

## *Kipling In Perspective*

It was T.S. Eliot's favourable introduction to *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* in 1941 which began the reinstatement of Kipling as an eminent literary figure. Hitherto, a sustained propaganda campaign had dismissed him as a merely jingoistic trumpeter in service of the British Empire. In retrospect, it is fascinating to note that both the artistic and the political decrying of this author often contained more snobbery than it did well-founded, or even truthful, criticism. Almost as if to prove the snobbish argument that he was a low-level writer, Kipling continued throughout his life, and continues long after his death in 1936, to be one of the world's best-selling authors. Today the critical climate is altogether fairer and the appreciation of Rudyard Kipling as fabulist and moralist is productively under way with much of the contribution being made by modern Indian and Pakistani scholars and writers.

A clue to Kipling's outlook is found in his tantalisingly scant autobiography, *Something of Myself*:<sup>1</sup> 'Having no position to consider, and my trade enforcing it, I could move at will in the fourth dimension.'<sup>2</sup> Because he was young, and because he was a journalist, Kipling could move, without causing too many snobbish eyebrows to be raised, among army rankers, minor administrative officials and the various castes in Indian society, all of whom rarely received face to face attention from people in the upper levels of the British imperial organization. This lack of attention derived to a great extent from the Britishers' own imported system which, somehow, taught those in the middle and upper classes that they should not have any interest in people further down the social scale than themselves. More than that, the imported caste system was intensified when it came in contact with the Indian caste system. Many middle and upper class Britons who settled in India developed an aristocratic way of life based on the abundance of cheap, domestic servants in a sub-continent that lacked industrial development. This way of life conferred far more privileges than could be justified even by the rigours of the Indian climate.

Kipling's social meanderings in his short stories do not simply challenge the values of the Indian and British caste systems. He demands that we pay attention to Private Mulvaney's big greased feet as the real plinths of the British Empire; he requires that we show true compassion for officials forgotten in remote scorched districts, heart and soul committed to India's social and material improvement; he insists that we acknowledge the devotion to ser-

vice and the nobility of character displayed by the Indians themselves, qualities all too easily ignored in them. Instead of exulting in the British Empire as a design for commercial profit and international domination, instead of seeing the British Empire only in the present moment, Kipling widened and deepened his reflections by seeking a moral purpose in world history. Conscious of time – the fourth dimension – and its swift flight, Kipling tried to find meaning for the Empire. To do so he went beyond simple observation of the influences of Britain and India upon each other and examined Indian, British and Roman political and cultural history in the surviving archaeological evidence and historical accounts.

This, however, is to digress somewhat. Early in his career in India, Kipling revealed in his writing an insight into class systems and social justice far deeper than that generally revealed by his contemporaries in their writings, an insight which sprang out of his physical contacts with all manner of people. Kipling invites his readers to examine this human being or that human being irrespective of colour, creed or rank. Hence the impact of his description of the silhouette of lowly sentry Mulvaney, despised, if considered at all, by so-called respectable society: 'When I woke,' writes the reporter in the story 'The Courting of Dinah Shadd', 'I saw Mulvaney, the night dew gemming his moustache, leaning on his rifle at picket, lonely as Prometheus on his rock, with I know not what vultures tearing his liver.' Kipling's probing of the individual being is characterized by an intensity and intimacy unhampered by caste taboos.

G.M. Carstairs, in his second Reith lecture for the BBC, offers conclusions about British society based on careful sociological research which confirm insights attained by Kipling eighty years earlier. Within a complex society like Britain's, says Carstairs, the barrier between middle and working classes does not arise from any difficulty in understanding each other but from an inability to share feelings. The same barrier makes assimilation for a Britisher into another society difficult: 'To master the facts about a people and its folklore is easier than to share feelings because these have been acquired at a much earlier, preconscious stage of learning.'<sup>3</sup> The advantage that Kipling had over other writers about India was that he received his early upbringing from Indians. This resulted in his thinking, dreaming and speaking first in the local Indian dialect and his speaking English as a later age.<sup>4</sup> He had been given entrée to the Indian milieu and as a precocious youngster of seventeen he set about making the most of it. He overcame most barriers

inside British society in India and most barriers across the white man's path into Indian society. Give me Kipling before Forster whose *A Passage To India* is, compared to Kipling's Indian writings, a mannered, academic exercise!

