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AGES OF EMPIRE

JOHN KEAY

## From Kensington to Kathmandu

The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire

By Deborah Baker

(Chatto & Windus 358pp £25)

In his masterly *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest*, the Canadian writer Wade Davis re-envisioned attempts to climb Mount Everest in the 1920s as a response to the despair and carnage of the trenches. The book deservedly won the Samuel Johnson Prize in 2012. Deborah Baker's no less accomplished *The Last Englishmen* could be read as a sequel to Davis's book; it might even be another prize contender. Taking up the Everest story in the 1930s, Baker tracks the lives and loves of a string of unlikely Himalayan pioneers before, during and after the Second World War. Like Davis, she interprets their unsuccessful attempts to come to terms with the Himalayas as a metaphor, in this case for Britain's failing grip on its Indian empire. Yet, oddly, neither Baker's text nor her fifty pages of notes and bibliography contain any mention of Davis's work.

Where *The Last Englishmen* excels is in exploring the wider cultural and political dimensions of its subject. The title may have been borrowed from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's quip that it was he, not Mountbatten, who was 'the last Englishman to rule India'. As an alumnus of Harrow, Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Inner Temple, Nehru's credentials as an Englishman were indeed impeccable, as were those of the group of Indian independence campaigners, many of them Oxbridge graduates, whose ruminations punctuate Baker's text like the voices of a Greek chorus. As the Luftwaffe blitzed London and Gandhi began another spell behind bars, these Calcutta luminaries – nationalists, communists, renegades and spies – gathered to lambast the iniquities of British policy while lauding the giants of English literature and recalling expensive lunches in the Café Royal. Is it they who are 'the last Englishmen'? And was the British-Indian relationship really one of such fusion? Or just confusion?

Alternatively the book's title could come from Louis MacNeice's recessionary 'India Diary':

Night falls on Kipling's Grand Trunk Road  
and all the deserted cantonments.  
Night falls on the Murree Hills and the  
rhododendrons of Simla ...  
On the crop watcher on the gimcrack perch,  
On the man who has never left the forest  
On the last Englishman to leave.

But MacNeice visited India only once and didn't much like it. Instead the colourful careers and unhappy romances that link Baker's many narrative strands are principally those of Auden and Spender. Not, though, of the hopelessly louche Wystan Hugh Auden and Stephen Spender, but of their elder, less effete brothers, the mountain-loving John Auden and the unbearably competitive Michael Spender.

Besides being eclipsed, and occasionally infuriated, by their literary siblings, John Auden and Michael Spender had a good deal else in common. Both fell for Nancy Coldstream (née Sharp), a chestnut-haired artist and muse who ran off with MacNeice, and would have done the same with W H Auden had he been so inclined, before eventually marrying Michael Spender. Additionally, both John Auden and Michael Spender maintained throughout their lives their boyhood fascination with science. John became an enormously distinguished geologist and Michael an outstanding surveyor who pioneered the use of aerial photography for compiling maps. Both men believed that, with their various expertises, they could reach a new understanding of the Himalayan region. Both men also hankered after the fulfilment and celebrity that awaited the successful Everest. They duly headed east.

Auden went first and stayed the longest. He joined the Geological Survey of India in 1926 and retired from it in 1953, the last Englishman in the organisation.

That was the year in which Everest was finally 'conquered'. Spender repeatedly ascended beyond 21,000 feet. But neither man played any part in the final scaling of Everest. Spender by then had died from injuries sustained in the crash of a plane on which he was a passenger in the final days of the war, an ironic end for an RAF squadron leader whose aerial photo intelligence had directed the bombing raids that nearly obliterated German cities. Meanwhile Auden, a gentle introvert compared to the obsessive Spender, had retired from bagging summits and turned his attention to subterranean geological activity.

At a time when drifting continents and colliding tectonic plates were widely regarded as science fiction, Auden's rock-sampling rambles in Garhwal and Nepal alerted him to the forces which, for some fifty million years, had been subducting sheets of oceanic rock deep into the earth's mantle, and there metamorphosing them into granite before thrusting them back up as the Himalayan peaks. In the process, the original sequence of strata became inverted, with the oldest and hardest material emerging on top. Auden's investigations led to the identification of the great boundary fault that runs the length of the Himalayas and to the discovery in the outer Himalayas of strata otherwise peculiar to the Aravalli hills in distant Rajasthan. But he stopped short of speculating about the forces responsible for all this movement. After marrying a daughter of the Calcutta barrister and independence campaigner Womesh Chandra Bonnerjee, he converted to Catholicism and devoted his last years in India to assessing the geological feasibility of irrigation schemes and hydroelectric dams.

How Baker manages to weave all these strands – and many more – into an enlightening and utterly compelling read is not obvious. This is an easy book in which to lose one's way. The reader may be whisked from Kensington to Kathmandu, then to a Cornwall cottage, a Calcutta hotel and a Karakoram glacier all within a couple of short chapters. Datelines and location tags certainly help. Likewise one cannot but be grateful for the inclusion of a *dramatis personae* listing at the start. The list runs to over fifty people, nearly half of whom



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belonged to the Calcutta circle, including Hassan Shahid Suhrawardy, 'professor of art history, Russophile and anti-Bolshevist', and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, 'rogue brother of Shahid, Muslim League politician' and later Pakistani prime minister (I'd always supposed they were the same person). Baker's research is hard to fault;

her mastery of subjects ranging from photogrammetry to the infighting that plagued the Indian Congress party impresses.

But what really distinguishes the book is its brilliant characterisations and its structural agility. It reads like fiction. Anyone seeking only information will be disappointed. Non-fiction ought always

to be this engaging. Baker is not herself a novelist. Her husband, Amitav Ghosh, however, is, and so she must know how fine is the line between biographical fact and historical fiction. *The Last Englishmen* straddles it to quite dazzling effect.

*To order this book from the Literary Review Bookshop, see page 32.*