

## **WILLIAM LITHGOW, THE SINAI PENINSULA AND THE**

### **SEARCH FOR PARADISE**

by

**Shaun McCarthy**

William Lithgow's *Adventures* are rarely read these days; the most recent full edition - published in Glasgow in 1906 - is something of a rarity. (1) But in the years following its first publication in 1614 it was a well-known and in some ways an influential book; it was republished in 1616, anthologised in *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, and the later complete version ( including Lithgow's Second and Third Journeys ) went through three further editions before the turn of the century . It is the First Journey, however, which is of interest to us here, and in particular that final section which describes his trek from Jerusalem towards Cairo across the Sinai Peninsula. The word "trek" is chosen advisedly, since - if his word is to be believed - he walked every step of the way, and this in the month of May ! Since the other members of his party were furnished with "Camels or Dromidories to ride upon ... for nineteene Piasters the man." his persistent adoption of what he calls the "pedestrial" mode should probably be attributed to sheer meanness . Certainly, he gives no other reason .

Apart from contributing in this way to the legend ( for such it must be accounted ) of Scottish parsimoniousness, Lithgow's accounts of his journey are remarkably factual ; for this reason, here as elsewhere, his word is indeed to be believed. Such errors as he falls into can generally be indebted to the obvious difficulties of keeping accurate written notes while engaged on hazardous and exhausting journeys - never to a wish to romanticise or dramatise their background. The *Adventures*, therefore, mark a significant break with the great travel chronicles of the Middle Ages and with such "histories" as those of Joinville, which characteristically record fact and fantasy with equal diligence and make little effort to distinguish between the two ( revealing in this way the close etymological links between the English words "story" and "history." ) Though certain passages show him to have been, by modern standards, somewhat over-credulous, Lithgow reveals, in contrast, the new scientific spirit of the seventeenth century, properly mingled with a traditional Scottish "canniness" - Erasmus had remarked, a century earlier, on the "logical sense" of the Scots - and describes virtually nothing that he has not seen for himself; this, indeed, he claims in his preface to be his book's chief merit. His narrative has for the most part the plainness and clarity that we now associate with the "scientific" prose style advocated by Thomas Sprat in his famous address to the Royal Society, (2) though rather interestingly linked with frequent attempts at a more ornate and Latinised vocabulary - "pedestrial," "umbragious," "ruvidous," "sequestrate," are among his favourite and typical pre-Miltonisms. Such infelicities - if as such we regard them - may today amuse us, but do not, of course, detract from the accuracy of his descriptions .

Lithgow was in no way an "explorer" - he was simply an inquisitive and observant traveller, and sometimes, like the hero of Nashe's novel, an unfortunate one. He never strayed very far from well-known and

recognised commercial routes. But the Middle East he visited was that dominated by the Ottomans, at a time when Islamic civilisation and culture had reached, perhaps, its lowest ebb. Contemporary European records of this scene are not very numerous, and to compare Lithgow's with other accounts will not be very profitable. It will be of much greater interest to see how his recordings stand in relation to the general European concept of Arabia, as such popular ideas have developed between Lithgow's time and the present day.

The seventeenth century is the period in which one can first detect, in European thought, a movement from the pastoral ideal towards Romantic primitivism. The pastoral idea attributes all manner of human virtues to the members of non- and never-existent societies, flourishing in an imaginary "Golden Age"; the primitivist ideal attributes such virtues to existent but technologically backward societies, usually subsisting on an agricultural or a pre-agricultural economy. ( It can hence be viewed as part of the Romantic reaction to the industrial revolution, and may require quite as strenuous an act of the imagination as does the other. ) The nomadic life-style of the desert-dwelling Arabs, their physical hardiness, chivalric traditions and generous hospitality have often aroused the admiration of European nations - especially the British and the French - and constitute ( like the comparable qualities of Fenimore Cooper's American Indians ) an ascetic primitivist ideal assimilable, in many ways, by the puritan philosophy. Such admiration - though no doubt flattering - can be a considerable embarrassment to the modern Arab, who may well be on the one hand aware that the sophistication of his native cultures is every whit as complex as the European, and - on the other hand - conscious of the extent to which Western romanticism may hinder much-desired technical advances in regions where human life may tend to be - as a clearer-sighted and pre-Romantic philosopher once described it - "nasty, brutish and short." (3)

"The philosophes," as Crane Brinton has said, "loved to invent wise Persians, Chinese, Hindus, Hurons and South Sea Islanders who, coming in contact with European ways, brought to the criticism of Europe the wisdom of their own points of view . The trouble is ..... these non -Europeans are no more than fictions, straw men, sticks with which to beat something Western, and no proof at all that we Westerners have really learned at high ethical and metaphysical levels from other peoples. "(4) Lithgow is laudably little concerned with "invention" of this kind. Himself a man of abnormal physical toughness, he would have been temperamentally unlikely to concede to any man, Arab or European, a hardihood greater than his own ; as for ethics and metaphysics, these are matters outside his sphere. It is all the more interesting to observe what must be one of the first hints of the modern primitivist fallacy in his description of the cave-dwelling Arab women of the Northern Sinai and his comparison of them with the pampered ladies of Western Europe :-

... Their beds were made of soft Sand, and over-spread with leaves a foote thicke; whose new borne Babes lying in their armes, were swadled with the same Leaves . And for all their Sicknesse, which was very small, they had none of our Wives sugred sops, burnt Wines, Venison pasties, Delicate fare, and great Feasting, not a months lying in, and then Churched, putting their husbands to incompatible charges . No, no, their food is onely Bread, Garlicke, Hearbes, and Water, and on the third or fourth day, in stead of their Churching, they goe with Bowes and Arrowes to the fieldes againe, hunting for spoiles and booties from passing Caravans .....

( 171 )

Again one may suspect that it is not the stoicism of the women so much as their admirable avoidance of needless expense which appeals

to Lithgow, but the implied rejection of what we would now call a "consumer society" is clear enough . His view of the Sinai Arabs is otherwise highly uncomplimentary, and his blunt characterisation of them as "Savages" might be thought offensive, were it not clear that his encounters were uniquely with small nomadic communities living in pre-Islamic conditions and dedicated to brigandage . He confirms, both here and elsewhere, that the bow and arrow (as Walter Scott suggests in *The Talisman* ) is the characteristic Arab weapon ; but it is a little surprising to learn that the women of the tribes participated in caravan raids, and probably as effectively as the men . Lithgow's narrative is generally enlivened by the description of a whole series of such attacks :-

We incountered with such deep sandy ground, that the Mulets were not able to carry our Company through : Whereupon they all dismounted, wrestling, and wading above the middle part of their bodies, and sometimes falling in over their heads, they were in great danger of perishing, although the robustnesse of my body carried mee through on my feete ... Even in the middest of this turmoyling paine, ( the night being darke ) the unwelcomed Arabs, environed, and invaded us with a storme of Arrowes, which they sent from the tops of little hard hils, whereupon they stood, for knowing the advantage of the ground : they tooke opportunity to give the more feareful assaults : yet they prevailed nothing ( although they wounded some of our Souldiers ) such was the resolute Courage of our valourous Defendants. True it is, that in all my travailles I was never so sore fatigated, nor more fearefully indangered, as I was that night ...

( 152 )

Though Lithgow was given an equally inhospitable reception in several parts of Europe - notably France and Spain - later in his travels, his final "Epitomised" description of the Arabs of the Sinai may not, in the circumstances, be thought overweighted with prejudice :-

The people generally are addicted to Theft, Rapine and Robberies : hating all Sciences Mechanicall or Civill, they are commonly all of the second Stature, swift on foote, scelerate, and seditious, boysterous in speech, of colour Tauny, boasting much of their triball Antiquity, and noble Gentry ...

( 172 )

We are certainly in any case far removed from the romanticised "noble Saracen" of Sir Walter Scott and the extravagances of Beckford's *Vathek*.

