

Critical Essay by John Freeman

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Criticism

SOURCE: "Mr. H. M. Tomlinson," in *London Mercury*, Vol. 16, No. 94, August, 1927, pp. 400-08.

In the following essay, Freeman describes Tomlinson's journeys as portrayed in his writings, particularly The Sea and the Jungle.

I

Nothing now is left remarkable, except the flatness of the world; curiosity has destroyed whatever is curious, and invention has overtaken invention until we are fatigued by wonders and retreat into the unfathomably familiar.

It is not Mr. Tomlinson that leads me to talk thus, but the announcement, recently made, that liners are ready to take you a thousand miles up the Amazon into the heart of America. Years ago Mr. Tomlinson made this journey in a steamer full of Welsh coal, the first ocean steamer to penetrate so far among so many dangers; and now a liner will carry you with a tourist's ticket into the very heart of the obscure, and the hosts of wingless guardians of the mystery will flee from the wrath of the bacteriologist. Next year, I suppose, a convoy of palaces will steam a thousand miles further, into the never yet shaken darkness of the watery jungle, and listless throngs will finger their diaries and think, as they stare far down at the water, of last year at Dieppe, last month at Wimbledon, or last week at the London Pavilion.

It was not thus that Mr. Tomlinson made his journey, nor in this spirit that he recorded it in *The Sea and the Jungle*, his best book. He reveals himself in this narrative without being aware (I am sure) how much of himself he is revealing, and indeed without greatly caring. Nothing very wonderful happens to him or his ship, but everything that happens serves to reflect his image in motion; and of all, the chief events and the chief revelations refer to his contacts with ordinary human beings. Few writers have less invention but few have a better imagination. He sees things as poets do, in an imaginative light, not in their parts but as wholes, not rationally but by intuition; and even as he looks he is thinking of something else through which, in a moment, he is gazing more steadily, fondly and faithfully until the visible is charged with the reality of the invisible.

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But to write thus of Mr. Tomlinson is to begin at the end. I ought to have said first of all that *The Sea and the Jungle* tells of a voyage in a tramp steamer from Swansea to Para in the Brazils, and then two thousand miles between the forests of the Amazon and the Madeira, in 1909-10. Parts of the story were published here, there and anywhere, for Mr. Tomlinson is a journalist, but the upgathering of the parts, or waves, is perfect and the whole moves like a tide. He presents his story as the story of an escape



from London, a casual felicitous escape from home, streets, winter, care; a long slow voyage into the homeless tropic world; and then a hurried return to all he had fled from. He has not that "lust" of travel which the cultured are supposed to share and which means no more than an appetite for something to keep them from thinking closely and feeling sharply. He travels because he is by nature a dreamer, and he writes because he is by circumstance a rebel. His mind falls into the order of dreams, the dreams recur and stimulate him again and again to fresh journeys; in the breath of dreams he sees the same images, like figures in smoke, and he returns to the same early country of childhood's memory, the same admired characters and scenes of manhood's memory, repeating what he loves because he loves it and because it revolves and in its turn possesses him again. Yet there is nothing dreamlike in what he tells, and perhaps his best prose is given to the sharp, clear and simple telling of simple matters—of the rust of an anchor, the coldness of seas, the unexpectedness of stairs and passages in rough weather. Of these and a hundred other items he writes as the most businesslike, dreamless alderman would write if he could. For a long while, he says, the steamer was a harsh and foreign thing, unfriendly to the eye, hard to understand; but he learned to know her faults and now would resent any change:

The two little streets of three doors each, to port and starboard of her amidships, the doors that open out under the shade of the boat deck to sea. There, amidships also, are the Chief's room and the galley, the engineers' messroom, and the engine-room entrance; but these last do not open overside, but look aft, from a connecting alley which runs across the ship to join the side alleyways. Forward of these cabins is the engine-room casing, where the 'midship deck broadens, but is cumbered with bunker hatches (mind your feet, at night, there); and beyond, again, is the chart-room, and over the chart-room the bridge and the wheel-house, from which is a sheer long drop to the main deck forward. At the finish of that deck is an iron wall, with the entrance to the mysterious forecabin in its centre; and over that is the uplifted head of our world watching our course, a bleak windswept place of rails, cable chains, and windlass. The poop has a timber deck, and there in fine weather the deck chairs are. The poop is a place needing exact navigation at night. Long boxes enclosing the rudder chains are on either side of it. In the centre is the saloon sky-light, the companion, the steward's ice-chest, and the hand-steering gear. Also there are two boats. I gained my night knowledge of the poop deck by assault, and retained my gains with sticking plaster. I am really proud of the privilege which has been given me to roam now this rolling shadow at night.

He shows something childlike and candid in his stare at strange things, counting and looking at them—familiar enough to others—as though no one had ever seen them before. It is as if Robinson Crusoe or John Bunyan had gone to sea in a tramp steamer and confronted that anchor, that heavy swell, those stairs and passages, and gazed half in doubt, half in delight. Thus it is that *The Sea and the Jungle* gives you immediately a double view—of what the writer sees with his unaccustomed stare, and of the fresh receptive mind touched by the succession of images and wonders. And all is so simple that there is an effect of cunning in the simplicity, the plain thing being enriched, yet no more complicated than is the tree by its shadow, which as you look becomes indeed a part of the tree.



In this he is at a great distance from Joseph Conrad. Like Mr. Tomlinson, Conrad was poor in invention, although he was uniquely rich in imagination; but it was Conrad's habit to complicate things endlessly, often without enriching them, while Mr. Tomlinson, as I have said, enriches without complicating them. All such comparisons are as stupid as comparisons of beast with beast and flower with flower, but like many stupidities they are for a time inevitable, and it will be long before a writer on the sea can escape being damned because he is not Conrad, but himself. Perhaps the main point of difference between the two is in style, and of this I shall be speaking in a moment; and the main point of likeness—since comparisons which are inevitable as well as stupid must be faced—is the moral one. Conrad was essentially and utterly simple-minded, with the simplest and most unfailing morality; and this at any rate Mr. Tomlinson shares. Integrity, faith, religiousness of heart—these pervade, stimulate and stiffen the work of both; but in Mr. Tomlinson they fortify the English puritan who has never been sophisticated by the sight of evil or embittered by renouncing it, but hates it, rather, instinctively, as one man hates oil with his food, and another theatres. Hence you feel at ease with him, for you know where he is and where he will be: he is as firm as a hawthorn, as sound as an apple, and in his looks is a good deal like both.

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This impression of a personal character is one of the clearest and happiest impressions you receive from his books. In *The Sea and the Jungle*, especially, the personality is pure of theory, for being away from the life of cities and hasty civilisation there is little for the traveller to demur to and denounce. The rebel is quiet, and I think the work gains therefore in quality, for although rebellion may be native and hate may be as strong as admiration, a rebel in great things may become querulous in small. Mr. Tomlinson is naturally of those who now and again produce the doctrinaire, the liberals who can so readily, and so sincerely, proclaim ideas which other parties adopt. They pick the pocket of the future, but the profits pass to the tory fence or the labour fence; and so the liberals remain of all men the most miserable. It is not wonderful, therefore, that they become exacting and over-righteous, though still hardy, intrepid, bearded animals, less crude than the wolves on their left and less amiable than the oxen on their right. Mr. Tomlinson is a born liberal, but he has escaped the pressure of their circumstances and all but wholly escaped their dolorous readiness to complain. Some men are saved by humour, some by triviality, being unable to take a wrong seriously, some by honesty, being unwilling to exaggerate a wrong. Mr. Tomlinson shows little humour and is incapable of triviality, and is saved by the honesty of his heart and the sanity of his mind. Men err, they are foolish and selfish and often incapable of acting for the common good, they have built abominable cities and there is no fire to descend on the plain and purge them or destroy them; but he sees nevertheless that the world has infinite capacities, and that present evil is not a sudden corruption but an item in a sequence, a link in a chain. He is, in short, at once free from the loathsome optimism of the materialist, and the feeble pessimism of the idealist; and whenever he tries to philosophise, cheerfulness breaks in as it did on Johnson's friend.



