Rudyard Kipling’s Letters to His Agents, A. P. Watt and Son, 1889–1899

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RUDYARD KIPLING, then twenty-three years old, left India for London to seek his literary fortune on 9 March 1889. He travelled by an unusual route, via Japan, the north Pacific, and the United States, and did not arrive in England until 4 October 1889, some seven months after he had set out.

If he was slow in reaching England, once there he lost no time in establishing a reputation. He had not arrived entirely unknown. While still in India he had sent copies of Departmental Ditties and the stories in the Railway Library series to English editors, and these had attracted some attention. Andrew Lang, a critic of high standing, praised the stories in the Saturday Review while Kipling was still en route from India.1 When he arrived in London he was able to place his work almost immediately: the “Ballad of the King’s Mercy” appeared in Macmillan’s Magazine for November, and on 1 November the St. James’s Gazette offered “regular work” (Letters, I: 353). He was soon besieged with offers from the Spectator, Longman’s, Punch, the Cornhill, Fortnightly Review and other journals. In the midst of this sudden excitement he was determined to take his time and move deliberately: “I did not come to England to write myself out at first starting” (2 November 1889: Letters, I: 356). In order to free himself to write without distraction he was glad to take the advice given to him by Walter Besant and hire as his agent A. P. Watt. This he did within weeks of his arrival in England, when Watt took over the management of all of Kipling’s publishing and business arrangements, or, as Kipling put it, the two men together devised “a plan of campaign” (29 November 1889). The working relationship begun thus remained unbroken to the end of Kipling’s life.
That a man such as Watt stood ready to act as Kipling’s man of business was a happy stroke of luck for both men. Though technically not the first, Watt was practically the first genuine literary agent, an identity that he defined and developed against all sorts of obstacles and hostilities. Authors were suspicious of agents: why, they wondered, give up 10% of one’s earnings to a mere intermediary? Publishers were immediately hostile; why should they have to deal with a mercenary intruder who stood between them and their authors? Kipling saw the agent’s services quite differently: an agent knew the literary market as no author possibly could; an agent could gauge the value of a literary work without prejudice; and an agent could spare the author all the time-consuming, energy-draining business of circulating manuscripts, bargaining with publishers, auditing their accounts, and dealing with the requests and demands of all kinds from the public, domestic and foreign. Finally, the agent’s experience and enterprise would produce a lot more money for an innocent author, who, by himself, would be at the mercy of predatory publishers.

Not every writer would have Kipling’s reasons for his enthusiastic welcome to a literary agent. His immediate success, the scale of that success, and the eager offers that followed from that success, made him a special case. Almost at once Kipling was publishing through newspaper syndicates, in magazines, in trade books in England and America, in the colonies, and on the Continent; translations, musical settings, dramatic adaptations followed. To manage all this commercial activity took time and knowledge, just what an agent could provide. But for other authors in less blooming condition, the agent remained a suspect figure. Curiously enough, Walter Besant, who recommended A. P. Watt to Kipling, and who himself employed Watt as his agent, remained a critic of literary agency in his conduct of The Author, the organ of the Society of Authors.²

But with Kipling, as has been said, it was different. Shortly after Kipling had signed on with Watt he wrote to his friend Mrs Edmonia Hill thus:
Saw my literary agent A. P. Watt—a nice man who vows that I shall have a princely income. Besant advised me to put myself in his hands. He does all the business for Besant, Haggard, etc., and is Wilkie Collins’ executor. “Hurry up your novel,” sez he, “and become rich.” He took me up on the strength of Plain Tales only. I like him. He takes 10% of all prices, fights the publisher and sees you reviewed (12 December 1889: Letters, I: 370).

Alexander Pollock Watt (1838–1914), the subject of this description, was born in Bridgeton, Scotland. His father was a bookbinder and bookseller, with a shop in Edinburgh. The son was self-educated through “incessant” reading. He married the sister of Alexander Strahan, a London publisher, in 1866, when he was employed in Glasgow as a “drapery warehouseman”; three years later he was in London, still employed as a warehouseman, but about to join his brother-in-law’s publishing business. After his bookish origins he was now again in the commerce of books. According to W. Robertson Nicoll, Watt’s work at Strahan’s was as “a reader of manuscripts.” Later he became a partner in the firm.

