

Robbie and the Poet

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In 1921 Captain H.R. Robinson, known affectionately in later life as 'Robbie,' was transferred at his own request from the Indian Army to the Burma Military Police. In May of that year he arrived in Katha. This was his first posting in Burma, although he had briefly glimpsed Rangoon and Mandalay some years earlier. His stay in Katha was also to be brief, for he was transferred six months later to distant Konglu (Kawng-lu), a small hilltop town near the north-east border. Getting there meant having to take a train to the railhead town of Myitkyina and then march for twenty-four days at the head of a line of mules laden with a year's supply of provisions. Once he had been settled in at this remote post, he was left in single-handed charge of the civil and military affairs of a huge tract of mountainous terrain. The above details about Robbie's career are drawn from his autobiography, and the page references that follow relate to the second edition of that book (Robinson, 2004), not to its original publication in 1942.

For this 24-year-old expatriate the first year or so in Konglu was, in Robbie's words, "interesting, if rather lonely" (p.11). Finding and apprehending law-breakers called for stamina, persistence and (as he came to understand) great self-control. In one case it took him an arduous two weeks' march to seek out a young woman accused of poisoning her elderly husband. On the way back she ran away into the forest, so he then had to find her, re-arrest her and finally imprison her in Konglu. Thus far, stamina and persistence had triumphed; but after some days his self-control failed him. From the beginning, he had found the young woman, handcuffed and in leg irons, very attractive. Not surprisingly he eventually found that – as he put it – 'an overwhelming aching and yearning seized upon my soul, and one night I fell' (p.20). Although she seems to have been a willing participant in what followed, the fact that she was still manacled and shackled adds a chilling note to Robbie's narrative.

He asserts that in February 1923, after more than a year in the hills, he received news that as part of the Geddes programme of cuts his service was to be discontinued and he was to return to Mandalay. There, the formalities concerning retirement from the Indian Army were soon completed and his passage to England was booked for early May. Meanwhile, he would sample the pleasures of life in Mandalay.

About three months before Robbie came back down from the hills, a nineteen-year-old named Eric Blair had arrived in Mandalay for training as an assistant superintendent of police. One evening late in April, Robinson was in the Upper Burma Club discussing his

plans with two friends whom, he says, "I will call the Poet and the Padre" (p.45). It is strange that even twenty years later when his autobiography was first published, he clearly did not wish to identify this pair. It suggests that he wanted to protect them because he had already become persona non grata in Mandalay's expatriate society, someone with whom respectable people did not associate. The reason might well be that whereas he claims to have retired from the Indian Army, in reality Robinson – as Stansky and Abrahams claim – "after a scandal involving his native mistress, had been cashiered" (1972:172). Other commentators have also remarked on Robbie's notoriety. Crick (1980:87), for example, observes that Blair "could have earned no bonus marks for knowing such a man as Robinson." I assume that 'the Padre' was an army chaplain trying to help Robbie, though he too might have been reprehensible in some way. Whatever the case, my main purpose here is to suggest that 'the Poet' was Eric Blair.

There is ample evidence that at this time Blair regarded himself as a versifier, if not as a budding poet. While still an Eton schoolboy he had seen two of his patriotic verses published in local newspapers, *The Henley and South Oxfordshire Standard* and *The Henley and South Oxfordshire Gazette* (see Crick: 36 & 38), and he had sent romantic poems to Jacintha Buddicom, a would-be girlfriend (Crick: 57 & 61). In Burma he was still conceiving poems. Two deal with prostitution, one of them a wry tale told in the first person:

ROMANCE

When I was young and had no sense
In far-off Mandalay
I lost my heart to a Burmese girl
As lovely as the day.

Her skin was gold, her hair was jet,
Her teeth were ivory;
I said 'For twenty silver pieces,
Maiden, sleep with me.'
She looked at me, so pure, so sad,
The loveliest thing alive,
And in her lisping, virgin voice,
Stood out for twenty-five.

Interestingly enough, the second poem is told in the persona of a man of the church (possibly 'the Padre?') and describes how his 'parson's week' – an occasional extended week off duty – was spent. Both poems were written on Burma Government paper and are quoted by Crick (1980: 92-3). Of the second poem's eight stanzas, three are enough to establish the much darker tone of this tale:

THE LESSER EVIL

Empty as death and slow as pain
 The days went by on leaden feet;
 And parson's week had come again
 As I walked down the little street.

I thought of all the church bells ringing
 In towns that Christian folk were in;
 I heard the godly maidens singing;
 I turned into the house of sin.

Why did I come, the woman cried,
 So seldom to her bed of ease?
 When I was not, her spirit died
 And would I give her ten rupees.

(There is another poem which Crick rightly calls 'awful' (ibid: 99-100).)

While the above supports my theory that 'the Poet' was Blair the evidence is admittedly only circumstantial, and more substantiation is needed. A comparison of physical descriptions of the two might help to confirm my hypothesis. When Blair first arrived in Mandalay he was met at the station by another recent recruit, Roger Beadon, who recorded his impression of a young man

sallow-faced, tall, thin, and gangling, whose clothes, no matter how well cut, seemed to hang on him – Eric A. Blair.
 (Stansky & Abrahams: 150-151.)

