

THE WRITINGS OF TORU DUTT

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TORU DUTT

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!

THE WRITINGS OF TORU DUTT

*Dipendranath Mitra*

**A**FTER a stay of about four years in France and England, the Dutt family—Toru, Aru and their parents—returned to Calcutta in November 1873. The sisters, who had, while in Cambridge, started translating into English from French poetry, appeared in print for the first time in the March 1874 number of the *Bengal Magazine*. Aru was already seriously ill and died four months later, in July. Between March and July of the same year, fourteen translations from French poets appeared in the magazine with the initials ‘A.D.’ or ‘T.D.’, inconspicuously printed at the bottom of each piece, from which we know that each sister contributed seven translations. Thereafter, only T.D.’s contributions, but in larger numbers, continued to appear in the magazine regularly for quite some time after her death on 30 August 1877.

What the initials stood for was never revealed until *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* was published and reviewed

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in the May 1876 number of the magazine. However, since 'no pains' were 'spared to make the magazine worthy of the best educated and most advanced section of the Bengali community', to which the eminent Dutt family belonged, and since quite a few of the Dutts were very actively associated with the magazine, very few regular readers of it, if any, found the initials mysterious.

In a letter\* dated 15 December 1874, Toru wrote, 'Papa says he will publish our translations from French poets as soon as there are two hundred pieces. At present I send them to the *Bengal Magazine*'. This must have inspired her to work harder, and from the January 1875 number, six to a dozen of her translations appeared every month under a new section called 'Specimens from Modern French Poets'. In November 1875 she informed Miss Martin, 'I have finished my book of French poetry translated into English.' The manuscript was then shown to a number of publishing firms, 'but Calcutta publishers,' she has recorded, 'are a very timid class of people, not at all enterprising, and they are besides more given to the sale of books than publishing new ones.' And so, 'It was to be printed only and not published.'

*A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* came out in March 1876. It contained translations of 165 poems (of which eight were done by Aru) by about 70 French poets, with her critical notes on each piece running to over 40 pages, but without any preface or introduction—a sizable volume of 232 pages, bound in pale blue cloth with gold lettering on the spine. Very few copies of this edition in the original binding are to be seen anywhere now (the National Library, Calcutta, has one), whereas Mr Edmund Gosse's remarks on the get-up of the book—'a most unattractive orange pamphlet of verse', 'the shabby little book', etc.—made in his 'Introductory Memoir' to her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, a much smaller volume than the *Sheaf*, are widely known. (There is a re-

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\* All of Toru Dutt's letters referred to in this article were addressed to her English friend Miss Mary Martin, and are produced in Harihar Das's *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, Oxford, 1921.

ference in one of Toru's letter, dated 24 March 1876, to Miss Martin to the effect that copies sent to England were in paper cover, that being easier for transmission; Mr Gosse must have received one of these copies.) However, looking at a copy of this edition now, accustomed as we are at present to seeing most books produced in this country under a restricted economy, we cannot, while we understand Mr Gosse's reaction, say that she was really that badly let down by the Saptahik Sambad Press.

The reception of her book was such that, with a few months of its publication, she could look forward to a second edition of it. We read in a letter dated 12 February 1877, 'I have very little time to give to reading just now, as I am so busy with adding pieces and notes to, and correcting my *Sheaf*.' But she did not live to see the revised and much enlarged second edition of the book which came out in 1878; it contained over 30 new pieces with notes, a 'Prefatory Memoir' by her father, Govin Chunder, and a frontispiece portrait of the two sisters. This edition was soon exhausted, and an attractively produced third edition was published by Messrs Kegan Paul & Co., London, from which a few pieces, included in the second edition, were dropped, and the poems were all re-arranged by grouping together all pieces by one poet.

During her lifetime, the *Bengal Magazine* also published, apart from her verse translations, the only two essays she is known to have written. One of these was on Leconte de Lisle together with some translations of his poems, and the other on Henry Vivian Derozio. Both appeared in the December number of 1874. And in June and July, 1875 appeared, under the general title of *A Scene from Contemporary History*, two translations in prose made by her from two speeches delivered, not long ago, in the French Legislative Assembly. One was by Victor Hugo, in which he, in 1851, vehemently opposed the proposal to bring about certain constitutional changes designed to make Louis Napoléon the virtual king of France; and the other was delivered by M. Thiers, in 1870, strongly objecting to the proposal of France's declaring war

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on the King of Prussia.

