



## Orwell, Kipling, and Empire

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One of the greatest of modern British writers was an Englishman who was born in India. He was privately educated in England, did not go to university, and returned to the East to work after leaving school. Empire, and the relation between those in authority and those under authority, became one of the principal themes of his writing, both in journalism and in fiction. He lived by his pen, and made a name as an author of strong political convictions. Many of his stories and phrases have embedded themselves in the English language and the consciousness of its users, even of those who have never actually read his work. Both admired and hated in his own lifetime, his genius made him a spokesman and a symbol in the great ideological contentions of modern times, and after his death he was considered not only an important writer, but also but a particular embodiment of the character of his country.



Well actually, not one of the greatest of modern British writers. Two of the greatest of modern British writers.

Orwell and Kipling emerge – and I think are beginning to emerge, even in the academic discourse of English literature – as giant figures, or twinned heraldic animals like the lion and the unicorn, of modern British writing. And though our first instinct is to think of them as opposites, the curious similarities between them proliferate. Both of them were patriots, though highly critical of their fellow-countrymen and frequently of their government. Both were public intellectuals who used their writing to raise political consciousness. Both loved animals and wrote books about them, and both had a strong feeling for the English countryside.

Both were men of principle, but they were also realists in the sense of a non-theoretical empiricism. They were both impatient with orthodoxy and theory. Orwell's disgust at W. H. Auden's glib phrase about "the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder" – "It

could only be written,” Orwell said, “by a person to whom murder is at most a word” (XII, 103) <sup>1</sup> – reminds me a little of Kipling’s rage at liberals like “Pagett M.P.” who pontificated about India without bothering to learn about it. Both attitudes, to be sure, have something of the smugness of a man of the world, playing the trump card of experience.

Importantly – this is part of what makes them modern – both had a global vision. Though Orwell at one point kept a village shop, and Kipling for years impersonated a country gentleman at Burwash, they were the opposite of provincial. Both of them were exasperated by British (English?) insularity. “What do they know of England, who only England know?” was Kipling’s lament that his neighbours knew and cared so little about their achievements, and obligations, in the wide world. Orwell agreed about the ignorance. He pointed out that most ordinary people at home had no idea or understanding of the fact that their whole economic way of life depended on Britain’s “coolie empire” overseas. His words, though brutally phrased, have a resonance for those of us who enjoy a more modern form of globalization. “We all live by robbing Asiatic coolies, and those of us who are ‘enlightened’ all maintain that those coolies ought to be set free; but our standard of living, and hence our ‘enlightenment’, demands that the robbery shall continue” (XIII, 153). This comes from his *Horizon* essay on Kipling (1942), one of the best he wrote.

Kipling and Orwell were citizens of the world. But the origin of this cosmopolitanism was rather different in their two cases. For Kipling, it was a function of empire. He travelled all over it, he came to think of himself as its bard, and though he was an acute observer of its local differences, he also found it everywhere the same. The empire he knew or imagined was a world network of power, hierarchical relationships, security and welfare. Globally diffused, it had little to do any more with the European island that had given birth to it. Sometimes when he speaks of it, he makes it sound like the United Nations. Empire was something the African bushman and the Himalayan hillgirl and the Irish infantryman had in common. It was, at its most exalted, a global moral force. At its core, of course, for Kipling, was the authority and duty of white people, the “white man’s burden”. Kipling’s empire was a vision of the world, a global Utopia, but it was a racially understood and organized world, under white government. Like his friend Cecil Rhodes, he continued to hope that the United States would re-federate with the British Empire (perhaps after a handsome apology on both sides?) and rule the world.

Orwell, of course, did not recognize that empire in the least, except as a foreshadowing of the terrible warring superpowers envisaged in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. His own global vision derived from his socialism, which is always a kind of internationalism. That was what gave him a feeling

of kinship with the Italian militiaman he describes meeting in the opening pages of *Homage to Catalonia*: and it was that sense of the world that had brought him to fight with the POUM militia in Spain, among people with whom, admittedly, he had very little in common and whose speech he could hardly understand. It was the betrayal of that internationalism, first in Barcelona and later everywhere else, that most disgusted him about Stalin and the regime he ruled in a country that had the word “socialist” in its name. From opposite ends of the political spectrum, Orwell and Kipling were globalists. There was nothing narrow about either of them. They could see the whole picture.

The similarities are intriguing. The differences, of course, were polar. “It is no use pretending that Kipling’s view of life, as a whole, can be accepted or even forgiven by any civilized person,” Orwell writes (XIII, 151). Kipling was an imperialist – though not a fascist (his outlook was “prefascist”, says Orwell carefully). Orwell was anti-imperialist; in fact his entire politics was erected on the emotional experience of his service in Burma as a policeman of the British Empire, and it was when he came to understand the relation between that, and what he saw and experienced in Spain, that the Orwellian politics emerged in its mature form. He was prepared to argue that some of what empire *did* was for the good: what it was, however, was indefensible.

