

## “Of every land the guest”: Aubrey de Vere’s travels

By his early thirties, Aubrey de Vere (1814-1902) was a seasoned traveller, having spent much of the years between his graduation from Trinity College Dublin in 1838 and the death of his father in 1846 away from the family estate at Curragh Chase, Co. Limerick, touring in England and Scotland, France, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Greece and Turkey. His experiences and his reflections on the meaning and significance of travel, and on issues of race, nationality, religion and culture, were highly influential in his life and in his writing, emerging in the poems he published in *The Search After Proserpine, Recollections of Greece, and Other Poems* (1843) and *Irish Odes and Other Poems* (1869), in his *Picturesque Sketches of Greece and Turkey* (1850), in his autobiographical *Recollections* (1897), in his response to Irish emigration in the 1840s and 1850s, and in his spiritual journey towards Rome – he converted to Catholicism in 1851.

### **Anti-tourism and the Picturesque**

De Vere was a classic “anti-tourist”, viewing travel as a bracing escape from luxury and privilege, disapproving of modern conveniences and vehicles that speeded up the process, and scornful of his fellow citizens abroad who were too mindful of their dinner or accommodation. As James Buzard points out, the range of meanings that had accumulated around the words “tourist” (cautious, pampered, unoriginal) and “traveller” (bold, enduring, pioneering) by the mid-nineteenth century, led to the development of a “Snobbish ‘anti-tourism’” which “offered an important, even exemplary way of regarding one’s own cultural experiences as authentic and unique, setting them against a backdrop of always assumed tourist vulgarity, repetition, and ignorance” (1993, 5). Even a trip to London in the spring of 1841 offered such an opportunity. De Vere travelled to Dublin “by a circuitous route, selected

for its beauty – one by Waterford and Wicklow”, then from Liverpool to London in “a very zigzag” direction, taking in Tintern Abbey, Bristol, Bath and Oxford, “for I hated the travelling that sacrifices the beautiful or the historical for the sake of speed” (1897, 108, 114.) One of his fellow-travellers on the steam-ship from Kingstown and train from Liverpool was Daniel O’Connell. Although O’Connell was going to London on parliamentary business rather than as a tourist, he managed to raise de Vere’s anti-tourist hackles. If, as Buzard suggests, “Abroad, the tourist is the relentless representative of home” (8), this is what O’Connell represents for de Vere: O’Connell insists on the superiority of Ireland and its manufactures (there is no fishing like that in the streams near Dublin, he tells the steward on the steamship, and he orders a companion not to eat an egg, as it comes from Liverpool “and you pledged yourself to consume no English manufactures”); he is indifferent to the English landscape (he kindly surrenders his window-seat on the train to a little girl so she can count sheep and cows); and he recites passages from Emmet’s speech and Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (de Vere 1897, 110-12). Good-humoured, crafty and confident, a wonderful man but, in de Vere’s view, misguided, O’Connell carries home with him wherever he goes, his “arrogant little sailor’s cap, with a good deal of gold lace about it” (109) an ironic counterpoint to his inability to travel (at least in England) authentically.

An encounter with another Irishman in Switzerland in 1839 offered an even greater opportunity for oppositional self-definition. At his hotel near the Handeck Waterfall, before which de Vere had stood long in reverent contemplation, he met a rather disgruntled tourist, socially skewered by de Vere on the basis of his conversation alone as “a Dublin shopkeeper resting himself after his labours by a holiday”, who was adamant that nothing in Switzerland could match the beauty offered by Ireland. The Handeck waterfall, which he refused to even go to see, could not compare to the O’Sullivan Cascade at Killarney; when de Vere suggested it was ten times higher and six times broader, he retorted “And tell me this now! Could not

you take a magnifying glass to it?” As for the mountains of the Mont Blanc range, “I am after walking along the Chamouni Valley for three days, and I only saw four of those mountains! Sure in Wicklow I have counted as many as eight of them in three hours!” (de Vere 1897, 101-2). The Dubliner was convinced the English guests in the hotel had persuaded the guide to trick him by luring him up supposedly first-rate mountains, and offered de Vere as a fellow Irishman the benefit of his insight and protection. Such patriotic partisanship is not limited to ignorant tourists, however. Even de Vere’s friend and mentor, William Wordsworth, was prone to claim that English mountains were superior, and was subject to gentle teasing by de Vere. Standing before Parnassus, de Vere quotes Wordsworth’s “Skiddaw”: “What was the great Parnassus’ self to thee, / Mount Skiddaw!”, commenting that “the venerable bard had in this instance exhibited more of patriotic sentiment than of that profound appreciation of nature which characterises his poetry more than any other existing” (de Vere 1850, I 43-4). Wordsworth suggested that English mountains were quite as grand as “those boasted Swiss mountains” – at least “when the clouds hang low” rendering half of them unseen. De Vere, knowing his man, wisely did not argue, and after a pause, Wordsworth continued: ““But I must admit, *you know that they are there.*” His characteristic veracity triumphed unaided over his patriotism – when he met with no opposition” (de Vere 1897, 125). While de Vere was no champion of his own native mountains, he found it difficult to accept the negative emotional responses of others to landscapes he loved. De Vere’s excitement at introducing his friend, the poet and civil servant Sir Henry Taylor, and Taylor’s wife Alice (de Vere’s cousin), to Lake Lucerne and the Swiss Alps turned to dismay when Taylor made it clear he found the scenery oppressive and distressing; de Vere persisted in trying various locations out on him, in the hope that it would come right, but Taylor’s settled antipathy “rubbed my sympathies the wrong way”, and a final trial, leading Taylor to “pray to Heaven I may never see mountains *of this sort* again”, caused de Vere to storm off at this insult to “my mountains” (1897, 149-

