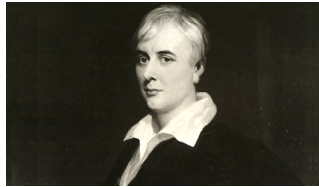


George Borrow in Portugal

By Ian Robertson

[This article – only slightly edited – was originally a paper delivered at the George Borrow Conference in Wensum Lodge, Norwich, in July 1991, and subsequently published in the *Proceedings of the 1991 George Borrow Conference*, ed. G. Fraser, Toronto 1992, pp. 9-21.]

[Ian Robertson is the author of *Los Curiosos Impertinentes*, a study in Spanish of English travellers in Spain between 1760 and 1855, in which, naturally, chapters were devoted to George Borrow and to Richard Ford, the subject also of his full-length biography, published in 2004, entitled *Richard Ford, 1796–1858: Hispanophile, Connoisseur and Critic*.¹ In addition, he has edited reprints of Ford's *Gatherings from Spain*, and the first (1845) edition of his *Handbook for Travellers in Spain*. He has also written extensively on aspects of the Peninsular War. After residence for almost two decades in Pedraza de la Sierra, near Segovia, he settled in France in 1990.]



In his letter to George Borrow dated 26 October 1835 the Revd. Andrew Brandram wrote that the Bible Society had ‘passed a resolution that you should go to Portugal; but when it came for confirmation my heart misgave me. I had in imagination set you down at Oporto, had inquired what you would do, and the more I turned it in mind the less did it appear that the door was sufficiently open to warrant the step, and – I suggested the suspension of the Resolution’. He then went on to ask what Borrow thought. By return Borrow replied from Norwich, stating ‘I wish it to be clearly understood that I am perfectly willing to undertake the expedition, nay, to extend it into Spain, to visit the town and country, to discourse with the people, especially those connected with institutions for infantine education, and to learn what ways and opportunities present themselves for conveying the Gospel into those benighted countries.’ Thus reassured, Brandram dithered no longer.

On the 2nd of November the Official Minutes of the Society noted that it was ‘Resolved that Mr George Borrow be requested to proceed forthwith to Lisbon and Oporto for the purpose of visiting the Society’s correspondents there, and of making further enquiries respecting the means and channel which may offer for promoting the circulation of the Holy Scriptures in Portugal.’ Two days later Brandram was writing to the Revd. Edward Whiteley, the Bible Society’s correspondent in Oporto, stating in a postscript that ‘Mr. Borrow will direct his attention to Schools, and is authorized to be liberal in giving Testaments’, a different policy from that followed some months later once Borrow had established himself in Spain.

Borrow was no doubt thrilled to receive such marching orders; for although the steppes of Tartary had been his target once his employment in St Petersburg appeared to be drawing to a close, the idea of traversing the wilds of the Alentejo² and the high sierras of Castile certainly appealed to him – and he might also take advantage of the adventure by compiling an account of his experiences in the Peninsula. He had assured Brandram that he ‘knew Portugal’, but almost certainly his knowledge of the country

¹ Graham York at books@gyork.co.uk may still have stock of this title.

² This was the largest Portuguese province, extending south of the Tagus and abutting Spain, and then spelt Alentejo.

would have been at second hand: as he later admitted, in the day-dreams of his boyhood Spain always bore a considerable share, and he took a particular interest in her; and no doubt, in his youth, he had listened, fascinated, to the tales of Peninsular veterans, and may have read some of the numerous military memoirs published during the decades after the war. Who had not heard of the Lines of Torres Vedras, the horrific sieges of Badajoz and Ciudad Rodrigo, and the battles of Talavera, Busaco, Fuentes de Oñoro, Albuera, Salamanca, and Vitoria? And almost ever since the termination of Wellington's victorious campaigns, the Press had been full of reports of troubles in the Peninsula; of the civil war in Portugal between Dom Pedro and the Miguelites, which had only ended in May 1834; while in Spain the Carlist War had only recently flared up at the proclamation of Maria Cristina as Regent in September 1833, and was still being fought out, mainly in the northern provinces.

In the event, Borrow never met Edward Whiteley in person, although he wrote to him from Lisbon to ask whether he had any objection to the Scriptures being sold there at a lower price than he had determined for Oporto. Borrow thought it only right to consult him on the subject, as the Society was under great obligation to Whiteley, and he did not wish to do anything at which he might take umbrage. Whiteley had been Chaplain to the British community in Oporto since 1825, and was to remain so until 1871. He also had a reputation for knowing the north of the country in some detail, although his *Hints to Travellers in Portugal*, published in 1852, is in fact of very slight value.

Borrow had also been given a letter of introduction to Mr John Wilby, the Society's correspondent in Lisbon, before boarding the *London Merchant* steamship on the 6th of November 1835, which dropped anchor near the Torre de Belém before approaching the Caes do Sodré. Here, after having the usual delays and difficulties with the custom-house officers, he disembarked on the 13th. As he commented to Jowett in his first letter from Portugal to the Bible Society – which in fact was not written until the 30th of that month – they had been 'exceedingly dilatory in examining the baggage'.

