

An Empire and a City in Ruins: Delhi under Siege

Vinay Lal

William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal. The Fall of a Dynasty: Delhi, 1857*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. 528 pp. \$30.

William Dalrymple has long been in love with Delhi. Nearly fifteen years ago, when he was still in his mid-20s, he published a charming narrative of what he called the “City of Djinnns”; more recently, in a book that equally constitutes the backdrop to his present history of a city that has been under siege in more ways than one might commonly imagine, he explored the social and sexual relationships that British men in Delhi and north India forged with Indian women before, as he claims, the advent of evangelical Christianity proscribed intimacy between the two races. Dalrymple called his second book *White Mughals*; his new book, part of a wider projected study of the Great Mughals, takes as one of its pivots the last years of the “last Mughal”, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the melancholy poet whose forlorn destiny it was to pen the Mughal empire created by his forefathers into oblivion.

Dalrymple’s book comes, not accidentally, on the eve of the 150th anniversary of the Indian Rebellion of 1857-58. British historians knew this cataclysmic set of events as the Sepoy Mutiny. The Indian nationalist and ideologue of Hindu supremacy, V. D. Savarkar, who rejected the idea that British rule constituted a legitimate regime of order against which Indians could mutiny, rechristened the rebellion as the First Indian War of Independence. More than most episodes of Indian history, the Indian Rebellion of 1857 has attracted its share of widely divergent scholarly and popular interpretations. Many nationalist historians have arrived at something of a middling position, viewing the rebellion as something far more than a collection of local uprisings, but falling considerably short of a nation-wide movement of concerted resistance to British rule in the name of national unity. Imperialist historians have been inclined to view the “mutiny” as a consequence of calamitous policies pursued by the colonial state, while liberal historians have stressed, for example, the growing race divide. Marxist historians have dwelled on the long history of peasant unrest as one kind of precursor to the disenchantment with British rule which fed the rebellion. But Dalrymple interprets the uprising largely as a war of religion, an argument that is not sustained and is rendered all the more contentious by his simplistic genealogy that takes us from fanatic Wahhabi-minded rebels to Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

Though Dalrymple is evidently well-read in the historiography of the Indian Rebellion, he doesn’t care to engage with previous scholarship as such. He claims, not incorrectly, that professional Indian historians have seldom bothered to write for popular audiences, and his open ambition is to write an interpretive, narrative, and partial history of the Indian Rebellion that, while attractive to lay readers, constitutes a substantial work of scholarship. His even-handed sketch and denunciation of the atrocities committed by the British and the rebels is a welcome antidote to recent tendencies among historians such as Niall Ferguson to render the British empire as a benign and well-intentioned exercise in

the civilizing mission. Many Indian readers, in particular, will be visibly moved by his unflinching portrayal of psychopathic British commanders of the likes of John Nicholson and Herbert Edwardes, whose idea of punishment can be gauged by their joint proposal to put forward “a Bill for the flaying alive, impalement, or burning of the murderers of the [British] women and children of Delhi . . . I will not, if I can help it, see fiends of that stamp let off with a simple hanging.” (184)

If Dalrymple’s history is “partial”, it is because he is utterly candid in his assessment that a history of the Indian Rebellion should be resolutely focused on the events that transpired at Delhi. The filmmaker Ketan Mehta’s recent epic retelling of the rebellion, *Mangal Pandey*, takes its name after the celebrated sepoy Mangal Pandey who on 29 March 1857 instigated his fellow sepoys in Barrackpore, Bengal, to rebel and was summarily hanged for his crime. Dalrymple, in contemptuous dismissal of the alleged importance of this episode in conventional history, spares three lines for Pandey (130). He similarly argues that the place of Kanpur, entrenched in British memory as the site of vile deeds by ungrateful Indians, and Lucknow, where the British staged what would be remembered as a heroic and ultimately successful defense against impossible odds, in mutiny narratives is vastly overblown. Here, for all of Dalrymple’s love of language, fondness for lush description, and readiness to permit poets their customary indulgences, his attachment to a positivist conception of history comes through. The meaning of a text consists not merely in what a critic makes of the text, but is also constituted by the experience of generations of readers; similarly, memory and memorialization are not outside history, but become part of the very histories which they are supposed to filter for future generations. No one reading Dalrymple’s narrative would be able to understand why General Havelock, now condemned to absolute obscurity, was lionized to such an extent as the “Savior of Lucknow” as to earn a statue for himself besides Nelson in that most iconic and coveted mausoleum of English will and triumph, London’s Trafalgar Square.

Delhi was the seat of the Mughal Empire, the city to which the British had confined what they called the “titular King of Delhi”, Bahadur Shah Zafar. As Edmund Burke would have put it, the British were determined to emulate the French and engage in the cashiering of kings. Dalrymple is at his best in evoking the atmosphere of the court, the razor sharp contest between the poets Zauq and Ghalib, the easy lifestyle of Delhiwallahs, and the pitiful condition of the residents of Delhi once Zafar had allowed himself to be drawn into the mighty struggle against the British. Having rebelled at the cantonment town of Meerut, the sepoys arrived at Zafar’s palace and sought his blessings and so effectively asked him to take charge of the rebellion. Dalrymple describes this as “the most crucial decision Zafar would ever take.” Though Delhi’s elites were “lined up against the looting, mutinous sepoys, Zafar made an uncharacteristic decisive choice: he gave them his blessing.” And he did so for this reason: “With the armed, threatening and excitable sepoys surrounding him on all sides, he had little choice.” (163) Generations of historians have averred precisely this; but for all the voluminous and previously untapped archives at his feet, Dalrymple doesn’t add an iota to our understanding of why Zafar, doubtless also eager to restore the name of the once glorious Mughals, did not display his customary indecisiveness.

The history of Delhi, generally and in particular ways in 1857 under Zafar, is best described in the multiple idioms evoked by the word 'siege'. The Mughals lay under siege from the British: for decades before the rebellion, the British worked away at reducing the Mughal Emperor to a state of utter humiliation. Delhi has long been besieged by its history: sacked repeatedly by one invader after another, each of whom excelled the other in savaging the city and tormenting its residents, it was to suffer the same fate under the rebels and then the British. The British lay siege to the city, a well-recorded chapter of the rebellion, but more arresting, and a distinct contribution of Dalrymple's history, is the argument that Gujar and Mewati tribesmen, acting as roving bands of robbers, lay siege to Delhi and by cutting off supplies to the city were instrumental in the defeat of the rebels. The British completed the devastation of the city: they wrought a vengeance so terrible that Delhi would be transformed into the city of the dead. We continue to be besieged by the ruinous splendor of Delhi, and as Dalrymple's history so evocatively suggests, many a wondrous edifice can be built on the ruins of history.