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**ARTS & LETTERS**


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*In Defense  
of Kipling*

"Rudyard Kipling and the Establishment: A Humanistic Dilemma" by Harold Orel, in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (Spring 1982), Duke University Press, P.O. Box 6697, College Station, Durham, N.C. 27708.

More than 200 Kiplingisms pepper the third edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* ("the white man's burden"; "I've taken my fun where I found it"; "A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke"). And Rudyard Kipling's fiction—*The Light That Failed*, *Captains Courageous*, *Kim*, and much more—still sells briskly in America, Britain, even the Soviet Union. Why, then, asks Orel, a professor of English at the University of Kansas, is Kipling's reputation as a serious writer so tarnished?

Kipling (1865–1936) was the first Englishman to win the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1907. Yet generations of scholars, claims Orel, have chosen to evaluate the man's art on the basis of his controversial political pronouncements. T. S. Eliot joked that no one need worry about defending Kipling against "the charge of excessive lucidity." Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Malcolm Cowley, and Lionel Trilling alike damned him with scathing reviews. But, Orel argues, Kipling's convictions have been too harshly judged. Kipling did once contend that war was a panacea, but he held to the idea for only two or three years in the early 1890s. Nevertheless, critics portray him as a chronic warmonger.

A 1906 cartoon depicts Rudyard Kipling as the last celebrator of British imperialism.



Kipling Society and  
Royal Commonwealth Society.

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

Too often, critics have confused the opinions of Kipling's characters with his own. In 1942, George Orwell wrote, for example, "It is no use claiming . . . that when Kipling describes a British soldier beating a 'nigger' with a cleaning rod in order to get money out of him, he is acting merely as a reporter . . . Kipling is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting." But, born in Bombay and trained as a journalist in India, Kipling far more than his foes had witnessed firsthand the workings of empire at its outposts. His imperialist views were tempered by a firm belief that expansion without a proper sense of responsibility toward the governed was foolhardy. In his "The Ballad of East and West," he salutes strong men whatever their race.

Kipling was no saint: "He was never a democrat, he detested female suffragism, he despised the very concept of mass education," notes Orel. But his efforts to probe grief, the horrors of war, and the "irrationality of human existence" through fiction deserve the serious consideration of scholars.

*Godless Art*

"American Impressionism" by Barbara Novak, in *Portfolio* (Mar.-Apr. 1982). P.O. Box 2716, Boulder, Colo. 80322.

American intellectual thought before the Civil War revolved around God and a perceived divine order: Nature was God's handiwork; man was subordinate. The young Republic's art reflected this emphasis, until Charles Darwin and French impressionism together prompted a major change in artistic theory and style. So writes Novak, a Barnard College art historian.

Between 1825 and 1865, Americans developed a native art form, *luminism*. It drew on their experience in a New World, with its force, energy, and seemingly certain promise of renewal. Art showed "God-in-Nature," not man's interpretation of nature. Artists such as Fitz Hugh Lane painted smooth, linear surfaces; an individualistic stroke was taboo, since it presumptuously indicated the artist's ego.

The emergence in the late 1860s of impressionism in Europe helped to change all this. Where luminist art had striven for a transcendent "spiritual illumination," impressionism was secular and personal. Luminists had used minute modulations in tone to create landscapes that shone with divine light. French impressionist works also have a sunny, optimistic glow. But the viewer of paintings by such impressionists as Claude Monet is always conscious of the paint itself and of the artist's use of "broken color" to create light.

Meanwhile, the evolutionary theory in Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) challenged Americans' certainty about divine control of a stable world. American artists began to rely on their impressions and to experiment with style; God and nature lost some of their prominence in paintings.

The new American impressionist art produced by John Singer Sar-