[Engineer Khurram Dastgir-khan](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/engineer-khurram-dastgir-khan)

December 31, 2020

**Jinnah s house is burning**

Declan Walsh’s ‘The Nine Lives of Pakistan’ augments a veritable genre – books on our embattled homeland by anglophone Western journalists. A layered title, unique biographical approach, and acute observation make this the most insightful among recent works of reportage on the land of the pure.

Books of reportage on Pakistan were few and far between before the 1990s. Pakistanis had to content themselves either with reading history or huddling with a medium-wave radio to hear the BBC’s legendary Mark Tully.

Emma Duncan commenced a new genre with ‘Breaking the Curfew’ in 1989, followed in 1991 by Christina Lamb’s ‘Waiting for Allah’. The return of the US and Western forces to Afghanistan after 9/11 began another round of publication that has not abated two decades later.

The works of Mary-Ann Weaver, Owen Bennet-Jones, Pamela Constable, Nicholas Schmidle, Kim Barker, Steve Inskeep, Carlotta Gall, Kathy Gannon, and Isambard Wilkinson might not have caused much of a stir in Western capitals beyond Pakistan-watchers, but each created a short-lived sensation among the English-speaking elite in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad.

These books not only explain contemporary Pakistan to the West, they also explain the country to its elite – a cohort as distant from its poor, innumerable, fissiparous, illiterate, and religious compatriots as the foreign correspondent him/herself.

Declan Walsh covered Pakistan for far longer (2004-13) than most foreign correspondents. Reporting first for London’s ‘The Guardian’ and later for ‘The New York Times’, he has distilled his nine Pakistani years into profiles of nine Pakistanis. The profiles are rich in perception, history, and insight. Seven of the nine subjects are dead; four from bullets or bombs.

Some might call the book dated because its last events occurred seven years ago. Quite the contrary. “The past is never dead”, Faulkner wrote, “It’s not even past.” As the seeds of jihadism sowed by Gen Zia’s dictatorship in the 1980s and nurtured by his successors bore gory fruit, Walsh has borne necessary and eloquent witness to the most lethal cloudburst of terrorism in our history.

There are lessons to learn from those blood-drenched years. We have not even begun. Most Pakistanis, including the academia and the media, would rather forget the dark years when each day brought on average a half dozen incidents of terrorism across the land; electricity blackouts of eighteen hours; dozens of target killings in the economic hub of Karachi; and rising double-digit inflation and a stagnant economy.

We would also rather disregard that the 2013-18 government – elected the day before Walsh’s deportation – grappled with these deep crises and triumphed over them all, despite being under siege for four out of its five years.

The author has chosen wisely to illuminate those dark times through biography, though there is much from those years that does not find space in the Walsh menagerie. The nine personalities are mutually reinforcing allegories. Instead of explaining extremism, ‘Pashtunwali’ and jihadis, Walsh profiles Abdul Rashid Ghazi of Lal Masjid, retired ISI officer Sultan Amir Tarar aka Col Imam, and KP MPA Anwar Marwat Khan. Karachi’s murderous troubles find human shape in the (late) police officer Chaudhry Aslam Khan.

Balochistan’s insurgency takes human form in Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti; our ever-fledgling civil society is illustrated through the late Asma Jehangir and tycoon/governor Salmaan Taseer; and the role of intelligence agencies comes to the fore through a pseudonymous former Pakistani spy ‘Ashraf’, Col Imam, and Walsh’s narrative of his own deportation. Pakistan’s larger tragedy – its unmooring from our founding ideal of a constitutional, pluralist democracy – imbues the profile of the nation’s founder, M A Jinnah.

Walsh gets the big picture right, regarding the ‘glue’ that is said to be “holding the place together” and at the same time seems to be “tearing it apart”. He also rightly realizes who it is in the country that always wins in the end.

Despite his long years in Pakistan, the author falls prey to the cliché of Pakistan being “more concept than country…. strained under the centrifugal forces of history, identity, and faith. Could it hold?” Every issue in Pakistan seems an existential issue. It is not. The country has survived a traumatic break-up in 1971, decades of authoritarian rule, and the bloodiest onslaught of violent extremism in world history. But it is here and – as Pakistanis have proven with extraordinary resilience – here to stay.

A haunting incident concludes the book. A month after Walsh’s deportation, militants attacked the Quaid-e-Azam residency in Ziarat, killed a policeman, tore down the national flag, and destroyed the historical building as well as all mementoes inside the house where Jinnah spent his last days.

The residency was rebuilt promptly, but the mementoes are lost forever. So are the ideals that Jinnah enunciated in his August 11, 1947 speech to the Constituent Assembly, address to Gazetted Officers at Chittagong, and to army officers at Staff College Quetta.

Mere six years after its latest retreat, autocracy began a renewed siege of democracy in 2014 and has not subsided since. The republic founded by Jinnah is still burning, this time in the fire of hybrid tyranny. Declan Walsh’s work leads us closer to identifying the arsonist. ‘The Nine Lives of Pakistan’ is the finest general book on Pakistan published in 2020.

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