

An Excerpt from *The Last Englishmen*

If the nineteenth century had been all about piling up one scarcely credible heroic exploit after another and never stopping to ask why, the twentieth century thus far seemed to be all about sitting down and taking apart one's motives. Instead of thrashing through the jungle, battling fevers and hostile tribes in search of the source of the Nile, these new adventurers searched for themselves. This was a different sort of wilderness and required a different set of tools. In Paris, Margaret Marshall had ended John Auden's first formal session of analysis by saying that his candor posed a great difficulty. Honest patients were hard to treat. This was partly because honesty obscured the most important truths and partly because such patients usurped her role by trying to analyze their own behavior. Margaret insisted that she alone could determine his motives.

Why did he want to climb Everest?

"It is a mythical future admiration that you want," she pronounced. "The present and the analytical work required for this result you ignore. Without regard for the present you will be unable to achieve anything." She then compared his two attitudes.

"You expressed dislike of being loved simply for having a handsome face. But you court worldly admiration for some hypothetical achievement. Isn't there a contradiction here? You should wish to be liked simply for yourself."

"Of course I would wish to be liked simply for myself," John replied impatiently. "But what exactly is this self if it is not connected with some action? Should I just sit around all day in Paris cafés?" Their sessions took place in Paris cafés.

"That is taking it too far. You would not be yourself if you sat all day in a café."

When they were back on the street, Margaret asked him if he was enjoying his analysis.

"Very much."

"Wystan answered in just the same resentful manner," she said, sounding pleased. It was Wystan who recommended that John see Margaret. Margaret had pronounced his libido perfectly normal and he imagined she might fix John, too.

"What is it that draws you to the mountains?"

"I feel safe when I am isolated and unobserved."

...

It hadn't taken long before the question of whether he would return to India at the end of his furlough or commit to a serious and extended treatment took over. The faint hope that the Dalai Lama might allow passage of a new Everest expedition, argued for his return.

A sumptuous biographical saga,
both intimate and epic, about the waning
of the British Empire in India

The Last Englishmen

Love, War, and the End of Empire

DEBORAH BAKER

John Auden was a pioneering geologist of the Himalayas. Michael Spender was the first to survey the northern approach to the summit of Mount Everest. While their younger brothers—W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender—achieved literary fame, they vied to be included on an expedition that would deliver Everest’s summit to an Englishman, a quest that had become a metaphor for Britain’s struggle to maintain power over India. To this rivalry was added another: in the summer of 1938 both men fell in love with a painter named Nancy Sharp. Her choice would determine where each man’s wartime loyalties would lie.

Set in Calcutta, London, the glacier-locked wilds of the Karakoram, and on Everest itself, *The Last Englishmen* is also the story of a generation. The cast of this exhilarating drama includes Indian and English writers and artists, explorers and communist spies, Die Hards and Indian nationalists, political rogues and police informers. Key among them is a highborn Bengali poet named Sudhin Datta, a melancholy soul torn, like many of his generation, between hatred of the British Empire and a deep love of European literature, whose life would be upended by the arrival of war on his Calcutta doorstep.

Dense with romance and intrigue, and of startling relevance for the great power games of our own day, *The Last Englishmen* is an engrossing story that traces the end of empire and the stirring of a new world order.

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DEBORAH BAKER is the author of *Making a Farm*; *In Extremis*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Biography; *A Blue Hand*; and *The Convert*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. She lives in India and New York.