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Master of all he surveys

A rebuttal to imperial fantasies

ELIZABETH BAIGENT

Deborah Baker

THE LAST ENGLISHMEN

Love, war and the end of empire
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This skilfully constructed book explores a number of apparently quite separate worlds – exploration, art, literature, politics, and surveying – in the period from 1920 to 1950, and in Europe, the Indian sub-continent, and fleetingly in the US. These worlds are brought together through the family ties, friendship, acquaintance, or sexual liaisons of a disparate set of protagonists, among them two pairs of literary-surveying siblings: W. H. Auden and his surveyor and geologist brother John; and Stephen Spender and his surveyor and explorer brother Michael. Deborah Baker was drawn to the overlapping worlds of these men and others as a way of writing about India and Britain at the end of empire, but she covers wider themes of politics, literature, art,

manliness and Englishness. Her book rests on a substantial set of published and unpublished material, and her ties of nationality (she is American by birth, Indian by marriage) give the work a distinctive cultural perspective. It proceeds as a series of cameos of characters and glimpses of incidents and worlds, almost always with a secure evidential base: there is pleasingly little speculation masquerading as special author insight and instead an impressive list of endnotes. What propels the book forward is less an internal narrative than the sweep of world events in a tumultuous period

of history. The characters publish works and climb mountains, paint and conduct surveys, but the book itself has no clear narrative drive. This shows itself particularly at the end: *The Last Englishmen* peters out rather than concluding, while a postscript indicates that the end isn't really the end anyway.

Baker's book forms a (probably unwitting) parallel to recent scholarly attempts to examine global or imperial history through the ideas of networks and webs: the work of David Lambert and Alan Lester springs to mind. Baker's cast of characters is unusually well known. Apart from Auden and Spender, its literary members

include Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood, and Indian, especially Bengali, writers such as Sudhindranath Datta; the surveying/exploration cast includes Francis Younghusband, Eric Shipton and Arthur Hinks, and there are other worlds, each with its multinational cast. Constructing her networks and webs, Baker skilfully holds our interest almost to the end, despite juggling so many actors and despite their unattractive self-interest and sense of entitlement: the British adduce a string of arguments to justify their possession of India, the artists go their way regardless of how their actions affect spouses, partners and children; explorers pursue their goals regardless of the effect on their companions; and, in each circle, favoured races/castes/genders/classes disdain the less favoured. Maintaining readers' interest in such a bunch is a real achievement. Baker shows how the events and landscapes she describes affect their literary, scientific, cartographic and artistic output; in Auden and Isherwood's play *The Ascent of F6*, for example, the worlds of cartography, exploration and imperialism mesh. Above rise the mountains of the Himalaya and Karakoram, and beyond stretch the plains of India, and their



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inhabitants who remain when the conquerors and scientists have come and gone with varying degrees of success and insight.

Describing India's "last Englishmen", Baker has a clear view of empire. Spurning the new revisionism which considers it at least possible that empire was benevolent, she retells Wystan Auden's recollection of the Malayan planter who stated that the English would not leave India while there was either a virgin or a rupee left. Bald descriptions of British exploitation, complicity in atrocities, incompetence and bone-headedness follow: there is no imperial elegy here. Her view of the absurdities of manliness, notably its links with Alpinism and war, is also clear, but the book is far from feminist: Baker's women are almost wholly sexually defined (as wives, mistresses, girlfriends, widows) and passive, even if some men pivot around them. There is rather too much going on to leave newcomers feeling they really understand the Indian worlds into which they look, but enough for them to want to read more, guided in part by the bibliography.

Baker keeps the reader's interest because of the scope of the events she describes, the fame of many of her subjects, and her sound research and largely easy prose style. But there are also helpings of geology, geodesy, photogrammetry, plate tectonics, the Revenue Surveys and the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, and there are a few infelicities (no need to get stuck on *Felszeichnung*, for example, when "hachuring" – to describe an alternative to horizontal contours – is a standard English cartographical word); but Baker deserves congratulation for thinking technical fields worth the effort. By the end, readers' ability to assimilate so much disparate material may start to falter, but perseverance is rewarded with her chilling description of the Bengal famine near the end.

In Britain today, delusions of empire as a benevolent undertaking abound and Winston Churchill is often simply a beloved defender of England. This book shows the view from India, with empire a brutal undertaking and Churchill an imperial fantasist, complicit in the Bengal famine. Deborah Baker thinks she

writes of the last Englishmen. There are some left who would benefit from reading this.