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THE LAST MUGHAL

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

THE LAST MUGHAL

*The Fall of a Dynasty:
Delhi, 1857*

William Dalrymple



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CONTENTS

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Maps*](#)

[*Dramatis Personae*](#)

[*Acknowledgements*](#)

[*Introduction*](#)

[A Chessboard King](#)

[Believers and Infidels](#)

[Photo Insert 1](#)

[An Uneasy Equilibrium](#)

[The Near Approach of the Storm](#)

[The Sword of the Lord of Fury](#)

[This Day of Ruin and Riot](#)

[A Precarious Position](#)

[Blood for Blood](#)

[The Turn of the Tide](#)

[Photo Insert 2](#)

[To Shoot Every Soul](#)

[The City of the Dead](#)

[The Last of the Great Mughals](#)

[Photo Insert 3](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Notes](#)

[Bibliography](#)

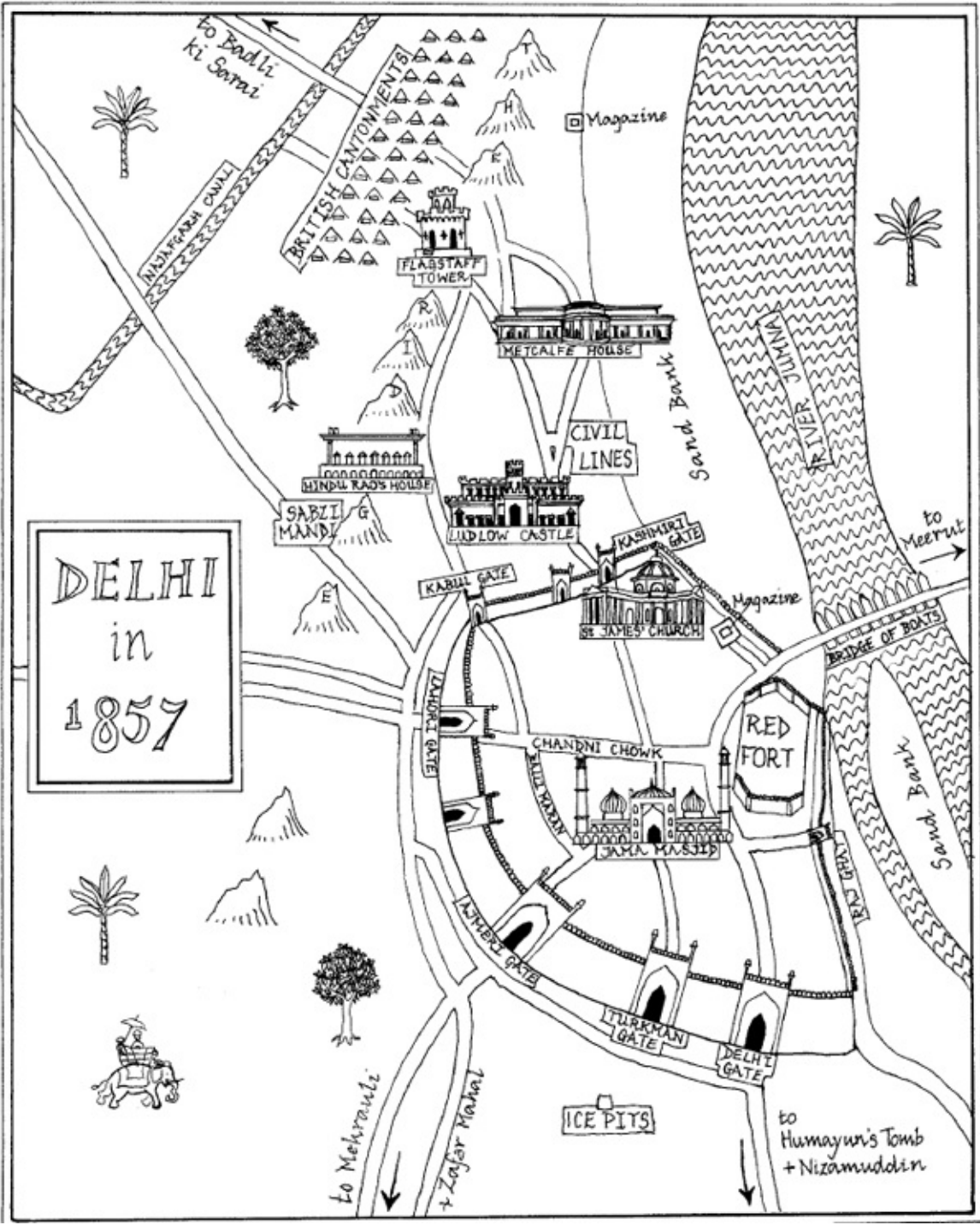
[Illustrations](#)

