Travel and Exploration

The history of travel writing dates back to the Bible, Caesar, the Vikings and the Crusaders, and its many themes include war, trade, science and recreation. Explorers from Columbus to Cook charted lands not previously visited by Western travellers, and were followed by merchants, missionaries, and colonists, who wrote accounts of their experiences. The development of steam power in the nineteenth century provided opportunities for increasing numbers of ‘ordinary’ people to travel further, more economically, and more safely, and resulted in great enthusiasm for travel writing among the reading public. Works included in this series range from first-hand descriptions of previously unrecorded places, to literary accounts of the strange habits of foreigners, to examples of the burgeoning numbers of guidebooks produced to satisfy the needs of a new kind of traveller - the tourist.

Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia During the Years 1520-1527

The publications of the Hakluyt Society (founded in 1846) made available edited (and sometimes translated) early accounts of exploration. The first series, which ran from 1847 to 1899, consists of 100 books containing published or previously unpublished works by authors from Christopher Columbus to Sir Francis Drake, and covering voyages to the New World, to China and Japan, to Russia and to Africa and India. This volume contains an English translation of a description of Ethiopia written by Francesco Alvarez (c.1465–c.1540) during the six years he spent as a missionary with the Portuguese embassy to the Emperor of Ethiopia. Alvarez describes Orthodox Christian monasteries and churches, compares the Orthodox and Catholic rites, and provides the first known descriptions of the ancient city of Axum in this, the earliest surviving Western description of Ethiopia, first published in English in 1881.
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NARRATIVE
OF THE
PORTUGUESE EMBASSY
TO
ABYSSINIA
DURING THE YEARS 1520-1527.

BY
FATHER FRANCISCO ALVAREZ.

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE,
AND EDITED,
With Notes and an Introduction,

BY
LORD STANLEY OF ALDERLEY.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR THE HAKLUYT SOCIETY.
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INTRODUCTION.

The present work on Abyssinia is the earliest extant; for though Pedro de Covilham, the explorer of King John II, who was despatched from Portugal in May 1487, reached Abyssinia more than thirty years before our author, he does not appear to have left any written memorial of his long residence in that country.

This work of Francisco Alvarez has been translated from the original edition printed in black letter by Luis Rodriguez, bookseller of the King, on the 22nd October 1540, the British Museum Catalogue supposes at Coimbra.

The narrative of Alvarez has been translated into several languages, but most of these translations are considerably abridged. The following are a list of the translations:—

"Viaggio fatta nella Ethiopia, Obedienza data à Papa Clemente Settimo in nome del Prete Gianni." Primo Volume delle navigazione. 1550. Fol.

"Viaggio nella Ethiopia, Ramusio." 1 vol. 1554.

"Description de l'Ethiopie." 1556. Fol.

"Historia de las cosas de Etiopia." Traduzida de Portugues en Castillano, por Thomas de Padilla. Anvers: Juan Steelsio, 1557. 8vo.

"Description de l'Ethiopie." Translated by J. Bellere, from the Italian version of Ramusio. Anvers: C. Plantin, 1558. 8vo.
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"Die Reiss zu dess Christlichen Königs in hohen Ethiopien." 1576. Fol.

"Historia de las cosas de Ethiopia," traduzida por M. de Selves. Toledo, 1588. 8vo.

"The Voyage of Sir Francis Alvarez." Purchas, his Pilgrims, Part II. 1625.

Francisco Alvarez relates in this volume how much he desired, on his return to Portugal, to be sent on a mission to Rome, to present the Prester John's letters to the Pope, and it appears from the Portuguese *Biographical Dictionary* of Innocencio da Silva, that he succeeded in going to Rome, and afterwards returned to Lisbon.

Figaniere, and José Carlos Pinto de Souza say, in their Portuguese *Bibliographies*, that Alvarez was a native of Coimbra.

The utility and good effect of this Portuguese mission to Abyssinia suffered very much by the dissensions and quarrels which arose between Don Rodrigo de Lima, the Ambassador, and Don Jorge d'Abreu, the Secretary of Embassy, quarrels which, as usual in such cases, caused disunion amongst the whole staff of the Embassy. Father Alvarez acted a most useful part as peace-maker on all occasions; but he is very reticent, and has avoided saying upon which side the blame for these quarrels should be laid. It appears from the narrative that the Ambassador was very selfish, and thought too much of
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his personal interests; his conduct appears all the more blameable, from the account of the very different conduct of Hector da Silveira, who brought away the mission from Africa; but Jorge d’Abreu was very quarrelsome, and carried his quarrels further than can be excused, even by the fact that he could not refer his complaints home to his Government. The conduct of the Ambassador must, however, have been even worse than appears from the narrative, or the Abyssinians would hardly have supported Jorge d’Abreu as much as they did.

The reader is invited to compare the description of the entrance to the mountain in which the Abyssinian Princes were confined at the time of our author’s visit, at pp. 140-144, and the motives for this confinement, with this opening passage of Ras-selas, describing the Happy Valley.

“The place which the wisdom or policy of antiquity had destined for the residence of the Abyssinian Princes was a spacious valley in the kingdom of Amhara, surrounded on every side by mountains, of which the summits overhang the middle part. The only passage by which it could be entered, was a cavern that passed under a rock, of which it has long been disputed whether it was the work of nature, or of human industry. The outlet of the cavern was concealed by a thick wood, and the mouth which opened into the valley was closed with gates of iron. . . . . .

“This lake discharged its superfluities by a stream, which entered a dark cleft of the mountain on the
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northern side, and fell with dreadful noise from precipice to precipice, till it was heard no more.”

These descriptions agree sufficiently to leave no doubt that Johnson borrowed the idea of Rasselas from actual descriptions of Abyssinia, and from the translation of Alvarez in Purchas’s Pilgrimes, when he wrote that work in 1759; but the matter is proved beyond doubt, by the fact that Johnson’s first literary work was a translation from the French of Lobo’s Voyage to Abyssinia. It was published in 1735, by Bettesworth and Hicks, of Paternoster Row, and for this task Johnson received only five guineas, which he was in want of for the funeral expenses of his mother.

Therefore, whatever frivolous persons in society may have done on insufficient information, Mr. Justin McCarthy, in his History of our Own Times, should have avoided the inaccuracy of writing: “He (Lord Beaconsfield) wound up by proclaiming that ‘the standard of St. George was hoisted upon the mountains of Rasselas’. All England smiled at the mountains of Rasselas. The idea that Johnson actually had in his mind the very Abyssinia of geography and of history, when he described his Happy Valley, was in itself trying to gravity.”

Mr. McCarthy goes on to say that: “When the expedition to Abyssinia is mentioned in any company, a smile steals over some faces, and more than one voice is heard to murmur an allusion to the mountains of Rasselas”.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Justin McCarthy should
not have fallen in with those Englishmen who sighed over the excuse for the expedition to Abyssinia, that “it would keep the Bombay army in wind”, or who reprobated the conduct of Lord Napier of Magdala to King Theodore, after having accepted from him a present of cows. But accurate ideas of political morality are not to be expected from an advocate of the most extreme proposals of the Irish Land League.¹

The reader will find many descriptions of Abyssinian Ritual, and interesting discussions between the Abyssinians and Father Alvarez, who always showed much tact in these arguments.

It appears from this book, that the population of Abyssinia was far larger at that time than at the present; and that the contact of Europeans with the Abyssinians has not been to the advantage of the latter.

An interesting part of the narrative of Alvarez is the description of the churches cut out of the rock; he is very enthusiastic over the beauty of these structures. The style of Alvarez is never very clear; and there was much difficulty in translating this portion of his book, owing to the number of architectural terms, some of which are almost obsolete. No modern traveller has described these churches. Mr. Markham was within a short distance of them, but was unable to visit them.

¹ See the *St. James’s Gazette*. Criticism of Mr. Justin McCarthy’s language, October 29th, published since the above was written.
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M. Antoine d’Abbadie visited them, but he has not yet written any account of his long residence in Ethiopia, having been occupied with the publication of his very copious astronomical observations, and being now engaged in printing a dictionary of the Ethiopic language.

M. d’Abbadie is anxious that the work on Ethiopia of the Jesuit Almeida, a MS. of which is in the British Museum, should be translated and published, as he considers it to be the most exact account of that country. I am indebted to M. d’Abbadie for several explanations of Ethiopic words and names which have been given in the notes: many of these were too much disfigured to be recognisable.

On one occasion, the Portuguese performed before Prester John a representation of the Adoration of the Magi, or an Epiphany miracle play. This would probably be similar to one that was found in a thirteenth century Service Book of Strasbourg, and which was published by Mr. Walter Birch in the tenth volume of the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature.

The Abyssinian envoy, Mattheus, who went to Portugal and returned to his country with the Portuguese Embassy, suffered much on his way to Portugal, and also on his return, by reason of the doubts cast upon the authenticity of his mission. What happened to him in India on his way to Portugal, is mentioned at length in Mr. Birch’s translation of the Commentaries of Albuquerque, vol. iii, p. 250. The truth appears to be that he was sent by Queen Helena, the queen-mother.
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In several cases, the dates given by Alvarez of the days of the week and the days of the month do not agree, but as these dates refer to the departure from some village, and not to any historical event, I have not thought it worth while to verify and correct these discrepancies.

Mr. Clements Markham has compiled a map of Abyssinia for this volume, extending from Massowah to Shoà.

Some years ago a rather savage criticism of the publications of the Hakluyt Society complained of the excessive length of their Introductions. This one is much shorter than it should have been, not in deference to the critic, but because the researches necessary for doing justice to the work of Alvarez have been interfered with and prevented by other less agreeable occupations; but the delivery of this volume could not be delayed any longer, and the members of the Society are entreated to excuse its brevity.

June 29th, 1881.
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ERRATA AND NOTES.

Page 36, line 22, for "Rodrigo", read "Rodrigo".

84 note, "mancal". "Baton ferré des deux bouts".—Roquette's Dict.

151, line 18, for "sleep", read "sleep".

178, line 28, "a crucifix painted on it", or perhaps, "a painted crucifix on it".


228, line 25, for "Bruncaliam", read "Brancaliam".

241. Col. Meadows Taylor describes a similar miracle play represented at Aurungabad by the Portuguese monks.—Story of my Life, p. 39.

295, line 2, for "pesons", read "persons".

324, last line, for "little", read "little".

325, "cap. cxvii", read "cxviii".

344, line 38, "Cosme, Damian", or the church of Saints Cosmo and Damian, martyrs united in the Calendar under 27th September.

408, note, "Tala". This is the Tau-cross or T-shaped crutch emblem of St. Anthony, so called from the name of the letter in the Greek alphabet.