There were personal and aesthetic differences as well as ideological ones. Kipling was brilliant and precocious, doing some of his best work in his twenties. He had his unhappiness, but I think he never doubted his imaginative and creative powers. He would not have understood Orwell’s gloomy statement that writing a book was like undergoing an illness. Orwell’s genius was entirely prosaic, he was a slow starter, diffident and often clumsy, always disappointed with his own work, the kind of writer for whom every book was doomed to be, in T. S. Eliot’s words, a different kind of failure. I don’t know that Kipling ever read anything written by Orwell. When Orwell criticizes Kipling’s work, he objects to his ideas, but also repeatedly to his vulgarity, and this is a complaint that probably has its roots in Eton rather than on the road to Wigan Pier. But one thing that the 1942 essay shows very clearly is that Orwell knew Kipling’s writing very well indeed. <sup>2</sup>

This is hardly surprising. For a boy of Orwell’s class and generation, and especially for one whose father actually worked for the Government of India, Kipling was the author of childhood. First *The Just So Stories*, then the *Jungle Books*, *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, *Rewards and Fairies*, *Kim*, *Stalky and Co...* Not just a favourite on the nursery bookshelf, Kipling was the author of childhood for the sons (daughters too) of empire in a wider sense; they experienced the world

through his eyes, and Kipling's books helped them to see and relate to the important things in their environment – animals, the natural world, home, parents and other adults, jokes and games, friends, school, and later more abstract issues, like duty, work, country, masculinity and femininity.

When the young Eric Blair, fresh from school, went to Burma to serve in the police, he was going to a place that Kipling had more or less invented for the benefit of his fellow-countrymen: they knew about the Orient, and Orientals, through him. Leonard Woolf, who belonged to the generation between Kipling and Orwell, went to work as a colonial official in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1904, and found the place uncannily familiar. It was Kipling country. Woolf said he could not decide whether Kipling had been brilliantly accurate in his description of the British in the East, or whether by now the British in the East modelled themselves on Kipling's characters.<sup>3</sup>

Orwell too must have felt a sense of *déjà vu* in the "Kipling-haunted clubs" of British Burma. Kipling is a ghostly background figure in "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant", and above all in *Burmese Days*. The racist mediocrities who hang out in the club at Kyauktada are Kipling characters, stripped of the glamour and charm with which Kipling invested them. But Veraswami, the comically pro-British Indian doctor, is a variation on a theme by Kipling too, and so is the wily and corrupt U Po Kyin. As for the central character Flory, his local mistress, his white fiancée, his enjoyment of the jungle, his sporting activities, his close friendship with an Indian, his moment of heroism during a riot, his disgrace, and his eventual suicide, all have identifiable precedents in Kipling. One thing you do not find in Kipling, though, is the central theme of *Burmese Days*, an Englishman in the East who has lost his faith in empire.

A knowledge of Kipling helps us to understand Orwell, for no writer was more important to him, as an influence, example, and antagonist. In some sense Orwell's whole life was a conversation, or quarrel, with Kipling. He seemed to acknowledge this when he wrote, when Kipling died, "I worshipped [him] at thirteen, loathed him at seventeen, enjoyed him at twenty, despised him at twenty-five and now again rather admire him" (X, 409).

But a knowledge of Orwell also helps us to understand Kipling, in a number of ways. In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T. S. Eliot talks about how, when a new literary work appears on the scene, every existing work is modified by it and the whole scene subtly re-arranged. Thus, we can't really read Kipling's stories of the Raj in the same way once we have read *Burmese Days*. Though Kipling's words are unchanged, the Orwell novel has changed how we read them.

Kipling, who died in 1936, did not know that the empire he loved would disappear within a lifetime. So in a sense we know more about the British Empire than Kipling did, because we know what was to happen to it. The one thing Kipling seems not to have been able to imagine was an alternative to empire. But if we know Orwell, we know the work of someone who devoted his whole writing lifetime to answering the question of what such an alternative might look like, and how – and how difficult it would be – to achieve it.

### Notes

1. These references are to *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (1998) by volume and page.
2. Most of the references to Kipling's work in Orwell's essay are to the poems. This is partly because the essay was prompted by Orwell's reading of T. S. Eliot's *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (1941). But it is also a reminder that, though nowadays Kipling is admired and discussed chiefly as a writer of prose fiction, many readers of an earlier generation thought of him first and foremost as a poet.
3. Leonard Woolf, *Growing: An Autobiography of the Years 1904-1911* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961) 46.

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