

T.S. ELIOT'S CAT

It is a wonderful irony that T.S. Eliot, the publication of whose long poem *The Waste Land* a hundred years ago is taken by the intelligentsia to mark the beginning of Modernism in poetry, should be better known to ordinary people in the London streets as the man who wrote the lyrics for Andrew Lloyd Webber's smash hit musical, *Cats*.

Most of those same ordinary people still believe poetry has to rhyme (a thousand years ago a likely Arab influence on Europe) and Eliot's delightful verses on a variety of cats, curious and crafty, do just that. But why should Eliot call his own Persian cat Mirza Murad Ali Beg? Thereby hangs a tale.

The Mitfords

The landed English Mitford family were notorious in the mid-20th century for the extreme behaviour of a busted flush of sisters chronicled by the fifth, Nancy, one of whose novels, *Love in a Cold Climate*, centres on the superficial society life of the daughter of a returned Viceroy of India.

An earlier (Hampshire) Mitford, Mary Russell, had published quite a different sort of book in the 1820s: a rural idyll, *Our Village*. Less well-known is a third literary Mitford belonging to a branch of the family that vanished into India, Godolphin Mitford.

Godolphin was born in Madras in 1844, the grandson of a soldier thought to have served in the armies of the legendary Tipu Sultan (subject, incidentally, of an overlooked poem by the overlooked poet Barry Cornwall). As a young man, post-1857, he converted to Islam, acquiring the name Mirza Murad Ali Beg, and eventually took service in one and the other of the happily "unreformed" princely states of Kathiawar. Here he adopted the literary pseudonym "Gaekwaree".

Lalun the Beragun

Mirza has some claim to literary fame. In Bhavnagar in 1879, thanks to princely patronage, was published the first volume of his novel, *Lalun the Beragun*, the second volume, bound together with the reprinted first, appearing in the year of his death, 1884.

In the original preface, the author declares it to be the first work in English to do "full justice to Indian life and character". Apparently unaware of the Bengal Renaissance, what he has in his sights are the works of British expatriates such as "Pandurang Hari" Hockley ("harsh and unsympathetic") and Meadows Taylor (European characters "masquerading in Indian dress").

In *Lalun*, set in Panipat in 1761, scene of the last great battle in what Mirza calls "free India", he aims to catch "the general social and political aspect of Pre-Anglian India". He is intent on countering the prevailing view of mid-18th century India as "a chaos of plundering Pindarees, cow-killing Muhumudans, and wealth-confiscating Rajas, as most modern text-books would lend them to believe" instead of "a land with its settled but progressive system of social machinery and public law."

Literary Ambitions

In the preface to the two-volume edition, Mirza lays out plans he had had for a series of historical novels designed to do full justice to Indian social life, free of reference to the British. Of these, the only manuscript of *The Bankas: Life in a Moosulman Kingdom before the Mooghul*

time, a tale set in Ahmedabad in the reign of Mahmoud Begra, is said to have gone missing in England while in search of a publisher.

The twenty chapters of *Jumeela, a story of 1857*, the author had himself destroyed, not wishing to foster ill-feeling. Meanwhile, some dozen chapters of *Loottoo, or the Mysteries of Bombay*, a story perhaps based on the author's own experiences in the city between 1857 and 1870, went out of circulation with, he claimed, the *Star of India* newspaper.

Did all these intriguing works ever exist? Quite plausibly they did and (bibliophile's dream) might yet come to light. It is also possible they did not since, more than most, Mirza's mind never drew a firm line between material and imaginative reality. Of nervous disposition, it seems he was particularly haunted by, among other afreets and djinns, a churel.

When Mirza wafted into the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Bombay in 1881, Madame Blavatsky, herself given to being translated through astral travel to meet the Masters in the high Himalaya, declared he was "a most extraordinary Mystic, of great learning and remarkable intelligence".

Sadly, having written a seminal paper on "The Elixir of Life" and testified to the actual existence of the Masters, the countervailing Sorcerers took hold of Mirza and, having attempted to kill Madame Blavatsky at Wadhwan station, he had to be confined and died shortly afterwards.

Literary Afterlife

So how did Eliot's cat come to be named for this little-known literary figure? The link is Rudyard Kipling.

In 1919, Eliot, whose versification on cats owes much to the versatile Kipling, mentions Kipling's story "To Be Filed For Reference" while praising his earliest collection of short stories, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) as "a perfect picture of a society of English in India, narrow, snobbish, spiteful, ignorant and vulgar, set down absurdly in a continent of which they are unconscious".

McIntosh Jellaludin, the protagonist in this (signature) story that closes out the collection, is a convert to Islam who has turned his back on that same English society to take a Muslim wife and live in the bazaars.

While he lies dying, McIntosh states quite specifically what the value is of *Mother Maturin*, the manuscript novel he leaves to the narrator: "What Mirza Murad Ali Beg's book is to all other books on native life, so will my work be to Mirza Murad Ali Beg's". To which Eliot rejoins: "What Mirza Murad Ali Beg's book is to all other books of native life, so is Mr Kipling's to all other books of Anglo-Indian life".

The (Kiplingesque) narrator within the story has another "take" on it, insisting it has been printed to prove that the (Mirza variant) McIntosh Jellaludin and not he is the author of *Mother Maturin*. This disclaimer is of some significance since, by 1885, at the outset of his career, the 20-year-old Kipling had drafted 237 pages of a novel of life in the Indian bazaars called, yes, *Mother Maturin*. This was never published and the manuscript disappeared, though bits of it were incorporated into *Kim*.

If Mirza's life and death caught the attention of the young England-returned journalist, so did his writing. Kipling mined *Lalun the Beragun* for his narrative poem, "With Scindia to Delhi", a direct re-telling in ballad form of the final part of Mirza's book.

Kipling mined it again in “On the City Wall”, this time for verses from a ballad, a Maratha *laonee* (uniquely of Mirza’s own composition) sung by a dancing-girl on the eve of the Battle of Panipat. In Kipling’s story, these are sung by the astute courtesan named (in acknowledgement of his debt) Lalun. This Lalun has a cat.

Although Kipling would never have got bogged down in the consciously detailed (“look out, reader!”) historical chapters that engulf Mirza’s romantic *Lalun*, he may very well owe a debt for his trademark use of dialect, especially the abuses and proverbs, both translated and untranslated, from the vernaculars: his Mahbub Ali in particular could come straight out of Mirza’s Afghan camp.

The eye of the young journalist may also have been caught by Mirza’s reference to his ill-starred tale of native life set in Bombay at the time Kipling was born there (1865). Whether or not the story or the magazine ever existed, the plot of *Loottoo* is intriguing enough: following the death of a “Mooghul Merchant”, steps are taken to ruin his son by “the profligate second wife and a trio composed of a Parsee liquor-seller, a Memun gambler, and a Hindoostanee adventurer from Delhee”.

That Mirza’s concern with a non-British India was a formative influence on Kipling is plain enough. It determined the way his Indian writing gravitated towards the underworld behind the bazaars and the other world of the occult.

But Mirza’s “madness” and death also had its effect. As fearful of “going native” as he was fascinated by it, even Kipling’s most imaginative writing on India was constrained, as Eliot observes, by Anglo-Indian attitudes.

Life and literature are both full of might-have-beens and lost manuscripts. And cats.

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