

Chronological Notes on the Life and Writings of R. H. Blyth 1898-1964

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1898. December 3rd. R. H. Blyth was born in the town of Leyton (now called Leytonstone) in Essex. His father worked for the Great Eastern Railway. While Blyth was still very young the family moved to the nearby town of Ilford in Essex.

1903. At the age of five he began the seven year grammar school course at Cleveland Road School in Ilford.

1910. At the age of thirteen he entered County High School to begin a five year course of study.

1914. Between his sixteenth and eighteenth years he taught French, Spanish and English at the Highbury Park School in northern London, and for six months he also taught at the Cleveland Road School in Ilford.

1916. At eighteen, when he graduated from Middle School, the First World War was in its second year. He refused to serve in the military as a conscientious objector, "not," he said, "because of any fear of death, but because of a horror at the thought of having to kill another human being." He was incarcerated in Wormwood Scrubs Prison in London, sentenced to heavy labor, for the duration of the war.

1919. The year after the end of hostilities, at the age of twenty-one, he was released from prison. He taught for six months at his old grammar school.

1920. At the age of twenty-two, he enrolled at University College, London, to pursue a degree in English literature.

1923. Graduated from University College, London, with First Class Honors. During his final year Blyth met Fujii Akio, a young Japanese scholar who had been sent to London University by the Japanese government. Fujii was scheduled to teach at the newly-established Keijō Teikoku Daigaku in Seoul, Korea, and had been commissioned to recruit an Englishman to teach at the new university. When he suggested that Blyth take the post, Blyth readily accepted. Fujii and his wife became close friends of Blyth during his years in Korea. Before he left for the Orient, Blyth married Anna Bercovitch, a fellow university student, about whom little is known but whom he would later describe as having "strong philosophical interests." Anna returned to England in 1934 and they were divorced the following year.

1924. In August of this year Blyth and his wife arrived in Kobe, and in the following month he began teaching at the new university.

1. 1927 Poetry: R. H. Blyth's first known appearance in print (one would assume the possibility of others prior to this, but none have been discovered) was in the literary magazine *The London Mercury*, August 1927, Vol. XVI No. 94. Since the *London Mercury*, edited by the poet J. C. Squire, was at the time one of the leading magazines of its kind in Britain, the fact that two of his poems were accepted for publication in it can be viewed as quite an achievement for a young twenty-one year old still enrolled in university. This is true not only in view of the *London Mercury's* prestige at the time, but also considering the two other poets whose works were published together with Blyth's. One of these poets, W. B. Yeats, was then at the peak of his career, and the poem of his that appeared in this issue was the now famous *Among School Children*. For Blyth, was certainly an auspicious beginning. We know that he was writing poetry at least into his thirties. In addition to the poems in *The London Mercury*, he also inserted a few of his works surreptitiously, without attribution, into his first book *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*. These are the last he is known to have written. Since the two poems contributed to *The London Mercury* are not available elsewhere, I will, quote them here in full :

Mortality

We that change,
 Hate change.
 And we that pass,
 Love what abides.
 Summer and winter,
 Day and night,
 All times and seasons,
 Winds and waves,
 Vex our spirits
 With an image
 Of its waning,
 And bequeath
 In dying beauty,
 Ashes,
 Darkness,
 Dust.

Snow in Moonlight

On one dark trunk he laid
 His brow of thought.
 On all around, the snow
 A hush had wrought.
 There birth and life and death were stayed,
 A silent pause, a quiet made
 In Nature's ceaseless flow.
 All things were one,
 Changeless eternity
 At last begun.
 Upon the pine tree crest
 Of that bright hill,
 All thought dissolved in peace,
 In calm and still.
 His was enough of joy and rest,
 Only to be, made quiet his breast,
 Only to stand where trees
 Laid, far below,
 Moon-shadows soft and grey,
 Upon white snow.

