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Asian Classic Literature and the English General Reader, 1845-1915

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On the 9 of January 1886 the banker and Liberal MP, Sir John Lubbock, gave a lecture at the Working Men's College in Great Ormond Street, London. His objective was to advise the College's students on what reading to prioritise in their limited leisure hours. Lubbock had entered parliament in the very same month—February 1870—that the Elementary Education Act was introduced, and it would hardly have escaped his attention that among his audience were members of the first generation to benefit from the Act's provisions. How the newly-literate classes might be led away from the dangerous (*Paine's Rights of Man*) and the sensational (*the Illustrated Police News*), and guided towards the morally and politically uplifting, was a question that had troubled their social betters throughout the nineteenth century. Lubbock's view was that this socialising process would best be effected through exposure to all that was most excellent in culture and philosophy, in contrast to the evangelical-cum-utilitarian mind-set that had prevailed earlier in the century, and that had regarded imaginative literature as a pernicious distraction from the workingman's proper occupation of studying pious tracts and acquiring 'useful knowledge'.<sup>1</sup> Lubbock was by no means the only proponent of sweetness and light, and the books he recommended would likely have passed without wider comment had it not been for the manner in which he laid them before his public, in the form of a list: not merely one hundred good books, but the one hundred *best* books – or, to use Lubbock's own phrase, those books 'most worth reading'.

Lubbock's list has chiefly been remembered for the mockery, criticism and controversy it provoked (a controversy fixed initially on his surprising omission of the Bible), and for the series of rival lists promulgated in subsequent years by Frederic Harrison, William Morris, Lord Acton, Clement King Shorter and others.<sup>2</sup> Reviewing it today, what is remarkable is Lubbock's diverse, even cosmopolitan selection, and the universal application of his didactic purpose—something the middle-class daily which publicized the list, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, picked up on when it titled its report 'Sir John Lubbock's Liberal Education'. Lubbock intended that his choices should be representative of human achievement across cultures, and by giving them the status of a canon, he was hazarding the implication that anyone who aspired to consider themselves an educated person—whether they be a self-improving mechanic of the Working Men's College, or an Oxford undergraduate—should emulate the seriousness and catholicity of taste his list upheld.

Those with the means, but not the time or inclination, to have yet sampled every dish in Lubbock's banquet of knowledge were somewhat abashed. And that portion of the feast where they may have felt themselves quite as much, if not even more at a loss than Lubbock's working class audience was the oriental buffet. 'There are in your list about a dozen books which I humbly confess,' wrote Lord Iddesleigh, 'to not having read myself,— Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus (barely glanced at once or twice), Confucius, Spinoza, Wake, Mahabharata, Ramayama [sic], Shahnameh; and I am afraid I must add Miss Martineau's two books.'<sup>3</sup> John Ruskin was more violent and openly satirical in his reaction, posting to the *Pall Mall Gazette* a vandalized copy of Lubbock's list in which he had brutally scored through the sections on 'Eastern Poetry', 'Non-Christian Moralists' and 'Philosophy' (sparing only Sir Francis Bacon), and erased every text of an Asian origin with the sole exception of the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, besides Lubbock's tactless omission of the Bible, the greatest source of reproach and debate were these items drawn from the scripture or classical

literature of India, Persia, China and the Middle East. In the original list, they numbered seven: the Quran, the *Arabian Nights*, three epic poems (the *Shahnameh* from Persian, and the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from Sanskrit), the *Analects* of Confucius, and the *Shijing* or *Classic of Poetry*, a canonical Chinese anthology compiled between the eleventh and seventh centuries B.C.E. When Lubbock revised his list in February 1886 for the *Contemporary Review*, he made space for the Bible but stood by his oriental selection, adding St-Hilaire's *Le Bouddha et sa Religion* (intended perhaps as a substitute for actual Buddhist scriptures, only a fraction of which had at that time been translated into English). A further addition, the ancient Sanskrit drama *Sakuntala*, appeared when the list was published in Lubbock's self-help manual *The Pleasures of Life* (1887)—or, to be exact, it features from the twentieth edition (1890) onwards. Moreover, Lubbock explicitly defended his position in a new preface written for that landmark edition:

The Ramayana and Mahabharata, and St. Hilaire's Buddha, are not only very interesting in themselves, but very important in reference to our great oriental Empire. Kalidasa's Sakountala is generally regarded as the gem of the Hindoo Drama, and the Shahnameh is the great Persian Epic. Of the Koran, I suggest portions only. We must remember that 150,000,000 of men regard it not merely as the best of books, but as an actual inspiration. Surely, then, it could not have been excluded.<sup>5</sup>

Lubbock's list made two normative presumptions of its audience: as it neared full literacy, the British public would – or should – aspire to educate itself universally in a standard canon of worthy texts; and being an imperial public, it either was or else *should* become interested in the literature of Asia. Implicit in these two norms is a third expectation: that those books of Asia 'most worth reading' should be made available in English translation to all readers irrespective of prior knowledge or financial means. As has already been mentioned, Lubbock was obliged to nominate a history of Buddhism (and a French one, at that) in the absence of

genuine Buddhist scriptures, while for the Hindu epics he recommended the synopses given in J. Talboys Wheeler's *History of India*. The *Mahabharata* in 1886 was available only in abridgement, while R.T.H. Griffith's five-volume *Rámáyan of Válmíkí* retailed at 18s per volume.<sup>6</sup> Where exactly were his impecunious clerks and mechanics – let alone bankers and peers – to buy or borrow these poems? This problem touches directly on the task for historians of books and reading, and brings us to the questions for this chapter: what Asian texts were available in Lubbock's time, and were they useable by readers with no specialist training? What motivated them to read these books, what texts did they favour over others, and what benefit did they derive from them? And above all, how large really was the orientophile public that Lubbock seems to imagine?

