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**Travelling for Her Health: The Extraordinary Life of Isabella Bird Bishop\***

**by James Huntley Grayson**

Mrs. Bishop was, perhaps, the quintessential example of that species of Victorian woman, the lady traveller. She was also in two senses the perfect Victorian lady, for not only did her lifetime fit nearly perfectly into the years of the reign of Queen Victoria, but she was, at least in Victorian Britain, very much a well-mannered lady. Her exploits to then exotic parts of the globe make quite a contrast to the image of the life of a Victorian gentlewoman, and for this reason, if no other, she excites our interest. I first became acquainted with Mrs. Bishop during my period of missionary training when I read with enthusiasm her absorbing account of Korea at the end of the 19th century. I came to have the highest regard for her powers of observation and her ability to sympathize with the Korean people while at the same time maintaining a critical distance. This lecture represents the fruits of some research pursued as a hobby about this interesting figure. The books upon which this lecture is based are listed at the end of the written article. A special word of thanks is due to the Manuscripts Department of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh and to Miss Elspeth Yeo of that department for her generous assistance in supplying useful materials. From 4 December, 1981 to 13 February, 1982, the library held an exhibition of materials relating to the life of Mrs. Bishop entitled “A Curious Life for a Lady, Isabella L. Bird, 1831-1904.” Materials in that exhibit formed the basis of this paper.

**CHILDHOOD**

Isabella Lucy Bird was born on the 15th of October, 1831, the first daughter born to Edward Bird, a minister of the Church of England. Although the family background and the early experiences of Isabella do not totally explain the woman she was to become, they do help us to

\* This article was first presented as a lecture before the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

[page 36] understand the source of many of her ideas and beliefs. Her family on both sides could be described as a high-minded, activist Christian family passionately committed to Christian causes. Her father came from a well-to-do Warwickshire family and he had originally been a barrister before the Supreme Court of Calcutta, India. Following the death of his first wife and his son, he returned to Great Britain to seek ordination in the Church of England—he married the daughter of the prebendary of Ripon Cathedral in 1830. Edward Bird was a strict Sabbatarian, probably as much for social reasons as for theological reasons. On her mother’s side, Isabella’s family were related to the abolitionist William Wilberforce and were strong supporters of the movement to abolish slavery. Some of them even refused to use sugar in their tea because it came from plantations employing slave labor. In the modern age, this is the kind of family which for reasons of Christian faith would be in the forefront of the movement to ban nuclear weapons, or involved with other high-minded causes. Isabella gained from her family not only a strong sense of the social implications of Christian faith, but also an early training in the disciplined observation of the world around her. From the age of four, her father would take her around the countryside in which they resided pointing out to her the various things which were about them. He would then ask young Isabella to tell him exactly what he had told her. At an early age, she learned the value of close observation and the ability to recite to others what she had seen.

Although there is no diary which remains from the years of Isabella’s childhood, there are several incidents which have been recorded from that time which give us some insight into the kind of woman she was developing into. One characteristic of Isabelia was a dislike for cant and rhetoric and she seems to have had this trait from a very early age. When she was in her sixth year, a local political hopeful came to pay a call on the parson, Edward Bird During his visit, this gentleman made some flattering observations about the parson’s younger daughter, Henrietta. Isabella, by chance overhearing these fulsome remarks, flew in to the room and addressed herself to the candidate thus:

Sir Malpas de Grey Tatton Egerton, did you tell my father that my sister was cute because you wanted his vote?1

Another characteristic of Isabella’s personality which manifested itself from an early age was her intellectual curiosity. One luncheon during her seventh year when she could not be found in the normal places in the home, the family discovered her in the loft of their stable engrossed in [page 37] Archibald Alison’s *History of Europe during the French Revolution, Embracing the Assembly of the Notables of 1789 to the Establishment of the Directory in 1795* (1833). This may not be quite the ordinary fare of the average seven-year-old, but it is indicative of the inquiring mind which Isabella had. She was precocious and was encouraged to be so. This pre- cociousness resulted in the authorship of a short book on *Fiscal Protection and Free Trade* written in her sixteenth year. One can readily imagine the intellectual vigor which must have characterized Edward Bird’s parsonage, but in doing so one must not overlook, as has one recent biographer, the high moral tone of that environment. It was not simply knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but knowledge and effort for a moral purpose. In this respect, the Bird household undoubtedly represented the best of the Victorian character.