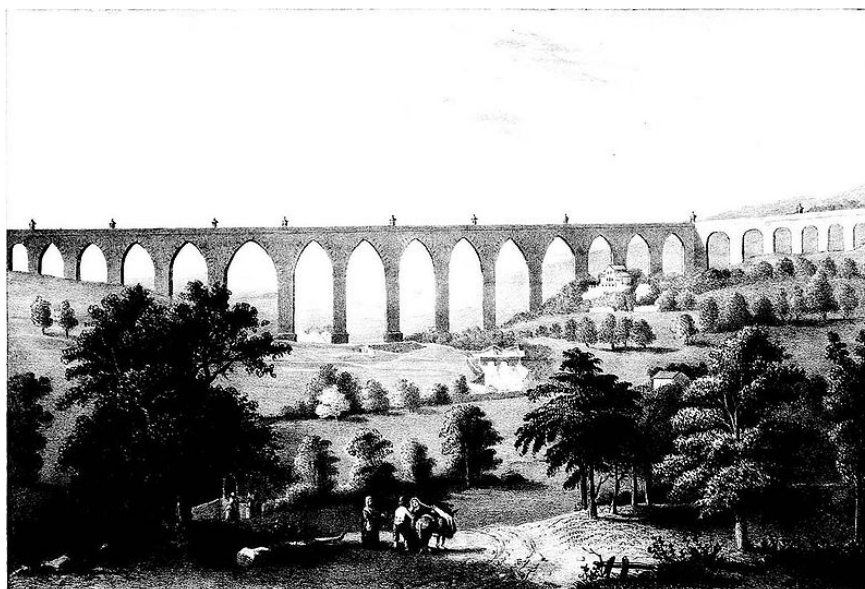


Lisbon in about 1850

Unfortunately Wilby was out of town, so together with a certain Captain John Rowland Heyland of the 35th Regiment of Foot, whose acquaintance he had made aboard ship, Borrow set off to find some temporary accommodation, which turned out to be ‘dark, dirty, and exceedingly expensive’ in his view, from which he was only too glad to sally out and explore the town. Next day he hired a servant, named Antonio, whose company made it easier to perfect his Portuguese, and within a fortnight he claimed that he could converse ‘with considerable fluency’.

Many of the streets of Lisbon he found ‘precipitously steep’, such as the Rua do Alecrim, but he did not find them so dirty as had been represented. He made his way to the convent of the Jerónimos at Belém, which, since the recent expulsion of its monks, had been converted into an orphanage, in which over 500 children were being educated on the Lancastrian system.³ He was horrified to see that ‘vile papistical book called Christian Doctrine’ in the hands of one of the younger boys. He remarked to Jowett that it was his intention to revisit the institution with a view to being better informed ‘as to the moral and religious education of its inmates’.

Borrow also walked out to view the Aguas Livres aqueduct, its immense arches spanning the Alcantara valley immediately north-west of the city, which, with its huge cistern, feeding innumerable fountains, was one of the ‘lions’ of Lisbon.



The Aguas Livres (or ‘Free Waters’) aqueduct; this dominating section, striding over the valley, being completed in 1744.

Not far away stood the umbrageous English cemetery or Cemitério dos Ingleses, in which stood the church of St George. The Protestant burial-ground had been established there in 1717, but it would have been a church built in 1815, later burnt down and replaced by the present edifice of 1885, which Borrow saw. Nearby stood Henry Fielding’s massive stone tomb, which Borrow admitted to have kissed. This had been set up in 1830 to replace the original – ‘on a spot selected by guess,’ according to Mrs Dora Quillinan, Wordsworth’s daughter, who visited the site in 1846. The forty-seven-year-old author of the posthumously published *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* had made the unavailing journey in an attempt to recover his health, but had died only two months after his arrival in 1754. Also buried there was the ‘justly admired and esteemed’ Dr Philip Doddridge, the nonconformist divine and hymn-writer, who had survived only a fortnight after disembarking at Lisbon in 1751.

³ Joseph Lancaster (1778–1838) led a movement, influential in the first three decades of the 19th century to establish schools following what was known as the Monitorial System – also referred to as the ‘Lancasterian’ or ‘Lancastrian’ – by which the more advanced students taught less advanced ones: this enabled a smaller number of adult masters to educate larger numbers of students in basic and often advanced skills, and at less expense.



Henry Fielding's tomb in the Protestant Cemetery, Lisbon

On the 19th of November Borrow and Captain Heyland set out for Sintra, putting up at Isabel de Belém's inn, and next morning ascended the ridge on which stood the Castelo dos Mouros. He does not mention the so-called 'Cork convent', which was also frequently visited by travellers. Among the 'strange and wonderful objects at Cintra' to be seen was the Royal Palace, apparently unfurnished at the time. Borrow 'instantly accosted' a local priest and cross-questioned him as to the state of education among his flock. Although affable and communicative, he had to admit that they were in 'a state of great ignorance', and virtually illiterate. The nearest school was at neighbouring Colares, nearer the coast, which Borrow went to inspect.



A view of the Castelo dos Mouros, Sintra

He alludes also to the ruinous residence 'of the English Millionaire, who there nursed the wayward fancies of a mind as wild, rich, and variegated as the scene around', which stood 'on an abrupt rocky promontory' in a dingle. This would have been the Quinta de Monserrate, which William Beckford had rented late in 1793, during the second of his periods of residence in Portugal (when in the following June he had made the excursion to the monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha), but it had been allowed to become derelict soon after. It was described by Byron in 1809 as 'the most desolate mansion in the most beautiful spot I ever beheld'. Whether Borrow had ever read Beckford's *Italy; with Sketches of Spain and Portugal* or his *Excursion* (published in 1834 and 1835 respectively), I have been unable to ascertain.



