

Kipling and masculinity: “But a good cigar is a smoke”

It is an honour to be invited to speak to the Kipling Society on a subject of my own choosing. For more than twenty years I have enjoyed the variety and depth of presentations by a range of experts.

In contrast, my title relates to a comparatively commonplace concern, though perhaps an old theme that needs to be discussed again. The subject arose when I observed at an online discussion in which one of Kipling’s stories was linked firmly to his upbringing, and what was described as his ‘weaknesses’ – in particular his questionable masculinity.

Predictably, I hope, I reacted against this, but the zoom system had failed, as it does, and I was left to ... rehearse my arguments.

I considered opening by asking my audience to join me in reciting the most famous of Kipling’s verse. If you follow my weekly Facebook postings, you will know that I do class this as ‘only’ verse – though as Eliot suggests ‘There is poetry in it’. However, a group recitation today could so easily become a tradition, like Blake’s *Jerusalem* for the Women’s Institute. I will allow you time to consider the aspects of masculinity in it as I recite.

IF-

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build ’em up with wornout tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on";

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run—
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

I intend to respect the request in another piece of verse, 'The Appeal', by using Kipling's own words wherever possible as evidence. Remember - Kipling was writing the latter toward the end of his life, hoping to ward off the Analysts, Biographers and Critics – the Higher Cannibals. He did not like the Kipling Society much, either.

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

Now, many simple aspects of the topic of masculinity are covered in 'If', and more than one critic has stepped beyond that controversial last line.

And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

I intend first to discuss the culture in which Kipling was raised, thus transmitted to his son, and how, two or three generations later, we sometimes struggle to accept the implications.

When we consider how quickly expectations and public opinions have changed, I think we should first reflect that, had John survived the Great War,

there could easily be one of Rudyard's grandsons – or granddaughters – in my audience. John was born when Kipling was thirty-one. John would have been that age in 1928. There are plenty of hale and hearty ninety-five-year-olds today – perhaps in my audience.

No matter how such a grandson or granddaughter self-identified, I would emphasise to them that it is certainly possible to admire self-reliance, stoicism, or responsibility, directly from the verse, without ever suggesting that these are gender-related. There are parodies of 'If-', supposedly written for daughters, that advance equally valuable traits, identified as feminine: sensitivity, empathy, intuition. Surely suggesting that these are gender-based is just as damaging to equality.

Few of us would argue against the guidance offered to any teenager, boy or girl, when 'If-' was first published, over a hundred years ago.

However, well before this, Kipling had written stories and verse that included, indeed revelled in, less acceptable aspects of masculinity. I could list 'natural' aggression, brutality, chauvinism, assumed superiority, pointless bravado ...

It is telling that E. M. Forster's analysis of some of these traits was published just a year before *Rewards and Fairies*, and the first appearance of 'If-', and we still return to that essay when discussing Kipling's understanding of manliness. You will remember that Forster derided Kipling's **'strong silent man who says so little and feels so much'**. He doubted whether **'strong silent men feel anything at all'**.

Remember also that Rudyard's mother wrote, in a letter to Edith Plowden in 1881, **'Ruddy thirsts for a man's life with man's work'**. We might suggest that the boy who had missed so much mothering was expected to welcome his masculine heritage. However, I undertook to look at the work, not the man.

Like many members of this Society, I have offered dozens of talks about Kipling over the years. In village halls, I have sung 'Jerusalem' with my W.I. audience, and in a bookshop in Kyiv, in the strange atmosphere of 2014, I sang a suitably patriotic piece over the public address system with a borrowed guitar. It was Peter Bellamy's arrangement of 'The Children'. At all of these I could expect pointed questions about Kipling's racism, imperialism, antisemitism, colonialism, antifeminism ... and so on.

I first came to Kipling as a youngster, of course quite unaware of the man himself and his own story. I was certainly free of any considerations of sexism,

racism, colonialism ... One theme of my talk is that I believe we have a duty sometimes to approach the stories and the poems with as little consciousness of these problematical themes as Kipling's audience may have had at the time. I know that many Society members have exactly this approach to their enjoyment of the works.

Nevertheless, we can consider just one, fairly 'safe', aspect of that first piece of verse— **'If you can keep your head'**. Perhaps it could be characterised as typical manly over-confidence ...

