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Restoring Rabindranath Tagore

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In *The Reconstruction of India*, published in 1930 just before the First Round Table Conference in London, Edward J. Thompson proposed measures that would in his view go far to encourage a new beginning in British-Indian relations. In a 1931 edition, published after the Conference, he explained why he had addressed the book not only to England and India but to America as well. He placed little trust in ‘the books by which the American public forms its opinions of Indian affairs’, for they gave that public a drastically distorted picture of the situation. Americans liked to think that in the Indian resistance to British control they were seeing their own early history repeated, and they tended to give things Indian a thick coating of romanticism. Neither in politics nor in cultural affairs was this desirable; Thompson wrote:

It is intolerable that a whole field of human experience and activity, a field so vast and varied, should continue to be the home of ignorance and pedantry and brag and complacency. The main outlines of Indian legend and history and belief must become part of the normal equipment of educated men and women everywhere. The angry ghosts of nationalism and imperialism must be exorcized from the region where they have stalked so long.

Ghosts of both political and literary history, English, Indian and American, still hover over Tagore’s reputation in the West. In 1913 he was a verifiable international sensation, for *Gitanjali* (*Song-Offerings*), his own English prose recreations of a hundred poems selected from his Bengali lyrics, brought him the Nobel Prize for Literature. The fact that he was the first Asian to win that award
had political as well as literary repercussions. But even within the
decade his popularity began to decline, as is documented beyond
question in book reviews and publishers’ annual reports. How
could this have happened? Western preconceptions and miscon­
ceptions, facile romanticising, the intractable British-Indian con­
flict, and great changes in literary taste all contributed. In the West
today Tagore is known to relatively few, and not all of those
comprehend his immense significance as both a literary and a
political figure. Yeats, in his Introduction to Gitanjali, prophesied
that ‘these verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon
ladies’ tables . . . or be carried about by students at the university to
be laid aside when the work of life begins . . .’

Yet I often ask my

students what they know of Tagore. It is not unusual to find them

confusing him with Kahlil Gibran. Only rarely does one indicate

any real knowledge, and that is usually a student who has been

enrolled in some course in a South Asia Studies Programme. The

others recall vaguely a little book that once lay on the bedside table

da grandmother or an elderly aunt.

Tagore deserves better. The ghosts that hover over his reputa­
tion are more sorrowful than angry. Exorcising them might begin
with a thorough clean-out of myths and critical clichés, and I
should like to try to invoke here the Tagore who arrived in London
in the summer of 1912, before the public persona began to obscure
the candid personality.

The most persistent myth, which began to adhere from the very
beginning of his Western career and has done lingering harm, is
that of Tagore as latter-day Wise Man from the East. His arrival on
the London scene in 1912 was one of the genuine romances of
literary history. He was fifty years old, and he was about to embark
on what was in effect a completely new career. It had all the
requisites for romance: a delightful and startling unexpectedness,
the promise of something novel, mysterious and remarkable.

Tagore was a wise man; his poems were remarkable. Unfortunately
the principal role that many assigned to him was that of Tagore­
the-Prophet. He looked the part: his grave and handsome features,
long robes and grey beard seemed in prophetic accord with the
Western iconography of soft-focus Bible illustrations and stained­
glass windows. His lyric poems spoke of the faraway, of unsatis­
fied longings, of lovers’ devotion and of all-too-brief meetings
with a Beloved – but many readers, knowing nothing of the literary
and religious traditions from which they had sprung, could not