

Roo Borson reviews *Glimpses of World History* by Jawaharlal Nehru

“I do not know when or where these letters will be published, or whether they will be published at all, for India is a strange land to-day and it is difficult to prophesy.” Thus begins *Glimpses of World History*, a volume of collected letters written originally for a single reader, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, by Nehru himself. Though it is also easy, with a figure like Nehru, to imagine him writing intimate letters to his daughter all the while feeling History looking over his shoulder – just as it is hard to imagine Virginia Woolf setting down her neat turns of wit in the diaries without Literary History in mind. Nonetheless these “glimpses,” being addressed to a single reader, are in effect addressed to every single reader: Nehru takes you by the hand on every page as though you were his little daughter, and shows you the wide world bit by bit, beginning with the beginnings of life on Earth and ending near the ends of the earth, or at least one of its endings: the fearsome politics leading into World War II. The letters were written from various prisons, where Nehru was allowed almost no contact with his family, which accounts for some of the intimacy of the tone; the rest is accounted for not only by fatherly feeling but by Nehru’s situation: he was one of the rare figures who, by predilection, intellect and position, was able – literally in the world as well as in words – to compose world history and hand it on to his daughter. He lived, unlike most of us, in a society that he had a hand in shaping; so-called “current events” were intimate to him, and their being so made all of the past, and all possible futures, personal affairs.

The collection of letters was revised for publication, but retains the mood of being spoken lovingly to one person. It is remarkable as a “history” in part because it presupposes no historical knowledge on the part of the reader – meant, as it was, as an educational introduction to the political history of the world for one who had only recently entered it, told in the form of true stories by a father to a daughter. The preface to the original English edition is dated January 1, 1934; the copy I grew up with was published in the US in 1942, bought used, and bears the inscription “Happy New Year, 1947” from my mother to my father, as my family was beginning its post-war life, when I was not yet born, and in a time when “to-day” was not yet written as a single word.

Ondaatje, M., Redhill, M., Spalding, E. & Spalding, L. (Eds.)(2001) *Lost Classics*. London: Bloomsbury.