

BIOGRAPHY & LITERATURE

# Tacitus, Tagore

Two studies of a remarkably neglected polymath

**ROSINKA CHAUDHURI**

**RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

**BASHABI FRASER**

248pp. Reaktion. Paperback, £11.99.

**THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

**SUKANTA CHAUDHURI, EDITOR**

515pp. Cambridge University Press.  
 Paperback, £34.99 (US \$44.99).

**O**PPPOSITE THE TITLE PAGE of Bashabi Fraser's summation of Rabindranath Tagore's life and work appears a long list of the "leading cultural figures of the modern period" who also appear in the series to which it belongs - a series called *Critical Lives*. Alphabetically arranged, it begins with Antonin Artaud, Roland Barthes and Georges Bataille, but unexpectedly it also includes Coco Chanel and Derek Jarman. There are - glaringly, in the age of Black Lives Matter - only a handful of non-European names in the list. Alongside figures such as Fidel Castro, Frida Kahlo, Yukio Mishima and Octavio Paz, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore are the only Indians who have, thus far, qualified for inclusion.

In such a context, the reader should perhaps be grateful that Tagore, the first non-white writer to attain worldwide fame after he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, has been included at all. Fraser does well in this short book, taking us swiftly, over the course of twelve chapters, from his family home and background to his "modernity" and "legacy". There are also rare photographs here, rescued from widely dispersed archival sources. No summary in 200 pages can be expected to do justice to the vast, complex and influential oeuvre of this poet who

was also a short story writer, dramatist, educationist, artist, songwriter, composer and many other things. It is important, however, that his name be put into circulation in contemporary times to remind the world of Rabindranath Tagore - yet again.

There was a time when everybody who read knew his name. Wilfred Owen's mother famously wrote to the poet during his visit to London in 1920 to tell him that she had found some lines of his - "when I leave, let these be my parting words: what my eyes have seen, what my life received, are unsurpassable" - inscribed in her son's pocket book, which had come back to her after his death. She sent this letter without having a full address to send it to, confident that just his name on the envelope might be enough to find him. It was. Yet, writing in the *Guardian* in 2011 to mark Tagore's 150th year, Ian Jack remarked that today, among those who speak no Bengali, "Tagore's neglect is extraordinary". He had consulted two dictionaries of quotations, the Oxford and Penguin, to check the most memorable lines by Tagore, to find not a single entry. "They skipped from Tacitus to Hippolyte Taine as if there was nothing in Tagore's collected works (28 thick books, even with his 2,500 songs published separately) that ever had stuck in anyone's mind", he marvelled. Why this is so is a question that has a myriad answers. There are hardly any decent translations; interest has waned in a figure perceived as a personification of Eastern mysticism (a troublesome category that currently lacks any kind of allure); tastes have simply changed. But if comparable alterations do not affect Goethe, why should they compromise Tagore?

*The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, does not attempt to answer this question. What it does instead, with admirable efficiency and great scholarly application, is present to us, in almost 500 pages, an overview of, and reflection on, the different aspects of Tagore's career. In twenty-five essays written mainly by scholars and researchers (mostly retired professors in different disciplines), it covers Tagore's achievements in poetry and drama, music and song, the novel and visual arts, history, politics,

education, village economy, ecology, science, literary criticism and aesthetics, while also addressing his views on women and children, and his thoughts on religion and humanism.

The volume begins by reproducing two essays by canonical commentators from the two countries, India and Bangladesh, that take their national anthems from Tagore: the poet Sankha Ghosh and the critic Anisuzzaman (sadly, the notes on contributors will already need updating as both have died since then). Two long sections follow, Overviews and Studies, with the first summarizing Tagore's career by genre: Sukanta Chaudhuri writing on the poetry, Supriya Chaudhuri the novels, Ananda Lal the plays and Siva Kumar the visual arts. The second section allows for critical analysis. Here we have Sibaji Bandyopadhyay on "Rabindranath and the Child", Sabyasachi Bhattacharya on "Tagore's View of History", Sobhanlal Datta Gupta on his view of politics, Swapan Chakravorty on his literary criticism, and Saranindranath Tagore on his humanism, to name only a few of the distinguished names among the contributors. Readers familiar with Indian scholarship will recognize these names. They bring their experience and expertise to a topic they know intimately and have specialized in for many years. Students and researchers, scholars and teachers, or indeed anybody looking for an authoritative retelling of Tagore's achievements in any field, will find much to be thankful for, not least because of the compendious "List of Tagore's Works Cited, with Index" and the "Further Reading" section.

"The wider purpose of a book like this", the editor writes, "is to help extend the line beyond the linguistic and geographical boundaries of Bengal, and make it more central to international literary scholarship." This aim should certainly be achievable with the publication of this *Companion*. "International literary scholarship" will benefit greatly, although there is no detailed analysis here of the intriguing essay on World Literature ("Visva-sahitya") (1907) that has recently gained great currency in academic circles. One might also wonder about the absence of younger scholars in whose hands Tagore's legacy will rest in the future. And the best interpreters of Tagore have often been writers themselves, who are barely acknowledged here.

But then neither is the most imaginative of the scholars who have written recently in Bengali on Tagore, Ranajit Guha, who is mentioned only once. Perhaps, one could argue, these gaps and silences are inevitable in any "one-volume guide to the range of achievements of this multi-faceted genius in English", as this book calls itself. Tagore might himself have claimed that he was "tied to no public by

history", but it is the editor and the scholar's job to do just that and tie him down to context and production. For the deepest insights into his literary genius, we still need to look elsewhere. ■

*Rosinka Chaudhuri's books include The Literary Thing, 2014, and Freedom and Beef-Steaks: Colonial Calcutta culture, 2012*

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