

## WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

### **The ebullient author on writing *White Mughals*.**

*(Tatler, 2002)*

Four years into researching *White Mughals*, the true story of a love affair between a British diplomat and an Indian noblewoman in the age of Jane Austen, William Dalrymple was on a final visit to Hyderabad, where the couple had met. He had four hours to spare before catching the plane home, and decided to visit the bazaar to buy some ornate metalwork boxes – for which the city is famous – as presents for his family. But it was a Sunday: most of the bazaar was closed, and Dalrymple was beginning to despair when a stranger – offering his help in broken English – led him off to make one of the most extraordinary discoveries of writing career.

‘He said, “I know boxes”,’ Dalrymple explains, ‘and he took me round to the side of the bazaar; and there was a shop which sold not boxes but “booksies” – and not just books, but manuscripts. The owner had bought them in the Sixties when all the great Hyderabadi palaces and their princely libraries had been bulldozed; and what he knew and I didn’t was that my heroine’s first cousin had written a 650-page autobiography which gave every single detail of the story from the Indian side, and had never been translated into English. It wasn’t just a crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, it was a bloody great goldmine.’

With the aid of that manuscript, British family papers, and spies’ reports from secret files in the India Office library, Dalrymple has pieced together a fascinating and heartrending saga with elements – as he says – of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Madame Butterfly*. The book was originally planned as a general study of late eighteenth-century British officials who

had ‘gone native’, adopting Indian dress and customs and marrying Indian wives; gradually, however, it came to be dominated by James Kirkpatrick, a brilliant young British Resident (or ambassador) and his scandalous passion for Khair un-Nissa, the teenage niece of Hyderabad’s Prime Minister. When Kirkpatrick married her and converted to Islam, his British superiors began to suspect him of acting as a double agent – hence the spies’ reports.

Kirkpatrick died at only 37, leaving as his monument the spectacular Residence he had built for himself (‘a massive great Palladian mansion about the size and date of the White House’) with, behind it, an exquisite Mughal palace created for his wife. But *White Mughals* doesn’t end there: after following Khair un-Nissa through her seduction and betrayal by a caddish friend of Kirkpatrick’s, it turns to her daughter Kitty, who – sent to England at the age of three to be brought up as a Victorian lady – grew into a famous beauty, immortalised by Thomas Carlyle in his novel *Sartor Resartus*. The letters she wrote on finally re-establishing contact with her Indian grandmother are so moving that even now, Dalrymple says, he cannot read them without weeping.

There can be little doubt that, shipped out to the Orient 200 years ago, Dalrymple himself would have gone native. His customary uniform is a Nehru jacket and collarless shirt, and his own Residence – three cottages knocked together to create what has been described as ‘a country house on the Chiswick roundabout’ – brims with Mughal paintings, framed Arabic calligraphy, and vivid watercolours of India by his wife Olivia Fraser. Olivia, he confesses, ‘has found it a bit of a trial living in a *menage a trois* with Khair un-Nissa, and me clearly fantasising about being James Kirkpatrick’s reincarnation.’

At 37, with an ever-receding hairline and a brow creased like a well-used Ordnance Survey map, he cuts a stockier, less ascetic figure than he

did when – fresh from Cambridge – he first found fame with *In Xanadu*. But his youthful energy and enthusiasm remain undissipated: in fact, says his former Ampleforth housemaster Edward Corbold, ‘Of all the people who have passed through the house, he’s the one who’s changed least. He was always precocious and irrepressible, with an extraordinarily enquiring mind.’ In conversation Dalrymple resembles one of those two-tier coffee pots whose quiet simmering on the hob periodically gives way to startling gurgles and eruptions, as he alternates between measured academic discourse and hilarious bonhomie.

Although he had ‘an incredibly sheltered upbringing’ at Ampleforth and his parents’ house in North Berwick, he soon learnt to stand up for himself. ‘I feel sorry for him,’ says his brother Jock, ‘having three brothers who were nine, seven and five years older than him. We were not enormously kind to him, and I think his legendary drive must have been fuelled by that.’

At Ampleforth, William showed a passion for archaeology combined with a genius for self-promotion. Edward Corbold remembers him giving a lecture on a local Anglo-Saxon sculpture: ‘He made certain that the hall was packed, and at the age of 14 he sat cross-legged on a table in front of an audience of 130 and harangued them in the most impressive manner.’

It was in his gap year that Dalrymple first visited India, teaching in a Himalayan school and working for Mother Teresa. He found it, he says, ‘a complete shock to the system; but after the first month I fell in love with the place in a way that’s never left me.’ By the time he went up to Cambridge, his future path was set: his friend Samantha Weinberg describes his room there as ‘a little corner of the East. He was full of colour – he wore waistcoats and those baggy Indian trousers – and he was always going to be a writer: he knew it, and you knew it.’

Those who expected *In Xanadu* to be a flash in the pan have instead witnessed an unremitting chain reaction of commercial and critical success. None of his books has sold less than 100,000 copies, and Colin Thubron places him in a tradition of British travel writers that includes Patrick Leigh Fermor and Jonathan Raban: ‘He’s certainly the foremost of his generation – the one that’s made the most impact.’

Dalrymple does his best to be modest, claiming that many of his contemporaries have written equally good books, but whether he believes this in his heart is questionable. ‘He’s extremely generous to his friends, but very competitive,’ says Samantha Weinberg. ‘I sent him an e-mail saying, “Have you finished your book?” and his message came back, “Yes, and though I say so myself, it’s bloody brilliant.” But it’s not arrogance, it’s just confidence, and I really admire that.’

Like all Dalrymple’s books, *White Mughals* has a strong religious current. Although he comes from a devout Catholic family (his uncle Jock was a priest famed throughout Scotland for his radicalism), he passionately believes that the divide between Christianity and Islam is much smaller than most people realise. It is a message which, he admits, was ‘as relevant as *Dad’s Army*’ when he started work on *White Mughals*; now it is altogether of the moment. The story of James Kirkpatrick and Khair un-Nissa, he argues, ‘says very powerfully that East and West are not irreconcilable, and never have been. They are two halves of a diptych, and there is no reason why they cannot live together.’