CONCLUSION

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) was for the last decade of the nineteenth century and at least the first two decades of the twentieth the most popular writer in English in both verse and prose, throughout the English-speaking world. Widely regarded as the greatest living English poet and story-teller winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, recipient of honorary degrees from the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and the Sorbonne, he also enjoyed popular acclaim that extended far beyond academic and literary circles.

W. M. W. Tillyard observes,

Kipling stood, it can be argued in a special relation to the age in which he lived. He was primarily an artist with his individual vision and techniques but his was also a profoundly representative consciousness. He seems to give expression to a whole phase of national experience, symbolizing in appropriate forms the sense of the significance of life he [felt] acting as the unconscious metaphysic of the time.¹

He is in important ways a spokesman for his age with its sense of imperial destiny, its fascinated contemplation of the unfamiliar world of soldiering, its confidence in engineering and technology, its respect for craftsmanship, and its dedication to Carlyle’s gospel of work. That age is one about which many Britons-and to a lesser extent Americans and West Europeans-now feel an exaggerated sense of guilt; and insofar as Kipling was its spokesman, he has become our scapegoat. Hence, in part at least the tendency in recent decades to dismiss him so contemptuously, so unthinkingly, and so mistakenly. Whereas if we approach him more historically, less hysterically, we shall find in this very relation to his age a cultural phenomenon of absorbing interest.
Here, after all, we have the last Imperialist English author to appeal to readers of all social classes and all cultural groups, from lowbrow to highbrow; and the last poet to command a mass audience. He was an author who could speak directly to the man in the street, or for that matter in the barrack-room or factory, more effectively than any left-wing writer of the 1930s or the present day, but who spoke just as directly and effectively to literary men like Edmund Gosse and Andrew Lang; to academics like David Masson, George Saintsbury, and Charles Eliot Norton; to the professional and service classes who took him to their hearts; and to creative writers of the stature of Henry James, who had some important reservations to record, but who declared in 1892 that “Kipling strikes me personally as the most complete man of genius (as distinct from fine intelligence) that I have ever known,” and who wrote an enthusiastic introduction to Mine Own People in which he stressed Kipling’s remarkable appeal to the sophisticated critic as well as to the common reader.

Andrew Rutherford thinks an innovator and a virtuoso in the art of the short story, Kipling does more than any of his predecessors to establish it as a major genre. But within it he moves confidently between the poles of sophisticated simplicity and the complex, closely organized, elliptical and symbolic mode of his later works which reveal him as an unexpected contributor to modernism.

Kipling is a writer who extends the range of English literature in both subject-matter and technique. He plunges readers into new realms of imaginative experience which then become part of our shared inheritance. His anthropological but warmly human interest in mankind in all its varieties produces, for example, sensitive, sympathetic vignettes of Indian life and character which culminate in Kim. His sociolinguistic experiments with proletarian speech as an artistic medium in Barrack-Room Ballads and his rendering of the life of private soldiers in all their unregenerate humanity
gave a new dimension to war literature. His portrayal of Anglo-Indian life ranges from cynical triviality in some of the *Plain Tales from the Hills* to the stoical nobility of the best things in *Life*’ *Handicap* and *The Day’s Work*. Indeed Mrs Hauksbe’s Simla, Mulvaney’s barrack-room, Dravot and Carnehan’s search for a kingdom in Kafiristan, Holden’s illicit, star-crossed love, Stalky’s apprenticeship, Kim’s Grand Trunk Road, ‘William’s famine relief expedition, and the Maltese Cat’s game at Umballa, establish the vanished world of Empire for us as they established the unknown world of Empire for an earlier generation, in all its pettiness and grandeur, its variety and energy, its miseries, its hardships, and its heroism.

Andrew Sanders calls Kipling as a colonial writer and he compares him to Conrad. He observes,

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), the apostrophizer of ‘The White Man’s Burden’ (a poem addressed, incidentally, to the American imperial mission in the Philippines), has all too often been seen as the noisiest popular apologist for the climactic expansion of the British Empire.³

Kipling, born in Bombay, was, however, always more stimulated by the idea of the British imperial adventure in India than by the less romantic drive to acquire a colonial hegemony over Africa. He proved the most perceptive observer of the quirky anomalies of the British Raj in the relatively peaceful and prosperous period between the suppression of the Mutiny of 1857-8 and the growth of independence movements at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Kipling is not, however, an untroubled apologist for the common man’s idea of Empire and of the colonial races. His values may well be those of a world of masculine action, but he is also a writer who, at his best, is always alert to subtleties, to human weakness, to manipulation, vulnerability, and failure. India with its empty spaces and its densely overcrowded cities, its hill-stations and its hot deserts, its princely states and
its cantonments, conditioned him; its ancient, mutually severed cultures fascinated, rather than overwhelmed him (as is the case with some other English writers). He retained the detachment of a European outsider, but he tried to see India from the inside, not as a curious interloper or as an obsessed neophyte.

Kipling was a great fabulist. He was a fine children’s writer. In a completely different vein Kipling’s genius for the animal fable as a means of inculcating human truths opens up a whole new world of joyous imagining in the two Jungle Books. In another vein again there are the stories in which he records his delighted discovery of the English countryside, its people and traditions, after he had settled at Bateman’s in Sussex: England, he told Rider Haggard in 1902,

‘is the most wonderful foreign land I have ever been in and he made it peculiarly his own. Its past gripped his imagination as strongly as its present, and the two books of Puck stories show what Eliot describes as “the development of the imperial... into the historical imagination.”

In another vein again Kipling figures as the bard of engineering and technology. From the standpoint of world history, two of Britain’s most important areas of activity in the nineteenth century were those of industrialism and imperialism, both of which had been neglected by literature prior to Kipling’s advent. There is a substantial body of work on the Condition of England Question and the socioeconomic effects of the Industrial Revolution; but there is comparatively little imaginative response in literature (as opposed to painting) to the extraordinary inventive energy, the dynamic creative power, which manifests itself in the work of engineers like Telford, Rennie, Brunel, and the brothers Stephenson men who revolutionized communications within Britain by their road, rail and harbour systems, producing in the process masterpieces of industrial art, and
who went on to revolutionize ocean travel as well. Such achievements are acknowledged on a sub-literary level by Samuel Smiles in his best-selling *Lives of the Engineers* (1861-2). They are acknowledged also by Carlyle, who celebrates the positive as well as denouncing the malign aspects of the transition from the feudal to the industrial world, insisting as he does that the true modern epic must be technological, not military. That epic has never been written in its entirety, but Kipling came nearest to achieving its aims in verses like ‘McAndrew’s Hymn’ (*The Seven Seas*) and stories like ‘The Ship that Found Herself’ and ‘Bread upon the Waters’ (*The Day’s Work*) in which he shows imaginative sympathy with the machines themselves as well as sympathy with the men who serve them. He comes nearer, indeed, than any other author to fulfilling Wordsworth’s prophecy about science.

This is one aspect of Kipling’s commitment to the world of work, which as C. S. Lewis observes imaginative literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had [with a few exceptions] quietly omitted, or at least thrust into the background, though it occupies most of the waking hours of most men.

Kipling repudiates the unspoken assumption of most novelists that the really interesting part of life takes place outside working hours: men at work or talking about their work are among his favourite subjects. The qualities men show in their work, and the achievements that result from it (bridges built, ships salvaged, pictures painted, famines relieved) are the very stuff of much of Kipling’s fiction. Yet there also runs through his œuvre, like a figure in the carpet, a darker, more pessimistic vision of the impermanence, the transience—but not the worthlessness—of all achievement. This underlies his delighted engagement with contemporary reality, and gives a deeper resonance to his finest work in which human endeavour is celebrated none the less because it must ultimately yield to depth and mutability.
References:


