

REVIEW: PATRICK GEDDES AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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Bashabi Fraser (ed.), **A Meeting of Two Minds: Geddes, Tagore: Letters**,
Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2005, 178 pp, pb, £13, ISBN 0-
9549185-1-7.

Philip Boardman, in his book on Patrick Geddes, says of his relations with Rabindranath Tagore that there was 'a strong affinity between these two utterly different minds and personalities'. At first sight this may seem surprising. Tagore was a Bengali poet, an enormously prolific writer of poems, short stories, novels and over 2,200 songs. He won the Nobel prize in 1913, and it is said that he was the first Indian writer to become world famous. That may be true, although Bengal has had an active literature since the twelfth century. Geddes was essentially a scientist, a botanist, biologist, sociologist and town planner, but he was a scientist with a poetic vision.

Bashabi Fraser in her lucid and informative introduction asks what was it that made the ideas of these two men so similar? She remarks that 'both men had a similar puritanical upbringing, in fact almost spartan, without the luxuries and embellishments of opulence and indulgence'. Neither was interested in conventional politics, but both, she says, 'had strong ideas on nationalism'. They had deep affection for their native place, but were also devoted to international co-operation and, in particular, to breaking down the barriers between East and West. Both promoted universities on a very small scale to

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cultivate these ideas. Visva-Bharati, funded by Tagore, but with which Geddes co-operated, has a motto in Sanskrit, 'where the whole world meets in one nest'. Geddes's Outlook Tower in Edinburgh and his Scottish and Indian colleagues in Montpellier had the same aspiration.

The **Oxford Dictionary of National Biography** describes Geddes as 'one of the pioneers of modern Scottish nationalism'. Whether he had much influence in this direction or not, it is true that the Scottish nationalism of the SNP has always been influenced with a similar spirit to Geddes and Tagore, peaceful, democratic, and committed to international co-operation. Both Geddes and Tagore evidently had a deep affection and respect for one-another. Tagore, in particular, was eloquent on the subject. Bashabi Fraser quotes from a foreword which he contributed to a book about Geddes by Amilia Defries:

What so strongly attracted me in Dr. Patrick Geddes when I came to know him in India was not his scientific achievement, but on the contrary, the rare fact of the fullness of his personality rising far above his science. Whatever he had studied and mastered has become vitally one with his humanity. He has the precision of the scientist and the vision of the prophet, at the same time, the power of an artist to make his ideas visible through the language of symbols. His love of Man has given him the insight to see the truth of Man, and his imagination to realise in the world the infinite mystery of life and not merely its mechanical aspects.

The feelings of Geddes towards Tagore are evident from the tone of his letters. He does not explain them at length but, as he says in one letter, his 'expression is lacking'. In spite of this mutual regard, the correspondence gives the impression that Tagore was not as keen as Geddes in arranging to meet. Geddes was in India from 1914 to 1923 and Tagore travelled widely, and frequently but, in spite of all the efforts of Geddes, they seem to have met very seldom. They met once in Bombay, where Geddes was professor of sociology and civics, but Tagore failed to keep an appointment for 'a long talk'. When Geddes was established in Montpellier towards the end of his life, he made Tagore President of his Indian College and wrote repeatedly to press him to visit and speak to the students. All such plans failed with Tagore blaming the state of his health. Perhaps he felt that it was better to enjoy the inspiration and the enthusiasm of Geddes from afar.

February 2006