On the trail of an Auden and a Spender in India: They were not poets, they wanted to scale mountains

Deborah Baker’s novel-like story of lesser known Englishmen (with famous relatives) in the last days of the Raj is enthralling.

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Long years before Jawaharlal Nehru pronounced himself as the “last Englishman to rule India,” the nation had ceased to remember the small ministers of colonial maladministration who lived in India. One hardly remembers, for instance, William Makepeace Thackeray – the grandfather of the more famous William Makepeace Thackeray, the novelist – who became infamous in the eighteenth-century as the “elephant hunter of Sylhet”, retiring to London as a wealthy nabob at the age of twenty-seven.

A somewhat less notorious example – and even lesser known – is that of John Talbot Shakespear, a descendant of William Shakespeare, who lived in India in the early nineteenth century, and whose tombstone lies at the Park Street Cemetery in Kolkata, unsung and uncelebrated. Deborah Baker’s The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire, although not being about these characters, runs hot on the heels of the Englishmen who lived in India during the last two decades of the British Empire on the subcontinent, but have fast-faded since then from the shared colonial memory of India and Britain.
Brothers of famous poets

The saga begins with Louis MacNeice, the Irish poet and playwright, who, in the process of recovering from a broken heart through a broken marriage, began reading the Gita, the Vedas, Kabir’s couplets, Babur’s history of Hindustan, Robert Ernest Hume on the Upanishads, Tagore, Iqbal, and quotable quotes from a triumvirate that had conspired against the British for more than twenty years – Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah. He was witness to the macabre assertions of independence and the partition in August of 1947, bloodshed and exodus embodied in the sights he saw: “a woman was holding her child the way a little girl might hold a doll cut open with a penknife”. Back in Delhi, he was bewildered to find the crowds cheering the BBC vans and hailing the last Viceroy of India, “Pandit Mountbattenji ki jai.”

From MacNeice’s fascination for the Nanga Parbat, the story shifts dramatically to Wordsworth’s Lake District, where the Spender brothers grew up: the poet, Stephen, and the surveyor, Michael. Unlike his brother, who would be curious about why Wordsworth became a poet, Michael would ponder from an early age over questions like: “If the earth were flat instead of round would there be a horizon?”

Michael was not the only less famous brother of a poet whom Baker draws upon, for she follows him up with the life of the geologist and mountaineer, John Auden, the brother of the poet WH Auden. With these two men as the book’s chief protagonists, the story unfolds around the mid-1930s, when the Morning Post had announced to London that the climbing of Mount Everest was “an issue of National and Imperial importance.”

John Auden (1903-1991) and Michael Spender (1906-1945) collaborated on a cartographic expedition of the Himalayas. Auden left for India in 1926. Desirous of conquering the Everest, he patiently surveyed the Himalayas to ascertain when and how the ranges were formed. Spender brought in his expertise at photogrammetry, the science of interpreting and measuring landscapes through photographs, for the development of topographical maps. His skills aided Britain in the war effort.

Not only were Spender and Auden engaged in beating the Nazis in a race to conquer Nanga Parbat, but Spender’s photogrammetry also traced Nazi supplies and equipment stored for invading the Himalayas, for “somewhere along the way the Nazis had acquired the belief that the Himalaya were the true homeland of the Aryans”. Baker reckons that the tale of the British expeditions to the Himalayas – even in the decade of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the peak of the Civil Disobedience movement – was a profound colonial metaphor, in an age that “neatly dramatised Britain’s struggle, in its ongoing quest for Everest’s summit, to project its imperial power over a restive India.”
Intricate subplots
Baker’s nonfictional account is styled as a novel. Her narration gradually gathers pace, with an impressive dramatis personae that ranges from Nancy Sharp, Spender’s wife and Auden’s love interest, later “memorialised as one of the most underrated painters of her generation”, through explorers of the Royal Geographical Society, Eric Shipton, Bill Tilman and Frank Smythe, to Calcutta intellectuals – nationalists and communists – Sudhindranath Datta, Rabindranath Tagore, Hassan Shahid Suhrawardy, Mulk Raj Anand, and Sushobhan Sarkar, without missing out on Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Bose, Leo Amery, and Winston Churchill. Through Auden and Spender, Baker explores the psychological histories of these characters. For instance, just as they were almost always better known as their famous brothers’ brothers, Ratna Bonnerjee, the son of Womesh Chandra Bonnerjee, barrister and the first president of the Indian National Congress, was always to be the pallbearer to a famous father in an intricate chronicle whose historical subplots are lively detours.

“When his eldest was ready for Oxford, [WC Bonnerjee] had purchased a three-storey, ten-bedroom mansion just outside London, adding a new wing to accommodate a billiard room and smoking den. Named Kidderpore after the family ancestral estate on the Hooghly River, the spread included tennis courts, an orchard, gardens and a stable...WC returned to Calcutta to amass his wealth and reside in an equally grand residence on Park Street. Its grounds also included a tennis court and stable, as well as an aviary, two fern houses, and a veranda wide enough for a coach and four.”

The poignance of the last days of empire in India is consummated in the life of Nancy Sharp, who is in the frame of this story loved by at least three men of prominence, including MacNeice, whose portrait she had painted and whose love letters she preserved even after the death of her husband. The various shades of her life and character lend themselves as one of the leitmotifs of the book, eventually “haunted by the fragments that survive and struggling to see how they fit together...[in] a map of a country that no longer exists.”

Earlier, when Nancy married Michael, John had married Sheila Bonnerjee, one of the grandchildren of WC Bonnerjee. The Last Englishmen – a densely researched historical tale of how an imperial mountaineering quest brought the small fry of empire together in India – is compulsory reading for those unacquainted with the characters involved. For those even slightly acquainted, it is an inevitable treasure.

The Last Englishmen: Love, War And The End Of Empire, Deborah Baker, Penguin Viking.