### **Asian Texts in the Nineteenth-Century Marketplace**

Of the overall volume of English translations made from Asian languages in the nineteenth century, Persian accounts for much the largest share. John D. Yohannan spent his career illuminating the influence of its poetry on writers from Byron to Basil Bunting, and his *Persian Poetry in England and America* (1977), along with Javadi (1987), are the first points of reference for investigators in this area. Other languages have been treated less comprehensively, with research focussing instead on particular texts like the *Arabian Nights* (Caracciolo 1988, Warner 2011, Horta 2017), or specific instances of linguistic encounter such as Ezra Pound's engagement with Chinese (Qian 1995 and 2003, Xie 1999).

Biographies have also appeared of several orientalists, including William Jones (Franklin 2011) and James Legge (Girardot 2002). One finds these sometimes in danger of heroizing their subjects, but they have also highlighted how individual dispositions and motives govern translation activity as much as the larger colonial project, analysed first by Edward Said and more recently by Niranjana (1992), to study, categorise and – for a variety of reasons not necessarily malign – appropriate Asian culture.

Existing scholarship on orientalism has thus generally focussed on the imperial forces and the developments in European thought (the Enlightenment, Romanticism etc.) driving it, and its influence on a small number of writers and intellectuals. Less attention has been given to the dissemination and consumption of translations amongst the wider public, and the place they occupied in the Victorian literary economy. Today a reader can enter any large chain bookstore and walk out with a copy of the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* in Penguin Classics. If he or she wishes to make deeper forays into Sanskrit literature, the same series will afford him or her the *Hitopadesha*, *Panchatantra*, or *Baital Pachisi* at no great cost. The aspiring Buddhist will find the *Jatakas* and *Dhammapada*, while a Persian enthusiast may enjoy most of that language's classic poetry – though most of these texts will not be readily found on the shelves, and will have to be ordered in from the warehouse. In late nineteenth-century Britain and America, the book market could not adequately satisfy all these wants. But it could offer some things that even Amazon cannot. Firstly, it was considerably easier to obtain Asian texts in their original languages, by writing directly to specialist firms like the publisher Nicholas Trübner of Ludgate Hill, London. In its heyday his firm put out a bimonthly *American and Oriental Literary Record* advertising new items in stock: a customer who had consulted, for example, the issues for March and May 1889 could ask to have posted to him or her books printed in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Burmese, Japanese and Armenian. The clientele for these titles would principally have consisted of those who had some professional investment in those languages: orientalists, pioneers of comparative mythology, missionaries, and colonial administrators. But the *Literary Record* was a hunting ground too for bibliophiles, Indians and other expatriates living in Britain, and that small but remarkable class of readers who for various personal reasons decided to teach themselves Asian languages (notably the

dialect poet William Barnes, who studied Persian for decades in the privacy of his Dorset rectory).<sup>7</sup>

Turning to translations, while a greater range is effectively available today than at any other point in history, the visibility of certain texts in the nineteenth century was dramatically enhanced. By 1900, the *Rubaiyat* attributed to the medieval Persian astronomer Omar Khayyam had circulated in millions of copies bearing the names of over a dozen different translators into English (not to mention a babel of other languages ranging from Afrikaans to Yiddish).<sup>8</sup> Conversely, many other texts were comparatively invisible. The systems that create demand for and availability of books were, for oriental translations at least, much more asymmetric than they are now, as well as less settled and static. Today academics are more numerous and in firmer consensus about the worth of various texts. Degree courses in Asian languages are fully established, and reading lists guarantee that the must-reads stay in print. In contrast, what Victorians could obtain, or obtain affordably, in their marketplace was subject to inconstant factors and – to an appreciable extent – to public demand (whether real or anticipated). Government subsidy, a bulk-order from a missionary society, an ambitious publisher snapping up an expiring copyright, or the enthusiasm of a prominent literary figure, were all circumstances that could lead to the proliferation of a text among one or two generations of readers, before an equally rapid eclipse. Thus certain texts that loomed perceptibly on the horizon of many people's cultural knowledge in the nineteenth century are practically unheard of in general conversation today. The unhappy browser on amazon.co.uk searching for an up-to-date version of the episode of the lovers Salaman and Absal from Jami's *Haft Awrang* (*Seven Thrones*), or the fables in Kashefi's *Anvār-i Suhaylī* (*Lights of Canopus*), will find only print-to-order paperbacks of the translations made from Persian in the 1850s by Edward Fitzgerald and Edward Eastwick.<sup>9</sup> Though they may appear obscure now, both are texts that could have been found on the shelves of educated Victorians.

The great bibliophile Lord Amherst kept a copy of the *Anvār-i Suhaylī* in his library at Didlington Hall,<sup>10</sup> while the doctor G.F. Rogers (whose books are now at Newnham College in Cambridge) preferred the eccentric paraphrase made by Lafcadio Hearn in *Stray Leaves from Strange Literatures* (1884).<sup>11</sup> I have in my own collection a copy of Fitzgerald's *Salámán and Ábsál* (bundled with the fourth, 1879 edition of his *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*), which was formerly owned and annotated by the Radical statesman John Bright.

For both these reasons – the availability of source-language documents, and the turbulence and eccentricity of the translation market – the Western consumer of oriental literature would, in some ways, have been better served by the bookshops of Trübner's era than by their modern-day equivalent. And here one final contrast with the present is worth noting: genres which today would be stocked only by specialised retailers were then available generally. A reader wanting the *Jataka* in Pali in 1889 may have gone to Bernard Quaritch, a bookseller in Piccadilly whose shop stocked a wide range of translated literature, and paid twenty-eight shillings for it. Or she could have had a used copy for five shillings from Jesse Salisbury in the Gray's Inn Road. As early as 1847 Henry G. Bohn in York Street, Covent Garden had a good range of Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and Hebrew books running to some 200 titles. In the fashionable West End, F. Horncastle of the Burlington Arcade was offering more than one hundred books printed in Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew, Syriac, Chinese, Armenian, Bengali and 'Laplandish', while at his bankruptcy in 1851 the nearby premises of Alexander Black were found to contain a German translation of *Sakuntala*, and an Arabic text of the sixth-century poet 'Antar' printed at Paris in 1841. Even in rural England, local booksellers sold off obsolete texts at discounted prices. In Saffron Walden in 1907, P.M. Barnard advertised a copy of Stanislas Julien's French translation of the Yuan dynasty verse drama *The Chalk Circle* from 1832, at 2/6, and an ancient copy of the 'Odes of Hafey' (read Hafez) at two shillings.<sup>12</sup>

### Scholarly versus Popular Translations

The great historical tide that, when it ebbed, left *The Chalk Circle* washed up in an Essex bargain-bin was of course European imperialism. For the English-speaking world, the chief locus for translation activity was colonial India. From Calcutta especially – where Sir William Jones founded the Asiatic Society in 1784 – officials of the East India Company turned out grammars and dictionaries for Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic, and a variety of modern Indian vernaculars, along with a representative selection of literary translations to serve as aids in learning these tongues. Joseph Champion gave English readers a first, much abridged, version of Firdausi's *Shahnameh* (the Persian *Epic of Kings*) in the style of Pope's *Iliad*, while his contemporary Francis Gladwin authored a reliable version of Sadi's *Gulistan* (*Rose Garden*), a collection of didactic stories that later found favour with Emerson and the American Transcendentalists.<sup>13</sup> Jones himself first brought to English notice Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* (from the Sanskrit), the *Mu'allaqāt* (seven Arabic odes that were supposedly hung on the Kaaba in pre-islamic times), and the great Persian lyricist Hafez. The last was introduced in the form of his famous and much-imitated couplet on the Shirazi Turk, for a mole on whose cheek the poet offered to exchange all the riches of Samarkand and Bokhara. Unexpectedly, the earliest English translations of the Confucian classics were also made in Bengal, although the instrumental figure in Sinology would be the missionary James Legge, who laboured in Hong Kong through the middle decades of the nineteenth century on his versions of the *Analects*, *Classic of Poetry*, *Classic of History* and other texts. Japan, closed to prying Westerners for so long, was the last major literature to be interpreted, beginning with the *Japanese Odes* (1866) and *Chiushingura* (1876) of F.V. Dickins. It is crucial to appreciate, however, that European notions of East Asian literature were at this stage heavily skewed towards antiquity.<sup>14</sup> The eighth-century Tang Dynasty poets like Li Po and Du Fu,



whose names are now common currency in the West, only began to enter the general frame of reference in the 1910s, while most of the classic ‘novels’ (such as the *Tale of Genji* from medieval Japan, and the sixteenth-century *Journey to the West* from China,) would not be properly appreciated until the advent of Arthur Waley’s still-popular versions between 1925 and 1942.

The bulk of these pioneer translations were never intended seriously as commercial propositions, except as textbooks. Many were subsidised by the Oriental Translation Fund, set up in London in 1828. Nevertheless, they would become a ready quarry for the authors of popular translations and anthologies, intended for general readers – many of which were produced with no reference to the source text, but rather by paraphrasing existing versions in English, French or German. For the sales-minded men and women who projected these books, the guiding star was ultimately the *Arabian Nights*, which had entered English literature from the French of Antoine Galland in the early eighteenth century. Unauthorised ‘Grub Street’ translations of Galland ensured the *Nights* a special status in English reading culture long before the first Arabic-to-English version appeared in 1838,<sup>15</sup> by which point the tales formed part of the furniture of every affluent (and many working-class) English child’s imagination. They were enjoyed as fervently by Tennyson and Walter Bagehot as by the dyer’s son and future Chartist, Thomas Cooper, who borrowed the ‘enchanted’ collection in the late 1810s from the circulating library run by Mrs Trevor, a stationer at Gainsborough in Lincolnshire.<sup>16</sup>

The popularity of the *Nights* encouraged publishers to support a range of analogous ventures. The editor of *Tales of the East*, brought out by Ballantyne of Edinburgh in 1812, ransacked the work of out-of-copyright European orientalist to fill his three volumes. Anything answering to the description ‘popular romance’ was admissible, including Alexander Dow’s version of a Persian textbook used by the Mughal nobility, the *Bahar-i-*

*Danish* – one story from which gave Thomas Moore the scenario for his 1817 *Lalla Rookh*.

In a period when taxation and paper costs kept the price of new works of literature relatively high, oriental *rechauffés* made economic sense whether in book form, or in sixpenny number publications like *The Library of Romance* and *The Story-Teller*, which carried both *Nights*-style tales and *caizi jiaren* (Scholar and Beauty) stories popular in Ming and Qing China.<sup>17</sup>

Publications like these catered to, and in their turn bolstered, a fabular notion of Asia, and the general reception of more ‘serious’ genres is slower to develop. But if the taste for exotic fiction persists through the nineteenth century and beyond, the reading public was also influenced by the priority given in Victorian translation discourse to poetry, as the form of writing that most candidly represents a foreign nation’s culture and characteristics.<sup>18</sup> In the field of Asian languages, the poetry of Persia is the first to achieve general recognition in Britain and America. Byron, Shelley, Southey, Leigh Hunt and their Romantic peers all eagerly digested William Jones, though as Yohannan was at pains to point out, only Moore made any serious effort at study, and the so-called Persian vogue of these years was more successful at introducing common tropes (such as the nightingale’s love for the rose) into the British frame of cultural reference than any firm textual knowledge.<sup>19</sup> The various editions of Hafez, for example, published in this period are all intended more or less as cribs and were not targeted at the general public. Romantic ‘oriental’ fantasies like *Lalla Rookh*, however, did prepare readers for what was to follow, and it was a young friend and admirer of Moore who marked an unacknowledged epoch in 1845 by publishing a book titled *The Rose Garden of Persia*.

Louisa Stuart Costello (1799-1870) was the impecunious orphan of an Irish army officer who was obliged to support herself by her pen. Her knowledge of French and German opened to her the pages of continental scholars like Garcin de Tassy and Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, and while completely untrained in Persian she tentatively asked the

orientalist H.H. Wilson to check the spelling of the couplet of Hafez that appears on her title page. The book, she explained to him, ‘gives biographies and specimens of Persian poets, merely for the English reader, but I think a great Oriental scholar like yourself will not disdain the attempt to do honour to his favourites, even though the unskilful should presume to do so.’<sup>20</sup> Selecting short excerpts that she judges most likely to appeal, Costello edited and rewrote her material (sometimes turning prose into verse), ordered her extracts by poet and subject (e.g. ‘On True Worth’, ‘In Praise of Wine’), and added light-touch historical context and explanatory notes. The resulting volume is, in three respects, exemplary of the Victorian popular translation: it is conceived wholly for the general public and was taken up by a mainstream press; it is appealingly ornamented, with arabesque designs created by Costello’s brother Dudley; and it is consciously representative, offering its reader not the haphazard harvest of *Tales of the East*, but a cohort of sixteen major poets that gives a superficial but effective crash-course in the Persian literary canon.

*The Rose Garden* was ahead of its time, at least in respect to the economics of book production in the 1840s. In its first year it sold 517 copies, at 12s 9d, but by 1848 it must have become apparent to Longman & Co that at that price it could only ever have a limited public, and the remaining stock was disposed of cheaply to the bookseller Henry Bohn.<sup>21</sup> General readers, it must be remembered, were not necessarily poor ones, and indeed several of the noted popular translations of the period were conceived as art-books for wealthy non-experts and bibliophiles. But if it is difficult to credit Costello with direct influence, her book set a number of precedents for succeeding decades. Productions like W.A. Clouston’s *Arabian Poetry for English Readers* (1881) and Samuel Robinson’s *Persian Poetry for English Readers* (1883) encapsulate in their titles the project to make accessible to educated people a representative sample of a foreign canon of writing. Illustration was used to great effect in Richard Burton’s *Vikram and the Vampire* (1870), also published by Longman (and

a very free adaptation of the exploits of the Indian hero Vikramaditya), and Mitford's *Tales of Old Japan* (1871). And the oriental anthology format was taken up by a trio of American Unitarians – William Rounseville Alger, Moncure Conway, and Charles D.B. Mills – to create ecumenical digests that juxtaposed texts from various languages to demonstrate the unity of religious traditions.<sup>22</sup>

By the time Lubbock's list of one hundred books was publicised in 1886, the various strands making up the weave of Victorian oriental translation are much more plainly visible. In her *Epic of Kings* (1882), a redacted retelling of the *Shahnameh*, Helen Zimmern had candidly excused her ignorance of Persian by explaining that it had been her goal not to translate, but 'to popularize the tales told by the Persian poet Firdusi [sic] in his immortal epic.'<sup>23</sup> 1886 saw a second edition of her work, retitled *Heroic Tales* and adapted specially for children. Not only was the populariser now a defined role: professional scholars too were now more alive to the lay audience. The Cambridge don E.J.W. Gibb, who targeted his publications at what he called 'the non-orientalist reader', brought out a rendition of the Turkish romance *The History of the Forty Vezirs* in the same year, while in 1887 the elderly Oxford Professor of Sanskrit, Monier Monier-Williams succeeded in reissuing his old academic translations with the mainstream press of John Murray.<sup>24</sup> His new edition of *Sakuntala* is likely to have prompted Lubbock's inclusion of the Indian play in his revised list. From the 1880s onwards, consumers enjoyed increased choice as translators competed with one another, or reinterpreted major texts to serve alternative functions. Serious readers of the Quran, for example, could now benefit from the objectivity of E.H. Palmer instead of putting up with the supercilious J.M. Rodwell, a mid-century clergyman who seems to have translated the holy revelation mainly in order to discredit it. Another symptom of this diversification was Richard Burton, whose erotic, ribald retelling of the *Arabian Nights*

(1885-88), loaded with anthropological observations and circulated only to subscribers, represents an attempt to reclaim the text for a privileged coterie.

Fittingly, 1887 also saw the re-appearance of Costello's *Rose Garden of Persia*, from the press of George Bell and Sons, at seven shillings and sixpence. In 1899 another publisher would issue it in 18mo at five shillings, and by 1911 it would be available at one and six. Finally the anthology was priced and sized for the pocket of the clerk or even workman, and not destined only for the library of the moneyed dilettante. By this point it was, admittedly, obsolete technology. Indeed, excepting the works of Edwin Arnold – by far the most commercially-successful oriental populariser of the era – the cheapest bracket of translation in the 1880s and 1890s exclusively comprised reprints of the stodgy prose and heroic couplets characteristic of the early decades of the century. Perhaps for this reason, in 1905 the editors of John Murray's new 'Wisdom of the East' series determined whenever possible to take up unpublished translations or to commission new ones – and met with considerable success. The ledgers in the Murray archive prove the existence, at least by the Edwardian period, of a sizeable readership for such offerings as a two-shilling *Sayings of Confucius* (3811 copies sold in its first ten years) or a one-shilling *Gulistan* of Sadi (2817 sold in its first five).<sup>25</sup> So far then, we have our macro-data: we know what texts from the canonical literatures of Asia were available, and where they could be bought, and we can perceive our readers – Lubbock's imagined public – in the lump. What then of individual choice and experience, the activities of readers and their contribution to the overall development of taste?

### **Readerly Traces: the Evidence of Commonplace Books and Annotated Copies**

Like many nineteenth-century readers Charlotte Robinson, living at Hull in Yorkshire, kept a commonplace book in which she recorded affecting passages of poetry and scripture, and to which a number of friends – known only by their initials – have added mementoes and

sketches. Leafing through its pages, one finds a sketch of a Gothic ruin, Matthew's Gospel, an extract from the *Christian Minister*, an acrostic, and some original verses on the death in childbirth of Princess Charlotte in 1821. Later on comes some conventional oriental imagery: birds and gazelles in *Lalla Rookh*, and Byron's Assyrian coming down like a wolf on the fold in 'The Destruction of Sennacherib'. Then, on the 29 April 1824, 'J.M.' has inserted eight neat lines of Tamil – a dialogue, as the translation below indicates, between a Hindu pandit and a Christian. The contributor may have acquired the language in the Madras Civil Service, or perhaps it was conned from a textbook, after the manner of Jane Eyre and St John Rivers preparing for their Indian ministry. In any case, what may appear initially to be a mere curio in fact palpably illustrates the propagation of oriental letters even in regional England via the imperial connection.<sup>26</sup>

Along with official surveys, diaries, autobiographies and marginal annotations, commonplace books were one of the major sources that historians of reading turned to in the 1990s in order to, as Stephen Colclough put it, 'introduce some empirical depth to the theoretical speculation' that then dominated their field.<sup>27</sup> As Colclough points out, a significant drawback of commonplace books is that they do not provide an index of everything their keepers read, but only the choice 'beauties' that they took the trouble to transcribe. Their contents may also tend to represent books that were borrowed, rather than books – possibly important ones – that were purchased and annotated (this was the view of J.T. Hackett, whose published commonplace book went through several editions in the 1920s). On the other hand, as Colclough remarks, they are revealing of the 'diversity of reading strategies' that can be employed by one individual for 'diverse genres' of writing, and this quality is helpful for the study of a niche (or not so niche) interest like oriental literature in the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> I find that commonplace books afford me a combination of large-scale statistical data, as well as evidence of the particular reading practices of

individuals and, sometimes, communities of readers. In a survey of eighty-five manuscript books, covering the years 1845 to 1915, I found thirty-six to contain at least one quotation – either in the original or in translation – of Asian literature, philosophy, scripture or proverb. Furthermore, the frequency of occurrence can be seen to rise noticeably across the period. The books represent eighty-five individual readers with no professional or other obvious investment in Asia and its languages, and were consulted in twelve research libraries (four in Britain, two in Ireland, five in the United States, and one in Australia). Medical or legal commonplace books and suchlike were not included, but only books primarily dedicated to literature. I also excluded items created by residents of India or other parts of Asia, to prevent these readers' increased exposure to indigenous literary culture (or, perhaps, their prejudice against it) from distorting my results. A word on the Talmud: in my data, it is considered 'Asian literature', but not the Bible, unless (as in one instance) a reader was engaging with the original Hebrew.

Colclough remarks on the interesting mixture of quotations one often discovers in Victorian commonplace books. He does not go into the issue, however, of whether readers are deliberately assembling texts on the facing pages of their albums for the purpose of comparison – a supposition which it is nearly always impossible to prove, but which it may be useful to bear in mind when examining readers with multilingual interests. Incongruous juxtapositions, like that seen in the case of Charlotte Robinson of Hull, certainly abound in my sources and demonstrate the multiple paths that readers of the era were capable of pursuing simultaneously. While a student at Harvard in the late 1870s, the future English professor George Lyman Kittredge patiently compiled a list of oaths and insults culled from *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and seemingly every Jacobean play in existence. But he also somehow got hold of, almost as soon as it was issued, Part 1 of James Darmesteter's *Zend-Avesta*, the Zoroastrian scripture that constituted the fourth of

Oxford University Press's fifty-volume 'Sacred Books of the East'. Particularly interesting to him was the Chinvat Bridge, which the living must cross to enter the realm of the dead, and which as Kittredge notes reappears in Islamic tradition.<sup>29</sup> Other juxtapositions, if still perhaps incongruous, are nonetheless deliberate and suggest the analogies that note-keepers may have been drawing between texts far apart in time or place of origin. In the middle of the century the French governess Améline Petit de Billier wrote out part of the Spider Surah from 'Le Koran', which urges the faithful not to quarrel with their fellow monotheists the Jews and Christians. The Almighty, it adds, will erase our sectarian differences on the last day and judge us according to our good or ill deeds ('tous les hommes retournent à Dieu'). In the same spirit of humility, she chose on her journal's facing page to copy Southey's 'Imitated from the Persian', a paraphrase of a twelfth-century epigram by Suzani Samarqandi in which the poet, 'a child of dust', offers to God his nothingness, his sins and his contrition.<sup>30</sup> The logic which prompted Lewin Hill's selection is less obvious. An employee of the General Post Office from 1855 to 1898, he grouped on adjacent pages some verses on cleanliness by the Persian mystic Rumi, a Hindu myth about the creation of woman, and 'The Palanquin Bearers' by the contemporary Indian poet Sarojini Naidu. However, these are all classed under the heading 'Epigrams' and are probably intended to exhibit sententious gems of Eastern wit.<sup>31</sup> As already mentioned, my survey of commonplace books excluded readers in India. But as might be expected, such items can reveal diverse medleys and genuine, prolonged study. John Whaley Watson, a Political Agent in Gujarat from the 1860s to the 1880s, was all too fond of the sort of middlebrow verse (Jean Ingelow and C.S. Calverley) that probably aroused in many colonial exiles a nostalgia for 'Home'. But he also quoted Hafez and the *Anvār-i Suhaylī* in the original, and made a stab at translating Catullus into Persian. His selections derive from a characteristically late-Victorian mixture of erudite and popular sources: if he consumed E.H. Palmer's niche exposition of the medieval Cairene



calligrapher Baha' al-Din Zuhair from the point of view of a fellow-orientalist, he could also enjoy a commercial success like Edwin Arnold's *Indian Song of Songs* (a rendition of the Sanskrit *Gita Govinda*) from which he wrote out seven stanzas.<sup>32</sup>

In many cases, the quotations in the books I examined evidently did not derive from a published translation in a book or periodical. Some were taken at second-hand from books of travel or history. In 1848, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat Mary Louisa Talbot recorded a description of Pompey's Pillar at Alexandria given by the twelfth-century traveller and historian Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi. But while she credits the original author, her actual reference point is *Eastern Life* by Harriet Martineau, who had read the French translation of Silvestre de Sacy.<sup>33</sup> In the case of many shorter quotations, especially aphorisms and nuggets of sage counsel, the source was probably a periodical or even newspaper. This is particularly clear when examining the commonplace-cum-cuttings book of R. FitzGerald, an Irish immigrant in 1850s Melbourne. During those heady gold-rush years FitzGerald fortified himself with practical wisdom, including Longfellow and Ben Franklin ('time is money'), the speeches of Charles Gavan Duffy, assorted advice on how to get rich, Pope, Cardinal Newman, Bacon, 'Locke on education', doggerel about socialists, and remarks on 'The Degeneracy of the British Aristocracy'. One of the pages contains this: 'Learning without thought is labour lost: thought without learning is perilous. – Confucius'.<sup>34</sup> Probably this is connected with the summary, copied above on the same page, of an article in the *Philadelphia Ledger* about the perspicacity of 'Silent Men' – in this case George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. In the era of mass print, the re-printings and re-circulations of such extracts can be so frequent as to present a variety of possible routes of transmission. One consequence is an ever-increasing risk of misquotation or misattribution, or a distortion of meaning brought about by the act of reducing a Chinese philosopher to a handful of pithy sayings. A remark on life after death caught the fancy of Lewin Hill – 'if you do well here

you will do well there. I could tell you no more if I preached to you for a year' – turns out not to be Confucius at all, but Longfellow's 'Cobbler of Hagenau'!<sup>35</sup> Proverbs in particular, often cited simply as 'Chinese Proverb', 'Indian Saying', 'Turkish', 'Burmese', 'Malay' etc., sometimes reveal themselves as outright counterfeits. Suspect traffic, however, does not detract from the vibrancy of literary exchange in this period. R. FitzGerald also gives an elegiac image from Firdausi about the decay of empire that seems to have done the round of periodicals. In the course of transmission, the poetic form has been disrupted and the original distich expanded to three lines:

The spider's web is the royal curtain  
 in the palace of Caesar; the owl is the  
 sentinel in the watch-tower of Afrasiyab.

These phrases originally entered English literature through Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, which relates an anecdote given by the historian Cantemir about how Mehmet the Conqueror, after storming Constantinople, stood and recited them in the palace of the Byzantine emperors. William Jones gave an analysis of the lines in his Persian *Grammar*; they were in turn adapted by Byron for *The Giaour*, and by Felicia Hemans in her 1849 poem 'The Last Constantine'.<sup>36</sup> Even today they frequently crop up in novels and popular histories, and are variously attributed to Firdausi, Sadi, or – rather improbably – Rumi. Yet in actuality there is no primary source: the lines are simply, as Edward Heron-Allen remarks, a 'constantly recurring illustration of the vanity of earthly glory in Persian *belles-lettres*'.<sup>37</sup> This, we may presume, is just what FitzGerald valued in them, and while it is vital to interrogate the sometimes dubious provenances of oriental apothegms, this should not lead us to overlook the seriousness of an individual reader's choices or the variety of factors governing them. By

looking elsewhere on FitzGerald's crowded page, we may notice that he has grouped the Persian couplet with a passage from Shelley's *Hellas*, in which a latter-day Ottoman emperor challenges a Jewish magician to conjure up the person of his far greater, and more erudite, precursor Mehmet the Conqueror.

The *Arabian Nights* and *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* were the most frequently-occurring texts in the commonplace books I consulted, not even counting imitations, homages, parodies and other spin-offs of the reading culture surrounding them. A poem composed by Benjamin Disraeli during the Christmas holidays of 1829 for the enjoyment of his Grosvenor Gate neighbours, the Dawsons, is indicative. Alluding to the comparatively minor Story of Blind Baba Abdallah, the poem assumes a thorough familiarity with the *Nights* that would have been quite usual at the time.<sup>38</sup> Allusions to the *Rubaiyat* likewise often needed no gloss. Another Australian, Private D.H. Jude, kept a scrapbook while stationed in Egypt during the Great War, and inserted a picture of the Nile at sunset. By way of commentary, his friend G.E. Swiman added the well-worn lines (slightly misremembered and deprived of punctuation):

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough

A Loaf of Bread a Jug of Wine & Thou

Beside me: singing in the Wilderness

Oh Wilderness were Paradise enow<sup>39</sup>

Reversing the jug and loaf in line two, Swiman was evidently quoting from memory. But many other soldiers, such as his fellow-Australian Private Thomas Ambrose Palmer, will have been carrying their own copies of what was probably among the poems most read by English-speaking combatants. As has often been remarked, the war created a huge demand for portable reading matter; and it is suggestive that the Edinburgh firm of Nimmo, Hay & Mitchell, who had introduced the *Rubaiyat* to their Miniature Series in 1907, decided to

reissue it in 1914 in time to occupy the pockets of soldiers like Palmer, who filled the tiny margins of his rain-damaged, 9 x 5 cm Nimmo Miniature with annotations.<sup>40</sup> By choosing to do so, the young Anzac was joining a worldwide community of Omarians who diligently added, alongside each of the poem's quatrains, variant renditions by E.H. Whinfield, Justin Huntly McCarthy, Richard Le Gallienne and others – with particular attention paid to the original translator, Edward Fitzgerald, whose text exists in four versions. A teenage Gertrude Stein, for instance, annotated Fitzgerald's verse with McCarthy's prose in her 1890 copy, while the Shakespearian scholar H.H. Furness bound together Fitzgerald's 1868 and 1872 versions and then added his own comparative assessment of each quatrain: 'better', 'much better', 'worse, worse', 'ugh' etc.<sup>41</sup> I have seen more than a dozen instances of this tradition of Omarian annotation. In Palmer's case, however, the annotations do not contain translational variants but rather quotations from other works both Asian and European, which Palmer considered allied in theme or sentiment with the text of the Rubaiyat. Omar's remarks on the transience of earthly joy and beauty, for instance, find their echo in a lyric from the classical Japanese poet Fun'ya no Yasuhide:

Fire of the Autumn turns to  
 Red & Gold the greenness  
 of the leaves before their  
 grave receive them  
 but for ever pure & cold  
 the white foam blossoms  
 on the tossing wave.<sup>42</sup>

If many fin-de-siècle readers celebrated Omar Khayyam as a sceptical hedonist, however, Palmer was a member of another sizeable faction which claimed him as a mystic or Sufistic allegorist and advocate of religious tolerance. Tennyson's 'Akbar's Dream' and an imitation

by Kipling of the medieval Hindi poet Kabir both strike an ecumenical note suggesting the essential unity of all religions. The comparative framework that Palmer thus sets up is indicative of many readers, especially in the early twentieth century, who harvested cheap translations and Theosophical literature to piece together a private agnostic creed. For Jane Norton Morgan, the wife of the great financier, this came principally through a series of lectures given by Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, the leader of the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist organization founded during the Bengal Renaissance. The oriental anthology of Charles Mills, mentioned earlier, evidently played an important role too in widening her perspective, giving her quotations from Sadi and Rumi which she added to her commonplace book. But as in so many other cases, Omar Khayyam is present too in one of his various guises: in this case the stoical and serene philosopher as imagined by the translator E.H. Whinfield, and transmitted to her by none other than Sir John Lubbock in his *Pleasures of Reading*, the book which contained his revised list of one hundred texts.<sup>43</sup> Lubbock had consciously resisted calls to include the *Rubaiyat* among them, which is additional proof – if any were needed – that readers independently made use of the growing body of material at their disposal to interpret, assign value and draw diverse texts into a quasi-curricular formation.

### **Conclusion: Birth and Death of an Oriental Canon**

It is essential to bear in mind that, though Jane Norton Morgan or Thomas Ambrose Palmer offer examples of readers seriously engaged with foreign literature and thought in its own cultural particularity, they represent a small reading community in comparison with the much vaster public for travelogues and fictions about the mysterious East. Between 1910 and 1912, only one member of the Leeds Library (a long-established subscription library, separate from the city's public library) borrowed Herbert Giles's *History of Chinese Literature*, one of a series of short guidebooks issued by Heinemann covering the major literatures of the world. In that same period Robert Hichens's 1904 novel *The Garden of Allah*, which features a

decadent Algerian poet and abundant local colour, was loaned thirty-one times.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, such readers are exemplary representatives of a substantial branch in nineteenth-century literary culture, and evince a marked contrast with reading patterns today, in which the Western consumption of Sanskrit epics, Persian lyrics or even the perennial *Arabian Nights* is dwarfed by that of contemporary novels from Asian countries.

This brings us finally to a discrepancy which is apparent in almost all of the sources I have cited. Before 1900, translations into English of contemporary Asian authors – that is, anyone living later than the eighteenth century – is very rare, and even rarer if we exclude books and periodical articles published only in India. A strong preference operated for the *classic* literature, especially poetry, of Asia, undergirded by an essentialist rationale that such writing encapsulated the ancient and enduring spirit of these nations, and often buttressed too by the assumption that Persia, China and neighbouring cultures were but feeble shadows of what they had once been in golden antiquity. This only began to change in the second decade of the twentieth century, when the writing of the 1913 Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, charges into the general frame of cultural reference. The popularity of *Gitanjali*, a Bengali collection which Tagore, with the help of W.B. Yeats, recreated for the English reader, marks a watershed in reading history. Gradually the cluster of assumptions and expectations that lay behind the phrase ‘Indian literature’ or ‘Chinese literature’ shifted away from the historic greats, many of which receded into the zone of academic study and specialised publishers – though the pattern that emerged in the nineteenth century for ‘crazes’ centred on certain authors persisted. The Omarians who flourished in fin-de-siècle Britain and America, or the Hafez Clubs that sprung up in ‘Silver Age’ Russia, made way for the New Age devotees of Rumi.<sup>45</sup> In many ways this is all to the good. The flawed thinking behind attempts like Sir John Lubbock’s to nominate a canon of oriental ‘Great Books’ is all too clear to us today. Go to the library of the Working Men’s College today, and take down their copy of William

Jennings's *Confucian Analects* (a cheap edition issued, along with all one hundred of Lubbock's choices, by George Routledge & Sons in the mid-1890s), and you will find tipped between its sheets a tram ticket. Discolouration of the pages caused by the ticket's acidity testifies to its long presence, and at some date up to 1938 – the year when the tramways near the College were removed – we may picture to ourselves an interwar student riding home and using his ticket to mark the passage in which the Master discourses on The Superior Man: 'The superior man is exacting of himself; the common man is exacting of others.'<sup>46</sup> That this 'common' reader, whoever he may have been, sought self-improvement through Chinese philosophy rather than evangelical tracts or Samuel Smiles (though for all we know he may have enjoyed those too), is a phenomenon that surely warrants sustained attention.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: a Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), p.132.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, & Reputations: Literary Life in Britain, 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.68-69.

<sup>3</sup> British Library Add MS 49648, Iddesleigh to Sir John Lubbock, 25 Nov 1885.

<sup>4</sup> Reproduced in the pamphlet *The Best Hundred Books, by the Best Judges* (London: Pall Mall Gazette, 1886), p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Reprinted in *The 100 Best Books: Sir John Lubbock's List* (London: Amalgamated Press, 1899), p.10.

<sup>6</sup> 'Trübner & Co.'s New Publications', *Saturday Review* 37:964 (18 April 1874), p.516.