2. 1928? Article: *Natura Resurgens*. In *Essays and Studies, Articles from Studies in English Literature vol. VI-VIII (1926-1928)*. A *Quarterly Review Compiled and Issued by The English Seminar of the Tokyo Imperial University*. As the title explains, the book in which *Natura Resurgens* appeared was a collection of articles which had already been printed in the university journal, *A Quarterly Review*, published by the English Literary Society of Japan, Tokyo. Blyth's contribution originally appeared in Vol. VII, 1927, pp. 191-197. This is the first known prose work published by Blyth. In the same collection are articles by other English writers and academics who had come to Japan to teach, among them Edmund Blunden, E. V. Gatenby, and Ernest Pickering. In content, *Natura Resurgens* presages some of the themes that would appear in Blyth's later writings, but it must be said to lack the wit and vivacity that is such a characteristic of his later prose style. It may well be that he wrote the essay at the request of his Japanese colleagues at Keijō University. And while here is no proof of this, I suspect that it may be an essay — perhaps even a college paper — that he wrote even prior to leaving for Korea.

3. 1942 Book: *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 435 pages+5 page preface.

Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics, the most well known of all Blyth's books, was completed in May of the previous year and submitted to Hokuseido Press in Tokyo, who would in the following decades publish virtually all his major writings. By the next year, when it was published, war had broken out, and Blyth, as an enemy alien, had been taken into custody by the police. Given the circumstances, the book was issued in a small printing and few copies made their way outside of Japan during the war years. It was reprinted soon after the end of war, and has remained in print ever since.

On the title page of *Zen and English Literature and Oriental Classics* Blyth is introduced as "Late of Keijō Imperial University and Daiyon Kōtō Gakkō."

The information on the book jacket in the original edition, undoubtedly written by Blyth himself, gives an excellent sketch of both the author and his book:

"The author, R. H. Blyth, late of the Keijō Imperial Univer-

sity and of the Kōtō Gakkō, who was introduced into Buddhism and Zen through Kayama Taigi, Rōshi of Myōshin-ji Betsu-in, Keijō, Chōsen, has applied himself to the painstaking task of searching literature and classics of the East and the West for the gem of the Zen spirit that might be found in it. It is his belief that 'all that is good in European literature and culture is simply and solely that which is in accordance with the Spirit of Zen.' Having studied literature in London University, he is well qualified for the task and shows a penetrating insight and a keen judgement in the treatment of the subject, and has succeeded in it.

"The book falls between two or more stools, since it is addressed on the one hand to English readers who know much of English literature and nothing of Zen, and on the other, Japanese readers who know a little of both. The value of the book might be attested to by the highly complimentary comment on the book by a prominent Japanese professor of English literature in Tokyo."

There is a dedication, to Kayama Taigi Rōshi, inscribed with the words "but for whom I should have known nothing of Zen." The preface to the book is dated "Kanazawa, May 1941."

The 28 chapter headings alone, many of which are taken from famous lines of English literature, especially Shakespeare, give a good idea of the book's contents and of Blyth's interests during the pre-war period :

1. What is Zen? 2. Religion and Poetry. 3. Poetry is Everyday Life. 4. Directness in All 5. Subjective and Objective. 6. Concrete and Abstract 7. The Unregarded River of Our Life 8. Everything Depends on the Mind. 9. The Mind of Man. 10. Words, Words, Words. 11. Figures of Speech. 12. The Pale Cast of Thought. 13. Paradox. 14. Don Quixote. 15. Pantheism, Mysticism, Zen I. 16. Pantheism, Mysticism, Zen II. 17. 'Religious' Poetry. 18. Non-Attachment I. 19. Non-Attachment II. 20. Non-Attachment III. 21. Non-Attachment IV. 22. Death. 23. Children. 24. Idiots and Old Men. 25. Poverty. 26. Animals. 27. Wordsworth. 28. Shakespeare.

As the title of the book suggests, Blyth is looking at English and Oriental literature, the latter being represented almost exclusively by works of great Chinese and Japanese writers, from a Zen perspective. There are chapters devoted to two of his

favorite English poets, Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and many of the themes that would occupy his writing to the end are reflected in the choice of chapter titles.

It was this book that would, in time, establish Blyth's reputation in the West, particularly in post-war America. Its influence on many well-known literary figures, Aldous Huxley, Edmund Blunden, Henry Miller, J. D. Salinger, to mention a few of the most notable, can be traced in their letters and writings: It was the first introduction for many Westerners in the fifties and sixties to Oriental thought and especially to the traditions of the Zen school of Buddhism, at the time virtually unknown in the West. Blyth time and again credited his own introduction to Zen to the English writings of Daisetz Suzuki, which had appeared during the twenties and thirties but still remained relatively unknown. I believe that it was through Blyth, rather than directly from Suzuki, that many Americans and Englishmen many Westerners got their first taste of zen literature.