

# TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

William Dalrymple: East India Company (1764)

We're in Bloomsbury, London for Episode 8 of Season 2 of *Travels Through Time*, the podcast made in partnership with *History Today*, the world's leading serious history magazine.

[Intro music]

**Peter Moore:** Hello, I'm Peter Moore. Today, we're going to go back to the year 1764; a year remembered as one of bloodshed and confusion that changed the history of India forever.

Many people have found the history of the East India Company astonishing. The writer Leo Tolstoy once wrote in wonder at 'the commercial company that enslaved a nation, comprising two hundred million people.' But just how did they do it? Our guest today is going to take us back to the year 1764 to try and make sense of this riddle. That guest is William Dalrymple. William is one of Britain's leading historians and over the past quarter of a century, he's published books that have won the Wolfson Prize, the Duff Cooper Prize and the Kapuściński Prize. Whatever the subject though, the Indian subcontinent has remained a consistent fascination. Earlier this year, his latest book, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* was published. His aim was to understand just how the East India Company became an empire within an empire. It's a superb book. I caught up with William the other day at his publishers and I began by asking him to tell me a little about the company's origins.

**William Dalrymple:** I suppose the story begins on 24th September 1599. Somewhere in South London, in Southwark, Shakespeare is finishing off *Hamlet*, which is about to be performed at The Globe but 20 minutes walk north from there, over London Bridge, a group of merchants have summoned a public meeting in the Founders' Hall in Moorgate Fields. A lot of grandees are there, like the Mayor of London and a lot of the senior members of the Levant Company, which is one of the rich, London shipping companies. Unusually, there is also quite a lot of ordinary people there. We know exactly who is there, frankly, because in the British Library, there is the actual list taken at the door by a bunch of notaries. There are people who describe themselves as vinters, skimmers, leatherworkers and so on; in other words, small, London businessmen. The reason they bothered to turn up to this meeting is that they're going to be given a chance to invest small sums of money, whatever they can afford, in what's clearly one of the most exciting financial developments in London's recent history. The background to this is that the Levant Company had been shipping spices from Aleppo and Cairo in the Middle East and sometimes, via Venice, going deeper into the Middle East and getting them back from the far Levant shore. But that business had taken the most spectacular downturn, three years earlier, when the Dutch found that they could actually just sail around the Cape, head off to Indonesia and buy nutmeg, cinnamon and pepper direct from the producers at a tenth of the price. They brought it back to Europe and sold it at a price that completely undercut everything that these London spice traders were doing. So when the Dutch sent a mission to London to see whether they could buy up any spare London shipping to mount a second expedition, the patriotism of Elizabethan London was roused and a man called 'Customer' Smythe, who was the head of the Levant Company and known sometimes as 'Customer' Smythe because he ran the customs and sometimes 'Auditor' Smythe because he then became the auditor of the City of London, called this meeting to raise as much capital as possible to found a company which could do what the Dutch had just done and go to Indonesia, buy, plunder or somehow get hold of spices and bring them back. This was as risky and as difficult as a manned mission to Mars would be today. The last time the British had tried it, the fleet had ended up wrecked in the Mallacas and the few survivors had stumbled

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home by flagging down passing ships, like Robinson Crusoe. It was a high-risk venture and for that reason, 'Customer' Smythe decided not just to appeal to his 35 Levant Company investors but to open it up to the whole city and everyone could put in what they could. The result was enough to launch the East India Company. They go off the next day to Deptford to try and find a ship. They reject a creaky hulk called the Mayflower *[laughter]*.

**Peter Moore:** Yeah, I've heard of that somewhere. It's a familiar ship.

**William Dalrymple:** I don't know what happened to that but they do then go and buy a pirate ship called the Scourge of Malice.

**Peter Moore:** Well, maybe that's a good point to leave them suspended.

**William Dalrymple:** Some of them realise that it isn't a great advert for the new trading company, so they rename it the Red Dragon *[laughter]*.

**Peter Moore:** Yeah, I love this opening to your book. There's this idea that your neighbours, in neighbourly terms - we're talking about the Dutch, of course - are doing quite well with their trade and they're doing so well that this is probably irritating to the English anyway. They then come over and borrow some of your ships so they can do even better. So they're driven into this enterprise by, I suppose, an obstinacy and envy.

**William Dalrymple:** We're not going to miss out *[laughter]*. Jealousy.

**Peter Moore:** Through the 17th century into the early 18th century, you get this general growth.

**William Dalrymple:** Actually, it's quite interesting because what happens is that initially, everyone is after the spices and the Dutch basically win that round. The British are driven out of the Indies, which means modern Indonesia, and famously at the end of this, there's this swap where the Dutch handed over the island of Run, which is where all the nutmeg comes from and is the great prize in that ocean and the English are given *[laughter]*, as a kind of sop, a muddy island in the Hudson River called Manhattan which, in the long run, proved not a bad investment.

