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Encountering Buddhism in Twentieth-Century British and American Literature, edited by Lawrence Normand and Alison Winch. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. ix + 238pp. Hb. £59.99. ISBN-13: 9781441184764. Also available as an e-book.

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This book offers a welcome series of articles on various ways in which contact with Buddhism, primarily through its philosophical aspects, has affected various Anglophone poets, novelists and other writers in the twentieth century. This represents a real development in literary study of Buddhist influence: there are few books of this type, most of the material so far being isolated essays in literary periodicals read only by specialists on particular authors.

The introductory essay, by Normand, provides an extended overview of some intellectual influences that percolated through to the West in the nineteenth century. Buddhist philosophies, and the way they were often only partially understood in certain contexts, are presented well. Normand argues that the 'Buddhism that fascinated British and Americans can be defined with some precision' (p.1). He then supports this by examining various Buddhist modernist movements, the role of Vivekānanda and the Japanese Zen teachers in the Parliament of World Religions in 1890 (though he leaves out Dharmapāla), the search for authenticity of Western authors and poets in exploring Buddhism and its principles, and an extended discussion of a few key twentieth-century figures.

So Normand gives a concise account of the way Buddhist and Indian ideas were influencing late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century intellectual life, and starting to be evident on the stage of international global debate. After an excellent discussion of Edwin Arnold's best-selling poem, The *Light of Asia* (1979), he deals from a literary point of view with the twentieth century, in sections on T.S. Eliot and Hermann Hesse. He notes, in a helpful study of the two authors, that their works, not represented in the essays, demonstrate a preoccupation with the nature of self and its experience of the world that both links these two important figures and anticipates much of the interest in Buddhism in western cultures in the latter part of the twentieth century. His analysis of *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Siddhartha* (1922; translated into English in 1951), gives us an important anticipation of some twentieth-century interpretations of Buddhist thought and practice described in the essays, in a momentum that in some ways started, he argues later in this book, after the watershed of the First World War. From this time Buddhist

philosophy is explored, challenged and absorbed primarily through its appeal to the experiencer, and its phenomenological concerns. Indeed, as Normand's overview of this large period maintains, Buddhism continues to be reinterpreted according to the needs of those who encounter it:

> The questions that writers have raised in their encounters with Buddhism include that of personal authenticity in an alienating modern world; the ultimate reality of the physical world as conveyed through science; the nature and potential of human experience, and the possibility of experiencing it; and questions of moral action in a world without 'God'. (p.17)

As he points out, even 'religion' as a category is challenged in literatures both American and British, by Buddhist thought and practice. Normand's introduction, and his helpful summary of the arguments of the essays in the book, unifies this series of very disparate viewpoints.

This otherwise interesting discussion leaves out, however, the diverse literary impact of Buddhism in the period up to the third decade of the twentieth century. While theories concerning international discourse, outlined here so well, are central in the encounters, we cannot ignore the books, poems, ballads and stories people from both Europe and North America at this time were actually reading at this highly creative time. From the end of the nineteenth century, periodical literature, as well as the burgeoning short story and fantasies, produced for a newly literate 'railway' readership, popularized all kinds of stories influenced loosely by Asian philosophies of various kinds: this period, to the beginning of the First World War, gives us the birth of the modern short story and discrete populist genres, often characterised by 'yarns' of reincarnation and fictional past-life recollections, themes particularly popular from this time right through to the twentieth century, along with frequent literary depictions of tropes that include journeys or references to mountain-dwelling oriental sages and Buddhist renunciates. They frequently employ terms derived, not always as chaotically as is often thought, from Buddhist and Hindu contexts; indeed the emergence of various genres that became so popular in the twentieth century, happened to accompany the first waves of influence of Asian religions too. This fertile inventiveness combines a willingness to dissolve and recreate literary convention, unabashed mystery-making and an often genuine search for Eastern guidance, in fictions aimed at a popular, often lower income-bracket, readership. While often partial and 'Orientalist', some of these works demonstrate real attempts to resolve through fiction the fractured sensibilities of a disorientated 'self', of which growing imperialism was one, very dangerous and unhappy, symptom. In such works Buddhism had its more human impact: such fictions often continued in the twentieth century to provide many readers with their first contact with Buddhism and the figure of the Buddha.

