

Last of the line

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ON November 7th 1862 the body of the exiled Bahadur Shah Zafar II was lowered into an unmarked grave in Myanmar, in the city then known as Rangoon. Zafar had been the last Mughal emperor, his death the final act of a dynasty that had reigned for 350 years. At its height, under the Emperor Aurangzeb in the early 18th century, it ruled over all of the Indian subcontinent bar its southernmost tip. By the time Zafar came into his inheritance in 1837, the Mughal emperor was a pensioner of the British, whose writ scarcely ran beyond the walls of Delhi. William Dalrymple's new book is a riveting account of the dynasty's final months.

Zafar was on the throne in the summer of 1857 when a series of clashes began in northern India that have variously become known as the “sepoy mutiny”, the “first war of independence” or the “national uprising”, each label reflecting the user's prejudice. For Mr Dalrymple it is simply the “uprising”. British histories of the Indian mutiny trace events as they unfolded across the plains, from Meerut to Delhi, to Kanpur and Lucknow. They tend to concentrate on the British side of the story, how an insurrection in their Bengal army—of which all but 7,796 of 139,000 men turned against their masters—was defeated by vastly inferior numbers.

“The Last Mughal” concentrates exclusively on events in Delhi, from the first arrival of mutinous sepoys in May 1857 to the fall of the city in September. It is neither wholly a biography of Zafar, nor solely the story of the siege and capture of Delhi. Instead Mr Dalrymple charts the course of the uprising and the siege, weaving into his story the unfolding tragedy of Zafar's last months.

The animating spirit of the book is not the last Mughal, but Delhi itself, a city that Mr Dalrymple knows intimately, having spent much of the last 20 years there. His 1993 book, “City of Djinns”, remains one of the best on Delhi. It is here that the originality of his new book lies. By delving into previously untapped Urdu sources, Mr Dalrymple brings to life the chaotic lawlessness in Delhi during the uprising. With the influx of troops, order collapsed; looting and random violence became commonplace, but worse was to come. When the British captured Delhi, they avenged themselves upon the city and its inhabitants with wholesale slaughter and destruction. Delhi was reduced to “a desolate city of the dead”. Symbolic of this was the vandalism of the Red Fort, the principal glory of Mughal Delhi, leaving it with scars that it bears to this day.

British historians of the Raj have commonly regarded Zafar as a nonentity who was, one wrote, “somewhat gaga and addicted to opium”. Mr Dalrymple has a more favourable view. Zafar, he shows, presided over a cultural flowering of great sophistication in Delhi. His tragedy was his inability to control events. An old man swept along by the mutinous

sepoys, he reluctantly gave his blessing to the uprising, but quickly became disenchanted with its violence and philistinism. His loyalty was to his dynasty and his city but, in the end, he condemned both to destruction at the hands of the British.

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