The Quinta de Monserrate, Sintra

They continued the expedition by riding over to Mafra, only to find that immense convent also virtually abandoned. However, Borrow felt it his duty to visit the neighbouring school, run by one of the brothers ejected from the convent, who apparently felt humiliated at having to be a schoolmaster. On the steep road back, Borrow was thrown to the ground when the girth of his mount suddenly burst and the saddle slipped. He lay stunned for several minutes, but soon recovered from the fall.



A view of the Convent of Mafra, completed by 1735.

They were back in Lisbon on the 23rd, and Borrow introduced himself to John Wilby, who had returned meanwhile to his home in the Rua dos Restauradores. They were now able to get down to business. Wilby had long been a member of the British Factory in Lisbon, being admitted in 1814, and was at one time its treasurer. The minutes of the General Meeting in November 1822 had recorded thanks for his unremitting attention to the office which he had filled ‘in a manner so highly honorable to himself and satisfactory to the Meeting’.

Wilby had just taken delivery of 400 copies of the Bible and New Testaments, and was about to hand them over to local booksellers had not Borrow suggested that at least half the consignment should be put into the hands of colporteurs. Although Wilby agreed that this might be practical in Lisbon itself, he thought it most inadvisable to send any such people into the countryside, as it was quite likely that they would be assassinated by the fanatical priesthood.

Before long, Borrow decided to make an exploratory excursion into the Alentejo, as being a particularly backward region, and to visit its principal town, Evora. As he reported (in his letter to Brandram of the 15 of December, addressed from Evora), the province ‘has few hills or mountains; the greatest part of it consists of heaths, broken by knolls and gloomy dingles, swamps, and forests of stunted pine infested with banditti, and not a week passes without horrible murders and desperate robberies occurring’; while Evora itself was ‘formerly the seat of an Inquisition far more cruel and baneful than the terrible one in Lisbon’.

On the 6th of December Borrow and his servant Antonio set off, first crossing the wide estuary of the Tagus to Aldea Gallega (now known as Montijo), where he hired mules, which were then loaded with his baggage and the twenty Testaments and two Bibles they had brought with them. Riding east from Aldea Gallega, Borrow's route passed through dull country via Pegões, on approaching which he fell in with a party, likewise travelling to Evora. Among them, providentially, was Dom Geronimo Azevedo, secretary to its Governor, who spoke 'the purest English' Borrow had ever heard pronounced by a foreigner. Together they rode on to Vendas Novas, where Borrow 'passed the night with great comfort in a clean bed, remote from all those noises in general so rife in a Portuguese inn'. They inspected the former royal palace there, with its magnificent kitchens, run up in 1728 by Dom João V in one of his several fits of extravagance, merely to house the bridal cortege of Mariana Victoria, the Spanish infanta who was to marry his son, Dom José.

Montemór-o-Novo (the New Great Hill) was traversed next, which Borrow misheard as Monte Moro, which led him to assume it was once the 'Moorish Hill'. This orthographical error was one of several for which he was later to be pulled up short by Terence Mahon Hughes,⁴ who scoffed at his 'very ludicrous mistake'; and not content with fancying it was a Moorish fortress, Borrow had then run his head against his post in discovering 'Moorish architectural traces at every turn'. Before describing Borrow's exploits in Evora, let me say more about Hughes, who admitted to the Peninsula as being his 'constant residence' from 1841. He was the author of *Revelations of Spain in 1845*, published later that same year, and in 1847 of *An Overland Journey to Lisbon at the Close of 1846*. In the latter, Hughes takes any opportunity offered to cast some slur or other on Borrow, not only for such orthographical or topographical inaccuracies –such as calling the frontier stream between Badajoz and Elvas the Acaja and not the Caya – but also for writing such 'arrant nonsense' about the English having 'forced themselves, by a treaty of commerce to drink the coarse and filthy wines of Portugal, which no other nation cares to taste'.



Ruins of the castle of Montemor-o-novo (courtesy Peter Missler)

According to William Knapp, Borrow reached Evora on the evening of the 8th of December. Here he put up at an *estalagem* in the Largo de São Francisco (between the southern wall of the town and the central Praça do Giraldo), which his muleteer informed him was 'the best hostelry in town'. It was kept by an aged Gypsy-like female and her daughter Geronima, a fine blooming girl of about eighteen years of age. 'In the upper storey was a very long room, like a granary, which extended nearly the whole length of the house', Borrow's description, which leads me to think that it might have been the large vaulted building (formerly a Real Celeiro Comun)⁵ which stands opposite the north side of the church of São Francisco; otherwise, the lower building flanking the north-western side of the square.

⁴ His name is sometimes spelt McMahan Hughes.

⁵ It now houses the Museu do Artesonato.

The next day, provided with a letter of introduction (presumably by Wilby) to an enlightened shop-keeper in the market-place, Borrow soon came to an agreement with him to take half his stock of Testaments, which were delivered that same evening: it was a promising start. He then walked out about half a mile from the southern wall of the town, where, some distance beyond the curiously buttressed church of São Blas, stood a stone fountain. Here he remained two hours, 'entering into conversation with every one who halted'. Borrow was to repeat the visit every day. By following this plan, he estimated that during his eight days in Evora he had spoken 'to at least two hundred of the children of Portugal, upon matters relating to their eternal welfare', although apparently 'none of them had seen the Bible, and not more than half a dozen had the slightest knowledge of what the Holy Book consisted.'



Possibly Borrow's stone fountain at Evora (courtesy Peter Missler)

He had emphasised repeatedly to the wide-eyed group of muleteers, water-carriers and local gaffers who gathered there 'that the Pope, whom they revered, was an arch deceiver, and the head minister of Satan here on earth, and that the monks and friars, whose absence they so deplored, and to whom they had been accustomed to confess themselves, were his subordinate agents'; but, in spite of such inflammatory disclosures, because of the 'utter fearlessness' which he displayed, he experienced no insult or ill-treatment from his largely peasant audience. But well may one wonder what these rustics thought of the tall blond foreigner in their midst. Borrow had fervent hopes that the words he uttered sank deep into the hearts of some of his hearers. He had observed 'many of them depart musing and pensive': and – should one add – perhaps baffled?

In *They Went to Portugal*, Rose Macaulay, when describing Borrow's adventures in Evora, suggests that one explanation 'which did not, apparently, occur to him is that very little of what he said was understood. Even his gift of tongues cannot have enabled him, after a few days in Portugal, to talk Portuguese as the Portuguese talk it; he probably pronounced it rather as if it were Spanish'. It had been well enough understood by the shop-keepers, nevertheless.

Borrow reported that he 'occasionally distributed tracts among them', for although they themselves were unable to turn them to much account, he considered that by that means they would fall into the hands of others to whom they might be instruments of regeneration. At other times he 'rode about the neighbourhood for the purpose of circulating tracts'; and, as he explained, 'I dropped a great many in the favourite walks of the people of Evora, as I felt rather dubious of their accepting them had I proffered them with my own hands; whereas if they found them on the ground, I thought that curiosity might induce them to pick them up and examine them'. He also handed round some tracts to a band of Spanish *contrabandistas* who happened to be putting up at his inn. Normally, the Bible Society was not in the business of distributing tracts, only the Scriptures, but it is possible that Wilby had provided him with such additional ammunition, produced by the Religious Tract Society.

On the Friday Borrow went to pay his compliments to Azevedo, his recent acquaintance, and was introduced to the Governor. He was taken to see the Roman temple 'of Diana', which at that time was in a much debased condition, the nearby governor's residence in the former archbishop's palace, and also



The Roman temple 'of Diana', Evora

the fine library, based on that of its late bibliophile incumbent, Manuel do Cenáculo Vilas-Boas,⁶ to which the contents of conventual collections had been added.

Dom Geronimo confided that they were endeavouring to establish a school in the vicinity, and that they had applied to the Government for permission to use for this purpose the empty convent of Nossa Senhora do Espinheiro, which stood some two and a half miles north of the town.⁷ Borrow had then 'urged him in the most pressing manner to use all his influence to cause the knowledge of the Scriptures to be the basis of the education of the pupils in the intended school', adding that of the Testaments which had brought with him, half were at his disposal. Azevedo took over this consignment next day.

It may be of interest to note here that in Madeira the Bible had been distributed to the Lancastrian schools there as early as 1818 by a certain Joseph Phelps, and although a law was passed in 1824 forbidding the possession of books not printed in Portugal, the Bible was exempted from this prohibition. Under Thomas Edwards, a wine merchant in Madeira and also agent for the Bible Society, its distribution continued to flourish until the misplaced zeal of Dr Robert Reid Kalley, a fervent and irascible Calvinist, who had arrived on the island in 1838, was to cause widespread complaint.

The distribution of Testaments to schools might well have more impact than being placed in the hands of the common people, who, in Borrow's experience so far, were indifferent to religion. They appeared to have 'shaken off the old superstition and to feel no inclination to bend their necks to another yoke.' 'Many of them', he asserted, 'have told me that the priests are the veriest knaves in the world, and that they have for many years subsisted by imposing upon them, and that they wished the whole body was destroyed from the face of the earth. I have enquired of many of the lower orders whether they ever confessed themselves, whereupon they laughed in my face.' One day, when in Lisbon, Borrow had asked a muleteer whether he revered a cross which stood over a chapel, and 'he instantly flew into a rage, stamped violently, and spitting on the ground said it was a piece of stone'. "'I believe that there is a God"', he had added, "'but as for the nonsense which the priests tell us I believe no part of it'."

⁶ Abp. Vilas-Boas (1724–1814), son of a blacksmith, was described by young Southey; who met him at Beja (in 1801, where he was then bishop), as 'a little, cheerful, large-eyed man'. He was apparently the only person who bought a book in Beja, so the bookseller complained to Southey, to whom the bishop also hospitably gave 'cheese and incomparable wine' for his journey on. The former archbishop's palace in Evora, where Vilas-Boas had entertained Lord and Lady Holland in July 1809, but which had been plundered in the previous year by Général Loison during the brief French occupation, when heaps of manuscripts were destroyed and gold and silver medals stolen, is now the Museum.

