

The Masonic Poetry of Rudyard Kipling.

An Appreciation by Bro John Davies, Given before the Master, Brethren and Visitors of the Lodge of St. Michael no 2933 E.C. on Thursday 2nd February 2006.

W.Master, Brother Wardens and brethren, it gives me great pleasure to present this short paper entitled *The Masonic poetry of Rudyard Kipling*, which is a personal appreciation of some of his Masonic verse in particular, and his contribution to literature in general.

As an introduction we should perhaps familiarise ourselves with his life and work, in order to place him in the frame of history, and to appreciate how his art was influenced by external events.

Rudyard Joseph Kipling was born in Bombay in 1865. His father, John Lockwood Kipling, was the author and illustrator of *Beast and Man in India* and his mother, Alice, was the sister of Lady Burne-Jones. In 1871 Kipling was brought home from India and spent five unhappy years with a foster family in Southsea, an experience he later drew on in *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* (1888.) The years he spent at the United Services College, a school for officers' children, are depicted in *Stalky and Co*, (1899), and the character of Beetle is something of a self-portrait. It was during his time at the college that he began writing poetry and *Schoolboy Lyrics* was published privately in 1881. In the following year he returned to India and started work as a journalist in Lahore where he parents were now living, and produced a body of work, stories, sketches and poems - notably *Plain Tales from the Hills*, which made him an instant literary celebrity when he returned to England in 1889. *Barrack Room Ballads* published in 1892 contains some of his most popular pieces, including *Mandalay*, *Gunga Din* and *The Mother Lodge*. In this collection Kipling experimented with form and dialect, notably the cockney accent of the soldier poems, but the influence of hymns, music-hall songs, ballads and public poetry can be found throughout his verse.

In 1892 he married an American, Caroline Balestier, and from 1892 to 1896 they lived in Vermont, where Kipling wrote *The Jungle Book* published in 1894. In 1901 came *Kim* and in 1902 the *Just So Stories*. Tales of every kind continued to flow from his pen, but *Kim* is generally thought to be his greatest long work, putting him high among the chroniclers of the British Empire.

On 5th April 1886 He was initiated a Freemason in the Lodge Hope and Perseverance, No. 782, E.C., at Lahore, by dispensation from the District Grand Master, Kipling being only 20 years old at the time. His proposer was Wor. Bro. Colonel O. Menzies; he was seconded by Bro. C. Brown. He was initiated by the W.M., Bro. Colonel G. B. Wolseley. He was passed on May 3rd following, there being only seven Brethren present, and raised on the 6th December, 1886. He was for a short time Secretary of the Lodge. In 1887 Kipling became a Mark Master and a Royal Ark Mariner. Having left Lahore to reside at Allahabad, on April 17th, 1888, he became a member of the old Lodge, "Independence with Philanthropy," Allahabad. In March, 1889, he was put on the absent list of that Lodge, and resigned in 1895 from America where he was then

residing. From the time he finally left India 1889 until his death in 1936 there are few records of him attending lodge, although he was an elected honorary member of several English, and especially Sussex lodges. In 1918 he was elected member of the Correspondence Circle of Qautuor Coronati Lodge no. 2076 but there are no records of him submitting any research papers. His active participation in organised freemasonry therefore effectively ended when he left India for the last time aged twenty five.ⁱ

From his autobiography published posthumously in 1937, *Something of Myself*-

“In '85 I was made a Freemason by dispensation (Lodge Hope and Perseverance 782 E.C.), being under age, because the Lodge hoped for a good Secretary. They did not get him, but I helped, and got Father to advise in decorating the bare walls of the Masonic Hall with hangings after the prescription of Solomon's Temple. Here I met Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, members of the Arya and Brahma Samaj, and a Jew tyler, who was priest and butcher to his little community in the city. So yet another world opened to me which I needed.”

From 1902 Kipling made his home in Sussex, but he continued to travel widely and wrote some excellent reportage on the Boer War. However, many of the views he expressed were rejected by anti-imperialists who accused him of jingoism and a love of violence. Though rich and successful, he never again enjoyed the literary esteem of his early years. With the onset of the Great War, his work became a great deal more sombre. The stories he subsequently wrote, *A Diversity of Creatures*, *Debits and Credits* and *Limits and Renewals* are now thought by many to contain some of his finest writing. The death of his only son in 1915 also contributed to a new inwardness of vision.

Kipling refused to accept the role of Poet Laureate and other civil honours, but he was the first English writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize, in 1907. He died in 1936. His autobiographical fragment *Something of Myself* was published the following year.ⁱⁱ

The famous Masonic poem *The Mother Lodge* relates to Kipling's own Mother Lodge, Hope and Perseverance no 782 in Lahore. There is a sprinkling of poetic license here because many members of the real lodge were in fact high ranking British army officers, as we have seen, but Kipling omits mention of them, and instead he includes more humble brethren in this idealised lodge. A concept of a multiracial and classless brotherhood of man runs through much of his prose and verse, and stands in stark contrast to the much maligned and apparently racist *White Man's Burden* and *Recessional*.