In her later youth, Isabella had two experiences which were important in molding the course of her future life. When she was nineteen, she underwent the first of many operations for “spinal problems”. Exactly what these problems were, I have not been able to discover precisely, but it is a fact that painful problems with her back caused her to be virtually an invalid during her years of residence in Britain. It was because of the severity of these ailments that her doctors recommended she take long sea voyages for her health. One would hardly have guessed that this petite invalid at home would become a Goliath among world travellers. Her remarkable courage and ability to make quick and conclusive decisions is illustrated by an incident which took place in 1852 when she was twenty-one. During a solitary journey to London, the cab in which she was riding was stopped briefly in the traffic, at which juncture a bundle of leaflets was thrown inside. Stooping to pick them up, Isabella discovered another package which contained a plan for the assassination of one of the members of the Cabinet. While she was mulling these matters over, a strange and suspicious looking individual put his head through the cab window and asked if there was a package which had been left in the vehicle. With great presence of mind, Isabella gave the man the bundle of leaflets and quickly instructed the driver to go straight to the Home Office. Arriving there, this diminutive girl demanded and was granted an immediate interview with the Home Secretary. The latter was so impressed by Isabella’s remarks that he listened with close attention and concluded the session by granting Isabella a police escort for the remainder of her stay in London. At the end of her youth, we find Isabella a young woman with a keen intellect, an ability to closely observe the scene around her and describe it clearly to other people, and great courage in the face of dangerous cir- [page 38] cumstances. These qualities and others would seem to indicate that she had a bright future before her. Were Isabella’s prospects to be undermined by her painful health problems?

**THE YOUTHFUL TRAVELLER**

Although Isabella Bird was to be one of the most peripatetic of Victorian travellers, she did most of her travelling, at least initially, for her health. In the spring of 1854, her family sent her to Portsmouth to recuperate from a case of insomnia which must have been in part related to pains in her back. While there she watched the fleet depart for the Baltic Sea as part of maneouvers for the Crimean War and wrote two articles about the wartime appearance of Portsmouth. Her stay in that seaside city did not seem to result in the restoration of her health and her physician recommended that she take what was to be the first of many long sea voyages. Her family gave her £100 and sent her off to North America telling her to come back only when the money ran out. On this first jaunt abroad, Isabella made an extensive tour of the North American continent, visiting Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Boston, Cincinnati, and Toronto. She travelled by what were the most modern forms of transport at that time, the steamboat and the railway. Her observations of the young American republic and its frontier, as described in the book which she wrote about her experiences, are in refreshing and frank contrast to the myths which have developed about that time. On her travels west by rail she had another experience which called forth her resourcefulness. She discovered that a fellow passenger had picked her pocket. When the conductor came round she merely remarked that the gentleman next to her had her tickets. Isabella always had great presence of mind. When she returned to Britain, she wrote up her travel observations into a book and attempted to have it published. It was at first rejected, by Blackwoods, but finally accepted by John Murray, who was to become her lifelong publishing agent. The book, *The Englishwoman in America*, was published in 1856 and became an immediate success. Isabella’s career as a literary traveller was successfully launched.

From 1850 onward, her family had taken to summering in the Highlands of Scotland, from which experience Isabella gained her permanent interest in the livelihood and welfare of the Highlander. Mr. Bird also was favorably impressed by the dour, strict northern Scot. Isabella’s father, being a strict Sabbatarian, had been forced to leave one parish after [page 39] another and found that the Sabbatarianism of the Highlander was much to his liking. Isabella donated the proceeds of her first book to buying deep sea fishing boats for the Highlanders, the first of what were to be many benevolent donations.

In 1857, her back began to give her problems again and Isabella set off on her second journey to North America, this time seeing more of the United States than on the previous journey, making a trip of more than 2,000 miles. In the course of these travels she went both to the Deep South and as far north as Hudson’s Bay. Her father was very interested in reports of the religious revival which was sweeping the United States at that time and had asked Isabella to make some notes on what she saw of it. In her precise manner, she listened to and made copious notes about 130 sermons, which resulted in a further book, *The Revival in America by an English Eye-witness* which was published in 1858. Her father used her notes to write his own book on the subject, but he died before he could complete this project. Isabella worked to finish this book of her father’s and it was published in the following year under the title *The Aspects of Religion in the United States of America*. The death of her father and the family’s subsequent removal to Edinburgh closed the early period of adventure in Isabella’s life. It did not close off her activity but only redirected it into new channels.

**THE SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND THE WORLD TRAVELLER**

The family’s move to the Scottish capital placed Isabella in a vital cultural center dominated by two important social forces, the Kirk and education. The home which the Birds were to occupy for the next twelve years at 3 Castle Terrace immediately adjoined the headquarters of the non-established United Presbyterian Church of Scotland. This physical proximity is symbolic of the intellectual similarity of many of Isabella’s views with those of leading ministers of that church and the other free churches. In 1861,she first made the acquaintance of Dr. Thomas Guthrie, minister of Free St. John’s Church in Edinburgh and the founder of the “Ragged Schools” for what Dr. Guthrie described as the city’s arabs. It was through men such as Dr. Guthrie and other members of the Edinburgh intellectual establishment that Isabella got her first taste of social work. Although she always maintained an interest in the destitute of her adopted city, during the middle years of the sixth decade of the nineteenth century she resumed her interest in the welfare of the Highlander. She [page 40] became acquainted with and worked with Lady Gordon Cathcart, a wealthy land-owner in northern Scotland, who tried to alleviate the poverty of the northern crofters by assisting emigration to Canada. This scheme involved not only assistance with transport to the New World but help with the purchase of land in Canada. Isabella, representing Lady Gordon Cathcart, made her third trip to the other side of the Atlantic in 1866 to visit the settlers in their new homes. Upon her return she toured the Outer Hebrides and wrote a series of five articles which compared the destitution of life in the Highlands with the comfortable life which the settlers had made for themselves farming in Canada.

In 1867, she again took up her cudgels on behalf of the poor of Edinburgh. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Edinburgh was two cities, one the elegant and sophisticated New Town and the other the ugly, filthy relic of the Scottish Middle Ages, the Old Town. The Old Town, built on the rocky outcrop which is topped by Edinburgh Castle, was a composite of many tall, cramped and decrepit tenement buildings, some of which attained a height of nine or ten stories. It was not for their height for which they were renowned, but rather for their squalor. Isabella and several of her friends were moved to investigate the situation of life in these tenements. The results of their thorough investigations were written up in a book which Isabella authored*, Notes on Old Edinburgh*, which was published in 1869. In this tract she castigated the city fathers for their lack of interest in the welfare of the lowest stratum of society in their city, and challenged them to do something about the appalling conditions.

Even after their mother’s death in 1866, Isabella and her sister Henrietta continued to reside at Castle Terrace and to summer, as had their parents, in the Highlands. However, Isabella’s health continued to deteriorate so that by 1871 her physicians were recommending that she take a voyage, preferably to the Mediterranean Sea. She took this advice and extended her journey to include a fourth visit to North America, this time only to New York. This voyage had little effect on her health and a further journey was suggested in 1872. Isabella decided to take her first lengthy sea voyage and chose to go to Australia and New Zealand. Not only did this trip not seem to influence her health favorably, but she found the Antipodes boring and took a strong dislike to them. While contemplating her return to Britain, it was a chance remark by a fellow traveller that led Isabella to include the Sandwich Islands in an extended itinerary. This was to have a lasting influence on her life.