⁷ Recently converted into a luxury hotel!

It would seem likely that on one day Borrow may have ridden out from Evora to the Serra de Ossa, a range of hills some eighteen miles north-east of the town. In the continuation of his *Journal* (dated 10 January 1836, and received by Brandram on the 29th of February) he calls the range the Serra Dorso (sic) – as he had heard it pronounced – although he refers to it, in error, as being to the south-east, and described it as being ‘picturesquely beautiful’, and containing within its recesses ‘wolves and wild boars in numbers’. Strangely, Borrow does not refer to any such expedition in *The Bible in Spain*, only remarking, when approaching Estremoz *en route* to Badajoz, that the range ‘which I had seen from Evora’, came into view.

Borrow also wrote to his friend John Hasfeld (addressed from Evora, dated 24 December), stating:

About six leagues from Evora there is a tall ridge of mountains called the Serra Dorso; my duty called me thither a few days since, and after having transacted what I had to do, I ascended to the highest summit, and sitting down turned my eyes to the far North East, and wept like a child. It is not very pleasant living in Portugal during the Winter for the cold nearly deprives one of one’s senses, and this is particularly the case with foreigners who are not accustomed to the fine rare atmosphere in which any degree of cold is far more sensibly felt than in the countries of the North ... Here are no fires, no stoves for warming the rooms ... all the houses are built with the view to guard the inmates against heat ... I wrap myself up in my Russian pelisse and sit with my feet over an earthen pan of charcoal; but the charcoal makes me sick without half warming me and then I say: How I wish I had never left Russia.

What exactly the ‘duty’ was that called him to the Serra de Ossa, and which he had transacted, is left unsaid.

Both this letter and that addressed to Dr John Bowring, to be referred to later (which was dated 27 December ‘from Evora in the Alemtejo’), are dated at a time when, in fact, Borrow was back in Lisbon. In the former he also describes Lisbon briefly, and it is likely that he started writing it when still at Evora, but added the date just before posting the letter in Lisbon. The draft letter to Bowring was actually composed on the 15th of December, while he was still in Evora, and I can only assume that the reason for not changing the place of dispatch on the fair copy dated the 27th was Borrow’s way of substantiating his not entirely truthful statement therein that ‘For the last six weeks I have been wandering amongst the wilds of the Alemtejo and have introduced myself to its rustics, banditti, etc.’

At dawn on the 17th of December, having hired a chaise, Borrow set out from Evora on his return journey to Lisbon, reached on the 19th or 20th, following the same road as he had taken on the way out.

Although a long extract from Borrow’s *Journal* (dated Badajoz 8 January 1836) and its continuation, dated 10 January, were received safely by Brandram on 15th and 29th February respectively, unfortunately the subsequent letter, describing his return journey from Evora to Lisbon and the long ride to Madrid, is apparently missing from his correspondence in the Bible Society’s Library.

It would appear that the translations into Romany made by Borrow from Chapter XV of the Gospel of St Luke (which he was soon after authorised by the Bible Society to print ‘for distribution among the wandering tribes as a trial of his success in endeavouring to communicate to them a knowledge of the Scriptures’), together with several specimens of Gypsy curses rendered into English, were also received by Brandram on the 15th of February, presumably enclosed with the first extract from the *Journal*.

The next letter to reach London was dated 13th of February, from Madrid, and we have therefore to rely to a great extent on *The Bible in Spain* for a narrative of Borrow’s adventures during these intervening weeks.

He appears to have been glad to get back to Lisbon. As he wrote in a later paragraph of his letter to Hasfeld: ‘What a noble town Lisbon is on its seven hills towering above the Tagus... What glorious convents and churches and what castle-like houses’. He was not so impressed by the appearance of its natives, describing them as ‘with features so plain and disagreeable. Their voices are harsh and screaming, and in no part of Portugal [he wrote this having seen very little of the country] is the language so little musical as at Lisbon; I speak it with tolerable fluency but dislike it, as it is in every respect inferior to the Spanish, which is certainly, as regards sound, the noblest language in creation’. Borrow then goes on to tell Hasfeld that it was his plan to visit Madrid, returning via Granada, Seville

and Cadiz to Portugal, ‘every province of which and every principal town I shall visit’, which would confirm that it was still his intention to concentrate on Portugal, and that his brief tour of parts of Spain was merely exploratory.

Borrow’s last ten days in Lisbon were eventful. One day, no doubt to satisfy his curiosity, Antonio took him to the Colégio dos Inglesinhos,⁸ and there he spent a pleasant hour or two with the rector, who hospitably escorted him all over the ‘rather dilapidated’ building (which still exists), even ascending to the roof, which certainly commanded a noble view over much of the city, and across the Tagus estuary. But, as Borrow insisted, he did not go there ‘in the hope of seeing busts, or books, or fine prospects, – I visited this strange old house to converse with its inmates; for my favourite, I might say my only, study is man’. Whenever Borrow alludes to Catholics, even when in conversation with the benevolent rector, he rather childishly prints asterisks, as though to avoid the word contaminating his pages.