Kipling was a versatile and complex artist who wrote in many genres, which often reflected opposing social and political stances, and as such his work is extremely difficult to categorise. He was as much the product of a typically middle class, conservative upbringing in the late days of Empire as of a deeply thoughtful, observant and compassionate nature, giving rise to some extraordinarily profound work in his later years. I have taken the liberty of introducing one or two non-Masonic poems in this paper in order to illustrate this diversity of his thought and expression.

The Mother Lodge is written for the cockney accent as was much of the verse from *Barrack Room Ballads*, his earliest published volume of poetry. It is begging to be read aloud, and “performed” rather than just recited. The same is true of the Masonic

works of Robert Burnsⁱⁱⁱ, which were penned for the broad Scots dialect. *Barrack Room Ballads* was composed for the entertainment of the British forces scattered around the Empire's far flung outposts during the late nineteenth century, and it may seem naïve of Kipling to have envisaged the uncouth British Tommy reading poetry to his fellows in the barracks of an evening, but the attempt reveals Kipling's underlying ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality.

Various detractors have criticised Kipling's use of the cockney accent as being crass and tasteless, T.S. Elliot and George Orwell^{iv} among them, but they have missed the point. It is difficult to see how such an outpouring of aching nostalgia and good fellowship could have been so successfully expressed in any other way.

The dedication from the volume of poems *The Seven Seas* entitled *L'Envoi* is reminiscent of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, or of his famous engraving *The Ancient of Days*. Blake was an intensely religious man. W.B. Yeats, incidentally, called him one of the "Great Artificers of God".^v *L'envoi* evokes the vastness of creation and gives us fleeting glimpses of eternity, in similar fashion as *The Ancient of Days*. It is an example of Kipling's power to illuminate and enlighten, when much of his poetry may seem pedestrian in comparison.

In *My New Cut Ashlar (L'Envoi to Life's Handicap)* Kipling has in effect composed a Masonic prayer. Masonic as well as biblical imagery is employed here to great effect. Both his grandfathers were Methodist ministers and it may be partly their influence that we see here. Imagery is used in order to make a point more succinctly, or to express an abstract concept more coherently than would otherwise have been possible. Kipling was a skilled wordsmith and drew on many sources for his art, freemasonry being but one. Nevertheless, the poem certainly resonates in the hearts of all freemasons. The final plea for Charity is touching and heartfelt.

Much of Kipling's secular work was centred in the intricate details of reality, and sometimes reflected what seems at times an obsessive urge to confront the reader with the stark nature of suffering, deception and death. It is this trait which I think Orwell refers to when he accuses Kipling of cruelty. Kipling's first glimpses of battle took place in South Africa as an observer in the Boer War, but he was familiar with the details of death from early childhood in India, where the dead were buried in shallow graves around his house. *From Something of Myself* -

"The dead of all times were about us—in the vast forgotten Muslim cemeteries round the Station, where one's horse's hoof of a morning might break through to the corpse below; skulls and bones tumbled out of our mud garden walls, and were turned up among the flowers by the Rains; and at every point were tombs of the dead. Our chief picnic rendezvous and some of our public offices had been memorials to desired dead women; and Fort Lahore, where Runjit Singh's wives lay, was a mausoleum of ghosts."

In his verse, Kipling could be as direct and uncompromising on the subject of death as the War poets, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Rupert Brooke, and it is ironic that Kipling is viewed as the unapologetic jingoistic Poet of Empire when you take in the naked horror of "The wild-eyed corpse" or "Blanket-hidden bodies, flagless, followed by the flies," or " 'is carcase past rebellion, but 'is eyes inquirin' why".

His sea poetry too, demonstrates that he was an astute observer of the physical world, as well as the passions of the human heart, these faculties being honed to perfection during his years working as a newspaper correspondent. Only an unrepentant snob could fail to appreciate the almost tangible sight of Aden seen over the ship's rail conjured up in the following lines from *For to Admire* -

Be'old a crowd upon the beam,
An' 'umped above the sea appears
Old Aden, like a barrick-stove
That no one's lit for years an' years!

The interminable weeks at sea during extensive travels in the 1890's were obviously not wasted when we consider such masterpieces as *M'Andrews Hymn*, which among other things, describes a reciprocating marine steam engine in minute detail, *The Mary Gloster*, a bitter portrayal of a ship-owners' disappointment in a son, or *The Derelict*, a riveting account of the sea's unremitting violence.

This poetry is sometimes written in a stark, uncompromisingly direct style, and predates the modern poets, T.S.Eliot, Dylan Thomas *et al* by a generation or two. Scholars are at last turning their attention to these long neglected works and a restoration of Kipling's rightful place in literature is now underway.

Kipling's collection of complete verse spans^{vi} eight hundred pages and almost as many poems. Their subjects include everything from *The Overland Mail* to *Christmas in India*, from *Route Marching* to the *Ballad of Boh Da Thone*. Just about every facet of life in all its endless variety is to be found in these lines, usually painted in the colours of the British Empire. Many of the poems have lost their relevance over the years, and have become as obscure as the political and social events they described, fading from collective memory. But Kipling can astonish when he ventures into areas outside his usual compass of Empire and of duty, the army and of national sacrifice.

