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A REVIEW OF *KIPLING AND YEATS AT 150: RETROSPECTIVES / PERSPECTIVES*

Promodini Varma and Anubhav Pradhan, eds., *Kipling and Yeats at 150: Retrospectives / Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 286, ISBN: 9780367728328

Reviewed by Kaori Nagai

Rudyard Kipling was born on December 30, 1865; in his memoir, *Something of Myself*, he congratulates his first daughter on “her sense of the fitness of things” in joining him in the end-of-year club by being born on the twenty-ninth of the same month, especially as his wife’s birthday falls on New Year Eve.¹ This made his birthday very personal and special for him, besides being an occasion on which he could look back over the entire year.

I begin this review by congratulating Kipling on his “sense of the fitness of things” in having been born in the same year as William Butler Yeats (born June 13, 1865). *Kipling and Yeats at 150: Retrospectives / Perspectives* originated in a series of conferences in Delhi, Rajkot, and Shimla, India held in 2015 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of their births (6). By bringing together recent scholarship on Kipling and Yeats, the book establishes “family” connections between the two through their shared contemporaneity, cultural heritage, and literary tradition, while critically assessing their many differences, both politically and aesthetically. If Kipling had arrived a few days later to join the 1866 birth club, this anniversary volume would not have been possible.

Kipling and Yeats at 150 contains seventeen essays (excluding the introduction), and is divided into four parts: “Influences and Legacies” (Part I), “Self and Society” (Part II), “Craft, Medium, Politics” (Part III), and “Masculinity and/as Empire” (Part IV). Each section is headed by an essay comparing Kipling and Yeats. R. W. Desai’s, which opens Part I, usefully establishes “parallels, divergences, and convergences” between the careers and works of the two authors, to set the tone for the section as well as for the whole volume. Part II is introduced by Malabika Sarkar’s “Yeats, Kipling, and the Haven-Finding Art,” which identifies voyaging to find a sanctuary as a common trope running through the two authors’ works, reflecting their journeys of self-discovery through their interactions with the wider world. In Part III, Robert S. White’s brilliant essay “The Chameleon and the Peacock:

Kipling and Yeats as Creative Readers of Shakespeare” challenges the common perception of Kipling as a bullish, egotistical imperialist by characterizing him as a Keatsian “chameleon”: “driven by open-minded curiosities” (138). Kipling, like Shakespeare before him, fluidly takes on the many different identities of the characters he invents. In contrast, Yeats is a “peacock,” or a Wordsworthian poet of the “egoistical sublime,” who creatively appropriates Shakespeare to enhance his self-expression. In Part IV, Alexander Bubb’s opening essay compares both authors’ aesthetics of violence and heroism to launch the section’s theme. Bubb is the author of *Meeting Without Knowing It: Kipling and Yeats at the Fin de Siècle*,² an innovative and pioneering comparative study which has helped to shape the terms of discussion in this book (15). Bubb’s essay adds to our sense of the volume’s aims and scope, as it gives an account of his experience of studying the two authors together, and of the rewards and challenges of this endeavor. Part IV ends with another comparative essay by Anubhav Pradhan, which also serves as the concluding piece of the volume. Intriguingly titled “Chaps,” the essay argues that Kipling’s and Yeats’s celebrations of masculinity and heroism make apparent the internal fracturing of imperialism as an empire of men; Pradhan does this by drawing on the double meaning of the word “chap,” at once “a man or boy” and “a crack or sore patch on the skin” (256).

Kipling and Yeats at 150 opens with the editors’ statement that “At first sight it does seem that Kipling and Yeats have been by violence yoked together in this volume” (1). One of the book’s suppositions is that Kipling and Yeats, despite their contemporaneity and many similarities, are two very different writers: to quote Bubb, comparing the two has often been described as “pairing chalk and cheese” (213). For me, however, the sense of forced comparison comes more from the fact that twelve out of the seventeen essays in the volume discuss only one author, Kipling or Yeats, without making any reference to the other. This is a missed opportunity, as the main strength lies in its intriguing juxtaposition of Kipling and Yeats scholarship. Some cross-referencing between the Kipling and Yeats chapters would have greatly added to the book’s commitment to cultivating fresh comparative perspectives in which to bring these two seemingly dissimilar authors together.

One thing Kipling and Yeats had in common was their deep interest in, and engagement with, India: “Kipling in more obvious ways but also Yeats, as his advocacy of Mohini Chatterjee, Purohit Swami, and Rabindranath Tagore attests” (1). Interestingly, this collection, in the making of which Indian scholars played a leading role, does not include any essays which compare Kipling’s and Yeats’s attitudes toward India. Instead, several essays offer fascinating interpretations of Kipling’s or Yeats’s texts in light of ancient Indian literature and philosophy. For instance, Amiya Bhushan Sharma, in her essay on Yeats’s

poem “Ego Dominus Tuus,” draws on the Sanskrit concept of *karayitri pratibha* (creative talent) to guide his discussion. I especially enjoyed reading Mythil Kaul’s essay, which discusses the similarities between Kipling’s *Jungle Books* and the *Panchatantra*, and insightfully relates Kipling’s “Law of the Jungle” to “*niti*”: “the wise conduct of life” which Indian fables like the *Panchatantra* teach (41). Similarly, Ruth Vanita offers an Upanishadic reading of Yeats’s “A Prayer for My Daughter,” through which she critiques the unidimensional ways in which European scholars have approached the poem. Nanditha Rajaram Shastry even goes so far as to suggest that Kipling’s famous poem “If” is hardly original but an appropriation of the teachings in *Bhagavad Gita*. I found these readings refreshing and important, as they reverse not only Kipling’s and Yeats’s practices of appropriating oriental texts, but also the Eurocentric critical practices which we are so accustomed to, in which non-Western texts can never be the authoritative frame of reference.

It may be noted that the collection’s emphasis falls more on Kipling than Yeats: eight out of the twelve non-comparative essays are about him. In addition to the two Kipling essays mentioned above, the book collects essays on: Kipling and cultural hybridity (Grover); Kipling as an educator (Krishna); Kipling as a journalist (Lee); Kipling’s Indian short stories (Gupta); Kim and Imperial boyhood (Mudiganti); and Kipling as a global writer (Davies), whose imagination is wired into the expanding network of technologies, such as trains, ships, and even the deep sea cables connecting the world by telegraph. The four Yeats essays include those by Vanita and Sharma discussed above. The remaining two both center on the figure of Yeats as a nationalist writer. Prashant K. Sinha explores Yeats’s political visions through select plays such as *The Countess Cathleen*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and *Purgatory*, and a selection of his nationalist poems. In his “Songs of the Wandering Aengus,” Peter Schulman considers Yeats’s political and literary legacies in his reading of Dorothy Salisbury Davis’s novel *The Habit of Fear* (1987), which traces the protagonist’s journey to conflict-riven Ireland in search of her father, a Yeats-like poet and political activist.

Overall, the collection is a rich record of international collaborations, which offers fresh perspectives not only on both authors, but also on the field of comparative literary study. Now that the celebration of a joint birth anniversary has joined Kipling and Yeats scholars together in an extended family, I hope many future reunions will follow.

NOTES

- 1 Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself*, ed. Robert Hampson, with an introduction by Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), 101.
- 2 Alexander Bubb, *Meeting Without Knowing It: Kipling and Yeats at the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).