Rather abruptly, we are taken from the English College in the Bairro Alto to the Rua do Ouro and Rua da Prata, rebuilt in the lower town or Baixa since the Great Earthquake of 1755. Here the gold- and silver-smiths formerly plied their trades; and about noon every day, certain strange-looking men might be observed near their seaward end, whose appearance was neither Portuguese nor European. These were the Jews of Lisbon, into the midst of a group of which Borrow introduced himself and pronounced a *beraka*, or blessing’. Welcomed as ‘a powerful rabbi’, and imposing on their mistake (one of his favourite devices, by which he retained anonymity), within a few days he ‘knew all that related to them and their traffic in Lisbon’.

In earlier editions of *The Bible in Spain* this paragraph is followed by others, excised from later editions as likely to give offence, in which Borrow, disillusioned, described them as in fact they were: ‘a vile, infamous rabble, about two hundred in number’, who ‘principally depend for their livelihood on an extensive traffic in stolen goods’. And although it was said that there is honour among thieves, ‘this is certainly not the case with the Jews of Lisbon’.

During his last few days in the capital Borrow must have had several lengthy discussions with Wilby on the best way to further his project. It was all very well to have button-holed two or three individual teachers when feeling the pulse of religious education among their schools, but that alone was not going to get him very far. It is quite possible that his friend Azevedo had convinced him that if he wanted to see anyone influential among the upper echelons of the educational authorities, a formal letter of introduction, and at a high level, was indispensable. Such sensible advice may well have persuaded Borrow, when still in Evora, to compose his draft letter, soliciting Bowring’s help.

It seems strange that, apart from referring Borrow to their correspondents, the Bible Society had not thought to supply him in advance with any such letters of commendation; and it would appear also that Wilby had reservations as to the expediency of making a direct approach to the British Minister, Lord Howard de Walden,⁹ over such a project as Borrow had in mind. Be that as it may. Without delaying further, Borrow posted the letter to his former collaborator Dr John Bowring. Bowring was now Member of Parliament for Kilmarnock; he had authority, and had helped him before. Borrow came straight to the point. I quote the essential part of the letter verbatim, in order to retain its peremptory tone:

I want you to give or procure me letters to the most liberal and influential minds of Portugal. I likewise want a letter from the Foreign Office to Lord De Walden, in a word, I want to make what interest I can towards obtaining the admission of the Gospel of Jesus into the public schools of Portugal which are about to be established. I beg leave to state that this is my plan and not other persons’, as I was merely sent over to Portugal to observe the disposition of the people, therefore I do not wish to be named [sic] as an Agent of the B.S., but as a person who has plans for the mental improvement of the Portuguese; should I receive these letters within the space of six weeks it will be time enough, for before setting up my machine in Portugal I wish to lay the foundation of something similar in Spain. When you send the Portuguese letters direct thus:

⁸ This had been established in 1628 for the education of English seminarists during penal times.

⁹ Charles Ellis, 6th Baron Howard de Walden (1799–1868), Minister in Lisbon from November 1833.

Mr George Borrow,
to [sic] the care of Mr Wilby
Rua Dos Restauradores, Lisbon.

I start for Spain to-morrow [the letter is dated 27 December, and in fact Borrow did not leave until the 1st of January], and I want letters something similar (there is impudence for you) for Madrid, which I should like to have as soon as possible. I do not care at present for an introduction to the Ambassador at Madrid, as I shall not commence operations seriously in Spain until I have disposed of Portugal. I will not apologise for writing to you in this manner, for you know me, but I will tell you one thing, which is that the letter which you procured for me, on my going to St Petersburg, from Lord Palmerston, assisted me wonderfully.

On the 29th of January, writing from Brussels, Bowring sent him the two letters demanded, one for each country, enclosed with a rather cool note.

But by the time he had reached Madrid, Borrow seems to have grown much more confident, and any inhibitions he may have had about approaching a British Minister directly, and without any such letter, appear to have vanished; for when seeking an interview with Mendizábal, the prime minister, he merely ‘waited on’ the Hon. George Villiers,¹⁰ and, ‘with the freedom permitted to a British subject’, sought his advice and assistance. In *The Bible in Spain*, written with hindsight, admittedly, Borrow states that his ‘principal motive for visiting the Spanish capital was the hope of obtaining permission from the government to print the New Testament in the Castilian language, for circulation in Spain.’ Printing, rather than importing and distributing: what had inspired this sudden change in his plan of action?

Borrow set out from Lisbon on New Year’s Day 1836, according to Knapp and Darlow. That he left ‘the greatest part’ of his baggage in Lisbon, perhaps with Wilby, as it was his intention to return there from Málaga, is confirmed in his letter to Mr Jackson at the Bible Society, dated Madrid 10 August 1836. He had also drawn on ‘excellent Mr Wilby’ for seventy-five pounds, twelve of which were to be remitted to Málaga.

For the third time Borrow passed through Vendas Novas, again putting up at the inn kept by José Dias Azido. Later, at Montémor, he climbed up to explore the castle ruins, stooping and looking full in the eye a huge dog that had bounded up to him, which stopped it in its tracks! Its owner, who had served under Wellington, so he told Borrow, escorted him to the buildings of a convent standing within the enceinte. Here, the hospitable nuns could hardly restrain their curiosity, and anxious to obtain a glance at least of their handsome visitor, crowded to the windows, tittering among themselves as Borrow kissed his hand repeatedly to them as he strode away. In spite of Hughes’s observation, Borrow, having seen the ruins at close quarters, realised that they were not of Moorish origin: more likely the fortifications had been run up by the Christians when re-conquering the Peninsula, for the site was a naturally strong one.

Having refreshed himself with the delicious cheesecakes confectioned by his nuns and available in the village, Borrow mounted his mule and rode east, at first along the highway towards Arraiolos, before making a short cut across country. It was off the beaten track near here that Borrow describes an impressive megalithic dolmen or *anta*. The incredulous Hughes, who presumably had remained on the post-road, and did not bother to investigate, had no doubt in his mind that Borrow’s overheated imagination had taken over. But even Hughes was fallible. Borrow’s dolmen certainly exists.¹¹

It was on the following day that he overtook a party of soldiers escorting stores and ammunition, and who, assuming Borrow was a Frenchman, began insulting him. Imprudently, he started to laugh, only to have two bullets whizzing past his ears only seconds later. Putting spurs to his mule, he waded over a nearby stream and galloped well ahead, glad to see Estremoz on its hill in the distance. On a ridge of the wooded Serra de Ossa which he now skirted, rising to the south, he would have seen the castle of have two bullets whizzing past his ears only seconds later. Putting spurs to his mule, he waded over a nearby

¹⁰ The Hon. George Villiers (1800–1870), later the 4th Earl of Clarendon, Minister in Madrid since 1833.

¹¹ There are indeed several dolmens or *antas* in the district, and further south, but exactly which was the one he saw remains uncertain. It is also possible that he visited some while in the vicinity of Evora, but chose to refer to them here.

stream and galloped well ahead, glad to see Estremoz on its hill in the distance. On a ridge of the wooded Serra de Ossa which he now skirted, rising to the south, he would have seen the castle of Evoramonte, which, by a slip of memory, he again refers to as Monte Moro Novo: but such mistakes can be easily made.



One of several dolmens in the vicinity of Evora

Riding into the extensive market-square of Estremoz, Borrow put up at the principal inn – very likely the same at which Joseph Baretti had stayed in 1760, with his straw-bag placed over the chinks in the floor boards; and in which Beckford passed the night in 1787, first taking the precaution of spreading on the floor the Arraiolos carpets he had just acquired. Borrow does not refer to these carpets, which were an important local manufacture, but then it is most unlikely that he would have seen them in any simple *estalagem*. His description of the interior of the inn is very typical of his writing. The cold being far too terrible for him to remain in his room, he descended to ‘a kind of kitchen on one side of the arched passage, which led under the house to the yard and stables. A tremendous withering blast poured through this’. He took his place with difficulty among the noisy crew of peasants and farmers from the neighbourhood, and three or four Spanish smugglers from the frontier, who had gathered round the cork tree blazing beneath a spacious chimney, ‘as a Portuguese or a Spaniard will seldom make way for a stranger, till called upon or pushed aside, but prefers gazing upon him with an expression which seems to say, “I know what you want, but I prefer remaining where I am”’. Before long, a fellow ‘mounted on a fine spirited horse, dashed from the stables ... into the kitchen, where he commenced displaying his horsemanship, by causing the animal to wheel about with the velocity of a mill-stone, to the great danger of everybody in the apartment.’ Later, half intoxicated, he returned and soon got embroiled in an argument with a Spaniard, who drew out his knife, and would have cut open the drunkard’s cheek had not Borrow pulled his arm down just in time – all this recounted in the most graphic Borrowian fashion. The inn appears to have improved by 1846, when Hughes passed that way, for Hughes was supplied with sheets, even if they were damp, which next morning, when his bed was transformed into a table, served as breakfast tablecloths!

Between Estremoz and Elvas stood a ruined hilltop tower, to which Borrow ascended, and where he came across a poor maniac, probably deaf and dumb, who sat ‘gibbering and mowing, and distorting his wild features into various dreadful appearances.’ This description is taken up by carping Hughes, who when quoting it, commented gratuitously that it was strange ‘how madmen always meet others madder than themselves’.

The strongly fortified frontier town of Elvas later came into view, together with its huge aqueduct, which appeared to stalk across the highway. Near the main gate stood José Rosada's hostelry, which, although recommended to him by his host at Vendas Novas, was 'for convenience and accommodation, inferior to a hedge alehouse in England'. Here Borrow came across an ancient female who, although only slightly deaf, was said to be over 110 years of age, and claimed to remember distinctly the great earthquake of Lisbon eighty-one years earlier, when at mass on that All Saints' Day the priest had staggered to the ground, letting the Host fall from his hands.

Next morning Borrow encountered a tradesman named Almeida, who promised to do all in his power to sell any Testaments Borrow might care to leave him, flattered by the fact that his name appeared as the translator – and this would confirm that the translation by Ferreira d'Almeida, first printed in 1712, and used by the Bible Society in their edition of 1809-10, was still in circulation and in Borrow's stock, although both in 1818 and 1821 the Society had chosen to reprint the translation of Antonio Pereira de Figueiredo, published in Lisbon between 1794 and 1819, as being more accurate.

