

Texts and Documents

JOHN NOTT, M.D. 1751–1825

THE ORIENTAL TRAVELS OF AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PHYSICIAN

by

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The recent reorganization of the Cathedral Library at Winchester has revealed seven manuscript journals of travel in Europe and the Far East covering the years 1775 to 1793. Examination of the volumes reveals that they were written by Dr. John Nott, M.D. (1751–1825). His executor was his nephew, George Frederick Nott, Prebendary of Winchester Cathedral from 1810 to 1841. Through him the volumes came into the hands of the Dean and Chapter and this is the first time that any part of their contents has been published.

Dr. Nott is a minor celebrity who receives rather more than two columns in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and is credited with twenty publications ranging from a translation of the *Basia* of Johannes Secundus to a *Chemical Dissertation on the Thermal Waters of Pisa*. When he died, a lengthy obituary appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for December 1825, and it seems that the article in the *Dictionary* is based on this notice. It is written by W. P. Courtney, who records that Nott studied medicine under Edmund Hector at Birmingham; and later under Sir Caesar Hawkins, the famous surgeon associated with St. George's Hospital, London. From London Nott went on to study in Paris. Courtney then continues: "About 1775 he [Nott] went to the Continent with an invalid gentleman, and stayed there for two years, when he returned to London."

It is at this stage that the journals begin to throw light on Courtney's account. The first volume records how he left London with his charge on 12 October 1775 and returned on 9 October 1776. Courtney's brief résumé is therefore not quite correct in the length of the stay abroad. But interesting as this journal is, the story of European travellers in the eighteenth century is not so unusual as the story of an oriental traveller at that time. The other five volumes covering Nott's European travels are: France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany (three volumes, 1787–1788); France, Italy, Switzerland, 1791, 1792; The Low Countries, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Holland, 1792, 1793. When these European travels are added to his oriental travels it will be seen that he was an indefatigable peripatetic.

However, it is the volume marked *INDIA* which is of most interest. It is a vellum-

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bound volume in excellent preservation, consisting of 360 pages (20 cm. x 16 cm.). Describing Nott's return from the Continent, Courtney, in his brief biography, says: "In 1783 he travelled to China, as surgeon in an East India Vessel, and during his absence of three years he learned the Persian language. In a note to his edition of Decker's *Gull's Hornbook*, he speaks of having witnessed Chinese plays in the streets of Canton (p.56 n.2. 1812)." It is this voyage which the Journal describes in such ample detail. Nott's writing covers 229 pages with a description of the voyage from 18 November 1783 to 5 June 1785. Then after seventy-seven blank pages he writes a number of appendices: *The Brahmin's Booth, or Moulagatauny i.e. Pepper-water; State of Cohong or Licensed Trading Merchants at Canton A.D. 1784*. Pages 312-326 are devoted to Chinese words and grammar. And finally there are two further appendices: *Daily Run of the Ponsborne in her Voyage to and from Madras and China*; and *Meteorological Diary from our Arrival in the Downs in the Ponsborne Voyage to China*. The daily run ranged from two to 187 miles in any particular day and the whole voyage is estimated to be 31,372 miles. The meteorological part devotes a line to each day and gives date, place, thermometer reading, wind and weather. The whole Journal is most clearly written and is a joy to read.

THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

Here it is well to remind ourselves that the narrative of the Journal is set within the activities of the East India Company. Founded at the end of the sixteenth century, it was one of a number of European companies established in order to exploit trade with the East. Hence in the course of the Journal we read of French, Dutch, and Spanish ships in the various ports of call. The Journal is exactly contemporaneous with Pitt's India Bill which finally subjected the Company to the authority of Parliament. It thus gives us glimpses of the final days of the Company in Canton, Madras and St. Helena. The Company was firmly established in Canton in 1684, and Nott was able to mix with this community on his arrival. In Madras the English and the French were still unfriendly to each other and there are many references to the French presence. The Company had seized St. Helena from the Dutch in 1651 and were now "the true and absolute lords and proprietors" of the island, which was important to the Company because it was used for refitting and revictualling on the return voyages from the East. Nott's Journal indicates that there was a pleasant social life for traders there, based upon a slave population.

CANTON

As Courtney draws special attention to Nott's visit to Canton, we naturally consult the Journal to see if his comments are substantiated. Turning to pp.109 ff (4, 5, 7 and 8 October 1784) we find a number of interesting references to Chinese plays which it is worth transcribing in a little more detail. Nott writes:

[4 October] Saw a public play before a merchant's house. The actors attempted singing which was little different from their speaking: one evidently was in the character of the Emperor, another seemingly of his Queen: there was also a dance of two warriors not ill performed; and their band of music really played a wild, though not unpleasing, regular tune: their music consisted of some kinds of lutes, cymbals and drums: and every now and then crackers were

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let off and a kind of stage signal something like an Oppodium was thrown upon the stage blazing. The performance begins about 10 in the morning and does not end till evening—it seemed to have something of the Italian Opera in it, as it was interspersed with singing.

[5 October] . . . The Play was continued to-day, the latter part seemed a kind of farce and had a good deal of buffoonery in it—the former part was evidently tragical and there was a person slain upon the stage, and another weeping over the corpse. This sing-song is repeated annually at the same season by a merchant before his house by way of rejoicing at some event.

[7 October] . . . A play exhibited before the house of Yun Yun a merchant at his own expense, which is to last three days; the comic humour of one actor I admire exceedingly; the emperor is the principal personage generally introduced, I observe, in their plays. Between each scene, which seldom takes up above 15 minutes in the representation, a man comes on the stage exhibiting in writing on a large piece of board what is the subject of the scene coming on.

[8 October] . . . Mr. Yun Yun informs me the subject of all their plays is the relation of old histories when China had two contending kings or rather when the Tartar and Chinese contended for empire.

CAPE TOWN

The Journal contains many other matters. Prefacing the whole Journal is a note on his fellow passengers: Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull, Miss Keeble, Captain Mason of the Queen's Light Dragoons, Mr. Lind, a Hanoverian Officer, who commanded thirty-odd Hanoverian soldiers for the Madras Service.

The voyage out to Madras lasted from November 1783 to 3 June 1784. The voyage was through the Bay of Biscay down to Cape Town (reached on 19 March after 117 days at sea). Here Nott saw the *Norfolk*, an East Indiaman returning to England from the Bay of Bengal. Correspondence for England was put aboard the *Norfolk*, while the latest newspapers from England were among its cargo. Nott tells us that riding in the bay was a squadron of the Royal Navy under Sir Richard Bickerton returning from service in the East Indies. Nott and his fellow passengers found it very difficult to secure accommodation in Cape Town because the inhabitants had been turned against the English by the French "during the late war". A topical note is that the cost of living had gone up 500 per cent in the last four years and a cabbage cost two shillings. The houses were of a single storey, thatched, hiding the roof by a parapet. Of the life in the town Nott says: "in general you see Menheer leaning against one door post smoking his pipe and his frau sitting by the other, with their children playing about them which are in general very numerous, few families having less than eight or ten, some thirteen or more." He learned that the French soldiers were on their way to Pondicherry; that five Dutch ships were leaving for Europe and two Danish ships had arrived from Europe. On Sunday he attended the local church which reminded him of churches in Holland.

MADRAS

From Cape Town to Madras the voyage lasted sixty-seven days from the end of March to the beginning of June 1784. He stayed almost two months and did not set sail again until 25 July. He comments on the weather in Madras: "fine, but sultry and hot, it being the midst of their summer: some times we had rain; on two different days it rained during the whole day—Lightening we more or less had every night; Thunder but seldom". The temperature he gives as ranging between 88° and 93°F.

On arrival in the Madras Roads the ubiquitous English Fleet was seen, under the command of Sir Edward Hughes. One of the few glimpses of Nott's profession is

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revealed when, on 21 June, he petitioned the Governor and Council respecting his pay for attendance on their recruits on board. This was remitted to him in Bengal Bills. Three days later Captain Johnstone of the *Barrington* cashed them for him, "without discount". One day a short excursion was made to a Portuguese settlement about eight miles from Madras. But usually a pleasant social life was followed; a little entertaining by local residents, an occasional concert and some sightseeing. Nott gives a hint as to his own health: "was blooded on board" or "took an emetic". A glimpse of the current code of behaviour is given by a brief reference to "Hankey second mate of the *Middlesex* killed in a duel . . . by Mr. Mead surgeon's mate . . . was buried the same evening".

Just before the ship set sail they took on a number of new passengers: "Mr. Simpson, a passenger from Madras to England [a voyage which was to take him via Canton] likewise a Captain Campbell and a Mr. Campbell, an Armenian, to China, and ten invalid soldiers were sent as passengers with us to England, all invalided for liver complaints, one of whom had a dropsy". On leaving Madras the ship kept in company with the *Foullis*. On one occasion Nott's professional services were required on the *Foullis*. But even such a visit was turned into a social occasion as he stayed to dine on board. So they came to Canton and the plays which have already been mentioned.

ST. HELENA

The long voyage back began on 3 January 1785, and land was not touched until St. Helena was reached on 24 March. On arriving at the island, where he stayed for ten days, he was so impressed that he wrote a short account of it covering ten pages (*Journal*, pp. 197–206). This is the only prolonged description of any place that he met in his many travels. He writes:

In this little speck of enchantment, for so it may properly be called . . . we see nature in all her wildest variety, rocks stupendously romantic, interspersed with vallies ever green and gay. The only "assemblage" of houses is in St. James Valley. Near here the governor's house which resembles the sporting cottage of a country gentleman of moderate fortune in England—rose walks, stunted firs . . . a small chapel . . . neat stables for six horses only. The Lieutenant Governor lives at Long-wood [Napoleon's future home in exile] some five miles further away. Large and commodious—spacious gardens, fine lawns, evergreens, oak and gum trees . . . plantation of red wood.

He devotes a paragraph to the animals on the island—horses, cattle, sheep, rabbits, but no hares or other diversions for the sportsman. The island was infested with rats and mice, and there were few venomous insects.

Fish abounded: mackerel, bullseye (a small red fish), albicores, conger eels, lobster. Fascinating tropical birds, web-footed pigeons, sparrows, linnets, turkeys, pheasants, guinea fowls were also plentiful. The shooting of these incurred a fine of £20.

Nott concludes with a lyrical peroration: "Such is the outline of this lovely little spot. Happy islanders! who assisted with the bounty of nature and the liberality of commerce, enjoy every comfort of life; unacquainted with its vitiating luxuries, and alike estranged to its rigorous wants; distant from your mother country, you behold but the commotions that distract her, but lead your peaceful lives beneath the happy sanctions of mild, mercantile influence."

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RETURN TO ENGLAND

The pleasant interlude came to an end, and the *Ponsborne* set out on the voyage home, giving a nine-gun salute on departure. The voyage was uneventful but hot. The French vessel *Concorde* was sighted on her way from La Rochelle to Angola, carrying slaves. Nott's services were required shortly after the vessel crossed the line when one of the passengers "was safely brought to bed of a boy . . . I attended her seven hours in labour". A few days later an American vessel was sighted but at last the English Channel was reached, Passengers were put off at Falmouth but the ship continued to Deptford, arriving on 5 June. Nott left the vessel the same day and returned to London.

CONCLUSION

Going back to Courtney again, he comments: "His love of travel was not yet exhausted, for soon after returning to England he accompanied his brother and family on a journey abroad for their health". This journey is the one covered by the three volumes on France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany, 1786–1788.

At the end of all these travels Nott was still without a degree in medicine, says Courtney, and on the advice of Dr. Warren, physician to George Prince of Wales, he became an extra-licentiate of the College of Physicians in London on 8 October 1789.