

White Mughals

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July 26-28, 2007

'East is East and West is West, and never the two are to meet'. Those are the oft quoted words by Kipling, words which in recent years have gained a new spurious immediacy. The obvious purpose of this book is to give them the lie. Eastern culture and Western one, which seem so utterly alien to each other, have in fact until fairly recently mixed, just as adjacent cultures throughout history have always tended to cross-fertilized each other. More specifically, the theme of the book is how the British traders, and to some extent their military men, during the 18th century naturally adopted the manners of the prevalent cultures they encountered. This changed towards the end of the 18th century, and by the time of the so called 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857-58, the change had become irrevocable. The author has chosen to present the end of this tradition in the form of a love story, between a young, we would nowadays say far too young, aristocratic lady, a so called *begum* and the British resident to the Nazim court of Hyderabad. The story is short, to all appearances passionate, and with a fitting tragic ending, reflecting the tragedy of the ending of a period of mutual cultural respect. Thus the author, unwittingly or not, has hence chosen to write in the popular genre, which properly speaking falls half-way between scholarly history writing and the historical novel¹. As a scholarly work, it is of course at least formally impeccable, with a respectable apparatus of notes, as well as being founded on a sustained delving into primary historical sources, but it does not address scholarly issues head on, only obliquely, and surely would have become (even) more readable, had it been written as a novel. Of course as a historical novel it would not have been taken as seriously and would have left the reader with an uneasy uncertainty as to what is true and what is merely made up. Many historians are capable of writing compelling narratives, a traditional aspect of history, if sufficiently motivated, but few would have the literary merits to transcend the obfuscating impact of a writers mere imaginative intrusions, so the choice is probably a wise one. In fact the writer is, as far as I can tell, not so much a trained academic historian, as a man of letters, more precisely a travel-writer, born into the generation for which world-wide travel has become almost a common-place, a rite of passage, often with marginal formative impact, instead of an almost unattainable romantic prospect, open only to the most devoted (or those blessed with independant means)². In the wake of such a vulgarization of exotic travel, there has grown up a cader of young travel-writers, whose one avenue of transcending this very vulgarity and globalizing dissolution of cultural differences, is to increasingly take the historical perspective. There is no longer the easy option of simply reporting on what meets the open senses of a pioneer, as so many

¹ The efforts of another young British writer - Montefiori, come naturally to mind

² The traditional way for someone of modest standing and initiative to see the world was of course to go to sea. However, with the advent of modern rational handling of merchandise through the invention of container traffic, this option is no longer viable.

people have travelled the road before.

Nowadays it is natural to think of the highly developed world of the West, and the undeveloped surroundings, whose deplorable primitivity as manifested by its material poverty, being separated by a rift that may more or less being quickly bridged, mostly due to the beneficial tutoring of the West as to the blessings of a democratic political system based on co-operation and a private economic system based on competition. This was not always the case. Until the beginning of the 17th century the Ottoman empire was a formidable rival to the Christian West, whose long term survival was not a foregone conclusion. Europe too was rather poor, pockets of wealth floating upon an ocean of poverty and misery, just as in the Orient. Thus when European traders went to India they were as likely to be overwhelmed by the opulence of Mughal splendour as dismissive of an alien culture. And India did of course have no existence as India, it was a subcontinent with a long history of being ravaged by foreign invasions, two of which in separate waves had brought Islam. The Mughals were the latest, having provided a Sunni alternative to an earlier Shiite conversion. The Mughals were partly of Persian provenance, and in fact their court language was Persian, while their Islamic faith had been strongly influenced by the indigenous Hinduism, just as the latter had of course been modified by Islamic practices. Dalrymple paints an almost idyllic picture of 18th century Hyderabad in which the Hindus and Muslims partook of the same ceremonies, borrowing freely among themselves as to religious rituals, very far from the sectarian divisions that plague modern India, divisions which may have its origin in a revived Hinduism of the 19th century partly of British encouragement, coming . Thus it was natural that European traders would go Native and fuse with the culture, just as the upper echelons of the Persian aristocracy had fused with the upper castes of Hindus and Muslim converts previously. At the time there was none of the arrogant superiority which would develop at the end of the 18th century and come to fruition with a missionary zeal of the 19th century, a zeal that continues, if with less open religious affectations, to this day. That sexually isolated tradesmen would mingle carnally with the local population, is of course less a case of conscious cultural integration, than blind drive, to which racial prejudice may add a spice as well as purifying the encounters from emotional entanglement and social responsibility. But in many cases the adoption of local habits went beyond the keeping of concubines if not veritable harems, but involved language, dress, dietary customs and often religious conventions. Religious conversions have of course been legion throughout history, and mostly done out of the kind of expediency, to which early traders would not be immune. What should be kept in mind was that the confrontation between the West and the East only involved narrow circles of the populations. The traders were not that many, and the officials that went with the ventures even fewer, and those tended to interact with the upper echelons of the hosting society. Nowadays much is made of racial divisions, but I believe divisions by class, especially in the highly hierarchial societies of the past, go far deeper than race, and that it would be far more socially damaging to the upper classes to have intercourse with the lower, than to cross racial barriers, as long as the commitment to class would be honored. Although as one of the less fortunate aspects of the Enlightenment one must list a growing racial consciousness, namely the fact that there were so to speak real racial differences between people, based on science, an attitude which became possible once one abandoned the notion of God and the concomitant view of man

