A VISITOR TO PORTUGAL IN 1789

by A. H. NORRIS

Amongst the records given to the Historical Society of Portugal by the Directors of the English College — the «Inglezinhos» — when they closed down their activities in Lisbon in 1975, is a book or, more correctly, the remains of a book, **Travels in Portugal in the years 1789-1790,** by James Murphy, architect. It was dedicated to His Royal Highness Don John, Prince of Brazil, and published in London in 1795.

The author, James Cavenagh Murphy, was born in County Cork and was originally a bricklayer. His gifts as a draughtsman, «exhibited in caricaturing his master with a burnt stick upon a wall», brought him to the notice of Sir James Chatterton who sent him to Dublin. Here he was introduced to the Hon. W. B. Conyngham, «at whose suggestion and... with whose assistance» he went to Portugal. Here he stayed for several years, translating antiquarian and architectural books from Portuguese into English. Murphy also travelled in Spain and related his experiences in a book entitled **Arabian Antiquities of Spain** (Jenning's **Landscape Review** for 1839).

The **Travels,** an account of Murphy's first visit to Portugal, contains detailed descriptions of the architecture of the principal buildings he visited and lengthy disquisitions on Portuguese history. The following short digest of the book has been designed to give a picture of everyday life and the general aspect of the country, as well as the author's impressions of places of interest which he visited and which still exist today. Members of the Society who may be interested in Murphy's architectural descriptions will find a complete copy of the book in the special Anglo-Portuguese Section of the British Council's Library in Lisbon.

Murphy sailed from Dublin in December 1788 and reached the mouth of the river Douro after a voyage of 17 days. He gives a vivid description of the difficulties and dangers encountered in sailing up the narrow, winding estuary against a current running at 9 miles an hour and, when the ship finally anchored off the city of Oporto, it was 3 days before the usual official visits could be paid, owing to the turbulence of the river. Customs were soon disposed of and the port doctor, who was ill, sent a substitute who stood on the bank 200 yards away, whence he surveyed the ship's company assembled on deck and, after taking a pinch of snuff, certified everybody on board to be in good health!

Murphy was recommended to an English tavern which he found clean and comfortable, in marked contrast to those in which he later stayed on the road to Lisbon. He was much impressed by the devout appearance of the inhabitants of Oporto, religion seeming to be their only pursuit. «The clattering of bells, the bustling of processions and the ejaculations of friars engage the attention of the day, whilst every part resounds by night with the chaunting of hymns.» The female inhabitants were seldom seen out-of-doors, except in going to or returning from church, usually visited twice a day. He found the Portuguese polite to strangers and respectful to each other. The labouring classes consisted chiefly of Spaniards, natives of Galicia, of whom there were said to be 8,000 in Oporto alone and 50,000 in the whole of Portugal.

The streets of Oporto he found generally so steep that one had to climb rather than walk them; but this defect was compensated by their cleanliness, which they owed «more to nature than to police», for rain swept away all the impurities of the town. Lamps had not yet been introduced into the streets.

One of the buildings Murphy described was the headquarters of the British Factory, which was then nearing completion. It had been designed by William Whitehead, the British Consul, and was finished and occupied in 1790. Murphy remarked that, over the centre acrotoire on the top of the building, a statue was to be placed and suggested that it might suitably be one of Prince Henry the Navigator, seeing that this was a commercial edifice. The members of the Factory, however, had not been able to make up their minds and would probably not do so for some time. There is still no statue on the acrotoire.

From Oporto Murphy set out for Batalha in a small chaise drawn by mules. For the first day the muleteers hired four Galicians to accompany them as the road was so bad the carriage had frequently to be dragged and dug out of the mud. Thereafter the

condition of the roads improved, but the inns at which the nights were spent were invariably rough and uncomfortable, and the food unappetizing. «Our repast consisted of bread, wine, dried fish and oil; this last I did not taste as I saw the cruet replenished from the lamp.»

It took four days to reach Coimbra where Murphy visited the University, at which there were 3,000 students. He considered the Museum «inferior to few in Europe» and the library remarkably well stocked with an immense number of books and manuscripts.

Two days later he arrived at Batalha and considered the tribulations he had suffered to have been well worth while. «The sight of the Royal Monastery would have amply repaid a longer journey even though less pleasant than that I had just experienced; and what enhanced the pleasure of the prospect was the unexpected sight of it at an hour when the sun was setting and every turret was gilded with the radiance of the descending beams.» Here he stayed for 13 weeks and he later described the monastery in a book **Plans, elevations, sections and views of the Church at Batalha** (referred to by Professor S. G. West, O. B. E., M. A., in his paper **Robert Southey, the Rev. Herbert Hill and the Bishop of Beja,** in the Ninth Annual Report & Review of the Historical Association, Lisbon Branch, 1945).

According to the Royal Archives kept in Lisbon, he related, the name of the architect of the church was Stephen Stephenson, a native of England, appointed by King John I of Portugal, whose consort was the daughter of John of Gaunt. In a letter to his patron, Conyngham, Murphy wrote that he was regarded with suspicion by some of the friars who were apprehensive at first that he had not gone to Batalha solely for the purpose of making drawings of the building. Lest they should take it into their heads to try to prevent him, he assiduously applied himself to his task and, by working day and night, completed all the sketches and the finished plan and elevation in 22 days. This proved too much for his health, however, and threw him into a fever. «The ignorance of the physician only helped to increase the evil; he was one of those wretches who carried fate and physic in his face, commissioned by that seminary of dunces at Coimbra to despatch the unfortunate candidate to the grave.»

Although a Catholic, Murphy did not give unqualified approbation to monastic establishments. «The mass-friars have nothing to do but eat and drink, saunter about or sleep... What a pity it is to see so many stout fellows leading a life of indolence and sloth, that might be of service in cultivating the land, in feeding the

poor and enriching or defending their country.» He was, however, grateful, for the hospitality shown him and, when he left, he received, under the royal seal of the convent, a certificate of his good conduct during the three months he had resided there.

After leaving Batalha, Murphy stayed briefly at Leiria, where he saw his first 'bull-feast', and from there went on to Marinha Grande where he stayed for a month with William Stephenson, who had founded his glass factory there 10 years before. This, the only factory of its kind in Portugal, had proved so successful that it was already supplying practically all the glass used in Portugal and the colonies, except bottles. William and his brother bequeathed the factory to the workers, and a bust of William, commemorating the appreciation of this generous and public-spirited action, has been erected outside the principal building. (The factory is still in full production and was visited by members of the Historical Society on 1 July 1975.)

Murphy continued his leisurely progress to Alcobaça where he stayed three weeks at the invitation of the Abbot-General. He remarked on the grandeur of the church when entered from the west front and recalled that the monastery was said to commemorate three remarkable events: the origin of the Portuguese monarchy, the foundation of the Bernardine Order of monks and the introduction of a new species of architecture into the kingdom. The Abbot-General and Superiors of the Convent saw him off at the end of his visit and the nuns of the Order sent him a present of sweet-meats and scented soap.

On the way to Lisbon via Villa Franca he remarked on the number of peasants working on the roads, along the margins of which were planted olive trees whose produce was to be applied to keeping the roads in repair. «The manner and opulence of the capital had visible effect on the inhabitants as we advanced.»

He reached Villa Franca at mid-day and was unable to get any refreshment as all the inhabitants were asleep. Here he embarked on a passage boat which had accommodation for 50 passengers, divided into two classes, and arrived at the capital the same evening.

Speculating on the origins of Lisbon, Murphy writes that they were, as was the case with many other cities, involved in obscurity, but that the most generally held opinion was that it was founded by Ulysses, after the destruction of Troy. At the time of his arrival the population of the city was said to be about 200,000, but Murphy considered this was probably an underestimate since the dimensions were four miles by one and a half. He was immediately struck by the extent of the destruction caused by the earthquake of 1755 which was evident in many parts of the city. The older inhabitants

were still constantly relating the horror of their experiences at that time and it was the epoch from which they dated all modern events. It was then the belief that not fewer than 24,000 lives were lost as a result of it. (Modern historians, however, estimate that the number who died was between 10,000 and 15,000, including 77 British citizens. Kendrick.) It was recognized that advantages had been derived from the destruction of the ancient narrow lanes and unhealthy houses. All the new streets laid out in Lisbon in place of the old were wide, regular and well paved, as in the streets of London, and the new houses were lofty, uniform and strong. In point of cleanliness, Lisbon was no longer a subject of animadversion for strangers but it was still lacking common sewers, piped water and «cabinets d'aisance».