**Peter Moore:** Wasn't that part of someone's dowry or is that a slightly different story?

**William Dalrymple:** That's a different one. That's Bombay.

**Peter Moore:** That's Bombay, okay.

**William Dalrymple:** Having lost, in a sense, the first battle against the Dutch, the English East India Company falls back on the next best option which is the textile trade. They want to trade in silk, chintz, cotton piece goods, which means large quantities of baled cotton, and the indigo with which to dye it. The source of all four of those items is one place, India. So they fall back, as the second choice, on India as the centre of their enterprise and it's an incredible piece of good luck because actually what happens is that the spice trade diminishes. For example, everyone in Elizabethan England thinks that pepper is the Elizabethan equivalent to Viagra *[laughter]* and it's very quickly proved not to be.

**Peter Moore:** But a useful marketing device at the time *[laughter]*.

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**William Dalrymple:** A useful marketing device at the time but also it's quite easy to show it has very little effect. So for a variety of reasons, the spice trade doesn't actually crack up to be all that it first appears to be. While, on the contrary, the slightly duller market of cotton and silk turns out to have enormous possibilities and the Moghul Empire grows as the company is growing to become literally the world's number one industrial producer of textiles and it is the company that ships this all over the world. So much so that, for example, that you get deindustrialisation in Mexico because of the sheer amount of Indian cotton going over there. The company, by pure default and good luck, ends up backing the right horse and as the Moghul Empire grows to represent about 37% of world GDP, in the one time in its history, India overtakes China as the world's leading industrial producer.

**Peter Moore:** This is about what time?

**William Dalrymple:** This is throughout the early 18th century now. The Moghul Empire is politically beginning to get a bit ropey but in terms of it as an industrial power, it's reaching its peak. The company is parasitical of this. It is the shipping agency which moves Indian goods around the world and so as the Moghuls grow richer and richer, so does the company.

**Peter Moore:** I know, in some senses, this is an incredibly superficial overview of a very complicated story. We've done quite well to get through what is essentially 150 years of early East India Company history there but I want to go to the 1760s, which is a fascinating decade in so many dimensions. We know this is the time of the Seven Years' Wars which is coming to a conclusion in 1763/4. Some people talk about it as the first world war because you have conflicts sprouting up all over the place from the North American continent, Europe and the Philippines but I think one of the sentences you finish off one of your chapters with is 'the place that was most changed by the Seven Years' War was not North America or Europe. It was India.'

**William Dalrymple:** Correct.

**Peter Moore:** Do you want to tell us what effect that war had on that place?

**William Dalrymple:** The Seven Years' War is the great confrontation, or part of the great confrontation, between England and France which will reach its final conclusion at Waterloo. I suppose this is the third season of this ongoing soap opera. There has been the War of the Austrian Succession and there has been the War of the Spanish Succession. Now, there's the Seven Years' War which is on a hugely different scale. It starts in the headwaters of Ohio. There's a lot of argy-bargy going on with the young Washington and First Nation Canadian Indians rowing across Lake Erie, plundering loose British settlements lost in the woods of New York State. All this has huge repercussions globally. The war breaks out on mainland Europe. Hanovarian armies are going backwards and forwards. In the middle of all this, there is an intelligence document which arrives at the East India Company headquarters in Leadenhall Street and this intelligence document, like a more modern one, turns out to be complete fiction or certainly, in its essential detail that a large, French fleet was heading specifically to Bengal it was wrong. There was clearly a large, French fleet but it was going somewhere else. As a result, two things happened. One is that the East India Company sends instructions to Calcutta to fortify itself because they should expect an attack and secondly, they persuade parliament to send a task force out from London and to put in charge of these marines, Robert Clive, the guy who had already distinguished himself in earlier scuffles in the Carnatic. Clive really is the central figure of this story. He was a kind of punk from rural Shropshire, who was this restless youth and had a gang on the Welsh borders where he used to threaten to throw stones through shopkeepers' windows unless they paid him off and even, on occasions, lying in gutters and

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diverting water into someone's shop if they wouldn't give him what he wanted. This slightly unsatisfactory, violent kid is quickly shipped by his parents [*laughter*] off to India because he's clearly too moody for the Church or the law. Twice, he turns this innate violence on himself and tries to kill himself but doesn't succeed. His moment comes when the French actually captures Madras. In the months that follow, it turns out this guy has got an incredible capacity for soldiering. He's got no formal training of any sort but in an age when campaigns are like chess games with chivalrous meetings of generals and letters going backwards and forwards, Clive has none of that. He attacks at night. He attacks in the dark in fog banks. He's a believer in an 18th-century version of Blitzkrieg.

**Peter Moore:** Yeah, you characterise him as a ruthless opportunist.

**William Dalrymple:** But also an extremely effective one. He almost never loses a battle or miscalculates. He's very good at sizing up his battles.

**Peter Moore:** With that, does he have technological superiority in terms of the weaponry that he has available to him?

