

The Father of the Novel and the Mother of the Waters

By Peter Missler¹



Henry Fielding

The sign on the massive iron gate reads, in faultless English: “British Cemetery. Visiting Hours 09.00-13.00. Please ring and wait”. It is an imperfect message. What it ought to say is: “Our gate-keeper is over eighty. Kindly ring the bell and return in twenty minutes”. Fortunately, our profound disappointment stops us from giving up at once. We have come such a long road to visit the site – Ronald all the way from Holland by plane; myself nine hours in a shaky Portuguese bus – that we are loath to relinquish our quest on the spur of a moment. And this is our salvation.

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After some ten minutes, as we stand pouting indecisively on the sun-burnt Lisbon sidewalk, not knowing what to do and why the door isn't open at 11.15, we suddenly hear the rumbling and grumbling of rusty locks being forced against their will, and the gate swings open at a snail's pace to show us, against a backdrop of moss-covered tombstones and blooming shrubbery, a *very* aged Portuguese lady, who seems to have walked straight out of Grimm's Fairy Tales. She stands no taller than four feet three, leans most unsteadily on a cane even older than herself, and despite the heat comes wrapped in a thick coating of shawls, blankets and what seem to be heavy damask curtains ripped from a theatre stage. I don't think I ever saw a face more wrinkled, or eyes more squinting against the light of day; and when she speaks, in a rasping voice which miraculously preserves the crystal tones of youth in the last syllables of each clause, I cannot help but remember that "elderly female" whom George Borrow says he met in an Elvas tavern late in 1835, and who assured him that it was 'more than a hundred years since I was a girl, and sported with the daughters of the town on the hillside'². And it turns out that I am only a decade or so off the mark: for - seeing that she was over 30 when the Great Earthquake struck in 1755 - Borrow computed the age of his Lady Methuselah at some 110 years; and this here old girl is Adelina Pires, age 98, lifelong caretaker of Lisbon's British Cemetery, who only last year was awarded a Royal MBE for 70 years of loyal, dedicated and uninterrupted service to the graveyard.

Will she let us in? It looks, at first, as if she won't. But it is hard to grasp the reason why. Even Ronald, whose Portuguese is fluent, cannot make heads or tails of what she says; as if this Sybil spoke in oracle tongues impenetrable to the 21st century ear. Only after five or six sentences we begin to make some sense of it. It seems there is a service going on in the St. George chapel, and at such times nosey sightseers are not, on the average, welcome. 'I really should not-', she mumbles... But then she smiles, a broad and toothless smile which bobs on her collar like a cork on a rough sea. She quickly throws a glance over her right shoulder, looks us over once again, seems to give us a wink of the eye, and puts a twiggish finger to her lips. With a long and almost naughty *shhhhhht* she begs us in. If we promise to be silent like mice and do not steal into the church... We vow to be our very best behaviour, and enter Lisbon's Protestant graveyard on tiptoe.

² George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain*, chapter 8. (Below, this title will be abbreviated to *BiS*.)

Borrow, who visited the site in November 1835, called it ‘a Père-la-chaise in miniature’³. It is an apt description; but he’d have done better to say it ‘a Père-la-Chaise *in camouflage*’. For this is a *Protestant* cemetery in a deeply Catholic land, and everything has been done to keep this plot, pillaged from the Holy Soil of Portugal for the benefit of heretics who will only contaminate it with their vile dead bodies, perfectly inconspicuous and out of sight of the faithful⁴. That is why the gates are kept hermetically closed at all times; why a blind, 10-foot wall surrounds the site; and why the trees are allowed to cover the whole of the area with an impenetrable blanket of foliage (just imagine that those who live in the top stories of the houses up the hill were to feast their innocent eyes on these pagan graves!)



The effect is slightly claustrophobic. This is not so much a garden of the slumbering dead, but a dense, antediluvian forest of the sort where Robin Hood might take cover from the Sheriff of Nottingham or druids might celebrate their most lugubrious rites. The tombstones – inscribed in English, Portuguese, German and Dutch, Cyrillic Russian and Biblical Hebrew for the few discreet Jewish graves in a distant corner - lie as thick on the ground as leaves in autumn; and the whole of the terrain is jam-packed with hedges, cypresses, dwarf-oaks, myrtle-bushes and a variety of flamboyantly blossoming trees unknown to my city-boy’s botany. We are in fact lucky to visit on such a splendid day. Even now – with sheets of sunlight breaking through the foliage - there is an undeniable, almost *subterranean* gloominess to the place, which would surely turn outright depressing if the usual Atlantic fog drifted in and covered the skies above.