51).

This sensitivity may have increased his leaning towards solitary travel; while de Vere spent much of 1843-4 in Italy with the Taylors, and climbed in the Alps with a friend and two guides, his preference seems to have been to travel alone, and the speakers of his poems about travel characteristically present themselves as Romantic solitaries. He begins his poem “Sophocles”: “Alone I wandered through a city lone” (1843, 132 l. 1); and ends “St Peter’s by Moonlight”: “Alone I stood, a stranger and alone, / Changed by that stony miracle to stone” (1869, 293 ll. 13-14). While in Switzerland, he walked with only a guidebook and a change of linen tied in a handkerchief, doing without guides, who “would have cost too much, and interfered with my liberty”, suspicious even of mules, as “I will not affirm positively that they are judges of the picturesque: but the spots where the views are finest are those where they rest while the traveller admires, and if I had passed such spots by, I had no doubt that they would have looked upon me as an idiot” (1897, 93). As an “anti-tourist”, he rejected the still developing infrastructure of continental tourism, the ease and profligacy and prescription of leisure travel, for a more hardy and unique experience. While he accepted and used a guidebook – unnamed, but quite possibly one of ubiquitous handbooks John Murray began publishing in the late 1830s – he resisted being herded like the ordinary traveller. His independence, and ignorance of German, almost resulted in tragedy, when he took the wrong path on his way to Interlaken, and narrowly avoided falling to his death in the dark; and to humorous encounters, as when he had to resort to charades in Munich to get the driver to take him to The Golden Stag (1897, 93-8, 106).

Such hardships are character-building: “one of the benefits we should derive from travelling is an emancipation from the bondage of comforts” he claimed, a benefit of particular value to the “effeminate children of the west” who could hardly feed or clothe themselves without servants (1850, I 47, 178). Part of this emancipation is a lack of reliance

on the technology and timetables of modern travel. Had there been a steamer from Patras to Corinth, he probably would have taken it, but to have foregone the four-day ride through an exquisite landscape would have been a huge mistake (1850, I 58). Initially frustrated at missing the Austrian steamer from Patras to Corfu, he rebuked himself in retrospect for being “so blinded by a traveller’s superstitious devotion to his own arrangements, as to have regretted the prospect of another fortnight spent in Greece” (1850, II 70). The necessity of travelling on horseback rather than by carriage is one of the hardships identified in the “Maxims and Hints for Travelling in the East” in Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in the Ionian Islands, Greece, Turkey, Asia Minor, and Constantinople*, but also one of the benefits: “You are in immediate contact with nature. Every circumstance of scenery and climate becomes of interest and value, and the minutest incident of country, or of local habits cannot escape observation” (1840, i). Yet even this was suspiciously easy and speedy for de Vere. After a delightful five-hour gallop on the plain of Marathon, what he chose to take away as a symbolic souvenir was a cedar walking stick, a descendant, he hoped, of weapons used against the Persians, but also a remnant of the most ancient form of travel (1850, I 210). His horses frequently prove to be lame or otherwise unreliable: one having “two serious defects” – “he would not go on unless I gave him a loose rein, and he could not stand on his legs unless I held the bridle tight” – de Vere insisted on walking from Salona to Delphi instead, despite his servant’s remonstrations, and otherwise would have missed the finest scenery in Europe (1850, II 8, 15). Immersed in the glorious light of Greece, surrounded by the most perfectly picturesque scenery either nature or ancient monuments could offer, why would one choose to rush onwards?

This resistance to the modern extends also to signs of change or “improvement” in the cities he visits; he particularly disapproves of accommodations made for tourists, such as the public places devoted to billiards and cards at Vostizza, or at Athens the “usual vulgarities of

a metropolis – cafés, restaurants, a theatre, and hotels” (1850, I 43, 145). He disliked as particularly inauthentic the entertainments that had grown up around tourism, and sights other travel writers urged their readers to see. The dancing Dervishes of Constantinople, or the Public Baths, descriptions of which “abound in every book of eastern travel, from the days of Lady Mary Wortley Montague to our own”, were far too public for de Vere’s liking: “nor can I believe that, either for health or cleanliness, it is necessary to allow oneself to be kneaded like dough, pommelled like a feather-bed, or scoured like the bars of a grate” (1850, II 246-7). The resounding note is fear that the past is fast disappearing, to be replaced by something infinitely inferior. He half-seriously wished that all Greece had suffered the fate of Pompeii, to be rediscovered inviolate by him (1850, I 35-6).