For her return voyage to Britain, Isabella arranged her journey so that she could spend an anticipated three weeks in the Hawaiian Islands. [page 41]

This diversion extended itself into a stay of six months during which time the bored invalid showed her mettle as a world traveller of great daring. Her book which records her adventures whilst sojourning in Hawaii shows that she accurately perceived the political and cultural problems of a primitive society adjusting to the impact of European imperialism. But more interesting to the ordinary man, perhaps, was Isabella’s description of her adventures mountain climbing for the first time. As an experiment, she climbed the volcano Kilaeua, which rose to a height of 4,008 feet, in preparation for her assault on Mauna Loa. After experiencing the exhilaration of ascending the smaller mountain, she then set out to conquer the peak of Hawaii’s most famous volcano. She attained the summit at 13,675 feet and established herself as a woman mountain climber, a rare being even among Victorian lady travellers.

Reluctantly leaving the Sandwich Islands, she continued her journey home by travelling across the continental United States, her fifth visit to the New World. Arriving in San Francisco, she immediately boarded the first train going east, stopping off at Estes Park in Colorado where she was to spend the next six months. During her sojourn in the Rocky Mountains she was in the company of one of the most notorious frontiersmen, Rocky Mountain Jim, who was to be her guide and mentor for most of her stay. A rough friendship between them blossomed when Isabella and Jim made the assault on Long’s Peak. It seems incredible that a woman who was considered an invalid at home could have made the ascent of this mountain, which at 14,255 feet was some 600 feet higher than the great volcano on Hawaii. Mountain climbing was clearly in Isabella’s blood. Isabella wrote two books about her experiences in Hawaii and the Rockies, both of which proved to be great successes. These were *The Hawaiian Archipelago* (1875) and *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879). The title of the latter book suggests that notwithstanding her arduous outdoors life, Isabella thought of herself very much as a lady and not as a rough and ready traveller.

For much of the seventh decade of the nineteenth century, Isabella devoted most of her time to social work and began to take a particular interest in medical missions, both within Britain and abroad. Upon her return to Edinburgh in 1873, she immediately threw herself into the work for a Grand Bazaar to support the work of the Livingston Mission in Central Africa. Her interest in the work of medical missionaries led her to take up an interest in medicine and medical research. She studied the use of the microscope, which is an important fact not only because it symbolizes the seriousness of her interest in medical research, but also be- [page 42] cause it shows how Isabella invariably kept herself abreast of the latest scientific and technical knowledge. In 1876, she became closely acquainted with Dr. John Bishop who was her sister’s physician and was soon to become her own. Dr. Bishop was very much interested in medical missionary work and Isabella and he found that they had many interests and causes in common. Her interest in the destitue of Edinburgh was re- invigorated and was linked with interests in medical work. During the period 1876 to 1877, she threw herself into the creation of a dispensary and clinic which was to be located in the Cowgate area of the Old Town. In the nineteenth century as today, this section of the Scottish capital was one of the poorest and roughest parts of the town. The clinic which was created in that area was maintained by an organization to which Isabella gave her wholehearted support, the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society. Her interest in helping her fellow man was not limited to concern for their health. In 1874 to 1875, she waged a vigorous battle in support of a rest and refreshment house for the cabmen who drove the carriages in Edinburgh. At first the city fathers paid little attention to the demands made by this diminutive lady, but Isabella was not easily put off. She deluged the City Chambers with letters and requests until, overwhelmed, the city fathers gave in and granted her request. By the end of the seventies Isabella again began to experience problems with her health and it seemed time for another voyage to regain her strength.

**THE MATURE WORLD TRAVELLER**

In 1878, she set off on another long journey abroad, this time to Japan where she was to spend seven months. Today we think of Japan as one of the most advanced nations in the world. In the nineteenth century, Japan was a developing nation. When Isabella visited the Island Empire, it was only ten years after the Meiji Restoration had brought the progressive party to power. At the time of her visit the world thought of Japan as an advancing nation, and the government of Japan sought to show this progress to the world through its modernized cities such as Tokyo and Yokohama. Isabella was not the least interested in these areas, but in the “real” Japan, the lesser visited parts which rarely if ever saw a European face. She in fact scorned those who concentrated their interests only on the bright lights. In the introduction to her book Unbeaten Tracks in Japan she says:  [page 43]

From Nikko northwards my route was altogether off the beaten track, and had never been traversed in its entirety by any European. I lived among the Japanese, and saw their mode of living, in regions unaffected by European contact. As a lady travelling alone, and the first European lady who had been seen in several districts through which my route lay, my experiences differed more or less widely from those of preceding travellers...2

Her interest in Japan, however, was not merely confined to the Japanese, but included a strong interest in the aboriginal inhabitants of the islands, the Ainus. When she travelled, Isabella utilized an approach that would be familiar to modern anthropologists, participant observation. Although she did not use this term herself—it was not invented until much later―she did exactly what an anthropologist on a field study would do: live with the people and observe closely their way of life. In the same preface, she says:

I am able to offer a fuller account of the aborigines of Yezo, obtained by actual acquaintance with them, than has has hitherto been given.3

and goes on to add that:

In Northern Japan, in the absence of all other sources of information, I have to learn everything from the people themselves, through an interpreter, and every fact had to be disinterred by careful labour from amidst a mass of rubbish. The Ainos supplied the information which is given concerning their customs, habits, and religion; but I had an opportunity of comparing my notes with some taken about the same time by Mr. Heinrich Von Siebold of the Austrain Legation...4

These remarks also indicate that Isabella was not a hasty or sloppy researcher, but carefully sifted and sorted her material, comparing her observations with others for accuracy. Unbeaten Tracks in Japan is still an important resource on conditions in Japan during the early Meiji Period, and deservedly so.

En route to Britain, Isabella stopped in Singapore where she was encouraged by acquaintances to see Malaya before returning home. She spent some five weeks there and her observations about the Malay states which had come under the protection of the British Crown are very [page 44] astute. Her book describing her travels there, *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883) is composed of thirty-three letters which she had written to her sister, Henrietta, relating her journeys not only on the Malay Peninsula, but in Hong Kong, Canton, and Singapore. This information allows the reader to compare the impact of British imperialism on its major centers in the Far East. It also makes for interesting comparisons with her observations on early Meiji Japan, which also appear in letter form. Although not principally a political commentator, she did have strong views on how colonial governments should be conducted. She said:

If I may venture to give an opinion upon so controverted a subject, it is, that all Colonial authorities in their dealings with native races, all Residents and their subordinates, and all transactions between ourselves and the weak peoples of the Far East, would be better for having something of “the fierce light which beats upon a throne” turned upon them. The good have nothing to fear, the bad would be revealed in their badness, and hasty counsels and ambitious designs would be held in check.5

Although a child of her time insofar as she accepted the fact of colonialism, passages such as this leave no doubt that Isabella regarded colonial governments to be at the service of the citizens of the colonies.

On the 25th of February, 1879, Isabella sailed from Penang for home making stops in the Near East before arriving on her native shores. Passing through the Red Sea, she stopped off on the Sinai Peninsula for four days, camping in the vicinity of Mt. Sinai. She also paid a visit to Cairo before pushing on for home, which she reached in May. Her work for the next few years consisted in preparing the manuscripts of her trips to Japan and Malaya for publication as books. She was saddened greatly by the death in May of 1880 of her sister Henrietta to whom she was very devoted. During the course of her sister’s final illness, Isabella grew close to Henrietta’s attending physician, Dr. John Bishop. Isabella had, of course, known Dr. Bishop for many years, but it would appear that it was the devotion which both of them had for Henrietta that led Isabella to accept John Bishop’s proposal of marriage. They were married on the 8th of March, 1881, when Isabella was fifty. As devoted as they were to each other, life with the extrovert Isabella could not have been easy for the more introverted John Bishop. He often used to tease Isabella by saying that she had a tiger’s appetite and an ostrich’s digestion. Although un- [page 45] doubtedly secure in Isabella’s ultimate devotion to him, John used to say that his only rival was the plateau of Central Asia and he was probably right.