³ *BiS*, chapter 1.

⁴ For the attitudes that ruled the burial of Protestants in Portugal and Spain until deep into the 19th century, see Ken Eaton, ‘The awakening of Protestant interest in Spain as a mission field’ (part 2), in: *George Borrow Bulletin* n° 27, 44-62; also Antonio Giménez Cruz’s account of consul William Mark’s efforts to set up a British Cemetery in Malaga, in *La España Pintoresca de David Robert*, Malaga 2002, chapter 4. How hard such habits died may be seen in the story of the 1890 ‘Cimiterio de los Ingleses’ near Camariños, told by Juan Campos Calvo-Sotelo in chapter 10 of his *Náufragos de Antaño*, Barcelona 2002.

This desolate atmosphere would almost be enough to reconsider if we really wish to spend a full hour here. But just twenty steps into the grounds proper, we come upon a signboard of immaculate black letters on a spotless white background, which reads “Henry Fielding”, and points us to the only true tourist attraction – if that is the word for it – which the British Cemetery is rich: the sepulchre of Henry Fielding, author of *Tom Jones*, *Amelia* and many other works, who was not only ‘the most singular genius which [England] ever produced’, as Borrow formulated it, but has even been called ‘the father of the English novel’ by no one less than Sir Walter Scott⁵.



The reason why the famous author rests here is, to put it mildly, a little ironic. Fielding – exhausted by his taxing legal work and troubled by a small host of ailments such as gout, dropsy, jaundice and asthma - had come south to fix his failing health. Why in the world he would have picked Lisbon for the purpose is a mystery. By the looks of it, the city was mainly chosen because it could be reached by boat. Aix-en-Provence, Fielding’s preference, was out of the question, because, being perfectly bed-ridden, he could not travel overland, and he lacked the funds to be carried all the way. Then – making a mistake which many made since – he imagined that Lisbon, which lay hundreds of miles south of Tuscany, ‘must be more mild and warm, and the winter shorter and less piercing’.

But Lisbon, then as now, lies on the lee shore of the Atlantic, and enjoys the corresponding foul climate. On top of that the city at that time was one of the most crammed, one of the most populated, one of the most busy and certainly one of the filthiest places on the face of the earth. Even half a century later – after both urban and human room had been made by the Great Lisbon Earthquake which killed a fifth of the population and flattened half the town – we still hear stories of how chamber pots got emptied enthusiastically into the street from top story windows, with a fleeting, euphemistic warning of “*Agoa Vai!!*” (“Water Coming!!”) to warn pedestrians to step away from the sidewalk or ‘put up their umbrellas’. There was no garbage collecting

⁵ Scott, W., *Henry Fielding*, 1820, in: *Miscellaneous Prose Works* (1829), 3, p. 82.

beyond a few mud-carts run by the truly poor looking for sustenance, and the famous packs of wild dogs scavenging for forage. The shipping over grand oceans brought as many bugs and bacilli to the Tagus quays as it did cargoes. Dead rats, cats and dogs lay around in the streets. English travellers observed that the capital of Portugal was home to ‘a race of fleas more venomous and hungry than any to be met with in England’. And the weather was as foul as it can be today; with the difference that central heating, modern isolation, and even *fireplaces* were unknown until deep into the 19th century.⁶

Fielding, an observant fellow, hated this hell house from the moment he laid eyes on her, and in the parting words of his posthumously published “*Voyage to Lisbon*” stated bluntly that Lisbon was ‘the nastiest city in the world’. One should never so rudely defy the *Lares* of the house that welcomes you. The city was quick to take revenge. On 8 October of 1754, soon after he had penned the line and a mere two months after he had landed, Henry Fielding passed away.

Since he was, all at once, British, broke and famous at the time of his death, the members of the British Factory of Lisbon allowed him to be buried in their private graveyard, this ‘leafy spot where the nightingales fill the still air with song’⁷. But that was all. Despite the fact that he was the only immortal celebrity who would sleep forever in their midst, they raised no monument. Neither did his family, which was so poor that Fielding’s brother had to provide for the livelihood of his wife and children on their return to England. Consequently the grave was a most scrawny affair: a plot of 2 yards by 1 in the hillside dirt, perhaps not even covered by a tombstone, only by a wooden board with his hand-painted name⁸. Admirers who visited the grave throughout the following decades invariably came away scandalized to find it the victim of wanton neglect, ‘nearly concealed by weeds and nettles’⁹. And the *foreign* devotees among them never failed to pour scorn on English indifference towards their greatest men. ‘Is this how the British honour their best and brightest?’ they asked with a sneer. How can it be that philistine merchants and money-men erected ‘marble monuments with long, pompous, flattering inscriptions’¹⁰ to themselves and their vulgar wives, while a man of

⁶ See for the conditions in Lisbon: Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington, the years of the sword*, Granada Publishing, London 1971, p. 224; Terence McMahon Hughes, *An Overland Journey to Lisbon at the close of 1846*, (Colburn: London 1847), vol. 2, chapter 20, p. 317; Fireplaces unknown: Richard Ford, *Handbook of Spain*, 1845 ed., vol. II, 785.