Watt no doubt learned a good deal about publishing in general and about the business of magazine publishing in particular from Strahan, who founded such periodicals as Good Words and the Contemporary Review. But Strahan was a bad businessman, ruinously generous to his contributors; he was forced to resign from his firm in 1872. Watt then (date unknown) side-stepped into another form of literary commerce as an advertising agent, an intermediary between advertisers, magazines, and newspapers. When exactly he settled on the idea of literary agency is not known; Robertson Nicoll says that the thing came about when Watt, “as a matter of friendship … disposed of a story by Dr. George Macdonald, and in this way the idea of a literary agency occurred to him.” No date is given for the inspiration; the firm itself gives 1875 as the year of its foundation. By 1881 Watt is identified in the London Post Office Directory as a literary agent.

Literary agency was a new thing. The times demanded such a profession, for the commerce of literature had reached a size and complexity unknown before, powerfully aided by improved printing presses, fast-
er steamboats, and popular education. English books now had large American and colonial markets that generated many questions of contracts and distribution. It was the age of the magazine, a market that demanded a vast supply of fiction and poetry from syndicates and from agents. Subsidiary rights proliferated—dramatizations, translations, musical settings, special editions—and had to be carefully protected. New copyright legislation made new grounds for profit. To exploit all of these opportunities, and to see that an author’s interests were defended, one needed expert knowledge and experience, and it was just those things that A. P. Watt, and after him a host of other agents, were prepared to offer. By 1889, when the young Kipling joined him, Watt, who stood first in the profession, was a power in the literary marketplace, serving both authors and publishers.

The times were propitious, but Watt’s success seems to have owed just as much to his personal qualities. He was trustworthy, experienced, intelligent, persevering, and diplomatic, as he needed to be in developing the role of the literary agent. Watt was interviewed in the Bookman (London) in 1892, at a time when the literary agent was still a figure regarded with much suspicion. He described his business to the interviewer succinctly and without apology: “I … do nothing but sell or lease copyrights,” he said. But how he did this was the secret; the interviewer was left “marvelling much at the skill which reconciled author and publisher.” Arthur Waugh, himself a publisher who had had many dealings with A.P. Watt and Co., echoed this judgment in his history of the firm of Chapman and Hall. Watt, he wrote, “set his successors and rivals a distinguished example of integrity, sound judgment, and fair negotiations between client and customer” (A Hundred Years of Publishing, 1930).

The close and friendly relation that Kipling developed with A. P. Watt was continued with Watt’s son, A. S. Watt, who joined his father in the agency in 1891 and who succeeded as head of the firm after his father’s death in 1914. That relation was, if anything, even closer than that between Kipling and the elder Watt. Kipling, always deferential to
his elders, typically addressed the father as “Dear Watt” and never used Watt’s given name; with the son, however, who was four years younger than Kipling, it was always “Dear Alick,” and he was on fairly intimate terms with the younger Watt’s family.

Beginning in 1892 the firm of A. P. Watt largely confined its advertising to a small book composed of letters written by satisfied authors; *Letters Addressed to A. P. Watt*, it was called, and it went through thirteen editions down to 1929, by which time it contained four letters from Kipling himself (for the first of these see 6 March 1890). How this worked is rather enviously described by the publisher George H. Doran (*Chronicles of Barabbas*, 1935):

They [A. P. Watt and Son] do not make direct solicitation of business from an author.

They have a much more astute plan. An author of promise emerges on the literary or even the bookselling horizon. Forthwith this author receives from Messrs. A. P. Watt & Son, with their compliments, an exquisitely produced brochure containing extracts from letters from contented authors, many of them the most prominent and successful of English writers. The new or young author is highly flattered to be invited to join such goodly company.

Probably he does join, and is well served; for, as Doran goes on to note, “As the oldest and most meticulous of all literary agencies, this house of A. P. Watt & Son may be taken for models of procedure.”

