

## Biographies as Travel Writing- William Dalrymple

*"At its best travel writing beats fiction, firing the imagination with tales of foreign peoples drawn close by our common humanity."* Ruairidh Nicoll, Observer.

By Uma Anyar

William Dalrymple will be paying the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival a second visit this October, promoting his latest book ***Nine Lives: in Search of the Sacred in Modern India***. Dalrymple is one of the most productive, curious and multitalented writers on the Asian scene. He has been a South Asia correspondent for the New Statesmen since 2004 and is a fellow of The Royal Asiatic Society and The Royal Society of Literature.

He hails from a prestigious family. His father, Sir Hew Hamilton –Dalrymple, was 10th baronet and cousin of Virginia Woolf. Writing must have been part of William's family heritage. He was born in Scotland in 1965, attended Trinity College, Cambridge and wrote his first travel book, ***In Xanadu***, at age 22. The book covered his travels from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem to the site of Shangdu (now part of Inner Mongolia) and long referred to as Xanadu in English literature. Indeed, my first acquaintance with the notion of an exotic Xanadu entered my consciousness via Coleridge's poetry rather than in a geography class.

" In Xanadu did Kubla Khan his stately pleasure - dome decree: where Alph, the sacred river ran through caverns measureless to man, Down to a sunless sea."

Dalrymple credits Lord Byron and Bruce Chatwin as influences on his travel writing, but thinks the genre has changed since the hay day of the 1980's and 90's. Since then the publishing industry has produced too many mediocre and some very bad travel books. Travel guides to just about anywhere pack the shelves of bookstores. Mass travel has turned tourism into another consumer product shrinking the world into bite size pieces of experience. Dalrymple thinks that the time for a new approach to travel writing has arrived. He has said, "the epic journeys, often by young men, conveying the raw intoxication of travel during a moment in life when time is endless, and deadlines and commitments are non-existent is fading. Instead, it lies in the writings of "individuals who have made extended stays in places, getting to know them intimately".

Does this mean that the age of commitment has arrived on more than the matrimonial level? Are we as a global culture starting to yearn for stability over endless freedom?

Dalrymple's passion for travel writing expanded to include TV documentary shows. He has written and presented a BBC series *Stones of the Raj*, 1997, and *Indian journeys* 2002. Then turned his attentions to British/Indian history. ***White Mughal***, 2002 and ***The Last Mughal, The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857***, in 2006. Both award winning and great historical reading for anyone interested in British Colonial History particularly

the situation of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the subsequent downfall of the last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar.

His latest book, **Nine Lives: in Search of the Sacred in Modern India** has won the Asia House Award for 2010. This collection of religious biographies may be Dalrymple at his best. It is a return to travel writing but it adheres to his principle as it is about an India he knows well and has studied ardently for decades. His interests in religions, politics and history merge with his correspondent skills and produce a provocative read. What makes people believe the things they believe? How does that belief affect their lives? There are stories of a repentant Buddhist monk and of a privileged girl who joins the Jains and takes to the road after pulling out each hair on her head one by one. There are a variety of unusual people each with a story more astonishing than fiction. Dalrymple relies on the power of story to guide the readers to their own conclusions. I strongly agree with Ruaridh Nicoll who writes in the Observer.

*“ It's a strange thing: at a time when the row between Richard Dawkins-style atheists and fundamentalist Christians grows increasingly wearisome, Nine Lives celebrates faith's ability to offer peace and sanctuary to those who have suffered horrifying lives.”*

With **Nine Lives** Dalrymple has added a whole new dimension to the book tour. He isn't just signing copies of his book in bookstores, but putting on a multi media event. Since publication, he has been touring the UK, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, Holland and the US with a band consisting of some of the people featured in his book including Sufis, Fakirs, Bauls, Theveram hymn singers as well as a prison warder and part-time Theyyam dancer widely believed to be an incarnation of the God Vishnu. Months on the road with an ensemble of unique characters can't help but produce a sequel to **Nine Lives**.

His projects do not just promote his writings, as he is also the founder and co-director with Namita Gokhale of the Jaipur Literature Festival. He decided something had to be done since he was meeting more Indian writers who were winning Bookers and other awards at festivals in Sydney, Australia and Hay-on-Wie in Great Britain, but there were no festivals in India itself. That has been remedied as the Jaipur festival has grown into the largest free festival in the world. Tina Brown of the Daily Beast called it, “The greatest literary show on earth.”

William Dalrymple's love affair with India has lasted over 25 years. He lives most of the year on his farm Mehrauli outside New Delhi with his wife, the artist, Olivia Fraser, and their three children. Dalrymple's farming neighbors consider him to be lax in animal husbandry, as he does not bundle his incestuous family of goats in used cardigans and wool mufflers in cold weather. Indians fear catching chills and apparently extend that concern to their goats. Dalrymple may not be the best goat herder but he is a prolific writer and multi-tasking guy par excellence as he shows no sign of slowing down to smell the roses or... the goats.