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 RE: Dr Alex May[33786] AE: Revd Professor Judith Brown [614]

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Ray, Sukumar (1887–1923), writer, illustrator, and song composer, was born in Calcutta on 30 October 1887, the son of Upendrakishore Ray, otherwise Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury (1863–1915), a well-known Bengali writer, illustrator, song composer, publisher, and printer, and his wife, Bidhumukhi Devi. His father was a prominent figure in the western-influenced Hindu reform movement known as Brahmoism, which flourished in Bengal from the late nineteenth century until the 1910s.

As a child Ray was a natural story-teller. He would show his two brothers and three sisters pictures of weird and wonderful animals from their father's storybooks and invent his own stories about them. He created his own creatures, too, with untranslatable onomatopoeic names. He soon became a favourite of the poet Rabindranath Tagore, a close friend of his father, who in later life tried to outdo Ray's nonsense verse but gave up in admiration.

Ray was educated at City College, Calcutta, founded in 1879 by supporters of the Brahmo Samaj, and Presidency College, Calcutta, before leaving in 1906 with double honours in physics and chemistry. His 'Nonsense Club' began around this time. Its inspiration came from one person—himself—but many of his family and friends took part in it. He wrote two humorous Bengali plays for the club: the first, *Jhalapala* (a nonsense title), is all word-play; the second, *Laksmāner Saktisel* ('Laksman and the Wonder Weapon'), is a spoof on the epic *Ramayana*. Excerpts from each, staged by Ray's son, Satyajit Ray (1921–1992), appeared in the latter's documentary film *Sukumar Ray*, made for the centenary of his father's birth in 1987. In the words of his son, 'Characters out of the *Ramayana* descend from the epic heights . . . Unpoetic matters easily find place here . . . Hanuman eats sugar-puffs, the Messenger of Death finds his salary in arrears' (Introduction, *Select Nonsense*, n.p.).

Like Lewis Carroll, Ray was also an accomplished photographer. He developed and printed his own photographs and in 1922 became the second Indian to be made a fellow of the Royal Photographic Society. In 1911 he took up a scholarship to study printing and photographic techniques in London and Manchester. His stay in England coincided with the celebrated meeting of Tagore and W. B. Yeats in 1912. Soon after, Ray wrote an article, 'The spirit of Rabindranath Tagore', which was the first serious critique of Tagore by an Indian to be published in the West. It appeared in *The Quest* in October 1913, a month before Tagore won the Nobel prize in literature.

Ray returned to Calcutta with Tagore in 1913, and settled down in the new house-cum-printing press built by his father during his son's absence abroad. From there, after his father's death in 1915, Ray edited and printed a magazine for young people, *Sandesh*, established by his father in 1913; the title means both 'Sweetmeat' and 'Information'. The inaugural issue included some illustrations by Ray (his first to be published), sent from Britain. On 13 December 1919 he married Suprabha Das, from a musical Brahmo family; they had one son, Satyajit.

Ray's greatest achievement was not so much his drawings, brilliant though the fantasy

ones are, as his creation of a nonsense world unique in Bengali literature. In some ways it is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's and Edward Lear's worlds—and there is no doubt that the adult Ray was fully aware of Carroll, if not so much of Lear—yet his creatures are not pure fantasies but generally half-known to us, both in the language they speak and in their appearance. They also usually impinge on ordinary human beings, unlike many of Lear's creatures. Much of his humour is also rooted in Bengali behaviour, for example the puritanism of the Brahma Samaj and the pomposity of the office clerk: the *babu* mercilessly lampooned by Rudyard Kipling. In one illustrated poem, a 'Boss Babu' maintains that his moustache—an important symbol of his status—has been stolen while he was dozing. His staff humiliates his vanity with a mirror, but the boss furiously sounds off:

Their moustaches, I predict,
 Will soon be mercilessly picked:
 And when that happens they will know
 What Man is to Moustachio:
 Man is slave, Moustache is master,
 Losing which Man meets disaster.
 (Ray, *Nonsense Rhymes*, ed. Satyajit Ray, 1970, 25; Satyajit Ray's translation)

Nearly all of Ray's best work belongs to his last two and a half years, after he contracted the virulent parasitic disease kala-azar (leishmaniasis). It includes *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La*, a story with some obvious similarities to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* but infused with Ray's own spirit; *Hesoram Husiar's Diary*, a sort of parody of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* with prehistoric animals that are named in matchless compounds of Latin and Bengali; and an unfinished attempt to introduce each letter of the Bengali alphabet through long poems using traditional alliterative techniques. Most celebrated, though, was *Abol-Tabol* (another nonsense title), a collection of poems that Ray began to publish in *Sandesh* in 1914, to which he continued to add right up to his death. In fact, he never saw the finished book; *Abol-Tabol* was published by U. Ray and Sons nine days after its author died on 10 September 1923, at his home in Moshua, Kishoreganj, Bengal. Its last poem was his last composition. 'I do not know of any other humorist', his son later wrote, 'who could jest in this spirit at the meeting-point of life and death' (Introduction to Ray, *Select Nonsense*, n.p.).

When news of Ray's premature passing reached Tagore, he said:

I have seen a great deal of Death, but I have seldom seen such a youthful figure, with such a short span of life behind him, stand before Death and offer so much to the Divine Spirit and with such dedication. At the gate of Death itself he sang a song of praise for eternal life. As I sat beside his death-bed he filled my soul with the note of that music. (Quoted in Satyajit Ray's commentary in the documentary film *Sukumar Ray*)

Andrew Robinson

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SOURCES SHEET

Article: *Ray, Sukumar (1887–1923)* [107500]

MATERIAL USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THE ARTICLE

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ARCHIVAL DEPOSITS

Named collections

Unknown

Important deposits in other collections

Unknown

Moving-picture archives

BFI NFTVA, documentary footage [U]

Sound archives

Unknown

LIKENESSES

Unknown

WEALTH AT DEATH

Unknown

Sources queries and comments: