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GEORGE BORROW IN
EAST ANGLIA

William Dutt
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William A. Dutt

George Borrow in East Anglia

“Apart from Borrow’s undoubted genius as a writer, the subject-matter of his writings has an interest that will not wane, but will go on growing. The more the features of our ‘Beautiful England,’ to use his own phrase, are changed by the multitudinous effects of the railway system, the more attraction will readers find in books which depict her before her beauty was marred—books which picture her in those antediluvian days when there was such a thing as space in the island—when in England there was a sense of distance, that sense without which there can be no romance—when the stage-coach was in its glory, when the only magician that could convey man and his belongings at any rate of speed beyond man’s own walking rate was the horse—the beloved horse whose praises Borrow loved to sing, and whose ideal was reached in the mighty ‘Shales’—when the great high roads were alive, not merely with the bustle of business, but with real adventure for the traveller—days and scenes which Borrow, better than any one else, could paint.”

Theodore Watts.

CHAPTER I: EAST ANGLIA

It is a trite saying, the truth of which is so universally admitted that it is hardly worth repeating, that a man's memory, above all things, retains most vividly recollections of the scenes amidst which he passed his early days. Amidst the loneliness of the African veldt or American prairie solitudes, the West-countryman dreams of Devon's grassy tors and honeysuckle lanes, and Cornish headlands, fretted by the foaming waves of the grey Atlantic; in teeming cities, where the pulse of life beats loud and strong, the Scotsman ever cherishes sweet, sad thoughts of the braes and burns about his Highland home; between the close-packed roofs of a London alley, the Italian immigrant sees the sunny skies and deep blue seas of his native land, the German pictures to himself the loveliness of the legend-haunted Rhineland, and the Scandinavian, closing his eyes and ears to the squalor and misery, wonders whether the sea-birds still circle above the stone-built cottage in the Nordland cleft, and cry weirdly from the darkness as they sweep landward in the night. Many a wanderer, whatever else he may let go, holds in his heart the hope that one day he may go back to the place where his boyhood's days were spent, even though it be but to dwell alone amidst the phantoms of long dead dreams and long lost loves.

East Anglia may well be compared to a sad-faced mother, who sees her children, whom she would fain keep with her, one by

one go out into the wide world to seek those things that cannot be found in her humble home. For years the youths of Eastern England have had to leave the hamlet hall, the village rectory, the marshland farmstead, and the cottage home, and wander far and wide to gain their daily bread. Toil as they might, farm and field could give them little for their labour, the mother-country's breast was dry. And yet they loved her – loved her dearly. Deeply and firmly rooted in his heart is the love of the East Anglian for East Anglia. The outside world has but recently discovered the charm of the Broadland: by the dweller there it has been felt since the day when he first gazed with seeing eyes across its dreamy, silent solitudes. The secrets of the marshland wastes have been whispered in his ears by the wind in the willows, and have been sung to him by the sighing sedge. He knows the bird voices of reed rond and hover, and has read the lesson of the day's venture in the brightening sunrise and sunset glow. Amidst scenes that have little changed since the Iceni hid in the marshland-bordering woods, and crept out in their coracles on the rush-fringed meres, he is at home with Nature, and becomes her friend, her lover. She holds back no secret from him if he wills that he should learn it; she charms him with her many moods. Her laughter is the sunlight, and ere it has died away she has hidden coyly in a veil of mist; now she is tearful with the raindrops falling on her changeful face, but the light comes back with the silvery gleaming of her winding rivers. When her lover leaves her, and wanders off to wooings far away, she reproaches him by her

silence; and when he has time to think, he remembers with regret and longing the restful loveliness that was once about him like a mantle of peace.

Flowering meads, wide-reaching marshland solitudes, lonely heaths and sandhills sloping downward to the sea; wildfowl-haunted shores and flats, rivers and lagoons through which the wherries glide, the calling of the herdsman and the sighing of the sea-wind through bracken, gorse, and fir ridge – these are East Anglia, and, like voices heard in childhood, they are with her children wherever they may wander, until all earthly voices are for ever lost in silence.

No one felt the charm of peaceful Eastern England more fully and deeply than did George Borrow. An East Anglian born, he was nurtured within the borders of Norfolk during many of the most impressionable years of his life, and when world-worn and weary, he sought rest from his wanderings, he came back to East Anglia to die. During his latter days, he became rather inaccessible; but an East Englishman always had a better chance of successfully approaching him than any one not so fortunate as to have been born within the compass of East Anglia. Mr. Theodore Watts discovered this when Borrow and he were the guests of Dr. Hake at Roehampton.

“When I went on to tell him,” writes Mr. Watts, “that I once used to drive a genuine Shales mare, a descendant of that same famous Norfolk trotter who could trot fabulous miles an hour, to whom he, with the Norfolk farmers, raised his hat in reverence

at the Norwich horse fair; and when I promised to show him a portrait of this same East Anglian mare with myself behind her in a dogcart – an East Anglian dogcart; when I praised the stinging saltness of the sea-water of Yarmouth, Lowestoft, and Cromer, the quality of which makes it the best, the most delightful of all sea-water to swim in; when I told him that the only English river in which you could see reflected the rainbow he loved was ‘the glassy Ouse’ of East Anglia, and the only place in England where you could see it reflected in the wet sand was the Norfolk coast; and when I told him a good many things showing that I was in very truth not only an Englishman but an East Englishman, my conquest of the ‘walking lord of gipsy lore’ was complete, and from that moment we became friends.”

“It is on sand alone,” said Borrow, “that the sea strikes its true music – Norfolk sand.”

“The best of the sea’s lutes,” chimed in the artful Watts, “is made by the sands of Cromer.”

CHAPTER II: EARLY DAYS

The eighteenth century had almost run its course when the exigencies of England's conflict with the French brought Thomas Borrow, a stalwart Cornishman, into East Anglia, on recruiting service. For several years the worthy West-countryman had served his king in the rank and file of the British army before he was appointed serjeant-major of the newly raised body of West Norfolk Militia. The headquarters of this regiment was East Dereham, a pleasant little country town situated about sixteen miles from the Norfolk capital.

Thomas Borrow came of a good Cornish family, and explanation of his having attained nothing better than non-commissioned rank is to be found in the fact that he preferred to enter the army as a private soldier – some say that he ran away from home in order to enlist. That his duties as a serjeant-major were performed in a creditable and satisfactory manner we are justified in believing, knowing that in 1798 he was raised to the position of captain and adjutant of the regiment.

While in Dereham, Serjeant-major Borrow made the acquaintance of Ann Parfremont, the daughter of a small farmer of French Huguenot extraction, living at Dumpling Green, an open neighbourhood in the outskirts of the town. This acquaintance ripened into a mutual attachment, and on Borrow receiving promotion the two were united in marriage. Two

children were born to them; the younger of whom, George Henry Borrow, was born on July 5th, 1803.

The wandering instinct that George afterwards developed may well have been the natural outcome of the roving life of his early years. Before he was many months old, his parents, obedient to the dictates of military command, had moved from Dereham to Canterbury. The year 1809, however, saw them back again in the little Norfolk town with which Borrow's earliest recollections were associated.

East Dereham is a town of Anglo-Saxon foundation, and strange legends and traditions are interwoven with its history. To-day it is chiefly known for the fact that the bones of the poet Cowper rest beneath the chancel of its ancient church. To this church of St. Nicholas, George was taken by his parents every Sunday. Writing in after years, he says, "Twice every Sunday I was regularly taken to the church, where, from a corner of the large spacious pew, lined with black leather, I would fix my eyes on the dignified High-church rector, and the dignified High-church clerk, and watch the movement of their lips, from which, as they read their respective portions of the venerable Liturgy, would roll many a portentous word descriptive of the wondrous works of the Most High."

The vicar of Dereham at this time was the Rev. Charles Hyde Wollaston. The "dignified High-church clerk" was George Philo (spelt Philoh in "Lavengro"), an old soldier, retired on a pension.

The Borrowes remained in Dereham only a few months, but

their stay in the place was ever after a memorable one in George's mind, for the occurrence of a great event. A young lady, a friend of the family, presented him with a copy of "Robinson Crusoe." This book first aroused in him a desire for knowledge. For hours together he sat poring over its pages, until, "under a shoulder-of-mutton sail, I found myself cantering before a steady breeze over an ocean of enchantment, so well pleased with my voyage that I cared not how long it might be ere it reached its termination."

After settling down for a time at Norman Cross in Huntingdonshire and in Edinburgh, Captain Borrow retired into private life; but not for long. Elba failed to hold the fiery Corsican, Napoleon again burst upon the battlefield of Europe, the demon of war and ravage was again abroad. Borrow's corps was levied anew, and his eldest son, John, became one of its officers. Before the regiment saw service, however, the escaped lion was again caged. But it was not disbanded, and, being in a thoroughly efficient state, was ordered to Ireland, where local trouble was feared. The autumn of 1815 saw the Borrowes sail from Harwich. After a voyage of eight days, during which a terrific storm was encountered and the transports nearly foundered, the military force of eight hundred men was landed on the Irish coast. After a lengthy stay at Clonmel, where, as in Edinburgh, George was sent to school, the corps moved their quarters to Templemore.

During the following year, Captain Borrow returned to Norfolk, and settled down with his family in a small house

which is still standing in Willow Lane, Norwich. George was at once entered as a pupil at King Edward's Grammar School, then conducted by Dr. Valpy, and remained a scholar there till 1818, when he attained his fifteenth year. As a schoolboy he appears to have been an apter pupil of Defoe than of the reverend headmaster of the Norwich academy. Dr. James Martineau, who was one of his schoolfellows, has related how Borrow once persuaded several of his companions to rob their father's tills, and run away to join the smugglers of the East Anglian coast. For this escapade he was awarded due punishment, which he received hoisted on the back of the future celebrated Unitarian divine. Miss Frances Cobbe, who knew both Borrow and Dr. Martineau in after years, says in her Autobiography, "The early connection between the two old men as I knew them was irresistibly comic to my mind. When I asked Mr. Borrow once to come and meet some friends at our house, he accepted our invitation as usual, but, on finding that Dr. Martineau was to be of the party, hastily withdrew his acceptance on a transparent excuse, nor did he ever after attend our little assemblies without first ascertaining that Dr. Martineau would not be present."

On another occasion, George – probably in emulation of the East Anglian Icenii – dyed his face with walnut juice, causing Dr. Valpy to inquire whether he was "suffering from jaundice, or if it was only dirt." Dr. Jessop, who was afterwards headmaster of the school, says that there was a tradition that Borrow was indolent and even stupid. There is little doubt that he was a

dreamy youth, much given to introspective thought and wild imaginings; but, in spite of these drawbacks in the dominie's eyes, he was a very human boy, fond of outdoor life and sports. Some of his pursuits, however – such as his liking for philological studies, and for the company of gipsies and horsey men generally – might well trouble his father, who was a steady-going old gentleman of strictly conventional methods and ideas. George stood in considerable awe of him, and always felt ill at ease in his presence. No doubt the old soldier frequently remonstrated with him for his indulgence in idle pleasures and lax ideas of duty. As a lad, he probably found it hard to justify himself in his father's eyes, but there is a passage in "Lavengro," written five-and-twenty years later, which clearly expresses his views:

"I have heard talk of the pleasures of idleness, yet it is my own firm belief that no one ever yet took pleasure in it. Mere idleness is the most disagreeable state of existence, and both mind and body are continually making efforts to escape from it. It has been said that idleness is the parent of mischief, which is very true; but mischief itself is merely an attempt to escape from the dreary vacuum of idleness. There are many tasks and occupations which a man is unwilling to perform, but let no one think that he is therefore in love with idleness; he turns to something which is more agreeable to his inclination, and doubtless more suited to his nature, but he is not in love with idleness. A boy may play the truant from school because he dislikes his books and study; but, depend upon it, he intends doing something the while – to

go fishing, or perhaps to take a walk; and who knows but that from such excursions both his mind and body may derive more benefit than from books and school?"

Contemporary with Borrow at Norwich Grammar School were several lads whose names were afterwards written in large and shining letters on the scroll of fame. Amongst these were James Brooke, the Rajah of Sarawak, Sir Archdale Wilson, and, as has already been said, Dr. James Martineau. The old city has always borne itself with dignity during the passage of events that have gone to make up its history, as though conscious of its ability to send forth into the world sons who would do honour to her record and old foundations and traditions. From that old school they have gone out into every walk of life, carrying with them over land and sea, into court and pulpit, to bench and bar, hallowed memories of days spent within its walls. Not ten years before Borrow's name was entered on its roll, its most brilliant star had set at Trafalgar, where Nelson found amidst the hailing death that poured upon the decks of the battered *Victory* the passport to immortal fame and glory.

CHAPTER III: THE LAWYER'S CLERK

When, at the end of his fifteenth year, George Borrow completed his term of study at the Norwich Grammar School, his parents had considerable difficulty in determining upon a profession for their erratic son. In the solution of this problem he, himself, could help them but little towards a satisfactory conclusion. His strange disposition and tastes were a source of continual astonishment and mystification to the old people. What, they asked themselves, could be done with a lad whose only decided bent was in the direction of philological studies, who at an early age had attained a knowledge of Erse, and whose great pleasure it was to converse in Romany with the gipsies whom he met at the fair-ground on Norwich Castle Hill? His father was anxious that he should enter the Church; but George's unsettled disposition was an effectual bar against his taking such a step, for he would never have been able to apply himself with sufficient attention to the necessary routine course of college study.

In the midst of the warm controversy that the question excited he fell ill, and firmly believed that he was going to die. His near approach to dissolution found him quite resigned. A listless willingness to let life go, grew upon him during the dreary days

of helpless inactivity. "Death," he said, "appeared to him little else than a pleasant sleep, and he wished for sleep." But a long life was before him, and, after spending weeks upon his bed, his strength came back to him, and with it the still unsolved problem of a suitable vocation. It was at last decided that he should enter upon a legal career.

There is little doubt that the legal profession was one for which Borrow was the least adapted, and of this he was well aware. When, however, in 1819, the time arrived for him to be articled to Messrs. Simpson and Rackham of Tuck's Court, St. Giles, he apparently offered no objection, and his recollections of the years when he was tied to a lawyer's desk were always pleasant to him in after-life.

But these pleasant recollections had little to do with the duties of his calling – they arose rather from the fact that his work was easy, and so intermittent as to give him ample opportunity for indulging in his day-dreams. Who can doubt the personal basis of that passage in "Lavengro" in which he says: "Yes, very pleasant times were those, when within the womb of a lofty desk, behind which I sat for some hours every day, transcribing (when I imagined eyes were upon me) documents of every description in every possible hand. Blackstone kept company with Ab Gwilym – the polished English lawyer of the last century, who wrote long and prosy chapters on the rights of things – with a certain wild Welshman, who some four hundred years before that time indited immortal cowydds or odes to the wives of Cambrian

chieftains – more particularly to one Morfydd, the wife of a certain hunch-backed dignitary called by the poet facetiously Bwa Bach – generally terminating with the modest request of a little private parlance beneath the greenwood bough, with no other witness than the eos, or nightingale; a request which, if the poet may be believed, rather a doubtful point, was seldom, very seldom, denied. And by what strange chance had Gwilym and Blackstone, two personages so exceedingly different, been thus brought together? From what the reader already knows of me, he may be quite prepared to find me reading the former; but what could have induced me to take up Blackstone, or rather law?”

Yes, there was little in Borrow’s nature that was in common with that of the followers of the legal profession. What food for his wild imagination could he find in the prosy records and dry-as-dust documents of a lawyer’s office? They contained words that to him, as to many of his master’s clients, were without meaning: his thoughts wandered beyond their mazy entanglements into a realm where the law that restrained was that of Nature alone, and whose only order was planned by the spirit that sent forth shadows and dreams. He had been too much of a rover, had seen too many strange sights in his young life, to be able to satisfy his cravings for knowledge in musty law tomes and dusty deeds. His curiosity had been aroused by many things he had seen in his early travels, he had had glimpses into so many wide fields of interest that led his mind astray. But none of these seemed to the steady-going old Militia captain to show

a practical opening for his second son, whom, therefore, we find copying legal documents in a “strange old house occupying one side of a long and narrow court,” instead of going a-viking with the Norseman or roving with the wild Welsh bard.

Borrow has left us a striking picture of the head of the firm of Simpson and Rackham; a picture drawn with that wealth of detail and uncompromising truthfulness which would have made the worthy gentleman tremble had he known at the time what a keen observer he was receiving beneath his roof. “A more respectable-looking individual was never seen,” writes his erstwhile pupil; “he really looked what he was, a gentleman of the law – there was nothing of the pettifogger about him: somewhat under middle size, and somewhat rotund in person, he was always dressed in a full suit of black, never worn long enough to become threadbare. His face was rubicund, and not without keenness; but the most remarkable thing about him was his head, which was bald, and shone like polished ivory, nothing more white, smooth and lustrous. Some people have said that he wore false calves, probably because his black silk stockings never exhibited a wrinkle; they might as well have said that he waddled because his shoes creaked, for these last, which were always without a speck, and polished as his crown, though of a different hue, did creak, as he walked rather slowly. I cannot say that I ever saw him walk fast.”

And then follows a little glimpse into the provincial life of the old Norfolk capital that shows how little change there has been in

the aims and habits of a certain portion of the middle class since the first quarter of the century. "He had a handsome practice, and might have died a very rich man, much richer than he did, had he not been in the habit of giving rather expensive dinners to certain great people, who gave him nothing in return, except their company."

This worthy old gentleman must have been sorely puzzled as to what he should make of the tall, spare, serious-looking lad who was placed under his charge. He confessed to the old captain that the latter's son was "a very extraordinary youth, a most remarkable youth, indeed;" and we can well believe him. On one occasion, Borrow showed a one-eyed beggar into his master's private room, and installed him in an armchair "like a justice of the peace." At another time, when invited to Mr. Simpson's house, he electrified a learned archdeacon and the company generally by maintaining that his favourite Ab Gwilym was a better poet than Ovid, and that many of the classic writers were greatly over-valued. Borrow often distinguished himself later on by his blunt way of expressing his opinions, and the habit seems to have grown upon him early in life.

A sense of duty towards those who were responsible for his upbringing, does not seem to have been a strong point with George Borrow. He disliked the profession to which he was apprenticed, and it is evident that his mind was as absent from his duties as was his heart. He was always dreaming of sagas and sea-rovers, battles and bards. Shut up in his dull and dusty desk,

he would

“catch in sudden gleams
The sheen of the far-surrounding seas,
And islands that were the Hesperides
Of all (his) boyish dreams.”

No one will deny that “the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts,” for have we not all thought such thoughts, and dreamt our dreams? But they are not as a rule conducive to the attainment of a mastery of the details and subtleties of law.

One day an old countryman from the coast brought George a book of Danish ballads, left at his coast-line cottage by a crew of shipwrecked Danes. Once possessed of this work, he could not rest satisfied until he had mastered the Danish language in order that he might unearth its historical and legendary treasures. “The Danes, the Danes!” he exclaims to himself, as he holds the priceless volume in his hands. “And was I at last to become acquainted, and in so singular a manner, with the speech of a people which had, as far back as I could remember, exercised the strongest influence over my imagination. For the book was a book of ballads, about the deeds of knights and champions, and men of huge stature; ballads which from time immemorial had been sung in the North, and which some two centuries before the time of which I am speaking, had been collected by one Anders Vedel, who lived with a certain Tycho Brahe, and assisted him in making observations upon the heavenly bodies, at a place called

Uranias Castle on the little island of Hveen, in the Cattegat.”

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