



Alexander Bubb, *Asian Classics on the Victorian Bookshelf*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 304 pp. Hb £78.00. ISBN: 9780198866275

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Alex Bubb's *Asian Classics* opens with the story of a powerful encounter between the author and a text. A book he has found in the Mitchell Library in New South Wales is marked with signs (water damage, worn leather, a signature, dense annotations), suggesting that a certain Corporal Thomas Palmer from the remote settlement of Mangain, Australia, was reading – in the European trenches some time during the latter part of the First World War – a 1907 one-shilling edition, published in Edinburgh, of the translation of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* by Edward Fitzgerald. As the short afterward of that edition put it, the translation had “attracted very little attention at the time of its publication [in 1859], but of recent years it has had an immense vogue” (xxi). How did Thomas Palmer come to be reading it in the trenches and why did he value it so much that he took it back to Australia?

Despite the apparent distance from popular fiction in the title of *Asian Classics on the Victorian Bookshelf* then (claiming “classic” rather than “popular,” and seeming to limit itself to “Asian”), it will be apparent already that this volume is relevant to all readers of the *VPF* journal and all students of books that Victorians and later might have on their shelves, whether we are concerned with translation or not, “classics” or the disvalued. While it extends before and after at times, the volume covers mainly 1845 to 1915, a 70-year span for a “Victorian Bookshelf” that does not coincide with Victoria's reign but with the duration of patterns in publishing. Through a wonderfully playful and pleasurable narrative based on outstanding research and rigorous argument, the patterns Bubb identifies in that span are what enabled a translation/adaptation from an eleventh-century Persian poet-astronomer to be read in France and Belgium by someone from the other side of the world, to be annotated with quotations from cheap editions of other texts, and to be treasured and preserved so as to enable that encounter.

As a contribution to the analysis of the problematic but still highly relevant concept of “world literature”, the volume illuminates three main blind spots in the criticism, a series of acts that will warm the cockles of any student of the Victorian popular. First, it notes how scholars of world literature have paid and still pay insufficient attention to popularizers. Second, it points out that critics assume too automatically that the mediation of colonial cultures and contexts operated as two distinct areas, high and low (or exclusive and popular), with translation restricted to the former. Bubb shows both the mixture of the two imagined zones and how translation is a fundamental part of popular reading. Finally, and as one can see from the encounter I described in the opening paragraph, Bubb’s third aim is to focus on readers and reading rather than on translators and their intentions.

While *Asian Classics* never points a finger at the question for long, the book returns again and again to the issue of what constitutes the popular, and offers an exciting set of answers that we would do well to engage with. After all, “popular” doesn’t just mean what we happen to like today or what sold a lot at the time.

Amongst his many energizing provocations, Bubb develops the work of Annmarie Drury’s *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (2015) which had argued that, for Victorians, poetry was the most apparent written form that national temperaments took on the page: in other words, poetry should be regarded as the most “popular” form not in the sense of being widely attended to (read, listened to) but in the sense that poetry was the most complete expression of the spirit of the “people” (“populus”). What effect, Bubb wonders, did this hypothesis have on what was written, published, reviewed, and read – and how?

Then again, as Bubb explains, the “popular” can also be defined in relation to aspiration rather than achievement: how, he asks, do the practices of those who want to sell in large numbers differ from those of authors who don’t, even if such commercially-minded authors don’t always succeed in their aims? Bubb offers an illuminating answer when he compares specialist (restricted-market) translators, who would likely know what kind of people their readers were, with translators who, wanting to be popular (in the sense of selling to many), could only guess at the identities of theirs. As he wisely reminds us, and in a new context, the writer’s relationship to the intended reader would greatly affect both the subject matter and the style.

The book is divided into seven chapters, plus a prologue and an epilogue that are both rich and extensive and, while exquisitely written – as the whole volume is – will especially reward attentive and thoughtful reading. While the prologue sets the agenda and the epilogue acts as a reflective space, the numbered chapters focus on the processes whereby a text crosses from one culture to another. To do that they circle around but do not exclusively focus on specific texts that illustrate the issues at hand.

Chapter 1 (“A Century of Translation”) may spend time on *The Rose Garden of Persia* by a working woman author/journalist from the first half of the century, Louisa Costello (the first of several remarkable women translators/authors Bubb recovers for us), but it also serves to introduce issues of imperialism, the operation of publishing and the market, and how far cross-cultural communication was possible. Chapter 2 (“Taking an Interest”) uses the various versions of the *Rubáiyát* to focus a wide-ranging study of the growth of markets for ‘oriental’ literature across America and Britain. The chapter outlines various factors, including the growing interest in non-Christian religions and in cosmopolitanism, the new kinds of travel made easier by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and what Bubb calls “Global Empire and Metropolitan Anxiety” (p.40).

If the first two chapters are engaging and clever, Chapter 3 on circulation is nothing less than ingenious. Using the affordances of digital technologies (whose advantages and limitations are not explored at length but are brilliantly exemplified), Bubb tracks down proverbs, maxims and aphorisms in commonplace books and quotations embedded in printed materials to demonstrate how far and where a text percolated through a society. The chapter covers the practice of scissors-and-paste journalism, and even remarks statues on public buildings and place names (as in an American street called “Rubayat Drive” or “Gulistan Terrace” in Dublin; the previous chapter had noted quotations on gravestones).

Chapter 4 (“Canonising”) uses Confucius as an anchor to explore a process that is central to this journal’s mission (if only in the sense of repudiating it), that is, the interplay between what Bubb, with typical panache, calls “the desultory and the directed” (personal interest and advice from authoritative figures). Building on Jan Gorak’s important *The Making of the Modern Canon* (1991, the chapter has a fascinating long section on Sir John Lubbock’s *100 Best Books* (1886), just over 50% of which were originally in languages other than English. In its explorations, the chapter stresses the importance of the cheap reprint and the ‘classic library’ as well as the marketing claim that books define us in a social process of reaffirmed community and continuity.

Chapter 5 (“Translating”) takes the *Ramayana* to suggest how messy, contested and emotionally fraught the borders are between the high and low. Yet it also takes time to discuss Richard Burton’s letter to Ouida disparaging “the Idiot Public” so as to put it in a new context (133). Bubb points out how the remark stems from Burton’s clear commercial desire to keep the market for translation for himself by disparaging his rivals and those readers who prefer their work to his, a tactic he must have known Ouida would have appreciated.

Chapter 6 (“Publishing”) offers a comprehensive view of the “translation trade.” Just one of its many *aperçus* is the reminder that Fitzgerald’s version of the *Rubáiyát* came out of copyright in 1901, which surely stimulated the explosion of twentieth-century reprints (no doubt also Private Palmer’s). Another – since Bubb knows that publishing doesn’t only comprise the dissemination of words – is a refreshing if brief look at book design. I was particularly struck by Arthur Rackham’s surprising distaste (expressed in quasi-orientalist language) for Edmond Dulac’s gorgeous illustrations to the 1906 version of the *Arabian Nights* written by Laurence Housman: was this another case of a Burton-like desire to capture a market entire? As Bubb remarks elsewhere, conflict and power struggles are everywhere in his materials, and this seems another, if petty, instance.

With chapter 7 (“Reading”) we return to Persia, to the thirteenth-century prose narrative *Gulistan*. The chapter opens with an amusing yet convincing speculation about what version of *Gulistan* John Addington Symonds read, a speculation that enables Bubb to raise many of the methodological problems involved in the historical study of reading. About the *Rubáiyát*, Bubb had written many pages before, “out of this tiny volume opens a vast horizon of possible intertexts, and from artefacts like it we may achieve a global outlook on cultural production and consumption in the nineteenth century” (xxvi, Prologue). It is his sensitive, careful and intricate linkage of the macro and micro, the general and the specific that makes this chapter, like the whole volume, of such extraordinary interest.

While few of the primary sources in the quasi-synopsis above may be of obvious interest to my imagined reader of the *VPF* journal, what will and should interest is Bubb’s always acute methodological and narrative procedures that his discussion of those texts exemplifies. Maybe not the *what*, then, but the *how* will interest you. As we will by now be expecting, his methodology is rigorously empirical and based on assiduous archival research, whether its evidence comprises Private Palmer’s annotations on a volume of Fitzgerald’s *Rubáiyát*, the

records of purchasing and borrowing from libraries, publisher's sales figures, decisions, book design or pricing strategies, letters, reviews, the number of editions, annotations on individual copies, and so on.

Throughout Bubb is alive to the operations and segmentations of a market where gender, race and class play powerful roles, and where imperial concerns permeate every element in the value chain, whether they comprise the fraught relations between European and native-speaker translators, the decisions of publishers (who were not all imperialist zealots, as Bubb shows on page 174 when discussing Unwin) or, very intriguing to me, even the use or otherwise of diacritics to indicate cultural and linguistic distance from English (a discussion which to me casts new light on the use of the diacritics in the 'translations' in Rider Haggard's *She*).

But the best indication of its rigour is the volume's constant alertness to the ambiguity and contradictions and possible non-evidential basis for its findings: it is not afraid to extrapolate, hypothesise and imagine but always makes clear when it does so (as at the beginning of chapter 7). At other times, and a sign of its assiduous faithfulness to the materials, the volume is careful simply to record what evidence there is (for example in the discussion of the minutes of book clubs on page 206). The book shows every sign of *caring* about its materials, that it has a responsibility to them as objects with which one enters into a dialogue, not talks over or twists and cuts to a pre-conceived Procrustean agenda. This care is where its carefulness stems from, as well as its courage.

I started this review by saying that *Asian Classics* was a book relevant to readers of this journal. I conclude by saying rather that it should be essential reading. All of us can learn from its methodological precision, its reflexivity and its thoroughgoing engagement with material evidence, from its clear ethical stance where human actors and passions are never forgotten even in the analysis of systems, and from its elegant, readable and always engaging style. For it cares about you too, dear reader. *Asian Classics* offers a writing model for us all.