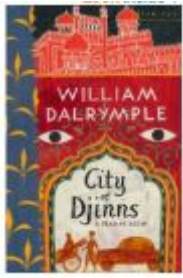


## **William Dalrymple**

### **‘CITY OF DJINNS - A year in Delhi’**



#### ***William***

Simplistically this book delivers a history lesson in the guise of a travelogue supported by the detailed etiquette of the author’s research as he articulates a profile of India of which few of us would be aware. Although my interest wavered from time to time I did enjoy the gifted elements of the text,

Watched over and protected by the mischievous and invisible djinns, Delhi has, through their good offices, been saved from destruction many times over the centuries.

If I can distinguish one element that resonated most with me it was the section that reflected the consequences and impact of the horrors of introducing and effecting ‘Partition’ of India and the opportunities it presented for communities to enable and inflict a pogrom on their neighbours.

Reading this book made me realise that I knew nothing of the impact on families in effecting the ‘Partition’ in 1947 and quite ignorant of its ensuing mass killings. I had not appreciated the profound and fundamental dissonance that generated the scale of the death toll and that it was inflicted by neighbour upon neighbour.

The ‘official’ consequence was that India and Pakistan emerged legally as two self-governing countries that led to the displacement of more than 14 million people, paving the way for an insurmountable refugee crisis, mass-scale violence, killings and disruption over religious lines. Whatever else they do, such actions cast long shadows and the author’s candour is refreshing.

When India was no longer a safe place in which to live many Anglo-Indians emigrated to England including the families of Gerald Dorsey from Madras and Harry Webb from Lucknow who later

found fame as Engelbert Humperdinck and Cliff Richard respectively.....

I learned that the English outlaw Dick Turpin reversed the shoes on his horse to confuse those endeavouring to follow and capture him. An example adopted by an Indian miscreant.

I also discovered the location of Samarkand. Many years ago I attended a retirement celebration where the retiree was encouraged in a valedictory eulogy to 'take the Golden Road to Samarkand'. Now know where it is and its relevance.

The book is extremely well written and I always like to discover, what to me, are outstanding sequence of words and was impressed, for example with:

*'births follow upon marriages, love affairs decay, middle age gives way to crumbling senility.'*

*'Ahmed was an angry man .. he spluttered and spat like a well-warmed frying pan'*

*The brief but bitter Delhi winter came as suddenly as an undertaker'*

*'Like some symbol of the city over which he presided, Shah Alam was a blind emperor ruling from a ruined palace'*

*'... his thoughts and feelings, his character and emotions remain relaxed opaque: unfathomed and incomprehensible'*

*'... as we passed black bats would flit through the ruins like departed spirits'*

Aleck's confession might resonate with many of us... *'I reaped the fruits of my idleness at college.'*

And metaphorically:

*'The old men swam together through great oceans of nostalgia before finally coming ashore on a strand of melancholy'*

Common sense did prevail - for some. During periods of unbearably hot weather the Indians would remove to the cooler climes offered by the Simla area, whereas the British would remain stoically in Delhi, dressing every night for dinner in full evening dress as if the integrity of the Empire depended upon it.

I have faith in the world when I read that 'God was an Englishman....'

### **Stephanie**

I loved this book. It is written with obvious warmth, humour and deep knowledge of the history of India. With my scant knowledge (complete lack of knowledge) of Indian history I found parts of it

difficult to follow, as were many of the words - although some of these were in the glossary - but I was left with a great feeling of fascination and wishing to know much more. The portrayal of the people Dalrymple met whilst staying in Delhi was warm, funny and completely non-judgemental. His landlady, Mrs Puri, who would turn off his water supply if his guests flushed the toilet too many times in one night. His taxi driver, Balvinder Singh, who was thrown out of his home by his wife and was forced to spend a month with the local whores 'paying forty-fifty rupees, spending whole night. Too much fun everyone too much happy'. He returned to his wife. The eunuchs, considered to be even lower than the untouchables, and their role in Delhi life. The picture of contemporary life was lively and fascinating, with clear accounts of people and weather. This contemporary picture overlaid so much historic detail from Partition back to centuries BC with descriptions of ancient buildings, their associated mythology and their religious significance even in today's life, customs and (maybe) superstitions.

The portrayal of India as such a very ancient country perhaps explains the presence of the djinns and the significance of the dervishes in everyday life

### ***Sharon***

I only got halfway through *City of Djinns* and was struggling before thinking life is too short to struggle with a book when there is so much else to read. I am afraid I gave up, which I hate doing.

I did find it muddled and kept trying to find some sort of structure apart from the months of the year. There were some interesting passages about Delhi and Anglo-Indian history but then he seemed to go off on a tangent again. I also found it a bit old fashioned and felt the Indian people were portrayed as a bit childish and described with an amused indulgence. I realise it was written 30+ years ago and language changes. Anyway, I won't go on as I didn't manage to give the book the respect of finishing it. I am sure other people will have some interesting ideas about it and look forward to reading the reviews.