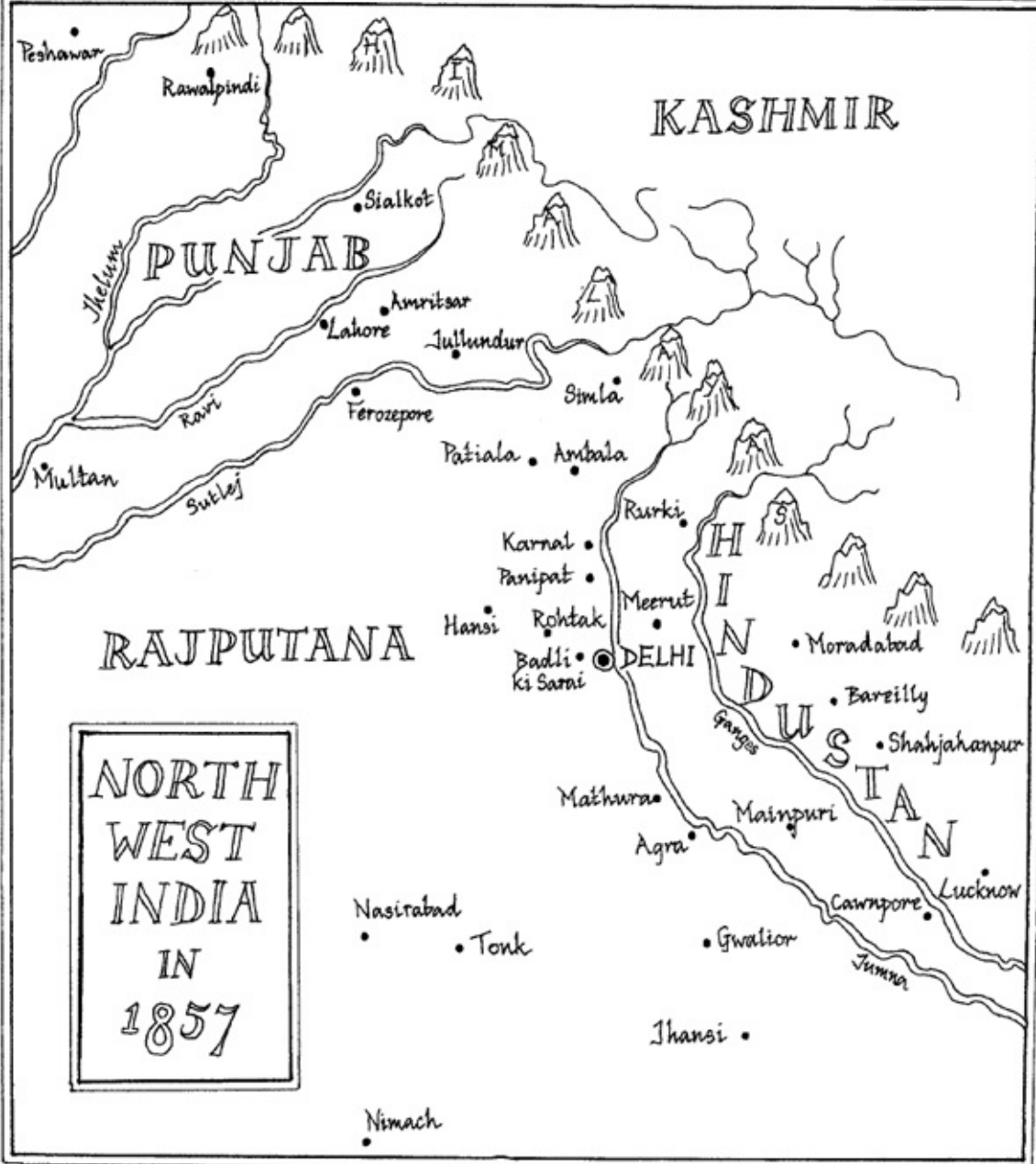
[A Note About the Author](#)

[Also by William Dalrymple](#)

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To my beloved Iby





NORTH
WEST
INDIA
IN
1857

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

1. *The Mughals*

THE MUGHAL IMPERIAL FAMILY

The Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II (1775–1862)

The elderly Mughal Emperor—eldest but not favourite son of the Emperor Akbar Shah II—was a calligrapher, Sufi, theologian, patron of painters of miniatures, creator of gardens and a very serious mystical poet, but by the 1850s he held little real day-to-day power beyond the still potent mystique attached to the Mughal dynasty and was in many ways “a chessboard king.” Though he was initially horrified by the rough and desperate sepoys who barged into his palace on 11 May 1857, Zafar ultimately agreed to give his blessing to the Uprising, seeing it as the only way to save his great dynasty from extinction. It was a decision he later came to regret bitterly.

The Nawab Zinat Mahal Begum (1821–1882)

Zafar’s senior wife, and his only consort to come from an aristocratic background: when they married in 1840 she was nineteen while he was sixty-four. Having toppled her rival Taj Mahal Begum from the position of favourite wife and provided a son in the shape of Mirza Jawan Bakht, she worked single-mindedly to have her son—the fifteenth of Zafar’s sixteen boys—declared heir apparent. Zafar was widely regarded to be completely under her influence, but during 1857 the limits of her power over him became quickly apparent.

Taj Mahal Begum

The beautiful daughter of a humble court musician, Taj presided over the celebrations that accompanied Zafar’s accession to the throne in 1837 as his favourite wife and the head of his harem. Taj’s fall began when Zafar married the nineteen-year-old Zinat Mahal in 1840. By 1857 she had been imprisoned for a suspected affair with Zafar’s nephew, Mirza Kamran, and remained bitterly alienated from both Zafar and Zinat Mahal.

Mirza Fakhru—aka Mirza Ghulam Fakhruddin (1818–1856)

When Zafar’s eldest son, Mirza Dara Bakht, died from a fever in 1849, the British assumed that Zafar’s next son, Mirza Fakhru, would succeed him as heir apparent. Mirza Fakhru was a talented and popular poet and historian, but under the influence of Zinat Mahal Zafar tried

unsuccessfully to block his appointment as heir apparent in favour of Zinat's fifteen-year-old son, ~~Mirza Jawan Bakht~~. ~~Mirza Fakhru died in 1856, probably from cholera, but Palace gossip attributed the death to poisoning.~~

Mirza Mughal (1828–1857)

Zafar's fifth son, by a sayyida (descendant of the Prophet) of aristocratic birth named Sharaf ul-Mahal Sayyidani, who was a senior figure in Zafar's harem. Mirza Mughal rose to prominence at court as a protégé of Zinat Mahal after the disgrace of Mirza Fakhru in 1852 and was appointed qiladar (fort keeper). After the death of Mirza Fakhru in 1856 he was the oldest of Zafar's surviving legitimate sons, and may at this point have made contact with the discontented sepoys in the Company's army. Certainly from 12 May onwards he became the principal rebel leader in the royal family, and worked with great industry to keep the Delhi administration running amid the chaos of the Uprising and siege.

Mirza Khizr Sultan (1834–1857)

Zafar's ninth son, the illegitimate child of a Palace concubine. Aged twenty-three in 1857, he was renowned for his physical beauty and had some capacity as a poet and marksman, but after throwing in his lot with the rebels in 1857 he did little to distinguish himself and ran away in fear from the battle of Badli Ki Serai, so causing a panic among the rebel troops. During the siege he earned himself a reputation for corruption, and is frequently criticised in the sources for making arrests and collecting taxes from the town's bankers without authority to do so.

Mirza Abu Bakr (d.1857)

Mirza Abu Bakr was the eldest son of Mirza Fakhru and Zafar's oldest surviving legitimate grandson; he was also the principal badmash, or ruffian, in the imperial family. Within a few days of the outbreak Mirza Abu Bakr began appearing in petitions and complaints to the Emperor, accused of whoring and drunkenness, whipping his servants, beating up watchmen and casually attacking any policeman who tried to rein him in. He took nominal charge of the rebel cavalry, looting Gurgaon and various suburbs of Delhi before leading the disastrous expedition to Meerut which ended in the rebel defeat at the Hindan Bridge on 30 and 31 May.

Mirza Jawan Bakht (1841–1884)

Zafar's favourite son, and the only child he had by Zinat Mahal. Though he was the fifteenth of his sixteen male offspring Zafar was determined to try to make him heir apparent. Spoilt and selfish, Mirza Jawan Bakht had few supporters other than his parents and took little interest in his studies. During the Uprising he was kept away from the rebels by his mother, who hoped that after the sepoys' defeat her son's succession would be assured.

Mirza Ilahe Bakhsh

Father-in-law of Mirza Fakhru, grandfather of Mirza Abu Bakr, and one of the leaders of the pro-British faction in the Palace, both before and after 1857. He was in close contact with William Hodson throughout the siege, and was instrumental in persuading Zafar to surrender

after the fall of the city. In the weeks that followed he was responsible for identifying which of his relatives had sympathised with the rebels and, having guaranteed his own life at the cost of that of most of his family, including his own grandson, he became known as the “Traitor of Delhi.”

THE EMPEROR’S HOUSEHOLD

Hakim Ahsanullah Khan

A highly intelligent, wily and cultured man, the Hakim was Zafar’s most trusted confidant and was appointed to be both his Prime Minister and personal physician. Before 1857 the Hakim had an uneasy relationship with Zinat Mahal, but they made common cause during 1857, uniting against the rebel army and opening communication with the British. When his letters were discovered by the rebel sepoys they tried to kill him, but he was protected by Zafar. The Hakim continued to press Zafar not to commit himself to the rebel cause, and to surrender himself to the British, but when he ultimately did so the Hakim betrayed him, providing evidence against his master at his trial in return for his own pardon.

Mahbub Ali Khan (d.1857)

The Chief Eunuch of the Palace and Zinat Mahal’s notoriously ruthless “enforcer” beyond the walls of the zenana. Like his mistress he was deeply suspicious of the Uprising, and he was a leading member of the pro-British faction in the Palace after the outbreak. His death on 14 June 1857 followed a prolonged illness, but was widely rumoured to be the result of poisoning.

Mirza Asadullah Khan—“Ghalib” (1797–1869)

The greatest lyric poet in Urdu, and from 1854—following the death of his great rival Zauq—the Poet Laureate of Mughal Delhi. A mystical Sufi by inclination, self-consciously rakish and aristocratic by temperament, Ghalib in his writings provides some of the most sophisticated and melancholy records of the destruction of Mughal Delhi in the siege and fall of the city in 1857.

Zahir Dehlavi (1835–1911)

An attendant to Zafar at the Mughal court who had been working in the Fort since his thirteenth birthday. By 1857 he was twenty-two and had risen to the post of Darogah of the Mahi Maraatib, or Keeper of the Dynastic Fish Standard of the Mughals. A pupil of Zauq’s, he was a highly polished and cultured courtier and poet. His Dastan i-Ghadr, which has never been previously translated or used in any English language account of the Uprising, gives the fullest and most richly detailed surviving account of the course of the siege and Uprising from the point of view of the Palace.

THE REBEL ARMY

General Bakht Khan

A subahdar of artillery prior to 1857, Bakht Khan was a much-garlanded and battle-hardened veteran of the Afghan wars. A tall, portly and heavily built man, with huge handlebar moustache and sprouting sideburns, Bakht Khan had been elected General by the Bareilly troops and arrived in Delhi with a reputation as both an administrator and an effective military leader. When he arrived in Delhi halfway through the siege, on 2 July 1857, it initially looked as if Bakht Khan and his 3,000 men would bring a swift victory to the rebels, but the General's tactless treatment of other rebel leaders—and particularly of Mirza Mughal—quickly made him enemies, as did his “Wahhabi” religious views. By the middle of August his failure to dent the British defences led to his demotion from rebel Commander-in-Chief.

General Sudhari Singh and Brigade Major Hira Singh

The leaders of the Nimach Brigade and the principal rivals of Bakht Khan. They refused to accept the latter's authority and worked to undermine his position, especially after he left their troops to their fate when ambushed by Nicholson's column at Najafgarh on 25 August.

Brigade Major Gauri Shankar Sukul

Leader of the Haryana Regiment who became the most important British mole and agent provocateur within the rebel ranks.

Maulvi Sarfaraz Ali

Bakht Khan's spiritual mentor, the “Wahhabi” preacher Maulvi was soon known as “the imam of the Mujahedin.” Prior to the Uprising, he had spent many years in Delhi and was well-connected to both the court and the city. He had been one of the first clerics to preach jihad against the British in the days leading up to the outbreak, and as the siege progressed and the number of jihadis increased, his influence as a rebel leader grew.