During the scant five years of their marriage, both John and Isabella suffered from various ailments―John more so than Isabella. On the recommendations of their own physicians, the Bishops made several trips to the Riveria for rest and relaxation, but to no avail. As Isabella’s back continued to give her problems, she agreed to an operatioan by John’s mentor, Sir Joseph Lister, the inventor of chloroform for surgery. Apparently, Isabella found this experience so interesting that she recorded her sentiments in a poem, “Under Chloroform, a Psychological Fragment”, in 1885. John did not improve and the Bishops made yet another trip to the Riviera in 1886,this time to Cannes, where John died. Within five years’ time, the death of two people to whom she was greatly devoted had a strong impact on Isabella. She resolved to devote the remainder of her life to the cause of medical missions, which had been a major concern of her late husband. To this end, she studied medicine during 1887 in St. Mary’s Hospital in London, while at the same attempting to organize a mission hospital in Nazareth in the Holy Land. The Turkish government which ruled Palestine at that time refused to give permission to build the John Bishop Memorial Hospital, and Isabella sought to apply her efforts elsewhere. At the end of the year, she went to Ireland to help with famine relief there, returning to Britain in 1888. In that year, she was consecrated for service by the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, which became another turning point in her life.

**FINAL JOURNEYS**

In the last fifteen years of her life, Isabella, now popularly known as Mrs. Bishop, was to undertake three major journeys―to India, the Far East, and Morocco―any one of which would have taxed the energies of a younger person. In the course of each journey she applied the same method of travelling amongst the people to closely observe their ways of life which had proved effective on earlier trips. Most of these trips were undertaken not only for the adventure of discovering knowledge about distant places, but with the additional, if not primary, aim of founding mission hospitals. Whatever Isabella did, she did it with enthusiasm, so it is not surprising to learn of the number of institutions of this sort which she was responsible for founding.  [page 46]

Her first lengthy journey taken after the death of her husband was to India and Persia. She sailed in February of 1889 for India and after journeying through the western part of that country, she went north to Kashmir and Lesser Tibet (the Ladak region) from where she peered for the first time into Tibet and the Himalaya Mountains. She reached Simla in October and proceeded from there to Amritsar and on to Karachi. She left the subcontinent and attempted to enter Persia by going first to Iraq. On her journey up the Tigris River to Baghdad, she met Herbert Sawyer who was on a diplomatic and military mission to Persia for the British government. Travelling with this adventurer and later by herself, she made a circuitous journey from Baghdad to Tehran and from thence south to the holy city of Isfahan. From there she journeyed north through the Baktiari country and Kurdistan, finally coming out on the Black Sea at Trabzon. She arrived in London in December, 1890. This journey had been as full of adventure as any of her previous trips. Once, in Kashmir, her guide was arrested for murder just as she was making a sketch of him. Isabella furthered her concerns for medical missions on this trip by founding two hospitals, the John Bishop Memorial Hospital in Islamabad, and the Henrietta Bird Hospital for Women in Amritsar. She had seen first-hand the oppressive treatment of the Christian Armenians in Islamic lands and went immediately to speak to Prime Minister William Gladstone about the matter, later speaking to a Parliamentary committee on the same subject. From these journeys there resulted two books, *Among the Tibetans* published in 1894 and *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* published in 1891, the year after her return from the East.