Rudyard Kipling is mentioned only in one sentence, through citation of one critic criticising his imperialist agenda in the novel *Kim* (1901). Kipling's allegiances, often far more complex than they first appear, give grounds for serious and important objections by some modern scholars. It is Kipling, however, who demonstrates, above all writers of the period, proof of the very contact with the cultures, practices, and local participation with Buddhist ritual and life that Normand detects as missing in Anglophone literature until well into the twenti-

eth century. *Kim*, and Kipling's other stories and poems, defy stereotyping. *Kim* is a complex work, where the Buddhist *vinaya*, storytelling and compassionate humour of the Tibetan lama disarm all colonialist assumptions, including those often ascribed to the author. It gives perhaps the first and certainly one of the most effective characterisations of a Buddhist monk in Anglophone literature, and retells several *jātaka*s as part of the narrative. Kipling allows popular Indian religion to seep into his writing; his observation of ritual is delighted and accurate. *Just so Stories* (1902) are based on a template of 'How the x got its y ...' found also in *jātakas*; the poetry is nuanced in its presentation of the human, as opposed to political, encounter between West and the East: it needs to be read carefully. The short stories are sometimes polished jewels of craftsmanship, with many communicating the mores and underlying notions of Buddhism and Hinduism, and their practitioners, with unusual understanding and sympathy. 'The Finest Story in the World' (1891), for instance, suggests with powerful symbolic economy the notion of repeated reincarnation/rebirth as a metaphor for the hidden well of human potential and creativity (Kipling 1907, 95–135). As Prickett's still classic study, *Victorian Fantasy*, notes of this story: 'From the first, Kipling was a man haunted by other worlds, and as his art developed he became progressively more skillful in suggesting the intersection of different planes of reality' (Prickett 1979, 200). Buddhism and Hinduism offered him, as it did other authors of the time, a rich vocabulary to do this.

So the argument would have been helped by consideration of one or two other literary works up to and including the opening decades of the twentieth century, that do empathise with Buddhist culture and doctrine. At this time British travellers, in particular, from all social classes, were having 'on-the-ground' contact with Buddhist cultures, in most areas of Asia, and produced ballads, poems, travelogues, stories, and romances exploring this. Publications were usually transatlantic, and the editors' incorporation of both America and Britain in this volume is justified. Such influences are pervasive and by no means all based on partially understood theory or confined to populist fiction. *The Burman: His Life and Notions* (1882), for instance, although written by the explorer J.G. Scott, under the pseudonym of a Burmese Buddhist, 'Shway Yoe', gives an 'insider' account of Buddhist ritual, mores and doctrines: it caused a great stir at the time, running into three editions. Its descriptions of ritual, devotion and theory are, oddly enough, far more in sympathy with our recent understandings of Buddhism than more cerebral accounts sometimes found in mid to late twentieth-century literature (Yoe 1910, 105).

In fiction, Buddhism is explored in interesting ways. The ambivalent narrator, Marlow, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), is described twice explicitly, and once implicitly, as exhibiting varied poses of the Buddha at crucially significant points of the narrative, suggesting a subtle understanding of the implications of the varied meaning of these by a writer noted for deliberation in the use of symbolic imagery (Conrad 1899, 7, 10, 76; Bauld 1999). One of the leading novels of the nineteenth century, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), records animated discussion about the Bodhisattva and the hungry tigress story in the warmly described Klesmer family (Eliot 1876, chapter xxvii). A widely read romance by Edwin Arnold's son, *Phra the Phoenician* (1890), deals with the 'rebirth' of a central character in several historical periods and places (Arnold 1913). By 1922, H.G.

Wells' highly popular *Short History of the World* (1922) includes the Buddha, and the Buddhist king Aśoka, as amongst the greatest figures the world has ever known. Such works provide literary roots for subsequent writers, and in sometimes brief vignettes explore the principles and practice of Buddhism with an engagement that steps outside the parameters of received thinking and public debate on all kinds of matters, spiritual and political. They were widely read well into the twentieth century. As the essays in this book amply demonstrate, it is often in literary composition that theories, cultures and practices are represented with an intuitive grasp of meaning that doctrinal discussions sometimes miss. But despite this lack of an early literary emphasis, Normand manages a difficult job with subtlety and care, and provides a good account of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century intellectual understanding of Buddhism and its legacy, as it affected at any rate the public arena of debate and the growing shift to internationalism in political life.

The first essay, Erin Nouttit's discussion of the South African Olive Schreiner (1855–1920), does set her writer's work firmly within its own literary context, which is discussed in depth and detail. Considering closely the ironically titled 'The Buddhist Priest's Wife' (1891) and *Undine* (1929), Nouttit shows that Schreiner, whom she reveals as a sensitive and atmospheric writer, found intuitive understandings of Buddhist principles that ran counter to many misapprehensions of the time, such as the prevailing notion that Nirvana was in some way a nihilist goal. Her fictions 'stand apart from much of the work of her contemporaries ... Buddhism is treated as ordinary and relevant to all living beings rather than an exclusively scholarly concern' (p. 36).

In a well argued essay on the world of 'Shangri La', Normand notes various doctrinal works on Buddhism that appeared from the late nineteenth century onwards. This chapter explores that paeon to a putative Buddhist world, James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933), a wistful postscript to the wave of Utopias and 'lost worlds' that characterized much fantasy fiction from the late nineteenth century. Alongside an impressively allusive discussion of contemporaries such as Isherwood, Auden and Jung, Normand makes also a very significant point: 'One of the things Hilton effected — wittingly or not — was to release into Anglophone culture some vague but positive ideas about Buddhism that helped shaped his readers' thoughts and feelings about Buddhism' (p. 51).