**William Dalrymple:** He does and the British and the French, both at this point, have all the fruits of Frederick the Great's innovations from the Austrian Succession War and the Spanish Succession War, like putting socket bayonets on advanced muskets, elevating screws on the back of canons and horse artillery; nothing that can't be easily emulated by other armies around the world but it gives both the English and the French East India Companies about 30 years before the Indians catch up, who have large Indian, heavy cavalry armies, like Crécy. It's all about heavy knights with maces and swords bearing down on the enemy and India has no answer to this new form of warfare. Clive, who's been sent out to attack the French, finds himself, instead, facing up a man called Siraj Ud Daulah, who is the Nawab of Bengal and who's taken against the British refortifying Calcutta against the French (though he doesn't know that) because they hadn't sought his permission. He just comes down, he takes Calcutta and destroys it. Normally, the East India Company would have had to have given some presents, opened diplomatic relations and sorted it all out but on this rare occasion, just as the news comes of the fall of Calcutta, Clive turns up with his fleet. They just sail north, recapture Calcutta and knock out the French. At that point, Siraj Ud Daulah's own principal banker, who's a man called the Jagat Seth, reaches out and offers him £2 million if he'll do regime change, in modern parlance, and he'll get rid of Siraj Ud Daulah and replace him with someone more amenable. There's this Arab general called Mir Jafar who is appointed. What is regarded in Victorian textbooks as this great victory of British arms is, in fact, an act of base treachery between two groups of financiers.

**Peter Moore:** What capacity is Clive acting within there? Is he working for the East India Company?

**William Dalrymple:** Clive is working for the East India Company but just to complicate matters, he has a local commission from the British Army [*laughter*].

**Peter Moore:** Things are never very simple, are they? This is the start of what we're going to get on to in a moment.

**William Dalrymple:** The important point is that almost all the big battles we're going to be talking about, particularly the big set-piece of Buxar, is fought not with white, British troops, by and large. It's fought with local mercenaries, who are called sepoys, who are trained up in these new infantry techniques by both the French and the British and often with money borrowed

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from local bankers. The British pull off this trick. There was never more than about 2,000 British clerks in Bengal and they pull off this trick of basically borrowing money from local bankers who were sympathetic to them, as other bankers talking to bankers, to train up mercenary troops to defeat other Indians. It's amazing that they get away with it, frankly.

**Peter Moore:** Well, the other side of the story which we're going to get on to in a moment is the fractured political nature of what's happening in India at this time because there are lots of different personalities which, when put together with Clive and the British, create this very unique historical context but we'll talk about those in the context of these scenes.

**William Dalrymple:** As far as this period that we're talking about, 1764, is concerned, it's actually not that complicated. The Moghul Empire has diffused to its regional governors and so although the emperor is still nominally the most important man sitting in Delhi, or wherever in India he's wandering around, in actual fact, power has passed to his regional governors. This is true in the south and it's also true in the area that we're interested in today which is Delhi, Avadh, which is central northern India, and then the incredibly rich eastern province of Bengal. As we approach this crucial year of 1764, what happens is that the Prince of Bengal, Mir Qasim, who has risen up against the company and been defeated by them, flees back into Avadh and there he forms a grand alliance of the greatest three Moghul commanders, the emperor, the Nawab of Avadh and the Nawab of Bengal.

**Peter Moore:** Wow!

**William Dalrymple:** These three great Moghul armies into one enormous mass and suddenly, the company, rather than facing its usual scattering of piecemeal states that it can take out one by one, actually faces an extraordinary army of 150,000 Moghul troops.

**Peter Moore:** That's incredibly visual - 150,000 troops, what does that look like? You have to kind of leave that one to your imagination. This is in the February of 1764 when Mir Qasim, you say, and somebody else, in particular, are meeting. Do you want to tell us who these two particular characters are, in general, because they form the central characters in a narrative that we're going to follow through for the next half hour or so?

**William Dalrymple:** There are three characters and they're all fascinating characters in their own right. At the top of the pyramid is the Moghul emperor, Shah Alam, who is the central figure in this book. He's the one character that carries the whole story from the beginning to the end. We see him first aged 12 when Delhi is being plundered by the Persians and this whole empire built up over a century and a half is collapsing visibly in front of him. Poor old boy and at the end of his days, aged 82, he's been blinded by a former male lover. He's the blinded king of a now illusory empire and sitting in a ruined palace.

**Peter Moore:** It's a horrible metaphor, isn't it?

**William Dalrymple:** It's a fabulous image [*laughter*]. If you think of it filmically, I love the idea of this character. He starts off so optimistic. He's brave. He's handsome. He's a poet in five languages.

**Peter Moore:** But he's there on this day in February.

**William Dalrymple:** He's there and he's dubious about this because the East India Company is very happy to be his ally and to operate in his name. The company realises that this man, rather

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like the papacy in the European Middle Ages, has the kind of imprimatur of legitimacy and law and represents a sort of higher set of values above the scuffle of real politics. The company rather hopes to make an alliance with Shah Alam and to use his name to hoover up more of India themselves. Shah Alam knows this and so he is not at all convinced.

**Peter Moore:** So he's not a natural rebel. Rebel is not the right word. He's not a natural opponent for the East India Company maybe.

