

Verrier Elwin (1902 - 1964)

The recent death on February 22, 1964, of Verrier Elwin is a severe loss to the cause of Indian folklore. Elwin was a man of manifold talents: a poet, a novelist, a fighter for Indian freedom, an anthropologist, and a folklorist. It was Elwin's plan to collect and edit a series of volumes under the general rubric, "Specimens of the Oral Literature of Middle India," and his work with the folktales and folk-songs of the nonliterate tribes of India will forever insure him a place among the great folklorists of Asia. Certainly it can be said that his folktale collections are outstanding both as regards the actual recorded material and the annotations. The folktales themselves which he recorded and published are among the very few which are available in English and which conform as closely as possible to the way in which the stories were actually told. In the vast majority of Indian folktale publications we get not the stories as actually told by the traditional tellers, but some editor's notion of how a folktale should be told. After wading through the labored retellings of tales by a Lal Behari Day, for instance, who used a literary and sophisticated style, it is like a refreshing breeze on a hot day to come to the simple, straightforward style used by Elwin in translating the stories which he collected. In his folktale annotations, too, he set a high standard above most Indian folktale collections. He pointed out in *Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal* the difficulties inherent in attempting to properly annotate the individual tales, saying: "This book was prepared in India during the war. Two letters to England in search of a copy of *The Types of the Folk-Tale* were destroyed by enemy action. No copy of the book was to be obtained from any of the main Indian libraries, nor was it possessed privately by any of the scholars known to me." (p. xx). None the less he gave rich cross-references to other Indian collections and in later volumes added motif numbers. It is to be regretted that he did not take the time to write a general survey at some length of Indian folktales, a task for which he was uniquely qualified, but his introduction to *Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal* is a model survey as far as it goes.

It is impossible for one who did not know Elwin personally but who has only worked with his folklore collections to do justice to the man and his life work. It is to be hoped that a detailed memoir will be forthcoming from the pen of one who knew him well. The following should be considered but a rough sketch composed of gleanings from various official sources such as *The International Directory of Anthropologists* (1950). Verrier Elwin, the son of Bishop Elwin of Sierre Leone, was born in 1902. He was educated at Dean Close Cheltenham and Merton College, Oxford. He received the M.A. and 1943 the Doctor of Science (Oxon). In 1926 he was appointed Vice-Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Lecturer at Merton in 1927. He maintained his connections with Merton College throughout his life, the

college financially supporting his fieldwork as late as 1946 (*Myths of Middle India*, p. xvi). In 1927 he went to India as a member of a liberal ashram and almost at once came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and the national movement. At the suggestion of Gandhiji he went to the NWFP to investigate affairs there and was arrested and deported from the Province. In order to acquaint people abroad with the struggle in India he wrote *The Dawn of Indian Freedom* (1930) and *The Truth About India* (1932). When he went to England in 1932 to lecture on the struggle, his passport for India was cancelled by the Secretary of State for India. Elwin was allowed to return to India only after he gave assurances that he would refrain from political activities and confine himself to work among the tribes. In the meantime Elwin had left the Christa Seva Sangha and had joined Gandhiji's Ashram at Sabormati. After his return from the NWFP, Gandhiji sent him to the Central Provinces to do welfare work for the tribal Gonds and Baigas. It was to the work in behalf of and study of the tribal people that he devoted the rest of his life, principally in the Central Provinces. From the beginning of 1932 until 1953, Elwin's work was centered in Madhya Pradesh. With a few colleagues, he founded and maintained there the Tribal Welfare and Research Unit which was for the study of and service to the tribal people, maintaining a Leprosy Home, Dispensary, schools, and a social welfare center. All during this period, and, indeed, down until the time of his death, Elwin did extensive fieldwork. In 1940 he was appointed Honorary Ethnographer to Bastar State and in 1944 Honorary Anthropologist to the Government of Orissa. From 1946-49 he served as Deputy Director of the Department of Anthropology, Government of India. In 1954, he went to NEFA, filling a post at first called "Anthropological Consultant" and later "Adviser for Tribal Affairs." He was married in 1940 and is survived by his wife and two sons. He became a citizen of India in 1954.

His scientific research brought him many honors. He was awarded the Welcome Medal in 1942 and the Rivers Medal in 1948 by the Royal Anthropological Institute; The Roy Gold Medal in 1945 and the Anandale Gold Medal in 1951 by the Asiatic Society of Bengal; the Society Medal in 1947 and the Campbell Medal in 1960 by the Bombay Asiatic Society; and the Dadabhai Naoroji Prize in 1961. He was a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Fellow and Council Member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Fellow and Council Member of the National Institute of Science of India, Hon. Member of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient, and member of the International Society for Folk-Narrative Research.

When one considers his manifold duties and interests, his list of publications is of impressive size. It would be of great use to have a complete bibliography of his writings, including articles and reviews, but below I give a list only of those books which it was possible to locate in readily available sources:

- The Dawn of Indian Freedom* (1930)
- Mahatma Gandhi* (1931)
- The Truth About India* (1932)

Songs of the Forest (with Shamrao Hivale) (1935)
Leaves From the Jungle (1936)
Phulmat of the Hills (1937)
A Cloud That's Dragonish (1938)
The Baiga (1939)
Loss of Nerve (1941)
The Agaria (1942)
Maria Murder and Suicide (1943)
The Aborigines (1943)
Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal (1944)
Folk-Songs of the Maikal Hills (with Shamrao Hivale) (1944)
Folk-Songs of Chhattisgarh (1946)
The Muria and Their Ghotul (1947)
Myths of Middle India (1949)
Bondo Highlanders (1950)
The Tribal Art of Middle India (1951)
Tribal Myths of Orissa (1954)
Motley (1954)
The Religion of an Indian Tribe (1955)
Studies in N.E.F.A. Folklore (1955)
A Philosophy for N.E.F.A. (1956)
Myths of the North-East Frontier of India (1958)
The Art of the North-East Frontier (1959)
India's North-East Frontier in the XIXth Century (1959)
Nagaland (1961)

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