De Vere foregrounds the picturesque in the title of *Picturesque Sketches of Greece and Turkey*, but does not appear to have been particularly committed to the idea, using the term, as many nineteenth-century travellers did, “in the manner of British gentlemen – with a certain nonchalance, without learned pedantry, with occasional contradictions” (Schiffer 1999, 94). In *Recollections*, he associated it with a rather superficial outlook, commenting of Wordsworth that “It was by no means the picturesque aspects of Nature which affected him most – it was a something far more serious and absorbing” (1897, 123). Whereas for Gilpin, people were not of interest to the picturesque eye except “as the ornament of scenes” (1792, 44), for de Vere they were inseparable from the scene: “In every country we observe an analogy between the scenery and the character of the people” (1850, II 5-6). The national costume was not simply local colour, but an indictment of western dress, and de Vere was distressed to discover in both Greece and Turkey the introduction of “those more modern habiliments, invented, apparently, to shew how like monkeys men can make themselves” (I 163).

For de Vere, the five finest cities of Europe “regarded as architectural scenes in

combination with picturesque natural effects” were Constantinople, Naples, Venice, Genoa, and Edinburgh (1850, II 113). But he was much more interested in their moral worth; the speaker of “Ode on Leaving Italy” is dejected by signs of decay in cities such as Venice, Genoa, Rome and Florence: “Fair, sculptured shapes recalled the Past”, but beauty is “Descending fast to death and ruin!”: “’Tis going – It is gone”. This is largely the fault of its modern citizens; there are no Dantes, Petrarchs, Raphaels or Virgils to save modern Italy, only “men too abject to be free” (1843, 107-113). Perhaps most bitter is his poem “A Farewell to Naples”, dated 1844 which, following two stanzas of praise for the glorious landscape surrounding the city ends with a devastating “last adieu”:

From her whom genius never yet inspired,  
 Nor virtue raised, nor pulse heroic fired;  
 From her who, in the grand historic page,  
 Maintains one barren blank from age to age;  
 From her, with insect life and insect buzz,  
 Who, evermore unresting, nothing does;  
 From her who, with the future and the past  
 No commerce holds, no structure rears to last;  
 From streets where spies and jesters, side by side,  
 Range the rank markets, and their gains divide;  
 Where Faith in Art, and Art in sense is lost,  
 And toys and gewgaws form a nation’s boast;

Where Passion, from Affection's bond cut loose,

Revels in orgies of its own abuse;

And Appetite, from Passion's portals thrust,

Creeps on its belly to its grave of dust; (1869, 70 ll. 60-75)

This is a city so dissipated and monotonous that the king's brother is reduced for entertainment to stripping the beds in his palace in the hunt for fleas (1897, 161).

De Vere was still an Anglo-Irish Protestant on his first visits to Rome, but one whose family had supported Catholic Emancipation, and who was slowly being drawn towards Catholicism himself. He did not suffer from the religious phobia that afflicted some British travellers there, who insisted on attending Catholic masses but only to sneer and disrupt: on one occasion, Mrs Trollope was told, the silence of the transubstantiation was broken by popping champagne corks (Pemble 1987, 212). Yet even Rome, whose majestic architecture inspired the individual poems of de Vere's "Urbs Roma" on St Peter's, the Sistine Chapel, the Pillar of Trajan, the Catacombs, the Appian Way and the Coliseum; even Rome, which "is rest to those who understand it" (de Vere 1897, 175), was potentially oppressive to the mind of the traveller. Victorian and Edwardian travellers to the cities of Italy and Greece frequently "fed on a penitential diet of erudition and then sacrificed themselves to a remorseless regime of museums, galleries, monuments, ruins, and churches" (Pemble 1987, 68). The speaker of de Vere's "A Wanderer's Musings at Rome" has been diligent in this duty: "From wreck to wreck I roamed: my very dreams / Nested in obscure haunts and vaults unhealthy". At last he is forced to flee from the city to a secluded nook, to hide away from the weight of history:

No legend haunts it. Unalarmed I turn,

Confronted by no despot from the grave,



By no inscription challenged. If this spot

Was trod of old by consul or by King,

It is my privilege to be ignorant: (1869, 110 ll. 64-5, 13-17)

In a reversal of anti-tourist rhetoric, this traveller recoils from culture and clings instinctively to a more healthy ignorance. The Wanderer temporarily adopts a picturesque outlook in rejecting Art for Nature; for him Rome is polluted by the death of Art, whose “soul-less body, stretched across the street, / Blocks up the public ways”, whereas “Nature lives!” (114 ll. 128-9, 174). But the pealing of the bells of the city’s many churches, and their reminder of its religious history, revives him and draws him back: “Great Rome is mine at last!” (120 l. 319).

