Reconciling the two worlds: William Dalrymple's India

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Abstract

The travel writer, historian and journalist William Dalrymple has been sensitive enough to local conditions to exclaim (in an essay on the caste system in Rajasthan) that “the foreign eye is easily misled”, and has based his latest book, White Mughals (2002), a study of the romance and marriage between James Kirkpatrick, the British resident in Hyderabad and the Mughal princess Khair un-Nissa in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, on the forgotten history of cultural crossings and conversions. He explicitly draws attention to the need for such cultural reconciliation now, “at a time when respectable academics talk of a Clash of Civilisations, and when East and West, Islam and Christianity appear to be engaged in another major confrontation”. Before this, his City of Djinns described in great detail the histories of Delhi, finding its different ages represented in the people who walk its streets. In this part-travel, part-history, Delhi is itself a multi-faceted character and Dalrymple rejects the fixed national stereotypes of much travel writing. He criticizes the fascist character of British imperial architecture, as well as the “most horrible characteristics of the English character – philistinism, narrow-mindedness, bigotry, vengefulness – [which] suddenly surfaced at once” during and after the suppression of the 1857 uprising. And he reverses the British perspective on India, showing British rule as a brief interlude that is already being shed.

He neither suggests that things have not changed nor mourns a lost past. However, in his first book, In Xanadu, he writes of “Arab deviousness” (p.33), of Turks as “boring” (p.62), of the Armenians as the most “unpleasant race in Asia” (p.64), of “slit-eyed Mongol features” (p.112); he jokes at foreigners and makes fun of their accents; and he suggests that it is the unflattering appearance of their women that explains “the Turks’ easy drift out of heterosexuality” (p.71). But even in that

first book he admits having his preconceptions of Iran confounded by the complex realities of the country. Perhaps we might say of Dalrymple as he has observed of Delhi, that we find “different ages [laying] suspended side by side”.

He is no monolith. My paper, which will draw on an interview I conducted with Dalrymple at the Lowdham Books Festival in June 2004, examines Dalrymple’s writing and will question the idea of the uniform, monolithic “white man’s lament”.

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5 Dalrymple, City of Djinns, p.9.
6 The interview will be published in Studies in Travel Writing 9, 1 (Spring 2005).