⁷ Austin Dobson, *English men of letters: Fielding*, first published London 1883, chapter 7 (The Gutenberg version which I consulted gives no year or place of publication; but seeing the dates of the introductions it is probably based on a re-edition of 1907).

⁸ Testimonies are conflicting. Nathaniel Wraxall says he saw a tomb- or head-stone under the weeds in 1772. However, Richard Twist, in the same year, wrote that he found that ‘the great author of Tom Jones (...) is here interred without even a stone to indicate that here lies Henry Fielding.’ See Rose Macaulay, *They Went to Portugal*, 1946, p. 92, which is by far the best account available on the history of Fielding’s grave.

⁹ So Wraxall, quoted in Dobson, *op. cit.*, chapter 7, and in Macaulay, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ The words are Twist’s, quoted in Macaulay, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

proven genius and fame was left to rot and be forgotten in a frosty hole? The most bloodthirsty of these Bloody Foreigners went even further, and threatened to raise a splendid monument paid for out of their own unworthy continental pockets, and chisel a mocking epitaph onto it! The cheek!!¹¹



At long last embarrassment and foreign derision whipped the Lisbon British into action. In 1830, a supreme effort was made under the aegis of the Rev. Christopher Neville, British Chaplain of Lisbon, and the humble, unmarked plot in the dirt was replaced with a splendid, towering, heroic monument of epic stone which Borrow visited five years later, and which may still be seen today¹².

¹¹ Among them were the French consul, the Chevalier de Meyrionnet, who started an abortive scheme to this effect in 1776 (see Macaulay, *op. cit.*, 93; and Dobson, *op. cit.*, chapter 7, who however misinterprets the accurate statements of Alexander Chalmers in the General Biographical Dictionary (1812-17) 14: 282-93) and the art-loving Dom João de Braganza, uncle to the Queen and founder of the Lisbon Academy, whose efforts to raise a monument with an elegant Latin epitaph composed by the Abbé Correa de Serra floundered on clerical obstruction (Macaulay, *op. cit.*, p. 93f; also Notes & Queries, 8th series, IV, 26 August 26 1893, p. 164).

¹² Note, however, that there is some uncertainty whether the great author really sleeps in his own grave... Wordsworth's daughter, Mrs Dora Quillinan, who may have had some murky inside information, wrote after a visit in 1846: 'The exact spot where Fielding was buried (...) is not known. His monument (...) is on a spot selected by *guess*. The bones it covers may possibly have belonged to an idiot.' (Macaulay, *op. cit.*, 94f; quoted from Mrs. Quillinan's 1847 *Journal of a Few Months Residence in Portugal*.)

Whether this renovation was really an improvement is rather a matter of taste. The tomb is an all-time 18th century favourite: a heavy rectangular pedestal, heaved upon an altar of four bulky steps, topped with a heavy granite soup tureen, which itself is surmounted by a sculptured ‘urn and flame’ of giant dimensions. It is austere and yet unbearably pompous, as if to proclaim to the world that celebrities should not so much be buried, as squashed beneath a pile of massive cenotaphs which embody their weighty deeds and fame¹³. To add even more splendour to the whole, the base is inscribed with an interminable epitaph, which sets out with ‘*Henrici Fielding a Somersetensibus apud Glastoniam oriundi*’ and goes on and on in that brick-layer’s Latin of the Baroque age, by which our ancestors hoped to ensure that, *in saecula saeculorum* and *so long as the ages roll*, the educated of the civilized world would be able to grasp their meaning; and which, ironically, guarantees that nearly nobody today can read it, the present author being no exception¹⁴.