**William Dalrymple:** He's not a natural opponent for the East India Company because the East India Company understands that they have common interests but this is not the case with the other two. The firebrand at the centre of this is this fantastic Nawab of Avadh, the governor of central-northern India, based in the great city called Faizabad. This is Shuja Ud Daula who is a giant. He's seven foot tall and he's got enormous projecting moustaches. He's said still, in middle age, to be strong enough to cut off a buffalo's head with a single swing of his sword and to lift up two of his officers, one in each hand. This is this giant guy. Some of the more sophisticated historians of the time are a bit dubious about whether his intelligence matches his strength.

**Peter Moore:** I think it's his moustache which sticks in my mind. You say 'his oiled moustache projected from his face like a pair of outstretched eagles' wings.'

**William Dalrymple:** He was obviously proud of his moustache because in all the pictures, you do see these moustaches just sort of oiling their way outwards like a pair of propellers [*laughter*]. The best historian of the time is this wonderful character called Ghulam Hussain Khan, who has been one of my key sources for this book, and he regards him as a slight liability. I'll just read you a bit of what he has to say about Shuja Ud Daula. Shuja, he wrote, 'was equally proud and ignorant. He had conceived as high opinion of his own power, as he had an indifferent one of what his enemies could perform; and he thought himself more than equal to the task of conquering all three provinces (of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa). Indeed, he had a numerous army with plenty of artillery, great and small, and all the necessary requisites of war but no real knowledge about his means of availing himself of so much power ... Yet he fancied himself a compound of all excellence and believed that asking advice would detract from his own dignity, even if the advisor was an Aristotle. He was so full of himself and so proud to have fought by the side of the Afghan warlord Ahmad Shah Durrani, who he had taken as a model, that when anyone proposed any advice on the mode of carrying on the war, he used to cut him short with, "Do not trouble yourself about that. Just fight as I bid you!"'

**Peter Moore:** Wonderful. He's a great, dynamic character. Did we talk about Mir Qasim? He's the third of this ...

**William Dalrymple:** This trilogy of warlords.

**Peter Moore:** ... you could call them a band of brothers. I'm not quite sure but the third of the characters is Mir Qasim.

**William Dalrymple:** Mir Qasim is another extraordinary character. Mir Qasim is small, wiry and very bright. He is of Persian extraction and he has persuaded the company, in fact, to appoint him as governor of Bengal after they get rid of the previous guy. He immediately moves his capital as far away as possible from the English in Calcutta and begins to rebuild the army, reform the revenue and, to the astonishment of the English, turns out to be a real ruler.

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**Peter Moore:** Yeah, and reading your book, I was getting the sense that there was a lot of admiration towards him.

**William Dalrymple:** Yeah. Well, you get that from the contemporary chronicles. There are an awful lot of duds as this time [*laughter*] on the Moghul side and Mir Qasim is almost as effective as Clive. He brings in a pair of Armenians to train up his troops. He copies the munitions of the East India Company and he uses Western weapons against themselves. He's really the first Indian ruler to realise that the military bravado shown by the East India Company on the battlefield is not magic. It's just a matter of training and the right weapons.

**Peter Moore:** If we think about this in the context of February 1764, is this quite a rare moment of accord between usually quarrelling factions which don't always have common interests but for this moment, they're all..

**William Dalrymple:** It's an almost unique moment. In fact, there is only one other moment, which is about 1780 to 1783 when you have something called the triple alliance when, again, a whole series of Indian powers gather together to take on the company. There are only two times it happens and one of the things that allow the company to win through, in the end, is the fact that its opponents are often divided and quite often, the company is allied with one or other Indian faction against other factions.

**Peter Moore:** Can we just do the description history bit because we've done a lot of analytical stuff? There are 150,000 people, you say. Where exactly were they meeting?

**William Dalrymple:** Mir Qasim, who has already been fighting the English and has had a hard time, has retreated back into Avadh, where Shuja Ud Daula is thrilled at the notion of a triple alliance against the company and he welcomes Mir Qasim with a great hug and throws this enormous durbar reception for him. The six miles away from the throne platform, troops are lining the roads in scarlet uniforms with their bayonets glinting. There are some fantastic descriptions. I'll just read one. 'On hearing the news that the Nawab was coming to greet him, His Highness of Bengal had scarlet tents erected, in which he placed two Nawabi thrones. The cavalry and infantry lined the road for six miles; the officers dressed in their finest, scarlet, broadcloth jackets and sparkling new flintlocks. The Nawab Vizier descended from his elephant and was greeted by His Highness at the entrance with all the pomp and ceremony. They exchanged greetings, holding hands, and mounted the thrones together. His Highness of Bengal sent to His Majesty 21 trays of precious robes and jewels as well as elephants, majestic as mountains. The Nawab Vizier was impressed by the opulence with which Mir Qasim was travelling and with all the desire of his enormous appetites, dreamt of extracting from the English huge sums of gold and all the riches of Bengal. He talked gently to his guest and commiserated his loss, promising help and seconding his demand that the English return his confiscated provinces. Then Mir Qasim and Shuja Ud Daula went to wait on His Majesty Shah Alam, the emperor; sitting as one on a single elephant, like a conjunction of two auspicious constellations and proceeded in this manner into the Royal camp.'

