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**Tracing a complex web of social relations in British-ruled India, through the lives of John Auden, Michael Spender and Sudhin Datta, from the 1920s to the eve of independence.**



Mount Everest Expedition,

1933. PHOTO: ERIC SHIPTON/ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY/GETTY IMAGES

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By

*Neel Mukherjee*

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The biographer Deborah Baker, born in the United States but long resident part-time in India, has always been interested in how cultures and civilizations rub up against each other, her preternatural intelligence registering the harmonies, the miscegenations, the antagonistic and productive frictions resulting from these encounters. In “A Blue Hand” (2008), she brought together two unexpected domains: the Beat poets, notably Allen Ginsberg, and India. In “The Convert” (2011), a more extreme example, the collision of cultures became a transformation or doubling of the self, as Margaret Marcus of New York became Maryam Jameelah of Lahore. In her ambitious new book, “The Last Englishmen: Love, War, and the End of Empire,” she brings to bear this art of

juxtaposition upon a much-told story, the last two decades of the British Empire in India, to create something wholly original.

The lenses she uses to focus on her narrative are the surprising ones of mapping and mountaineering. Who would have thought that expeditions to scale Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world at just over 29,000 feet, and to map the terrains of the Himalayan range and the Hindu Kush could have afforded a new perspective on empire? Well, here it is, a dense, rich, exhilarating piece of work that moves deftly between worlds and peoples, between locations (Tibet, Cornwall, London, the Karakoram range, Berlin, Calcutta, the Garhwal mountains), between the private dramas of individuals and the tectonic shifts of history.



Medicine chest used

during the 1933 Mount Everest Expedition. PHOTO: SSPL VIA GETTY IMAGES

#### THE LAST ENGLISHMEN

By Deborah Baker

*Graywolf*, 358 pages, \$28

Central to Ms. Baker's story are three figures: John Bicknell Auden, brother of the poet W.H. Auden ; Michael Spender, brother of the poet Stephen Spender ; and a Bengali

poet, intellectual and literary-salon host, Sudhindranath Datta. John was a geologist with the Geological Survey of India; his first assignment, which took him to India in 1927, was to field-map the Bengal coalfields and, from there, the underlying geological structure of the entire subcontinent.

Michael, whose lab partner at school was W.H. Auden, was a geographer with the Royal Geographical Society. He was part of an expedition in 1935 to map the peaks of the Himalaya using the latest developments in stereophotogrammetry that he had learned in Switzerland. Sudhin Datta, the most brilliant poet of the generation after Rabindranath Tagore, ran a famous salon in Calcutta from his family home in on Cornwallis Street. In the 20 years that form the bulk of the book, from the mid-1920s to the end of World War II and the independence of India from British rule two years after that, these lives unfold mostly within the matrix of British-ruled India.

Part of what the book achieves is a lucid rendering of the complex web of filiations and affiliations that connected not only these three central figures but also others in their orbit and in their disparate, often far-flung worlds. So, for example, featured prominently are Winston Churchill, Christopher Isherwood, Humphry House, successive viceroys of India, and an Indian Civil Service officer named Michael Carritt (who was also a Communist spy). The role of Carritt, a former Oxford rugby player with whose younger brother W.H. Auden had been “smitten,” is a particular revelation. Nancy Coldstream (née Sharp), a painter, has a bigger, more crucial part: Both John and Michael Spender were her lovers, as was the poet Louis MacNeice, whose heart she broke, and it was in her home (shared with Bill Coldstream, her husband) in North London that W.H. Auden lodged when he was in England. Nancy was eventually to divorce Coldstream and marry Michael.

Step back from this teeming density of tangledness and you have a brilliant tableau of actors participating in the making of history. This was the world of the Spanish Civil War (which W.H. Auden observed and two of Carritt’s brothers fought in), of World War II, of the continuing struggle for Indian independence, and it is to Ms. Baker’s credit that she keeps the big events always in view, dramatizing and humanizing the workings of

history, particularly the story of empire and its machinations, in a way a novelist would—by making it a story of individuals. She understands everything about these people, the details of their lives, the connections and the criss-crossings, intersections, overlaps, friends-of-lovers-of-friends. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that there is something Tolstoyan to her vast project.

Ms. Baker's other great achievement is an unsparing depiction of the hypocrisy, venality and inhumanity of British colonialism. Empire is the central nervous system that animates everything in the story. We discover why climbing and mapping the world's highest peaks should provide the metaphorical underpinning for the project of colonial domination. The failed 1922 and 1924 expeditions to climb Everest originated, Ms. Baker writes, in the hope "that by reaching the summit a traumatized nation would find the perfect Englishman, and through him the perfect means, to memorialize all the lives lost" in the Great War. In the 1930s, the urge morphed into something else: Summits became a "means to assert or reclaim a nation's power and virility." The magical thinking was that "the conquest of Everest would grant England powers more lasting and splendid than any imperial durbar." Ms. Baker's writing on the various mountain expeditions undertaken during the period—such as the 1935 reconnaissance mission to Mount Everest of which Michael was a part of the team, or the 1937 expedition to the Karakoram to map K2, the second-highest peak in the world, in which both John and Michael participated—is stunning, vivid, granular. England would eventually gain the highest peak but only on its ninth attempt, and six years after India got its independence.

The irony is that both Michael Spender and John Auden came to think of empire as repugnant. In Spender's view, Ms. Baker writes, for a British explorer to hold himself out "as a paragon of Western civilization or the embodiment of a heroic ideal . . . was a romantic delusion." John Auden darkly imagined the anger "once British rule was finished and Indians were left to contemplate all those statues of men on horseback." Michael Carritt's experience of the brutality meted out to Indians by Raj officials, Ms. Baker shows, delivered him straight to the Indian Communist underground. Sudhin Datta, an inhabitant of a betwixt-and-between world that comprised the best of both India and Europe, was profoundly aware, too, of "England's failure to abide by its stated ideals,

whether in regard to India or its European alliances,” as the war came ever closer and India got caught up in it. The way that Ms. Baker has woven all of this into a cogent, coherent whole is remarkable.

Britain has never had—and looks unlikely to ever have—a systematic reckoning with its unsavory history, choosing willed oblivion instead. The past 70 years has seen the increasing diminution of the country’s standing in the global order. Now that Brexit, a project whose main architects are fueled by imperial nostalgia, is poised to further deflate it, Ms. Baker’s book seems all the more valuable.