The word de Vere most frequently uses for his travels is “pilgrimage”, and in spite of often humorous adventures, there is an intense seriousness in his search for the quintessence of a place that goes beyond the picturesque survey described by Gilpin; like Coleridge, de Vere “borrowed and extended” the picturesque into a search for the whole, for “meaningful contact with what these places essentially were” (Buzard 1993, 10). In Constantinople, he refused to look at the antiquities first:

The original impression which we receive of anything great, whether in nature or in art, is of the utmost importance; and it is absolutely lost if we do not endeavour to take in, as a whole, the object which we can afterwards examine with reference to its several parts (1850, II 116).

His awareness that he was “travelling [...] through time as through space, amid a world half-visionary and half-historical” (I 24) required a remarkably fine balance and intensity of focus to achieve, which he described as “moral temperance” (I 118):

The great art of seeing things in travel consists in the management of the mind. If we

visit an interesting spot without having read or thought enough about it to render the mind apprehensive, we either miss its historical interest altogether, or are reduced to study our guide book, when we should be looking around us, and to learn our lesson instead of enjoying our feast. If on the other hand we have thought over the matter too eagerly, and too often, the reality is sure to fall short of our expectation (I 67-8).

Without the proper spiritual and intellectual perspective, there was little point in travelling. He would have preferred never to have seen Athens at all than to have seen it in the unthinking manner of too many travellers. His approach is ethical and philosophical as much as – if not more than – aesthetic.

### **Greece and Turkey, Ireland and England**

De Vere went to Greece and Turkey in the spring of 1840, and the experience bore early fruit in the poems he published in 1843, such as “A Night at Corfu”, “Lines Written Under Delphi”, “Sonnet written at the Tomb of Agamemnon”, “The Acropolis of Athens”, and “Constantinople”, but it was not until 1850 that he published his *Picturesque Sketches of Greece and Turkey*.<sup>1</sup> His travel book is deliberately structured to reinforce a growing sense of alienation in his movement from the Ionian Islands, through Greece into Turkey. While de Vere visited Constantinople after Athens, then returned to Greece to continue his tour, he disrupts the chronology in his record of his journey to save his experience of Constantinople for last: chapter 11 of Volume I describes his experience of quarantine on his return from Constantinople, while chapter 4 of Volume II onwards deals with his voyage to Constantinople and time in Turkey, and the book ends with the overheated image of the crescent of the waning moon dropping into the ocean to the sound of thunder, suggesting the Turks are destined to be driven out of Constantinople in their turn, probably to be supplanted

by the Russians (1850, II 282-3).

Greece was in many ways uncannily familiar, as the source of western civilisation and culture, and yet strange and hybrid in its influences and colonial history: “Travelling around Greece Europeans envisaged themselves remaining within the bounds of a familiar culture at the same time as Greece was defined in dichotomous terms as an exotic, Asiatic Other” (Peckham 1999, 172). The landscape of Greece seemed immediately recognizable to de Vere, each spot sacred to Ulysses, Nausicaa, Sappho, Sophocles or Byron, or the warriors of Marathon. “Strange memories, and something more than memories, seemed to stir within me, as, leaving the islands behind, we drew near to ancient Hellas” (1850, I 30); to visit the Acropolis was “to see your own old thoughts rising up from behind prostrate pillar or broken frieze” (I 70).

The sense of uncanny familiarity may have been enhanced for de Vere by beginning his tour in the Ionian Islands, a British protectorate since 1815. Pemble suggests the islands were “virtually unknown” to British travellers in this period, beyond a few eccentrics astray (1987, 47), but interest was clearly increasing as transport links improved. John Murray published his *Handbook for Travellers in the Ionian Islands, Greece, Turkey, Asia Minor, and Constantinople* in 1840, recommending the picturesque scenery of Corfu, whose capital is much improved “since it was placed under British protection” (1840, 3, 5). De Vere experienced the colonial machinery, attending a party for the Queen’s birthday at the Lord High Commissioner’s Palace at Corfu, and witnessing the prorogation of parliament, which, he commented ironically, “illustrated well the meaning of our British ‘protection,’ and the freedom of the Ionian republic”; the Senators, “much-complimented, and somewhat bewildered”, were clearly powerless, dominated and manipulated by their British masters (de Vere 1850, I 15-16). Even outside the Protectorate, Britain’s legacy of cultural appropriation in Greece both added to de Vere’s sense of comforting familiarity, and his resentment. At the

Parthenon, de Vere remarked that Britain's "hospitality" to portions of the Panathenaic procession in the British Museum made him feel "as if I were meeting old friends", though he was glad to see at least part of it "still holds its ground where it has a better right to be" (I 80). He hoped the Caryatide from the Temple of Minerva Polias, which, having been carried off by Lord Elgin "enjoys the British Protectorate", might also be restored to its proper place (I 91).