Borrow climbed to the Forte de Lippe,¹² completed in 1792, which surmounted a hill north of the town, but was forbidden entry, foreigners not being allowed to visit the place, and he could hardly pass for a Portuguese. This little incident roused his ire even if he shrugged off the insult – 'one of the beneficial results of protecting a nation, and squandering blood and treasure in its defense'.¹³ But only the previous evening he had crossed verbal swords with a young Portuguese who had shown his resentment of the English, who had only sent a handful of troops to Spain during the struggle then taking place against the Carlists, 'in order that the war might be prolonged, for no other reason than that it was of advantage to them'. There was no arguing with him.



The Forte de Lippe, dominating Elvas

By the 6th of January Borrow had crossed the frontier into Spain, at adjacent Badajoz making his way to the *Fonda de las Tres Naciones*, 30 Calle de la Moraleja: and there, with his Gypsies, we must leave him. But not entirely, for Borrow continued to make reference to Portugal. In his letter of the 13th of February, written to Brandram from Madrid, he asks for further instructions: 'Shall I return to Lisbon and exert all my interest towards the execution of the plan which I communicated first to Mr Wilby, and then to yourself, namely, attempting to induce the Government to adopt the Scriptures in the schools ...?' Brandram had replied that 'Our feeling inclines to a return to Lisbon as the most open door at present'; but Borrow, in response, stated that he 'intended to remain a few weeks longer at Madrid ... for

¹² Forte Nossa Senhora da Graça was also known as 'de Lippe' after its designer, Count William Schaumburg-Lippe-Bückburg (1724–1777), an English-born German, who reorganised the Portuguese army in the 1760s.

¹³ A reference to the fact that Portugal had been the base of Wellington's forces during the greater part of the Peninsular War, when Portuguese troops were also to form a good proportion of the allied army which eventually forced the French from the peninsula in 1814, thus well within living memory.

the present moment is too fraught with interest to allow me to quit it immediately. As far as self is concerned I should rejoice to return instantly to Lisbon, for I am not partial to Madrid, its climate, or anything it can offer, if I except its unequalled gallery of pictures; but I did not come hither to gratify self but as a messenger of the Word.’

Weeks became months. It was not until early October that Borrow was back in London to consult with Brandram as to the field of his future activities. On the 4th of November he sailed for Cadiz. The steamship *Manchester* only just avoided shipwreck off Finisterre, and limped into Lisbon on the 13th. Here Borrow had an opportunity, while it was undergoing repairs, of seeing John Wilby again, who had been ‘doing everything in his power to further the sale of the sacred volume in Portuguese; indeed his zeal and devotedness are quite admirable, and the Society can never appreciate his efforts too highly. But since I was last at Lisbon the distracted state of the country has been a great obstacle to him; people’s minds are so engrossed with politics that they find no time to think of their souls.’ One wonders if they had much time to do so in Spain!

Borrow was twice more in Lisbon, but only very briefly, firstly on the 29th of December 1838, when the steamship *Thames* anchored there for a few hours *en route* to Cadiz, but long enough for him to meet Judah Loeb, a Jew who he was to come across again the following August in Gibraltar. The following March, when writing from Madrid to his friend Mrs Clarke, who was to sail out to Spain that June, Borrow warned her: ‘The ship stops four and twenty hours at Lisbon, but be sure not to go on shore there; it is a very dangerous place.’

The last time Borrow was in Lisbon, four and a half years after he had first set foot in the Peninsula, was on the 5th of April 1840, when the *Royal Adelaide* packet sailed into the Tagus from Cadiz, with Borrow, Mrs Clarke, and her daughter Henrietta aboard. It was on this occasion that took place the curious interview with General Don Luis Fernandez de Córdova,¹⁴ as described on pages 339-42 of the first volume of Knapp’s biography. Sailing next day, the ship touched at Oporto, Vigo, and Falmouth, reaching London on the 16th. George Borrow and Mary Clarke were married at St Peter’s, Cornhill, on the 23rd.



General Don Luis Fernández de Córdova

¹⁴ Luis Fernandez de Córdova (1798–1840), a Liberal general commanding Cristino troops in the Basque Provinces during the Carlist War.

Eight years later, when in Lisbon and describing the condition of the Church in Portugal, particularly in the capital, Terence Mahon Hughes remarked: 'The efforts of Mr Borrow to inculcate the Scriptures here are well remembered, but it does not appear that he has been rewarded with much practical success.' He continued on page 372 of the second volume of his *Overland Journey* by observing that although well-executed versions of distinct portions of the New Testament were exposed for sale in many bookshops, he 'could not ascertain that they were either purchased or read'. Perhaps he was confusing Borrow's exertion with those of the estimable Wilby. Hughes seemed to find it difficult not to show his disapprobation; although several pages earlier he appeared to be willing to 'take leave of Mr Borrow's blunders, surprised that they should have imposed on the world so long, and regretting that one who has so stirring a style should take refuge in bounce and exaggeration, from the honourable task of candid and searching observation'. When travelling between Trujillo and Merida while *en route* to Lisbon, Hughes devoted three pages, 180-82, to describing a band of Gypsies he passed, as though to suggest that the subject was not one that Borrow could claim as his own; nor does he even refer on those pages to Borrow, whose *The Zincali* had appeared six years earlier.

But it is George Borrow's Gypsies which we now remember. It was in their company and that of other under-privileged members of society that he was always more at ease. It was this underworld, with its strange and picaresque characters he was constantly meeting on his wanderings, and so inimitably described, which was Borrow's natural world: and our world would certainly be poorer without them.