**Peter Moore:** Brilliant. I love that. That's a wonderful description. We're not going to improve on it at all [*laughter*]. Let's go to our second scene which is gathering momentum. They're actually going to do something with this pact that they have but they cross the Ganges, don't they? We get to 3rd May when the combined Moghul army reaches the fortified walls of Patna and they begin to lay siege. Do you want to tell us what this ancient city is, what the significance of it is and why they are going there?

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**William Dalrymple:** Sure. The combined triple alliance have first gathered all their forces at Benares, the great holy city of the Hindus on the Ganges. Today, we associate Varanasi, or Benares, with sadhus and sacred Hindu ceremonies but on this occasion, it's the centre of the gathering of this great army. All the different regiments are there. There are the Moghuls with their cavalry and the Afghan Rohillas, who previously fought with the Afghan Ahmad Shah Durrani. They're dressed in long, thigh-length boots and these fantastic long tunics. The most exotic of all, there is an entire regiment of entirely naked Naga sadhus, who are the traditional warriors of Hinduism. Although, on this occasion, they're fighting for a Moghul prince *[laughter]*. Just to finally add to the confusion, there is a bunch of people in East India Company uniforms who are not, in fact, English but French deserters. They've been pressed into service by the company, run away and they're under a French Breton soldier of fortune called René Madec, who hates the English with a passion and regards himself as massively wrong. You've got a bunch of Frenchmen, you've got some naked sadhus, you've got some Afghans in boots and then you've got a huge body of Moghul cavalry.

**Peter Moore:** It's a curious army, isn't it?

**William Dalrymple:** It's a fantastic army. Even Ghulam Hussain Khan, who is this very cynical chronicler, is impressed by it but he also says that, given their different allegiances and different religions, there were problems. Again, I'll just read a little bit from him because he's such a wonderful writer. He says that 'fights broke out between the naked Naga sadhus and the Pathans with entire platoons coming close to bloodshed. Meanwhile, rumours spread among the commanders that Shah Alam was in secret communication with the company. His Majesty was utterly opposed to fighting the English,' said Ansari, 'so throughout these campaigns took no part in the deliberation or plannings and during the battles, stood by to observe his warring vassals from a distance.' 'There was little order and discipline amongst these troops,' wrote Ghulam Hussain Khan, 'and so little were the men accustomed to command that in the very middle of the camp, they fought, killed and murdered each other and went out a-plundering and a-marauding without the least scruple or control. No one would enquire into these matters and these ungovernable men scrupled not to strip and kill people of their own army if they happened to lag behind the main troop or to be found in some lonely spot. They behaved exactly like a troop of highwaymen, carrying away every head of cattle that they could discover. The plundering troops were so destructive that within a radius of ten miles, they left no trace of prosperity, habitation or cultivation and the common people were reduced to desperation.'

**Peter Moore:** Well, we can imagine, like from a Google Earth perspective, this little dot moving...

**William Dalrymple:** Across the Ganges.

**Peter Moore:** Yeah, with a ten-mile radius of devastation around it.

**William Dalrymple:** Facing this great army is one Englishman called John Carnac. John Carnac, faced with 150,000 troops of all these different varieties heading fast towards him, decides he's got no option but to fall back on Patna. Patna is one of the great commercial capitals in the period. It's where a lot of the bankers are based. It's the centre of the saltpetre trade, which is essential for the manufacture of gunpowder. It's a very rich town and it's also got very effective walls. Carnac knows this and decides that his best option is to go back to Patna as quickly as possible and rearm Patna, put up all sorts of new fortifications and outworks using the latest 18th-century technology to do this. He has three weeks, basically.



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**Peter Moore:** The numerical differential is enormous, isn't it? There are 150,000 on the march...

**William Dalrymple:** 150,000 on the Moghul side and 19,000 on Carnac's side but Carnac is an engineer and understands the importance of fortifications and how to build the latest fortifications. In France, in particular, there has been a lot of scientific study by a man called Vauban on how to resist the new armies since the age of Frederick the Great. This means low walls with banter that can't be destroyed by artillery and very different from the traditional, massive Indian fortifications that rise vertically upright and are vulnerable, of course, to artillery fire. Carnac has three weeks to get his act together and build everything that the 18th-century defensive technology can arm him for. He does very well. By the time that the Moghul army finally trundles exhaustedly towards him, he's ready for them. There is this battle before the walls of Patna. Shuja Ud Daula, the giant, goes straight into competition; refuses to wait and takes his favourite Pashtun Afghan cavalry straight into the march. He rides immediately forward onto the walls, only to have this extraordinary barrage of 18th-century artillery mince them down. He then sends the naked Naga sadhus into battle who, likewise, are high as kites on opium and hash and charge straight into the face of the guns, completely fearlessly, but are driven back time and time again and he loses these two armies. He then puts the French in and the French can't get anywhere. He then calls on his ally, Mir Qasim, to put his troops forward and Mir Qasim falters and he won't do it. He's already faced the company twice before and he's now so scared of company artillery that he just stays where he is. Nothing happens immediately but this creates a major rift in the army, which later fatally undermines unity in the next big confrontation.