While working on the manuscripts for these two books, Isabella found herself to be a lecturer very much in demand. In 1891, she lectured at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and in the following year at the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and the Royal Geographical Society in London. In 1891, she had been made a Fellow of the R.S.G.S. and when it became known that the London counterpart was contemplating the same move, some misogynist admirals of the old school created such a brouhaha that *Punch* was prompted to satirize the issue. During these years, Isabella entered into an agreement with a friend, a certain Miss Cullen, who set aside two rooms for Isabella’s use when she was not travelling abroad. It is an interesting comment on Isabella’s movements that during the five years from 1892 to 1897 that they had this arrangement, Isabella was at Miss Cullen’s residence for a total of eighteen weeks. She continued to keep abreast of the more modern scientific technology and spent time learning photography. However she [page 47] did not seem to think that she would undertake any further overseas trips. On August 23,1893, she wrote to her publisher John Murray:

I am thinking of going to pay a few visits in Japan next winter, and may possibly go on to Korea, but I am too old for hardships and great exertions now.

When she made these comments she could little know that some of the longest and most arduous journeys of her life lay in front of her.

In January of 1894, Isabella left Britain bound for the Far East and was not to return home until 1897 the longest continuous period which she had been abroad. Rather than going via the Red Sea, Isabella journeyed first to Canada, then across the North American continent by rail, and embarked at Vancouver to cross the Pacific to go to Japan. She spent little time in Japan this time but pressed quickly on to Korea about which country she had devised a program of research. In the preface to her book, *Korea and Her Neighbours* she says:

My four visits to Korea... formed part of a plan of study of the leading characteristics of the Mongolian races. My first journey produced the impression that Korea is the most uninteresting country I ever traveled in, but during and since the war its political perturbations, rapid changes, and possible destinies, have given me an intense interest in it; while Korean character and industry, as I saw both under Russian rule in Siberia, have enlightened me as to the better possiblities which may await the nation in the future. Korea takes a similarly strong grip on all who reside in it sufficiently long to overcome the feeling of distaste which at first it undoubtedly inspires.6

Her trips to Korea were the first time that Isabella set out to prove a point scientifically, so to speak, by observing the same people living under different social curcumstances. Her trips to Korea over a three year period convinced her that Korea rather than being the most underdeveloped and hopeless nation in the Far East bade fair to become an important country economically through the industry of its people. Certainly, she would feel fully confirmed by the events of the past two decades. In her journeys to Korea, a concern for medical missions was combined with an interest in the prospects for the economic development of the people. This concern in turn resulted in an affection for the Korean people which was stronger than any which she had felt for other peoples amongst whom she sojourned [page 48] on previous travels. She says on leaving Korea:

It is with great regret that I take leave of Korea, with Russia and Japan facing each other across her destinies. The distaste I felt for the country at first passed into an interest which is almost affection, and on no previous journey have I made dearer and kinder friends, or those from whom I parted more regretfully.7

Her record of her journey here, *Korea and Her Neighbours*, formed by that sympathetic attitude is no less an important resource for a Westerner’s view of the East than any of her other books.

In *Korea and Her Neighbours*, Isabella records the type of equipment which she carried with her on her journeys, rather spartan, especially when one remembers that she was 63 at the time she began this three year adventure. She says that:

I took a saddle, a trestle-bed with bedding and mosquito net, muslin curtains, a folding chair, two changes of clothing, Korean string shoes, and a “regulation” waterproof cloak: Besides, I took green tea, curry powder, and 20 lbs. of flour. I discarded all superfluities, such as flasks, collapsing cups, hand mirrors, teapots, sandwich tins, lamps, and tinned soups, meats, bouillon, and fruits. The kitchen equipment consisted of a Japanese brazier for charcoal, a shallow Japanese pan and frying-pan, and a small kettle, with charcoal tongs, the whole costing under two dollars!...Tables, trays, tablecloths, and sheets were from thenceforth unknown luxuries. I mention my outfit, because I know it to be a sufficient one, and that every pound of superfluous weight adds to the difficulty of getting transport in Korea and in many other countries.8

Her three years in the Orient were not confined to Korea alone, for Isabella made extensive journeys in China as well. In 1895, she visited China, Japan and revisited Korea. During her stay in Japan, she founded the John Bishop Memorial Orphanage in Tokyo. In 1896, she pressed on to China, first going to Shanghai and then travelling up the Yangtze River. She left the Yangtze at Ch’engtu in Szechuan Province proceeding overland toward Tibet. It had been her intention to explore part of that mountainous country, but she had to turn back because of tribal warfare amongst some of the non-Chinese tribes en route. She went back to Ch’engtu and [page 49] returned via water to Shanghai, making a total journey by boat of some 2,000 miles. At the end of the year she returned to Korea and made some final observations about Christian mission work here. Judging from Isabella’s remarks about some early women missionaries in Pusan, she strongly felt that mission work should not be conducted from a compound but by living as had these ladies amongst the people.

