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Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*:
About the Poems

(For a brief biography of the poet, please see the start of the Critical Introduction)

Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* is a posthumous collection of poetry first published by Kegan Paul of London in 1882. The poems were prefaced by an Introductory Memoir from Sir Edmund Gosse, who was single-handedly responsible for whatever fame her name held in Britain at the time of her death. According to Gosse, in August 1876 he was in the office of William Minto, editor of the *Examiner*, bemoaning the dearth of reviewable books at the time, when Minto in jest tossed his way a completely unremarkable-looking volume of poetry newly arrived from Saptahiksambad Press of Bhowanipore, India. It was *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, a collection of original translations of French poems into English by a 20-year-old Calcutta "poetess," and Gosse actually was impressed enough to review it quite favorably in the *Examiner* that year.

By that time Dutt had been studying Sanskrit diligently for almost two full years and was in the process of composing poetic retellings of Sanskrit puranic tales (which she referred to in a letter to her friend Mary Martin, dated 8 September 1876, as a new 'Sheaf' that she hoped to glean in 'Sanskrit Fields'). On 30 August 1877, before she had completed this project, she succumbed to the same consumption that previously had taken both her siblings years before, but her father Govin Chunder Dutt eventually

arranged (with Gosse's help) for Kegan Paul to bring out *Ancient Ballads*, her second and last volume of poems (two years after it had brought out its own edition of *Sheaf*).

As there is no indication Dutt ever provided her father with directions regarding the contents or organization of this collection, it is particularly important to bear in mind that one must not attribute anything about the selection or the arrangement of the poems to the poet herself. Indeed, although Dutt did envision her Sanskrit sheaf as containing nine ballads, Gosse reports that two of the poems ("The Royal Ascetic and the Hind" and "The Legend of Dhruva") were not originally intended for the collection but merely added by her father to fill out the volume—and I would argue that "Sîta" was not as well. What is more, one cannot claim with any certainty that all of the ballads actually included would have made Dutt's own final cut if she had continued to produce more than nine ballads from which to choose. Indeed, along these lines, of all the poems in *Ancient Ballads* Dutt only had proofread "Royal Ascetic" and "Dhruva" for publication (and these "legends" are prosodically distinct from the other "ballads").

Yet one may nonetheless glean from the content of these poems a fair amount of insight into how Dutt had begun to situate herself in a number of Fields. *Ancient Ballads* technically consists of two separate sections, though the main body of ballads and legends (where one finds her working largely in Sanskrit Fields) is far more substantial than the brief portion of miscellaneous poems with which the collection concludes. The nine poems of the first section comprise over 90 percent of the total lines. In some respects it is odd to have included the second section at all, separated off as it is by its own title, Miscellaneous Poems. Most likely her father and/or Gosse simply deemed it expedient to publish whatever work she had left behind, as there simply was not enough

extra material for a third and final volume of other poems. Whatever the ultimate motivation behind this decision, it ends up being a great boon for scholars interested in plumbing the complexities of the nexus of East and West in her poetry, for here one finds her working explicitly in English Fields, French Fields, and contemporary Indian Fields.

Ancient Ballads opens with Dutt's most ambitious piece, the long poem *Savitri*. This 995-line ballad, offered in five parts, features 12-line stanzas of alternately rhyming octosyllabic verse (*A B A B C D C D E F E F*). The story of Savitri comes from the *Mahabharata*, one of the two great Sanskrit epics. Dutt has her readers follow Savitri as she wins her husband Satyavan's life back from Death. Due to her devotion to her husband, Savitri traditionally has served as a type for the ideal Hindu wife, and certainly one may see Dutt's version as reinforcing this legacy, yet at the same time the independence and strength of her hero just as certainly allows one to detect in her rendering a more modern, if not Western, type.

The next ballad, "Lakshman," comes from the *Ramayana*, the other great Hindu epic. It is a 176-line poem divided into 8-line stanzas of alternately rhyming octosyllabic verse (*A B A B C D C D*). Lakshman (Laksmana) is the half-brother and best friend of Rama, the great hero-king of the *Ramayana*. Rama is in exile because of Kaikeyi, one of three wives living with his father Dasarath (Dasaratha), who prevails upon the king to install her son Bharata as crown prince instead of Rama and to exile Rama instead. Kaikeyi had been granted two boons (favors/rewards) for her help to Dasarath during a battle years before, and she had been saving them. She decided to ask for the above after it had been announced that Rama (whose mother, Kausalya, was one of the other wives; Lakshman's mother was Sumitra, the third wife) was to be confirmed as the crown

prince. Lakshman accompanied Rama and his wife Sîta into exile. In this scene, Sîta convinces Lakshman to leave her in order to go help Rama. She has fallen for a ruse, however, and while he is gone she is kidnapped by Ravana, Rama's arch-enemy, who is king of Lanka and of the demons known as Rakshases (rakshasas).