### ***Margaret***

When I first picked up this book I thought that I was going to really enjoy it after reading about the introduction to Mrs Puri and comparing her flat to a scene from *Great Expectations*. However, afterwards I did find the writing a little tedious at times and the entertaining facts were rather understated. Nevertheless this was an interesting history of Delhi plus travelogue. Dalrymple documented the city's violent past including the 1857 mutiny against British rule and the riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. The book outlined the awfulness of the partition

massacres in 1947. He also unleashed the facts about racism and snobbery in Delhi as well as coming up with some surprising snippets, for example, about their weddings i.e. the bride did not appear and was not seen until the wedding ceremony was complete. We also learnt about dervishes (members of a Muslim religious order), eunuch dancers, mischievous invisible djinns (in Muslim mythology - an intelligent spirit of lower rank than the angels, able to appear in human and animal forms and to possess humans) and the festival of Ramadan. Mrs Puri came over as an colourful character but on the whole the book was a little confused due to the mixing of the history with the present time.

### ***Jean***

William Dalrymple's intriguing travelogue describes Delhi as a city of Djinns.

The mystic, Pir Sadr-ud-Din, sat the writer down on a carpet, offering him tea, and told him about the djinns.

He told him that, when the world was new and Allah had created manhood from clay, he also made another race, fashioned from fire.

The djinns were spirits, invisible to the naked eye. But, one night, asleep in a graveyard, he was visited by the King of the Djinns - -

Delhi came as a shock to the writer, who had grown up in North Yorkshire. He was mesmerised by this city of contrasts, full of riches and horrors.

Although Delhi had been sacked by invaders over the millennia, it was always rebuilt, rising, like a phoenix, from its ashes.

In his travelogue, Dalrymple starts with the Sikh riots of 1984, through the Partition, the Mughal Empire, the Sultanate, and on to the Pandavas of Indraprastha (now New Delhi).

He conveys the mysticism surrounding the city.

I found this book overwhelming, at times.

The horrors of the Partition, on 15th August, 1947, are almost indescribable, when two million people died and ten to twenty million were displaced.

British India was split into the countries of Hindu majority India, and Muslim majority Pakistan.

Some years ago, I met a prominent historian, who stated that the British were responsible for Partition, and that Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, was culpable when he rushed the change through in a few months, quickly returning to London where he socialised and enjoyed cocktail parties!

Mountbatten made many mistakes but this, surely, must have been his worst, when he hurriedly drew the new borders in secret.

Barely seventy-three days were allowed to complete this complex operation -the destiny of millions

of Indians.

On summing up; one needs time to fully appreciate and assimilate 'City of Djinns', which moves through time rather than space.

Olivia Fraser's illustrations blend perfectly with this book.

No wonder Dalrymple dedicated it to her 'with a big hug'!

### ***Gill***

Dalrymple has told a tale about living in Delhi – a memoir interspersed with historical research. Thus the book is based on his thoughts, library research and oral histories, both past and present. I think it works very well, though at times I was a bit confused regarding the history, although I had previously thought I knew quite a bit! I had stayed in Delhi (the old city) for a short while on our way across India in 1969. This book has told me how little we actually knew about our wanderings in the city. We did, however, visit the Taj – I think the most beautiful building in the world.

I was particularly struck by the way Dalrymple shows the inequality and social divisions, not just during the Raj, but before and after as well. I thought comments of those in Karachi and elsewhere still affected by partition were perceptive and very sad. Similarly, Iris in Cambridge had reflected on her time in British India, saying; - - we were still very careless. We didn't give much thought to - - what on earth we were doing to that country and its people.

I didn't know much about Lutyens, so have learnt something there too. I noticed the architecture described as Indo-Saracenic. I am reading; *Stealing from the Saracens* by Diana Darke in which Christopher Wren is discussed as referring to the style and process of his work (specifically St Paul's) as Saracenic - less Gothic, more Middle Eastern (Islamic and Christian).

I'm glad I've read this book and shall now hopefully read his; *The Last Mughal*; and increase my knowledge of Indian history.

### ***Anna***

William Dalrymple is a writer whose books I usually enjoy, and so I was very glad to have a reason for getting it off the shelf and dusting it off - it is quite a few years since I first read it.

I certainly enjoyed the re-reading, but this second time made me realise that it is a much more serious and densely researched book than I remembered.

I knew that he had explored the history of Delhi, starting from the time when he and his wife moved to live there in the early 1990's, and peeling back the layers of history through the remains of architecture and through ancient beliefs and rites. However, this time I picked up more on the sufferings and destruction which so often seems to accompany changes in the city. I was surprised when Dalrymple discovered that very many of the original citizens - the muslim "Dehli-wallahs" - had fled or been forced out at the time of Partition, while the new arrivals were Sikhs and others who had fled the other way. Very many of them had suffered terribly as a result of these upheavals.

In this way, the continuity of the culture was broken. In the past, Dehli was known for its exquisite buildings and gardens, for poetry and music, for luxury and for the extravagance of its wealthy rulers, but now most of the city was broken, dirty, and chaotic.

Dalrymple has the gift of being able to relate to so many different people - his landlady Mrs. Puri, the drivers of the wonderful International Backside Taxis, Chaman and the other eunuchs, and the cultured Dr. Jaffery to give just a few examples - and it is through meeting and getting to know these people that he often finds a way through to the remnants of the past. It is a moving moment when, just as Dalrymple and his wife are departing for Scotland, he finds the source of the original myth of the founding of Delhi, and the sadhus who continue the traditions.

This is a deeply-felt book, written with lightly-worn erudition and with humour. His other books are also well worth seeking out.

### *Ann*

I found this book rather a difficult read at first, despite the fact that I have a certain fascination with colourful India, its cultures and crafts. I suppose I was put off by a young academic's attitude towards British domination in India, which I know had its faults, but the continual criticism of our history and failings tends to irritate me. (I know it is my age!). He even had a go at Lutyens! I am not keen on self righteous attitudes. I have probably got this wrong, as all the amazingly admiring reviews say how unbiased he is, and on all else I largely agree, he seems to be unbiased, although I think he definitely has more warmth towards his wife's Scottish old reprobates!

It seems Dalrymple was providentially and unexpectedly related through his young wife to a Scottish family, who had spent much time employed in India. He discovered a history of Delhi written by one of these relatives, William Fraser, one of four brothers who journeyed to India and who was an orientalist and lived in Delhi for 30 years. He was a very colourful character, going

native and thoroughly enjoying himself. I grew to enjoy the book more as I read on. Really loved the old very “English” lady who was born in India and never left it, living in a shack, in extreme poverty but was determined to be independent with a “stiff upper lip” and rejecting intimidation by the Indian authorities but was killed by a snake she allowed to lie under her bed! The book is full of characters left behind in India when we British left, who were victims of circumstance of birth and politics, as we all are to some extent. One of my favourite characters was Mrs. Puri, Dalrymple’s Indian landlady.

I fully understand the depth of this study about the history of Delhi but found it hard to put it all together, partly because of the large number of Indian words and partly because I had little historically to hang everything on. Also he seems to jump from one century to another. As Professor Lal, the anthropologist said when he was showing the layers of history revealed from excavations; “the whole history of Delhi is there! That wall represents continuous occupation for three thousand years. At no time was this area ever deserted.”

“People just carried on epoch after epoch. Despite all the burnings, killings and invasion?” Dalrymple queried. It made me think what’s new, it’s the same the world over.

I enjoyed the light hearted bits of this book, but have enjoyed other books featuring India a lot more, such as “Kim” by Rudyard Kipling, “A Suitable Boy” by Seth Vikram or a lot of jolly detective stories by Tarquin Hall. Perhaps this book was a bit too academic for me.

### **Addenda**

#### ***Christoper Lockwood, Daily Telegraph***

‘As the author of the best travel book of recent years at the intensely irritating age of twenty-two, William Dalrymple has now shown that “In Xanadu” was no fluke, “City of Djinns” is an entertaining mix of history and diary informed by a deep curiosity about the ways in which the ghosts of even the most distant past still walk Delhi in the twentieth century’

#### ***Charles McKean, BOOKS IN SCOTLAND***

“City of Djinns is a delight. William Dalrymple is in command of his subject, seizes the reader and uses his skill to tempt and tantalise.... The city of djinns is Delhi and Dalrymple reveals it like a Dance of the Seven Veils. It is very intricately organised: ostensibly structured around a year which he and his artist wife Olivia spent in Delhi, paced by vivid descriptions of weather change as signal of seasons, and by the formal punctuation of life, learning, loving and death. These episodes are interspersed in counterpoint with historical sketches, which (as you suddenly realise at the end) are organised in reverse chronology, beginning with the Sikh massacres after Indira Gandhi’s death,

back through Partition, the Empire, and the East India Company, back through the Mughal empire into prehistory and archaeology..... The book is Dalrymple's journey into the soul of Delhi.'

*Angela*

I first read this book many years ago, but it made a lasting impression on me. I have a paperback copy which I found a boon as it has a glossary of unfamiliar words which came in very useful. As my Mother's family used to live in one of the once lovely havelis in Old Delhi it was very interesting to read about how they would have been in Old Delhi's heyday. However, what I hadn't expected on this second reading was the overwhelming sadness I felt for times gone by and the many atrocities committed by successive invaders. There were indeed golden ages in Delhi's history and it has survived when many ancient cities have perished, but there have also been many horrors along the way. I enjoyed Dalrymple's style of writing; how he intermingled his present day experiences with the history and anecdotes he picked up along the way. I thought he particularly caught the whole atmosphere of the city, the beauty, the dust, the filth, the colour and charm, and the weather! Just loved the stories about their flat, Mrs Puri, her husband and the characterful servants. Idiosyncratic, but truly just *so* Indian. The Europeans he portrayed came over very realistically too even though some of the portraits were not very flattering. Overall a satisfying mix of history and gossip; a lovely introduction to the myth, magic and mystery of Delhi.