Kipling's Masonic compositions are few when compared to the bulk of his work, and they amount to perhaps ten poems and a handful of short stories, but they are much loved by freemasons everywhere nonetheless. Kipling's short story *In The Interests of The Brethren* was written in 1926 and is prefaced by the poem *Banquet Night*. The story concerns a fictional Lodge of Instruction held in London during the first war for the returning troops, and one of the brethren remarks -

"All Ritual is fortifying. Ritual's a natural necessity for mankind. The more things are upset, the more they fly to it. I abhor slovenly Ritual anywhere." "The Dominions are much keener on ritual than an average English Lodge."

This statement would seem to reflect Kipling's respect for form and order in all things, not only in Lodge but throughout life in general. Although he often used biblical and to a lesser extent, Masonic allusion in his work, he was not, in the sense that Blake was, an overtly religious man. Masonic ritual does employ a religious vocabulary to convey its inner meaning, and although freemasonry is not a religion as such, the comments later in the story may reveal Kipling's attitude to freemasonry in general -

"Brother Burgess started. He told us sleepy old chaps in Lodge that what men wanted more than anything else was Lodges where they could sit and be happy like we are now. He was right, too. A man's Lodge means more to him than people imagine. As our friend on your right said just now, very often Masonry's the only practical creed we've ever listened to since we were children. Platitudes or no platitudes, it squares with what everybody knows ought to be done.'

Banquet Night is a celebratory poem in the same vein as *The Mother Lodge*, joyous, almost Bacchanalian, steeped in the Hiram legends and the Fellow Craft degree.

Often included in collections of Masonic poetry, the poem *If* is an affirmation of the masculine, secular qualities of courage and single mindedness. Kipling may have had his friend, Cecil Rhodes in mind when he wrote it during a trip to South Africa. But there are allusions to egalitarianism in the last verse, and as such we as freemasons may claim a slight influence. *If* being perhaps the most popular poem in the English language, it is forgivable that we should embrace the poem as our own, the author being the most famous freemason in the English speaking world at the time it was penned. The poem is really one long sentence with the resolution suspended until the final line, and as such, as well as carrying a substantial message it also shows a supreme mastery of the language.

A Pilgrim's Way, like *My new cut Ashlar*, is really a humble prayer which uses Masonic imagery to great effect. The main themes are tolerance and forgiveness, and there is good humour too which prevents the overall subject matter from becoming too weighty. The whole impression is one of heartfelt humility and compassion, and it is surprising that it is not better known, or more widely quoted as being a fundamentally Masonic work.

The subject of love is rarely encountered in Kipling's work, but there can be few love poems as powerful as *Rahere*, notwithstanding even the metaphysical poets John Donne or Philip Marlowe. The story describes how Rahere, King Henry's court jester who later renounced everything to enter the monkhood, comes upon a leper and his untainted wife in a state of supreme loving kindness. This devotion is described as a coming of the spirit, in the same way as Rahere's fit of debilitating depression is described by Gilbert the physician as another, far more sinister visitation. It is one of Kipling's most profound utterances, and although not strictly Masonic in content, *Rahere* is a true masterpiece because it reveals Truth in all its beauty.

Kipling remained essentially a craft mason all his life. He probably never performed any ritual himself, being lodge secretary for much of his short Masonic career. He did not take the chair of any lodge and declined almost all invitations to visit the Sussex lodges of which he was an honorary member. Perhaps his reticence was due to a certain humility, as this letter of apology sent from Bath, dated 10th January 1931 shows -

"I have not passed the Chair and being of an Indian Mixed Lodge have never gone beyond the blue degrees"^{vii}

Nevertheless, Kipling's respect for the principles of freemasonry surfaces in many poems and stories not usually considered Masonic at all, and one can find fleeting references in the most unlikely places. Freemasons cherish his poetry for the honour and beauty it brings to the Craft, as well as for the eloquence and passion of its finely wrought lines.

His own *The Appeal* is a fitting conclusion -

IF I have given you delight
By aught that I have done,
Let me lie quiet in that night
Which shall be yours anon:

And for the little, little, span
The dead are borne in mind,
Seek not to question other than
The books I leave behind.

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ⁱ Harry Carr, *Kipling and the Craft*, Ars Quatuor Coronatorum Vol 77 P 213-215, 207-8

ⁱⁱ Craig Raine (Ed) , *Kipling- Selected Poetry* , Penguin 1992

ⁱⁱⁱ cf Burns *A Man's a Man for a' That* and *Tam O'Shanter*

^{iv} George Orwell, from *Critical essays* 1946

^v W.B. Yeats (Ed) *Collected Poems of William Blake* 1905

^{vi} Anchor Books Edition 1989 *Rudyard Kipling - Complete Verse (Definitive edition)*

^{vii} W. Bro Peter J. Knock, MA, Provincial Asst Grand Chaplain, Sussex 1989-1990, *Rudyard Kipling and Freemasonry*, 1990, (Private Publication)