We know that Kipling was well aware of both sides of that question. However, he wrote often of men whose self-confidence and authority is painted as wholly admirable... and manly.

"Stalky,' in their school vocabulary, meant clever, well-considered and wily, as applied to plans of action; and 'stalkiness' was the one virtue Corkran toiled after."

So 'Corky' Corkran gained his change of nickname from something in his character that some might associate with masculinity. These potentially useful qualities were also linked quite naturally to others less admirable. When he was involved in 'head knuckling', or 'cock fighting', I, as a ten-year-old, did not assume that Kipling approved of bullying. The writer was reporting true events, and leaving it to me to make judgments.

As I trace my examples, I know that you will think of others, and many will be better. 'Stalkiness' is more than simple bravado or cunning; he does keep his head, and this I certainly approved of as a boy, without for a moment assuming that this was unique to the Male of the Species. Much later I read a story about another single-minded man, confident to the point of brutality, who conducted his personal life in a way that might have been seen as understandable by many of Kipling's generation, and only sensible by some, but which I, and Kipling, rejected.

“The Bride and the Bridegroom came out into the verandah after dinner, in order that the smoke of Georgie Porgie’s cheroots might not hang in the new drawing-room curtains.

‘What is that noise down there?’ said the Bride. Both listened.

‘Oh,’ said Georgie Porgie. ‘I suppose some brute of a hillman has been beating his wife.’

‘Beating-his-wife! How ghastly!’ said the Bride. ‘Fancy your beating me!’ She slipped an arm round her husband’s waist, and, leaning her head against his shoulder, looked out across the cloud-filled valley in deep content and security.

But it was Georgina crying, all by herself, down the hillside, among the stones of the watercourse where the washermen wash the clothes.”

The cad, Georgie Porgie, in sure knowledge of his masculine ‘rights’ has ravaged the life of an innocent ‘lesser being’. In 1969, Lionel Johnson included the 1888 tale ‘Georgie Porgie’ among his master list of **‘stories that in my sincere and humble opinion do not deserve publication.’** I must disagree. We can recognise it as a record and commentary on an unpleasant fact of life at the time. You will remember that Gillis, who turns away the Burmese girl – **‘Will you go in and tell that English woman that you lived with her husband?’** looked at the Bride **‘all the time.’** Kipling was, of course exploring more than one aspect of masculinity. The plot is complicated by this, but my point is that Kipling simply does not approve here of self-confidence and assumptions about manly rights.

We might also look on ‘Georgie Porgie’ as a modern commentary on misogyny and racism, almost obscured by the fact that we must admit that, earlier in the story, the villain is a competent, hard-working man in a difficult collision of cultures.

Remember that we can trace firm approval of self-assurance, of readiness to **‘trust yourself when all men doubt you’** equally in some of Kipling’s female characters too. His mother and sister may have felt that he could not and did not write well about women, but Mrs Hauksbee is a recognisable type, common enough in the work of the best women authors. Whether she is educating Otis Yeere, or launching May Holt and Lieutenant Hawley as a coming couple, Mrs Hauksbee is convincingly confident.

“Try my recipe. Take a man, not a boy, mind, but an almost mature, unattached man, and be his guide, philosopher and friend. You’ll find it the most interesting occupation that you ever embarked on. It can be done—you needn’t look like that—because I’ve done it.

There’s an element of danger about it that makes the notion attractive. I’ll get such a man and say to him: ‘Now there must be no flirtation. Do exactly what I tell you, profit by my instruction and counsels, and all will yet be well,’ “

The pattern I am following surely shows that Kipling was well aware that acknowledged and approved aspects of manliness at that time could have both positive and negative nature and effect.

So, my first contention is simply that there are examples of separate pieces of writing showing the good and the bad in aspects of masculinity, and often, as in our first piece of verse, offering both. Perhaps the easiest way to look for further examples of these two sides of Kipling’s head would be in the verse, and like many of you, I have read every page of the Definitive Edition, over the years. Indeed, as Verse Editor for John Radcliffe’s magnificent New Readers’ Guide, I have copy-edited all five-hundred-odd of those texts for simple literals (I spotted another today) and admired, absorbed, and even added to the notes. Remember that there are more than five hundred other verses in Tom Pinney’s Cambridge Edition. There certainly are some good examples, but two of these relate to my next point.

