



Rudyard Kipling.

Kipling, Rudyard (1865-1936)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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"Seek not to question other than / The books I leave behind," counseled Kipling in "The Appeal," a two-line poem written shortly before his death that editor M. M. Kaye describes as "a plea to posterity to respect his private life." Such an appeal proves especially ironic having been made by a man who deliberately lived by far the greatest part of his life in the public eye.

In his late teens Kipling hurried onto the public stage as a newspaperman in India; the poems and prose vignettes of British colonial and native life in South Asia that he wrote for local publications proved wildly successful when collected and republished in book form in England. They established him as one of the most original voices of his generation. For the entire of his adult life Kipling fashioned himself as the conscience of the English-speaking world, refusing government honors in order to remain free to pontificate publicly on a host of social, political, and economic issues.

Furthermore, Kipling was one of the first international literary celebrities. Thousands of people kept vigil in the streets outside his hotel in New York City when he struggled with near-fatal pneumonia in 1899, and entire communities in Canada waited at local stations to catch a glimpse of the great man as he traveled cross country in a private railway car in 1907.

Yet, as editor Kaye notes, Kipling's posthumously-published autobiography, titled *Something of Myself* (1937), "in fact tells us almost nothing and can be regarded as a smoke-screen, timed to go off after his death and designed to lead would-be biographers astray." The systematic destruction of his private papers (letters, diaries, and drafts of works), begun by Kipling while alive, was continued by his wife after his death, and completed by his daughter following Mrs. Kipling's own demise. Consequently, most of the evidence concerning Kipling's private life has been lost, while suspicion has been aroused of a secret that Kipling and his family hoped to suppress.

That secret, biographer Martin Seymour-Smith concluded in 1989, is that Kipling was in love with a charming, young, American literary agent, Wolcott Balestier, who died suddenly in 1891, and that a grief-stricken Kipling married the man's sister Caroline only six weeks later out of a sense of loyalty to his departed friend and/or guilt over his homosexual desire.

Biography

Kipling was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, on December 30, 1865 to a father who taught at the local crafts school and a mother who would become known as one of the wittiest women in India. He was taken to England at age 6, where his parents enrolled him in a school in Southsea, boarding him with a religiously fundamentalist woman whom Kipling later complained had been physically and emotionally abusive. On holidays, however, he enjoyed visits to his maternal relatives. One of his aunts had married the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones and presided over one of the most artistic and socially liberal households of the time.

A sudden, serious weakening of the boy's eyesight recalled his mother from India to care for him, following which he was enrolled in United Services College, a public school intended to prepare boys for a military career. Kipling's small size (5' 6" in adulthood), weak eyesight, and bookish disposition excluded him from such a life, however. At age 16, having failed to win a scholarship, and his parents being unable to pay his way through university, Kipling returned to India to write for an English-language newspaper in Lahore and, later, in Allahabad. The seven years that he worked in India provided him with the material that he would spend the better part of his creative life turning into stories, poems, children's books, and novels, making him England's unofficial Laureate of Empire.

In 1889, ambitious to make his name in London, the twenty-four-year-old Kipling returned to England, where he quickly established himself as a dominant literary personality. Kipling was an indefatigable writer, producing in his lifetime some eight volumes of verse, sixteen volumes of short fiction, and six novels--including the superb *Kim* (1901), the rousing *Captains Courageous* (1897), and the children's favorites, *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895)--in addition to numerous other volumes of history, travel writing, and war pamphlets. In 1907 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first English author to be so honored.

Kipling suffered two broken marital engagements before he married Caroline Balestier, the sister of his friend Wolcott, in 1892. The Kiplings settled near her family in Brattleboro, Vermont, for several years, until a quarrel with her brother decided their permanent return to England. For nine years they would escape the dampness and chill of the English winter by staying in South Africa, where Kipling's friend Cecil Rhodes provided them a house. Following the death of Rhodes and the British losses in the Boer War, however, the Kiplings wintered most years in the south of France.

Kipling's last years were difficult. The loss of their only son in World War I devastated both parents. Caroline's nervous depressions, coupled with Kipling's own painful stomach difficulties and his disgust with post-war social values, caused them to withdraw further into the isolation of their country estate, Batemans. Kipling died on January 18, 1936 of a duodenal ulcer diagnosed too late for effective treatment. Following cremation, his remains were interred in the Poet's Corner of London's Westminster Abbey, between the tombs of Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy.

