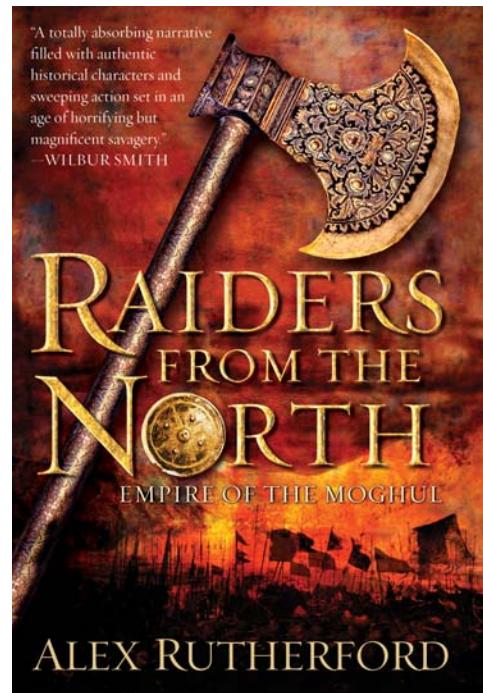




# *Raiders from the North*

by Alex Rutherford

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## About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Raiders From the North* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Raiders From the North*.

## About the Book

### **THE EPIC STORY OF ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL EMPIRES IN HISTORY**

The mighty Empire of the Moghuls burst out of Central Asia into India in the sixteenth century. The first in a compelling new series of novels, *Raiders from the North* tells the largely unknown story of the rise and fall of the Mogul dynasties.

It is 1494 when the ruler of Ferghana dies in an extraordinary accident. His only son, Babur, faces a seemingly impossible challenge. Babur is determined to live up to the example of his legendary ancestor, Tamburlaine, whose conquests transformed the face of the earth from Delhi to the Mediterranean, from wealthy Persia to the wildernesses along the Volga. But Babur is dangerously young to inherit a kingdom.

Before Babur can summon enough warlords to declare him the rightful king, plots against his crown, even his life, are hatching. And soon, he will discover that even the bravest and most fearless leader can be betrayed. With the wisest of advisers and most courageous of warriors by

his side, Babur can achieve a great destiny and found an empire in India, but every step of his journey will be fraught with danger.

Set in a world of tribal rivalries, rampaging armies, and ruthlessly ambitious enemies, Raiders from the North is historical adventure at its very best.

## Praise for *Raiders from the North*:

"A totally absorbing narrative filled with authentic historical characters and sweeping action set in an age of horrifying but magnificent savagery. The writing is as compelling as the events described and kept me eagerly leaping from one page to the next." —Wilbur Smith, New York Times bestselling author of *Assegai* and 31 other epic African Adventures

"Rutherford's glorious, broad-sweeping adventure in the wild lands of the Moghul sees the start of a wonderful series... In Babur, he has found a real-life hero, with all the flaws, mistakes, and misadventures that spark true heroism... Breathtaking stuff." —Manda Scott, author of *The Boudica Quartet*

"*Raiders from the North* is a rousing, rampant gallop through the golden age of one of the world's greatest empires. With a solid grasp of history and an eye for detail, Alex Rutherford imbues the story of Babur's rise with unstoppable momentum. If the first volume is any indication, this series will conquer readers as utterly as a Moghul army." —Nicholas Nicastro, author of *Empire of Ashes* and *Antigone's Wake*

"A swift and exciting book that brings to new life a story that history had nearly forgotten. Rutherford's handling of this complex tale is masterful, and I look forward to reading the sequels." —Michael Curtis Ford, author of *The Ten Thousand* and *The Fall of Rome*

"Brilliant and bloodthirsty." —*The Northern Echo* (UK)

"Rollicking." —*The Hindustan Times* (India)

"A compelling series of novels." —*Deccan Herald* (India)

"The pace is fast, and Rutherford carries off the battle scenes with élan." —*Business Standard* (India)

## About the Author

ALEX RUTHERFORD is the pen name for Diana Preston and her husband, Michael, whose nonfiction has been awarded the Los Angeles Times Science and Technology Prize and been praised worldwide. They have written seven books including *Cleopatra*, *Taj Mahal*, and *Before the Fallout*. They live in London.

## Discussion Questions

1. Soon after the establishment of the Moghul Empire, in the Europe of the day ‘Moghul’ became a synonym for immense wealth. In the 1920s it was applied to the powerful, opulent film magnates of Hollywood and also to major industrialists. If we know the name ‘Moghul’ so well, why don’t most of us know much about the history behind it? Who were the Moghuls and why did they matter?
2. What makes Babur bounce back from every set-back? How much is down to:
  - a. a desire to live up to the deeds of his ancestors, Genghis Khan and Timur (Tamburlaine)?
  - b. a wish not to die feeling a failure as his father did?
  - c. his own character?
  - d. a sense of destiny, however derived?
3. What effect does telling the story through a single point of view – Babur’s - have? How might our perceptions be altered if we had multiple points of view?
4. One of the pleasures in reading books about distant lands and different times is what we find out about peoples’ lives – a key element in which is food and drink. What do we learn about these topics from this book? How much does the food described differ from the Indian food we eat in Indian restaurants in the USA? How much of this is due to the fact that ingredients such as the chilli, the potato, the pineapple, the papaya (pawpaw) had not yet reached India via Europe from the Americas? How surprising is it that wine cultivation and drinking was so prevalent?
5. Why do you think Babur and Baburi are such good friends? What is it about their personalities and their histories that makes them so well suited to each other?
6. Babur wrote in his memoirs of the great influence on him of both his mother and grandmother, for example he called the latter ‘intelligent and a great planner’. What if anything does the book tell us of the role of women in the Moghul society at this time?
7. This is the first book in a series about a ruling dynasty. In Moghul times, dynasties were bolstered by the concept of hereditary rule. But why do dynasties persist in modern societies (e.g. the Nehru/Gandhi dynasty in India, the Bhuttos in Pakistan, the Bushes and the Kennedys in the United States)? How might it feel to be the child of a dynasty?
8. How does Babur change through the book and why?
9. This is, in part, a story of kingdoms along the great caravan routes of the Silk Road. How far do you think travel and trade had an influence on the culture of Babur and his contemporaries?

10. There were no printed books in Central Asia at this time – only laborious manuscript copies. How far do you think this influenced the way and extent information was transmitted?
11. Why do you think Babur kept a diary and then turned his writings into a memoir – the first autobiography in Islamic literature and still in print today? What motives impel people to write diaries? What does it say about how they see themselves? How much can we trust diaries as factual records? How much do factors such as self-justification, real or selective memory loss influence them?
12. In the historical note at the back of the book the authors reveal they used some composite characters e.g. Baisangar as well as historical ones. Why do you think they did so:
  - a. so the main character has someone to confide in and thus reveal his thoughts to us?
  - b. to avoid a multiplicity and confusion of subsidiary characters?
  - c. to carry the story onward?
13. What might be the main difficulties when writing an historical novel and looking at the sources?
  - a. getting beneath the skin of the main characters using the available material which might be scanty and having to imagine their thoughts and feelings etc.?
  - b. deciding what events to include and which to exclude?
  - c. deciding the kind of dialogue? (The authors did not use archaic language but also tried to avoid anything too modern in terms of similes, metaphors and modes of expression.)
  - d. having to immerse oneself in the culture of the time and working out how far to judge motivation and character against that background rather than that of today?
  - e. While knowing the historical ending, avoiding this foreknowledge dominating the action and dissipating the tension?
14. The book cover reveals that Alex Rutherford is the pen name for a husband and wife. What might the difficulties be in writing with someone else and in particular ones partner in life as well as in work?

## A Conversation with Alex Rutherford

### 1. Why did you decide to use a pseudonym?

We decided to use a pen name to keep our work as non-fiction and fiction writers apart since we take different approaches to the two. Initially we very much wanted to keep our identities a strict secret and it was only after much pressure from our publishers in the UK, US and India that we agreed to ‘out’ ourselves.

## **2. Why did you choose ‘Alex Rutherford’?**

We chose ‘Alex’ because we like it and it is one of the few names in English that can be either male or female. We have some Scottish family roots but the publishers didn’t go for the associated names so we chose another vaguely Scottish name – ‘Rutherford’ instead.

## **3. What is the scope of the “Empire of the Moghul” Quintet?**

The five novels relate the epic rise and fall of one of the most powerful, opulent and glamorous dynasties in history – the Moghul Emperors of India. The series spans two hundred turbulent years starting at the end of the 15th century and the lives of six very different emperors - big personalities all of them.

## **4. Why did you choose the Moghuls as your subject?**

Our decision wasn’t sudden. Our love of and interest in India began long before we ever thought of telling their story. Over the years we’ve traveled all over India. The great Moghul monuments of northern India – Humayun’s tomb and the Red Fort in Delhi, Akbar’s tomb, the Taj Mahal and the Fort in Agra - overwhelmed us. We became increasingly curious about their creators and started to read the Moghuls’ own diaries and chronicles. They revealed to us a compelling dynastic saga combining the high emotions and rich cadences of grand opera with enough edge-of-the-seat historical drama to fill a dozen big-screen epics and inspired us to write these novels.

## **5. What is *Raiders of the North* - the first novel in the quintet - about?**

Without giving too much of the plot away, it’s the story of how Babur, first of the Moghul Emperors, dreams of founding a fabulous empire and how, despite years of danger and heartbreak, he finally succeeds.

## **6. What are the other four novels in the quintet about?**

Babur’s reign was just the start of an epic period of Indian history. We didn’t want to stop there but to recreate the drama of what happened next – to show how, for all their outward brilliance, the Moghul dynasty founded by Babur was tainted by the poison of jealousy seeping corrosively down through the generations. The story of the Moghuls is a vicious circle of sons plotting against fathers, brothers murdering brothers and half-brothers and of empresses and would-be empresses plotting, scheming and seducing.

The second novel in the quintet *Brothers at War*, to be published in the USA next year, is about Babur’s son Humayun, warrior and dreamer and second Moghul emperor. The third novel covers the brilliant reign of the charismatic and liberal Akbar, truly the greatest of the “Great Moghuls.” The fourth novel about Akbar’s son Jahangir will show how the cycle of distrust and rivalry that will ultimately doom the Moghuls is in full motion. The fifth and last novel of the quintet will be about the final flowering of the Moghuls under the last great emperor, the jewel-loving Shah Jahan, devoted husband of Mumtaz Mahal and builder of the Taj Mahal, with whose passing the once magnificent Moghul Empire began to fade into anarchy and decline.

## **7. What is your ambition with this quintet?**

We want to take our readers to the heart of the battles as vast armies lock in conflict, to conjure in their imaginations the Moghul palaces and cities of milk white marble and rose sandstone as they rise up and to share with them the Moghul Emperors’ innermost feelings and desires. For us

as writers, one of the most human and compelling parts of the story is that for all its outward brilliance the Moghul dynasty carried within it the seeds of its own destruction. Their inheritance from their ancestor the great Timur was the warrior code that the strongest takes all. Their mantra - handed down through the centuries - was “Throne or Coffin!” With no law of primogeniture, Moghul princes fought each other and even their fathers for the crown.

