WHITLEY STOKES: FIRST & FORMOST CULTIVATOR OF OMARIANA

[Two anniversaries that fall this year provide an occasion to tell a story which shows just how much the fame of a writer's work may depend on the active appreciation of one keen reader. Edward FitzGerald, the poet translator of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, was born two hundred years ago this year. Whitley Stokes, the notable Irish philologist and Anglo-Indian jurist, died exactly a century ago. No writer ever had a more appreciative reader than FitzGerald did in Stokes].

The story is well-known how the first edition of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, published anonymously in 1859, fell dead from the press in London before copies were rescued from the penny box outside Quaritch's bookshop on what is now the Charing Cross Road, how it was then talked up among the Pre-Raphaelites until successive editions were issued and how it has never been out of print since.

When the story is told, Whitley Stokes is sometimes named as the man who (along with his friend, the Hispanist John Ormsby, early in July, 1861) salvaged a copy of the *Rubáiyát* from the box, recognized its value and passed on the news. It is certain he gave one copy to the Irish poet, Samuel Ferguson, and another to Dante Gabriel Rossetti (they fell in love with one another, he said, when he introduced them). He may also have bought other copies for friends. Quaritch was notably vague about what had happened to the bulk of the first edition entrusted to him. It may have got lost when he moved shop, though in one telling Quaritch claimed it had been bought up by a literary editor called Wilkes, possibly a slurred variant of the name, Whitley Stokes.

Stokes (1830-1909), the son of a well-known Dublin physician, deserves to be remembered in his own right as a scholar who, as a result of the tutelage of Rudolf Siegfried, the first Professor of Sanskrit at TCD, helped to put the study of Celtic philology on a relatively sound scientific basis. Stokes was also to hold the top legal post in British India and he himself regarded as the greatest undertaking of his life the comprehensive reference work in which he brought the disparate laws of India into a single, compact code. As a young Irish exile in London, however, Stokes was better known as a man of letters, a translator of poetry from eastern and northern Europe.

More than a century ago, when the first bibliography of FitzGerald's work was attempted, it was supposed (possibly as the result of a prompt from Stokes himself) that he had been the editor of the next edition of the *Rubáiyát* to be published after the failure of the first. This was a pirate edition privately printed in Madras in December 1862. Stokes, a young barrister, had been noticed at a course of lectures given in London the previous winter by H.S (later Sir Henry) Maine, about to go out to India as Law Member of the Govemor's Council. Stokes called himself a "muff" for not prospering as a lawyer in London and, when Maine offered to recommend him, he jumped at the opportunity to seek his fortune in India.

Stokes had long been urged by a barrister friend and fellow Dubliner, John Dawson Mayne, to join him in Madras and look for a lucrative judgeship. The pagoda tree was being shaken vigorously. Before the 1857 Uprising in India the British had pursued a policy of annexing many of the states still ruled by native Indian princes and this had led to a great deal of litigation involving private property. A judgeship was initially beyond Stokes but there was plenty of well-paid work for a barrister. He was soon appointed to a series of posts in the judicial establishment that finally led him all the way to the top. Imperial looting as much of the action undoubtedly was, it is also worth remembering that Mayne's work on Hindu Law, like Maine's on Village Communities, was read attentively by a young lawyer such as Gandhi and that Stokes played a very great part in providing modern India with a unified, if not uniform, law code.

Stokes, penniless when he arrived in Madras after a long voyage round the Cape during which he had twice fallen in love (fortunately, as he said, simultaneously so that the two affections counteracted one another), stayed with the Maynes in their bungalow in Adyar (the Howth of Madras). He had brought with him his precious copy of the *Rubáiyát* and immediately on arrival evidently showed it to Capt (shortly to be promoted Major) Evans Bell, a soldier with 20 years' experience of India. Bell, having been shunted aside to Madras for insubordination in his previous post (protesting British treatment of the Nagpur Ranis), was (among other things) Hon. Sec. of the Madras Literary Society, a learned society founded on the model established in Calcutta a century earlier by the great Orientalist and jurist, Sir William Jones.

Bell was not only a man who loved poetry but was also a committed secularist who had floated the idea of founding a radical Secular Party in England. He was delighted by the free-thinking philosophy no less than the gorgeous imagery of the *Rubáiyát* and, since the book was not otherwise available, proposed having the book privately reprinted. But Stokes and Bell, who had nothing in common except a love of imaginative literature, were not the sort to be content with a simple reprint. They decided they would not only edit and reprint the failed London edition; they would put this magnificent work in its proper context by publishing together with it other contemporary translations of the poetic quatrains attributed to the 11th century Persian scientist Omar Khayyám.

The excellent library of the Madras Literary Society was able to provide the two enthusiasts with a couple of items they chose to reprint. The library had recently made up a full run of the *Calcutta Review* and in the March 1858 number there had appeared a substantial article on the poetry of Omar Khayyám, including literal translations of 32 of his rubáiyát, or self-contained quatrains. The introductory essay to the (anonymous) *Rubáiyát* had quoted from this (unsigned) article so extensively that Stokes, for one, had no doubt it was the work of the same hand. Though Stokes was wrong in this assumption, his deduction was understandable.

FitzGerald's Persian teacher was his very close friend, Edward Byles Cowell, a younger man who, together with his wife (FitzGerald's idealised Lady), had sailed to Calcutta in 1856 to take up a post at Presidency College. Cowell had discovered a manuscript of (158) quatrains attributed to Omar Khayyám in the Bodleian and conned them with FitzGerald in the days before leaving for India. On arrival in India he immediately dug a second, much bigger collection (of 516 quatrains) out of the Asiatic Society's library in Calcutta. While the 1857 Uprising raged across the plains of India, determining that an English-inspired Empire would finally displace a Persian-inspired one, Cowell and FitzGerald conducted an intense (and still fascinating) correspondence leading to the creation of a poem that is a perfect fusion of those two cultures.

FitzGerald always deferred to Cowell as his Master, his Sheikh. He knew Cowell was the greater scholar, the more faithful translator. But he also felt that translation of poetry, in order to be any good, had to be free, not scientific, and had to be re-shaped to the demands of the new language. When Cowell, in 1857, proposed to publish some of his translations of Omar Khayyám's quatrains in *Fraser's* magazine in London, FitzGerald (most uncharacteristically) overrode him. Cowell, being an evangelical Christian, could not feel with the free-thinking Omar as could FitzGerald. FitzGerald claimed Omar as his own and with that the right to publish his verses in London.

Cowell, no doubt rather miffed, published his article (and pedestrian, if accurate, translations) in Calcutta. *Fraser's*, who would have liked Cowell's, certainly did not want to publish FitzGerald's versions of the irreligious Omar. FitzGerald had chosen some 35 quatrains he thought least likely to give offence to the divines among the magazine's readership but even these were too much for *Fraser's*. The editor never replied. Eventually, FitzGerald printed up 75 quatrains on his own account after first asking Cowell if he might summarize Cowell's own introduction to Omar's poetry in the Calcutta article - even though it took the form of an apology for free-thinking such as he himself would not make. FitzGerald's introduction paraphrased much of Cowell's so closely it is little wonder Stokes took the author of both to be the same.

Another document Stokes and Bell evidently found in the MLS library was by the French scholar, M. Garcin de Tassy, who had long been a corresponding member of the MLS and kept closely in touch. In 1857, when Mayne (also on the Committee of the MLS) was already in Madras, he had sent the library a copy of a *Note* he had written (and also published, with one small change, in the *Journal Asiatique*) on Omar Khayyárn, including translations of ten quatrains.

There is story behind this *Note*. In 1857 FitzGerald had sent De Tassy a copy of the verses by Omar Cowell had unearthed in the Bodleian. De Tassy was delighted by this windfall and at once translated ten of the quatrains and framed them with a short biographical introduction. This he at once proposed to publish and read before the Persian envoy to France. He intended to give full credit to FitzGerald and to Cowell for this work but FitzGerald, fearing both that Cowell might not want his name associated with the impious Omar and that his own copying of the Bodleian manuscript might not have been accurate enough and thus do damage to Cowell's scholarly reputation, insisted that their names be taken off the publication. This led to the impression that De Tassy had been first in the field of contemporary Omarian studies. Cowell could hardly have been happy about this muddle.

Stokes knew nothing of all this, of course, and the result of FitzGerald' s attempt to mend fences with Cowell left him with the impression that the two anonymous authors were one and the same. But while the prose sounded identical, Stokes could see there was a world of difference between the literal versions of Omar' s quatrains that appeared in the article and the brilliant finished translations in the *Rubáiyát.* He proposed to round off the Madras compilation by putting into metre and verse some of the literal versions he assumed the poet had discarded and not bothered to re-work into poetry. He took eleven quatrains from Cowell's Calcutta article and, following them line by line, adapted them to meet the requirements of the AABA rhyme pattern evident in the *Rubáiyát.* He did the same with four of the quatrains translated by De Tassy (though there of course he did actually have to translate, if only from the French). Curiously, these four were taken over by H.G. Keene and published as if they were his own even more blatantly than Stokes had appropriated Cowell's (which at least needed versification).

Stokes' s translations of the translations in 1862 rounded out what remains to this day an invaluable compendium, comprising not only quatrains done by FitzGerald but by his teacher Cowell, his colleague De Tassy and by his most

ardent reader Stokes: 136 quatrains in all. The value of FitzGerald's poetry is the more apprehensible for being seen in terms of the milieu out of which it emerged. This Madras edition is the first in a long line of Omarian studies inspired by FitzGerald' s *Rubáiyát.*

[A comparison of the way Cowell, Stokes and FitzGerald translated can be glimpsed from their respective treatments of one quatrain:

> Alas, that the book of youth is folded,
> And the fresh purple spring become December;
> That bird of joy, whose name was youth, -
> Alas I know not, how he came or is gone.
> *(Cowell)*
>
> Alas for me! the Book of Youth is read,
> The fresh glad Spring is now December dead:
> That Bird of joy whose name was Youth is flown –
> Ay me, I know not how he came or fled!
> *(Stokes)*
>
> Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!
> That Youth' s sweet -scented Manuscript should close!
> The Nightingale that in the Branches sang,
> Ah, whence, and whither flown again, who knows!
> *(FitzGerald)*]

The brief collaboration between Stokes and Bell that produced their notable edition of the *Rubáiyát* lasted but a few months. Bell fell ill in May 1863 and had to go back to England (in the event never to return). He left his beloved dog Tiger in the good care of his friend Stokes - much to the annoyance of the mongoose kept by Stokes. Bell had already sent a copy of the Madras compilation to his close associate George Jacob Holyoake, the last man in England to be imprisoned for blasphemy and the last to be prosecuted for publishing without paying stamp duty. Holyoake was the leading Secularist in his day and, in a pamphlet he wrote at the end of the century defending the proprietor of the Free-Thought Bookstore in Leicester from a charge of piracy brought against him by Macmillan's for infringing their copyright on the *Rubáiyát*, he argued that forty years previously Macmillan's would not have dared touch a poem that was such a comprehensive and polished denial of the main tenets of Christianity. It was the pirates who had brought about the liberalization of opinion from which Macmillan's could now reap their profits from duchesses and prelates.

Bell's reprint was of only 50 copies but it was being asked for in London in 1863 and clearly told among the radicals with whom he worked for causes such as Italian freedom, the women's suffrage and, most importantly of all for him, Indian reform. Another copy of the Madras edition was given to Amelia Chesson, not simply governess to the Bells' daughters but daughter and wife of active campaigners on behalf of victims of injustice and imperialism, her father George Thompson (sometime M.P. for Tower Hamlets) not only once having had a price on his head in the United States as an Abolitionist but also travelling unarmed up-country in India during the 1857 Uprising as a matter of non-violent principle. Bell's edition, then, played a part in establishing an audience for the *Rubáiyát* among Free-thinking radicals of a rather different set and class from those Irish and Pre-Raphaelite bohemians Stokes had alerted to it a year or two earlier.

Nor was Stokes, busy as he was, finished with his promotion of the *Rubáiyát.* First of all, he was determined to find out who was the anonymous author of the poem. Shortly after the Madras edition of 1862 was printed, Stokes scribbled across the title page of his own working copy that the translation had been done by E. Cowell. The most likely possibility is that he had learnt from his friends in Calcutta that Professor Cowell, Principal of the Sanskrit College and long established as an editor of Persian poetry, was the anonymous author of the Calcutta Review article and thus, by Stokes's (quite reasonable) reckoning, of the *Rubáiyát.*

Stokes had taken over from Bell not only his dog but the post of Hon. Sec. of the Madras Literary Society, along with the task of editing the Society's *Journal.* He only had time to edit one number (eventually published in July 1864) before his career took him on to the corridors of power in Calcutta but, while in the process of editing the *Journal*, he discovered that not Cowell but FitzGerald was the author of the *Rubáiyát.* This was something of a journalistic coup since FitzGerald was not named in print anywhere else in the world as author of the *Rubáiyát* until 1875.