The third ballad, "Jogadhya Uma," hails from Bengali folklore rather than ancient Sanskrit texts. Jogadhya (jugaadya) refers to a temple or sati pitha (shakti peetha), a seat of goddess worship, at Khirogram (Khirgram) in West Bengal. Uma, or Parvati, is the wife of Shiva (Siva), one of gods of the Hindu trinity, and she is traditionally is associated with beauty, light, and wisdom. This 240-line poem, like "Savitri," features 12-line stanzas of alternately rhyming octosyllabic verse as it narrates the story of a pedlar's vision of Uma.

The next two pieces ("Royal Ascetic" and "Dhruva"), as legends not originally intended for Dutt's Sanskrit Sheaf, both are written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter). They are, as noted above, the only two poems from *Ancient Ballads* that appeared in print during Dutt's lifetime. The 131-line "Royal Ascetic," originally published in *The Calcutta Review* in January 1877, tells the tale of Bharat (Bharata, the royal ascetic), a king who gave up his kingdom to live a solitary life of devotion in the forest. He was diverted from his devotions by his love for the hind (deer). This legend is, as Dutt indicates below its title, from the *Vishnu Purana*, a set of religious texts that promote the worship of Vishnu, the Preserver (one of the gods of the Hindu trinity). The 127-line "Dhruva," published in *The Bengal Magazine* in October 1876, also draws from the *Vishnu Purana*. Its focus is the legend of Dhruva, a boy who leaves his life in a palace to live in the forest and devote himself to Vishnu. He is rewarded with a place in the heavens as a star. Significantly, in the original rendition Dhruva does return to his

home before assuming his place in the heavens; indeed, his father eventually leaves the kingdom to him.

The sixth poem, “Buttoo,” is a ballad based on the legend of Ekalavya, which is found in the *Mahabharata*. This 272-line poem, like “Lakshman,” is divided into 8-line stanzas of alternately rhyming octosyllabic verse. It tells the tale of how a humble forest youth becomes a self-taught master archer after he was rejected and humiliated by the great teacher and warrior Dronacharya (Dronacarya or, simply, Drona). Despite this snub, Buttoo/Ekalavya retains his devotion to Drona, and consequently he ends up willingly parting with his right-hand thumb at the behest of the teacher so that Arjuna, another major character from the *Mahabharata* and Drona’s star pupil, might eventually be hailed as the greatest archer of all.

Next comes “Sindhu,” a three-part poem of 324 lines organized into the traditional ballad stanza quatrains that alternates not only its rhyming partners (*A B A B*) but also the number of syllables per line (eight and then six). The legend of Sindhu, also known as Sravana, is from the *Ramayana*. In the *Ramayana* it is a very brief tale, told by Dasarath himself (right before he dies from grief after having exiled Rama) recounting how the king had accidentally slain the only child of an ascetic sage, so Dutt’s retelling represents a significant elaboration upon the original. It is followed by “Prehlad,” a 352-line ballad in 8-line stanzas of alternately rhyming octosyllabic verse. The legend of Prehlad (Prahlad, Prahlada), from the *Vishnu Purana*, is the story of a prince who refuses to follow his father’s edict that no one may worship any gods, that all must worship the king himself instead.

The last poem in the main body of the volume is “Sîta,” a 22-line single stanza of rhymed iambic pentameter following an *A B B A* pattern and then finishing with a closed couplet. Sîta is the wife of Rama, the great hero-king of the *Ramayana*. In addition to her time in the forest with

Rama and Lakshman, which results in her kidnapping by Ravana, she also later is exiled by Rama himself. Worried that the potential perception of Sîta's time with Ravana as improper (and, thus, sully to her) might undermine his ability to lead his people, Rama leaves Sîta in the forest even though she is pregnant at the time. She raises her twin boys at the secluded residence of Valmiki, the famous holy sage to whom the composition of the *Ramayana* is attributed. It is to this second time of exile that the poem refers. Significantly, however, this poem does not narrate the legend itself but rather features a contemporary setting in which three children have been listening to their mother's bedtime story-song rendition of it instead. It ends with the speaker asking, "When shall those children by their mother's side / Gather, ah me! as erst at eventide?" Dutt had two siblings, a brother named Abju who died at the age of fourteen (when Toru was nine) and a sister named Aru who died at the age of twenty (when Toru was eighteen). Thus, both were dead at the time Dutt wrote this poem, making it all the more poignant.

