by the fact of one culture ruling over another. But a reappraisal of this truth has been under way for some time now at the hands of revisionist historians of the British Empire. These historians dislike Edward Said and the postcolonial critics who cite French theory and argue that the British Empire established lasting Orient/Occident and East/West oppositions in politics and knowledge. Uncomfortable with the political passion and theoretical language of these critics, the revisionists counsel us (in mainly British accents, with some American intonations) to lower the anti-imperial temperature and write old-fashioned narrative history. They contend that empire is the oldest and one of the most widely practiced forms of governance.

In the revisionist account, the British in India are seen not as agents of colonial exploitation but as hapless, well-meaning imperialists.

The Romans did it, the Spaniards did it, the Russians did it, the Chinese did it, even the newly independent nations have done it. Everybody oppressed everyone else. Pax Britannica may have ruled over one-fifth of humanity, but the conquerors, soldiers, administrators, and scholars were also human. Why bring in such abstractions as Orientalism and colonialism? Underneath it all, the story of the British Empire is a narrative of individuals caught up in human encounters between cultures.

True, the revisionist argument continues, Britons went to distant lands to profit and conquer. But vastly outnumbered by the local population and pitted against powerful adversaries, they were deeply conscious of their vulnerability. This was particularly true in the eighteenth century, when the British were all too aware of the power and grandeur of the Ottomans and the Mughals. The Barbary corsairs and Algerian slave owners harassed them in the Mediter-
When the Uprising broke out, Company rule in India was already a century old. During this time, the Company had acquired effective military and political control over nearly the entire subcontinent. The imperial Moghuls, a dynasty that traced its lineage back to Timur (Tamerlane) and had ruled India since 1526, still enjoyed nominal authority. The aging Moghul emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, lived in Delhi. Clutching hollow emblems of authority, Zafar presided over the royal household and harem. Real power lay with the Company, which used it to build a modern empire. The Company annexed territories, established courts, laid telegraph and railway lines, collected taxes and instituted land settlements that caused widespread discontent. The developing ideology of liberal imperialism, buttressed by evangelical Christianity, left little room for existing cultures and traditions. The old nobility and landholders were summarily cast aside, and Thomas Macauley declared that all the accumulated products of Oriental knowledge were worth a single shelf of a Western library.

The simmering discontent against British rule boiled over with the "greased cartridge" controversy. At the end of 1856, the Company army, which consisted of both Hindu and Muslim sepoys (recruits) commanded by British officers, introduced the new Enfield rifle. Loading the rifle required biting open the cartridge, which was greased to ease pushing the ball down the barrel. Initially, the grease was made of cow and pig fat, defiling to both Hindus and Muslims. This was quickly changed to beeswax and linseed oil, but the damage was done. A rumor spread that the British were deliberately using pig and cow fat to violate the sepoys' religions. The Uprising began on May 10, 1857, with a mutiny of Indian soldiers in the military barracks of Meerut. The mutineers killed their British officers and marched thirty miles south to Delhi, where they were joined by the sepoys in the garrisons stationed in the city. Together, they "restored" Zafar as their emperor. The spirit of rebellion spread to other garrisons in North India and turned from a limited mutiny into a widespread revolt of peasants, artisans, laborers, religious leaders and the old gentry. For more than a year, the fire of the Uprising raged. European officers, women and children were massacred. British authority crumbled in large parts of North India until it was restored with brute force in the summer of 1858. Zafar's glory ended even earlier. Within a few months, the rebel position in Delhi fell. The emperor was tried and convicted for hatcheting an international Muslim conspiracy against his English benefactors, and exiled to Burma. The charge was legally and factually absurd. Since Zafar had never renounced sovereignty over the Company, he could not possibly be guilty of treason. In fact, Dalrymple explains, "from a legal point of view, a good case could be made that it was the East India Company which was the real rebel, guilty of revolt against a feudal superior to whom it had sworn allegiance for nearly a century." Equally groundless was the allegation that Zafar was behind an international Muslim conspiracy stretching from Constantinople to Delhi. "The Uprising in fact showed every sign of being initiated by upper-caste Hindu sepoys reacting against specifically military grievances perceived as a threat to their faith and dharma; it then spread rapidly through the country, attracting a fractured and diffuse collection of other groups alienated by aggressively insensitive and brutal British policies." The British "bigoted and Islamophobic argument" reduced the complexity of the rebellion to an oversimplified and fictional picture of a "global Muslim conspiracy with an appealingly visible and captive hate figure at its centre." Back in England, the Uprising and the aftermath of British bloodlust shocked the Parliament into assuming direct rule over India. Company rule was abolished, and Queen Victoria became the Empress of India.
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nderstandably, the Uprising aroused heated emotions. The British officials and civilians caught up in it captured the experience in their writings. Several fictional and historical accounts were published, including Flora Annie Steel's novel *On the Face of Waters* (1896) and John Kaye's three-volume *History of the Sepoy War in India* (1877). In the British imperial imagination the Mutiny was remembered as the moment when Indians bared their barbarian souls. In Indian nationalist mythology, it was the first war of independence. Outside these stock images and myths, there exists a substantial body of sophisticated and complex historical work on the Uprising, notably the writings of Rudrangh Mukherjee, Gautam Bhadra and Eric Stokes. But historians have largely ignored Delhi's experience of the cataclysm, preferring to focus on areas where the revolt was more protracted.

Dalrymple, a British travel writer and historian who divides his time between London and Delhi, sets out to correct this neglect. Writing with obvious affection for Delhi and appreciation for Mughal culture, he shows that the experience of the rebellion in the city was quite distinct. It was the seat of the imperial Mughals and the center of high Indo-Muslim culture. Even if Zafar no longer exercised real power, the emperor, as the rebel proclamation demonstrated, still exercised tremendous symbolic significance. From his palace in Delhi's Red Fort, Zafar wrote accomplished poetry and presided over a refined court milieu. Living under his patronage was Ghalib, possibly the greatest poet ever in the Urdu language, and one who went on to record his experiences of the Uprising. Using sources in Persian and Urdu along with voluminous British papers, Dalrymple has written a riveting and poignant account of the events of 1857 in Delhi.

When the mutineers descended on Delhi, the city initially welcomed them. Dalrymple shows that Zafar was gratified by the "restoration" of his imperial sovereignty but chafed at the lack of proper deference the rebels showed. He complained bitterly about the violation of imperial protocols and the country manners of the largely Hindu sepoys and was alarmed by the jihadi rebels who arrived from the North Indian town of Bareilly to add religious zeal to the Uprising. Trapped between the imperious British and the rude sepoys and zealous jihadis, Zafar reluctantly assumed the mantle of rebellion. However, he was too weak, too indecisive and utterly incapable of assuming the role assigned to him. The Uprising floundered and the elite opinion in the city turned against the violence and the unsophisticated culture of the lowly sepoys. Bandits and roving rebels ruled the roost on highways, making escape from the city hazardous.

Europeans found their houses ransacked, their property looted and their lives endangered. Upon victory, the British celebrated their triumph by letting loose a reign of terror on the fleeing insurgents and British officers did little to stop the raping of the women of Delhi. "To escape the victors' wrath, most of Delhi's residents fled to the surrounding countryside, finding shelters in tombs and ruins and scaven
ging for food. Looters went house to house, seizing whatever they could. "To all of us [soldiers]," wrote one officer, "the loot of the city was to be a fitting recompense for the tolls and privations we had undergone." Prize Agents stalked the city, confiscating native property and delivering it to Europeans. To punish the residents for having supported the Uprising, the British considered leveling the entire city. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. "Even so, great swathes of the city—especially around the Red Fort—were still cleared away." Many fine mosques, Sufi shrines, palaces and the houses of notables were demolished. Ghalib grieved that, under wanton destruction, "the whole city has become a desert." Dalrymple relates this story in all its horror, quoting extensively from the melancholy descriptions written by Delhi's literary elite and from accounts by the victors, who gleefully recorded the terrible vengeance they wreaked on the vanquished in what became known as the City of the Dead.

Dalrymple mourns the passing of an age, the end of Delhi's urbane milieu in which the Europeans had taken a deep interest. Now that the "beating heart of Indo-Islamic civilization had been ripped out," the British-Indian racial divide ripped open the body politic. Contrary to received opinion, Dalrymple argues that the Uprising did not cause this divide: rather the blame should be placed on the Victorian Evangelicals whose insensitivity, arrogance and blindness did much to bring the Uprising of 1857 down upon both their own heads and those of the people and court of Delhi, engulfing all of northern India in a religious war of terrible violence. The rebellion and the British retribution did much to widen the gap between the rulers and the ruled that had already opened before 1857. He tells this story with an eye on the current phenomenon of an evangelically inspired American imperial power locked in battle with jihadi Islam. He sees ghosts of the past in the present good-versus-evil war: "Today, West and East again face each other uneasily across a divide that many see as religious war. Jihadis again fight what they regard as a defensive action against their Christian enemies, and again innocent women, children and civilians are slaughtered." The contemporary passion for absolutes, he argues, inflicts irreparable

I am not cruel, but I must confess I did enjoy the opportunity of ridding the earth of these wretches," wrote a British officer to his sister.
damage on ordinary interactions and exchanges between cultures and religions.