For some reason, Kipling always distrusted publishers. In his view they were not only dishonest, they were incompetent as well. They failed to follow instructions, they altered the author’s work, they did not send proofs, they bungled publication dates, failed to send accounts, did not advertise properly, showed no initiative, and so on through a long list of charges. Kipling affected to know all about these sins even before he had any experience of London publishers: “I dealt with publishers [in India] as one pork butcher with another,” he boasted to Walter Besant, “and so came to know the difference between their buying and selling prices” (20 November 1889: *Letters*, I, 368).
Kipling was thus always ready to suspect the worst of any publisher. When he dined with Sir Frederick Macmillan he was struck by the luxury of Macmillan’s house: “I begin to see now why authors were created and where go the profits that should rightly be theirs” (2 November 1889: *Letters*, I: 355). The draft of a proposed publisher’s agreement he called “unmitigated burglary” (14 July 1898). On another occasion he observed that “It’s curious to notice the difficulty there is in cork-screwing money out of publishers” (17 June 1894). Publishers, he said, “don’t seem to have any honour worth worrying about” (22 October 1894). And he once urged Watt in dealing with a peccant publisher to “knife those robbers” (27 November 1897). It is typical of Kipling’s relation to publishers that, though Macmillan published his work for more than forty years in his lifetime, Kipling rarely bothered to spell the name of the firm correctly. As a rule, he chose not to correspond with his regular English publishers—Macmillan, Methuen, Hodder and Stoughton—but instead wrote what he had to say to Watt and let Watt relay the information.\(^8\) So we owe much of the interest of the Watt correspondence to Kipling’s jaundiced view of publishers and their ways. What he might have told his publishers he told his agent instead.

Did Kipling have any reason to think about publishers as he did? Maybe. He was sure that Thacker, Spink, the Indian firm that published his first “real” book (as he called it), *Plain Tales from the Hills* (Calcutta, 1888), took an inordinate share of the profits. He was sure that Emile Moreau, the head of the firm that published the Indian Railway Library, was a thief. He quarrelled with the American firm of Harper for publishing an edition of *The Courting of Dinah Shadd*, consisting of stories for which they had the serial rights but not the book rights. Harper also included a story to which it had no right at all. When Harper belatedly attempted to pay him for the purloined story (“The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney”) Kipling angrily rejected the money and instructed Watt never to offer anything of his to Harper’s again (20 July 1892). And then there was the unrestricted piratical reprinting in America of Kipling’s early work before the United States passed an international
copyright act in 1891. Kipling afterwards spent much time, energy, and money in futile court cases attempting to protect early work that could not be protected, since the act was not retrospective. Whether or not Kipling’s suspicions of publishers in general had any basis in fact who is to say now? He certainly made a lot of money for himself as well as for his agent and for his publishers.

In the course of their long and cordial relationship Kipling came to rely on Watt for many more things than one would suppose were among the duties of an agent. Although Watt said all he did in his work was “sell or lease copyrights,” for Kipling he did far more than that. Kipling sometimes treated Watt as his banker (as to some degree he was), or used him as a convenience for paying his bills. If Kipling wanted to register a protest then Watt would write the letter. Watt would settle tax questions, provide a secretarial service, act as shipping agent, give investment advice, and supply a clipping service. When the people in a bank in Brighton failed to recognize Kipling and so refused to cash his check, Kipling told Watt to call on the London headquarters of the bank and instruct the officers in the proper conduct of their business (see 21 July 1897). Since we do not have the other side of the Kipling-Watt correspondence we can only guess at Watt’s response to such demands, but good feeling seems to have survived.

Watt was jealous of his role. He disapproved of the arrangements made for the publication of The Naulahka by Kipling’s collaborator, Wolcott Balestier, who acted without consulting Watt and so, Watt declared, “lost a very large sum of money.” When Kipling was living in America he at first conducted his own negotiations with American editors and publishers or worked through S. S. McClure’s syndicate. But he repented of this practice when he found that the magazines “took liberties with the unprotected author” and gladly turned over his American arrangements to Watt, as Watt certainly wanted him to do (see 18 October 1894).

The relation of the two men was not all one-sided. Apart from providing highly saleable and highly profitable stories and poems to Watt’s
agency, Kipling sometimes acted as though he were part of the firm. He regularly touted Watt’s services to other authors, and he made efforts to recruit authors as clients for Watt—Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Wilkins-Freeman, among others. He usually suggested on such occasions that he was owed a commission, whether seriously or in jest is difficult to determine.

