

Original Letters from India

E.Fay

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Elizabeth Fay was a half-educated woman who followed her lawyer husband Fay to Calcutta India at the end of the 18th century. She wrote long letters home, which were collected and actually published in the early 19th century. Later on she was re-discovered by E.M.Forster, who persuaded Leonard and Virginia Woolf to publish it, while Forster wrote an introduction and supplied supporting end-notes. The letters, although somewhat marred by deficient grammar, make a fine case by their vivid language and significant detail. As a reader more than two hundred years later¹, one is curious of the direct unmediated narrative, looking for fresh news. In fact one would like to put oneself into the situation of her sisters and parents back home, although such an ambition is doomed to fail from the start, the difference in context and experience being too great.

Travel in those days were hazardous indeed and took a lot of time. Thus they were adventures, the like of which the modern mass tourist has no inkling of. In the case of the Fay couple they travelled through France, although France was at war with England at the time. This makes for the first remark. A hundred and fifty years later, this would not have been possible, as wars rather than being diplomatic engagements by other means became total. A private citizen, or any kind of citizen, of an enemy country would not be allowed travel. In the past this was apparently still possible. In Paris Fay has the privilege to watch Marie Antoinette at some function, chatting amiably with a lady of waiting. After France they cross the Alps, a journey fraught with some danger and then go through parts of Italy before setting sail to Egypt on a Swedish vessel. There is Alexandria and then Cairo. Natives are not friendly. Then follows some sightseeing of pyramids, and then a dangerous transverse of the desert by means of an armed caravan, as previous travelers had come to a sorry grief just before on the same stretch. In fact, after having been robbed by bandits, deprived of all their belongings, including their means of transportations, and then reduced to fend for themselves walking by foot and predictably expiring in the effort, save for one lucky Frenchman, who lived to tell the tale. After that the Fays secured passage on a boat, a Danish in fact. One learns that the Danes had colonial interests in part of what is now known as Kerala (the Malabar coast). The Indian King of Malabar turns out to be at war with the English, so when the ship arrives in Calicut, they are advised to try and pass for Danes. They do not really try to, and end up in captivity, in which they will suffer for many months. They have to deal with dishonest people, constantly being disappointed in their trust, but eventually saved by an old Jewish merchant, for whom the lady has no end of praise, extolling him and his race. They travel then by boat down to Colchin and then further around India to Madras, which Fay finds very charming and rich.

¹ E.Fay was born in 1756 and she took off for India in 1789, from which her letters date. She would return to India several times, and at the end of her life tried to write a brief biography in epistolary form. She died at sixty in 1816

This is another fact to pause at. Modern travelers arriving in India, especially for the first time, are struck by the poverty. Not Elizabeth Fay, on the contrary she makes a point of the wealth displayed, the brightly painted Palanquins are in particular mentioned. From this one is tempted to draw the conclusion that abject poverty was as endemic to the old country as it was in India, and hence taken for granted. What was new was the eastern opulence. From Madras they continued north to Calcutta, where her husband took on a judicial position. Through the journey, they have shared the good and the bad, especially during the trying months of captivity. But in Calcutta their marriage unravels quickly. Her husband refuses to honor the high connections he is at first introduced to, misbehaves and loses all credibility. She is soon forced to divorce him, in order to extricate herself from his downward trajectory, in the process living on the generosity of her new-found friends. This must have been trying to her, a young lively woman, so much dependent on her social standing. We are treated to her difficulties with servants, how she dismisses them and are later forced by circumstances to readmit them. She quotes the price on many food items, giving you a fair idea of what was cheap and what was dear. A goat can be procured without too much outlay, while other things we would consider more trivial, require more substantial sums. In the end she will be forced to return back, this time entirely by boat. In her later reminiscences she recollects other journeys, by way of St-Helens (before the time of Napoleon). During one of those trips, she is accosted by a young woman she had earlier dumped there while in transit, and who had later on been sold as a slave. Slavery was outlawed by the English at the time, and her relation to the woman was unclear. Had she dumped her as a compensation for some outlay? If so, she clearly had treated her as a slave, which was furthermore corroborated by her being sold in her turn. This is a nasty business and she is eventually forced to pay a substantial sum and compensate the victim handsomely. Fay never being in comfortable situations, this must have imposed a hardship.

Now the reconstruction of the life of the writer from the fragmented evidence, displayed partly by her own letters, and partly by archival documents in India and elsewhere, interests the modern reader far less than the inconsequential minutiae that are accidentally revealed by her correspondence. What would interest us, is of course seldom of sufficient interest to her, to qualify for mention. She simply takes it for granted. What maybe of somewhat less interest are her emotional outpourings, which save from some turns of phrases, would not differ that much from a modern woman. Yet, as we all know, human nature has not really changed through history. This is what makes history particularly interesting, as we are able to identify with its actors. In particular this holds for the personality of the epistolarian. We may be impatient with her dwelling on things with which we are familiar, rather than telling us things we would find exotic; yet without those familiar outbursts, we would not really trust her, because they enable us to indeed identify with her.