

I shall re-enter politics with them.”

It is a commonplace today in certain circles (*i.e.*, the losing ones) to hear people remark that, after all, living well and having fun are the best revenge. Things in Belloc's own time were not yet so grim for people of his type. Nevertheless, Belloc lived as if he thought they were, and he was determined to take *his* revenge by living the fullest life possible. Though he wrote over a hundred books and thousands of articles, Hilaire Belloc never resembled the driven careerist, the stoop-shouldered scholar locked away in his study, the pale and pasty Gradgrind bent over his desk. He was a strong and vigorous man, though inclined to corpulence in middle age as a result of an appetite equally vigorous for food, wine, and ale as for the manly activities of canoeing, sailing, yachting, tramping, horseback riding, and doing his own brick and stonework at King's Land. The “boozy halo” surrounding his and Chesterton's friendship (which produced the lumbering literary beast George Bernard Shaw dubbed the “Chesterbelloc”) was legendary in their time, giving rise inevitably to such witticisms as “The Man Who Was Thirsty.” Chesterton himself claimed that Belloc's “low spirits were and are much more uproarious and enlivening than anybody else's high spirits.”

A typical evening with Hilaire Belloc included torrential conversation (*never* spoiled by pontification), red wine flowing, and Belloc singing his own songs in a voice that Max Beerbohm once compared (for Edmund Wilson's benefit) to that of “a very large nightingale.” Even after the premature death of his beloved wife, Elodie Hogan (a California girl), when both were in their 40's, though the tragedy marked him forever and he never remarried, Belloc maintained that gusto that was a special property of his genius, manifesting itself in his work as well as in his life.

At the bottom of this *joie de vivre* was, of course, the Faith with which his name is identified. Belloc was irrepressible because he never repressed his powerful instinct for life, which was at bottom a religious impulse. Visitors to King's Land were likely to be summoned out into the night to “watch God make energy” in the sky, or treated to a peculiar family ritual round the dinner table, initiated by one child suddenly shouting out “*Hell!*” — whereupon all the Bellocs fell to clashing their knives against their plates to simulate the souls of the damned gnashing their teeth in Hades. It was faith in Heaven that gave Hilaire Belloc, when he need-

ed it, faith in himself. Not quite 20, he was persuaded by Elodie not to make a defiant stand for election to the vacant professorship of history at Glasgow University, whose principal had informed the young man (who, as an historian, was in maturity to insist that Europe is the Faith and the Faith, Europe) that his religion was an absolute bar to the post. Belloc wrote to a friend,

It is very sad . . . I have fits of depression when I consider that there is no future for me, but I am merry when I consider the folly, wickedness and immense complexity of the world. It is borne in upon me that before I die I shall write a play or a poem or a novel, for the sense of comedy grows in me daily.

There was, of course, another, less sensitive and more classical side to Belloc's makeup that was perceived by Chesterton at their first meeting: “What he brought into our dream was his Roman appetite for reality and for reason in action, and when he came to the door there entered with him the smell of danger.”

All literature begins with poetry, and poetry has its beginnings in the recitation of the lives and deeds of great men, in whose countenances we see the face of the poet-biographer reflected, however faintly, if he is worthy of his subject. Having read *Old Thunder*, I know Hilaire Belloc much better than I did before, while suspecting I might recognize Joseph Pearce himself from among a congeries of faces across a crowded room.

*Chilton Williamson, Jr., is Chronicles' senior editor for books.*

## Palm and Pine

by Jeffrey Meyers

### The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling

by David Gilmour

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux;  
351 pp., \$26.00



David Gilmour's witty and elegant, original and useful book chronicles “Kipling's political life, his early role

as apostle of the Empire, the embodiment of imperial aspiration, and his later one as the prophet of national decline.” Sympathetic yet aware of Kipling's faults, Gilmour shows that his ideas were more subtle than those of a crude imperialist. Kipling's political causes included

British rule in India, Imperial Federation, Tariff Reform, the survival of France, compulsory military service, the preservation of Ulster from home-ruled Ireland, the protection of Britain from the dangers of Germany . . . and the cause of British supremacy in southern Africa.

Always a good hater and man of strong words, Kipling's range of loathing

stretched from the Germans to the Québécois, and from the Irish to the Indian National Congress. In England it encompassed trade unions, democracy, liberalism, Free Trade, socialism, [suffragettes,] and bungalows.

His *bêtes noires* included prime ministers H.H. Asquith, Lloyd George, and Winston Churchill, as well as Lord Ripon, the viceroy of India. His pantheon of heroes consisted of Cecil Rhodes, proconsul Alfred Milner, colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain, and Teddy Roosevelt, who warned Kipling that a war with England over the Venezuela boundary would be worthwhile if it enabled America to seize Canada.

Born in India, the son of an artist and a teacher, with (like Maugham and Orwell) a public-school but not a university education, physically unattractive, unusually dark, extremely nearsighted, personally insecure, and aggressively trying to make his way in the world, the young Kipling felt threatened by India and the Indians and accepted the moral justification of imperialism: “introducing a sane and orderly administration into the dark places of the earth.” His two great themes were the need to defend civilization against brute nature and barbarian people and the stoic self-sacrifice of the British officials who devoted their lives to the welfare of the native population. His virtues throughout life were “courage, loyalty, obedience, self-control, leadership and endurance.”

