

RUDYARD KIPLING AT 150

Delighting children, but not all adults.

(Intelligent Life)

Some years ago I found myself on a canoeing safari in Zimbabwe. It was an exhilarating experience, but I couldn't shake off the suspicion that our tough-as-rhinoceros-hide guide saw me as a contemptible tenderfoot. Then, one evening by the camp fire, a poem by Rudyard Kipling changed everything.

I'd first read "The Way Through the Woods" as a schoolboy, and remained in thrall to the incantatory rhythms and internal rhymes evoking a summer's evening "When the night-air cools on the trout-ringed pools/ Where the otter whistles his mate". Called upon to entertain my travelling companions, I recited it from memory – and found our guide staring at me with undisguised awe. Kipling himself could hardly have devised a more telling example of his work's appeal to every type of person.

One hundred and fifty years after his birth, the first British writer to win the Nobel Prize hovers on the edge of acceptability. To many he remains a shameless apologist for British colonialism; others prefer to think of him as the avuncular author of "The Just So Stories". Recently, however, our obsession with the First World War has cast him in a more sympathetic light: he is respected as a driving force in the Imperial War Graves Commission, and the formulator of the phrase which graces thousands of anonymous headstones, 'A soldier of the Great War known unto God.'

It was this work that inspired "The Gardener" – a short story, in my view, with few equals. It tells of a bereaved woman, Helen Turrell, who travels to France to visit the grave of the young soldier she treated as a son. In a cemetery containing "a merciless sea of black crosses", she meets a man who – in a deliberate echo of the Easter story – she mistakes for a gardener; and the few words he speaks to her turn our understanding of her life upside down. It's a tale of grief and compassion which encapsulates the suffering of an entire generation, and what is most brilliant about it is that the revelation which shakes the reader is something Helen hardly notices.

T.S. Eliot argued that Kipling was a rare example of a writer who was equally good at poetry and prose. But his versatility goes beyond this: he produced first-class novels, short stories and children's books; he was a master of adventure, comedy, tragedy and – what is

often forgotten – satire. His poem “Mesopotamia, 1917” was directed at stay-at-home warmongers, but could have been written for the architects of our present economic crisis:
Shall we only threaten and be angry for an hour?

When the storm is ended shall we find

How softly but how swiftly they have sidled back to power,

By the favour and contrivance of their kind?

It’s hard, too, to think of a writer with a greater historical and geographical scope. Among his short stories, “The Church That Was at Antioch” gives fresh life to a Biblical tale, while “The Eye of Allah” considers medieval science; “The Limitations of Pambé Serang” tells of a feud between two sailors pursued from Yemen to England by way of Bombay and Hong Kong.

It was his breadth of vision – together with an ear that could capture a multitude of voices, from Cockney to Hindi – that made Kipling the great chronicler of the British Empire. This is not, of course, a fashionable thing to be in a post-colonial age, and one cannot escape the fact that he shared his contemporaries’ fondness for generalising about races and nationalities, often in patronising and sometimes in denigrating terms; but he is more a portraitist than a propagandist. Though he may see the British as the fittest rulers, there is no pretence that they are in every way superior, and to write him off as a bigot is hopelessly simplistic. One of his most moving stories, “Without Benefit of Clergy”, focuses on an ill-fated love affair between a British official and an Indian woman; at the end, the Englishman wishes to preserve their house as a shrine to the past, but his native landlord is wiser: “ ‘It shall be pulled down, and the Municipality shall make a road across, as they desire, from the burning-ghat to the city wall, so that no man may say where this house stood.’ ”

As for class and creed, he sets no store by either. Kim’s eponymous hero has grown up as a penniless bazaar boy and is none the worse for it: open to every new experience, he is happy to throw in his lot with an elderly Tibetan lama who seems at first a comic figure but proves to be the novel’s philosophical lodestar. The India Kipling portrays is one in which holy men are respected even by those of other faiths, and perhaps his most important message for our own century is one of religious tolerance:

My brother kneels (so saith Kabir)

To stone and brass in heathen wise,

But in my brother’s voice I hear

My own unanswered agonies.

His God is as his Fates assign –

His prayer is all the world's – and mine.