Nevertheless, it is an impressive monument in its way, as much for its setting as its vastness. And if I do not press a kiss onto this cold tomb, as Borrow claims he did and urges his readers to emulate, it is because I am not ‘of England’, which seems to be a prerequisite; and perhaps also because of the slight, superstitious discomfort I feel at seeing that Fielding, who only lived to 47, was exactly my own age when Lisbon finished him off... Beset by a sudden, superstitious discomfort, I quickly search my memory for verbal sins. Did I say anything *offensive* about the town since I got here? Did I call her names or make a jibe? To my horror I remember how, just yesterday evening, provoked by *vinho verde* and a particularly bad-mannered waiter, I also said some rather uncomplimentary things about the city... What if the *Lares* heard me? What if, *at this very moment*, they are deliberating what to do with me; how to punish another disrespectful Dutch pen-pusher who comes to a decent town only to insult her? No, this clearly is no time to *embrace the grave!!*

So instead we walk around the sepulchre twice. We shoot some pictures, breath the still, refreshing air and feast our ears on the belated songs of the nightingales. And then we set out to explore the remainder of the grounds, to find that other tomb which Borrow mentions, the resting place of Phillip Doddridge (1702-1751), the Nonconformist author ‘of a different stamp, but justly admired and esteemed’, who died in a perfectly identical manner as Fielding, only a little faster still. Doddridge sailed to Lisbon on 30 September 1751, also to fix his failing health, but within a fortnight of his arrival, on October 26th, he died and was buried here. For some fifteen minutes, perhaps a little half-heartedly, we try to find his grave; but we fail to locate it among the many ancient tombstones overgrown with weeds and nettles; and old Mrs Pires is nowhere to be seen (and in any case: how would we explain our quest to her or understand her answers?) And so our labour here is done; and nothing stands in the way moving on and exploring the other Lisbon site which Borrow strongly recommends his readers to visit.

¹³ John Moore’s tomb in Coruña is similar, but without the flaming urn which, I understand from Dobson, was inspired by the Chiswick tomb of Fielding’s friend, the painter Hogarth.

¹⁴ But see the appendix for the text and its translation by Martin Murphy.

‘Let travellers devote one entire morning to inspecting the Arcos and the Mai das Agoas’, Borrow wrote in the same Lisbon chapter of *The Bible in Spain*, for ‘I boldly say that there is no monument of man’s labour and skill, pertaining either to ancient or modern Rome (...) which can rival the water-works of Lisbon; I mean the stupendous aqueduct whose principal arches cross the valley to the north-east of Lisbon, and which discharges its little runnel of cool and delicious water into the rocky cistern within that beautiful edifice called the Mother of the Waters, from whence all Lisbon is supplied with the crystal lymph, though the source is seven leagues distant.’



There is surely some truth in that – although the dismissal of all Roman aqueducts as inferior to their modern Portuguese cousin contains some very bold Borrowian hyperbole indeed. To grasp the measure of the exaggeration, one only needs to think of the Pont du Gard near Nîmes and the aqueduct of Segovia, both of which are double-tiered, much more beautiful and nearly 1,500 years older, or of the great cistern of Constantinople with its dozens of subterranean pillars. But rethorics aside, the Lisbon *Aqueduto das Águas Livres* (literally: *Aqueduct of Free Waters*) is certainly remarkable; if only for its total length and its famous early feat of dogged endurance.¹⁵ Opened in 1748 after a record construction in 16 years, the whole of the structure stood firm through the famous 1755 Earthquake; and that is no mean accomplishment, given the fact that the 940 m long stretch which spans the Alcântara valley is made up of 35 towering lanced arches - some of them 65 meter high! - seemingly fragile and considerably less stable than the full, round, Roman arch.

¹⁵ Borrow’s ‘seven leagues’ (i.e. 40 km) holds a fair middle between the longest and the shortest length that may be ascribed to the whole of the waterworks. There is 18 km from the actual source at Belas village to the city itself; yet if one also counts the network of side-channels, the total length comes to some 58 km.

Although Borrow could not know it, his advice that readers explore the structure throughout an entire morning was ill-timed in 1835, and outdated when *The Bible in Spain* appeared. At the time of his own visit the aqueduct was still accessible and so it served as a pedestrian shortcut across the valley, which many people took to avoid cumbersome descents and struggles uphill. But barely a few months after Borrow's visit, a psychopath killer by the name of Diogo Alves began a series of heinous hold-ups. Hiding out behind some obstacle up on the conduits, he waited for weak and lonely pedestrians to pass, whom he hurled to their deaths after stripping them of their belongings. Seventy-six people were murdered this way (four of them from a single family!) before the authorities began to grasp that they were not dealing with some inexplicable succession of hysterical suicides, but with a vintage serial killer; and it was not until 1839 before they finally caught their man. Alves was tried, condemned to death and hanged in 1841, the last criminal to be executed in Portugal. So fascinating did the scientific community find this case of outright and incurable evil, that they had his head cut off and put into a glass jar for future study. It may still be seen today in the Lisbon Museum of Medicine and occasionally forms the centrepiece of bizarre 'anthropological' exhibitions.