The second order of masculinity, in my opinion, occurs when an attitude or an action arises from a quality or aspiration that we might accept as inherently masculine. In other words, masculinity can be a convenient label for the source of a range of societal constructs. When the hunter/gatherer evolved, heading out to find food, there was bound to be competition, and one family or tribe or nation would have more (or all) of the mammoth meat or, eventually, the oil wells.

There will be subjugation and even slavery, gangs and wars. Prehistory gave us manly traits that have led inexorably on to such horrors as knife crime and colonialism... colonialism as extended masculinity.

Kipling’s approval of colonialism is clear enough, so that you are immediately thinking of an example.

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

I have guessed that you too may have chosen this reference to **'Your new-caught sullen peoples, Half devil and half child'**. Anyone whose ancestors could be included among those so dismissed might well be outraged. Of course, we may protest that 'The White Man's Burden' was pointed at new imperialism in the United States of America, but it is a fact that Kipling saw the duty of the colonial powers as **'the business of introducing a sane and orderly administration to the dark places of the earth that lie to your hand.'**

And later, of course, in 'The White Man's Burden' he warns of **'Sloth and heathen folly'** that will **'bring all your hopes to nought.'**

A standard reply to complaints about this verse is probably to trot out 'We and They', in which Kipling advances a view based on those rather unmanly virtues of tolerance and understanding. The fact that he couches this almost as a parody of Stevenson does not help in the defence, I think.

**All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They:
But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
As only a sort of They!**

By the way, if your choice of a verse, in a challenging question, was actually 'The Ballad of East and West', instead we have an example of both sides in the first stanza, of course.

***OH, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the
earth!***

Or, of course, two strong women

In fact, this does seem to be a prime example where an unsuitable extension of manliness for modern eyes is immediately countered by something acceptable from the same trope.

However, Professor Montefiore examines this in an essay available on our website, titled 'Being a Man'. There, she points out that, at the end of the verse, Kamal, representing the subject people, loses, having to give his son as a servant to the English imperialist.

We have seen that great hymn 'Recessional' used as a counter to Kipling's imperialist reputation. We must admit, I feel, that it is simply a recognition that empires fail and fall, and that undue celebration does not fit with the vision of a mature masculinity, one that rules responsibly and with no fuss. I do not see, in the text, the implication that empires are wrong. The verse was set to music and sung by more than ten thousand British soldiers when Pretoria fell to General Roberts in June 1900.

**If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the Law—
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!**

In other words – we do have an empire – let us remain polite.

Before turning away from the link between masculinity and imperialism, and admitting that there are fewer examples of anti-imperialist sentiment in the verse, we might look for a piece, perhaps a story, that speaks of the failure of the man who goes out there to do the work. Several tales fit that bill, but 'The

Man Who Would Be King' could well be the archetype. It seems a parable for the power-hungry. The Kipling character says to Carnehan and Dravot:

'You won't enjoy your lives much longer if you are going to try this idiotic adventure'

Again, you will think of your own examples.

In fact, several prose pieces come with, or are based around, the message that an ultimate expression of masculinity in daily life might be the patriarchal calling, which can lead, as we fathers know, to overwork and eventually to breakdown. Paternal feelings, and actions, are certainly among the signs of masculinity, surely, and Kipling offered them freely. We can point happily to the Just So Stories, the sharing of childhood fantasy in the Puck stories, and many verses. I would certainly include sympathy (and some empathy) for a younger sister in 'My Rival'.

In contrast (and I can mention them since the letters are long-since in the books left behind) there is the brisk demolition of a young dyslexic son's confidence in his writing skill,

Wood you lick it if I rote you a leter al ful of mispeld wurdz? I no yu know kwite well howe to spel nly yu wonte taik the trubble to thinck!?

And for 'Phipps', the 'Bird of Ill Omen' – for Elsie – there was the antifeminist in 'The Female of the Species'.