as equally weak and sinful creatures dependant upon his grace. An attitude that gained ascendancy at the end of the 18th century³ to fully bloom out in the 19th century.

The conquest of the Indian sub-continent was very different from the conquering of the New World. In the latter case the intruders found an almost virginal world, sparsely populated, and with a marked assymetry as to disease, with the result that the native populations literally melted away. In India on the other hand there were already strong civilizations present, and a climate that were far more forgiving to the natives than to the immigrants, most of whom succumbed to fevers and other mysterious tropical illnesses within short time⁴. The great mystery is how a mere trading company - the East Indian Company, which initially was just tolerated at specific trading posts could over time accumulate such power and prestige. The East Indian Company was a multi-national co-operation, albeit an uni-national one, largely independant of government control, (yet with government blessings and support) setting up its own armies and concluding its own treatises, skillfully and with time progressively more ruthlessly, exploiting internal strifes, to its own advantage. So while most of the initial traders and officials were sympathetic to the alien culture, many of whom actually adopted local ways and needless to say were fluent in many local languages, such interests and habits were eventually discouraged in order not to interfere with the overriding interests of the company as well as those of British national ones⁵.

The story Dalrymple choses to narrate is of course a very minor one, in fact on the face of it more in the nature of a family secret to be divulged to curious descendants. The reasons why the story is told in the first place are many and interrelated. First and foremost because it allows itself to be told, by being amply documented, mostly by a wealth of articulate letters, which have happened to survive into posterity. Secondly because it deals with interesting people, in the sense of people who are rich and influential, thus providing glimpses of intriguing consumption and occasions for intricate intrigues, all of which the author tries to unravel. Private consumption and social intrigue are matter that deeply interest most people, and especially with the former, modern readers can identify. Ostensibly it is about love and its complications. I must admit to a certain scepticism as far as the love story goes, as I find it somewhat prettified. If the author gets his chronology right we are to believe that a fourteen year old girl would truly fall in love with a man more than twenty years her senior. Today the hero of the story, Captain James Kilpatrick surely would go to jail for the molestation of a child. In fact this was one of the

³ One may argue that Slavery, rampant throughout the previous centuries, was if ever a clear case of racism. But slavery has throughout most of history been an economic necessity, as illustrated by the supposedly democratic Greeks as well as the originally republican Romans. The trade in African slaves was made possible by the indigenous African tradition of taking slaves in warfare and use them as merchandise. With the growing demand of them in the economic developement in the New World the temptation to the African elites became too sweet to temper the extent of the trade. Then it is quite another thing that the very existence of Black Slavery could provide compelling reasons for developing racist views.

⁴ And even among those who initially survived, life expectancies were more often than not limited. Yet of course, as in all walks of life, there are always individuals blessed with good luck and solid constitutions, who live into their ninth or even tenth decade, seemingly no matter what.