The Near East was in a certain sense well-known to the average educated Englishman of the seventeenth century, who was acquainted with the geographical background of the Classic authors and to whom the religious controversies of the time had made the topography of the Holy Land and its surrounding regions a matter of interest and concern. Even such an early work as *Tamburlaine* shows, for all its colourful rhetoric, attention to geographical exactitude, (5) and Milton's geographical and astronomical references are notoriously precise. At no time before or since, in all probability, has the Near East of the Bible been more familiar to the English; yet this familiarity is strangely theoretical. Thus it is curious to see ( for example ) Lithgow refuting the apparently prevalent idea that the Red Sea is really red in colour. And while he is fully aware of the religious significance ( to Christians ) of many of the towns and sites he visits, his descriptions of them may be called "scientific" also in the sense that they are totally untouched by any kind of mystic awareness. ( We may again be reminded here of the close links between rigid Protestantism and the scientific spirit.) Lithgow's interest is that of the intelligent present-day tourist, of a peregrine Pepys; he goes to very considerable ( and literal ) pains to scale the mountain of Quarantanam ( supposedly the scene of Christ's temptation by Satan).

only, on arrival at the summit, to survey the view with the complacent approval of Bouvard and Pecuchet at the seaside :-

... Where after diverse turnings, traversings, and narrow foot passages having come with great difficulty to the top, we entred first into an umbragious Cave, Joyning to, and under the Chapell, where the Frier told us, that in this place Christ did fast forty dayes : and here it was, where he rebuked Sathan . The Chappel which covereth the top of this high and steepy Rocke is covered, and also beautified, with an old Altar : betweene the outward sides whereof, and the craggy face of this mountaine, two men may only go side to side : Here we dined and refresht our selves with water that I carried on my backe hither : From which place we saw the most part of all the Holy Land, except the North parts, and a great way into Arabis .....

( 156 - 7 )

The description of the mountain climb may recall the most famous lines of Donne's Third Satire ( probably composed some ten or fifteen years earlier, but not published till 1633 ) :-

On a huge hill,

Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will  
Reach her, about must, and about must go;

And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so ...

— but in "Truth" of a transcendental kind Lithgow is not even remotely interested. We may in much the same way compare the great simile in the First Book of *Paradise Lost*, wherein the fallen angels are likened to -

scattered sedge

Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed

Hath vexed the Red Sea coast, whose waves o'erthrew  
Busiris and his Memphian chivalry ...

with Lithgow's characteristically prosaic and informative account :-

The Red Sea, which we left to the Westward of us, and our left hand is not red, as many suppose, but is the very colour of other Seas : The reason for which it hath beene called *Mare rubrum*, is only because of the banks, rushes, sands & bushes that grow by the shore side, which are naturally red. Some others have called it so, in respect of the Brookes, which Moses turned to red blood, who misconstruing the true sense, tooke Seas, for Rivers. This Sea is famous for the miraculous passage of the Israelites through it, and the drowning of Pharaoh and his people : and because of Spices that were brought from India and Arabia to Alexandria, from whence the Venetians dispersed the same through all Europe and the Mediterren coasts of Asia and Africa : But this Navigation is now discontinued by the Portugals, English, and Dutch; which bring such Wares to their severall homes by the backe side of Affricke : So that the Trafficke of Alexandria is almost decayed, and the Riches of the Venetians much diminished; so is the vertue of the Spices much impayred by too much moisture contracted, with the long and tedious carriage thereof .....

(174)

To read Lithgow and authors of a similarly inquiring mind ( such as Aubrey and Evelyn and Burton ) in conjunction with Milton and the Metaphysicals is to see more clearly how little seventeenth-century writers were affected by what Eliot has called "the dissociation of sensibility" : "in the seventeenth century," Lawson Dick has said, "learning was part of the joy of life, just as much as drinking or love-making ..... and educated men naturally sought their recreation in the study, rather than on the golf-course."(6) Lithgow finds the



movement from Biblical history to political economy so easy and natural as hardly to seem to involve movement at all; it is in just this way that the Metaphysicals achieve their "conceits". And Lithgow's lack of metaphysical concern, the "scientific" bent that I have here tried to emphasise - this often has the paradoxical effect of demonstrating a more basic mental affinity with the habits of poetic thought common in his own age .

