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## **REVIEW OF THE MEANING OF RICE AND OTHER TALES FROM THE BELLY OF JAPAN**

- The Way of All Flesh covers six generations of strife in the Pontifex family, and spans a period from 1750 to 1880. However, the bulk of the story concerns the life of Ernest Pontifex, from about age 5 up to age 28, and describes his unsatisfactory relations with his parents, his school, his church, his wife, and his friends. Sometimes we feel sorry for Ernest, because many of his problems are caused by unbelievably cruel or thoughtless people, and sometimes we're furious with him, because he himself is

the author of at least half of his troubles, but either way his misfortunes make him stronger and move him steadily along the path to maturity. Throughout, the book remains an easy read, although the writing is very witty and often rewards close examination. Even today, 100 years after the book's publication, a reader finds many things to identify with. Anyone who felt unjustly treated by his or her parents or teachers will find much to sympathize with here. Anyone who has wrestled with the conflict between Reason and Faith will find much to think about here. Given how much change the last century has seen, it's surprising how many of the issues still seem

fresh and relevant, and the book definitely makes you think about them. It is easy to see how many people have described reading *The Way of All Flesh* as a turning point in their lives. A point worth keeping in mind: the characters are all described from Ernest's point of view. Several clues tell us that Ernest exaggerates the cruelty of various characters - some of whom seem evil beyond belief, and I think it's quite clear that, at these points, we're supposed to smile at Ernest - not shake our heads at the author. This is most obvious with Ernest's schoolmaster, Dr. Skinner, whom Ernest consistently sees as a pompous fool, but who we also know is very popular with the best

students, and who shows other signs of being a much better man than Ernest believes him to be. The footnotes in my edition (Penguin Classics 1986) are very skimpy, focusing on comparing elements from Ernest's fictional life to Samuel Butler's real one. The failure of the notes to translate passages in French or Latin, or to explain very contemporary references, is inexcusable. (E.g. but for the recent controversy over his Beatification, we'd have no clue that "Pio Nono" was Pope Pius IX.) Hoggart's introduction (1966) is decent but a bit dated, not having weathered as well as the book itself!

- In this book, as in many of his other

works, Ellis seeks to portray an "image" of a people and a nation, reflecting a view of the Celts deeply tinged by a romantic view of a long-lost, mystical people. What emerges is sort of an odd duck, an ostensibly scholarly work rehashing old chestnuts about the supposed rights and freedoms of Celtic women even as most scholarship of Irish history has long forsaken them for more in-depth and objective analysis. I have personally not read the entire book - although I have seen numerous excerpts from it - but I have gotten a good sense of what it contains, what Ellis's basic arguments are, and how he sets out to prove these arguments. I will discuss my issues with



this book as well as point out some of the more recent scholarship and the ways in which it differs from Ellis's claims. Ellis has long been known by his followers (and he has a considerable body of followers) as a "Celtic scholar": to many, he is the foremost authority on Irish and Welsh history. Certainly, he has a natural ability to entertain. His most famous works are the "Sister Fidelma" mystery series, which he publishes under the pseudonym of "Peter Tremayne." No matter what one's opinion of Ellis's academic rigor might be, one can't help but be enthralled by these works. Peter Tremayne's fan base has become so huge that a Sister Fidelma society has organized

in South Carolina. Many of Ellis's faithful followers were people who were introduced to him through his Sister Fidelma series. However, leaving aside his imaginative and inventive popular novels, his scope as a scholarly and serious historian is somewhat more limited. For one thing, his sources are often highly questionable. Although, as one reviewer correctly pointed out, Ellis's work is free of some of the New Agey mysticism that characterizes other popular work in this field (which makes it more readable in my opinion), nevertheless he frequently uses Celtic spiritualist and neo-druidic authors as sources, probably more

often than he ought. In general, his work appeals to the same generation of readers who clung to popular novels like "Mists of Avalon" during the 1980s. His work is profoundly bound up in the theory that Celtic society was by nature matriarchal and matrilineal, but that over time Christianity, and later, English/Norman influence, eroded the status of women, until in the 20th century there was nothing but a dim memory of this glorious past. To prove this, he uses the sagas and narratives of the Mythological, Ulster, and Fenian Cycles and the Brehon Laws, conveniently passing over anything contained in these sources that does not fit his worldview (or else attributing it to the negative effects of Christianity). However, most mainstream scholars no longer view the sagas as evidence of a pre-Christian survival into modern times, but rather as basically constructs of a later era, much as the Arthurian legends could not be said to actually date to the time of the legendary King Arthur. Ellis attempts to prove that Celtic women enjoyed great sexual freedom by referring to the many promiscuous women in Irish literature like Medb, but has little to say about women in the literature who were prized for their modesty and virginity. When he gets into talking about Brehon law, the line between reality and fantasy

becomes especially blurred. We hear only one side of the story. Irish women could hold property on their own (much like women in other northern European societies), demand divorce (again, like women in other northern European societies), and hold free citizenship and public office (whoa...where in the Brehon laws do they talk about that?). If there is anywhere in the laws where women seem to be disadvantaged (and trust me, people, there are plenty of instances), it must be the fault of evil Christian patriarchy. How about the direct's insistence that a woman cannot make a contract without the approval of her male superior? Christian infiltration. The statement in Bretha Crolige that a man is not liable for abusing a promiscuous woman? Christian prudery. The laws of tanistry which bar a woman from participating in political assemblies? Errr...some evil Christian thing. This is the way the book is written. If the author likes something, he attributes it to the mystical, ethereal Celtic race; if he doesn't, it's Christianized, Romanized, and wholly anti-Celtic. For those who are looking for actual scholarship in this field, I would recommend several works. The Land of Women, by Lisa Bitel, probably the best work in the field of Irish women's history; A Guide to Early Irish

Law, by Fergus Kelly (curiously, Ellis refers in some of his work to Kelly's book, although the two fundamentally disagree on important issues); Cattle Lords and Clansmen, by Nerys Patterson, which looks at the status of women in regard to farming and agrarian social structure; A Woman's Words, by Joanne Findon, which reassesses the way scholars view female literary characters from the Ulster cycle; Women in a Celtic Church, by Christina Harrington, which compares the Irish status of nuns and abbesses with their continental counterparts; and Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, by David R. Wyatt, which includes lengthy discussion on the role of women in regard to slavery, not only in Ireland, but in Wales, Scotland, and England as well. All of these are very useful and informative, much more so than Ellis's restatement of previously debunked cliches.