⁵ Of which rivalry with the French was uppemost, as to be noted below

charges levelled against him at the time. Do we not after all glorify those dirty old men as cross-cultural pioneers, when it really was nothing but a sordid tradition of Western riff-raff taking advantage of a sexually licentious society? In fact Dalrymple makes no secret of the debaucheries westerners greedily engaged themselves in, upon reaching the shores of the Indian continent. The author spends a lot of time describing the role of the *zenanas*(harems), the rentinues of concubines and the troops of the *Devadasi*(temple dancers) and their *Nautch* displays, many of which were essentially prostitutes. He stresses the fact that while traditional Islam, as practised say in Persia, was relatively puritanical, the Islam that had developed under strong Hindu influence in Inida was sexually very tolerant, not to say encouraging. Thus while one should always be aware of falling into anachronistic traps, forgetting that at the time girls were considered ready for marriage by their first menstruation (and in fact are so still considered in traditional India) if not necessarily for intercourse, I cannot but find the facts of the story troubling, and I am suprised at how unquestioningly the author takes things on face value, especially in this time and age, when sexual intercourse with minors are considered to be one of the morally most reprehensible of crimes⁶. According to the story, the poor girl was arranged by her maternal grandfather to be married to a man, a match which she and her mother found reprehensible, and that for purely social reasons, a match with the present Resident, i.e. the formal representative of the Company to the Hyderabad court, was highly advantageous, even if formally such a union between a Muslim girl of good family with a Christian would be impossible. Thus according to Kilpatrick himself, he had never taken the initiative, and thus in no way debauched the young woman (which incidentally indicates that even in that licentious society there were mores against the seduction of minors), but instead been seduced by the machinations of the mother (as well as the grandmother) to which the young woman herself was an eager accomplice, providing a temptation to which he had not been able to resist consistently. Possibly twenty years earlier the whole thing might have proceeded smoothly, but now at the very eve of the 19th century, the whole thing was considered a scandal, with potentially disastrous consequences as to the relations with the Nazim of Hyderabad and the British. Kilpatrick himself tried to hide the full extent of his involvement, which turned untenable as the woman shortly thereafter became pregnant. Investigations were conducted, which he only survived due to the unselfish intervention of his older half-brother - William Kilpatrick, for whom he had to thank the rapid rise in his career⁷. In the end he formally converted to Islam and a formal marriage was conducted, without the public aspect. Two children were born in the union, and were then shipped off to England, and shortly after that Kilpatrick himself, of weakening health, died in Calcutta on mission to see the new Governor General, who incidentally had died shortly before, making his trip moot. Thus the short love story had come to a tragic end, and of course having been aborted to early in its initial stage, it is easy to see it as an eternal

⁶ Did the girl look upon the older man as a father figure, and the older man on the girl as a precious innocent being to be slowly moulded in his tender hands? Can one speak of phedophilia, when there is but one object, and no repetition, when the desire is not abstractly directed to a body, but engages a person? Nevertheless the situation is morally ambiguous

⁷ W.Kilpatrick had been the former Resident at Hyderabad and managed to appoint him his successor, in spite of his meagre credentials, in particular his military record had been unremarkable.

union frustrated by fate.

