

White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India

By William Dalrymple



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White Mughals is the romantic and ultimately tragic tale of a passionate love affair that crossed and transcended all the cultural, religious and political boundaries of its time.

James Achilles Kirkpatrick was the British Resident at the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad when in 1798 he glimpsed Kahir un-Nissa—'Most excellent among Women'—the great-niece of the Nizam's Prime Minister and a descendant of the Prophet. Kirkpatrick had gone out to India as an ambitious soldier in the army of the East India Company, eager to make his name in the conquest and subjection of the subcontinent. Instead, he fell in love with Khair and overcame many obstacles to marry her—not least of which was the fact that she was locked away in purdah and engaged to a local nobleman. Eventually, while remaining Resident, Kirkpatrick converted to Islam, and according to Indian sources even became a double-agent working for the Hyderabadis against the East India Company.

It is a remarkable story, involving secret assignations, court intrigue, harem politics, religious and family disputes. But such things were not unknown; from the early sixteenth century, when the Inquisition banned the Portuguese in Goa from wearing the dhoti, to the eve of the Indian mutiny, the 'white Mughals' who wore local dress and adopted Indian ways were a source of embarrassments to successive colonial administrations. William Dalrymple unearths such colourful figures as 'Hindoo Stuart', who travelled with his own team of Brahmins to maintain his temple of idols, and who spent many years trying to persuade the memsahibs of Calcutta to adopt the sari; and Sir David Ochterlony, Kirkpatrick's counterpart in Delhi, who took all thirteen of his wives out for evening promenades, each on the back of their own elephant.

In **White Mughals**, William Dalrymple discovers a world almost entirely unexplored by history, and places at its centre a compelling tale of love, seduction and betrayal. It possesses all the sweep and resonance of a great nineteenth-century novel, set against a background of shifting alliances and the manoeuvring of the great powers, the mercantile ambitions of the British and the imperial dreams of Napoleon. **White Mughals**, the product of five years' writing and research, triumphantly confirms Dalrymple's reputation as one of the finest writers at work today.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Dalrymple, author of the bestselling *In Xanadu*, now anchors himself in India around the turn of the 19th century to focus on James Kirkpatrick, an officer for the East India Company and the British Resident, representing the British government, in the Indian city-state of Hyderabad. Kirkpatrick, who converted to Islam and, after a celebrated and notorious romance, married Khair un-Nissa, the teenage great-niece of the region's prime minister, exemplifies the "White Mughals," British colonialists who "went native." One of the book's strengths is its stunningly detailed depiction of day-to-day life—gardens, food, sexual mores, modes of travel and architecture—and portraits of British governors-general, Indian politicians, their wives and families, and adventurers. It is also an astute study of the political complications Kirkpatrick faced because of his conversion and cross-cultural marriage, and the difficulties his divided loyalties caused him in his role as agent of the increasingly imperialistic British. But most suspenseful is the fate of Kirkpatrick's willful and charismatic wife, just 19 when he died in 1805, and the fate of their children. The twists and turns in the life of their daughter—sent to England when she was five, never to return to India or see her mother again—are fascinating. Dalrymple makes note of the present schism, which some believe unbridgeable, between Western and Eastern civilizations and Kirkpatrick's tale as a counterexample that the two can meet. Illus., maps.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

At the end of the eighteenth century, James Achilles Kirkpatrick, the promising young British Resident at the Shia court of Hyderabad, fell in love with Khair un-Nissa, an adolescent noblewoman and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. The story of their romance and semi-secret marriage endured in local legend and family lore but was otherwise forgotten. After five years' work with a trove of documents in several languages, Dalrymple has emerged not only with a gripping tale of politics and power but also with evidence of the surprising extent of cultural exchange in pre-Victorian India, before the arrogance of empire set in. His book, ambitious in scope and rich in detail, demonstrates that a century before Kipling's "never the twain"—and two centuries before neocons and radical Islamists trumpeted the clash of civilizations—the story of the Westerner in Muslim India was one not of conquest but of appreciation, adaptation, and seduction.

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From [Booklist](#)

Dalrymple has successfully interwoven history and romance into an absolutely fascinating overview of the often ambivalent and conflicted relationships between British colonists and native Indians. At the center of this compelling slice of social history is the true story of the passionate love affair between James Kirkpatrick, British ambassador to the Court of Hyderabad and an officer of the East India Company, and a young Muslim princess. Defying convention, Kirkpatrick not only took Khair-un-Nissa, the great-niece of the region's prime minister, as his mistress, but he eventually converted to Islam and married her, initiating a scandal that rocked two cultures. In addition to recounting this stirring love story, the author also successfully communicates the almost mystical hold that lushly exotic India exerted over quite a few British nationals who "turned Turk" during the colonial era. Dalrymple breaks down the facade of conventional historical stereotypes, painting a richly textured portrait of an imperial India in which racial and cultural relationships were surprisingly fluid and complex. *Margaret Flanagan*

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Users Review

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