

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Tony Diamond, The Life and Work of Rudyard Kipling

Tony Diamond presented a lively and interesting talk to the December meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about Rudyard Kipling which made effective use of quotations from his extensive writings. Tony used the pun, 'Where does the truth lie?' to explore the life and work of a man who he described as the first 'spin doctor' because the patriot Kipling was a propagandist for the British Empire.

Kipling was born in Tipperary Barracks in Bombay, in 1865. His father was a cartographer serving in the British army. Kipling claimed to have learned to lie when he was five because of the harsh treatment he received at the hands of his nanny. One punishment was to spend hours locked in cupboards where he whiled away the time devising stories in his head. A recurring theme in his fiction is the small and the weak overcoming the powerful. For example, his hero Kim helped to defeat the Russian Empire and Mowgli survived in the jungle.

Living in India gave Kipling the opportunity to become the editor of a newspaper which was an invaluable experience aiding the success of his later career. By 1890, Kipling had returned to England where he married Caroline Balestier. They had two children. Despite the wealth that Kipling amassed through huge sales of his short stories and poems, he did not belong to any social class. He was not bound by the rigidity of late Victorian society and so he was able to mix freely with people of all classes. By 1895 he was very friendly with the Duke of York, the future King George V, who helped him to become the foreign Correspondent of *The Times*. He wrote headlines for the newspaper which were read all over the world. Many would now describe these as propaganda but at the time they were accepted as the 'truth.'

Kipling became interested in South Africa. In his newspaper articles, he pressed for action against the 'ignorant, half-German Boers' who were mistreating the native population. This was his 'truth' but it ignored the underlying 'lie' of the gold and diamonds that would be the prize if the Transvaal became part of the British Empire. Kipling was pleased when the Boer War began in 1899 as there was an expectation of an easy victory over the 'cowardly' Boers. However, the British repeatedly suffered very heavy casualties inflicted by an enemy that they could not find. A system of concentration camps was devised to deprive the Boers of shelter and supplies. Victory was won at the expense of terrible suffering of women and children held in insanitary conditions where many died of malnutrition. These events and the incompetence of the army leadership led Kipling, the patriot, to change his views and he became very critical of imperial policy.

Kipling won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907 but refused other offers of honours, including Poet Laureate and a seat in the House of Lords. By 1914 his belief in Empire had been restored. George V appointed Kipling as press liaison correspondent which meant that he effectively controlled the content of newspapers when World War I began. Kipling worked extensively upon recruitment posters which were extremely successful as hundreds of thousands of men enlisted. In 1915 Kipling experienced personal tragedy when his only son was killed at Loos. Later that year he created a myth around the execution of Edith Cavell to encourage recruitment to avenge the murder of a woman by monstrous 'Huns.' In 1916 he played down the horrendous casualties suffered in the Battle of the Somme. After 1918, he acted as the literary advisor for the inscriptions on memorials and graves, commemorating the war dead. Kipling's influence gradually diminished. His warnings of the Great Depression and the threat posed by the rise of the Nazis in Germany were ignored. However, Kipling was a patriot who remains a major literary figure and he was an extremely influential, though not always uncritical, apologist for empire. He died in 1936 aged 70.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on 22 February when John Stark will give a talk about the Mid Suffolk Light Railway. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy