

Upon the crags

Rupert Arrowsmith

DEBORAH BAKER

The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire
Vintage: 2019

Why the sudden obsession with mountaineering in Europe of the nineteen-twenties and thirties? Filmmakers were very much into it, with the popular director Arnold Fanck and others turning out feature after feature about sturdy, self-reliant types valiantly scaling dangerous crags, merely, to paraphrase the contemporary British climber George Mallory, *because they were there*. Fanck's star actress, Leni Riefenstahl, of course went on to direct *Triumph of the Will*, the lavish documentary of Hitler's 1934 rally at Nuremberg, by which time the business of summing snowy peaks had itself begun to display markedly authoritarian symptoms. "Above one thousand meters," as one Nazi newspaper put it, "there are only supporters of the Führer." The world's most wayward topographies, it seemed, were out there waiting to be brought beneath the mastering jackboot of the superman.

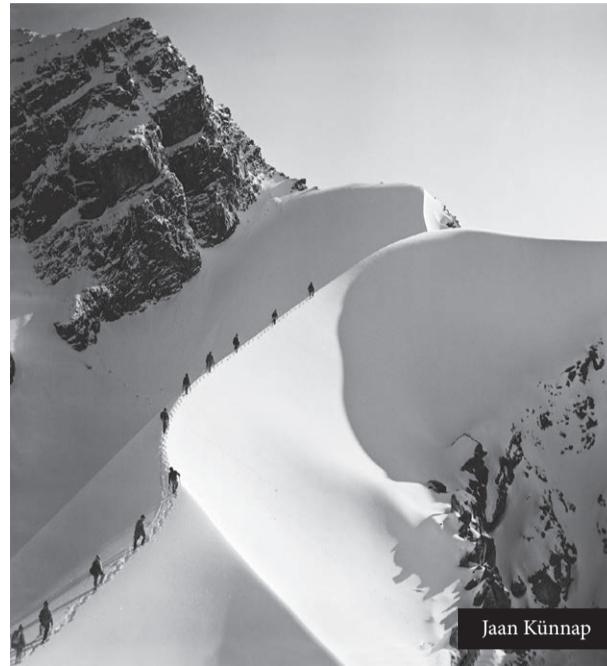
Amid another authoritarian project, that of British India, a related mania had taken hold. "We ought not to treat the climbing of Everest as a domestic issue," urged Captain George Finch, another mountaineer of the day, "it is a matter of National and Imperial importance." Even as England's potency softened, it was reasoned, if the colonisers could lay underfoot the world's tallest mountain, would that not prove to all and sundry their continued viability as rulers?

The need to demonstrate virility, Deborah Baker thinks, was also behind the Everest-conquering ambitions of the two biographical subjects of *The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire*. "Of course I would wish to be liked simply for myself," one of them blurts to an amateur psychiatrist when questioned as to his motives, "but what exactly is this self if it is not connected with some action?" His name was John Auden, elder brother of W.H., and the fact that Baker's other protagonist was the elder brother of another of the era's leading poets, Stephen Spender, adds necessary star-power to Baker's cast of characters.

For neither Michael Spender nor John Auden achieved their dreams of celebrity by reaching the top of Everest, though both took part in expeditions towards it from India, and its apex would remain untrodden until 1953, five years after the British had quit their occupation of the subcontinent. Michael instead made the first survey by aeroplane of the mountain's north face, innovating techniques of aerial photography that later became crucial to the success of wartime bombing raids against Germany, while John became more interested in what was underneath, peering into the geology of the Himalayan massif until he discovered the fault-line that is known today to have given rise to it.

Baker herself understands the mountains well, having travelled extensively throughout the Indian Himalayas as well as the high places of Nepal and Bhutan, and her descriptions of the two men's travails among the arêtes glitter with empathy, as in the following description of one of Michael Spender's reconnaissance trips:

Staggering toward the crest of Kongra La pass they all looked like second-rate actors, miming the climbing of Everest as if on a stage, bodies curved against the wind, faces screwed into scowls. Michael was wearing his anorak over an Iceland sweater and



never felt so cold or so bloody [...] This Everest business was clearly all about making oneself deliberately ill, Michael decided. Only the Tibetan mule drivers seemed blithely unaware of the cold.

