

*The Last Mughal The Fall of a Dynasty Delhi 1857 by William Dalrymple
Bloomsbury 2006*

William Dalrymple has gained a high and richly deserved reputation for writing both travel and historical works of the highest literary quality. His City of Djinns, about a year spent in Delhi, remains one of my favourite books.

With The Last Mughal, Dalrymple turns his attention to the sad story of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar II, whose rule and dynasty were among the casualties of the Indian Mutiny of the late 1850s.

Dalrymple describes the life led by Bahadur before he became king, and the detail is an eloquent counter-blast to the last image of the man, in a black and white photograph of him taken after his deposition and trial, when he looks small, sick and broken. Bahadur at his best was a talented and artistic man, a very fine poet and patron of the arts; but he was also unable to control or manage the increasingly intrusive power and influence of the British, who came to view him with ill-concealed contempt.

When the Mutiny erupted, and the sepoy's gravitated to Delhi, Bahadur was neither capable of controlling and using them, or stopping the anarchy they caused in his city. When the British forces broke through and captured the city it was almost inevitable that among the things destroyed, for political and practical reasons, would be the remnants of the Mughal dynasty.

The Indian court in all its rich diversity, intrigue and colour is not the only subject of this book however; there is much about the British, as a group in India and as individuals, from the most eager to assimilate to the ways of the sub-continent to those who believed that it could only be civilised by intense missionary activity and the dismantling of ancient culture and structure.

Bahadur Shah Zafar II died in exile in Rangoon in 1862 and was buried in an unmarked grave in a prison compound. His demise and burial remain a shameful blot on the Raj's reputation, and his needless destruction another sad episode in the long history of misunderstanding between Occident and Orient whose whirlwind we are reaping today in all too abundant measure.

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