**Peter Moore:** Just to, I suppose, characterise this confrontation at the walls of the city, it's completely fruitless for the army.

**William Dalrymple:** It's fruitless.

**Peter Moore:** There is no conquest. There are no significant losses in the East India Company army at all and then with Mir Qasim, the story gets quite strange with him, doesn't it?

**William Dalrymple:** Mir Qasim is now everyone's least favourite Moghul commander.

**Peter Moore:** That is because he failed to act at what was seen as a decisive moment.

**William Dalrymple:** He failed to act at this crucial moment. Shuja is badly wounded but continues to fight. He's incredibly brave but just not very bright. Poor old Shuja.

**Peter Moore:** They're a wonderful contrasting pair, aren't they? You've got the swashbuckling guy with the great moustache and...

**William Dalrymple:** The small, clever Persian.

**Peter Moore:** ... the clever, small and almost Svengalish...

**William Dalrymple:** Yeah, exactly. Anyway, so this rift in the command now becomes apparent but what Shuja doesn't know is that Carnac has fortified this place brilliantly but has very few supplies. If Shuja had had the patience, as Mir Qasim tells him, just to sit down behind fortifications to besiege Patna and to let time erode the company because they have a whole city in there without supplies but Shuja is too impatient for that. He says, 'I've had enough,' and he marches off to his winter quarters, where he summons the dancing girls from his capital and he summons his pigeons which he loves playing with. He summons all the pleasures of Avadh and

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the courtesans and to the despair of Ghulam Hussain Khan, this very bright chronicler, 'pleasures himself for the entire winter.' When spring comes, the company goes on the offensive. A new regiment is marched up from Calcutta under a completely ruthless and very brilliant Highland commander called Sir Hector Munro.

**Peter Moore:** Yes, let's get on to him. When is the time to deal with Mir Qasim? Is it now? Because there's a moment he feigns madness, isn't there? I think this is when he's lost his prestige. He's in the tent and he's having many accusations made against him. This is a man of enormous power.

**William Dalrymple:** He's come into Shuja's dominions with enormous quantities of treasures, which are hidden in harem carriages. According to traditional Muslim propriety, these carriages are closed carriages because of the veiled women. By the time he's been in the camp for a couple of months, people have realised that there's no one coming in and out of these carriages [laughter] and are highly suspicious that these harem carriages actually contain solid gold and all the wealth he's brought with him from Bengal. This increases the temptation of Shuja to take action against him and in the middle of winter, in the middle of all the parties, the nautch girls and the dancing, he wins over Mir Qasim's ruthless German commander, a man called Sumru. Sumru arrests his own boss, Mir Qasim. Mir Qasim dresses up in a fool's outfit and feigns madness and is basically just locked away.

**Peter Moore:** You write in the book, 'In the space of a few months, Mir Qasim had transformed from being one of the richest and most powerful rulers in India to become Shuja's shackled and penniless prisoner.' This is all completely cinematic, isn't it?

**William Dalrymple:** If that doesn't get Netflixed, I think we can go and retire.

**Peter Moore:** It could be a Netflix original series.

**William Dalrymple:** Original series.

**Peter Moore:** Our third scene - we've seen the great coming together of the armies and we've seen what is an abortive first attempt at military success. This is difficult to underplay as a significant moment in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It's 22nd October 1764 and the Battle of Buxar. What happened at the Battle of Buxar? Who was involved and how does it go?

**William Dalrymple:** Shuja is still having bowling parties, pigeon parties, nautch girls and playing around when one day in October, to the beat of regimental drums, the red coats of the first battalion of company sepoys can be seen marching through the mango groves and along the banks of the Ganges. More importantly, shadowing these advance regiments are the company barges. The company moves all its ammunition and all its supplies by barge at this period. Behind these waves of drummers and sepoys come these sinister-looking barges full of the latest weaponry fresh from Britain. The leading French advisor in Shuja's court is an aristocrat called Gentil. Gentil takes one look at what's happening and realises that they've got to move quickly and he says to Shuja, 'Listen, it will take the British a whole day to unload their weapons, to build their initial fortifications and their entrenchments. Attack now. Attack this minute while they're unloading the barges and you can get them on the run.' Shuja says, 'Don't tell me what to do. I know how to fight a war.' All he does, in fact, is send his girlfriends back to the capital and gets everything ready. The next day, the English go straight into an offensive mode and march forward towards Shuja. Shuja, again, very stupidly leaves his fortifications at Buxar, that he's spent the whole winter behind, and says, 'I'm not going to be frightened by a tiny army of

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company soldiers.' He marches out of his prepared entrenchments, goes immediately into the command and initially, he has rather incredible success.

**Peter Moore:** We could talk at this point though about Munro because one side of the battle I think we've characterised really, really well but Munro is a kind of typical character from this time, isn't he? He's Scottish.

**William Dalrymple:** He's Scottish. His family have fought on the wrong side at Culloden and like a lot of Highland chieftains, he's getting back into favour by going off to the colonies and proving himself a loyal citizen.

**Peter Moore:** There's a quote of his, which I think tells you a lot about his personality, that you've got in the book which says 'regular discipline and strict obedience to orders is the only superiority that Europeans possess in this country.' That tells you a lot about his personality, doesn't it?