A few years later, when Blair was working in Moulmein, he was described as "a tall, gaunt, young man" (Hearsey: 94). The adjectives *sallow*, *thin*, *gaunt* and *gangling* do not suggest a robust constitution, and Blair's tallness would only tend to heighten any fragility of body. We also know that his lungs were frail: his sister wrote that in the early thirties 'he got desperately ill with pneumonia' (Coppard & Crick: 28). Blair claimed to have left Burma "partly because the climate had ruined my health" (ibid:38), and in a letter to Cyril Connolly in 1938 he referred to 'an old TB lesion ...which I must have had ten years or more' – perhaps, therefore, before he left Burma in 1927.

Let us, then, compare these impressions with Robbie's physical descriptions of 'the Poet'. Towards the end of 'the cold weather of 1923-24', Robinson says, he drove out with 'the Poet' and another man towards what must have been Maymyo:

The Poet was hardly one's idea of a mighty hunter before the Lord.
 Pale and delicate in appearance, but otherwise healthy enough, he

looked what he was – a poet. But poets, like woman with child, have peculiar fancies, and this one wanted to shoot an elephant. (p.93)

While we must not be distracted by that final phrase, when Blair's colleague Roger Beadon asked him on another occasion whether he wanted to come out for a tiger shoot, Blair "thought it was a good idea" (Coppard and Crick, 1984:63). This confirms that Blair had no compunctions about big game hunting. What is more relevant here is the description of the Poet as "pale and delicate in appearance but otherwise healthy enough." Soon (p. 94) "the slight figure of the Poet" is seen running back from the futile hunt and is described as "exhausted" – as one would expect in the case of a man with weak lungs. These descriptions might be seen as supporting my theory. Taylor (2004) disagrees with me on the basis that Blair was 'a gangling six foot three', but in my view tallness in itself does not make anyone appear less *sallow*, *thin*, *gaunt* or *slight*.

Robbie provides a little more evidence that could suggest that 'the Poet' was Blair. We know that Blair's mother Ida Limouzin grew up in Moulmein, and that Blair had a grandmother and at least one aunt, Nora, still living there – see, for example, Bowker (2003: 6-8) and Taylor (2003:72). In his attempts to shake off an addiction to opium, Robinson took the train to Rangoon, where he "put up at the house of the Poet" and 'The Poet's aunt' gave him an injection of morphia (p.97). Had Nora by now moved to Rangoon? Was this another aunt? Or in this case was 'aunt' just the usual term of respect for an unrelated elderly lady? Since we do not know and probably never shall, this little piece of evidence is inconclusive.

However, further evidence of a link between Robbie and Blair can be found in the latter's writings. Robbie had already been repatriated by the time Eric Blair left Burma in 1927, and by 1934 – when *Burmese Days* was published – Eric had chosen to be known by the name of George Orwell. I believe that there are in this novel several echoes of Blair's friendship with Robinson. Once he had become addicted to opium, Robbie had set up his own smoking den at home, screened by "deep red velvet curtains, some nine feet in height" (p.77). Later, when he was at his wits' end, he decided to shoot himself. Retiring to his bedroom, he hesitated to bite on the barrel of his revolver:

That would, I thought, result in an unsightly corpse, with the back of the head blown out. The correct way, according to the tenets of common usage, was to fire through the temple. It is strange, is it not, that men should be swayed thus in their final hour? (p. 120)

In *Burmese Days* the central figure Flory is as much a misfit as Robbie – or indeed as Blair – and again like Robbie has a ‘native mistress’ who is the cause of his disgrace. Like Robbie, Flory retires to his bedroom in order to commit suicide, but decides first to turn his pistol on his dog Flo:

When she was a yard away, he fired, blowing her skull to fragments.

Her shattered brain looked like red velvet. Was that what he would look like? The heart, then, not the head. (Orwell, 1934: Ch. 24)

The detail about red velvet may be sheer coincidence, but the fact that both Robbie and Flory paused to worry about what they would look like after death suggests that it was a topic that Robbie had discussed with Blair. Indeed, in his review of Robbie’s book Orwell makes a point of highlighting this aspect of Robbie’s suicide attempt:

The description of the attempted suicide is worth the rest of the book put together. It is profoundly interesting to know what the mind can still contain in the face of apparently certain death – interesting to know, for instance, that a man can be ready to blow his brains out but anxious to avoid a disfiguring wound. (Orwell, 1942)

Finally, the very fact that Orwell chose to review Robbie’s book may be significant. In his phrasing – “Those who knew the author in Mandalay” and “Those who knew Captain Robinson in the old days” (ibid) – he clearly indicates his acquaintance with Robbie. This is reinforced by his expressed pleasure in seeing

the photograph of him...completely cured of the opium habit and apparently well-adjusted and happy, in spite of his blindness. (ibid)

I consider the various coincidences outlined above to be fairly convincing support of my theory that ‘the Poet’ was the future George Orwell, but there may well be a scholar somewhere who can prove me wrong.

POSTSCRIPT

Robbie’s blindness had been caused by his blowing out both eyeballs in the suicide attempt seventeen years earlier. Soon after arriving in England, Robinson decided to enter the Massage School of the National Institute for the Blind and subsequently worked in South London hospitals as a physiotherapist until his retirement in 1960. He developed close friendships

with various people, one describing him as having been “our closest friend, Robbie. A man in a million – so caring, so wise, and such fun to be with” (Personal correspondence, 2004). Unfortunately, however, he finally killed himself in March 1965 at the age of sixty-nine.

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