As critical as Dalrymple is of the current ideological war of opposites, he is equally impatient with Edward Said and postcolonial critics. Writing with the traditional British suspicion of theory, he sees them as purveying the abstract concepts of Orientalism and colonialism. These abstractions, according to him, do injustice to the human interactions across identities that were common in the eighteenth century. Before nineteenth-century racism and colonial arrogance took over, the British and Indians bridged the distance of language and religion.

Dalrymple is familiar ground here.

He has published two acclaimed books that celebrated Europeans who crossed racial and religious boundaries. In City of Djinns, a book about his year in Delhi, he uncovers the ghosts of the city’s turbulent and varied past. Among them was William Fraser, a Scotsman sent by the Company to Delhi in 1805 to pacify thebrigand-infested countryside around Delhi. Cut off from his compatriots, Fraser gathered a private force of Indians and set about his business. Always ready to abandon the routine of the office desk for the excitement of the battleground in the Company’s wars, he surrounded himself with a community of Indian followers whom his contemporaries likened to Scottish Highlanders. He adopted native dress and customs, and he fathered “as many children as the King of Persia” from his harem of Indian wives. Dalrymple compares him to Mr. Kurtz in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness; like Kurtz, “he saw himself as a European potentate ruling in a pagan wilderness.” The Company officials did not trust him, but Fraser was no power-hungry brute. He was a philosopher who took a deep interest in Sanskrit, composed Persian couplets and befriended the poet Ghalib. His younger brother found him unrecognizable; he had turned “half Hindooistance.” In a curious twist, Dalrymple’s research uncovered that Fraser was a distant cousin of his wife.

This mixture of the personal and the intellectual also animates Dalrymple’s White Mughals. While researching the book, he discovered that his great-great grandmother was born to a Hindu Bengali woman who had married a Frenchman. This discovery awakened his interest in the unwritten history of interracial unions under empire. In White Mughals, he tells the fascinating story of James Kirkpatrick, the British Resident in the court of Hyderabad between 1797 and 1805. Kirkpatrick fell in love with 14-year-old Khair, the grandniece of a powerful Muslim noble, and married her despite official disapproval. Khair bore him two children, who were promptly packed off to England. After Kirkpatrick died, she had an affair with his assistant, who eventually deserted her. Khair was exiled from Hyderabad, lost her house and money and never got to see her children again. In telling this story of love and betrayal, Dalrymple weaves in accounts of other “White Mughals,” men like Sir David Ochterlony, the British Resident in Delhi, who lived the life of a Mughal nobleman. He dressed in Indian clothes, had a fondness for hookahs and dance girls and strolled Delhi every evening with his thirteen wives, each mounted on an elephant.

The Last Mughal returns to this territory of Frasers and Ochterlonys. Dalrymple writes that there were a number of landed families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who walked the fault lines between Islam and Christianity, the Mughals and the British. Several of these families descended from European mercenaries who had married into the Mughal elite and practiced a hybrid lifestyle. They were Christians but had adopted Mughal customs and manners. All this cultural borrowing came under increasing scrutiny and critique with the consolidation of Company power and the arrival of the evangelicals by the 1830s. An intolerant spirit was in the air. The winds of change were blowing on the Muslim side as well. Zafar himself was born of a Hindu mother, not atypical of the Mughals. He promoted a form of mystical Sufi Islam and was revered by many as a saint. Delhi’s literary culture was also open and tolerant, suspicious of orthodox theologians. But the orthodox opinion began gaining strength, setting the stage for the clash of fundamentalisms.

This is a neat formulation, but it is also false. The clash of religious fundamentalisms did not cause the Uprising. A great majority of the sepoys who mutinied and assembled in Delhi to “restore” the Mughal emperor were Hindus. Despite the presence of jihadi rebels, the rebellion was a remarkable display of Hindu-Muslim unity in Delhi and elsewhere. If it was a religious war, it was one only insofar as the rebels opposed what they thought was the British plot to impose Christianity. The growing evangelical influence was a factor in fomenting this opposition, but the causes of the Uprising lay in colonialism itself. Coercion, conflict and violence were built into colonial rule, even when it was imposed with the help of indigenous allies.
and soldiers. As the Company government violently displaced existing structures of power and authority, it encountered endemic opposition. The 1857 Mutiny in the army over greased cartridges served only to unify and escalate specific grievances at different places and among different groups into a widespread violent opposition to the Company.

To argue, as Dalrymple does, that it was only imperial arrogance and evangelical influence that forced the rebels to engage in a life-or-death struggle is to underestimate the depth of their determination. Revolt and resistance against colonialism were inherent in alien rule. Since the beginning of the Company conquest in the mid-eighteenth century, rebellions were endemic; the Uprising was only the most widespread and fierce expression of the built-in conflict between the colonizers and the colonized. Dalrymple overlooks this history and assumes that but for the nineteenth-century imperial foofaraw, the imagined eighteenth-century empire might have remained intact. This would be like supposing that prior to present wars of fundamentalisms, the West’s history of domination over the rest of the world was free of sharp oppositions and discords. In drawing a parallel between 1857 and the current “clash of civilizations,” Dalrymple makes precisely such a suspect assumption.

Whatever the role of the “clash of civilizations” ideology in the current conflict, the opposition to Western domination did not begin with it, just as the insurgency against Company rule in India did not start with the arrival of Victorian evangelicalism but was endemic to British rule. Empire has always produced challenge and resistance. If Dalrymple and like-minded writers were not so dismissive of the “abstractions” of Edward Said and postcolonial critics, they would not need the reminder that colonialism was always a fundamentally violent system.

Joseph Conrad wrote that the conquest of earth was never a pretty thing if you looked into it too closely, for it meant taking lands away from people of a different color and appearance. Even if racial superiority and the “civilizing mission” were not marshaled to justify the eighteenth-century empire, this does not mean that it was a pretty thing. As Nicholas Dirks’s superb recent book The Scandal of Empire shows, greed, duplicity, corruption, exploitation and violence were present at the birth of Company rule in India. With perceptive readings of the British record in eighteenth-century India, Dirks shows that the scandal of colonial violence and oppression was systemic, and not just the product of a few bloodthirsty and corrupt officials. Edmund Burke’s eloquent rage against the Company’s arbitrary power during Warren Hastings’s impeachment trial, for example, was underpinned by his scorn for Indian customs and traditions. He expressed sympathy for the plight of native rulers deposed by Hastings, but what really troubled him about the Company’s conduct was that it was being corrupted by India. One day, he feared, this corruption would spread to Britain. The scandal of Company rule had to be expunged so that the record of the British Empire would remain un tarnished. Such an assertion on behalf of the empire and its legitimacy is unthinkable without a belief in Britain’s right to conquer and rule and a complete disdain for Indians.

Consider the fabrication of European deaths in the Calcutta Fort in 1757 into the mythical “Black Hole” incident. Dirks points out that combat rather than imprisonment caused most of the deaths, and that there were far fewer fatalities than initially claimed. But Europeans were so quick to believe the lurid tale of Oriental barbarism that the Black Hole soon acquired a mythical status. When the Company carried out sustained wars against indigenous rulers in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the desire to punish native perfidy encouraged the brutal campaigns.

As globalization compresses space and time, those privileged and educated enough to travel between cultures find themselves increasingly impatient with the legacies of imperial racism and nationalist myths. This is understandable. But to retail the eighteenth century as a time when Europeans and non-Europeans overcame racial and religious boundaries is to fly in the face of historical evidence. To see the crossing of imperial borders in the lives of “White Mughals” is to misrepresent both the nature of interracial liaisons and imperial conquest.

Empire made the Frasers and the Ochterlony’s possible. It was because of empire, not despite it, that Europeans took an interest in non-European cultures. Colonial power enabled the Europeans to enter into interracial unions, keep concubines and father children, and learn native languages and customs. This was largely a one-way street on which mostly European men traveled to “collect” Indian women, territory, texts and artifacts. Astonishingly, Dalrymple fails to see the sense of imperial entitlement that permitted Company men to penetrate indigenous culture and become White Mughals. He identifies William Fraser with Kurtz but still insists that the eighteenth-century conquerors could act without a sense of racial privilege. This is to claim that empire can permit “easy relationships” between cultures, that human exchanges can occur outside history. Not now, not then.

Mission Impossible

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Since ancient times, statues have served as barometers of power. They go up when the fortunes of a regime run high, and when empires tumble they too can fall. What do you do with a defunct icon? The Greeks and the Romans used to recarve images, turning one emperor into another, or change pedestal captions to suit new circumstances. French revolutionaries toppled a statue of Louis XV in today’s Place de la Concorde, melted it down and replaced it with a guillotine. More recently, in Budapest, the bronze and stone corpses of the Communist regime were set up in a sculpture park just outside town, aestheticized and tourified. One wonders what happened to that statue of Saddam Hussein, pulled down with such symbolic pomp—and careful staging—in Baghdad’s Firdaus Square in 2003.

The fall of the British Empire, which could once treat about a quarter of the world as its sculpture garden, has produced statue anxieties of its own, particularly in the imperial capital. Postcolonial migra-