The Ionian Greeks may also have been strangely familiar. They were, de Vere announced, 'a false people':

Seldom, even by accident, do they say the thing that is; and never are they ashamed of being detected in a lie. [...] The Ionian Greeks are also greatly deficient in industry. They do not care to improve their condition; their wants are few, and they will do little work beyond that of picking up the olives which fall from the tree (I 10-11).

Substitute digging potatoes for picking up olives, and this could be a typical description of the Irish peasant, who had long appeared to English eyes as "dirty, lazy, dishonest and violent" (Foster 1989, 25), a fact of which de Vere could not have been unaware. The comparison of poorer Greeks and Italians to the Irish was frequently made by British travellers, "a measure of the depth to which their assessment [...] could sink" (Pemble 1987, 238). Maria Paschalidi describes the situation of the Ionian Greeks within the British Empire as strongly resembling that of the Irish: unlike those colonies where skin colour was an obvious marker of difference, they were white and Christian, but nonetheless "children", "corrupt", "immoral", and "dirty", and therefore in need of government (2009, 41-3). Yet de Vere avoided explicitly relating the negative aspects he saw in the Greeks to the Irish, choosing to emphasise instead more positive analogies: the arbutus in full flower at Marathon reminded him of Killarney, "though in Greece I have seen none comparable in size with those

of Mucruss and Dinis” (I 173), or the Greeks and the Irish shared an ardent thirst for knowledge, “and their apprehension is so quick that they can master in a few months what others would require years to learn” (I 248). He also considered the significance for nationalists in both countries of being surrounded by ancient monuments: confronted by these signs of former glory in the landscape, even the orators and politicians of a colonised country could not fail to be inspired, which was, he noted, “one of the arguments on which Grattan laid most stress, when resisting the Legislative Union between Great Britain and Ireland” (I 151). The Acropolis he compared to the Rock of Cashel – though the dilapidation of the latter is described as an “act of barbarism” (I 136-7). It is notable that the final passage of de Vere’s *Recollections* reverts to this comparison of the ancient literature and monuments of Greece and Ireland; *The Tain* is Ireland’s *Argonautic Expedition*, or *Seven Against Thebes*, and fortifications such as Dun Aengus, New Grange, Knowth and Dowth offered to Irish warriors “a background in harmony with them”, but also “resembling the tomb of Agamemnon and the huge ruins at Mycenè” (1897, 374).

These associations were part of a much longer tradition of associating Ireland with the East. Joseph Lennon notes that comparisons between Asia and Ireland were established in ancient Greco-Roman texts “amid connections between Ireland and all borderlands” (Lennon 2004, 8). But alongside this colonial strategy of estrangement and abasement developed a more complex self-identification by Irish writers with the East, which Leerssen calls “*auto-exoticism*”, particularly among Anglo-Irish writers who did not share the “heritage of hegemonistic representations and cultural victimization” of the Irish, Greek or Arab poor (Leerssen 1998, 169, 166-7). Antiquarians and philologists traced and celebrated similarities in the rituals, monuments and languages of Ireland and Eastern countries. In his series of articles, translations and pastiches of Persian and Turkish poetry published in the *Dublin University Magazine* between 1837 and 1846, James Clarence Mangan frequently drew

comparisons between Irish and Oriental literature, history and politics, and refers to the theories of Charles Vallancey on the Oriental origins of the Irish language: “According to Vallancey every Irishman is an Arab” (Mangan 2002, 7).

In his preface to his lyrical chronicle of Ireland, *Inisfail*, de Vere describes Ireland as “an Eastern nation in the West” (1863, xiv), expanding this description in a later version to further increase Ireland’s strangeness: “She was an Eastern nation in the West, and a Southern in the North” (1877, ix). Son of an Anglo-Irish landlord (who was himself a well-regarded poet), nephew of Lord Monteagle (who had served as secretary to the Treasury, colonial secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer, and who was keen to have Ireland renamed “West Britain”), friend of Wordsworth and Tennyson, de Vere was far from peripheral to the British political or literary establishment. But by the time he came to publish *Picturesque Sketches*, his sense of his own nationality had shifted, in large part due to the experience of the Great Famine, much of which de Vere spent in the harrowing relief effort on his family’s estate in Co. Limerick. His anger that not just the starving, but Irish landlords who in his view bore the brunt of both blame and taxation during the crisis, had been abandoned by the British government, emerged in his *English Misrule and Irish Misdeeds* (1848), and with it his feeling that his class were being forced to make a choice between Ireland, “the mother who fed our bodies with her milk”, and England, “who nursed our spirits from the stores of Shakspeare [sic] and Bacon” (260). The choice for de Vere was clear:

There never was a time when I did not feel Ireland to be my country; and the stormy scorn with which for a year and more you have assailed her, trampling upon her in the hour of her sorest adversity, and embittering the flavour of the bread you gave, has pressed that sentiment around me with a closeness for which I thank you (1848, 259).

While de Vere never identifies himself as an Irishman in *Picturesque Sketches*, his

encounters with Englishmen in the Ionian Islands and Greece offered opportunities to criticise and detach himself from them, and they are grouped into objects of his anti-tourist satire, and stereotyped as soulless, ignorant, mechanical materialists. An odd episode during a festival in Athens sees de Vere lectured by a Scot about the reasons why childlike and volatile races like the Greeks (and presumably also the Irish and the Scots) were not capable of self-government – while the English – and camels – were, “because, absorbed as they are in industrialism, they happen to want next to no government” (I 132-3). Travelling from Zante to Patras in an English steamer, de Vere was struck by the impassive stolidity of newly-arrived Englishmen:

I gazed almost with awe at their smooth-brushed hats, which the Egean breezes hardly dared to ruffle, – their unblemished coats, and immaculate boots, on which several of them gazed more attentively than they would have done at the Leucadian rock. [...] Had a whale risen close beside us and spouted its foam in their faces, they would, I believe, have contented themselves with observing that “it was not in good taste.” To one of them I spoke, by way of experiment, of Sappho’s leap and the Leucadian rock; “Yes,” he replied, “I have heard that it was the scene of a distressing accident” (I 28-9).

De Vere acknowledged them to be gentlemen, patriotic, dutiful and honourable, but it is clear that none of that excuses their Philistinism. They proved hard to escape during his time in Greece. His enjoyment of the Acropolis was interrupted by an Englishman who “passed his time there chiefly in prophesying concerning his dinner”; worst of all was stumbling upon the English *en masse*, desecrating the ruins with luncheon and bottles of English porter (I 146, 68-9). In spite of the fact his travel book was published in London, he felt free to execrate

that universal nuisance, the all-seeing English traveller – the traveller of that class, I

mean (for to no nation do more intelligent travellers belong also) who scribble their names on the walls of temples, write witty criticisms in the stranger's book at inns, are always paying too much, and raving about extortion, depreciate everything that is not like what they are used to, swallow an infinite quantity of dust, and return home with as much knowledge and worse morals than they took with them (I 145).

No doubt he felt assured that most of his English readers would identify themselves as "intelligent" rather than "nuisance" travellers, and agree with him about "the traveller of that class" who must be avoided.

However, the closer he came to Constantinople, the more his anti-English rhetoric evaporated in the face of his antipathy for Islamic culture. The French man-of-war that had engaged to take him and a group of other travellers to Constantinople abandoned them at Syra, to de Vere's fury; when a French steamer arrived, de Vere delivered "an oration full of sublimity and pathos, insisting on the law of nations, the honour of the French flag, insult to the English nation, and the rights of man; – in the midst of which the vessel steamed off, splashing us all over with the spray from her paddles" (II 77). Given the other travellers were Greeks, Turks, Jews and Armenians, de Vere was the only representative of "the English nation" there to be insulted. His eventual arrival at the bay of Smyrna was delayed when the French ship ran aground, an indignity in stark contrast to the fine English ships anchored there, which inspired de Vere's poem "The English Fleet at Smyrna":

Where spread the ocean levels

Old England rules and revels;

Her palace dome is Heaven,

And the sea her palace floor! (1843, 99 ll. 29-32)



The “Rule Britannia” mentality may have as much to do with his encounters with the French as the Turks at this stage of his journey, but it is a position which solidified in the course of his time there. The Greek cicerone who offered to take him directly to the antiquities of Constantinople was much surprised at his desire to ride randomly through the city, but accepted with a good grace:

Eccentricities pass for nothing on the continent if they come from an Englishman. If costly as well as unreasonable in their character, they find their place, of course, in the bill; if not, they hardly excite a remark, the general opinion, in many places, being that all Englishmen are more or less mad [...] (1850, II 117).

De Vere did nothing to correct his guide’s impression, either of his nationality or his sanity.

Constantinople seems to have been a step too far for de Vere; while Italy, France and Greece were so familiar as to seem “part of your country”, yet different enough to offer stimulation to the imagination, Turkey was overwhelmingly alien:

A diversity between the customs and manners of a foreign country and of our own tends naturally to excite, not to repress, interest, if that diversity be not too great; but where, in addition to usages the most remote from ours, and aspirations antagonistic, as well as a different language and race, we are opposed also by that wide gulf which separates the Oriental from the Western, and the Mahometan from the Christian, the affections can find no grappling points, and the stranger, a stranger still, however long his sojourn, is thrown upon nature for companionship, and on his own thoughts for friends (II 221-2).

In Constantinople, he became a Frank, deeply aware of the eyes of a silent, secretive, reclusive populace, and the isolation he had valued in roaming through Europe was now

depressing. In the bazaar, the traders fastened immediately on the “unwary Frank” the moment he strayed into view (II 132), and during one of the accidental conflagrations to which the city was prone, and which the whole populace turned out to watch as if it were the Opera, he was warned that while locals viewed this as entertainment, any signs of mirth on the part of a foreigner would lead to violence (II 152). At the Valley of Sweet Waters, a resort for the veiled beauties of Constantinople, a thoroughly Oriental scene ensued, complete with carriages drawn by white oxen, women reclining on crimson pillows, Persian carpets, Cashmere shawls, pipes, and sherbet, slaves, conjurors and storytellers, and “the strangest part of the spectacle – the Frank stranger, inquisitive and ill at ease, and looking as if he longed for business, sandwiches, and the *Times* newspaper, or even for *Galignani*” (II 173-4). His sense of difference from Englishmen or Frenchmen disappeared; he was first and foremost “a son of the West” now (II 223).

The two most prominent cultural differences de Vere was struck by were the practice of religion, and polygamy. Islam he regarded as a temporary imposition on the essentially Christian fabric of Constantinople. Polygamy he found illicitly intriguing. De Vere was fascinated by Turkish women, particularly the tantalising glimpses he caught of their smooth, pale faces and dreamy eyes behind veils and lattices. One of the few things he seemed to approve of in Turkish society was the subjection of women, both Muslim and Christian, which, he suggested, “like every other bondage long and willingly endured, has probably been maintained in consequence of the benefits it has conferred”, and which he compared favourably to the “misnamed liberty” of western women, particularly Parisian women, which resulted in less respect, security, virtue and happiness (II 162). However, like most travellers to the East, he was desperate to see inside a harem, and when an opportunity presented itself to become one of the very few European men to penetrate into this most secret enclave, he leapt at it. A Frenchman who had impressed the Sultan with conjuring tricks, and who had

subsequently been asked by a Turk to discover which of the women of his harem had stolen the ring of his favourite wife, determined to take this chance to force an entry into the harem, and offered to take de Vere with him. After a two-hour battle of wills they managed to persuade the husband that the only way to discover the criminal was to see all the women – four wives and six slaves; not only that, they administered electric shocks to them to keep up the ruse of interrogation. De Vere seems to have found this bizarre escapade an extremely enjoyable experience, and to have assumed (in spite of the potential danger and pain inflicted on them) that it was for the women also, particularly as the Frenchman managed to persuade the husband that the ring had simply been lost:

I have more than once thought, with pleasure, how amusing an incident the visit of the strangers must have been to the secluded beauties. No doubt the baths of Constantinople have rung with many a merry laugh occasioned by this invasion of the Franks. Never, perhaps, have the inmates of a harem seen so much of the infidel before, and conversed with him so familiarly, in the presence of their husband (II 220).

This symbolic adultery is revenge for the exclusion of the Frank from this city on the very edge of Europe.

### **Irish Colonization**

De Vere's travels took him only eastward; but during the Famine his older brother Stephen, who was in favour of assisted emigration following the closure of the Public Works scheme, travelled west with a group of Curragh Chase tenants who were emigrating to Canada.

Stephen de Vere not only organised and financed the journey in 1847, but travelled steerage

with the group on the passenger ship, and on arrival at Quebec stayed to help those who had fallen ill, and to settle the others in the city. His account of the journey was read out by Earl Grey, Secretary for the Colonies, in the House of Lords, leading to an inquiry into and eventual amendment of the Passenger Act (McCabe). “It is impossible to guess how many thousands of emigrants may have been saved by this enterprise” his proud brother declared (de Vere 1897, 253). De Vere’s reflections on the journey west taken by his fellow Irishmen emerged in the collection *Irish Odes and Other Poems* (1869), published for “those Irish ‘of the dispersion’”: “There now exist in America more of my Irish fellow-countrymen than remain in their native country”, and his desire was to encourage them to remain true to their history and religion (de Vere 1869, vi-vii). But *Irish Odes* also offers an optimistic outlook on the journey west. Like many of his contemporaries, de Vere was convinced that the Famine, in spite of the devastation it wreaked, was providential, and would lead Ireland to fulfil its destined role as a nation: “to the different nations different vocations are assigned by Providence”, he asserted in *Recollections*, “to one, an imperial vocation, to another, a commercial one; to Greece an artistic one, to Ireland, as to Israel, a spiritual one” (1897, 354). He suggests in “Ode VIII. The Desolation of the West” that Ireland’s consolation for its suffering in the Famine would come through “world-wide victories of her Faith” (1869, 48 l. 59). Ireland’s spiritual destiny would be wrought through travel, but this is less an exile than a colonisation.

*Irish Odes* is not solely concerned with Irish emigration – it also contains de Vere’s poems on his journeys to Naples, the Apennines, Delphi and Rome, providing a thematic framework of travel east and west, into the past and into the future. Nor are the emigrants depicted in his poems only Irish peasants fleeing westward; in the preface he states that Ireland’s “Sectarian Ascendancy” is “on the point of ceasing” (vii), and in “The Irish Gael to the Irish Norman; Or, The Last Irish Confiscation. 1850” describes the preparation of an

Anglo-Irish landlord, his estate swallowed up by the Famine, to emigrate to Australia. The Irish Gael warns the Irish Norman against emigrating to “the Britain of the southern sphere”; better a tropical island, better even a tomb in Italy, like Tyrconnell or Tyrone, than that (1869, 154 ll. 66, 5-6). Irish emigrants to England do not fare well; in “The Sisters”, Mary escapes the Famine but only to Liverpool, where she finds herself herded beyond the city limits with others of her nation:

A rough clan

Those outcasts seem'd; not like their race at home:

Nor chapel theirs, nor school. Their strength was prized;

Themselves were so esteem'd as that sad tribe

Beside the Babylonian streams that wept,

By those that loved not Sion (1869, 176 ll. 450-54).

The sonnet “Written in Cumberland, Sept. 1860” provides the ironic juxtaposition of the Irish missionaries who brought Christianity to Britain and present-day Irish migrants:

To-day the sons of Ireland, far and near,

Amerced of altar, priest, and sacrifice,

Like the blind laboring horse or harnessed steer,

Sweat in your fields! (1869, 39-40 ll. 9-12)

Ireland’s spiritual destiny clearly does not lie in this direction.

De Vere’s sonnet series “Irish Colonization. 1848” first appeared (as “Colonisation”) in the *Dublin University Magazine* in July 1849, following directly on from Samuel

Ferguson's "Dublin. A Poem. In Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal", whose speaker approves a friend's decision to leave Ireland and "shift his dwelling to the tents of Penn, / And give Columbia one more citizen" (Ferguson 1849, 102). Unlike Ferguson, de Vere signed his three sonnets, which excoriate England for what its "six hundred tyrannous years and more" have done to a "prostrate realm" (de Vere 1849, 110 ll. 9-10). Here emigration is figured as exodus, significantly with Grecian overtones:

Fell the tall pines! – thou nobler Argo leap,

Wide-winged deliverer, on the ocean floods;

And westward waft the astonished multitudes

That rot inert, and hideous Sabbath keep;

Or, stung to madness, guiltier ruin heap

On their own heads. No longer fabled gods

Subdue vext waves with tridents and pearl rods;

Yet round that barque heroic gods shall sweep,

And guard an infant nation (1849, 110 ll. 15-23).

The colonisation of Ireland has been disastrous, but colonisation *by* the Irish, the speaker prophesies, will be glorious. For the version in *Irish Odes*, de Vere adds two sonnets reinforcing the contrast of English and Irish colonisation; England has failed because it is a Firm rather than a Nation, but Ireland will succeed in founding an outpost of Britain and civilisation on the other side of the Atlantic:

Conquest I deem a vulgar pastime: trade

Shifts like the winds; and power but comes to go:

But this is glorious, o'er the earth to sow

The seed of Nations: darkness to invade

With light: to plant, where silence reigned and death,

The thrones of British law and towers of Christian faith (1869, 138 ll. 51-6)

Despite the fact that de Vere spent much of the Famine period in Ireland, and movingly described what he witnessed in *Recollections*, the speakers of his poems about the Famine are often distanced from it. In “Ode VII. After One of the Famine Years”, the speaker is a traveller experiencing a double vision: he is physically in the midst of the 1848 revolution in Paris, at the Champs de Mars, the Tuileries, the Invalides and the barricades, but simultaneously haunted by the cry of his native land, and auditory and visual hallucinations that call him away from the glory and pageantry of Paris back to Ireland. The Irish traveller, “of every land the guest”, is native only of one, “unlike the rest”, but eternally exiled (1869, 44 ll. 97, 99). In *Picturesque Sketches* de Vere stressed that his journey east was a journey into the past; but the journey west taken by his countrymen was into the future, and part of the natural progression of civilisation: “The European commonwealth thus inherited all that antiquity and the East had done and thought: – America inherits us” (1850, I 194-5). Nevertheless, the Irish, as either colonisers or recipients of American hospitality, would never be at entirely at home there, and Irish poetry, which “ponders the tear-blotted letter, and the lip-worn rosary [...] finds something which makes her tread the wanderer’s native land, and share with him the recollections of the Past” (1869, vii). It was de Vere’s mission as a poet and as a traveller to provide this bridge between the past and the future, east and west.

## Notes

1. Robert Welch's entry for de Vere in the *Dictionary of National Biography* states that he went to Greece and Turkey in 1843, but de Vere notes in his introduction to *The Search After Proserpine* that it was "written at Athens during the May of 1840", and "The poems immediately following, which relate to foreign scenes, were composed for the most part in the same Spring". He also dates his poem "Islam" "Constantinople, 1840" (de Vere 1843, vi, 137).

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