<sup>7</sup> Lucy Baxter, *The Life of William Barnes, Poet and Philologist* (London: Macmillan, 1887), pp.24, 153.

<sup>8</sup> The figure of two million is given, in 1927, in the preface to a facsimile of the original 1859 edition of Edward Fitzgerald's translation printed by the Omar Khayyam Club.

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<sup>9</sup> Accessed 28 Feb 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Box 4, Amherst of Hackney Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Toronto.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers Collection R H20, Newnham College, Cambridge.

<sup>12</sup> The catalogues for Henry G. Bohn (1847), Jesse Salisbury (1889), P.M. Barnard (1907), and the catalogues prepared by the auctioneers Puttick & Simpson for the sale of Alexander Black's stock (on 13-17<sup>th</sup> February 1851) and F. Horncastle's (on 6-7<sup>th</sup> July 1852) were all consulted at the library of the Grolier Club in New York.

<sup>13</sup> See John D. Yohannan, *Persian Poetry in England and America: a 200 Year History* (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1977), pp.24, 113.

<sup>14</sup> Peter France (ed.), *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.224-25.

<sup>15</sup> Paulo Lemos Horta, *Marvellous Thieves: Secret Authors of the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 2017), p.91.

<sup>16</sup> Roger Ebbatson, 'Knowing the Orient: the Young Tennyson', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 36:2, 125; Walter Bagehot, 'The People of the Arabian Nights'. *National Review* 9:17 (1859); Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1872), p.34.

<sup>17</sup> *The Story Teller; or, Table Book of Popular Literature: a Collection of Romances, Short Standard Tales, Traditions, and Poetical Legends of All Nations* (May 1843), 110-17.

<sup>18</sup> Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.3.

<sup>19</sup> Yohannan, *Persian Poetry*, pp.31-35.

<sup>20</sup> British Library, Mss Eur E301/9 (Louisa Stuart Costello to HH Wilson, 23 Feb 1845).

<sup>21</sup> Reading University, Records of the Longman Group, MS 1393 1/A5, Divide ledger D4 (1844-61), p.46.



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<sup>22</sup> Respectively, *Poetry of the East* (1856), the *Sacred Anthology* (1874), and *Pebbles, Pearls and Gems of the Orient* (1882).

<sup>23</sup> Helen Zimmern, *Heroic Tales, retold from Firdusi the Persian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1891), p.v.

<sup>24</sup> E.J.W. Gibb, *Ottoman Poems, translated into English verse* (London: Trübner and Glasgow: Wilson & McCormick, 1882), p.7.

<sup>25</sup> National Library of Scotland, John Murray Archive, Acc.13328/13 (Report on Authors of the Wisdom of the East Series) and MS.42739 (Copies Ledger N, 1905-1958).

<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Robinson's commonplace book (circa 1817-36) is in my own collection.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Colclough, 'Recovering the Reader: Commonplace Books and Diaries as Sources of Reading Experience', *Publishing History* 44 (Jan 1998), pp.6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12-13, 7; J.T. Hackett, *My Commonplace Book* (1916; 4<sup>th</sup> edn London: Macmillan, 1923), p.xiv.

<sup>29</sup> Houghton Library, HUC 8878.315: George Lyman Kittredge, commonplace book 1878-80.

<sup>30</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. WHF Talbot 123: Améline Petit de Billier, commonplace book, 1825-74. The attribution to Suzani is made by Hasan Javadi, *Persian Literary Influence on English Literature* (1987; repr. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda, 2005), p.79.

<sup>31</sup> Lewin Hill, *Verse, Prose, and Epitaphs from the Commonplace Book of Lewin Hill, C.B.: 1848-1908* (London: Brown Langham, 1920), pp.21-22. Since Hill's original manuscript book is not extant, it was not included in the aforementioned survey.

<sup>32</sup> British Library, Mss Eur F244/3-4: John Whaley Watson, commonplace books.

<sup>33</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Talbot e. 17: Mary Louisa Talbot, commonplace book 1847-48.

<sup>34</sup> State Library of Victoria, MS 12408: R. FitzGerald, commonplace book titled 'Patch Work'.

<sup>35</sup> Hill, *Verse, Prose, and Epitaphs*, p.77.

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<sup>36</sup> Javadi, *Persian Literary Influence*, pp.81-82.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Heron-Allen (ed.), *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyām, being a Facsimile of the Manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford* (London: H.S. Nichols, 1898), p.303. Recent misattributors of the lines include Ken McClellan, in his 2009 novel *The Last Byzantine* (Denver: Outskirts Press), p.23.

<sup>38</sup> Dep. Hughenden 203/1: Benjamin Disraeli, commonplace books 1826-60.

<sup>39</sup> State Library of Victoria, MS 11238: Private D.H. Jude, scrapbook of poems, postcards, and photographs, 1914-1915.

<sup>40</sup> Jane Potter, 'For Country, Conscience and Commerce: Publishers and Publishing, 1914-18' in Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed (eds.), *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.12; Ambrose George Potter, *A Bibliography of the Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām* (1929; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1994), p.15.

<sup>41</sup> Beinecke Library: Za St34 Zz890P; Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania: PK6513 .A1 1872.

<sup>42</sup> State Library of New South Wales, Thomas Ambrose Palmer Collection.

<sup>43</sup> Morgan Library, ARC 2235-2236: Jane Norton Morgan, commonplace book 1875-1886.

<sup>44</sup> Leeds Library, Borrowing Ledgers GI 1908-1957 and GA 1910-1970.

<sup>45</sup> John E. Malmstad and Nikolay Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin: a Life in Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.104.

<sup>46</sup> William Jennings, *The Confucian Analects: a Translation, with Annotations and an Introduction* (London and New York: George Routledge & Sons, Sir John Lubbock's Hundred Books series, 1895), p.175. I examined the book in 2017, and photographed the tram ticket.