OTHER DELHIWALLAHS

Munshi Jiwan Lal

Prior to the outbreak of the Uprising, Jiwan Lal had long been the hugely fat Mir Munshi (Chief Assistant) of Sir Thomas Metcalfe at the British Residency. Although restricted to the cellar of his house during much of the course of the siege, Jiwan Lal ran a highly effective intelligence operation from his hideaway, every day sending out “two Brahmins and two Jats for the purpose of obtaining news of the doings of the rebels from every quarter,” which he in due course passed on to William Hodson, the British chief of intelligence on the Ridge.

Mufti Sadruddin Khan—“Azurda” (d.1868)

Mufti Sadruddin Azurda was a close friend of both Zafar's and Ghalib's, and played an important

role as bridge between the British and Mughal elites in the early days of the British ascendancy in Delhi. For thirty years Azurda balanced his roles as chief Muslim judge (Sadr Amin) in Delhi, leading literary figure at court and prominent madrasa teacher with a mild Anglophilia, but in 1857, alienated by the Company's encouragement of missionaries, he threw in his lot with the rebels. A natural mediator, he was responsible for reconciling the jihadis, the court and the sepoys during the crisis over cow killing which took place during the 'Id of 1 August 1857, so avoiding a potential civil war within rebel ranks.

Muin ud-Din Husain Khan

At the outbreak of the Uprising, Muin ud-Din Husain Khan was the Thanadar, or Head Police Officer, at Paharganj police station, a little to the southwest of the walled city. Muin ud-Din was from a minor branch of the noble Loharu family; his cousins included both Ghalib and Nawab Zia ud-Din Khan. Having helped to save Theo Metcalfe's life, he joined the rebels and was elevated to the position of Kotwal for most of the Uprising, before being replaced by Sa'id Mubarak Shah. After the suppression of the Uprising, both former Kotwals survived to write excellent Urdu accounts of life in the city during the months of the siege.

Sarvar ul-Mulk

A young Mughal nobleman, probably aged around twelve at the time of the outbreak. During the conflict, his Afghan tutor became a jihadi and his father had to defend the family house against the assaults of plundering sepoys. The family escaped from the city just after 14 September and made it safely to Hyderabad, where Sarvar ul-Mulk eventually wrote a fine description of the siege in his autobiography, *My Life*.

2. The British

THE METCALFES

Sir Charles Metcalfe (1785–1846)

The first of the Metcalfes to come to Delhi, in his first spell—initially as assistant to Sir David Ochterlony from 1806 and as Resident from 1811—Charles Metcalfe had fitted in with the tone set by his principal, building himself a house in the Mughal Shalimar Gardens and fathering three sons by a Sikh bibi who (according to family tradition) he married “by Indian rites.” By the time of his return to Delhi as Resident in 1826, Metcalfe had however jettisoned his bibi and begun to take a very different attitude to India and its Mughal rulers. “I have renounced my former allegiance to the house of Timur,” he announced to Lord Bentinck in a letter of 1832, shortly after he had left Delhi to take up a position as Member of the Council in Calcutta.

Sir Thomas Metcalfe (1795–1853)

Sir Thomas arrived in Delhi in 1813 as assistant to his elder brother Sir Charles Metcalfe and stayed there for his entire career, rising to become Resident in 1835. A very particular and fastidious man, Metcalfe dedicated much of his professional life to negotiating a succession settlement that would allow the Company to expel the royal family from the Red Fort on the death of Zafar. He had some affection, but little real respect, for the man he was determined should be the last of the Timurid line. Although to Zafar's face he was always polite, in private he was less generous. "[Zafar] is mild and talented," he wrote, "but lamentably weak and vacillating and impressed with a very erroneous notion of his own importance." Having negotiated a succession agreement with Mirza Fakhru that entailed the Mughals leaving the Red Fort, Metcalfe died in 1853 from a digestive disorder that his doctors believed was caused by poison, which his family believed was administered on the orders of Zinat Mahal.

Sir Theophilus Metcalfe—"Theo" (1828–1883)

In 1857 Theo Metcalfe was a junior magistrate in the Company's service, and a very different figure from his father. Where Sir Thomas was reserved and particular, Theo was sociable and expansive and also, when he wished to be, extremely charming. If the father liked solitude and disliked the business of entertaining, Theo was noisy and convivial, and enjoyed parties, riding, horses and dogs. If his father was resolutely self-disciplined and law-abiding, Theo had a tendency to cut corners and get into what his father described as "scrapes." At the outbreak of the Uprising on 11 May 1857, Theo was one of the only British officials within the walls successfully to make his escape, and after joining the Delhi Field Force he took the lead in the bloodthirsty work of revenge.

Sir Edward Campbell (1822–1882)

Son-in-law of Sir Thomas Metcalfe and Prize Agent during the siege of Delhi. Campbell had been a protégé of Sir Charles Napier, the former Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in India, with whom Sir Thomas Metcalfe had had a serious disagreement. Moreover, despite his title, Campbell was more or less penniless, all of which led Sir Thomas initially to try and block Campbell's engagement to his daughter Georgina (known in the family as "GG"). Campbell's regiment, the 60th Rifles, was one of the first to try out the new Enfield rifles; after his regiment mutinied, Campbell joined the Delhi Field Force on the Ridge and at the end of the siege was voted Prize Agent, responsible for administering the legalised looting of the captured city, a job for which his gentle and religious temperament was quite unsuited.

THE BRITISH IN DELHI

Reverend Midgeley John Jennings (d.1857)

Padre Jennings had come out to India in 1832 and, though initially posted to various quiet hill stations, had long dreamt of opening a mission in Delhi and getting stuck into some serious work as "Missionary to the Heathen." He finally got the job of chaplain in the Mughal capital in 1852 and moved straight into the front line, the Red Fort itself, having been invited to share the Lahore

Gate lodgings of Captain Douglas, Commander of the Palace Guard. His unctuous yet tactless manner won him few friends, and he was regarded as a “bigot” by much of the British community in Delhi. The people of Delhi disliked him even more, especially after he succeeded in converting two prominent Delhi Hindus—Master Ramchandra and Chimam Lal—in 1852. Jennings was personally responsible for convincing many of the people of Delhi that the Company intended to convert them, by force if necessary.

Robert and Harriet Tytler (Robert d.1872, Harriet d.1907)

Tytler was a veteran of the 38th Native Infantry and an officer of the old school who was close to his sepoys, concerned for their well-being and completely fluent in Hindustani. Tytler appears to have been a kind and sensitive man, a widower with two little children who had recently remarried, this time to the brisk and resilient Harriet. Harriet was half his age, and as fluent in Hindustani as her husband. Together the two Tytlers pursued their amateur artistic enthusiasms and—unexpectedly for an army couple—became pioneering photographers. At the outbreak, the couple escaped from Delhi to Amballa, where they eventually joined the Delhi Field Force. Harriet’s memoirs are among the best sources on life on the Ridge during the siege of Delhi, and on the fate of the city after the fall.

Edward Vibart

In 1857 Edward Vibart of the 54th Bengal Native Infantry was a nineteen-year-old company commander in Delhi, from an Indian Army family: his father was a cavalry officer in Kanpur. During the Uprising, Vibart’s father was killed at the Kanpur massacre, while the son narrowly escaped from the city at the outbreak and survived to take part in the siege and recapture. His memoirs, and particularly his letters, are one of the best sources for the atrocities committed by the British during the taking of the city and during the extended reprisals that followed.

THE DELHI FIELD FORCE

General Sir Archdale Wilson (1803–1874)

A small, neat, cautious gentleman of fifty-four, Archdale Wilson was one of the station commanders of Meerut at the outbreak of the Mutiny, and later led a column from the garrison which defeated Mirza Abu Bakr at the Hindan Bridge on 30 and 31 May. He rendezvoused with the Delhi Field Force at Alipore shortly before fighting the battle of Badli ki Serai on 8 June. Following the death of General Barnard and the resignation of General Reed, he took over command of British forces at the siege of Delhi from 17 July. He quickly put in place a defensive strategy, much criticised at the time but which successfully preserved British strength until reinforcements arrived shortly before the assault on 14 September. During the taking of the city Wilson’s nerve finally failed him, and at one point John Nicholson threatened to shoot him if he should order a retreat.

Brigadier General John Nicholson (1821–1857)

A taciturn Ulster Protestant, Nicholson was said to have personally decapitated a local robber chieftain, then kept the man's head on his desk. He had "a commanding presence, some six feet, two inches in height, with a long black beard, dark grey eyes with black pupils which under excitement would dilate like a tiger's." For reasons that remain unclear Nicholson inspired a religious sect, the "Nikal Seyn," who apparently regarded him as an incarnation of Vishnu. During the Uprising Nicholson became a legend among the British in India. His mixture of piety, gravity and courage, combined with his merciless capacity for extreme brutality, were exactly the qualities needed to put heart into the British troops on the Ridge, and there were few who remained immune to the hero-worship of this great imperial psychopath. Shortly after his arrival at the siege, Nicholson led a forced march to ambush a column of sepoys at Najafgarh on 25 August. On 14 September he personally led the assault on the city, and was mortally wounded the same day.

William Hodson (1821–1858)

Prior to 1857 William Hodson had been regarded by most of his colleagues as a black sheep. Hodson was the bright, university-educated son of a clergyman, and had risen rapidly to be Adjutant of the new Corps of Guides. His fall from grace was equally sudden. In 1854 Hodson was relieved of his command after an investigation declared that he had embezzled regimental funds. During the Uprising he founded an irregular cavalry regiment known as Hodson's Horse, and ran the remarkably efficient British intelligence service on the Delhi Ridge. On his own authority he negotiated the surrender of Zafar and Zinat Mahal, and on 21 September he brought them captive into Delhi. The following day he went back to bring in princes Mirza Mughal, Khizr Sultan and Abu Bakr; then, having separated them from their followers and disarmed them, he told them to strip naked and shot all three dead at point-blank range. He was killed a few months later, in March 1858, at the siege of Lucknow.

OTHER BRITISH OFFICIALS

Lord Canning (1812–1862)

Canning was a handsome and industrious—if somewhat reserved—Tory politician in his early forties, who had accepted the appointment of Governor General of India only because of his frustration at his consistent failure to gain a senior Cabinet berth in London. Before his departure he had had no previous interest in India and, having only arrived there in February 1856, had yet to leave the heat and damp of Calcutta by the time of the outbreak. However, none of this prevented him from taking a confidently dismissive attitude towards "the farce of Mughal pretensions" and putting in place plans to depose the Mughals within a few weeks of his arrival. After the suppression of the Uprising he attempted to limit the vindictiveness of the bloody British retribution, with mixed results.

Sir John Lawrence (1811–1879)

Younger brother of Sir Henry Lawrence, who in 1857 was Chief Commissioner in Avadh, Sir John

was a former deputy of Sir Thomas Metcalfe's in Delhi. John Lawrence had risen rapidly through the ranks of the Company's civil service thanks to his reputation for hard work and efficiency, and in 1853 he was made Chief Commissioner of the newly conquered Punjab. He forbade his officers from going up to the hills for the hot weather, and made known his disapproval of "a cakey man," by which he meant someone who, besides presumably liking cakes, "pretended to much elegance and refinement." In 1857 he proved to be arguably the most capable of all the British officials in North India, disarming mutinous sepoys, raising new irregular regiments and quickly pacifying the Punjab so that the maximum number of troops could be sent to the Delhi Ridge. After the fall of the city he worked hard to minimise the scale of the retribution, and personally saved Mughal Delhi from a plan to level the entire metropolis.

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WRITING A BOOK puts pressure on the most patient of families, and I have been especially lucky with mine: not only did they all uproot themselves from homes and schools in London and move to Delhi while I researched this book, Sam and Adam also put up with the loss of bedtime stories while I was writing; and my gentle, beautiful and sweet-natured Olivia has been almost superhumanly sensitive and forbearing with her husband as he locked himself away from family life for six months and immersed himself instead in the inner courtyards of the Mughal court.

