

The Secret History of the Mongols and Other Pieces

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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

The Secret History of the Mongols and Other Pieces. By ARTHUR WALEY. Pp. 320. London: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN, LTD., 1963. 32s.

This is a Far Eastern miscellany, despite the emphasis of the title. It is composed mainly of articles already published in respectable journals (the earliest dated 1921) and of the texts of broadcasts on the Third Program of the BBC. Some examples follow.

"A Chinese Poet in Central Asia" yields beautiful vignettes of Chinese revels in the frozen (or overheated) towns of Turkestan, complete with rouged dancing girls, fox-fur quilts, and jade wine-cups. This fiercely alien land allowed the poet Ts'en Shen to write verses free of the mist of literary and historical allusions inevitably suggested by a Chinese scene, and ". . . moved him profoundly and wrang from him poems of a vividness and intensity rare in the poetry of his day."

"Lo-yang and its Fall" is a scintillating picture of the great city and the nihilistic ideas of its cutivated aristocracy at the beginning of the fourth century, and of its sack by the "Huns" under Shih Lo.

"Blake the Taoist" is a novelty of comparative literature, and "History and Religion" is a gentle critique of the fluent crudities of some popularizers of twentieth century Zen, who call upon the evidence of history, while disdaining the labors of historians—"intuitive" when convenient; "reasonable" when absolutely necessary.

There is also a liberal sprinkling of Chinese ghosts, dreams, magic mirrors, and medieval actresses, not to mention translations from the *Manyōshū* and other Japanese books.

Of *The Secret History of the Mongols* we have translated here ". . . only the parts founded on story-tellers' tales. These are some of the most vivid primitive literature that exists anywhere in the world." "Contrary to some scholars," writes Waley, "I regard the historical value of the *Secret History* as almost nil and it is as legendary story-telling not as history that I offer it here."

I know nothing of the Ainu language (any more than I do of Mongolian), and Waley himself is modest about his obviously real competence in this tongue. His version of "The Ainu Epic" is true barbaric poetry, simple and honest, yet full of wonder and magic—a spirit also prominent in his rendition of the *Secret History.*

In "Notes on Translation," Waley takes just exception to literal versions of the coarse, heavy-handed sort, and pleads for the sensitive use of one's own language. We cannot object to this—but surely an equal need nowadays is to stand firm against the facile, commonplace "that's-close-enough-for-the-average-reader" renderings, now so much the vogue, which debase all brilliance of juxtaposition, dull all elegantly contrived or skilfully revived metaphors, and gloss over all complexities of imagery and diachronic enrichments—which, in short, treat the language of the original with contempt.

Among the abundant riches of this book we also find a translation of a Kafka story, and one of "The Hymn of the Soul" from the *Acts of St. Thomas*, "gay with many colours." There are also a few original pieces in prose and verse. One of the former, "In the Gallery," suggest the script for a nightmare film by Buñuel or Fellini: "Two naked men in plumed helmets were rescuing an empty bird-cage from a ruined church. Towards the flat blue distance a camel, led by chanting angels, carried lashed to its back a marble fountain and a trumpet draped in cloth of gold."

In offering this collection to intelligent readers of every sort—not just to professional scholars—Waley makes of "popularization" a sumptuous art, and so raises the level of civilization. It is a fruity bag indeed—a Lucullan feast, a garden of delights, a Christmas tree laden with colored lights and magical dainties, informed throughout with the imagination and lively intelligence of one of the cardinals of the clerisy.

Here, in a expert study of the ambiguous character of Han Yü, Waley tells of "China's Greatest Writer." It would be no exaggeration to refer to Waley himself as "China's Greatest non-Chinese Writer."

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