THE DON OF DELHI

WITH HIS EYE FOR THE EXOTIC, **WILLIAM DALRYMPLE** HAS BECOME INDIA'S AUTHORITY ON ITS MUGHAL PAST.

Karan Mahajan

The writer William Dalrymple lives in a farmhouse on the outskirts of New Delhi with his wife, their three children, four incestuous goats, a cockatiel, and the usual entourage of servants that attends any successful man in India's capital city. The previous resident of the house, a British journalist, was driven from the country by death threats after he published an article in *Time* magazine outing the previous Indian prime minister's bladder problems and habit of nodding off during meetings. Dalrymple is also British—Scottish, to be exact—but his controversial statements are more likely to concern the country's Mughal or British past. He is today India's most famous narrative historian.

A number of modern British writers—including Geoff Dyer, Patrick French, and the late Bruce Chatwin—have been fascinated by the land that their ancestors once ruled, but Dalrymple is unique, in the past twenty years, for how rigorously he has pursued that fascination, writing one brilliant travel book (*City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi*), two vivid histories (*White Mughals* and *The Last Mughal*), and one anthology of acute journalism (*The Age of Kali*) about South Asia. He came to India before it had achieved its status as a frontier boomland for computer programmers and writers alike, and he has lived there, on and off, since 1989. As a result, at the age of forty-five, he has become something of a godfather to a generation of writers who are producing nonfiction about the country. The fact that Dalrymple looks like a sunnier version of the actor James Gandolfini and loves to party no doubt helps with this reputation.

Dalrymple is also an important example of what a foreigner can bring to the table at a time when more and more of the writing about India is being produced by Indians themselves—which is to say: an unabashed eye for the exotic. This is not backhanded praise. India's best nonfiction writers are understandably taken up with the messiness and seaminess of the present, while readers find themselves cut off from religious and ethnic traditions by the distractions of big cities. Dalrymple has stepped into this void and punched out riveting, accessible histories of the Mughal era and studies of disappearing mystical practices. His fluent and moving presentations of big subjects—India's first war of independence in *The Last Mughal* (2006), for example—sometimes irritate native historians who feel they have been scooped by a powerful foreign interest, but this is a little unfair: There is only one Dalrymple, and there are many Indians. Instead of capitalizing on their native credibility, Indian historians have either lost themselves in a thicket of doublespeak about subalterns or have taken one look at the publishing industry in India, which pays handsomely for Booker Prize–nominated novels and zilch for popular histories, and given up on trying to communicate with the general public (Ramachandra Guha and Gurcharan Das remain exceptions). Dalrymple's success has shown that there is a market for well-written history in India. This is itself an achievement.

Dalrymple began his career as a travel writer, and reading his works of history one is always bracingly conscious of the place where one has landed. *White Mughals: Love & Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (2002) commences with Dalrymple pleading exhaustion from his last major book, *From the Holy Mountain* (1997), a travelogue about the disappearing Christians of the Middle East, and then plunging through the streets of Hyderabad to "go off on a whim, to travel aimlessly again."

> It was spring. The stones of the mosques were warm underfoot, and I wandered through the shrines of the old city, filled now with black-robed Muharram mourners reciting sinuous Urdu laments for the tragedy of Kerbala. It was as if Hussain had been killed a week earlier, not in the seventh century AD. This was the sort of Indian city I loved.

He soon comes upon the tattered monument that will yield the story of James Kirkpatrick, a Scottish officer in eighteenth-century Hyderabad who fell in love with Indian culture and then, more disastrously, with a young Muslim girl. But it is the grit and sweat of the opening that stick with the reader, even as the thesis of the book occasionally turns gooey with its suggestion that Kirkpatrick's longing for interracial intercourse is proof that "East and West are not irreconcilable, and never have been."

William Dalrymple with Albinia, his pet cockatiel, at home in New Delhi.

The Last Mughal, Dalrymple's take on the "sepoy" mutiny of 1857 (often termed India's first war of independence), is distinguished from other contemporary accounts by its tight geographic focus and evocative writing. The rebellion of Hindu and Muslim soldiers—which was brutally suppressed by the British and claimed a hundred thousand Indian lives—occurred in haphazard spikes all across North India, but Dalrymple concentrates mainly on the action unfolding within the walls of Old Delhi (a setting he knows well from his first and best book about India, *City of Djinns* [1993], which took six years to research). Drawing on previously unused papers in India's National Archives, he describes the gathering street-level chaos as the hapless Mughal emperor is swept to the head of the rebellion, and the city is first looted by the mutinous soldiers, then decimated by the British in retaliation. Though he sometimes flatters Indian audiences by romanticizing the permissive Urdu culture of the city—where poets jousted nightly in the Mughal court and the emperor was himself a dandy and a poet—he makes a good case for why the composite culture lost in the destruction was irreplaceable: After the mutiny, the British became hardened in their high-handed attitude toward Indians.

His success in India can be chalked up to this particular combination of an insider's perspective and an outsider's awe. In Dalrymple's work, the central character is the marvelous culture of a place—perpetually under threat, always worth preserving.

Dalrymple the person is a little like his farmhouse in Delhi: muddled extravaganza of Indian art on the surface, cool book-lined bunker within. I met him in May at his open-air poolside shed, an unusual workspace in a city of a million air conditioners. Dalrymple was dressed in a crumpled kurta and loose khakhis. He tapped away at a BlackBerry behind a desk while a large white cockatiel named Albinia rocked uncomfortably on a stand nearby. Dalrymple is a big, restless man with a quick laugh and a prominent dome of a forehead, and he immediately summoned a servant so I could spray down the cockatiel with water and watch it flap its enormous white wings.We talked briefly about Indian art. "If I win a prize, I spend a little bit of that on artistic things related to the book," he explained in his mannered Oxbridge accent. "You can still buy lovely stuff in India for two to three thousand quid."

Sitting down to lunch in the house with him and his wife, the painter Olivia Fraser, I admired his collection of bronze Hindu sculptures. Afterward, we discussed Dalrymple's newest work, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2010)—an anthology of profiles of men and women from nine distinct religious traditions threatened by modernity. *Nine Lives* is the first book by Dalrymple whose Indian edition has outsold its British cousin. This is a startling turnaround for a man who was initially dismissed by Indian critics as yet another Orientalist intruder. It also says much about the growing purchasing power of the middle class and Dalrymple's fame in India as the organizer of the glamorous Jaipur Literary Festival, which, since 2006, has attacted Bollywood stars and Nobel Prize winners.

But Dalrymple is still a big fish in a small literary world. In Delhi, the writers I met trotted out amusing anecdotes about "Willy" and his tightfistedness and love of big public gestures and pronouncements. They were also quick to tell me that "other people" judged him for his Oxford-don pronunciation of Indian names and his lack of Hindi. (Remarkably, Dalrymple is not fluent in any Indian language; an assistant translated all the archival documents for *The Last Mughal*.) There was also gossip about his flirtatiousness: In 2004, a Ugandan-Indian heiress, who had been in and out of jail for years for credit-card fraud, confessed to British tabloids about a summertime fling with Dalrymple in London. Others tittered about the remarks the historian Ramachandra Guha made a few years ago in the prominent weekly newsmagazine *Outlook*: "When I first met Dalrymple, it soon became clear that this 'India expert' did not know who Dr B.R. Ambedkar [one of India's founding fathers] was. Yet the media allows him to set himself up as the arbiter of literary taste in India," wrote Guha. "I suppose it is this combination of (their) arrogance and (our) deference that encouraged the British to claim an empire. It seems worth remembering that they also lost one." (The two have since patched things up, though Guha has not rescinded the remarks.)

The Shah Jo Raag fakirs were among the performers William Dalrymple brought with him on his *Nine Lives* book tour in 2010; above, at the Asia Society in New York.