**Unprovoked and awful charges -
even so the she-bear fights,
Speech that drips, corrodes, and poisons -
even so the cobra bites,
Scientific vivisection of one nerve till it is raw
And the victim writhes in anguish -
like the Jesuit with the squaw!**

I hope that I have painted a picture, so far, of a writer who can be read without doubts about his acceptable personal masculinity, provided we look for pieces that carry the other view. There are also times when we are comfortable that the outrageous style of 'Belts' or 'Loot' is no more than the faithful recording of real characters and lifestyles.

'The Betrothed', from which my title is taken is, after all, simply a perfectly legitimate skit on a contemporaneous breach of promise case. In *Private Eye* today, it would be accepted without fuss, and with much amusement. Indeed, my talk seems to have confirmed the arguments we use when challenged on our reading habits:

He was a writer of his times, recording a world that we may not understand – and certainly cannot always approve of; he often pointed to both sides of an argument, as in my opening example; and he exaggerated for effect, for amusement or to challenge. All of these link conveniently, and relatively harmlessly, to the keyword, 'masculinity', until we introduce sexuality ...

So, we must turn to that other view that I met again recently, in the online discussion. I was tempted to say, 'We must dig 'til we come to it'.

I suppose many of us have met academics and enthusiasts who have read a biography by Martin Seymour-Smith, published in 1989 (Amazon currently has a first edition at £150, or paperbacks at £3.27. There are other booksellers). Mr Seymour-Smith suggests that a young poet who falls in love in his teens with a most disinterested girl may have lasting problems when she later rejects him to the extent of moving to Paris and embarking on a life-long lesbian relationship.

Seymour-Smith, this biographer, and higher cannibal, stirs in a background in which young Ruddy's mother is effectively absent during the key years of his childhood, when the mother-substitute is a Calvinistic Protestant monster. If you read Smith's account and then go back to 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', 'The Light that Failed' or indeed to 'Something of Myself', you may admit that these show something close to post-traumatic stress disorder.

'I had never heard of Hell, so I was introduced to it in all its terrors'.

Quite reasonably, you are thinking of verse and prose examples that reveal Kipling as insecure in relationships, and perhaps over-conscious of the maternal figure. We all enjoy being able to say 'Ah, so that's why'. My concern is not that we make connections but that we then leap on into the mists of speculation.

Martin Seymour-Smith suggests that the relationship between Kipling and Wolcott Balestier was more than mutual admiration. A quarter of a century ago, his book raised hackles because we, as a nation and a culture, were only twenty years into our own acceptance of the need to move on and grow up

about sexuality. Now, many of us do not even need the weasel words I used – a ‘relationship’ that was ‘more than mutual admiration’. Whether or not Rudyard was in love with the charismatic young publisher is not significant for me, except where it may change my understanding of his work.

However, there lies the problem, I believe, for all of the aspects of masculinity. Once the possibility is in our minds, we begin to build a tangled web, based on our own judgments and opinions. We look at E. M. Forster’s judgments on Kipling, based on our awareness of his ‘masculinity’ in that other sense, rather than the reasonable criticism of our man’s tendency to regard foreigners as ‘**a sort of moral football, designed by providence for the purpose of keeping the Chosen Race in good condition**’. We unconsciously expand, or just alter, our understanding of a writer’s work when we know something more about him or her, and if we claim to be able to ignore it, I suspect we are likely to be as lacking in originality as ‘Tomlinson’.

‘This I have read in a book,’ he said , ‘and that was told to me’

And this I have thought, that another man thought’

The fact that you are trying to finish that couplet underlines my final point. I listen to people who have analysed Kipling’s work based on their deeper knowledge of his life, contemporary history, and human psychology, but I try not to do so too much.

There is the dedication to Barrack Room Ballads that speaks of Wolcott, I read it, loved it, and learned it, as a boy. I remember that my mother quoted some of the lines when remembering my grandfather:

**He scarce had need to doff his pride or slough the dross of Earth –
E’en as he trod that day to God so walked he from his birth,
In simpleness and gentleness and honour and clean mirth.**

It was embarrassingly personal and almost effusive– but the verse was about someone Rudyard saw as ‘my brother’, and I unquestioningly allowed poetic licence.

Freedom to be a poet.

I sometimes wish that I could read the works now without 'deeper understanding' ...