The Watts, father and son, were Kipling’s main correspondents, and the letters that passed between them were not all confined to business. Best of all, Watt was rewarded for his devoted services by a genuine friendship, a friendship that passed from father to son. As Kipling wrote of that friendship in a late letter to the son, “I feel that it is one of the great things which I’ve extracted out of life” (25 December 1926). Four years later he put it another way:

And this must be about the 42nd or 41st year of our untroubled relations and that would make close on 25,000 letters back and forth—no, 90,000 counting back and forth with the wife. I don’t think there’s a finer record anywhere (27 December 1930).

The Watt Papers

The letters in this edition form part of the collection purchased by Yale in 2011 from Bernard Quaritch Ltd. and now in the Beinecke Library. The collection, besides some 319 letters from Kipling to the Watts, father and son, includes a number of manuscripts and corrected proofs of Kipling’s poems and stories, and most of the so-called copyright editions of Kipling’s works, some of them quite rare. Most of the items in the collection were acquired simply through the regular work of the agency. The copyright editions came to Watt as a matter of business; letters from Kipling were of course kept in the office files; corrected proofs would come back from the printers to Watt, who could keep them since Kipling himself had no use for them. The manuscripts in the collection are mostly of early work and were no doubt acquired when Kipling sent them to Watt to be typed and did not ask to have them sent back. And some were no doubt gifts from Kipling.
That practice changed at some time after Kipling’s marriage. Caroline Kipling made a point of keeping her husband’s manuscripts and, after the Kiplings acquired a secretary in 1899, the rule was that no manuscript left the house. Kipling had learned to type, after a fashion, early in his career, and he sometimes typed his letters. But his stories and poems were always written by hand and were literally manuscripts. After the arrival of a secretary, every manuscript was typed at home; editors and printers then worked from the typescript, while the manuscripts remained in Mrs. Kipling’s keeping. She had them bound and, in the course of time, these volumes were given to universities and libraries in France, England, Scotland, Australia, and Canada.

The present edition contains 222 of the 319 letters in the Watt papers, and they cover only the first decade of the sequence, from 1889 to 1899. The reason for this limitation is that, after 1899, the character of the correspondence changes radically. The year 1899 was disastrous for Kipling. In January of that year he had sailed with his family to New York for reasons now unknown. He fell ill after he arrived, developed pneumonia, and nearly died. Josephine, his first-born child, died of pneumonia while her father lay near death. Kipling did not recover sufficiently to return to England until 14 June 1899, after which he would never return to the United States.

During his convalescence Mrs. Kipling had the entire management of his affairs, and after their return to England she continued her management, an arrangement that Kipling was apparently quite happy to accept. It may be noted in passing that Mrs. Kipling’s prominence in Kipling’s business affairs did not begin with their marriage, as has sometimes been said. The letters in this selection make that clear. But after her husband’s serious illness she became the intermediary between Kipling and Watt, and her letters to Watt are exercises in indirect discourse. She wrote what Kipling told her to write; Watt in turn relayed to the publishers what Mrs. Kipling had written to him that Mr. Kipling had said to her. After a secretary was added to the Kipling household, the chain of information was often from Kipling to Mrs. Kipling to
the secretary (there were a number of them over the years) to Watt, to Macmillan, and to or others.

Kipling did not stop writing to the Watts, but the correspondence at Yale—another 97 letters from the years 1900 to 1936—becomes highly irregular. There are no letters at all in some years—1904, 1907, 1911, for example. That may mean that no letters were written in those years or simply that none were saved. In a few other years—1914, 1922, 1931—there is only one letter in each year. The extant letters after 1899 are only rarely about business or about Kipling’s literary plans but more and more about other things. There are letters of condolence or of congratulation, letters accepting or declining invitations, letters about marriages, births, and illnesses among the members of Watt’s family. Many letters accompany or acknowledge gifts: personal gifts such as a bottle of brandy, a pipe, a pair of gloves. Gifts of books were the main thing. “What I find most helpful in my doings has been the books that come just when I want ’em and deal with what I want to read,” Kipling wrote to Alick Watt; “Bless you for that among many other matters” (22 December 1928).