Of course his work has very little smack of "the study" in any formal sense, and it may, I suppose, be readily guessed that one great concern of the Metaphysicals finds little echo in his writings :- that interest in Middle Eastern matters which springs, not merely from antiquarianism, but from the idea that the area is peculiarly rich in those "vestiges" of Paradise, of the early days of Creation, that enable the enquiring mind to pursue through the Holy Land the tracks of God .

A Virgin-soile, which no  
Rude feet ere trod,  
Where ( since he stept there ) only go  
Prophets, and friends of God... (7)

"Man, enlightened by Biblical revelation, can grasp the Vestiges, the "traces," of God in external nature; and from this knowledge he can then turn inward to find the Image of God within himself".(8) This idea, which goes back to the medieval Augustinians, is given clear expression in the Eleventh Book of *Paradise Lost*, wherein Michael reassures Adam of the omnipresence of God throughout "all the earth":-

Yet doubt not but in valley and in plain  
God is as here, and will be found alike

Present, and of his presence many a sign  
Still following thee, still compassing thee round  
With goodness and paternal love, his face  
Express, and of his steps the track divine .....

Thus the endeavour of the natural scientist in the seventeenth century would often be to seek for knowledge as Peter Sterry (Cromwell's chaplain and Milton's colleague ) defines it : " ... Knowledge, springing in the Soul, seems to be ... an awakening by reason of the primitive Image of pure Nature raising it self by degrees, and sparkling through the Rubbish, the confusions of the present state". (9) From such contentions are derived Wordsworth's theories of childhood, as expressed in the *Immortality Ode*, and the idea that the child - like the primitive - constitutes an "Image of pure Nature" ; while the emphasis on reason as the vital agency profoundly affects the religious and philosophical thought of the eighteenth century. Characteristically, Vaughan sees the process in allegorical terms as a journey across desert sands :-

O how I long to travel back  
And tread again that ancient track !  
That I might once more reach that plaine,  
Where first I left my glorious train,  
From whence th'Inlightened spirit sees  
That shady city of Palm trees .....

(10)

Lithgow's was an eagerly inquiring yet not a speculative intellect ; but in undertaking precisely such journeys, he supplied through his records material to those more studious-minded souls who, seeking for the earthly Eden, sought it inevitably in the image of a miraculously fructiferous garden. "Paradise," Sterry wrote, "was the Similitude and Presence of God in the whole Creation. The Creation was a Garden."(11)

And precisely so, of course, does Milton describe it. As for Lithgow,

... The next day we travailed through a fruitful planure, fraught full of fruite Trees, and abounding in Wheate, Rye, and Barley, being new cut downe, May 14. For this was their first Harvest, the Land yeelding twice a yeare Cornes; and the latter, is in our December recoiled. The Land hath as it were a continuall Summer, and notwithstanding of the burning Heate it produceth alwayes abundance of Fruites and Hearbes for all the Seasons of the yeare: So that the whole Kingdome is but a Garden, having ever one Fruite ready to be plucked downe, and another coming forwards .....

( 175)

Lithgow may have been aware how closely his description parallels those of the Earthly Paradise in Ariosto, Tasso, and in Spenser :-

There is continuall spring, and harvest there  
Continuall, both meeting at one time .....

and Andrew Willet in 1608 - the year before the commencement of Lithgow's journey - had suggested in his *Hexapla* that in Eden "in the beginning trees did beare fruit in the yeare more than once." (12) Lithgow's confirmation of these hypotheses, as can be seen, is severely factual, even to the detailed noting of the precise date of his observations; yet here again we may sense how far this interaction of documentary recording and traditional poetic imagery is characteristic of the seventeenth century mind. A new *Road to Xanadu* remains to be written about the influence of the great travel writers of the immediately precedent age upon Milton, the *Metaphysicals* and the *Augustans*. (13) Mention therein might also be made of their influence upon the development of the novel, which in its early form reflects with clarity the patterns and movement of the travelogue .