Erin Lafford and Emma Mason, in one of the most literary of the articles, explore e.e. cummings' poetry in the light of contacts with breathing practices and philosophy. This produces a strong essay, with insightful research demonstrating, through a close reading of the poems, the way that breath rhythms suggested through Zen practice inform the pace and momentum of single works. Here is a demonstration of Buddhist influence not just on the content but also on the body and shape of the poem itself: this kind of reading offers skilled study of cummings' prosody, offering a quite new and important understanding into this poet's work.

Manuel Yang uses the wonderful phrase 'radical conviviality' to describe the way Henry Miller, Kenneth Rexroth and Thomas Merton use Zen Buddhism as a means of challenging the dehumanizing effects of capitalism, and shows how they helped to shape American individualism through their use of language, poetics and drama. Another study of Zen influence is James Patrick Brown's piece, dem-

onstrating a historical thread from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth, and the Beat poets, that combined American values of vitality and a love of nature with D. T.Suzuki-influenced Zen philosophy. Bent Sorenson picks up this theme, with a study of the way, in Kerouac's work, Zen was used to supplant perceived authoritarianism within the Roman Catholic Church, a task that, as he demonstrates, is achieved with only partial success. Andy Wimbush interestingly explores the nature of Beckett's contacts with Buddhism, if any, and skillfully demonstrates the influence of Beckett's reading of Haeckel's account of a visit to Ceylon to show that he was indeed profoundly affected by Buddhism, and uses this to challenge the compassion and integrity of his readers.

Bidhan Roy's chapter on Christopher Isherwood explores his notions of self, and, through Isherwood's contacts in California in the 1940s, suggests that he too was influenced in his work *A Single Man* (1964), by Buddhist, rather than Hindu sources, as is commonly supposed. Sarah C. Gardam shifts the perspective completely, by addressing the worlds of American Chinese immigrants, particularly women, and traces fascinating connections between Hong Kingston's stories, with their evocations of heaven realms and the notion of emptiness, and the Chinese traditions of Pure Land Buddhism. A western female writer is considered next, in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), which, Elena Spandri argues with care and with well organised substantiation, explores theories of the self derived from both Western, and Buddhist philosophy, ethics and epistemology. The last chapter, by Sean Miller, is in some ways the 'wild card', and in a suitable finale examines the remarkable present-day popularity of non-fiction books that present parallels between Buddhist notions of matter and quantum theory.

The title of the book is apt, as these essays show various kinds of 'encounters', within two often interconnected literary traditions, over a period spanning more than a century, from a religion whose philosophical movements and practices are themselves characterized by immense local and historical variation. There could have been a little explanation at the outset, even brief, of the popular literary background and a clear differentiation made between Eastern, Northern and Southern Buddhism and their respective doctrines; some readers may not know about this. Interpretations of Buddhism have been complex and varied, as is noted: but so are the sources, as there are many different types of Buddhism and practice. So a short preface might have helped here. Was it the result of a conference? Or did the work start out from the outset as a series of highly disparate essays, about very different genres and encounters? The editors had a very difficult task, and it does not in the end matter that the book cannot be comprehensive; but a preface would have helped orientate the reader, showing the book's intention.

In a way, it is a book really about the emergence of that difficult notion, modernity, and for this many will find it worthwhile. It needs to be read as it is: a series of very distinct, often very illuminating essays, on various impingements of Buddhist thinking and practice on many types of Anglophone literary expression, during a period of tumultuous change and search in all regions concerned. Inevitably writers come to mind that cannot all be mentioned in a slim volume, and whose appeal may extend outside some literary circles: for instance science fiction, popular romances, travel writing, children's stories, songs and ballads, and the works of some writers whose contacts touch the heart as well as the head,

such as Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849–1924), Noor Inayat Khan (1914–1944) or, interestingly, Doris Lessing (1919–2013). But in this it also, perhaps, offers a fair reflection of the nature of the attention Buddhist philosophies have often attracted in literature in Western cultures: the greatest strength of this book is that it demonstrates the extent to which global notions of self and authenticity have been shaped by Buddhism, irrespective of whether ideas have been correctly understood, or the practitioner base behind them. Normand's introduction sets the stage well, and the subsequent literary analyses represent some of the twentieth century's major writers, poets and thinkers. The editors are to be commended for a difficult undertaking, and for assembling this series of greatly diverse and absorbing essays, about often distinguished and highly influential writers and their works. The book, a pioneer in its way, is recommended for any scholar of twentieth-century Buddhism and its varied reflections and reinterpretations.

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