By the end of March 1877, Toru was too ill to write. She contracted the same dreaded disease, 'consumption', which had already claimed the lives of Aru and her brother Abju. Since Toru's return to India, Miss Martin had been regularly receiving from her long letters, but she received none for three months, between March and June. And when Toru wrote to her again on 18 June it was a mere note of sixty words, beginning with, 'I am still very ill—fever every day.' Her last letter to Miss Martin was dated 30 July 1877 in which she said, 'I feel sometimes very tired and weary and lonely, and this illness has made me suffer very much.' She passed away a month later.

When after her death her father examined her papers, he found, among some other writings, an unfinished romance in English, entitled *Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden* and a complete French novel, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*. *Bianca* was published serially in the *Bengal Magazine*, between January and April, 1878. The circumstances of the heroine of this unfinished tale, Bianca Garcia, the younger and only surviving daughter of a Spanish gentleman who had settled in an English village, have some touching resemblances with those of the creator of the romance.

About her French novel Govin Chunder wrote in his 'Prefatory Memoir': 'The great ambition of the sisters was to publish a novel anonymously, which Toru should write, and Aru, who was far more adept at the pencil, should illustrate. Toru's part of the contract has been faithfully fulfilled. I have before me the manuscript. It is in the form of diary written in French by a young lady. The scene is laid in France, and the characters are all French men and women. I shall publish it probably hereafter.' *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* was published in 1879 by a Paris firm, Didier. Mlle Clarisse Bader, whose *La Femme dans l'Inde Antique* Toru had wanted to translate and whom she had come to know through correspondence, looked the book through the press. She also wrote a preface introducing Toru to the French reading public. It must have been considered an amazing

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feat for a foreigner and that too, for a young 'Hindu' woman from Calcutta, to have written a novel in French, and that was no doubt the reason why the fact was boldly displayed on the title-page, just below the title; 'Nouvelle écrite en français par Toru Dutt, jeune et célèbre Hindoue de Calcutta, morte en 1877.' The book attracted considerable notice and was commented upon by some critics with admiration and wonder.

It is noteworthy that in recent years two complete Bengali translations of this novel have appeared—one in 1949 by Rajkumar Mukhopadhyaya, who has also published a study in Bengali, *Kavi Toru Dutt* (1959), and another in 1958 by Prithwindranath Mukhopadhyaya.

However, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, by which Toru Dutt's poetic achievements are now mainly judged, was not published by London's Kegan Paul & Co. till 1882. Apart from nine ballads and legends, this volume also contains a number of sonnets and, in a separate section called 'The Miscellaneous Poems', a few personal verses, including her masterpiece, *Our Casuarina Tree*, which has been acclaimed by a discerning English critic as 'the most remarkable poem ever written in English by a foreigner'. Mr Edmund Gosse in his famous introduction to this volume expressed the opinion that this collection of poems 'will be ultimately found to constitute Toru's chief legacy to posterity'. A reprint of this book was issued in 1927 by the same publishers.

Among the books in which representative selections from Toru Dutt's poetic writings have appeared two may be mentioned here: the third volume in the Oriental Literature series, entitled *The Literature of India* (1900), published by the Colonial Press, in which ten of her poems from the *Ancient Ballads*, together with Gosse's introduction, were included in a separate section; and a number of her poems were included in *Bengali Book of English Verse* (1919) edited by T.D. Dunn, to which Rabindranath Tagore contributed a preface. Her poems have also been included in a number of publications designed mainly for the use of students.

In Bengal perhaps more people have read her *Jogadhya*

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*Uma* in Satyendranath Dutta's beautiful Bengali rendering than the original in English included in *Ancient Ballads*.

Harihar Das's *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*, now out of print, is the principal, and almost only, known source of the details of her life. It contains, in addition to biographical information, all the 53 letters Toru wrote to Miss Mary Martin, in addition to those written in French to Mlle Clarisse Bader, with their translations. The book has a valuable Foreword by H.A.L. Fisher and includes a candid review of Toru Dutt's achievements by E.J. Thompson. Harihar Das also published in the October 1931 number of the *Asiatic Review* a paper, 'Classical Tradition in Toru Dutt's Poetry'.

'Both the sisters,' we read in Govin Chunder's 'Prefatory Memoir', 'kept diaries of their travels in Europe.' It is a pity that no portion of these diaries have ever been published. They would no doubt be delightfully revealing of this period of their lives, of which so little is known. Another unfortunate thing is that almost all letters Toru wrote from England and France were destroyed.

The following books, among others, have taken serious critical notice of Toru Dutt's contributions to literature. *Indian Writers of English Verse* (1933) by Latika Basu has a chapter on her poetry. There is a short section on her in *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945) by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, whereas in his later and larger *Indian Writing in English* (1962) he has devoted to her a complete chapter, giving lengthy extracts from her poems.