"Near Hastings" opens the section of miscellaneous poems. In it, the speaker recalls the kindness of a stranger to her and her sister one day (as the title suggests) near Hastings, England. It consists of five 8-line stanzas alternating both its rhyming partners and the number of syllables per line (eight and then six). It is followed by "France, 1870," five stanzas of 5 octosyllabic lines rhyming *A B A A B*. In July 1870 the Emperor of France, Napoleon III, declared war on Prussia (a confederation of states in northern Germany). Dutt's sympathies were wholeheartedly with France. By early September the war was over, for all intents and purposes. Napoleon III surrendered along with half of the French army on September 2, and just a few days later he was deposed by a new republican government (The Third Republic). During the spring of 1871 radicals in Paris established their own revolutionary government (The Paris Commune) for two

months before The Third Republic resolidified its power. Dutt's poem insists that France's role as the embodiment of Freedom cannot be destroyed by the Prussian ascendancy.

In "The Tree of Life," 38 blank verse lines convey the speaker's near-death experience during a fever. At the end, she awakes to her father at her bedside; the setting, presumably, is contemporary India. It is followed by "On the Fly-leaf of Erckmann-Chatrion's Novel Entitled 'Madame Thérèse'" (three 8-line stanzas of iambic pentameter rhyming in alternate lines). Erckmann-Chatrion was the pen name of two nineteenth-century French authors who wrote collaborative novels together, Émile Erckmann and Louis-Alexandre Chatrion. *Madame Thérèse* (published in 1863) is set in France during the years 1793 and 1794. This was an extremely volatile period in France's history; 1793 is the year of Robespierre's Reign of Terror. It also was a time during which the French Republic was vigorously defending itself against an alliance of armies representing many European countries that sought to bring stability to France via a restoration of the French monarchy (though King Louis XVI was executed in January 1793 and Queen Marie Antoinette was executed in October 1793). Dutt's sympathies here are (again, as in "France, 1870") with the French. In this poem, she renders a particular scene from *Madame Thérèse* in which the French are engaged with part of the Prussian army.

Two sonnets lead up to the collection's final poem. "Baugmaree" lushly renders the grounds at the Dutt family's garden house on the outskirts of Calcutta, while "The Lotus" champions its titular flower (read, India) over the rose (England) and the lily (France). *Ancient Ballads* then concludes with "Our Casuarina Tree," a piece that like "Sîta" evokes a profound nostalgia for her childhood and her now-dead siblings. In five 11-line stanzas of rhymed iambic pentameter (*A B B A C D D C E E E*), Dutt returns us to Baugmaree as she apostrophizes a magnificent tree that for her embodies her love for her family and her country. She claims her

inner vision of its form sustained her while she was in Europe with memories of her “happy prime” and her “loved native clime.” Most of all, however, the tree is dear to her for how it still to that day blends itself with the images of her brother and sister. Her readers, knowing that she would die herself not long after penning these lines, surely cannot help but find the final stanza all the more poignant:

Therefore I fain would consecrate a lay
Unto thy honour, Tree, beloved of those
Who now in blessed sleep, for aye, repose,
Dearer than life to me, alas! were they!
Mayst thou be numbered when my days are done
With deathless trees—like those in Borrowdale,
Under whose awful branches lingered pale
“Fear, trembling Hope, and Death, the skeleton,
And Time the shadow;” and though weak the verse
That would thy beauty fain, oh fain rehearse,
May Love defend thee from Oblivion’s curse.

While the verse of *Ancient Ballads* may indeed be weak in places (as one would expect from virtually any poet in his/her late teens/early twenties), the overall impression Dutt leaves one with after careful study of these poems is instead of the strength of her intellect and of her poetic gifts. As noted in the Critical Introduction, Gosse’s thoroughgoing orientalizing of the “fragile exotic blossom of song” he insists he has discovered in Dutt, however well-intentioned, is patently offensive to modern readers. He did, however, do his part to defend her verse from Oblivion’s curse, at least where Europe was concerned. Today there may be no need to rescue

Dutt from oblivion, certainly not in India anyway, but the question of whether or not her work ultimately will be condemned to obscurity is another matter, and one that here in the West is far from being definitively settled in her favor. It is my hope that this annotated on-line edition of *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* may play a part, however small, in making its poems more readily available (and accessible) to students and scholars alike, and that this will translate into more frequent appearances on course syllabi reading calendars and more numerous critical appreciations and analyses of her writing. For it is my firm belief that a greater familiarity with this poetry is the best way to assure Toru Dutt eventually will indeed assume her rightful place in the canon of nineteenth-century literature and permanently be numbered with the other deathless poets of her day.

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