Like most Anglo-Indian children, Kipling was educated in England because it

was “‘inexpedient’ to create little oriental-ized pashas . . . enervated by the climate and thinking of India as ‘home.’” But the harrowing maltreatment he suffered in a Southsea boarding house engendered a streak of cruelty in his work. His first, teenage job was at the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore (now in Pakistan). Fluent in Hindi, he loved to pick up useful information by wandering through Lahore’s labyrinthine alleys, bazaars, and opium dens. The journalist’s job, he felt, was alerting the public and the government to “the problems of a particular district and hammering away at them until something was done.”

Kipling’s first volume of stories, *Plain Tales From the Hills* (1888), taught “the English something of the world outside England” and created the English image of India. It gave Oscar Wilde, his literary antithesis, the sensation of sitting “under a palm-tree reading life by superb flashes of vulgarity.” Both his stories and poems were honed by high craftsmanship and an economy of implication. Gilmour gets to the core of the work in only a few sentences. He rapidly covers Kipling’s career and shrewdly places it in its political context.

In Kipling’s poignant and relentlessly rhythmic “Arithmetic on the Frontier,” the tragic fate of a British officer, cut down by a long-barreled Afghan matchlock, symbolizes the collision of medieval and modern civilizations, where highly trained soldiers with the latest weapons are defeated by a ruthless enemy with nothing to lose:

A scrimmage in a Border Station—  
A canter down some dark defile—  
Two thousand pounds of education  
Drops to a ten-rupee *jezail*.

Often inspired by the Bible, ballads, and hymns, Kipling introduced more memorable phrases into English than any writer since Shakespeare. “Recession-al” (the retirement of clergy and choir at the end of a service) is one of the most famous poems in the language. It appeals “to God for his mercy and to his people for repentance,” and contains many impressive lines:

Beneath whose awful Hand we  
hold  
Dominion over palm and pine . . .  
The tumult and the shouting dies;  
The captains and the kings  
depart . . .

Lo, all our pomp of yesterday  
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre! . . .

as well as the notorious:

Such boastings as the Gentiles use,  
Or lesser breeds without the law . . .

“In the Neolithic Age” contrasts the laxity of the East with the strict morality of the West: “And the wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Khatmandhu, / And the crimes of Clapham chaste in Martaban.” I remembered these lines when I took the ferry in Burma from Moulmein to Martaban. But in that swampy, sleepy village, I saw no signs of prodigious depravity or sexual corruption. In “Mándalay,” Kipling made an uncharacteristic mistake. To the west of Moulmein, across the bay, is the coast of central Burma; to the east, across the land, is Siam. So the dawn does *not* come up “like thunder outer China ’cross the Bay!” For China, even Indochina, is nowhere near Moulmein or its bay.

Kipling, who assumed the prophetic role, had the uncanny ability to anticipate, express, and encourage public sentiment “just before it became apparent.” He had no illusions and correctly predicted the dangers of “the Boers and apartheid, the Kaiser and a war, Hitler and another war, the Hindu-Muslim strife whenever Britain decided to withdraw from India.” After the Boer War and the advent of a Liberal government in 1905, however, his role changed: “No longer the apostle whom everyone wanted to hear, he was consigned to the role of Cassandra, condemned to utter prophecies that no one would heed.”

Kipling admired strong conquerors and, like Shaw and Churchill, at first praised Mussolini—though he later came to regard him as an irrational megalomaniac. But Kipling himself was a tame and docile husband, completely under the thumb of his old dreadnought of a wife. One friend described his married life as “‘one of complete surrender. He had handed himself over bodily, financially and spiritually to his spouse, obeying her commands without ‘any signs of murmuring or even of incipient mutiny.’” Carrie, a cross between a possessive nanny and a prison matron, would interrupt him, finish his stories, and, when he became too lively after a few bottles of wine, order him to bed. It is surprising that she allowed him to refuse all official posts and distinctions, including a knighthood

and the highly coveted Order of Merit. She constantly threatened to jump out of the window if he did not do exactly as she wanted, and it is a great pity that he never took her up on the offer.

Speaking of reactionary authors in his elegy on Yeats, Auden wrote that time pardoned Kipling and Claudel—pardoned them for writing well. Despite current political cant, there is no longer any need to pardon Kipling for glorifying imperialism. For all its economic exploitation, Britain laid the permanent foundations of medicine, education, justice, administration, transport, and industry in all the countries it ruled. It provided quinine and vaccinations, built roads, railways, and canals. It maintained the peace, protected minorities, and prevented people from dying of disease and starvation. British administrators brought feudal societies into the modern world and maintained a standard of honesty that has completely disappeared from the tropical countries of what once was the British Empire.

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## The Point of War

by H.A. Scott Trask

**Phantoms of a Blood-Stained Period:  
The Complete Civil War Writings  
of Ambrose Bierce**  
Edited by Russell Duncan &  
David J. Klooster  
Amherst: University of Massachusetts  
Press; 352 pp., \$19.95

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The U.S. government continues its slow but relentless buildup of military forces in the Middle East, preparing to unleash “Fourth-Generation” warfare against the eighth reincarnation of Adolf Hitler. Historians and pseudohistorians extol the liberating glories of past redemptive wars waged by God’s instrument on earth. The Bush administration, neocons, and theocons (and other cons in the pay of big oil or the Israeli lobby) promise that, out of charred flesh, severed limbs, radiation poisoning, and high-altitude massacre, the glorious dawn of Islamic democracy, peace, and tolerance