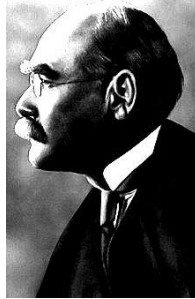


Kipling: “Will the Real Rudyard Kipling Please Stand Up?”

The Novel Club of Cleveland, February, 2019
John P Conomy MD JD



Rudyard Kipling

“Kipling strikes me personally as the most complete man of genius, as distinct from intelligence, that I ever known.”
Henry James

“Rudyard Kipling is a jingo imperialist...who was morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting.”
George Orwell

“Kipling is still and author who can inspire passionate disagreement and his place in literary and cultural history is far from settled.”
Douglas Kerr

This is not your usual Novel Club of Cleveland biographic review. There is as fine, thoughtful, detailed and chronological exposition of dates, place and time regarding Kipling available on Wikipedia. It is worth a read. Here are the bald facts: He was born in Bombay, now Mumbai, on December 30, 1865 and died in London at age 70 years on January 18, 1936. In between these events, he traveled the world, lived and work in India, England and the United States, wrote voluminously in collections of novels, short stories and poetry, married, had children, won the Nobel Prize for Literature, turned down a Knighthood and the opportunity to be the Poet Laureate of England and is now entombed in the Poets Corner of Westminster Cathedral amidst writers, admirals, generals, politicians, giants of business and industry, royals and other assorted grandees of the British Empire.

He loved India with the kind of affection I have seen in my own friends whose expatriate families have served their mother country there going back five generations. He left Bombay as a child, returned to England to live with relatives near Bath, and attended a frigid, Victorian school where he regularly had the hell beaten out of him. He returned to India as a teenager, and became a newspaper reporter, and a regular attendee at men’s clubs, played men’s games, and fell deeply in love with men’s ideals, particularly those which at least to him, resounded in physical strength, patriotism, moral rectitude and religious righteousness, at least as he conceived these things. Notions of moral and physical strength, duty and romantic devotion to stern, often impossible ideals, permeate the tsunami of writings he authored during his life. Given the sheer volume of his writing, it is hard for me to imagine he was ever without an inkpot and ream of paper at his ready.

2.

He was warm in his admiration and indeed, love, for those strong people he admired and imitated, much more abundantly expressed on paper than in his real life.

“... Tho’ I’ve belted you an’ flayed you, by the livin’ Gawd that made you,
Your’e a better man than I am, Gunga Din.”



Peacock Feathers, Pench, India, 2018

JPC

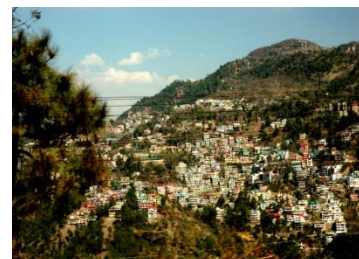
His parents were well connected. His father was a sculptor, and the Architectural Director at the School of Art at the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeeb Institute, Bombay. His mother, Alice McDonald, was a moving force, a vivacious Doyen among British expatriates of whom it was said that “she and dullness could not live in the same room.” He was a first cousin three-time British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. He lived the life of the Raj, writing, being a fly-on-the-wall in soldier’s drinking clubs, going to bed late and rising before lunch, and a graduate of United Services College, Devon, he settled somehow for non-membership in the Oxbridge-Sandhurst Clubs of the day. He worked productively, survived monsoons and escaped the oven heat of Bombay by escaping to Simla in the Himalayas for a month or more each year.



Poor Family’s Hovel



Christ Church Anglican Cathedral
The Kipling’s were Prominent Members



Mountainside Housing

Simla, JPC, 2018

3.

In 1892 Kipling married Carrie Balestier, three years his senior, in London. Henry James gave the bride away. They departed for the USA amidst an influenza epidemic, and via Yokohama and San Francisco, they landed completely broke in Vermont. Recovering from penury and Carrie pregnant, they settled near Brattleboro in a hire-purchase rustic cabin they called "Bliss Cottage." Their first child, Josephine, was born there, and the Jungle Books saw their birth there as well. Bliss already dwindling, the family moved to larger quarters called "Naualakha" near the Connecticut River. The family grew with the addition of daughter Elsie and son John. Conan Doyle was a visitor to their home. Bliss bottomed with the death of Elsie at age 6 from pneumonia, and Kipling found himself in both disputes and litigation with his neighbors, whom he accused of anti-British bias. In 1896, the family packed their bags and settled in Devon. Writing continued in torrents. *Travel of a Thousand Leagues* never stopped, and in 1900, he found time to attend the Boer War in South Africa.

Personal sadness plagued him. He never recovered from Josephine's death, and his son John, for whom he had personally arranged a position as a 2nd Lt. in the Irish Guards, was killed at the Battle of Loos (France). A body believed to be his was recovered from the battlefield in 1992. To add to the loss of Josephine (the bliss in Bliss Cottage), he now assumed perpetual guilt and mourning over the loss of his son. Kipling's "My Boy, Jack" was written about him.



Josephine



Elsie, Jack and Josephine



Lt. John Kipling

As years passed, and fame and fortune grew, Kipling did not. He became increasingly reactionary in his criticism, intolerant of virtually any view not his own on any subject whatever but never wavering in his view of the military tradition and strong men. He never really fancied Hitler, and eventually gave up marking books in his gargantuan library with Swastikas as his own stamp, saying it was Sanskrit. He long admired Mussolini before he hated him, and despised liberals of any stripe, particularly the likes of Liberal Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald, considering the whole batch of dissenters "Bolsheviks" or "Fascists." Catholics, Irishmen, Huns, the Treaty of Versailles and Oswald Mosely were beneath contempt. He loved King George V, the French and Theodore Roosevelt. He died at age 70 after undergoing surgery for a bleeding duodenal ulcer. At his burial, his ashes were draped with the Union Jack, and a Military Band played his farewell dirge.

4.



Rudyard's Wife and Posthumous Editor, Caroline "Carrie" Kipling

In an effort to find the real Rudyard Kipling, I did what all loyal Novel Club Members would do. I turned to the books. I thought his post-humously published autobiography, "Something of Myself," and a book of uncollected prose fictions entitled "The Cause of Humanity and Other Stories." Both works are edited by Thomas Pinney, but beware, the "Something of Myself" was heavily edited by the Widow Kipling. I wanted to know how a man who could delight generations of small children, inspire their parents and grandparents, and who could expel writings faster than the printing press could get them out really experienced his life and times. The answer to this question is "I don't know."

"Something of Myself" contains literally nothing of the "myself," and the "something" portrays an unyielding, acerbic, angry, stiff-necked, more than mildly misogynistic, and a more than slightly bigoted man. "The Cause of Humanity..." is a dull, silly and dithering piece of writing, and everything in it has some sort of bothersome moral. It should be avoided. Gertrude Stein could have written it.

In the end, I cannot begin to analyze how this man, this Kipling who could spellbind children for generations with Mowgli, Kim and Jungle Books, and stir the readers of the world with verse for generations, really grasped the world about him. I could not make the real Rudyard Kipling stand up. I must settle for the disturbing conclusion that both Henry James and George Orwell were right, spot on about Rudyard Kipling. And I agree with Douglas Kerr.



The Author with Friends at Lucknow, Kipling Land, 2018