Particularly touching has been the interest taken in the whole project by my eleven-year-old daughter, Ibby. Having appointed herself editor-in-chief, she proved a surprisingly tough critic of her father's tendency to use, as she puts it, "too many words." This book—somewhat shorter than it would otherwise have been—is dedicated to her, with all my love.

Introduction

AT 4 P.M. on a hazy, humid winter's afternoon in Rangoon in November 1862, soon after the end of the monsoon, a shrouded corpse was escorted by a small group of British soldiers to an anonymous grave at the back of a walled prison enclosure.

This enclosure lay overlooking the muddy brown waters of the Rangoon River, a little downhill from the great gilt spire of the Shwe Dagon pagoda. Around the enclosure lay the newly constructed cantonment area of the port—an anchorage and pilgrimage town that had been seized, burned and occupied by the British only ten years earlier. The bier of the State Prisoner—as the deceased was referred to—was accompanied by two of his sons and an elderly, bearded mullah. No women were allowed to attend, and a small crowd from the bazaar who had somehow heard about the prisoner's death were kept away by armed guards. Nevertheless, one or two managed to break through the cordons to touch the shroud before it was lowered into the grave.

The ceremony was brief. The British authorities had made sure not only that the grave was already dug, but that quantities of lime were on hand to guarantee the rapid decay of both bier and body. When the shortened funeral prayers had been recited—no lamentations or panegyrics were allowed—the earth was thrown in over the lime, and the turf carefully replaced so that within a month or so no mark would remain to indicate the place of burial. A week later the British Commissioner, Captain H. M. Davies, wrote to London to report what had passed, adding:

Have since visited the remaining State Prisoners—the very scum of the reduced Asiatic harem; found all correct. None of the family appear much affected by the death of the bed-ridden old man. His death was evidently due to pure decrepitude and paralysis in the region of the throat. He expired at 5 o'clock on the morning of the funeral. The death of the ex-King may be said to have had no effect on the Mahomedan part of the populace of Rangoon, except perhaps for a few fanatics who watch and pray for the final triumph of Islam. A bamboo fence surrounds the grave for some considerable distance, and by the time the fence is worn out, the grass will again have properly covered the spot, and no vestige will remain to distinguish where the last of the Great Moghuls rests.¹

The State Prisoner Davies referred to was more properly known as Bahadur Shah II, known from his pen-name as Zafar, meaning “Victory.” Zafar was the last Mughal Emperor, and the descendant of the great world-conquerors Genghis Khan and Timur. His more immediate ancestor Zahir-ud-Din Babur (1483–1530), a young Turkish poet-prince from Ferghana in Central Asia, had first descended through the Khyber Pass into India in 1526 with only a small army of hand-picked followers. But with him he brought some of the first cannon seen in Hindustan,^{*1} and he used them to carve out a principality that his grandson Akbar (1542–1605) expanded to include most of northern India.

The Mughal House of Timur ruled most of South Asia for more than two hundred years and became arguably the greatest dynasty in Indian history. For many, the Mughals symbolise Islamic civilisation at its most refined and aesthetically pleasing—think of the great white dome of the Taj Mahal that Akbar's grandson, Shah Jahan, raised in Agra in memory of his favourite Queen, or the fabulous intricate miniatures of the *Padshahnama* and the other great Mughal manuscripts.

The Mughals also define Islam at its most tolerant and pluralistic. Their Empire was built in coalition with India's Hindu majority, particularly the Rajput clans of Rajasthan, who formed a large part of their army. Indeed the Mughals succeeded almost as much through tact and conciliation as through war: their method, which came as much from religious conviction as *realpolitik*, was to make Mughal rule acceptable to the Empire's overwhelmingly non-Muslim population.

This was particularly so of the Emperor Akbar. He issued an edict of *sulh-i kul*, or universal toleration, forbade the forcible conversion of prisoners to Islam and married a succession of Hindu wives. He also ended the *jizya* tax levied only on non-Muslims, and ordered the translation of the Sanskrit classics into Persian.

At the same time that most of Catholic Europe was given over to the Inquisition, and in Rome Giordano Bruno was being burnt for heresy at the stake in the Campo dei Fiori, in India the Mughal Emperor Akbar was holding multi-faith symposia in his palace and declaring that “no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him.” He promoted Hindus at all levels of the administration, entrusted his army to his former enemy Raja Man Singh of Jaipur, and filled his court with artists and intellectuals, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

By the mid-seventeenth century, from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi, Akbar's grandson Shah Jahan (1592–1666) ruled an empire that covered most of India, all of Pakistan and great chunks of Afghanistan. Its army appeared near-invincible; its palaces unparalleled; the domes of its mosques and shrines quite literally glittered with gold. But what was built by the tact and conciliation of the first five of the Great Mughals was destroyed by the harsh and repressive rule of the sixth. Shah Jahan's son Aurangzeb was a ruler as bigoted as the best of his predecessors had been tolerant. The Islamic *‘ulama* were given a free hand to impose the harshest strictures of sharia law. The playing of music was banned, as was wine-drinking, hashish smoking and prostitution. Hindu temples across the country were destroyed. Aurangzeb reimposed the *jizya* tax on Hindus, and executed Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth of the great teachers of the Sikhs. The religious wounds Aurangzeb opened literally tore the country in two. On his death in 1707, the Empire fragmented.

By the time Zafar was born in 1775, sixty-eight years after the burial of Aurangzeb, the days of the Mughal Imperium were long gone; but the British were still a relatively modest and mainly coastal power in India, looking inwards from three enclaves on the Indian shore. In his lifetime, however, Zafar lived to see his own dynasty finally reduced to humiliating insignificance, while the British transformed themselves from relatively vulnerable traders into an aggressively expansionist military force.

Zafar came late to the throne, succeeding his father only in his mid-sixties, when it was already impossible to reverse the political decline of the Mughals. But despite this he succeeded in creating

around him in Delhi a court of great brilliance. Personally, he was one of the most talented, tolerant and likeable of his dynasty: a skilled calligrapher, a profound writer on Sufism, a discriminating patron of painters of miniatures, an inspired creator of gardens and an amateur architect. More importantly he was a very serious mystical poet, who wrote not only in Urdu and Persian but Braj Bhasha and Punjabi, and partly through his patronage there took place arguably the greatest literary renaissance in modern Indian history. Himself a ghazal writer of great charm and accomplishment Zafar provided a showcase for the talents of India's greatest lyric poet, Ghalib, and his rival Zauq—the Mughal Poet Laureate, and the Salieri to Ghalib's Mozart.

While the British progressively took over more and more of the Mughal Emperor's power removing his name from the coins, seizing complete control even of the city of Delhi itself, and finally laying plans to remove the Mughals altogether from the Red Fort, the court busied itself in the obsessive pursuit of the most cleverly turned ghazal, the most perfect Urdu couplet. As the political sky darkened, the court was lost in a last idyll of pleasure gardens, courtesans and *mushairas*, or poetic symposia, Sufi devotions and visits to *pirs*, as literary and religious ambition replaced the political variety.²

The most closely focused record of the Red Fort at this period is the court diary kept by a new writer for the British Resident, now in the National Archives of India, which contains a detailed day-by-day picture of Zafar's life. The Last Emperor appears as a benign old man with impeccable manners—even when treated with extreme rudeness by the British. Daily he has olive oil rubbed in his feet to soothe his aches; occasionally he rouses himself to visit a garden, go on a hunting expedition or host a *mushaira*. Evenings were spent “enjoying the moonlight,” listening to singers eating fresh mangoes. All the while the aged Emperor tries to contain the infidelities of his young concubines, one of whom becomes pregnant by the most distinguished of the court musicians.³

Then, on a May morning in 1857, three hundred mutinous sepoys^{*2} and cavalrymen from Meerut rode into Delhi, massacred every Christian man, woman and child they could find in the city, and declared Zafar to be their leader and emperor. Zafar was no friend of the British, who had shorn him of his patrimony and subjected him to almost daily humiliation. Yet Zafar was not a natural insurgent either. It was with severe misgivings and little choice that he found himself made the nominal leader of an Uprising that he strongly suspected from the start was doomed: a chaotic and officerless army of unpaid peasant soldiers set against the forces of the world's greatest military power, albeit one that had just lost the great majority of the Indian recruits to its Bengal Army.

The great Mughal capital, caught in the middle of a remarkable cultural flowering, was turned overnight into a battleground. No foreign army was in a position to intervene to support the rebels, and they had limited ammunition, no money and few supplies. The chaos and anarchy that erupted in the countryside proved far more effective at blockading Delhi than the efforts at besieging the city attempted by the British from their perch on the Ridge. The price of food escalated and supplies rapidly dwindled. Soon both the people of Delhi and the sepoys were on the edge of starvation.

The siege of Delhi was the Raj's Stalingrad: a fight to the death between two powers, neither of whom could retreat. There were unimaginable casualties, and on both sides the combatants were driven to the limits of physical and mental endurance. Finally, on 14 September 1857, the British and

their hastily assembled army of Sikh and Pathan levees assaulted and took the city, sacking and looting the Mughal capital and massacring great swathes of the population. In one *muhalla*^{*3} alone Kucha Chelan, some 1,400 citizens of Delhi were cut down. “The orders went out to shoot every soul recorded Edward Vibart, a nineteen-year-old British officer.

It was literally murder...I have seen many bloody and awful sights lately but such a one as I witnessed yesterday I pray I never see again. The women were all spared but their screams, on seeing their husbands and sons butchered, were most painful...Heaven knows I feel no pity, but when some old grey bearded man is brought and shot before your very eyes, hard must be that man's heart I think who can look on with indifference...⁴

Those city dwellers who survived the killing were driven out into the countryside to fend for themselves. Delhi was left an empty ruin. Though the royal family had surrendered peacefully, most of the Emperor's sixteen sons were captured, tried and hung, while three were shot in cold blood having first freely given up their arms, then been told to strip naked: “In 24 hours I disposed of the principal members of the house of Timur the Tartar,” Captain William Hodson wrote to his sister the following day. “I am not cruel, but I confess I did enjoy the opportunity of ridding the earth of these wretches.”⁵

Zafar himself was put on show to visitors, displayed “like a beast in a cage,” according to one British officer.⁶ Among his visitors was the *Times* correspondent, William Howard Russell, who was told that the prisoner was the mastermind of the most serious armed act of resistance to Western colonialism. He was a “dim, wandering eyed, dreamy old man with a feeble hanging nether lip and toothless gums,” wrote Russell.

Was he, indeed, one who had conceived that vast plan of restoring a great empire, who had fomented the most gigantic mutiny in the history of the world? Not a word came from his lips; in silence he sat day and night with his eyes cast on the ground, and as though utterly oblivious of the conditions in which he was placed...His eyes had the dull, filmy look of very old age...Some heard him quoting verses of his own composition, writing poetry on a wall with a burned stick.⁷

Russell was suitably sceptical of the charges being levelled against Zafar: “He was called ungrateful for rising against his benefactors,” he wrote.

He was no doubt a weak and cruel old man; but to talk of ingratitude on the part of one who saw that all the dominions of his ancestors had been gradually taken from him until he was left with an empty title, and more empty exchequer, and a palace full of penniless princesses, is perfectly preposterous...⁸

Nevertheless, the following month Zafar was put on trial in the ruins of his old palace, and sentenced to transportation. He left his beloved Delhi on a bullock cart. Separated from everything he loved broken-hearted, the last of the Great Mughals died in exile in Rangoon on Friday, 7 November 1861, aged eighty-seven.