Character and Thought

Kipling's imagination was a complex and deeply conflicted one. From all evidence, Kipling was a generous yet extremely difficult person. Not surprisingly, his life was riddled with contradictions.

Although Kipling sustained a cult-like veneration for the man of action, his weak eyesight and small physique excluded him from playing games in school and from serving in the military. He was left with a lifelong admiration for common soldiers and sailors, and a disdain for pacifists. Famous in his lifetime for his descriptions of both jungle life and the daily realities of the common soldier, he was forced to rely entirely upon others for his information.

In his writing Kipling presented a vision of a classless society in which everyone did his or her best to serve the needs of the Empire. Likewise, Kipling valued Freemasonry for its ecumenical nature, and he chose to join lodges with a multi-racial membership. Yet one of the most striking qualities of his work is what Angus Wilson calls "indulged hatred." Kipling used his writing to nurse resentments and settle scores with a ferocity that borders on the pathological.

Such writing seems to have been a necessary act of exorcism for him, the periodic expulsion of venom allowing him to lead the life of quiet retreat at Batemans that he valued. But even his friends could be shocked by the vicious hatred that he promulgated towards Germany, Jews, pacifists, members of the Liberal Party, academics, members of the literary world, suffragettes, and--following World War I--Roman Catholicism and the papacy.

As generous as Kipling could be towards those whom he respected (he was a great admirer of Islam because of the high level of civilization that he associated with a Muslim presence), he was enraged by anyone who threatened his sense of an ordered, disciplined existence. For example, he dismissed Albert Einstein as "certainly a Hebrew" and the scientist's breakthrough description of space as being "warped" as "only another little contribution to assisting the world towards flux and disintegration."

The resolution of any conflict, Kipling concluded fairly early in life, lies in obedience to Law, which he posited as the only thing standing between humankind and anarchy. In the most famous of his poems--"If," "Recessional," "The White Man's Burden"--Kipling articulates a doctrine of discipline and self-sacrifice in which the individual forsakes his own desire for the good of the Commonwealth. For Kipling, the individual is most himself when he does his duty, which includes recognizing the superior person or cause to whom he most owes allegiance.

Such a stance proved responsible for the most glaring contradiction in Kipling's character. As Angus Wilson points out, Kipling possessed a deep sympathy for native Indian culture, particularly Indian religion. And in works like "The Ballad of East and West," he asserted that friendship and action are superior to race and social convention. Unlike many of his fellow colonials, Kipling satirized the social pretensions of the British in India, and frankly acknowledged the inadequacies of British rule. "England," he complained in a letter to Cecil Rhodes, "is a stuffy little place, mentally, morally and physically," whereas India was expansive and generous.

Yet Kipling never questioned the social distinctions made in the colonial order between Anglo-Europeans and native Indians, and was outraged by the liberal clamor for Indian self-rule. However superior he found India to be to Britain in some ways, that country remained in his mind the home of "the happy Asiatic disorder" that required the superior British organization of law and order if it were not to devolve into complete chaos.

And it is as a temptation to disorder that Kipling, although himself deeply homosocially oriented, viewed and feared homosexual passion.

Colonialism and Homosexuality

Kipling respected marriage as the custom or tradition that prevented society from slipping into sexual anarchy. Yet, as an early biographer, the third earl of Birkenhead, tactfully observed, "Among the emotions that were to agitate him so fiercely a capacity for the passionate love of woman never seems to have found a place." In his imperialist view, women are finally a distraction from duty, and the distrust or fear of women is expressed repeatedly in his writing. (The story "Love-O'-Women," whose title echoes biblical David's lament for his beloved Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1: 26, concerns heterosexually-transmitted syphilis.)

Kipling's nature was so deeply homosocial that even after he married, he proved incapable of representing heterosexual love in anything other than a stilted, wooden way. In adulthood, he bonded closely with men like Henry James (who gave away the bride at the Kiplings' wedding), Edmund Gosse, and Cecil Rhodes who are now recognized to have been discreet or closeted homosexuals. Contemporaries questioned Kipling's orientation. For example, writer Enid Bagnold wondered--after she had become friendly with Kipling and his wife--if the older man was not a repressed homosexual.

As Martin Seymour-Smith interprets the facts of Kipling's life, Kipling feared expressing homosexual desire because he associated homosexual acts with "beastliness" and anarchy. His small size made him particularly vulnerable to other boys' advances in school, further coloring with anxiety any desire that he may have felt. Although in later life he publicly insisted that United Services College had been free of "uncleanness" while he was in residence there, he complained privately of the sexual activities that he had indeed regularly witnessed among his contemporaries, and in which he himself was accused of participating by one of his

schoolmasters.

Kipling's tepid engagements to Florence Garrard and Caroline Taylor seem to have been attempts on his part to will himself into being in love with a woman and achieving the semblance of "normalcy." The great love of his life, Seymour-Smith posits, was Wolcott Balestier, the "dear boy" to whom Kipling addressed in manuscript the poem "The Long Trail," which is an invitation to join Kipling in a life of travel where "the trail is always new!" (Significantly, "dear boy" is the same address that Henry James used with his younger male intimates, including the same Wolcott Balestier.) Balestier collaborated with Kipling on *The Naulahka* (1891), a novel about life in places on the margins of Anglo-European civilization for which Kipling wrote the chapters on India and Balestier those on the American frontier.

According to Seymour-Smith, Kipling hastily married Balestier's sister when he was depressed, first, by Balestier's rejection of his travel plan, and then by the latter's sudden death from typhoid while Kipling was journeying solo abroad. An unappealing woman who seemed as uncomfortable with physical pleasure as he, Caroline proved a strong-willed helpmeet who ordered the writer's life and killed any urge that he might momentarily think to indulge. She proved a formidable dragon whom he might keep at the gate to police his errant desires.

With the destruction of the Kipling family's private papers--in particular the surviving daughter's destruction of Caroline's diary--Seymour-Smith's thesis can neither be confirmed nor firmly refuted. The serious reader should, thus, be careful to consult Harry Ricketts' and David Gilmour's alternative versions of Kipling's life against Seymour-Smith's summary of events or Leon Edel's conclusion that "Between Balestier and Kipling it was a case of camaraderie and of love, almost at first sight. Platonic, quite clearly. Both would have been terrified at any other suggestion."

Seymour-Smith is particularly persuasive, however, when he emphasizes that at the outset of his adult life Kipling clearly felt most comfortable living on the margins of respectability. An insomniac, he began to make nocturnal rambles as a teenager in London where, Kipling said of his younger self, "the night got into his head." Upon his return to India at age 16, he explored Lahore's opium dens, gambling rooms, and houses of prostitution, which figure in his first novel, *The Light That Failed* (1890).

As Robert Aldrich has demonstrated, the colonial world offered sexually conflicted men opportunities to act upon their desires by placing them in sultry, exotic locales where the rules of Anglo-European civilized behavior were relaxed or could be safely ignored. Kipling's authoritarian, imperialist impulse apparently evolved to check his growing fascination with the illicit. The strict adherence to Law and Duty, Kipling grew convinced, was the only way to keep civilization on a steady course. Tellingly, Kipling, late in life, described homosexual urges as an infectious bacteria that threatened the body politic. Little wonder that he, like so many of his fellow imperialists, was fascinated by flagellation, a sexually conflicted man's way of simultaneously indulging and punishing errant urges.

Conclusion

Kipling's appeal to the reader to concentrate on his work rather than the details of his life may prove more troublesome than he anticipated. For it encourages the reader to speculate upon the significance of some key texts.

Consider, for example, Kipling's description of the "singular, though unwashed, beauty" of the eponymous hero of *Kim*, and of the boy's recurring need to resist the sexual advances of women, particularly the Woman of Shamlegh. Referring to the Buddhist commitment to the path of righteousness and to the British attempt to enlist him in their undercover operations, Kim wonders "How can a man follow the Way or the Great Game when he is so-always pestered by women?" Kim himself proves a distraction to others, as when a Hindu boy, threatened by Kim's arrival in Lurgan Sahib's household, irrationally poisons his beloved master from jealousy.

Perhaps nowhere else does Kipling articulate the powerful emotional bond that exists between men in a homosocial environment than in the moving monologue, "Follow Me 'Ome," in which one soldier laments the recent loss of his comrade. The speaker juxtaposes the loyalty of the dead man's horse, which "won't take 'er feed 'cause o' waitin' for 'is step," with the alacrity with which the dead man's girlfriend has found herself a new lover, "which is just what a girl would do." Such misogyny is the inevitable corollary of homosocial affection. "Oh, passin' the love o' women," the speaker exclaims at the close of the poem, echoing biblical David's lament for his beloved friend, Jonathan, and investing his love for the dead man with tragic grandeur.

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Raymond-Jean Frontain is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.

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