The limitation of this edition to the letters of a single decade is thus not arbitrary but is determined by the character of the correspondence. And what a decade it was! There is no period of Kipling’s writing life without distinction, but the first ten years after his return from India stand out from all the rest. The letters to Watt now provide a detailed, documentary look at just those years, the anni mirabiles of his literary career. From a starting point at which he was effectively unknown by the end of the decade, he is perhaps the most celebrated author in the world. The Indian work—Departmental Ditties, Plain Tales from the Hills, the Railway Library series—is brought out in English editions in 1890. To that beginning are added The Light that Failed (1890); Life’s Handicap (1891); The Naulahka (1892); Barrack-Room Ballads (1892); Many Inventions (1893); The Jungle Book (1894); The Second Jungle Book (1895); The Seven Seas (1896); “Captains Courageous” (1896); The Day’s Work (1898); From Sea to Sea (1899); Stalky and Co. (1899).
Add to this that the Outward Bound edition, the first collected edition, was begun in 1897, and that Kipling was well started on both the *Just So Stories* and *Kim* by the end of the decade, and you have the record of an astounding production of high artistic merit, striking originality, great variety of form, and wide range of subject. If Kipling had died from that illness in New York in 1899 he would still have left behind an *oeuvre* establishing him as one of the great writers of his time.

Apart from documenting this splendid progress, the letters to the Watts show us a good deal of what would otherwise not be known about Kipling’s plans, projects, missteps, and changes of mind. The letters begin when the now-lost “Mother Maturin” is the main object; it is soon forgotten as Kipling grows more interested in his new ideas than in an old inspiration. Then “The Book of the 45 Mornings” is almost carried to publication but is at last aborted, Kipling having recognized it as a piece of book-making only. We see ideas whose possibilities are not at first recognized but that are soon developed: the *Just So Stories* are first characterized as mere “baby nonsense”; what becomes *Stalky & Co.* was originally a single story; only later did it occur to Kipling to keep going and make a book out of the material from which the story was made. There is much more information of this kind about what might have been or what in fact was done.

We are tantalized by ideas that never got carried out: stories of Japanese soldiers or French Canadians; the death of Mulvaney; twelve letters from India in 1895; and American tales that “will make a sensation.” Among the missteps is the publication of “The Bridge Builders” in a disreputable magazine called *Town Topics*—one of Watt’s rare mistakes about the market. When the story—one of Kipling’s finest—appeared in that dubious company, Kipling wrote unhappily to Watt that “I am already getting talked to about it and told that if I take trouble I may even write to the dignity of the *Police Gazette.*” Altogether, the letters to Watt provide a richer account of the working life of a great writer than any other source yet published.
Notes

1. Charles Carrington, *Rudyard Kipling*, p. 131, quotes from “a whole crop of reviews of [RK’s] Indian ‘Railway’ stories” appearing when RK had not yet reached England, including reviews from the *St. James’s Gazette, Vanity Fair*, and the *World*. An even more detailed account of London’s knowledge of RK before he reached England is Roger Lancelyn Green, *Kipling: the Critical Heritage*, pp. 13–15. Two reviews in English papers in 1886 of *Departmental Ditties* and Herbert Stephen’s of *Plain Tales* in 1888, helped to determine RK to return to England. Of the Stephen review he said “it’s all towards clearing the way for the homeward flight” ([7–8 July 1888: to Edmonia Hill, *Letters*, I, 240]).

2. In his *Autobiography* (1902), Besant writes of his “lasting gratitude to my agents, Mr. A.P. Watt and his son, by whose watch and ward my interests have been so carefully guarded for eighteen years” (p. 203). For an excellent brief history of the development of literary agency, of the arguments for and against it, and for the long-continued hostility to it, see James Hepburn, *The Author’s Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent*, Oxford University Press, 1968.

3. Most of this account derives from the informative life of Watt by Elaine Zinkhan in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

4. According to Mary Ann Gillies, Watt arrived in London in 1871 (*The Professional Literary Agent in Britain*, Toronto, 2007, p. 183, n.3). But the dates for Watt’s early years are not certainly known.

5. Gillies, *Professional Literary Agent*, p. 27.


7. The firm remained a family affair throughout the years of Kipling’s connection with it. Watt had four sons, three of whom, Alick, William, and Hansard, joined him in the agency, as did Alick’s son, R.P. (called “Pon”). The eldest of A.P. Wat’s sons, James (b. 1867) was in the Navy.

8. There are a couple of dozen letters to Sir Frederick Macmillan and a few others in the great Macmillan archive now in the British Library, ranging from 1890 to 1935, but they are strictly business. I have found none to Methuen or to Hodder and Stoughton. Frank Doubleday, his American publisher, became a close personal friend and so a privileged correspondent.