The Sea and the Jungle, then, is his best book not only in its literary quality but also in its outline of his character, and this is drawn firmly in his admirations. Here is a passage which is in no way emphasised, a mere page in a chronicle of common events:

The construction camp was not more than a month old. Perched on an escarpment by the line was a row of tents, and at the back of the tents some flimsy huts built of forest stuff. They stood about a ruin of felled trees, with a midden and its butterflies in the midst. Probably thirty white men were stationed there. They were then throwing a wooden bridge across the Caracoles. Most of them were young American civil engineers, though some were English; and when I found one of them—and he happened to be a countryman of mine—balancing himself on a narrow beam high over a swift current, and, regardless of the air heavy with vapour and the torrid sun, directing the disposal of awkward weights with a concentration and keenness which made me recall with regret the way I do things at times, I saw his profession with a new regard. I noticed the men of that transient little settlement in the wilds were in constant high spirits. They betrayed nothing of the gravity of their undertaking. They might have been boys employed at some elaborate jest. But it seemed to me to be a pose of heartiness. They repelled reality with a laugh and a hand clapped to your shoulder. At our mess table, over the dishes of toucan and parrot supplied by the camp hunters, they rallied each other boisterously. There was a touch of defiance in the way they referred to the sickness and the shadow; for it was notorious that changes were frequent in their little garrison. They were forced to talk of these changes, and this was the way they chose to do it. As if laughter was their only prophylactic! But such laughter, to a visitor who did not have to wait till fever took him, but could go when he liked, could be answered only with a friendly smile. Some of my cheery friends of the Caracoles were but the ghosts of men.

Fever was not the only foe, for the plague of poisonous flies provoked a courage less conspicuous, perhaps, but not less real, even when the peril was ignored as the Chief Engineer ignored it. Mr. Tomlinson cannot dissemble his admiration of men moving so confidently in a haunted region, and certainly, by his expression of it, gives a sharper sense than Bates shows (in his *Naturalist on the Amazon*) of a land of flies that would satisfy even Mr. Abercrombie's imagination of their horror.

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It may be freely admitted that Mr. Tomlinson's other books are not all equal to *The Sea and the Jungle*. Some are precisely journalism, and the wisdom of collecting the items may be doubted, for when he reviews books, the poems, for instance, of Mr. Conrad Aiken, he shows that he is less interested in what men say than in what they do and the world they inhabit. Ideas attract little interest and no warmth in his regard, and so his reprinted reviews are not the things to compel a new reader's attention, and perhaps the best to be said for them is that there is nothing to repel it, certainly not that cleverness which, he sees, is craved only by the brain-sick, as drink is craved by a morbid body. There is, moreover, another difficulty in the way of esteeming some of his writings, namely, that they present him as a man exasperated by the wantonness of the war. Exasperation enters into chapter after chapter on one thing after another—an



exasperation as honest as the day, as right as rain, but also, it must be owned, as unexhilarating as rain. Looking at such chapters as literature and not as evidence of propaganda, the inflammation which frets them is seen as a real weakness, and if it is indifference which makes us turn the pages rather hastily now, it is an indifference which even Mr. Tomlinson, in his innumerable spurs and flicks, does not dissipate.

But the war is left behind in his more recent books, and in *London River* (1921) is already put by. A particular interest now creeps in:

Nothing conjures back that room so well as the recollection of a strange odour which fell from it when its door opened, as though something bodiless passed as we entered. There was never anything in the room which alone could account for the smell, for it had in it something of the sofa, which was old and black, and of the lacquered tea-caddy, within the lid of which was the faint ghost of a principle indefinably ancient and rare; and there was in it, too, something of the shells. But you could never find where the smell really came from. I have tried, and know. A recollection of that strange dusky fragrance brings back the old room on a summer afternoon, so sombre that the mahogany sideboard had its own reddish light, so quiet that the clock could be heard ticking in the next room; time, you could hear, going leisurely. There would be a long lath of sunlight, numberless atoms swimming in it, slanting from a corner of the window to brighten a patch of carpet. Two flies would be hovering under the ceiling. Sometimes they would dart at a tangent to hover in another place. I used to wonder what they lived on. You felt secure there, knowing it was old, but seeing things did not alter, as though the world were established and content, desiring no new thing. I did not know that the old house, even then, quiet and still as it seemed, was actually rocking on the flood of mutable affairs; that its navigator, sick with anxiety and bewilderment in guiding his home in the years he did not understand, which his experience had never charted, was sinking nerveless at his helm. For he heard, when his children did not, the premonition of breakers in seas having no landmark that he knew; felt the trend and push of new and inimical forces, and currents that carried him helpless, whither he would not go, but must, heartbroken, into the uproar and welter of the modern.