" This laborious worke of mine," Lithgow stated in the Prologue to his **Adventures**, " is only composed of mine own eye sight, and ocular experience ..... To the wise I know it will be welcome, to the profound Historian, yeeld knowledge, contemplation, and direction, and to the understanding Gentleman, insight, instruction, and recreation. " He imposed limitations upon himself that ( as Leavis said of Jane Austen) it is his distinction to have kept ; yet in his later career the strange many-sidedness of the seventeenth-century Briton is manifestly revealed - he was a poet of a kind, ( an atrocious kind, admittedly, ) an effective military historian, (14) a polemical theologian (and author, as such, of **The Gushing Tears of Goodly Sorrow, containing the Causes, Conditions and Remedies of Sinne**), and is also the probable author of the anonymous **Scotland's Paraenesis to her dread Sovereign king Charles the Second** ( published in 1660 ) . All these other and varied literary achievements have been for the most part, and very properly, forgotten ; yet it will be a pity if the **Adventures** suffers a similar neglect, for reasons that I have here tried to show . At his best, Lithgow links the manic energy of the Elizabethan pamphleteers to that wider and profounder, if more ponderous, mode of thought characterising the prose of Milton and of Hooker. "If good Bookes may be termed wise guides, then certainly true Histories may be termed perfite Oracles, secret Counsellors, private Schoolemasters, familiar friends to cherish knowledge, and the best Intelligencers ; being duely pondered, and rightly used." Only, perhaps, in the **Areopagatica** is the seventeenth-century attitude to learning - and, by implication, to foreign travel as a mode of education - been better summarised .

## NOTES

- 1 — The full title is **The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures and Painfull Peregrinations** by William Lithgow . The most easily available edition is the abridged version edited by B.I. Lawrence

and published by Jonathan Cape (1928) ; this, for the sake of convenience, is followed here. Page references are placed in brackets at the end of each citation, and I abbreviate the title to *Adventures* throughout .

- 2 — The Royal Society was of course formed in 1662, fifty-odd years later. Sprat urged its members to adopt "a close, naked, natural way of speaking in positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can ; and preferring the language of artisans, countrymen and merchants before that of wits and scholars" .
- 3 — Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pt.1, chap. 13 .
- 4 — Crane Brinton, *The Shaping of the Modern Mind*, (1953), p. 243.
- 5 — A pioneering study here is that of Ethel Seaton, "Marlowe's Map," *Essays and Studies*, (1924), which shows his familiarity with Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* and other geographical authorities of the time .
- 6 — Oliver Lawson Dick, intro. to Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, (Penguin, 1972), p. 34 .
- 7 — Henry Vaughan, "The Match."
- 8 — Louis L. Martz, *The Paradise Within*, (1964), p. 18 .
- 9 — Sterry, *A Discourse of the Freedom of the Will*, (1675), p.99.
- 10 — Henry Vaughan, "The Retreat."

- 11 — Sterry, cit. de Sola Pinto, Peter Sterry, *Platonist and Puritan*, (1934), p. 161 :
- 12 — The whole controversy stems from *Genesis*, i. 12, in which God commands the earth to bring forth simultaneously "the bud of the herb" (*herbam virentum*) and trees bearing fruit. Hence Eve's rejoinder to Adam in *Paradise Lost* - "Small store will serve, where store, / All seasons, ripe for use hangs on the stalk ..." But from very early times the Christian concept of Paradise had been confused with the pagan and Classical concepts of Arcadia and of the Golden Age (mentioned earlier in this paper) ; thus Lactantius, writing in the 4th century A.D., may have inspired the author of the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Phoenix* :-
- Harvests never fail, the gleaming fruits,  
but trees stand ever green, as God commanded.
- Winter and summer alike the trees are hung with fruit ...
- Milton, of course, takes advantage of this time-honoured confusion to introduce references that might seem, in the context of *Paradise Lost*, quite inapposite :-
- ... universal Pan  
Knit with the Graces and the Hours in dance  
Led on the eternal spring ...
- but which were fully acceptable to a seventeenth century audience familiar with this kind of interaction of pagan and Christian imagery. This is not the place to develop this subject further or to outline the heated contemporary arguments as to Eden's exact location; but I am grateful to Prof. Christopherson for amplifying this note.
- 13 — John Livingston Lowes' classic study *The Road to Xanadu* explicates many mysterious references in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*