By January of 1897, as Isabella contemplated going home to Britain, she could look back over a journey of 8,000 miles, 2,000 of which had been by inland water, and which had taken her to Japan, Korea, Siberia, Manchuria, and Central China. It was not only her most extensive journey, but her most comparative one as well, for she could compare at first hand the livelihood and social conditions of three peoples under various circumstances. Isabella had also caught the fever of living in the Far East and was reluctant to return home to Britain. In a letter dated January 23, 1897, addressed to John Murray, her publisher, she writes:

I feel very loth to leave (Korea). Indeed I am returning to England with a very bad grace. I am far more at home in Tokyo and Seoul than any place in Britain except Tobermory, and I very much prefer life in the East to life at home.

1898 was a busy year for Isabella. *Korea and Her Neighbours* was published and it proved to be an immediate success. Two thousand copies were sold in the first year, from which Isabella made a profit of £550. She lectured again before the British Association for the Advancement of Science on the topic of “The Valley of the Yangtze.” In the following year, her record of travel in China was published under the title Yangtze Valley and Beyond followed in 1900 by the publication of two volumes of photographs which she had taken in the Far East. The first one, *Chinese Pictures*, was published in Britain, but the second book *Views in the Far East*, was published in Tokyo, her only book to be published in the Orient.

As she and her sister had for many years, Isabella took up residence in the remote Scottish village of Tobermory on the island of Mull off the west coast of Scotland. During 1899 and 1900 she waged a war against the intemperance of the local villagers, but to no avail. This was perhaps the only battle which Isabella had ever lost. In January of 1901, she left on a journey to Morocco, in the course of which travel she rode over a thousand miles by horse and camel. She was seventy years of age. Her vigor so impressed the youthful Sultan of Morocco that when Isabella wished His Highness long life, he expressed the hope that he might be as active at her age. Although she spent some six months in this North African kingdom, [page 50] it did not sufficiently interest her, and she never wrote up her impressions in book form. It also proved to be her final earthly journey.

In August of 1902, Isabella began packing her bags for another trip to China, but fell ill and was never able to make the journey. She initially spent some time in a nursing home, but her indominatable spirit refused to be confined by medical or nursing routine. She wrote to a friend:

I am not going to be a cipher any longer.

and moved out immediately. She finally took up residence at 18 Melville Street in the elegant Georgian New Town of Edinburgh where she died on October 7,1904. It is a fitting memorial to this great lady traveller that her final earthly home is presently the Scottish headquarters for the Automobile Association.

In this lecture, I hope that I have indicated to the listener that Mrs. Isabella Bird Bishop was not only a great adventuress possessed of great powers of observation and courage, but that she was a women devoted to the cause of the betterment of humanity through what she saw as the advancement of Christianity. She was a principled lady of causes who took seriously the implications of her faith. I hope that it is also clear, as it has become clear to me in reading her books, that she not only led an exciting life, but that she would have been an interesting friend as well.

**NOTES**

1. As most of the information in this lecture is taken from the standard biographies of the life of Mrs. Bishop, only that material which is actually quoted from the writings of Mrs. Bishop is footnoted here. Letters quoted here from the manuscript collection of the National Library of Scotland are not footnoted.

2. Unbeaten Tracks in Japan, p. xxiii.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid, p. xxiv.

5. The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither, p. 271.

6. Korea and Her Neighbours, p.5.

7. Ibid, p. 459.

8. Ibid, p. 67.

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