Michael Spender and John Auden were not only rivals for the slopes of Everest, they were also both in love with the same woman. Nancy Coldstream (nee Sharp) was married to a minor painter, and before she had met either of the two mountaineers had already deceived her husband with the poet Louis MacNeice. She would have done it with John's brother, too, had W.H. Auden's interests not lain more firmly in being sodomised by young men in Weimar Germany, an activity he said was as good for peping him up as drinking a mug of hot Bovril.

Michael won Nancy in the end, and John, defying a potential future as a stereotypical colonial *sahib*, wed instead an upper-caste Hindu named Sheila Bonnerjee. The complications of such a cross-cultural union are not lost on Baker, herself a member by marriage of a globalised Indian family that divides its life between Brooklyn, Calcutta, and the Goan coast. Witness, for instance, this glimpse into Sheila's and John's hopes and fears for their children:

She saw something of her country's vulnerability in the lives that stretched out before her half-and-half daughters. She still hoped they would love both India and England, yet be worldly enough to see the faults of both [...] He supposed one day his daughters would find their suspicions they were different confirmed and would need to understand the meaning of their heritage. Where would they call home? England was out [...] he no longer trusted anything England said it stood for.

Baker has always been an insightful chronicler of the interactions of *firangi* — that universal slang for Westerners — with the cultures of the subcontinent. Her 2011 title *The Convert*, which documents the journey of a young Jewish woman from postwar New York to Lahore, Pakistan, to become an ideologue of extremist Islam, was nominated in the United States for the National Book Award. But it is an earlier book, *A Blue Hand* — about the antics of the Beat Poets in the

India of the sixties — that forms the stylistic prototype for the wider-ranging and more ambitious narrative of *The Last Englishmen*.

There is a joyous rough-and-tumble to *A Blue Hand*, with Baker's sense of humour, drier than the driest martini, converting documentary material into pieces of drama that crackle with life, as in her telling of Allen Ginsberg's questions about meditation to Pupul Jaykar, a polite female Indian intellectual:

[Ginsberg] didn't want to accept that drugs were not somehow part of the answer. He joked, "After all, God is very funny, and He might even accept drugs as a way to Him." Jaykar didn't think God was funny.

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. If not ecstasy, was it asking too much to ask for love?

"Can you help me find a gay guru?"

"An eccentric guru?" She looked at him, perplexed.

"No, a gay guru," he insisted. "I do not want to be grasping, but I feel it is essential I find God through a guru whom I can love."

The Last Englishmen follows a similar modus operandi. As the forty-odd pages of references at the back of the book testify, Baker's material is meticulously researched amid national libraries and university archives, but she never drops into the anaemic patter of an academic biographer. Instead, the presentation is close to novelistic, the author guessing at the inner lives of once-living personalities based on documented conversations and attitudes outlined in journals and letters, as in the following recreation of an encounter between Michael's uncle, the newspaper editor Alfred Spender, and Mahatma Gandhi. When Alfred arrived, Baker tells us,

Gandhi was in the middle of being weighed. To repair a rift between ashram factions, Alfred's fixer told him, the Mahatma had pursued one of his fasts a bit too zealously. This news was imparted in a matter-of-fact manner, leaving him no opportunity to inquire further. Alfred supposed Gandhi undertook fasts when things went wrong in order to put them right again. He tried to imagine the present British Prime Minister, the patrician Stanley Baldwin, refusing his food and turning his face to the wall in response to a threatened strike.

The above excerpt hints at Baker's main advantage over others writing on the demise of the British Raj. The tendency of such authors is either, as in Salman Rushdie's over-quoted phrase, to make it all about "the doings of the officer class and its wife", or to apply a decolonial approach and occlude the perspectives of the occupiers entirely. But Baker is able to inhabit characters from both sides, not merely as political entities or case-studies, but as confused and deluded human beings, crashing into one another with all the dissatisfaction and self-doubt that membership of your and my species entails. The result is a book that offers not only the historical facts, but also a convincing three-dimensional experience of the withering of European ambitions in Asia. □

Rupert Arrowsmith is an author and culture historian based in Myanmar