James Kilpatrick is clearly meant to be the hero of the book, we are asked to sympathize with his learning (he had a commendable grasp of the relevant languages such as Persian and Urdu, and no doubt a smattering of a few other local languages, skills that would be rare among subsequent officials to the British Raj, but which in the 18th century were considered requisities) and his sympathy for the Muslim culture, his loyalty to the local ruler - the Nizam, and his opposition to British arrogance and aggressiveness⁸. The British policy, as conducted through the Company, was of a relatively recent vintage. The new General Governor - R.Wellesley, incidentally the elder brother of the future Duke of Wellington, who himself was very active militarily in India at the time, arriving in India in 1798 (incidentally at the very time the elder brother of James Kilpatrick had resigned his Residency at Hyderabad⁹) was very much concerned about continued French influence in India, made acute by the ambitions of Napoleon as expressed in the latter's Egyptian campaign, and in fact one of the most important tasks of Kilpatrick in Hyderabad was to oust the very strong French military contingent in Hyderabad led by the charismatic Raymonds (who conveniently died) as well as to make the Nizam sign treaties with the English, especially favourable to the latter. However, relations between Kilpatrick and the Governor General became more and more strained, not only because of the incipient scandal, and would probably have led to the downfall of the former, had not his half-brother enjoyed such trust with the latter. Instead it was Wellesley who would have to step down, his conduct, personal as well as strategical, having been disastrous, and Kilpatrick whose situation had almost become untenable at the Nizam court after the deaths of the Nizam and his prime minister, enjoyed a change of fortune. But alas too late. The new governor, whose policies were in accordance of those of the liberal Kilpatrick, died untimely, and reversal proved only to be a short parenthesis of no import. But by that time Kilpatrick was dead himself.

Now the love story had a tragic continuation, the young widow was seduced by the former assistant of her late husband - a certain Henry Russell, who will play the villain in the story, perhaps more out of human selfish weakness than pure malice¹⁰. This seduction undermined her position at the Nizam court, making it impossible for her to return in fact. In the meantime Russell tired of her and abandoned her for another woman, a far less controversial choice of an Anglo-Portuguese beauty¹¹. The widow would eventually be able to return to Hyderabad, after her main enemies had died, but eventually she would die young, and her inheritances, due to her children in England, would eventually be confiscated by the Hyderabad government and suitably embezzled. Finally Dalrymple is able to follow the story through the line of her daughter, who lived to a mature old age, and in her youth did entice the young tutor Carlyle, adding to the story yet another famous name.

The story by itself, if charming (and troubling), is of little consequence, yet it serves

⁸ which bring to mind the actions of the present American administration

⁹ The two elder brothers met at the Cape and hit off very well, sharing similar apprehensions

¹⁰ to his diligent epistolary output much of the story is actually revealed

¹¹ with a little touch of Malay blood, making him fearful of the verdict of his racist father

to illustrate a vanishing phenomenon ¹², as well as give occasion to touch on a variety of different aspects of Anglo-Indian society two hundred years ago. In addition of learning something of the Nizams military campaigns, we are treated to court intrigues, the explication of sexual mores, as noted above, the ways of arranging a garden (the Resident becoming quite obsessed with his own garden as his political influence waned, planting mango trees) especially night gardens, where scents of flowers naturally played a greater role than their appearance, and the kind of festivities Hyderabad society were able to enjoy. Architecture is given its due, especially the travails of Kilpatrick to finance his own new residence, modelled on the White House¹³. And great care is made to try to evoke the visual splendour of Hyderabad itself¹⁴. To the modern reader it gives glimpses of a mainly unspoilt landscape in which to travel leisurely for weeks seated on *howdahs* on the backs of elephants with luggage being pulled in big-wheeled carts by bullocks, or for shorter transportations of being carried in Palanquins. An idyllic life maybe, especially if you were rich (and for which many tourists vainly look for), but in which diseases were rampant, making no discrimination between classes. The Indian Muslim aristocracy to which our hero was confronted, was of course a foreign one as well, of strong Persian provenance, which would account for the fairness of his bride, as well as the fairness of their progeny, who could pass off almost as white back In England, except for some exotic features, enhanced by the inevitable gossip as to their ancestry. Of the native Hindu Indians there is almost no mention, suppressed as much by Moghal suzerainty, and its Nizam split-off, as by the British colonisers.

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¹² the author in an interview reveals that initially the story was only to occupy half a page in a general survey of so called white Mughals, until he stumbled on ts rich documentation,which led to a kind of obsession to find out what really happened, the search for which took years and was only concluded on the eve of the actual writing down.

¹³ The Governor General Wellesly was not surprisingly niggardly in allotting funds, while at the same time being excessively profligate as to the budiling of his own Residence in Calcutta. Eventually the Nizam provided funds.

¹⁴ My own impressions, two hundred years later, was of setting foot in 'One Thousand and One Night'. The Charminar still stands impressively at the center, providing a nice overlook over the bazaars below.