It is the touch of himself, himself among the long-acquainted docks and quays of *London River*, that gives a peculiar value to the book bearing this for title, and incites him to descriptions that are vital and moving because they preserve for him what he most loves in the world—the lines of a sailing ship, the heavy strength of sailors buffeted by misfortune, the violence and the beauty of the sea. I think a barquentine, he says, the most beautiful of ships, the most aerial and graceful of rigs, memorable as a Greek statue; and added "to her beauty of line there went a richness of colour which made our dull parish a notable place.... You could believe there was a soft radiation from that ship's sides which fired the water about her, but faded when far from her sides, a delicate and faery light which soon expired." And throughout his remembrance of Dockland—"once we were a famous shipping parish"—there is an entangling of memories and regrets, that familiar sense of passed and passing, which may so easily be overcharged but which none the less, by a truthful man, may be uttered in words that we cannot and would not forget. He was born where he could hear even in his cradle the ships of London River, and before he became a writer was familiar enough with



sailors and freights; and so there is something solid at the base of his reminiscence, and whatever romantic hue is apparent now when he speaks of ships and water is reflected from a lamp lit in childhood and still undarkened. Too sparingly are the reverting glances allowed, and I wish he might be persuaded to indulge his fondness and add to that literature of remembrance which is surely of all prose writing the most endearing and durable.

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But while he keeps us waiting for this Mr. Tomlinson asks us to be content with a volume akin to *London River*, one of a series intended to show the state of English commerce—shipping, agricultural and industrial—in 1926, his own contribution being the most vivid of studies and also, I fancy, the most personal and odd book to crush into uniformity. I wish that other treatises on political disease were half so stimulating and persuasive; it is impossible to disagree with a man who writes so well, plucks you by the sleeve and has your sympathy before you begin to think. This is how he speaks of English shipping in *Under the Red Ensign* (1927):

I can be as doting in an old shipyard as are others in the cloisters of their old schoolhouse. The junk and lumber and the tradition affect me. There are ghosts about. I cannot believe there is much that London reveals by chance to the curious, or even to the cunning, which hints her story with deeper implications than that show of the Thames from Duke Shore, of Limehouse. On one hand is the reach of the Lower Pool and on the other is Blackwall Reach beginning the loop about the Isle of Dogs. The day is grey, the tide full, the ships pass, and there smoulders modern London, obscure and grim, where the labour of the Nobodies keeps our chimneys smoking and feeds with oil the light for our rare midnight studies. How could even a stranger come in with the flood tide, and approach that immense and central gloom which seems not a city but an ominous darkening of the heavens, a warning of the dubious enterprise of beings who have rebelled against the light and have dowsed even the sunset into smoking anger, and not be awed by the greatness of it, by the shadow of a tradition he does not know? But the tradition of that city, though darkness is its sign, is not ignoble, for the artless souls who made it and who still keep its fires, cannot be said to have laboured only for pay. They must have felt, though from what instinct we shall never know, that man must live by more than what goes into his mouth. They will endure for a ghostly idea, and perish for it, just as though they were Christian souls. We have witnessed that in recent years.

The whole chapter is sustained at this note, to the prejudice, no doubt, of social economics but to the great advantage of Mr. Tomlinson's personal account of his search for the truth about shipping. He collects statistics but avows that he does not know how to use them; and he collects impressions and characters, sounds and colours, and makes a picture of a precarious industry which no one else could paint so well. Some of his chapters remind me of a writer who has been so lightly neglected—for it is easy to neglect what is truthful but unassertive, and follow after foreign idols—and whom Mr. Tomlinson himself might admire, the late Frank Bullen. For Bullen possessed an earnest, instinctive admiration of the same men as Mr. Tomlinson writes of, and he has



only been forgotten because of the buzz of worse writers. Mr. Tomlinson has, however, the advantage of a knowledge gained from his journalism, a knowledge of the way things are going under the monstrous engine of progress. All good workers are artists, he says, lamenting that their pride should be wasted on something vast and sightless; and they have found reason to watch in horror the movements of the imperial State. We have been overtaken by industrial science, and calamity has fallen because we do not yet comprehend the energies we have unloosed; the clutch is slipping and the power is wasting noisily, while nobody knows what to do—"it is becoming clear to us that a long-continued concentration upon mechanics may put out the light of the mind." But the poet with his dream of beauty, and the savant with his dream of truth, these may yet be saviours, and it is not prosperity we need so much as another attitude of mind—the poet's. And thinking thus, recalling the false confidence of the past, and seeing the present failure of all confidence, he is able to look for a better comprehension of "those awful and nonsensical words," the Beatitudes; the state of British shipping in 1926 having been forgotten long before the last page is reached.