**William Dalrymple:** Yeah. He's very much that. He's regimented. He's disciplined. He likes everything in a straight line and so he lines all his guys up *[laughter]*. Shuja, who is a chaotic but a rather gallant character, sends his Afghan cavalry to entirely encircle the small company army and attack it from the rear. This does the trick. They attack the back of the thing where the weakest regiments are and all the reserves flee and run. Fatally, they leave the camp empty and so the Afghans, who can never resist a good plunder, leave the battle and go straight into the camp and begin plundering all Munro's treasure, try and find the women and try and find this and that. They leave the battle. Meanwhile, Shuja has assumed that he's actually won the battle and sounds the trumpet of victory and lots of his commanders come from the wings to give their congratulations. Quite a few British prisoners have already been taken and they're brought in bound and he laughs at them. At this moment, Munro, who had tried to retreat but realises that he's now entirely surrounded and can't even get to his barges, decides that the only for it is to risk everything in one last frontal assault on the wings where the commanders had actually vacated their spots and gone to congratulate the commander. Munro, himself, leads this fabulous charge.

**Peter Moore:** We can't really underplay this again, can we? I'm not sure how well regarded this is in the context of general historiography of India but as you read through the book, this strikes me as a real turning point in Indian history, this particular charge.

**William Dalrymple:** It is an unbelievable turning point and what we'll hear in a bit is how much this charge, frankly, hands the whole of north India to the British. Gentil has the best account of it. Gentil is there on the field. 'It seemed as if the English were completely beaten,' he wrote, 'they'd lost their ammunition and food stores, as well as all their baggage and the treasure for military expenses. Munro, having recognised his own defeat, sent orders for the supply barges to approach the battlefield as soon as possible, as the English army had no option but to retreat by the river. But there was a long delay in carrying out these orders and meanwhile, the Moghul cavalry was busy pillaging the English camp instead of harrying the enemy and giving the English no respite. Seeing this, Munro, having lost everything, made a desperate charge against the troops of our left wing. By this bravura act of desperation, Munro became the master of the battlefield, which he believed he'd been forced to abandon only a few moments earlier. The company had already started to retreat and they would have fled had they had the means but because they did not have any way of escaping, they plucked up their courage and seeing our left wing towards the Ganges was understaffed and unsupported, they charged it with a reckless bravery that had few parallels.'

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**Peter Moore:** You call it a 'short and confused battle'; a bloody one, absolutely. More than anything though, it was significant. It changed things. I suppose we started off in about February time with the triumvirate coming together and then you have the next six or seven months and we get to October. This is really the end of this particular mini arc of history, isn't it?

**William Dalrymple:** There is no coming back from this because the whole point of this triumvirate was to, in a sense, summon all the Moghul armies and to take on the British ...

**Peter Moore:** Yeah, and expel the East India Company.

**William Dalrymple:** ... and expel the company once and for all. To everyone's surprise, the company, which has initially been crippled by mutinies and is unprepared, actually wins this battle at Buxar. There is nothing else from keeping it from conquering north India and this totally changes the rest of history. The company, which has come to India as a needy series of adventurers, is suddenly transformed into the masters of the richest country in the world. Just to emphasise this again, this is not the British government and these are not, by and large (with a few exceptions), British government troops. These are the private security force of a company based in one office in London, under what's now the Lloyd Building. It's not commanded out of Downing Street and it's not the British regimental army. It is the East India Company's private security force.

**Peter Moore:** This is how you put it right at the beginning of your book and it's a wonderful encapsulation of what you were just saying and so I'll repeat it now. 'It was not the British government that began seizing great chunks of India in the mid 18th century but a dangerously unregulated, private company headquartered in one small office, five windows wide, in London (which is a wonderful detail) and managed in India by a violent, utterly ruthless and intermittently mentally unstable, corporate predator.' We're talking about Clive, of course [*laughter*]. We mentioned him at the beginning of this and he's now going to come back at the end. I suppose history is happening in all different places at the same time and so whilst we've been in Bengal, meanwhile in London, in Leadenhall Street, there have been messages coming back. It takes eight months or so for messages to get from India to England and there have been messages that there's an army, rebellion and trouble.

**William Dalrymple:** The share price has sunk.

**Peter Moore:** Exactly. Worst of all, the share price has sunk and Clive who, until this moment, was becoming part of the British establishment...

**William Dalrymple:** Buying country houses and so on.

**Peter Moore:** ... has been re-dispatched and he arrives. So the concluding part of this story...

**William Dalrymple:** He arrives in Madras and as he arrives in Madras, someone hands him this letter saying, 'The Battle of Buxar has just been won, Sir. This triple alliance is destroyed. We are masters of India.' Clive's first reaction is not to write back and say, 'Well done, chaps.' It's to send an urgent message in cypher to his banker telling him to mortgage all his properties and buy East India Company shares; in other words, what we today would call insider trading.

