

'Oh this terrible, fatal, miserable Rome!': The unhappy wanderings of Margaret Oliphant

By Anne M Scriven

Like many Victorians of means Margaret Oliphant Wilson Oliphant came to consider it a norm to spend at least part of each year abroad. Reading over the record of her life however and noting of the reality and reasoning behind her travels, one wonders if they brought her any real benefit or joy. In her autobiography she almost acknowledges as much when she recognises an experience of deep contentment rooted in the most simple of domestic situations:

When I look back on my life, among the happy moments which I can recollect is one which is so curiously common and homely, with nothing in it, that it is strange even to record such a recollection, and yet it embodied more happiness to me than almost any real occasion as might be supposed for happiness. It was the moment after dinner when I used to run up-stairs to see that all was well in the nursery, and then to turn into my room on my way down again to wash my hands, as I had a way of doing before I took up my evening work, which was generally needlework, something to make for the children. My bedroom had three windows in it, one looking out upon the gardens I have mentioned, the other two into the road. It was light enough with the lamplight outside for all I wanted. I can see it now, the glimmer of the outside lights, the room dark, the faint reflection in the glasses, and my heart fills with joy and peace - for what? - for nothing - that there was no harm anywhere, the children well above stairs and their father below. I had few of the pleasures of society, no gaiety at all. I was eight-and-twenty, going down-stairs as light as a feather, to the little frock I was making. My husband also gone back for an hour or two after dinner to his work, and well - and the bairns well. I can feel now the sensation of sweet calm and ease and peace.¹

This snapshot of domestic tranquillity comes early in her married life when all was comparatively ease and light. It was not to last. Returning home one evening

after an errand to buy dessert-knives (one cannot but be conscious of the symbolism here), Margaret finds her household in a state of anxiety as her husband, Frank, had 'in coughing, brought up a little blood'.² For the sake of Frank's health they decide to go abroad and thus set in motion a pattern and impulse for travel that was to be adhered to for the rest of Margaret's life.



In January of 1859, with their two young children, Maggie and Cyril, and their nursemaid, the Oliphants travel to Italy. Their first adventure outside of Britain was one beset by unease. Their journey to Florence is 'dreadful'³ - they are delayed in Lyons 'one of the coldest places I ever was in'⁴ because of lost luggage; have cash-flow problems due to an unforeseen bank holiday; endure an overnight stay in a freezing marbled floored hotel at Alassio 'I still feel the chill that went into my heart at the sight of this room',⁵ and eventually arrive in Florence which Margaret judges 'might have been Manchester for anything one saw or felt that was like the South'.⁶ Inexperience caused her to take rooms that were dark and cold which worsened her husband's condition. In her essay 'A Week in Florence', published in *Blackwood's Magazine* July 1859, Margaret pours out her dismay at her new surroundings:

The floor is tiled, and carpeted from the thin looms of Kidderminster; there is nothing but stone and marble, and universal chill - and another quarter of an hour's walk through those ghostly stone passages ere you can hope for some dinner. Oh much-abused climate of England, where the cold keeps out of doors and comfort lives within! Shall we ever speak ill of thee again!⁷

They stay for some months and just as the city was becoming warmer and more conducive for an invalid, Frank declares a desire to move on to Rome. He had not told his wife that his condition was terminal and possibly thought it would be wise for his little family to be near friends in Rome. A short while after their arrival there Frank dies leaving his wife - now pregnant with her last child - far from

home, with two infant children and very little money.

The young widow returned to Britain with her children and new baby, in Feb 1860, first to Birkenhead to stay with her brother, then feeling she was a burden, spent the summer in Elie, Fife, and from there to Edinburgh where she decided to settle for the time being. In November 1860 she met the Rev Robert Story who had heard that she was writing a biography of Irving (published 1862). Margaret travelled over to Story's manse in Rosneath, Argyllshire in Feb 1861, to read letters between Irving to Story's father, and found herself cheerful even though she had 'honestly expected never to laugh again'.⁸ And it was Rosneath - a place that she came to view as an Elysium - where she found 'sweet universal harmony all around'⁹ as she and her children revelled in some blissful family summer holidays. As she records: 'I doubt I had ever been so gay. I was still young, and all was well with the children. My heart had come up with a great bound from all the strain of previous trouble and hard labour and the valley of the shadow of death.'¹⁰

Perhaps feeling that her fortunes had turned, Margaret then travels back to Rome with a group of friends. But Rome was not to be kind to her as it was here, in January 1864, that her beloved eleven year old daughter, Maggie, dies of gastric flu and is buried in the same grave as her father in the Protestant cemetery in Rome, at the foot of Monte Testaccio. The joy and laughter of her summers in Scotland are overshadowed by her immeasurable grief in 'this terrible, fatal, miserable Rome!'¹¹

Margaret remains abroad for some time after Maggie's death travelling through Italy, Switzerland and France - travel working here as a 'numbing distraction from pain'¹² - and demonstrating the writer's ability to work from other impulses - writes one of her most famous and light-hearted comic novels - *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) - during this period.

Returning to London with her two sons in Sept 1865, Margaret does not venture abroad again until 1871 when she goes to France to get material for her biography of Montalembert. It was a dreary trip as 'the country was freezing cold and devastated by the war'.¹³ A research trip to Florence in 1874 for *The Makers of Florence* (1876)¹⁴ works better as she recognises that the writing of travel

books could afford foreign trips for her boys, and in 1875 she travels to Switzerland where she meets Leslie Stephen who invites her to do a serial for his *Cornhill Magazine*.

Since the death of their father Margaret had been the sole provider for her children. As her sons grew into young men there is much to suggest that her hope of them becoming independent and successful in the world was an empty one, as they returned her care of them with idleness and second-class achievements. In 1884 Cecco went to Göttingen to learn German in the hope that his could help him secure a job at the British Museum. His mother joined him at Heidelberg a little later in the year. Cyril also found a job as a private secretary to the Governor General of Ceylon and, believing that her sons were on a secure road, Margaret travels to Italy for research on her book on Venice. Her plans of staying some months on the continent were reversed however when she received news that Cyril had been seriously ill in Ceylon and was on his way home. As her hopes for her boys crumbled it is interesting that it is once again Scotland that affords her an experience of peace and calm during this testing period. As she records:

We were in St. Andrew's in Mrs Murray's house, I alone with them - And they had both gone out to the Club at night and I went wandering across the links in the late twilight, almost dark, towards the sea. [...] I was very miserable, crying to God for them, both, feeling more miserable almost than I had ever done before - when suddenly there came upon me a great quiet and calm, and I seemed stilled and a kind of heavenly peace came over me ... ¹⁵

For the next few years Margaret set herself to unrelenting work to provide not only for her sons but also for her two nieces who had returned home from their schooling in Germany. There are occasional trips to the continent - articles such as 'On the Riviera' (May 1889), arising from these travels - but they are also undertaken for the sake Cecco's health who was showing serious signs of TB. 1890 finds her far from home. Ostensibly to research for her books *Jerusalem: Its History and Hope* (1891), and her life of Laurence and Alice Oliphant (1891), Margaret travels to Palestine and Egypt. It is very possible though, as a believing Christian all her life, there was much of the nature of pilgrimage in this journey particularly as she goes at Easter. In her essay 'The Holy Land' (July 1890), she describes how overwhelmed she felt gazing at biblical scenes:

And is that indeed the Mount of Olives? We look at it with water in our eyes in a sudden rush. [...]But it is sure He must have walked, there mused and prayed and rested, under the sunshine, and when the stars came out over Jerusalem. I cannot think of any sensation more strangely touching, solemn, and real.¹⁶

And in a letter to her cousin, Annie, she says:

I insisted upon going along the Via Dolorosa on Good Friday, following what are supposed to have been His steps. [...]It was very deeply touching to toil along the laborious stony way, and to think, if not what He felt, which is above our thoughts, yet of what Mary must have been feeling [...] I envied the pilgrims who went along kneeling at the stations, kissing the stones. One would have been glad to have done it, to have been able to do it.¹⁷

Her sons and her niece, Madge, accompany her. The tone of her letters is peaceful – albeit a little worried as to the health of Cecco. They arrived home in August of 1890; Cecco's health still giving cause for alarm, but it was Cyril, the eldest, who dies at home very suddenly on November of the same year.

Having buried her eldest son, Margaret determines on getting her only surviving child out of England before the winter. They travel to Davos, Switzerland, where they plan to stay until May 1891. Their departure must have appeared strange as we find Margaret sending a letter of explanation to her niece, Annie, where she explains that her home in Windsor is 'too full of associations, so many of them of pain and sorrow; and I think to sit alone at night at my work, and feel those two empty rooms blank and dark, would be more than I could bear.'¹⁸ In the same letter there is an almost unconscious desire for the healing air and coastlines of her country of birth when she says 'I sometimes think that if I could hear the howl of the sea, and see a green world again, that it would do me good...'¹⁹ But she does not go to Scotland and instead finds herself in Davos which she judges 'a dreadful place – nothing but a vast shroud with black trees'²⁰ – a comment more reflective of her interior mindset than of the clean air, dry and sunny microclimate of Davos which RL Stevenson and Conan Doyle had found beneficial for their congested lungs. Ironically however it was here that Margaret herself became ill. This was blamed on the high altitude as not being advisable for elderly people but her depressed and grieving spirit at this time must have had much to do with her poor state of health. In March she and Cecco move camp to San Remo

in Italy where they see out the spring.

September 1892 finds Margaret and Cecco planning a book on the Riviera. Pitching her idea to her publisher, William Blackwood, we can read her now established hallmarks of travel for the sake of health and work:

To explore and collect all their historical and traditional associations will be the healthiest work for Cecco, and he has fully settled to begin when he leaves England in November. [...] It might take time to get known, but I have no doubt that it would be very profitable in the end, especially if we made it, as we at present contemplate, the first of a series of travel-books.²¹

They travel to France in February of 1893 and again in the spring of 1894. The tone of Margaret's letters more positive but characteristically slightly deprecatory:

I had no idea St Raphael was so fine. I think the bay quite beautiful, though I fear I don't appreciate the forest so much [...] it seems to me a little scrubby, the trees so much too small to be called by such an imposing name.²²

This was to be her last trip with her youngest son who died in October 1894.

For the next while Margaret lived quietly, travelling only as far as Dundee to be with her niece, Madge, who had married a jute manufacturer. Then in April 1897, for reasons of conscientious research for her article 'Siena' (published posthumously in July 1898), she travels to Italy despite her own very poor health. This article concluded her corpus of travel writing and there is a definite sense of peace and reconciliation with the foreign, pervading her lines:

It has always seemed to me that the great enchantment of Italy, the cause of that half-unconscious rapture with which the traveller is filled he knows not why, amid her delightful landscapes, is this universal breath of life which is everywhere, the sense of humanity, the kind love and fellowship which seems to dwell in those smiling isolated houses, each set on its hill, where could we wander and lose our way, refuge and succour could always be found.²³

Finally worn out by her efforts and the tragic losses sustained in her lifetime, Margaret died at her home in Wimbledon in July the same year. The death certificate gives the cause of death as 'malignant disease of the colon' and

'exhaustion'.²⁴



What becomes evident when considering Margaret's reaction to the places she physically found herself is that it was continually tempered by her own inner state. Travel is said to broaden the mind, but it can only do so if the mind is sufficiently free to really meet the new encounter. When it is cast low as Margaret's so often was, bound up with worry or loss of her beloved ones, it cannot truly see the new place as it really is. Margaret however appears aware of the various filters prevalent in any traveller's mind and indeed aware how nigh impossible it is to really see a place with unbiased eyes. In her introduction to *The Makers of Venice*, she speaks of how the mind of the traveller is caught up with imaginary preconceived notions - the textual knowledge of a country which we glean from an assortment of narratives - saying: 'Venice has long borne in the imagination of the world a distinctive position, something of the character of a great enchantress, a magician of the seas'.²⁵ And she also recognises that real understanding of any country can only come 'after long gazing'.²⁶ As the matriarch and sole provider for her extended family, Margaret did not have the time nor leisure for extended observation at any of the countries she travelled to; not for her the ease of the flâneur or curious tourist. Henry James, her old sparring partner, criticised her for this in his thinly veiled satirical portrait of her in his character Mrs Stormer:

The queerest pictures come back to me of this period of the good lady's life and of the extraordinary virtuous, muddled, bewildering tenor of it. She had an idea she was seeing foreign manners as well as her petticoats would allow; but, in reality, she was not seeing anything...²⁷

James' characterisation is of course both cruel and unfair. Had Oliphant's life been different, had she been protected against the unrelenting pressure to care for her dependent family, her travel writing may have taken another texture. As it was, abroad was a place she went to gather research material or for the health of her family. Home, despite its sad reminders of her beloved sons, was nevertheless 'better and sweeter' than anywhere on earth.²⁸

References & Further Information

- ¹ Elizabeth Jay (ed.), *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*. (Ormskirk: Broadview, 2002), p.105.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 107
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110
- ⁷ Oliphant, 'A week in Florence', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, (July 1859), p.584.
- ⁸ Jay (2002) p.140.
- ⁹ Oliphant, 'Among the Lochs, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, (October 1861), p.468.
- ¹⁰ Jay (2002), p. 150.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ¹² Elizabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.194.
- ¹³ Merryn Williams, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p.97.
- ¹⁴ This book formed part of a series which composed of *The Makers of Florence* (1876), *The Makers of Venice* (1887) and *The Makers of Modern Rome* (1895), all published by Macmillan.
- ¹⁵ Jay (2002), p.93.
- ¹⁶ Oliphant, 'The Holy Land', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, (July 1890), p.2.
- ¹⁷ Annie Coghill, (ed.) *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M.O.W.Oliphant* (Edinburgh and London, 1899) reprinted with an introduction by Q.D. Leavis, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974), pp.367-8.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 379.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.391.

²² *Ibid.*, p.394.

²³ Oliphant, 'Siena', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, (July 1898), p.24.

²⁴ Oliphant papers, National Library of Scotland, MS 23211, Folio 49.

²⁵ Oliphant, *The Makers of Venice*, (London: Macmillan, [1887] 1889), p.1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁷ Henry James 'Greville Fane', (London: Macmillan, 1893), reproduced by Gutenberg Etext, July 2001. <http://www.gutenberg.org>.

²⁸ Coghill, (1974), p.418.

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