

PRINCE WHO IS BEST FORGOTTEN

QUEEN VICTORIA'S MAHARAJA — DULEEP SINGH, 1838-93, by Michael Alexander and Sushila Anand, Vikas, New Delhi, Pp. 326. Rs 150.

MAHARAJA DULEEP SINGH first impinged on my consciousness in our village gurdwara. Occasionally Giani Sohan Singh Seetal came there, with his famous "dhadi" jatha to sing stirring ballads about Sikh heroes of yore. He sang of the great Maharaja, of his General, Hari Singh, of Bidhi Chand, who stole the horses from the Mughals, and of many more. Often he sang a poignant piece about the exile Duleep's visit to cremate his mother, Rani Jindan, on the banks of the Godavari. This moved us, as nothing else did, and the memory of a great prince, deprived of his kingdom and exiled from his motherland, lingered in the consciousness.

This sad romantic aura continued to prevail in the Sikh psyche, for little was known about the prince's life in exile. I visited England for the first time in 1967. Elveden was high on my list of places to be seen. The Kapurthala-palace like house and the Duleep family tablets in the churchyard further fuelled my sentimental streak, and I wrote a piece for The Tribune, suggesting the

bringing back of his remains. One of the Punjab Governments pursued the idea fairly seriously. I read up everything I could find on the subject and toyed with the idea of attempting a biography.

On a subsequent visit to Britain I searched out and talked to a lady novelist, the wife of a former I.C.S. officer, who was writing a novel on Duleep Singh's Egyptian marriage. She wanted Khushwant and others to form a committee and fight for the posthumous correction of the many wrongs done to the Maharaja by successive British Governments.

Michael Alexander and Sushila Anand have at last written the biography many must have thought of attempting. They have given us the first comprehensive account of the Maharaja's life. In the process they have shattered many myths, based on vague folk memory. The events of his life are well narrated. We read of how a five-year-old found himself on the blood splattered throne of Lahore; the fight with the British which lost him all of Doaba and placed him under Lawrence; the loss of the whole kingdom a few years later; the removal to Fattehgurd, and the conversion to Christianity; the departure for England, and the conquest of Queen Victoria's affections; the life of a country squire; the impulsive marriage with an Egyptian orphan; the squalid fight with the British Government for more money;

the petulant quarrel and comic revolt against the Queen's Government that would not give him more; the ridiculous flirtations with Russia, and the final sad ending in a Paris hotel.

What is one to make of all this? Simply this: Duleep Singh's was a pointless, wasted life. It is a tragic yet comic tale. One can feel sorrow for him but no admiration. The Punjabis, particularly the Sikhs, need not waste any more emotional capital on him. We admire the

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great Lion of the Punjab for he gave us freedom and dignity. Duleep Singh's story is only a sad reminder of how both were lost.

His was a fickle petulant nature, incapable of conceiving great thoughts or noble purposes. All his adult life was spent in leading the good life of a hunting squire in the Norwich countryside. Encouraged by Queen Victoria, he became one of the British aristocracy, and spent his days in breeding and shooting partridges and in

the flirtations of society drawing-rooms.

Apparently, he fell in and out of love, and yet found that the possibility of a marriage into British nobility was firmly closed to a "black" prince. This soured his mood. It turned peevish when he found that not enough money was being provided for his Eastern princely way by the prime imperialistic Victorian Ministers. His quarrel with the British Government was a shoddy one. Its sole pur-

pose was more money for himself.

It is true that the British Government, which had taken away even his private property after the annexation of the Punjab, could have been more generous. But whatever the nature of their pettiness, the quarrel did not lend a high purpose to Duleep Singh's motive.

As a child of 10 or 12, he was converted to Christianity by the pressures of the "padris" and persons around him, at Fattehgurd. One cannot blame him for this. In England he professed,

like all Victorians, to be a good Christian, but when his quarrel over money heated up, in a sudden fit of spitefulness he abandoned the Christian faith. His alleged conversion to Sikhism at Aden was more an act of impulsive anger against his erstwhile benefactors than a genuine return to the faith of his forefathers.

The statement from Aden, in which he reserved for himself, the right to follow his own brand of the faith, bears testimony to this. In his last days in Paris, when he was partially paralysed and in poor financial and physical health, he again threw himself at the mercy of Queen Victoria and the Christian faith.

It is obvious that Duleep was a rootless man with little genuine belief, either in Christianity or Sikhism, or for that matter, in anything else. His last meeting with the Queen in France, at which he gave way to a passionate bout of crying, which, embarrassed Victoria, is a sad commentary on the depth to which Ranjit's heirs had sunk.

In a way the pictures on the jacket of the book tell the entire story of Duleep. On the front is a handsome turbaned and bejewelled Indian prince, sword in hand. At the back is a fat bald brown skinned Indian, in English evening dress and with a cigarette in his mouth. One can understand why and how Duleep was reduced to this, and sympathise with him.

As a child of 5, he had seen

murder and mayhem all around him at Lahore. His uncle had been slaughtered by the Khalsa army before his own eyes and in spite of the screaming pleas of his mother. The British separated mother and son. A lonely child who had had such traumatic experiences and had ultimately been brought up by strangers was bound to grow up with a rootless and split personality.

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One feels sorry for the man, but one also realises that such is the fate of kings when they lose their kingdoms and swords. Even the Indian princes, whom the British kept on as captive and toothless tigers, were reduced to this, and men like Dewan Germani Das have chronicled their strange but true doings. One can understand and sympathise with the fate of such men, but one would be stupid to admire men like Duleep, as symbols of a people's aspirations.

The hopes of the Punjabis died with the Lion of the Punjab. Giani Sohan Singh Seetal would do well to sing of that great Indian's accomplishments, rather than of the doings of his quixotic son. Duleep's is a memory best forgotten.

— Manohar Singh Gill.