The first storey of each dwelling house, when not converted into a shop, was a «magazine» for merchandise, and the merchants usually kept their coaches in the halls; and sometimes they answered for both house and stable.

In the principal apartments of many of the nobility and merchants, coolness and ventilation were consulted before warmth. Here grates and chimney-pieces were almost unknown and a warm cloak in winter was the common substitute for a fire.

Murphy's description and drawing of the Praça do Comércio, completely rebuilt after the earthquake, show that it has changed very little in the last 180 years; and he refers to the statue of Joseph I as a work of considerable merit.

The principal building in the Rocio was «the celebrated Inquisition; a large empty building, now as silent as the Temple of Janus. Over the pediment is a group of figures representing Religion trampling on a prostrate heretic».

There were two theatres which were crowded on Sundays. Few ladies were visible in the audience. The music was excellent, the dresses tolerable, the acting indifferent or bad. No females were permitted to perform on the stage, their parts being played by male actors **en travesti**. «How provoking it was to see the tender, beautiful Inez de Castro represented by one of these brawny artificial wenches, especially in that affecting scene when she appears with her two children at the King's feet, supplicating for mercy.»

Next Murphy visited the bull-ring, situated near the theatres. He wrote that «bull-feasting» was losing popularity in the capital and the display was inferior to the one he had witnessed in Leiria.

Of the Patriarchal Church of St. George he wrote that the treasures of sacred relics, gold, silver, precious stones and costly furniture would require a volume to describe.

The New Church (to-day the Basílica da Estrela) he considered the largest and most magnificent building raised in Lisbon since the earthquake. It was said to have cost the equivalent of £562,500 to build.

He visited the Burying Ground of the British Factory, which was the only «exposed» cemetery in Lisbon. It had been acquired in 1717, the right to establish a Protestant cemetery having originated in the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1654. The part Murphy saw is the south-eastern section of the present British Cemetery which Norberto de Araújo, in his **Peregrinações de Lisboa,** states is the oldest cemetery in Lisbon. Murphy comments that Henry Fielding was buried in the Burying Ground but that no monument had been erected to his memory. Later Murphy found, in the Franciscan Convent, a monument to Fielding which had been designed by the French Consul; but this had been rejected by the British Factory as unworthy, an opinion shared by Murphy. Later Murphy himself designed a monument to Fielding, an engraving of which was published in The European Magazine; but none of Fielding's family, friends or admirers came forward with funds to erect it (Rose Macaulay: **They Went to Portugal**). The present monument was erected by public subscription in 1830 on a spot, according to Mrs. Quillinan, Wordsworth's daughter, «selected by guess» (Rose Macaulay: op. cit.).

Murphy was impressed by the magnificence of the Church and Monastery at Belém, founded by King Manoel in 1499, where many of the kings and queens of Portugal had been interred; and by the strong tower, erected at the same time in the river, opposite the Church, with two batteries and several pieces of cannon, to defend both the Monastery and the entrance to the capital.

The Convent of Bom Successo was founded in 1626 for the nuns of the Order of S. Jerónimo but was afterwards set apart for females of Irish birth who entered into holy orders. It then came under the control of the Irish Dominican Fathers of Corpo Santo in Lisbon. The monastery of that Order had been founded in 1659 and had been completely destroyed by the earthquake of 1755. It was rebuilt by local charitable contributions, with some help from Roman Catholics in Ireland. At the time of Murphy's visit there were 18 residents in the Convent, apart from servants. They lived principally on charity. «The students are remarkably sober and docile; even the Portuguese, whose career from youth to age is rarely chequered with sallies of intemperance, hold them as models of imitation to probationers of their own monasteries.» Murphy himself was responsible for structural alterations to the Corpo Santo in 1801. His plans are still preserved in the library of the monastery.

The aqueduct in Lisbon attracted Murphy's particular attention; he called it one of the most magnificent monuments of modern construction in Europe, in point of magnitude not inferior, perhaps, to any aqueduct the ancients have left us. He noted that the part which crosses the valley of Alcântara had two thoroughfares for passengers along the top, and that there were remains which indicated that a previous aqueduct had been built in the same place by the Romans. The present aqueduct was started in 1713 and took 19 years to complete, the cost of construction being partly defrayed by a tax of one real upon every pound of meat sold in the capital.

