

# A Difficult Friendship: Letters of Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore 1913-1940

Review >  
India

Twenty-seven years of correspondence between Tagore and the English missionary and Bengali scholar Edward Thompson are compiled in Uma Das Gupta's volume. Their turbulent relationship is a reflection of their times: the burgeoning of the Indian independence movement and the waning of the British Empire.

By Victor A. van Bijlert

Thompson, the Wesleyan missionary stationed at Bankura, was an avid student of Bengali language and literature. Thompson had a great admiration for Tagore. He thought that poor English translations were misrepresenting Tagore's work: better translations and a sympathetic assessment of his art would boost his reputation in the English-speaking world. In 1913 Tagore asked Thompson to correct his English translations, a task which he faithfully carried out.

*'the correspondence is emblematic of the larger issues of British colonial hegemony and Indian political self-consciousness'*

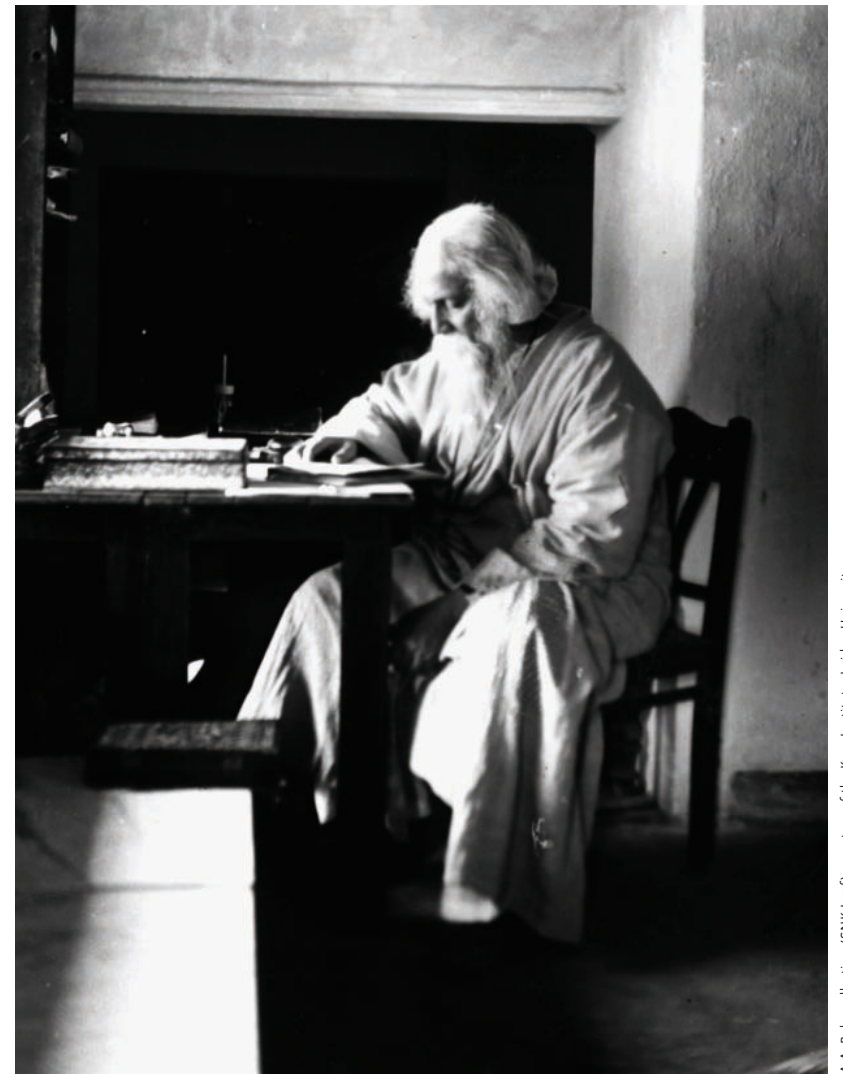
Thompson's first major study of Tagore's poetry and drama, based on his knowledge of the Bengali originals, was published in 1926. It drew a barrage of criticism from Tagore, who called him inept at Bengali and a condescending Eng-

lish schoolmaster. Less than a decade later their friendly correspondence recommenced. Their personal strains and reconciliations, alongside reflections on the unequal relationship between England and India, are well documented in their letters.

In her introduction Das Gupta sketches the unfolding of the friendship. The letters, presented in chronological order, are divided into eight periods between 1913 to 1940, with historical background for each period. Das Gupta has traced the correspondence, preserved in the archives of Rabindra Bhavan at Santiniketan and various libraries in England, to arrive at the most complete source-publication possible. Each letter is annotated and an index of names and subjects is included at the end of the book. *A Difficult Friendship* can be regarded as a companion volume to Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's publication (1997) of the correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore.

#### A cultural mediator

Thompson, though he lent support to Indian demands for independence, was not a political figure. He probably saw himself as a non-partisan mediator between India and England. In this role, Thompson felt he could venture his opin-



Tagore c. 1925

ions on Indian and English culture and politics alike, which made him unpopular with the Anglo-Indian elite and at times estranged him from his Indian friends (among whom were Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru). Das Gupta regards the correspondence between Tagore and Thompson as emblematic of the larger issues of British colonial hegemony and Indian political self-consciousness; their friendship, however, prevails over their disputes.

The issues discussed in the book remain relevant: Western hegemony and the subaltern position of the so-called Third World, moral integrity versus opportunism, and power politics versus social and political justice. This book is required reading for Tagore scholars; it will also be of interest to students of modern Indian and British history, the sociology of culture, political science and cultural studies. <

- Das Gupta, Uma, ed. (2003) *A Difficult Friendship: Letters of Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore 1913-1940*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, viii+243 pp. ISBN 019566312-8

#### Reference

- Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed. (1997) *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, India

*Victor van Bijlert has taught for the past three years at the Indian Institute of Management and the National Institute of Human Development, Calcutta. Affiliated to the Kern Institute at Leiden University, he is Bengal Studies correspondent for the IAS Newsletter and is finishing a monograph on Hindu modernity and early Indian nationalism.*

*v.a.van.bijlert@let.leidenuniv.nl*

#### Bengal Studies

In case you would like to introduce your own research in the field of Bengal Studies, please send your contribution or your article proposal to the editors of the *IAS Newsletter* or to the Bengal Studies correspondent.