



Classics in Short Number 103: Three Royal Monkeys

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Brian Alderson on a fraught journey to the Courts of Assasimmon.

Thummma, Thimbulla and Ummanodda

first set out on their wondrous jungle trek under the banner of **The Three Mulla-Mulgars** in 1910. Their strange story was in the hands of Walter de la Mare at the precarious freelance beginning of his career and it was so daring in its conception that one cannot help but feel it being pressed on him by some shadowy force ? what the Mulgars might call Nooma ? in a corner of his study.

These monkeys --

Thumb, Thimble and Nod for short ? are the sons of one, Seelem, a prince of the Blood Royal of Assasimmon who had wearied of life in his brother's palace in the Valleys of Tishnar and had become a wanderer in the ?immense and solitudinous forest? beyond. Eventually though he is drawn to return and although he promises to come back ?with slaves and scarlet and food-baskets and Zeverras, and bring you all there? he does not do so, and, after the death of Mutta-matutta, their mother, the three Mulla-Mulgars decide to follow him.

Climate change

has come upon them though. A strange winter of frost and snow has descended on the jungle, adding to the difficulties of what was to become a perilous adventure, although its uniform presence, along with that of the wild landscape and its vegetation make a stable background for the events of the journey. As with most picaresque tales it is the author's inventiveness in the matter of episodes that keeps the reader travelling alongside his characters: a boat is stolen from a Gunga-mulgar; a desperate escape is engineered from the flesh-eating Minimuls, only for Nod to fall from a galloping Zeverra and find himself snared by the one human, or Oomgar, to figure in the tale, Andy Battle.

This central section

was, like some other portions of the story, inspired by de la Mare's reading of the seventeenth century travelogue of **Purchas, his Pilgrimage** (a book which is part of the small library behind Coleridge's **Kubla Khan** as well) where Andy Battle features as a shipwrecked sailor. Here he becomes saviour and in part mentor to the lost monkey who, in turn, devises a plan to save Andy himself from the terror of a Nameless Beast ? a scheming that has a slight echo of Mowgli's defeat of Shere Khan to it.

But it would be idle

to pin any influence, either from Purchas or Kipling, on to the imaginative integrity of that event or the sequence of toils and calamities that beset our heroes after Nod's sojourn with the sailor. For one thing ? as should by now be obvious ? de la Mare is dealing not with a textbook topography, but one running parallel to reality, displayed in its Mulgar tribes, its Coccadriloes and its Ollaconda-trees. Moreover, the very journey to the Valleys of Tishnar is steeped in magic. Battle's Nameless One is an emanation of a force of darkness, part of a metaphysic which de la Mare, perhaps ill-

advisedly, set out as a long footnote at the start of his book (later it did little better as an epilogue). Like the 'naming of parts', or the magic of the Wonderstone, with which Nod overcomes certain dangers, or the sought-for Valleys themselves their beauty lies in their resistance to authorial explanation. The reader may interpret all for himself.

No doubt

such a narrative strategy lays itself open to the charge of whimsy (a threat which may have led to the book's change of title in 1927 to **The Three Royal Monkeys**). But this may be rebutted by the thoroughness with which de la Mare is absorbed into his own creation. He sustains his vision of the Forest of Munza-Mulgar with great consistency, just as his storytelling register gives it a hieratic formality. (Like so many great children's books it arose through stories told to his own children.) Most attractive of all though is the character with which he imbues his three travellers, especially Nod, the bright small boy in his sheepskin jacket, the Nizza-neela with magic in him.

When it was first published

The Three Mulla-Mungars was given only a couple of three-colour halftone illustrations by J.R.Monsell (these were not credited to him, but the publisher stuck in a slip to say they were done by a Mr.E.A.Monsell and that has led some people to attribute them wrongly to his sister Eleanor although he signed the pictures in his own characteristic way). The book offered greater opportunities to illustrators though and its first American edition of 1919, later published in London, was given to a young Dorothy Lathrop who lavished a responsive care on drawings and colour plates throughout the book. After the War, the expense of reproduction forbade their use, but an equally fine and extensive set of drawings in black and red by Mildred Eldridge replaced them in 1946 (shrunk and shorn of their colour for the later Puffin edition). Lathrop though spoke for many a reader, when she exulted in her privilege of being able to work on 'the loveliest thing Mr de la Mare has ever written'.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

The Three Mulla-Mulgars (The Three Royal Monkeys) by Walter de la Mare is available from Dover Children's Books, 978-0486493800, £12.49 hbk, illustrations in this edition by Dorothy Lathrop.

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