Murphy described many of the local customs which struck him as unusual and worth mention. To visit anyone above the rank of a tradesman it was necessary to wear a sword and a chapeau; if the family was in mourning, the visitor must also wear black; the servants would not consider the caller a gentleman unless he came in a coach; to pay a visit in boots would be an unpardonable offence unless, at the same time, you wore spurs.

In the houses of foreign merchants Galicians were the only servants employed and many Portuguese also preferred them to the natives in that capacity; they cooked, cleaned the rooms and made the beds. If there were female servants in the house under the age of thirty-five, they were invisible, except to the mistress and her daughters; after that age they were left to their own discretion, as their charms were then supposed to be sufficiently faded to render them safe from the «invasion of gallantry».

A notable feature of the Portuguese character was charity. There were many charitable institutions, all supported entirely by voluntary contributions. In the year before Murphy's visit, 1,279 children had been received by the Foundling Hospital. The Royal Hospital of St. Joseph, which cared for the infirm of both sexes of every nationality, was well attended by physicians and nurses, and the patients — who had numbered 11,798 the previous year — were comfortably lodged and, in every respect, well treated. There were also several Brotherhoods of Misericordia which protected and comforted the distressed of every religion, sect and country, and visited gaols and hospitals.

The common people of Lisbon and its environs, Murphy found, were a laborious and hardy race; many of them, by frugal living, laid up a decent competence for old age, but it was painful to see the trouble they were obliged to take for want of proper instruments to carry on their work. Their carts had the appearance of the earliest ages, being drawn by two stout oxen. Corn was shelled by the treading of the same animals, as in the days of the

Israelites. Many of their customs struck Murphy as singular; for example women sat with the left side towards the horse's head when they rode; a postilion rode on the left horse; footmen played at cards while waiting for their master; a hairdresser appeared on Sundays with a sword, a cockade and two watches or, at least, two watch-chains. A tavern was distinguished by a vine-bush; a house to let by a piece of blank paper; a midwife's door by a white cross; and a Jew by his extra Catholic devotions! Women, on marriage, did not assume the family names of their husbands: «In all vicissitudes of matrimony» they retained their maiden names.

From the capital Murphy went to Cintra, Mafra and the south of Portugal. Cintra did not impress him in the same way as it did other travellers of about this period — Byron, for instance, considering the village «perhaps the most beautiful in the world». Murphy remarks that, notwithstanding its many advantages, it was little resorted to by the natives; and the royal palace had been entirely deserted since the death there of King Afonso VI em 1683. At Mafra he found the magnificent edifice, completed in 1717, consisting of a church, a royal palace and a monastery, situated in a bleak and solitary country.

Murphy's journey to the south started with a visit to Setuval (sic), famous for its salt manufactures and its harbour. This was considered the best in Portugal after Lisbon. The population was about 10,000. Despite the importance of its trade with the capital, no road whatever existed and only those who constantly travelled between the two places could find their way; strangers had to hire a guide or, equally reliably, a mule which was trained to the route.

After passing through Alcácer do Sal, which had been a summer resort in the times of the Romans, he arrived at Beja, praising the beauty of the scenery on the way. Beja had been an important Roman colony and the ruins and antiquities were of great interest to Murphy.

From there he went to Evora, the final destination of his journey. Here he was accommodated at the bishop's palace. Although not so large as Oporto, Evora, with 20,000 inhabitants, was considered the second city in the kingdom. It, too, had been a Roman colony of importance. It had most interesting remains, including a fine aqueduct. He visited the Charnel House, the walls of which were lined with human skulls and bones set in hard cement: «The obscurity of the place and the prostrate posture of supplicants render the whole scene truly awful.» In point of antiquity, as well as elegance, the Temple of Diana, in the centre of the city, Murphy considered the most estimable structure in Portugal; but, alas,

the state of neglect in which it had been left redounded little to the honour and discernment of the people of Evora. It had been converted into the meanest of offices — a slaughter-house. «In this respect, however, it may be said to have some affinity to its former destination; for it then flowed with the blood of victims which were sacrificed to appease the Goddess Diana, whereas the like tragedies are now performed in it to appease hungry mortals.»

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After several years' residence in Portugal, James Murphy retired to London, where he died in 1814.