

**TRAVEL AND
TOPOGRAPHY.
EOTHEN**

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Travel and Topography. Eothen by Alexander William Kinglake

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ALEXANDER WILLIAM KINGLAKE

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TRAVEL AND
TOPOGRAPHY

KINGLAKE'S EOTHEN
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY HAROLD SPENDER

BLF
Kinglake

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EOTHEN *by*
ALEXANDER
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INTRODUCTION

WHY is *Eothen* a good book of travel? Why does it stand out in modern literature among the very few supremely good books of the wandering man—Arthur Young's *Travels in France*, Stevenson's *Through the Cevennes*, Borrow's *Bible in Spain*? That leads us to the further question—what makes a good book of travel? How is it that some of the greatest masters have failed here? Why is it we can no longer read, with as great satisfaction, Dickens's *American Notes* or Thackeray's *Kickleburys on the Rhine*? That some books of travel pass out of date with a change in the world, while others remain eternally interesting, immortally young?

These are questions that are not to be answered off-hand. An observant eye, for instance, may be said to be indispensable to a good traveller. A terrestrial inhabitant is passing through new regions of the planet to which he has been born. He sees for the first time and perhaps for the last. The swift impression must be seized as it fleets past him. It must be remembered with precision and recorded with accuracy. The travel-writer, then, it is clear, is a man who must see what he ought to see, and record it in a vivid, arresting way.

But that is, alas! far from being sufficient. Our shelves are crowded with the books of accurate, conscientious observers. There is no class of literature that pours from the region of Paternoster Row in a "broader, statelier stream"—always splendidly illustrated, usually in two capacious volumes, sometimes in three. Now it is an Arctic explorer—

"The first that ever burst
Into that silent sea—"

Now it is a climber, whose survival is the marvel of his

Opportunity Slips 31 Dec 1937

friends—a man who is the harassing, precarious treasure of his shivering family, who might often say—

"We thought him dying when he climbed
And climbing when he died."

Here, surely, we reflect, must be a man with something to say—a man who has braved death in terrible forms, who has gone where neither man nor beast would really love to tread. And we sit down to find ourselves at a Barmecide feast—listening to elaborate stories of mountain lunches, to meticulous records of guides' conversations, to pages of stale, trivial humour carrying the scent of a long-closed smoke-room.

No, it is clear that accuracy will not cover triviality, or industry egoism. Facts must be interpreted as well as observed. Better the books with the romantic touch—far more important the haze of poetry that veils the first-perceived, the sense of wonder that awakes, in savage lands, to the mystery and miracle of the human soul.

Of such stuff is *Eothen*, written in Kinglake's ardent youth, before his bright spirits were clouded with that vast and obscure task which spent so much of his literary life. *Eothen* was written at one of those rare romantic moments in the history of English literature, the moment of Monckton Milnes, Disraeli, and *Young England*. It was the decade of *Sybil* and *Coningsby*, the day of *Chartism* and the *Corn Law Rhymes*, that bright dawn which was not yet clouded with the heavy reality of European war. It was a time of much travel through a world at peace—travel of that simple, stimulating kind that was really possible before railways and modern hotels. In those days you wandered, a human unit responsive to alien peoples, where now you move swathed in an atmosphere of your own creating, like a pet bird in a cage.

Kinglake gathered no information.

"I believe I may truly acknowledge" (he says in his preface) "that from all details of geographical discovery or antiquarian research—from all display of sound learning and religious knowledge—from all historical and scientific illustrations—from all useful statistics—from all political disquisitions—and from all good moral reflections, the volume is thoroughly free."

Here he showed an absolutely sound instinct. A guide-book is an admirable thing, and so is a Blue Book. But a book of travel is different from either. A history is a splendid thing, and so is a study in constitutional law. But, again, a book of travel stands apart from both, distinct in its own species, separate in its own quality. It has an "atmosphere"—to use a much abused word—of its very own. It gives you impressions hidden to the historian—impressions from which the history of the future will be written. If "to see ourselves as others see us" is indeed one of the objects of a philosophic nation, then we should always read what travellers have written of our own country.

Englishmen, for instance, should read what Frenchmen have written of England, not merely because Frenchmen have been—at any rate, until the time of the "*entente cordiale*"—always remarkably open and candid in their observations about England, but also because they are remarkably keen in their observations about any country. There are no better writers of travel than the French, partly because they travel very little, and partly because they bring with them eyes that are very open and unprejudiced. As a record of English social life and customs in the seventies, for instance, there is no English book to be compared to the travel notes of M. Taine, who, with his mind full of English literature and his tongue apt to the English language, visited England at that time.

Kinglake brought the same openness of mind and integrity of judgment to bear on the Eastern world. "Openness of mind and integrity of judgment"—it sounds very simple, but how rare those faculties are! A genius, it has been said, is just a child that has not grown up. The true traveller must have something of the same quality. The kingdom of the earth is really very much like the kingdom of heaven. It can only really be revealed to him who has first become as a little child. The reason why most of us fill our diaries with gibberish when we are travelling abroad is, that we observe foreign nations with occupied eyes and