Dalrymple's success may carry a whiff of colonial advantage, but he maintains a sober perspective about his status in India. "I'm amazed that people allow me to function and read me as widely as they do, given British history in India. If you have even a measure of sensitivity, people are amazingly hospitable." He went on, "But the reality is that I am not Indian and will not be no matter how long I stay here—you are formed by your childhood. I don't claim to be Indian. I've kept my British passport."

He seems eager to communicate the opposite in his latest work, however. *Nine Lives* opens with a disclaimer that sounds a little like an outsider apologizing for his choice of subject. Dalrymple explains to the reader:

> Twenty years ago, when my first book, *In Xanadu*, was published at the height of the eighties, travel writing tended to highlight the narrator: his adventures were the subject; the people he met were sometimes reduced to objects in the background. With *Nine Lives* I have tried to invert this, and keep the narrator firmly in the shadows. . . . I have always attempted to humanize rather than exoticise.

On the face of it, this is laudable. A painstaking researcher, Dalrymple has gathered a superbly diverse group of characters: a Jain nun starving herself to death, a Rajasthani bard who recites from memory weeklong epics about desert deities, and Bengali minstrels who live like dissolute Beat poets, among others. The problem is that all the subjects in the book are self-exoticizers who talk like solemn religious texts. They need a knowing narrator to cut them down to petty, human size, to come at them from all angles as they speak, to judge—even if it is under Western eyes.

It was precisely this gift for judgment that makes *City of Djinns* such a mournful, witty treat. When Dalrymple came to Delhi in 1989 at the age of twenty-four, he found a city full of people mourning their pasts—albeit very different pasts. He wrote movingly about the Punjabis, who had been dispossessed by partition; the Anglo-Indians, still aggrieved by the loss of the empire; and the Muslims, who felt their once-proud culture had entered irreversible decline. He was also quick to show that these people *hated* one another to death. At a remove from these factions, who were busy bickering over the ugly corpse of modern Delhi, lay India's peace-loving Sufis and the figures of the British Raj who had gone native in the eighteenth century, adopting Indian costumes, languages, religions, and wives—men like Kirkpatrick, the subject of *White Mughals*, who had briefly brought everything together before it fell apart again. It was in these figures, seeking a multicultural ideal, that Dalrymple found a reflection of himself.

Born in 1965, a full eighteen years after India's independence, Dalrymple is part of a wave of British men for whom India is what V. S. Naipaul calls "an area of darkness"—a place that had a profound impact on the lives of their parents and grandparents but closed up behind them, leaving only a faint trace.

Growing up on the shores of the Firth of Forth, Dalrymple knew almost nothing about India. "It was just another part of the world," he says. "On par with Java, Australia, the Yucatán Peninsula." Nor had he intended to be a travel writer. A scrap of paper from primary school lists the seven-year-old Dalrymple's ambitions as "author and archaeologist," and over his youth, the latter won out: Dalrymple spent his high school summers at digs on the Orkney Islands and in Dorset. In his final year of school, he wrote a letter to the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, begging them to let him participate in a dig at a Babylonian site. The authorities assented, and Dalrymple prepared to head to Iraq. Then, a fortnight before his arrival, Saddam Hussein closed the school. Defeated, he hitched himself to a friend who was going to India to teach. He spent the summer backpacking across the country. The decision changed his life. "It was like landing on a different planet," he recalls.

After nine months in India, he arrived at Cambridge with an updated set of ambitions, swapping archaeology for eighteenth-century European colonialism in India and medieval European history (the Crusades and Byzantium—he comes from a religious family). He has not strayed far from this historical beat and has made raids on the academic armies guarding both fields, beginning with 1989's *In Xanadu*—a hilarious, bumbling attempt to follow Marco Polo's twelve-thousand-mile journey—written when he was twenty-two.