**Peter Moore:** Yes, this chap would have done quite well in about 2006, I imagine.

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**William Dalrymple:** Absolutely. This is absolutely city malpractice in its purest form and he makes a fair fortune through this because the share price does indeed go bonkers. It absolutely goes through the roof and Clive can buy Powis Castle in Herefordshire *[laughter]* in all its wonder.

**Peter Moore:** I suppose what we're getting towards is the concluding part of this little mini-narrative. It's a big book that tells the entire history of the company but really, we've looked at this one year but it ends almost with a bit of a full stop with something that happens in 1765.

**William Dalrymple:** This is a thing known to historians as 'the Diwani' which, of course, doesn't mean anything to anyone here or in India anymore. What it actually is, in modern terms, is an act of involuntary privatisation. Having captured the Moghal emperor, Shah Alam, who has actually played no part in Buxar because he stood by and watched, he is compelled by Clive to sign a document which hands over the administration of the three richest provinces of the Moghal Empire; Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, which have one million weavers and are generating all the cloth that the company has been selling so profitably for a century. It's to hand over the entire administration of this region to the company and so instantly, the whole nature of the business is transformed. Up to now, it had been the same as all Western traders trading in India since Roman times. Pliny the Elder complains that Roman ladies have this taste for Indian silk, Indian diamonds and Indian sandalwood and, as a result, all the collected gold and bullion of the Roman Empire is bucketing into India. The same is true in the 18th century with all this cloth, all this silk, all this indigo and all this opium. There is nothing, particularly, the Indians want from Europe and so there's been this drain of wealth from London into Bengal. From the Diwani and from the moment that Buxar is won, the drain of wealth heads in the opposite direction because now, the company has the right to tax and extract land revenue from India. After they've deducted the costs of the army, the occupation and everything else, the profits could be used for buying the silk, the chintz and the opium and so on. They need not ever again send any ships of gold and silver out from Britain but just by taxing Indians, they can buy the goods they need to sell in Europe. This is a business model that is just going to increase the profits of the company beyond the imagination of man and when you go today to gorgeous country houses around Britain with beautiful Palladian pediments that look as if Colin Firth might stride out at any moment with his cotton shirt and breeches, those are quite often built on the profits made in this quite brief period after Buxar when the company is just literally minting money. It has the right, with the Diwani, to mint money.

**Peter Moore:** There had been nothing like this before in history, had there?

**William Dalrymple:** It's a company. It's not the nation. A company has conquered an area. Companies are genetically primed to just make the maximum profit that regulators will allow them to make. In India, there is no regulation. What happens next, of course, is that the company screws up because it is just too greedy and it asset strips Bengal so badly that the next thing that happens is the Great Bengal Famine and it's like a dustbowl. Bengal, this incredibly fertile, rich, prosperous land, is reduced to ashes and starvation and a fifth of Bengal starve five years later but all that is in the future. As far as everyone is concerned at the end of this extraordinary year, the company has gone from a bunch of needy adventurers to the kings of Hindustan.

**Peter Moore:** That's a wonderful way to characterise the story. It starts off with a very prosperous, front-footed trading company and ends up with something which is quite staggeringly different and too powerful.

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**William Dalrymple:** It moves from an empire of business to the business of empire.

**Peter Moore:** Wow! I can't improve on that description either. William, can I ask you one last question before we let you dash off into the London night? I always like to ask this of people. We've been talking about 1764. If you could bring anything back, is there anything you'd like from that time to have on your goat farm just outside New Delhi?

**William Dalrymple:** It may sound a bit venal and perhaps it's a result of having read company records solidly for six years but at the end of six years, I've more or less bankrupted myself [laughter] writing this book and so I'd be very happy with one of Mir Qasim's abandoned treasure chests left on the battlefield of Buxar to take to my farm if I was given the option [laughter].

**Peter Moore:** Well, there we go. We shall magic it up [laughter]. Thank you very much.

**William Dalrymple:** If only it was that easy [laughter].

**Peter Moore:** Thank you very much for travelling back with us today. It's been a real pleasure talking to you.

**William Dalrymple:** Thank you. It was fun.

**Peter Moore:** It's a brilliant book.

I hope you enjoyed that conversation. That was me, Peter Moore, talking to William Dalrymple at his publishers in London. William's book, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* is available in hardback now.

**Artemis Irvine:** Hello, I'm Artemis. I hope you enjoyed listening to this tour through the year 1764 with William Dalrymple. If you'd like to learn more about the themes that we touched on in this episode, then there are loads more articles at [historytoday.com](http://historytoday.com). For example, you can read *India Versus the East India Company* by John Wilson, who shows that violence and expansion were an integral part of the company's armed bureaucracy. For more about Robert Clive, Richard Cavendish's article, *The Battle of Plassey*, examines that crucial moment in Clive's early career and for something which explores later implications of colonialism, you can have a read of Anna Maguire's article, *Colonial Encounters*, in which she discusses how the First World War threw together people from all over the world. You'll find links to all of these at [historytoday.com](http://historytoday.com), along with much, much more from the world's leading serious history magazine. Thanks again for listening to today's episode. We'll be back again, as ever, in a fortnight but from us, for now, that's it. Goodbye.

[Sound of ticking clock]

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