#### **8. What source material did you use to write *Raiders from the North*?**

One of the reasons we know so much not only about what happened but about what was in Babur's mind is that he kept a frank and detailed diary – the first known autobiography in Islamic literature – which describes everything from his battle plans, to his reaction to his shrewish first wife, to wild drinking parties as he floated downriver to conquer India, to the mind-expanding joys of smoking cannabis, to how he played polo with the severed heads of his enemies or cemented them into towers. The diary provides a brilliant and compelling picture of how an opportunistic robber prince from the Asian steppes never gave up till he'd achieved what he believed was his destiny. But at the same time he really does speak from the heart. He admits that being forced from his realm “wandering from mountain to mountain with no home and no house had nothing to commend it” and describes how his supporters were reduced to a mere two or three hundred men armed only with clubs and clad in rough boots and shepherds' garb but still writes optimistically of his “great expectations” of future glory.

#### **9. What other sources are you using to write the quintet?**

We're fortunate there's so much good original source material. We've been able to draw the major events - battles, coups, deaths, executions - and the principal characters from the immense treasure trove of sources that have survived. As well as Babur's own account of his life the “Baburnama” we have, for example, the “Humayunnama” written by Babur's daughter and the “Akbarnama” written about Babur's grandson. The physical and emotional detail of the Moghul period is superbly captured in these chronicles and also, for the later Moghul emperors, in other surviving letters and diaries that convey the sheer excitement of events as they unfold. They burst with compelling, exuberant stories not only about great battles and the passions of family politics but more intimate things like the number of an emperor's concubines and the frequency of his couplings, the name of his favorite war elephant, the cost of his bed linen and the way the empire was ruled.

For the later emperors beginning with Akbar, we also have the accounts and letters of European visitors - merchants, mercenaries and missionaries - to the Moghul court. These reveal the visitors' open-mouthed wonder at the spectacle of Moghul wealth and sophistication beyond anything the European courts could offer. To Europeans, the magnificent Moghuls were like characters from an exotic legend. They fastened on every fantastical aspect of Moghul life - gems the size of duck eggs, the gold-leaf decorated food and rose-scented wine prepared for the imperial table, the number of wives and concubines the emperors enjoyed and the other sensual aspects of Moghul life. A French doctor, exceptionally invited into the imperial harem to treat a woman there, wrote in amazement that he could not locate her pulse because so many ropes of pearls were wound around her arms. The first English ambassador to the Moghul court, Sir Thomas Roe, gives a nice snap shot when, in Jahangir's reign, he describes the Moghul court in terms which could fit the cast of a Shakespearean tragedy: “a noble prince, an excellent wife, a faithful councilor, a crafty stepmother, an ambitious son, a cunning favorite...”

## **10. Some people have queried Babur's sexuality. What is known?**

Babur tells briefly in the “Baburnama” of his adolescent crush on a market boy, Baburi, who was about his own age. However, according to Babur this infatuation never developed into a physical relationship. Elsewhere in the “Baburnama” Babur strongly criticizes other rulers who have relationships with boys.

## **11. What role do women play in the “Empire of the Moghul”?**

The story of the Moghuls is not only about warriors, conquests and battles. Royal women – despite living luxurious and pampered lives within the harem - played a key and respected role as political advisers, mediators in family disputes and even regents. The mother and grandmother of the first Moghul emperor Babur guided him through dangers when as a young boy surrounded by enemies he became King of Ferghana. A later Moghul Empress, Nur Jahan, became the real ruler of India when her husband became incapable through drink and drugs. She plotted to make her daughter by a previous marriage the next empress and had her enemies murdered. Many of the royal women also became successful businesswomen, building up fleets of ships and trading with Arabia.

## **12. How much is known about women’s life within the Moghul harem?**

Life in the imperial Moghul harem is well-documented. Western visitors to the Moghul court - male of course – wrote of a place of seeming “lascivious sensuality, and wanton and reckless festivity.” The imperial harem was guarded by soldiers, eunuchs and female guards and the emperor was the only ungelded male allowed to sleep there. Female harem officials kept a careful record of the emperor’s love-making, from its frequency to the name of his partner.

But the harem was many other things besides a sensual retreat for the emperor. It was home to large numbers of imperial family members – mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins and widows, together with superannuated concubines, put aside as their sexual attraction waned. The harem also functioned as a nursery for the imperial children who were sometimes brought up by senior matrons of the imperial family, rather than by their own mothers.

## **13. How do you write together?**

Working together is something we’ve developed over time and a number of non-fiction books. We’ve always enjoyed working together and the process has come relatively naturally. Writing can be a lonely business and it’s great to have someone to share the highs and lows with and to talk through the difficulties with. It’s harder for two writers to get writers’ block than one!

However our approach has been a little bit different for fiction since we wanted to keep the writing fresh and immediate so the reader feels right at the centre of the action. First we develop a strong plot line and subdivide it into chapters. Then we decide which of us will write each chapter or sub-chapter and produce a draft which we discuss and amend. Of course we sometimes disagree but thankfully talking things through nearly always provides a solution we’re both happy with and we think will capture our readers’ imagination which is our aim. We want them to be eager to turn each page and for the characters to ring true and also for our readers not to be able to detect which of us has written which scenes and we hope we have succeeded.

#### **14. How have you found the transition from non-fiction to fiction?**

Our previous books have been mostly but not exclusively non-fiction. In many ways, we find writing historical fiction liberating and exciting. We've tried to remain true to the main events and to the main characters. The sources are sufficiently rich – and candid – for us to be able to build up a real picture of what Babur was like. But when there are gaps in the sources - (the "Baburnama" itself has a number of missing years) – we've felt free to use our imaginations to interpret the silences and recreate how we believe things might have been. We explain in an historical note at the back of our book what is real and what is invented. We believe that almost all of history - which is after all a continuing story of human lives and experience and contains universal themes - can be fictionalized. Indeed the process of fictionalizing history can make it more accessible to people.

#### **15. How far are you prepared to go to get into your characters' shoes?**

Whether we're writing non-fiction or historical fiction – like our "Empire of the Moghul" series - our stories are based on what happened to real people. Inevitably we spend hours in libraries and archives. It's thrilling to handle documents carried to the South Pole by Captain Scott or to see sand trickle from a seventeenth century buccaneer's letters. But documents - chronicles and diaries - only convey part of the picture. So in the case of Captain Scott we visited his huts in the Ross Sea in Antarctica and in that of the buccaneer we crossed the Darien isthmus in his footsteps. As regards the Moghuls, the written word doesn't capture how the sand changes color as the sun sinks over the Indian deserts or how a filmy mist cloaks the land as the dawn comes up and birds take flight or how a Moghul dish of lamb simmered with pomegranates tastes.

Writing the first of our Moghul quintet, *Raiders from the North*, took us to Iran and to Central Asia - to eastern Uzbekistan where Babur was born and then through parts of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where, as a nomadic robber prince, he spent his early life. We drove for miles through the Pamir mountains along a remote part of the Afghan border, sleeping in villages, taking care to keep out of areas still peppered with landmines and having altercations at border crossings with drunken guards convinced we were smuggling drugs or rubies and wanting to "borrow" our vehicle. But it showed us the wild and beautiful lands that were the cradle of the Moghuls and where life can be as precarious and unpredictable as in their day.

We've also traveled extensively in the Moghuls' footsteps in India, spending over a year of our lives there in total. During our latest research trip we visited Fatehpur Sikri to look again at the sandstone city fashioned by Babur's grandson Akbar with such care and attention, even hewing stones side by side with his laborers. We also spent time in Rajasthan trying to learn more about Rajput history and culture. In the museum in the Jodhpur Fort we've looked at curved Moghul scimitars and massive double-edged Rajput swords, very like the swords or "claymores" used by the clans in Scotland. We were also amazed and amused to see the back-scratchers used by warriors wearing heavy, all-encompassing suits of chain mail to reach those inaccessible itchy bits. Those kinds of things make the past come alive and reveal figures from the past as real flesh and blood human beings just as we are.



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