

BOOK REVIEW

Adrian Smith. *Mountbatten, Cold War and Empire, 1945–79*

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A dozen years after his critically acclaimed *Mountbatten: Apprentice War Lord* (2010), Adrian Smith has produced a comprehensive companion in this life history that is slightly smaller than its predecessor, with its six chapters (supported by over sixty pages of notes and references) covering the controversial transfer of power in India and the Suez crisis in Egypt, apart from some storied episodes from the Commonwealth, nuclear deterrence, and the ministry of defense, with Mountbatten's place in these historical processes. Smith is a thorough researcher on Mountbatten, having written many journal articles on various facets of that outsized figure, from cinema to science and from royalty to navy. Thus, the “player” (1) that Mountbatten was, his career record has received sustained scrutiny at Smith's scholarly hands, from which I benefited during my PhD at Southampton. This scrutiny is welcome as, among the prominent British figures of the mid-twentieth century, Mountbatten, along with his similarly multifaceted spouse Edwina, remains a figure of periodic attention for rather sensational reasons, exemplified lately by Andrew Lownie's *The Mountbattens: Their Lives and Loves* (2019) and Gurinder Chadha's film *Viceroy House* (2017).

Starting with a historiographical survey of the scholarship on Mountbatten (and ending with a filmography), Smith “updates” (5) Philip Zeigler's *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (1985), by drawing upon a great range of primary sources and published material available since then. Throughout, Smith situates the history-making persona within his networks, especially prime ministerial connections, as well as the consequent political debates, none as timeless as those on the Partition of India, under focus in chapter 1. Still, Mountbatten's time in India under Clement Attlee's Labour Government was but a milestone in the march to his personal ambition to emulate his father “in leading the Royal Navy” (52). This coveted tenure came his way in April 1955, and it was a testimony to how that time was seen as a “good news story in Britain” (45) and how its key protagonist did not pay any price for it under the returning Winston Churchill's Conservatives from 1951.

Mountbatten's tenure at the top of the naval staff was embroiled in the Suez crisis, which therefore gets two chapters. Unlike his prolonged time out in 1947–48, the short and sharp sequence in 1956–57 saw Mountbatten partake in one invasion and proffer two resignations (59–74). Running through this saga is the analytical thread of his “fragile” relationship with Prime Minister Anthony Eden (74–80), while its long shadow fell upon the UK's French connection and the proliferations of its press (81–95). The slate of Suez was “wiped clean” (102) by Harold Macmillan, during whose premiership Mountbatten was appointed as the second chief of the defense staff in July 1959, thereby providing an entry-point into the equations between these “two very different men” (97). By July 1965, when his uniformed career ended under Harold Wilson's Labour Government, Mountbatten had turned his wary thoughts toward the “nuclear age” (106–14) and “the adoption of Polaris” (122).

The longest chapter in the book is the last, which is titled “Moulding the modern MOD” (139), covers “a unified command structure” (147) and a “centralized Ministry of Defence” (162), and brings out fully the politician in the admiral, not only behind the scenes but now increasingly on the screen (newsreel). Subsequently, the dozen or so years of the *afterlife* before his assassination saw Mountbatten get involved in “Britain’s problems of mass migration and poor race relations” (173) and prison security, as he could “scarcely resist playing the role of Her Majesty’s personal envoy” (177). Appropriately, Smith treats the storm in a *coup* cup story involving Mountbatten and the *Daily Mirror* from May 1968 the way it should be, in a couple of pages, before moving on to Mountbatten’s substantial interest in his alternative career passion, namely film production. That the inflated coup-talk continues to circulate, recently in the Netflix production *The Crown* (2019–20), is apt for someone for whom “the process of myth-making was a lifelong project” (186), but especially during his “life beyond Whitehall” (182–89).

As Smith writes, Louis Mountbatten was “consistently at the heart of the action [and] left a legacy” (193), although regular tides of historical time and successive waves of history-writing have crowded out that centrality and parceled out that legacy. Does Mountbatten loom large anywhere now except as a courtier, a controversy or worse, a caricature? Has his public recall across countries not been, for a while, that of foremostly making interesting copy rather than being of crucial importance across much of his life’s work? As the decolonization caravan comes home to rest and as the Commonwealth slides onto a tangent, Mountbatten of Burma is perhaps at best a dated curiosity; the country itself being called Myanmar since 1989. Without his four months plus viceroyalty, Mountbatten’s relevance would have remained within the royalty and the Royal Navy and/or WWII and NATO. In India, he stood atop an iceberg that melted into rivers of blood, escaping without a drop on him, until, that is, his IRA-claimed violent death for—tellingly—“who he was” (191) rather than what he thought or did.

A long sentence from the last page sums up well the paradoxes of Mountbatten, he “who portrayed the partition of India as a triumph while lamenting the outcome, who masterminded an invasion of Egypt while opposing its objective, who facilitated a submarine-based deterrent while bemoaning nuclear proliferation, and who promoted a functionalist, inter-service model of defence management while safeguarding the interests of the Royal Navy” (193). Unfortunately, this nuanced historical record is not likely to be the last word on this vain figure, the content of whose personal diaries, and not the context of whose public agency, continue to be obsessed over in a personality-oriented world.