Even Mr. Tomlinson's travel books are not more romantic in essence than this study in economic conditions, and when he writes *Tidemarks*, a record of an Eastern journey in 1923, he does not make Malaya and Singapore more alluring than London's river and "our shipping parish." A man cannot be born and bred in several places at once, and it is because that gorgeous East was not his cradle that Mr. Tomlinson has not succeeded in lifting its heavy oppression from our minds. His record is as good as he can make it, but the disenchantment which he feels in looking back is shared by the reader. Inevitably one reads his story with an eye on *The Sea and the Jungle*, and finds that he is repeating an experience; his observation no doubt is more skilled but not so fresh, there is less of the adventurer and more of the tourist, less to tell of what few of us can attempt and more of what all of us can so easily enjoy. We are aware, he remarks, that even our own street may sometimes give us the sensational idea that we really do not know it. He refuses to distort his brief span by trying to crowd every experience into it and does not answer his own question: *What are the significant things in travel?* for an answer is needless. He carries the unfamiliar about with him—can Ternate and Tidore be stranger? Certainly the East is scarcely strange now, since Java uses holiday posters as vivid as Bournemouth's, and the cinema theatres in the dark groves present the same films of faithless wives and bold burglars as we enjoy in London. When someone tells him there is nothing in the world like Borobudur, he answers, "This poor world is overloaded with Borobudors. We struggle beneath them, yet nothing will satisfy you but you must dig out another from the forest which had fortunately hidden it." And once again the supreme discovery is the exaltation of homecoming and the renewal of a million ancient contacts:

England! That shadow was the indenture on the very stars of an old grandeur, the memory impressed on night itself, blurred but indelible, of an ancient renown. It was the emanation of an idea too great for us to know; the unsubstantial reminder in my isolation and misgiving of wonderful things almost forgotten, of the dreams and exaltations of splendid youth, of the fidelity of comrades, of noble achievements, of our long-passed intimate sorrows, of precious things unspoken but understood, of our dead.



His attitude towards mere signs and wonders is developed in *Gifts of Fortune* "with some hints for those about to travel." We are often told that travel gives light to the mind, but he wonders whether it does. "Light comes to us unexpectedly and obliquely"—what can reach us in a floating cabaret, in the midst of organised amusements? To Mr. Tomlinson this oblique light suggests a life and a tendency outside our own, indifferent to our crises:

At sunrise today, on the high ridge of the shingle which rose between me and the sea, six herons stood motionless in a row, like immense figures of bronze. They were gigantic and ominous in that light. They stood in another world. They were like a warning of what once was, and could be again, huge and threatening, magnified, out of all resemblance to birds, legendary figures which closed vast gulfs of time at a glance and put the familiar shingle in another geological epoch. When they rose and slowly beat the air with concave pinions I thought very Heaven was undulating. With those grotesque black monsters shaking the sky, it looked as though man had not yet arrived.

These phrases are taken from the conclusion of a chapter entitled "On the Chesil Bank," and remind me once more that this "light" falls on him almost peculiarly amid English scenes, within sight and sound of the sea; for they travel farthest who travel least and do not encumber their vision with objects half seen in the delirium of speed. It is the reflective mind that is the seeing mind, and as I have already suggested it is in his power of presenting things in a double vision that Mr. Tomlinson shows his true value as a writer.

His prose style needs little comment, for its virtues are clear and make their own way, and the passages already cited may be looked at again for illustration. Sometimes he indulges himself with the short, sharp staccato sentence, one following another like barks, loud and arresting it is true, but seldom pleasant and seldom as effective as here:

And what were those ivory figures leaping and shouting in the shallows? As I watched them in that light a doubt shook me. I began to wonder whether I knew that little ship, and those laughing figures, and that sea. Who were they? Where was it? When was it?

Usually, the serenity of his mind is shown in the easy breathing of his sentences, their rhythm being palpable yet not formal. His prose is full of light and movement; if he writes of the sea it is untragically and without seeking ponderous phrases, and if he writes of men they are unsophisticated figures in his narrative. His tendency is lyrical, and the serene, ripe ardour which might have gone into poetry has liberated his prose and made it, without extravagance, personal, and without artifice, bright.