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GEORGE BORROW. [213a]

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It is a singular coincidence, perhaps, that during one and the same summer we should be celebrating centenaries of Samuel Pepys and George Borrow. Pepys died in the early summer of 1703; Borrow was born in July, 1803. Unlike each other in almost every respect, they are *dui palor*, [213b] as Borrow would say, in one very material point. The reputation of each of them has risen to such a point that, except for injudicious and exaggerated praise, it can have little to fear in the future; and in each case this reputation is based primarily upon autobiography. Among the world's autobiographers the author of "Lavengro" is entitled, we feel sure, to rank with St. Augustine, Cellini, Pepys, Rousseau, Franklin; and, for truthfulness, it is very probable, if we could only estimate it properly, that he would have to be put at the top of the class. His nearest competitor in this respect would undoubtedly be Pepys, and the veracity in both cases not the result of a double share of innate truthfulness, but very largely an accident, due to lack of invention and an absence of that powerful literary style which in the case of a Leigh Hunt or a Stevenson distorts everything that passes through it. In Pepys the malignity of the literary fairy is more than compensated by the worthy secretary's insatiable appetite for life; in Borrow by the *wanderlust* or extraordinary passion and faculty for adventure, which makes his best books such an ambrosial hash of sorcery, Jews, Gentiles, gipsies, prisons, half-in-halves, *cosas de España*—what you will.

George Henry Borrow, to give him for once his full baptismal name, was born at East Dereham, "a beautiful little town in the western division of Norfolk," on July 5, 1803. His father, who came of an old Cornish family, was in his forty-fifth year when Borrow was born, having married ten years previously Anne Perfrement, of a family which had migrated from Dauphiné in the days of Dutch William. The father was captain in a marching regiment, the West Norfolk Militia. Like Sterne's therefore, Borrow's early life was nomadic, and his school-life was broken between Edinburgh, Clonmel, and Norwich. But his real mentors were found in this last city, where he came in contact with a French *émigré* named d'Éterville. Here, too, he fell under the influence of "godless Billy" Taylor, and dreamt of writing plays and poems and abusing religion. Here, too, while he ought to have been studying law, he was claiming acquaintance with gipsies, bruisers, and shady characters, such as the notorious Thurtell. A more dangerous influence to Borrow than any, perhaps, was that of Sir John Bowring, a plausible polyglot, who deliberately used his facility in acquiring and translating tongues as a ladder to an administrative post abroad. Borrow, as was perhaps natural, put a wrong construction upon his sympathy, and his apparently disinterested ambition to leave no poetic fragment in Russian, Swedish, Polish, Servian, Bohemian, or Hungarian unrendered into English. He determined to emulate a purpose so lofty in its detachment, and the mistake cost him dear, for it led him for long years into a veritable *cul de sac* of literature; it led also to the accentuation of that pseudo-philological mania which played such havoc with the ordinary development of rational ideas in a man in many respects so sane as Borrow.

An entirely erroneous belief in the marketable value of Danish ballads, Welsh triads, Russian folk-songs, and the like in rococo English translations after the Bowring pattern led Borrow to exchange an attorney's office for a garret in Grub-street. His immediate ambition was something

between Goldsmith's and Chatterton's ballads, Homeric odes, epics, plays; he was, at all hazards, to write something grand—"to be stared at, lifted on peoples' shoulders." He found his Griffiths in Sir Richard Phillips, the radical alderman and philanthropic sweater, under whose tender mercies he rapidly developed a suicidal tendency, until in May, 1825, a windfall of £20 enabled him to break his chain and escape to the highway and the dingle and the picturesque group of moochers and gypsies enshrined for ever in the pages of "Lavengro." The central portion of this marvellous composition is occupied by the Dingle episode, in which Lavengro (the "word-master," Borrow's gipsy name for himself) is revealed to us in conflict with "the flaming Tinman" and in colloquy with his Romany friend, Jasper Petulengro, with a subtle papistical propagandist, "the man in black," with the typical gipsy chi, Ursula, and with the peerless Isopel Berners. His account of his relations with her we take to be strictly and almost literally accurate. He was powerfully attracted by the magnanimity of spirit no less than by the physical charm of this Brynhildic damsel, tall, straight, and blonde, with loose-flowing flaxen hair, and with a carriage, especially of the neck and shoulders, which reminded the postilion of a certain marchioness of his acquaintance. But Borrow was of a cold temperament, a despiser and mistruster of young women, whom he regarded primarily as invaluable repositories of nursery lore, folk-song, tradition, and similar toys, about which his male friends were apt to be reticent. The attraction was so strong that he had serious thoughts of emigrating with "the beauteous Queen of the Dingle," but he dallied with the idea with characteristic waywardness until it was too late. He sought to postpone awkward decisions, to divert himself and amuse Isopel by making his charmer learn Armenian—the language which he happened at the time to be studying. Isopel bore with it for some time, but the imposition of the verb "to love" in Armenian convinced her that the word-master was not only insane, but also inhuman. Love-making and Armenian do not go well together, and Belle could not feel that the man who proposed to conjugate the verb "to love" in Armenian was master of his intentions in plain English. It was even so. The man of tongues lacked speech wherewith to make manifest his passion; the vocabulary of the word-master was insufficient to convince the workhouse girl of one of the plainest meanings a man can well have. When the distracted Borrow had reached the decision that it was high time to give over his "mocking and scoffing," and returned with this resolve to the dingle, Isopel Berners had quitted it, never to return. She ran away to the nearest sea-port, and took shipping to America. Lavengro with some anguish steeled his heart against following her. The scene of these transactions was a wooded glen or dingle a few miles from Willenhall, in Staffordshire, where Lavengro and Isopel were encamped in their respective tents, having as their neighbours the gipsy clan of which Jasper was the chief. Upon the whole the Dingle chapters are perhaps the most brilliant and the most enduring that Borrow ever achieved. Their interest is greatly enhanced by the fact that they are probably a naked transcript from actual fact, for Borrow was a poor hand at invention. He rarely, if ever, invented a character. His surest source of inspiration was the unadorned truth.

After the experience of a summer in the open, Borrow, who was now twenty-two, relapsed into the indifferent versification of Danish ballads and Welsh bards, was severely fleeced in obscure journeyings in Southern Europe, and so gained some experience for future use, vainly sought a post, on the strength of his linguistic attainments, as an assistant in the British Museum Library, and was reduced to writing reactionary political leaders for a Norwich paper; he was, in fact, waiting, like Mr. Micawber, for something to turn up, or, in his own graphic phrase, "digging holes in the sand and filling them up again."

His deliverance was effected in rather a singular manner. About 1833 he became acquainted with the Skeppers of Oulton Hall, in that pleasant stretch of country which borders on the river Waveney. By Mrs. Clarke (afterwards Mrs. Borrow), the widowed sister of the owner of the Hall, he was introduced to the Rev. Francis Cunningham, rector of Pakefield, a fine type of the Evangelical clergyman of a past generation, who had married the sister of Joseph John Gurney. It seemed to this good man that Borrow's gift of tongues might well be employed in the service of the Bible Society, of which the famous Norfolk Quaker was an influential member. The hour of the former would-be martyr to infidelity had now come; he was taken into the regular service of the society upon an average salary of about £250, in addition to expenses, and was employed as editor, translator, and colporteur of Bibles in strange lands. The labours of the next eight years of his life were as fruitful and honourable as those of the preceding eight had been desultory and obscure. His first commission was to go to St. Petersburg and there edit and superintend the setting up and printing of Lipóftsof's version of the New Testament into Manchu. Borrow acquired the language and performed his task with an almost incredible expedition. He also learned Russian, and in the summer of 1835 proposed to the society that he should himself distribute the work which he had seen through the press upon the confines of the Far East. This scheme was scotched by the refusal of the Russian Government to grant him the necessary authorization and passports. But Borrow's energies were transferred to a project which scarcely, if at all, less deserves the epithet Quixotic. It was to disseminate a Castilian translation of the Vulgate (made by Father Scio at Valencia between 1790 and 1793) in Spain and Portugal. To disperse Bibles in Papua or in Park-lane were, it might be argued, an enterprise fully as hopeful as to scatter them in Galicia or La Mancha; but this is neither here nor there, and the stimulus that was lacking in other directions was abundantly supplied to the society and their emissary by the fact that, according to the *regla quinta* of the old Index, all Spanish versions of the Bible or of any part of it were absolutely forbidden, and that as a necessary consequence the Bible was a book as unfamiliar in Spain as it was held to be dangerous and revolutionary. Spain was to Borrow what the Harley Ministry was to Swift. It seemed to develop in him an almost superhuman activity and power; and, fond of cant as Borrow's employers too often were, it is

infinitely to their credit that they not only tolerated but even applauded the unconventional epistles which he wrote to them of his exploits during his three long journeys in Spain, which with two brief intervals occupied him from November, 1835, down to April, 1840. These letters with the addition of a few chapters and a number of insignificant changes made up "The Bible in Spain," which was published by John Murray on December 10, 1812, when "El Gitano," as the enthusiastic Ford dubbed the author, literally woke up to find himself famous. His experience for a season was that of "the man Sterne"; he dined with peers, Ambassadors, and Bishops, and, like Major Pendennis, was particularly complacent with Bishops. We might here for a moment compare his position to that of Johnson in 1763. He had gone down into the arena and fought his wild beasts, and had come up triumphant, as Johnson had done after the Dictionary. He still had difficulties to meet and debts to face, for he had gradually become estranged from "the sub-committee," and the Bible Society suddenly found that "no sphere remained open in which his services could be utilized." Fortunately, he had provided for his future, not by obtaining a pension, but by marrying, in April, 1840, an old ally of his, Mary Clarke, a widow with a good jointure (over £400 a year), a skilful hand at dumplings and treacle posset, and "an excellent woman of business." He was now fifteen years older than when he had "lost" Isopel. The motives which prompted this scorner of matrimony to marry a woman seven or eight years his senior were similar, it may be surmised, to those which actuated Disraeli on his marriage. The compact was based upon convenience and mutual esteem, and there is no reason to doubt that it conduced not only to Borrow's comfort and security, but also to his happiness. There were no children. The "daughter" whose accomplishments Borrow celebrated in the exordium to "Wild Wales" was his stepdaughter, Henrietta Clarke. He seemed now in an enviable position, with a small but agreeable freehold on the banks of Oulton Broad, able to indulge in "idleness and the pride of literature" to his heart's content. If he had had a "club" or a Boswell about him, he might still have been tolerably happy. But he was not a clubbable man, Borrow! Nevertheless it was during the years that followed that, like Johnson, he achieved his best title to fame, the wondrous five volumes of autobiography so capriciously planned and so strangely entitled "Lavengro—Romany Rye." The stimulus in his case was largely, we believe, if not mainly, pecuniary. "Money is our best friend" he wrote to his wife in 1844. He wanted a purse of his own to travel and give dinners with, for the edge of episcopal hospitality was already wearing off. He desired too, no doubt, to put a coping stone to his fame. Already in January, 1843, he wrote to his publisher that he had begun upon a Robinson Borrow, and Murray, Ford, and other friends threw up their caps. The publisher may have well seen a veritable gold mine in prospect. One has only to imagine the fervent curiosity which the personal element in "The Bible in Spain," so suggestive of mystery and romance, must have exalted in the reading public of 1843, to perceive that any such anticipation was fully warranted by the facts of the case. Here was a book which bore upon its title-page its passport to Sunday reading as a good, serious, missionary work, but for which it was manifest, as the surprised and delighted reader proceeded, that not Bishop Heber or the good Schwartz, but Mendoza and Lesage had been taken as models. May not people well have wondered (the good, pious English folk, to whom "luck" was a scandal, as the Bible Society's secretary wrote to Borrow) what manner of man this muleteer-missionary might be? The incongruity was only heightened by familiarity with Borrow's Pharaoh-like visage, abundant grey hair, and tall blonde Scandinavian figure, which reminded those who came under his spell of those roving Northmen of the days of simple medieval devotion, who were wont to signalize their conversion from heathen darkness by a Mediterranean venture, combining the characters of a piratical cruise and a pious pilgrimage. But if publisher and client were justified in believing that they had discovered an autobiographical El Dorado, they were, none the less, to be sadly undeceived.

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To whatever cause the disappointment may be attributed, it was certainly not due to any lack of pains on the part of Don Jorge. The labour which he bestowed upon his Life was immense, quite disproportionate to his previous efforts. "The Gypsies in Spain," for instance, was built up upon already existing jottings, extracts, and notes, very loosely thrown together; while "The Bible in Spain" itself was, in regard to its composition, nothing more than an *olla podrida* of journalized letters. But he wrote "Lavengro," as it were, with his life's blood. It cost him the same agony that parts of "David Copperfield" cost Dickens, while he had none of Dickens's trained fluency or descriptive power. His lack of ease in writing often gives a wrong impression of insincerity or artificiality. Most of his apostrophes, even the most strained, are expressions of genuine feeling, which he was simply incapable of assimilating to the prevailing tone of the book, that of a *novéla picaresca*. His determination to be original and to tell the truth, to avoid all padding and second-hand ideas, kept him on the rack; yet he persevered, working hard at the Life with intervals of discouragement for no less than six years. "Lavengro" eventually appeared, in three volumes, in February, 1851, and was received not merely with coldness and unconcern, but with hostile carping and even derision. The critics and Borrow pronounced themselves mutually disillusioned. It was natural that a man like Borrow should magnify and should misinterpret this unexpected blow.

The attitude of his critics was due to a very complex system of causes. The English have always been the most self-complacent of peoples, and 1851 was perhaps the one year in the whole of our history when this little weakness reached its climax. The Oxford Movement, with Newman and Ward as its prophets, had been succeeded by the Manchester Movement, upon which Cobden and Macaulay had long been busily engaged in shedding the most brilliant rays of the prevailing Whig optimism; factories, railways, penny postage, free trade, commercial expansion, universal peace and plenty, industrial exhibitions, religious toleration, general education—these were the watchwords of the day, and all these things alike were repulsive in the highest degree to George

Borrow. He was as conservative as a gipsy or a tramp, while his hatred of novelty was worthy of the race among whom *Vaya usted con Dios, y que no haya Novedad!* is a common form of valediction. His hatred of æsthetic culture, of sentimental toleration, and of the modern woman amounted to a positive mania. Of the great writers of his own century he never spoke unless it were to condemn, as in the case of Scott, Wordsworth, Thackeray, and Keats, of whom he once asked, "Have they not been trying to resuscitate him?" In his conversations with Agnes Strickland and Miss Cobbe, as recorded by the latter, he appears to have behaved like an escaped lunatic, while, upon the occasion of his meeting with Anna Gurney, we know that he literally took to flight and ran without stopping from Sheringham to the Old Tucker's Inn at Cromer. An interview with Mrs. Browning or George Eliot would have probably driven him stark staring mad. Another stumbling block to the critics of 1851 was the peculiar dryness, if we may so describe it, of Borrow's style. He could respond to the thrill of natural beauty. He could enjoy and find utterance for his mood when it came upon him, just as he could enjoy a tankard of old ale or linger to gaze upon a sympathetic face; but he refused to pamper such feelings, still more to simulate them; he refused to allow himself to become the creature of literary or poetic ecstasy; he refused to indulge in the fashionable debauch of *dilettante* melancholy. His life was in many ways the reverse of normal, but he insisted in writing about it quite naturally, "as if there were nothing in it." It is perfectly true, then; Borrow is dry. What needs to be appreciated is that his dryness is not that of dry rot, but the dryness of high elevation, of a somewhat solitary and craggy humour—the dryness of "Robinson Crusoe," of "Gil Blas," of "Hadji Baba," and, we might add, of "Don Quixote." There is an absence of verdure. You will not find much sentiment in Borrow. As to word-painting, picturesque glamour and deference to the prejudices of earnest people, a quality so dearly prized by Englishmen of every rank and period, Borrow would have none of them. You will find none of them in his works; but you will find "part of the secret, brother," especially in the Dingle. For there Borrow is at his best, in the open air, among the gipsies—with Jasper, Pakomovna, Tawno, Ursula, the Man in Black, and Belle Berners, interlocutors in dialogues of the greenwood unrivalled since the heyday of the forest of Arden. Once more "Lavengro" badly belied the expectations of those who were looking out for another "Eothen"; and finally, apart from the author's objectionable and reactionary prejudices, there were other and obvious faults about the book (mainly of literary detail, style, and arrangement) which were abundantly manifest to the strenuous critics of 1851. What these gentry did not perceive was the unique character of the book—its truth, its reality, its open-air quality, its distinctive humour, its dramatic power, the genius which revealed to Borrow instinctively the literary form and the picaresque manner which formed the right, nay the inevitable, setting of the particular story that he had to tell.

Borrow's previous success only served to emphasize the bitterness of his defeat, for so he regarded the failure of his originality to carry his darling "Lavengro" through the breakers. He complained that he had "had the honour" of being rancorously abused by every unmanly scoundrel, every sycophantic lackey, and every political and religious renegade in the kingdom. His fury was that of an angry bull tormented by gnats. His worst passions were aroused, his most violent prejudices confirmed. But the abuse did not divert him by a hairbreadth from his preconceived plan. He proceeded with deliberation to carry on in "The Romany Rye" the story so abruptly suspended at the close of the hundredth chapter of "Lavengro." The first chapters of "The Romany Rye" (which was not actually published until May, 1857) are quite equal to anything that Borrow ever wrote. The book falls off a little towards the close, which is, if possible, even more abrupt and inconclusive than that of "Lavengro" itself. In the appendix, the bigotries, hatreds, and centrifugal propensities which made up the George Borrow of 1850-57 were emphasized and underlined for the benefit of the flunkeys, vipers, and "yahoos" who had dared to asperse his autobiography. He never carried his story on from 1825 to 1832 or wrote the once projected "Bible in Russia"; perhaps he never meant to do so; but, even if he had, we more than doubt whether they would have approached in value the first 116 chapters of his immortal autobiography. His remaining work was the detailed journal of a vacation tour in "Wild Wales," which was in no way inferior to its predecessors in literary value, though it is considerably below them in general interest. Wild people and old word-music, in its "native wood-notes wild," were a passion with Borrow to the last, and helped to save him from himself. He suffered terribly from horror of death, religious gloom ("the horrors"), solitariness, and disappointment. He experienced a series of rebuffs, failing in succession to obtain a Consulship, a seat on the quorum, employment in China, and a manuscript-hunting mission from the British Museum. His unrivalled qualifications as a linguist failed to obtain for him posts for which he was eminently fitted, but to which he saw inferior men preferred. If a roving commission or an administrative post could have been found for him abroad, by preference in the East as he himself desired, hard work might have gone far to exorcise his melancholy, and we might have had from his pen contributions to the study of Eastern life that would have added lustre to a group of writers already represented in England by Curzon and Kinglake, Lane and Morier, Palgrave and Burton. With Burton's love of roving adventure, of strange tongues, and of anthropology in its widest sense, the author of "The Bible in Spain" had many points in common. As it was, with brief intervals of solitary excursion in the "Celtic fringe" or the Near East, Borrow remained glooming at home, working himself up into a state of nervous excitement bordering upon dementia about a neighbour's dog or a railway bisecting his wife's land. The gloom, of course, was not chronic. There were days upon which he was himself again, the old George Borrow. Generally speaking, his days and years were passed in a moody inactivity, now at Oulton, then at Yarmouth, next in London, finally at Oulton again, where he "died, as he had lived, alone" on July 26, 1881. It seemed for the time as if he had outlived his reputation. Appearances are proverbially deceptive.

George Borrow's life and works are one and the same thing. Few great writers have been more persistently autobiographical than Borrow was. Boswell, said Johnson once, had only two subjects, Dr. Johnson and James Boswell, and he, the Doctor, was heartily sick of both; but Borrow had only one subject—himself, from which he practically never wandered. The merry jests and marvellous exploits of the incomparable George Borrow—these form the unique theme of our *Gitano Crusoe*. But it is not enough to say that Borrow's autobiographical methods are unique. His life is presented to us in four panels, each as unlike the others as it is possible to be in size, shape, texture, and surface. The scale varies as much as that of an ordnance map, sometimes 25 inches to the mile, at others five miles to the inch. The colours upon the palette are artfully changed, details are sometimes obtruded, at others significantly hidden. A casual glance obscures rather than reveals the fact that, whether he is writing of his early life and struggles ("Lavengro," i.-lviii.), of one vivid Bohemian episode of his early manhood ("Lavengro"—"Romany Rye"), of the crowning triumph of his maturity ("Bible in Spain"), or of a vacation tour during the autumn of a disappointed life ("Wild Wales"), Borrow was always working upon the same model, with the same desperate and conscientious zeal, with the same extraordinary gust and vigour, with the same genius, the same bias, the same limitations.

As a man of letters he must be judged primarily as a biographer, and, if this be done, it will be found that Borrow has achieved the great object of biography; he has transmitted a great personality. The blemishes in his work are not particularly hard to find. Inadvertently we may have been betrayed into indicating one or two of them. But it is not by any means safe ground. With the exception of Jane Austen (and temporarily speaking, perhaps Charles Dickens) there is hardly any literary character whom it is so dangerous to approach without passports and periphrases (securing retreat, if necessary) and plentiful kow-tows as George Borrow. Among all literary clansmen you shall hardly find one more implacable, more fierce, or more blindly fanatical than your Borrovian. Charles Lamb is almost the only author we can think of (out of Scotland) who is worshipped by his admirers with quite the same canine sort of affection. But the cult of Lamb is restricted largely to briefless Templars, to University men and "Oxford M.A.'s"; the Borrovian is drawn from a lower social stratum, from printers, librarians, booksellers, and others who seldom read books, from indexers, dictionary makers, and such harmless drudges of literature. To men of such close and restricted horizons the breath of the *Romany Rye* is as that of "the wind on the heath, brother." Hence the stern and unbending jealousy of their cult. Real literary enthusiasts of advanced years are almost as rare in our streets as elderly naval men of the peculiar type discovered by Mr. Gilbert. Yet a chance word in a London thoroughfare has before now elicited this ingenuous confession of faith: "I'd walk any distance to see anything belonging to George Borrow or to read anything fresh of his. Lord bless you, I almost worship that man!"

Footnotes:

[213a] It was not the policy of the Times Literary Supplement to give the name of the author. For completeness the author is Thomas Seccombe, and the editor of the TLS. at the time was James Thursfield.—DP.

[213b] Two brothers. See "Gypsies in Spain," Preface to Second Edition.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GEORGE BORROW ***

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