

OLIPHANT, LAURENCE (1829-1888)

The only child of Sir Anthony Oliphant and his wife Maria, Laurence Oliphant was born at Cape Town in 1829. Oliphant's father was the Cape's attorney-general and, like Oliphant's mother, an evangelical. Oliphant returned to Europe with his mother due to her poor health, and though he attended school in Salisbury, his education was frequently interrupted by travel. Oliphant's father was knighted and appointed Chief Justice of Ceylon in 1839, and was soon joined there by his wife and son. Oliphant was tutored in Ceylon but his education remained significantly interrupted by travel; from 1846-8, for example, he accompanied his parents on a tour of Europe rather than starting at Cambridge as had been intended. During his travels, Oliphant witnessed some popular uprisings in Italy which left a significant impression. Oliphant returned to Ceylon with his parents and began work as his father's private secretary.

Oliphant went to the bar in Ceylon and enjoyed great success. He returned to England in 1852 and began studying for the bar in England and Scotland, before travelling to Russia and the Crimea. Oliphant travelled with his friend Oswald Smith to St Petersburg, and then entered Sebastopol in disguise, later publishing some of his reminiscences in *The Russian Shores of the Black Sea* (1853). Upon the outbreak of the Crimean War, Oliphant communicated his first-hand observations to Lord Raglan, and he was invited to write for the *Daily News*. In 1855, Oliphant was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn, but his subsequent career was dominated by diplomacy rather than law

A *Daily News* correspondent from 1852 onwards, Oliphant also contributed to the *London Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*. He established *The Owl* in 1864 and contributed to its first ten issues. Best-known for his work for *The Times*, Oliphant had been a war correspondent with Omar Pasha's army from October to November of 1855 and later described his experiences in *The Trans-Caucasian Campaign of the Turkish Army under Omar Pasha. A Personal Narrative* (1856). While officially undertaken for diplomatic purposes, Oliphant's travels were equally motivated by his desire to obtain copy for writing popular reflections on his travel; he famously accepted the invitation to accompany *The Times'* editor John Delane to the United States on the basis of the book he would be able to write as a result of his travels. Oliphant also reported as special correspondent from France during Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Whilst engaged in such assignments, Oliphant also managed to write his popular satire, *Piccadilly* (1870), through which he aimed to critique the upper echelons of society.

Much of Oliphant's witnessing of major events was serendipitous and occurred during the course of his secretarial and diplomatic travels. In 1854, Oliphant was appointed secretary to Lord Elgin during treaty negotiations with Canada at Washington. He travelled to Quebec with Lord Elgin, for example, and in 1855 was appointed superintendent of Indian affairs in Quebec which enabled his journey to Lake Superior and back via the Mississippi, which he later described in *Minnesota and the Far West* (1855). On one journey in 1855 to the Crimea with Lord Stratford de Redcliffe en route to the Caucasus, Oliphant witnessed part of the Siege of Sebastopol. On subsequent trips, he travelled to Calcutta with Lord Elgin, went to Hong Kong and witnessed the bombing of Canton, and saw the siege of Tientsin. Oliphant then travelled in China and Japan from 1857 to 1859, and published *Narrative of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan* in 1859, before returning to Europe in 1860. He visited Italy that year, and Montenegro the following year before being appointed first secretary of legation in Japan. He arrived at Yeddo in June 1861 and less than a month later he was badly injured during an attack on the embassy, which forced his return to England and his official resignation from diplomatic service in 1862. This, in fact,

provided cover for several unofficial meetings such as his 1863 visit to Poland to witness the insurrection, and to report on the Prussian-Danish War.

In 1865, Oliphant was elected M.P. for Stirling but resigned his seat in 1867 to join the community of The Brotherhood of the New Life which had been founded by Thomas Luke Harris in the United States. Oliphant went to live in the community, where he undertook menial labour and donated all his money to the organisation. Returning to England in 1870 on Harris' instruction, Oliphant became a correspondent for *The Times* during the Franco-Prussian war. Not only were Oliphant's movements dictated by Harris, but so were those of his wife and mother who had also moved to the community. Oliphant soon discovered that his wife had moved to San Francisco with Harris and no contact was to be made between them. From 1879, Oliphant was preoccupied by a scheme to colonise Palestine with Jews but had no success. *The Land of Gilead, with Excursions in the Lebanon* of 1880 describes these experiences. Oliphant was rejoined by his wife in England in 1880, and by 1881 was doubtful about Harris' community and managed to recover his property through legal proceedings. From 1882, Oliphant lived at Mount Carmel, Palestine, where he continued to argue for his colonisation scheme, though he continued to make trips to Europe and America. Known for his charm and honesty, Oliphant was widely mourned after his death on 23 December 1888 from lung cancer. **AD**

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