Kipling's emotional and psychological penetration, however, reveals much more than toleration of Private Mulvaney's body odor on a long march in the Indian heat and much more than simple awareness of the low expectations of life held by the British soldiers and the Indian masses. What is learned by Kipling and revealed to us is that by means of physical encounters his characters often acquire a special knowledge which cannot be gained in Britain, a knowledge vital to the quality and meaning of human living in India, a knowledge which usually emerged from the strenuous life of active service under the British Raj. In times of stress and crisis, both military and civilian, people share new understandings about themselves and their capabilities, and are transformed both physically and spiritually into more resourceful, more perceptive people than they could ever have been before the testing times of guerilla skirmish, flood, plague or famine overtook them. Those who do not achieve this transformation or who flinch from the effort to undergo it remain, in Kipling's view, inexperienced in understanding, even if civilized by Western standards.

Ignorance and misunderstanding of the difficult physical and metaphysical challenges faced in India by Anglo-Indians so misled some elements of the British intelligentsia that their criticism of Kipling became virulent and personal. Secure and smug in middle class Britain they called Kipling indelicate for showing interest in low society; they labelled him an enthusiast for violence rather than for aesthetics, too physical and not intellectual enough. These critics stridently refused to admit any other portrayal of Kipling than that of literary hooligan. The questions they posed reveal their attitude. Was Kipling a writer or just a journalist? Did he write poetry or just verse? How difficult then it was for those possessing such attitudes to understand the apparent perversity in this stanza from 'The Galley Slave' (1890):

By the brand upon my shoulder, by the gall of stinging steel,  
By the welts the whips have left me, by the scars that never heal,  
By eyes grown old with staring through the sunwash on the brine,  
I am paid in full for service, would that service still were mine.

Here a former galley slave tells us how savagely he had been tested and strained over years of servitude. Yet now, strangely, he misses

the terrible demands made on his body. For despite these terrible demands, the ceaseless physical and spiritual testing, he has survived unbroken. In retrospect, a mingled pride and regret overtakes him, and he is uncomfortable in his freedom. Only a writer who was willing to move in all levels of society and to be receptive to widely differing values among diverse Indian societies could understand the paradoxical feelings of the former galley slave.

Of greater seriousness is the actual perversity of deliberately limited quotation from 'The Ballad of East and West' (1889) thereby discrediting one of Kipling's abiding outlooks and vilifying him as a racist. Usually only the first line is quoted but the full stanza reveals the power of his conviction that in human affairs it is indeed possible to transcend all barriers:

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement seat;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the  
ends of the earth.

The gorgeous pomp and trappings of Empire, exemplified by one of the most extravagant pageants of all history, the 1911 Delhi Durbar for King George V, were not the signs to which Kipling looked for an understanding of what was going on in the Empire. Instead, he looked to people who knew themselves, were sensitive to Indian customs, and respected the demands of the Indian climate and terrain. It was on the work of unglamorous but essential human beings that the Empire was built. In his short stories he commemorates such devoted public servants as Orde and Tallantire in 'The Head of the District', Captain O'Neill in 'With the Main Guard', John Chinn in 'The Tomb of His Ancestors', Inspector Strickland in 'Miss Yougall's Sais', and the professionals Mottram, Dr. Spurstow, and Hummel in 'The Bridge Builders.' In Kipling's view, the value of the work and service performed by these men, without expectation of applause or even of sympathy, is both a code and a necessity for living responsibly. Still others of this kind celebrated by him are the reformer, the explorer and the settler who are building for 'the days that are the destinies' and for 'an host unborn.' Thus the generations of Man interlock overcoming space and time in service to each other.

Another practical purpose was intended by the code of work and service. Soldiers, administrators, engineers, doctors and technicians also find that work is an antidote to boredom and to madness.

Especially in remote districts of India, human life without work and service quickly becomes nothing. So it is, writes Kipling in his story 'Pig', that 'most Assistant Commissioners develop a bent for some special work after their first hot weather in the country.' Without work, madness or suicide are inescapable results of life's lack of purpose. Work and service, therefore, become healing activities not only for the receiver but also for the givers, a cardinal theme throughout Kipling's work. Sometimes this theme is brought forth by showing characters learning their limitations after breaking under the strain of overwork. But there are studies wherein overwork results not from healthy dedication at all but from despair, a problem struggled with by a writer who had not only observed despair at work in others but who had suffered its weight more than once himself.