In the wake of these gruesome events, the aqueduct was closed to pedestrians, and nowadays one must either rest content with studying it from street level, or take the guided tour to visit the splendid arched structure, and, at its end, the *Mãe das Aguas*, the *Mother of the Waters*, Borrow's giant reservoir of no less than 5,500 cubic meters in volume, which stands near the corner of the Rua das Amoreiras and the Largo do Rato.

Constructed in 1834, and finally deactivated in 1967 after more than 130 years uninterrupted service, the great cistern no longer supplies all Lisbon with ‘the crystal lymph’. It’s been turned into a Water Museum which – not counting school children on obligatory outings - few people ever visit. This is only natural; for the *Mai das Agoas*, as Borrow spells it, or the *Mãe d’Água*, as the official spelling seems to be, is no longer as impressive as when it stood in lone glory on the heights of its remote hillside. If one overlooks its present setting of concrete high-rises and modern motorways, the building is still beautiful and picturesque in its own way. It sports a little *piazza* of scenic houses at the back, has a charming little chapel built into one of the arches, and at the foot of the last pillars there are four very sweet Biblical “wet” scenes (e.g. Moses hitting water from the desert rocks) drawn up in the typical Portuguese blue-tile *azulejos*.



But as a feat of engineering it no longer astounds us as it once did Borrow, for we have all seen parking garages of greater dimensions and municipal swimming pools which hold more water. So it goes... For it is with pharaonic projects as it is with mankind himself: over time, the young Mothers of yesteryear change into venerable, ancient matriarchs, wrapped in bulky plaids and bent over wobbly canes; and when we meet them, we can no longer picture or appreciate their nimbleness and vigour during the days of their youth when “they sported with the daughters of the town on the hillside”.



The Mother of All Waters

Appendix: Fielding's Epitaph translated by Martin Murphy



As noted above, few are those who nowadays know how to make sense of Latin epitaphs. But fortunately, one of those few is my fellow Borrovian Martin Murphy, who took the time and trouble to produce the following corrected transcription and translation of the text on Fielding's tomb. In identical lay-out as found on the grave itself, the Latin text runs:

HENRICI FIELDING
A SOMERSETENSIBUS APUD GLASTONIAM ORIUNDI
VIRI SUMMO INGENIO,
EN QUAE RESTANT!
STYLO QUO NON ALIUS UNQUAM,
INTIMA QUI POTUIT CORDIS RESERARE, MORES HOMINUM EXCOLENDOS SUSCEPIT.
VIRTUTI DECOREM, VITIO FAEDITATEM [sic] ASSERUIT, SUUM CUIQUE TRIBUENS,
NON QUIN IPSE SUBINDE IRRETIRETUR EVITANDIS.
ARDENS IN AMICITIA, IN MISERIA SUBLEVANDA EFFUSUS,
HILARIS, URBANUS, ET CONJUX ET PATER ADAMATUS,
ALIIS, NON SIBI VIXIT.
VIXIT: SED MORTEM VICTRICEM VINCIT, DUM NATURA DURAT, DUM SAECULA CURRUNT.
NATURAE PROLEM SCRIPTIS PRAE SE FERENS,
SUAM ET SUAE GENTIS EXTENDET FAMAM.

On the other side of the grave is the brief inscription:

FIELDING
LUGET BRITANNIA GREMIO NON DARI
FOVERE NATUM

The style of this grandiloquent epitaph being opaque (particularly the meaning of the phrase 'Naturae prolem scriptis prae se ferens' is none too clear) Martin rendered it into the following free, but faithful, translation:

'Behold the remains of Henry Fielding, a man of supreme genius,
born in Glastonbury of Somerset stock!

In a style never matched by another, with the ability to unlock the inmost
secrets of the heart, he undertook the improvement of human conduct.

Whatever was fair he recognised as virtue, whatever was foul, as vice,
giving each its proper due
- not that he himself did not often fall into snares to be avoided

Warm in friendship, prodigal in the relief of distress,
cheerful, witty, a beloved husband and father,
he lived not for himself, but for others.

His life is finished, but he victoriously defies death's victory
so long as [human] nature lasts and ages roll.

Proudly carrying his written offspring before him [?],
he will continue to extend his, and his nation's, fame'.

The text on the reverse of the tomb adds:

'Britannia grieves at not being given her son to take to her bosom '.