It is not easy to determine from which quarter Stokes got his information. Dublin is a very real possibility. Richard Chenevix Trench, a great admirer of FitzGerald's translations of Calderón, had returned to Dublin at the beginning of 1864 as Archbishop. Trench was friends with Bodham Donne, one of the three men to whom FitzGerald had given a copy of the *Rubáiyát.* Stokes was very much in touch: he had Trench's poems with him in India, his superior officer in Madras was just returning from Dublin after being operated on by his father. The Trench connection is a real possibility.

Early in 1864, Stokes was also in Calcutta looking to further his career there and we may guess he would, then as later, have talked up the *Rubáiyát.* If he had named Cowell as its author and Cowell came to hear of it, he would have been horrified. He had been staying in Bishop Cotton's episcopal palace, proselytizing surreptitiously among his Hindu students at the college and regretting ever having introduced FitzGerald to such an impious author. There is little doubt he would have vehemently denied authorship and set the record straight.

However Stokes came by his information, he at once published it by way of an editorial footnote in the *Madras Journal.* This note provides us with the only contemporary collation there is of the Madras edition. Stokes writes of the Madras edition as Bell's reprint. We can assume it was Bell's idea, we can be fairly sure Bell paid for it. It may also be that Stokes, by now well set to climb all the way to the top of the judicial establishment in India, preferred what was after all a pirate edition to be known as Bell's reprint rather than Stokes's edition.

FitzGerald is named as the author of the *Rubáiyát* and praised for all the literary virtues Trench had found in his translations of Calderón. Stokes still has it fixed in his mind that the author of both the scholarly article and the poem are the same and so he now assumes FitzGerald is the author of both. He then makes reference to his own contribution to the Madras edition (though not naming himself) but, when he reprints this contribution, in his usual idiosyncratic way he not only changes some of the existing quatrains but adds a couple more.

The *Journal* article (by a barrister friend of Stokes), which appears to be little more than a pretext for this note, also adds a dimension to this story. It records that Stokes has received two copies of Omar manuscripts, one containing (along with work by another Persian poet, Nazíri) the largest collection of Omarian quatrains then known (801 rubáiyát). This copy had belonged to the Nawabs of the Carnatic (then in process of being deposed by the British, much to the indignation of Bell). According to Stokes, he had been given it by his Muslim tailor in the Madras bazaar (which, if true, is likely to have been on account of his reputation as an aficionado of the *Rubáiyát*). Stokes apparently tried his hand (for the first time) at direct translation of several of the quatrains and finally, on leave from India, while paying a quick visit to Cambridge from Dublin in January 1872, gave it to the University Library.

There is reason to surmise that on this visit Stokes met Cowell, by then Professor of Sanskrit at Cambridge, and that he very probably came clean about his piracy of the *Rubáiyát.* He probably also told the story of how he had originally supposed Cowell to be its author. After Stokes returned from India for good in 1883 he continued to fiddle with his Omarian quatrains and he could hardly have published them in a London magazine (the *Academy*) also read by Cowell had he not first cleared the way with Cowell (even allowing that he dropped the quatrains where he had hardly altered Cowell at all). Other variations appeared in Dole's Variorum edition of the *Rubáiyát* and in the final year of Stokes' s life, the *Dublin Book of Irish Verse* published ten of Stokes's quatrains from Omar. If Cowell deserves at least some credit for his part in FitzGerald's translations, he deserves a great deal more for his part in Stokes's.

Not that anyone should begrudge Stokes the little vanity of his Omarian verses, however engineered. To him goes the great credit for recognizing, acclaiming and tirelessly promoting the *Rubáiyát.* At the time of Stokes's visit to Cambridge, Cowell at once notified FitzGerald and FitzGerald wrote back to ask if he should prosecute the pirate and make money that way. He was obviously in jest since no writer ever did less to market his own work. Shortly afterwards, he wrote to Quaritch to say that he had not lived in vain if he had lived to be pirated. The piracy of his work had in fact been only one part of a much larger promotion of it. Moved to Calcutta and daily becoming a more eminent jurist Stokes continued to talk up the *Rubáiyát* among the Viceroys. Lord Lytton, who fancied himself as a poet and once scandalized Anglo India by hugging a Persian envoy because he was a fellow poet, asked Stokes to convey his congratulations to FitzGerald on the *Rubáiyát.* Stokes did so by way of his sister Maddie in Dublin and Bodham Donne. On receiving these congratulations FitzGerald scribbled a marginal note: "Stokes jokes". The joke may have been on him. He probably never did realise that the *Rubáiyát* might have languished forever had it not been for Whitley Stokes, the first and greatest cultivator of Omariana.

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