With Zafar's departure, there was complete collapse of the fragile court culture he had faithful

nourished and exemplified. As Ghalib noted: “All these things lasted only so long as the king reigned.”⁹ By the time of Zafar’s death, much of his palace, the Red Fort, had already been torn down along with great areas of the Mughal Delhi he loved and beautified. Meanwhile the great majority of its leading inhabitants and courtiers—poets and princes, mullahs and merchants, Sufis and scholars—had been hunted down and hanged, or else dispersed and exiled, many to the Raj’s new, specially constructed gulag in the Andaman Islands. Those who were spared were left in humiliating and conspicuous poverty. As Ghalib, one of the few survivors from the old court, lamented, “The male descendants of the deposed King—such as survived the sword—draw allowances of five rupees a month. The female descendants if old are bawds, and if young, prostitutes.”¹⁰

The city has become a desert...By God, Delhi is no more a city, but a camp, a cantonment. No Fort, no city, no bazaars, no watercourses...Four things kept Delhi alive—the Fort, the daily crowds at the Jama Masjid, the weekly walk to the Yamuna Bridge, and the yearly fair of the flower-men. None of these survives, so how could Delhi survive? Yes [it is said that] there was once a city of that name in the realm of India...

We smashed the wine cup and the flask;

What is it now to us

If all the rain that falls from heaven

Should turn to rose-red wine?¹¹

ALTHOUGH BAHADUR SHAH II, the last Mughal, is a central figure in this book, it is not a biography of Zafar so much as a portrait of the Delhi he personified, a narrative of the last days of the Mughal capital and its final destruction in the catastrophe of 1857. It is a story I have dedicated the last few years to researching and writing. Archives containing Zafar’s letters and his court records can be found in London, Lahore and even Rangoon. Most of the material, however, still lies in Delhi, Zafar’s former capital, and a city that has haunted and obsessed me for over two decades now.

I first encountered Delhi when I arrived, aged eighteen, on the foggy winter’s night of 26 January 1984. The airport was surrounded by shrouded men huddled under shawls, and it was surprisingly cold. I knew nothing at all about India.

My childhood had been spent in rural Scotland, on the shores of the Firth of Forth, and of my school friends I was probably the least well travelled. My parents were convinced that they lived in the most beautiful place imaginable and rarely took us on holiday, except on an annual spring visit to a corner of the Scottish Highlands even colder and wetter than home. Perhaps for this reason Delhi had a greater and more overwhelming effect on me than it would have had on other, more cosmopolitan teenagers; certainly the city hooked me from the start. I backpacked around for a few months, and hung out in Goa; but I soon found my way back to Delhi and got myself a job at a Mother Teresa home in the far north of the city, beyond Old Delhi.

In the afternoons, while the patients were taking their siesta, I used to slip out and explore. I would take a rickshaw into the innards of the Old City and pass through the narrowing funnel of gullies and

lanes, alleys and cul-de-sacs, feeling the houses close in around me. In particular what remained Zafar's palace, the Red Fort of the Great Mughals, kept drawing me back, and I often used to slip with a book and spend whole afternoons there, in the shade of some cool pavilion. I quickly grew to be fascinated with the Mughals who had lived there, and began reading voraciously about them. It was here that I first thought of writing a history of the Mughals, an idea that has now expanded into a quartet, a four-volume history of the Mughal dynasty which I expect may take me another two decades to complete.

Yet however often I visited it, the Red Fort always made me sad. When the British captured it in 1857, they pulled down the gorgeous harem apartments, and in their place erected a line of barracks that look as if they have been modelled on Wormwood Scrubs. Even at the time, the destruction was regarded as an act of wanton philistinism. The great Victorian architectural historian James Fergusson was certainly no whining liberal, but recorded his horror at what had happened in his *History of India and Eastern Architecture*: "those who carried out this fearful piece of vandalism," he wrote, did not even think "to make a plan of what they were destroying, or preserving any record of the most splendid palace in the world...The engineers perceived that by gutting the palace they could provide at no expense a wall round their barrack yard, and one that no drunken soldier could scale without detection, and for this or some other wretched motive of economy, the palace was sacrificed." He added: "The only modern act to be compared with this is the destruction of the summer palace at Peking. That however was an act of red-handed war. This was a deliberate act of unnecessary Vandalism."¹²

The barracks should of course have been torn down years ago, but the Fort's current proprietors, the Archaeological Survey of India, have lovingly continued the work of decay initiated by the British: white marble pavilions have been allowed to discolour; plasterwork has been left to collapse; the water channels have cracked and grassed over; the fountains are dry. Only the barracks look well maintained.

I have now divided my time between London and Delhi for over twenty years, and the Indian capital remains my favourite city. Above all it is the city's relationship with its past which continues to intrigue me: of the great cities of the world, only Rome, Istanbul and Cairo can even begin to rival Delhi for the sheer volume and density of historic remains. Crumbling tomb towers, old mosques and ancient colleges intrude in the most unlikely places, appearing suddenly on roundabouts or in municipal gardens, diverting the road network and obscuring the fairways of the golf course. Nevertheless Delhi is not new at all; instead it is a groaning necropolis, with enough ruins to keep any historian busy through several incarnations.

I am hardly alone in being struck by this: the ruins of Delhi are something visitors have always been amazed by, perhaps especially in the eighteenth century, when the city was at the height of its decay and its mood most melancholic. For miles in every direction, half collapsed and overgrown, robbed and reoccupied, neglected by all, lay the remains of six hundred years of trans-Indian Imperium—the wrecked vestiges of a period when Delhi had been the greatest city between Constantinople and Canton. Hammams and garden palaces, thousand-pillared halls and mighty tomb towers, empty mosques and deserted Sufi shrines—there seemed to be no end to the litter of ages. "The prospect towards Delhi, as far as the eye can reach is covered with the crumbling remains of gardens, pavilion

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