

ICON OF THE MONTH

A star is fading in the East and soon may be extinct. When the 20th century began, perhaps 100,000 tigers ranged from Kazakhstan to Java. Now, no more than 5,000 may remain.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, maybe this image should fill the page. It is difficult to think of a creature that is more beautiful. Some animals have strength and some have grace; the tiger has both, to burn.

It is not mentioned in the Bible (did God miss a trick when he challenged Job with the hippo and the crocodile?) but it patrols the imagination of the East. In Hindu myth, the goddess Durga rides on one (unlike ‘the young lady of Niger’, she survives). In parts of Thailand, it is a symbol of divine wrath. In China, it represents *yang*.

Indian fable tells how the tiger got its stripes, like a mark of Cain, because it killed the man it could not fear.

It has long been a byword for its ferocity, even in England. Shakespeare has Henry V exhort his men to ‘imitate [its] action’, and Romeo talks of being ‘savage-wild,/More fierce and more inexorable far/Than empty tigers.’

Today, the name of ‘tiger’ is claimed by fighting men from Serbia to Sri Lanka.

For that magnificence, tigers have been hunted by emperors and rajahs.

For much the same reason, they have been turned into novelty rugs or made to jump through flaming hoops or banged up in cages for the edification of the public. It makes us feel superior.



Icon of the Month

No 14: The tiger

‘What the hand dare seize the fire?’ William Blake saw in the tiger a fitting symbol for the French Revolution – an amalgam of wonder and terror. Jim

Corbett, a soldier employed by the Raj to kill man-eaters, recorded how the villagers would gather round a carcass in awe as if it were the body of a god. Rudyard Kipling made Mowgli’s bane a *khan* – an Asiatic prince.

Yet the final chapter of the tiger’s story is a tale of humiliation. One can easily forgive A A Milne for Tigger (‘a Very Bouncy Animal, with a way of saying How-do-you-do which always left your ears full of sand’) and even the *Daily Mirror* for Tiger Tim; but there is something deeply cynical in the way the tiger has been used to sell consumer goods that shaft the natural world. ‘Put a tiger in your tank,’ Esso exhorts us. No doubt it’s leaded.

The nadir of folly, this time, is in the Orient. That the tiger is dying out from loss of habitat and loss of prey can be excused; but many are being killed deliberately to supply the market for traditional Chinese medicine. An adult male can be worth £50,000.

Supposedly, tiger bone is a cure for rheumatism, and its brawn can calm a sick stomach. Sadly, no part of it can heal our most intractable disease. The creature that has been for almost two million years an icon of God’s grandeur is about to become a sacrifice to human selfishness. **Huw Spanner**