Kipling's belief in the work and service ethic had its source in something deeper than widely held, commonsensical views that work and service are good, mundane forms of psychotherapy. His great characters are those ones who 'in their single selves' have observed, reflected and acted, thus continuing to learn about mankind and his surroundings. They learn how to work with other human beings and how to interpret situations in which they find themselves; hence the appropriateness or, better still, the wisdom of their conduct. Nevertheless, during the processes of observation and reflection, the inevitable and the everlasting questions present themselves. Who am I? What is my meaning? What is the meaning of what I am doing? What is its value? Into the minds of these characters, and into Kipling's mind, steal the suspicions that perhaps Man's efforts are a cipher at best, maybe even nothing, relative to 'the artifice of eternity,' as Yeats puts it. Is work the game we are compelled to play in order to distract ourselves as much as possible from the unknown and the silence that confront our questionings? Does work healthily prevent our looking too often directly on *nada*?

It soon dawns upon his readers that one of Kipling's anxieties is that the sagas of human striving, achievement, failure, revival, suffering and triumph may be valued in the long run simply as distractions from *nada* with entire generations playing the game of work not only to put food in their bellies but also to keep out oblivion. Is the British Empire but one of the games the generations play, notable only because it is larger in scale than most work games?

Kipling's pessimistic view – the cyclical view of history – often obtrudes itself into his writings and overwhelms his evolutionary,

optimistic view. Midway through his life, especially after the South African War, the cyclical view enters increasingly into his thinking. It seems more and more likely to him, judging from his essay 'The Riddle of the Empire' and from his private correspondence, that the British Empire was destined to imitate the decline of the Roman Empire. If the imperial game collapses then Kipling and those playing it, millions of people the world over, are suddenly left again lacking underpinnings, facing eternal *nada*:

Heart may fail, and Strength outwear, and Purpose turn to Loathing,  
But the everyday affair of business, meals and clothing  
Builds a bulkhead 'twixt Despair and the Edge of Nothing.  
(*'The Supports'*, 1919)

Lacking a life-absorbing game, man is confronted by nothing else but the return of ancient western and eastern spectres such as capricious Fortune, Fate and the Grim Reaper. This is the often overlooked possibility in the early works *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888), and *Under the Deodars* (1888) wherein readers find an undertow of melancholy as the members of a small, impermanent hierarchy play out the vainglories of their uncertain lives.

On most occasions, however, Kipling offers himself to his audience as a stoic, his tough will bent on renewal of human resources, facing up to the possibility of nothingness and at last appealing to an outside power, notwithstanding his full awareness of human failure, material and spiritual. Written only one year before his untimely death, the last stanzas of 'Hymn of Breaking Strain' (1935) are impressive in their recognition of the possibility of nothingness and the likelihood of human failure:

We hold all Earth to plunder –  
All Time and Space as well –  
Too wonder-stale to wonder  
at each new miracle;  
Till in the mid-illusion  
Of Godhead 'neath our hand,  
Falls multiple confusion  
*Of all we did or planned.*

We only of Creation  
(Oh, luckier bridge and rail!)  
Abide the twin damnation –  
To fail and know we fail.

Yet we – by which sole token  
We know we once were Gods –  
Take shame in being broken  
However great the odds –  
*The Burden or the Odds.*

Oh, veiled and secret Power  
Whose paths we seek in vain,  
Be with us in our hour  
Of overthrow and pain;  
That we – by which sure token  
We know Thy ways are true –  
In spite of being broken,  
*Because of being broken,  
May rise and build anew,  
Stand up and build anew!*

Perhaps, temporarily, Kipling resorted to an ancient conceit of Art which claims that, relatively speaking, the sole permanence available to anxious Man takes the shape of the monuments of the intellect, in particular, the word of the writer:

What boots it on the Gods to call?  
Since, unanswered or unheard,  
We perish with the Gods and all  
Things made – except the Word.  
(‘A Recantation’, 1917)

The old Latin poet, Horace, cocked his snook at bronze monuments, at the very pyramids, (Odes, III, 30), in challenging death and time to obliterate his memorial, that of a body of poetry which would live on in the minds and hearts of posterity. But this *exegi monumentum* theme, as Coleridge more recently testifies in ‘Kubla Khan’, is a flimsy comfort, and Kipling knew it. We may be tempted to regard Kipling, with his many invocations to the Almighty, as a man who, despite his darkest visions, made the blind leap of faith: *credo quia impossibile est*. It may be so. On the other hand, we must be prepared to discover that that was a shirking of familiar terrors which he never allowed himself.

NORMAN MACKENZIE

NOTES

- 1 *Something of Myself*. (London: Macmillan, 1937).
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 3 'The First Years', *The Listener*, (BBC Publications), Nov. 22, 1962, pp. 853-56.
- 4 *Something of Myself*. p. 3.