He also began to explore his family's connections to India. The Scots were early pioneers on the subcontinent, and Dalrymple's great-great-grandfather made a name for himself among these fortune seekers as "the biggest liar in India" (he was an entrepreneur and a drunk). Decades later, Dalrymple's father, the tenth Baronet of Nova Scotia, was present, at the age of nineteen, for the moment when the British handed back the keys to the Indians and Pakistanis. "He was an attaché to the first commander in chief of the Pakistani Army, General Frank Messervy, and was present at the flag raising of Pakistan in 1947," says Dalrymple. "It was Messervy that the Pakistani government had to get out of the way before they could send the Pathans to invade Kashmir, so they put Messervy on leave. Messervy went back to Europe, but my father couldn't afford to go back, so he went on a shooting expedition in Kashmir and walked straight into the first Indo-Pak War. He came back from shooting to find that there was an international boundary between him and his post in Pindi. . . . He saw horrors at partition. He put his Hindu bearers on trains and they didn't get through. He had dinner at the viceroy's house—three or four seats away from Nehru, Gandhi, Mountbatten. He rarely talks about it."

"It upsets Willy that his parents have never visited us in India," says Fraser, who moved with him to Delhi for *Djinns* shortly after they got married and has accompanied him on many of his travels (she quit this role after being teargassed in Bethlehem while pregnant with their first child). She and Dalrymple met through a mutual Indian friend at Cambridge. Since then, her great-granduncle William Fraser has become one of Dalrymple's favorite figures from the British Raj, a man described in *City of Djinns* as "the first European to take a serious interest in the ruins of Delhi" and "part severe Highland warrior, part Brahminized philosopher, part Conradian madman." A cache of William Fraser's letters, acquired through Olivia's family, formed the foundation for Dalrymple's research into a period that historians call the Delhi Twilight and furthered the author's interest in the phenomenon of British men going native. It was during the writing of *White Mughals* that Dalrymple discovered something about his own family: His maternal great-great-grandmother Sophia Pattle was the daughter of "a Hindu Bengali woman . . . who converted to Catholicism and married a French officer in Pondicherry in the 1780s." Like Virginia Woolf, who is descended from Pattle's sister, Dalrymple is part Indian by blood. "If you look at photographs, Woolf looks almost Punjabi," he laughs. "Indians haven't yet caught on to it."

White Mughals collapses the gap between subject and author. Dalrymple identifies so strongly with his India-loving British colonialists that he never quite examines the complex power dynamics that underlie a white man's interest in the culture he is ruling. But the book's flaw is also Dalrymple's biggest strength as a person: He is an unembarrassed steamroller of multiculturalism. For his *Nine Lives* tour last year, he brought along a cast of Indian singers and dancers from the traditions described in the book, staging colorful performances in cities such as Singapore, Sydney, London, and San Francisco. And that wasn't all. When I met him in New York, the last leg of his tour, he was headed to the Asia Society to firm up an exhibition of Mughal art for 2011. The following night he was back at the Society for a show. Sitting cross-legged on a carpeted platform in a black kurta, Dalrymple made humorous asides ("It's hard being an Orientalist these days") and introduced each performer with a reading from *Nine Lives*. He interjected with real-time updates on the Pakistani fakirs, who were being detained by Homeland Security at JFK airport but made it out just in time to perform (a string of calls from the late Richard Holbrooke, then president of the Asia Society, helped).

America, not India, is Dalrymple's next target in his mission to sew up the fissures between the East and the West. In *The Last Mughal*, Dalrymple singles out the rise of religious fundamentalism in the ranks of British officers and Indian soldiers as the leading cause of the sepoy mutiny, making an explicit analogy with the standoff between American hawks and Muslim jihadists after 9/11. With his next book, he will move the action to the landscape where much of America's attention is focused today: Afghanistan. The British invasion of Afghanistan in 1839 began, like Bush's Iraq war, with a doctored intelligence report and a successful siege, and ended, in 1842, with a disastrous withdrawal from Kabul in which all but one of sixteen thousand East India Company troops were killed by tribal fighters or the freezing cold. Dalrymple can't teleport himself back to the scene of the war, but he has the next best thing: an account by a relative. Dalrymple's great-great-granduncle Captain Colin Mackenzie participated in the siege and was briefly held hostage by the Afghans. After his release, he returned to India and wrote a book about the war. It is one of the books that Dalrymple will use to build his own. □

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