

# **George Borrow in North-west Spain: from mid-May to the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1837**

**By Ian Robertson**

[This article – with certain revisions, but inevitably retaining some errors and infelicities – was originally a paper delivered at the George Borrow Conference held in Madrid at the Instituto Internacional in June 1993, and subsequently published in the *Proceedings of the 1993 George Borrow Conference*, ed. G. Fenwick, Toronto 1994, pp. 63-74. The majority of the illustrations now included were accumulated over a period of many years, and although sources are given after their captions in certain instances, I have been unable to establish these in every case, and apologise should any copyright material have been inadvertently used. I am grateful to Nathalie Bone for kindly allowing two examples of the work of Muirhead Bone to be reproduced.]

[Ian Robertson is the author of *Los Curiosos Impertinentes*, a study in Spanish of English travellers in Spain between 1760 and 1855, in which, naturally, chapters were devoted to George Borrow and to Richard Ford, the subject also of his full-length biography, published in 2004, entitled *Richard Ford, 1796–1858: Hispanophile, Connoisseur and Critic*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, he has edited reprints of Ford's *Gatherings from Spain*, and the first (1845) edition of his *Handbook for Travellers in Spain*. He has also written extensively on aspects of the Peninsular War. After residence for almost two decades in Pedraza de la Sierra, near Segovia, he settled in France in 1990.]



I have chosen to outline and study this – by far the most extensive of George Borrow's expeditions in Spain – partly on account of it being described comparatively briefly in most books about him. This period, during which Borrow was away from his base in Madrid for no less than five and a half months, took up fifteen chapters of *The Bible in Spain* – almost one third of its length.

In the summer of 1841, shortly after the publication of *The Zincoli*, he had asked the Bible Society to lend him their file of his letters from the Peninsula. By re-reading them, and in many places copying sometimes almost verbatim from them, Borrow was able, when composing *The Bible in Spain*, to infuse its pages with extraordinary verve and vitality, as fresh today as when written.

It is not always easy to date with accuracy his daily movements, but I have attempted to do so, to put certain matters in their proper context, and to fill in several lacunæ. I have tried also to be specific in detailing his route, and have corrected a number of his topographical errors, and spellings, some but not all of which have been pointed out previously. I have indicated within square brackets the modern spellings of place-names, although in Galicia particularly they may vary slightly on different maps.

It is hardly necessary to emphasise that, apart from the few main post-roads fanning out from Madrid and some in the Basque provinces, the highways of Spain at that time were often little better than rutted cart-tracks. They were quite liable to be washed away by floods and, not infrequently, in summer travellers preferred to follow the course of a dry river-bed or *rambla*. When not bespattered by mud, one was as likely to be enveloped in a shroud of dust. In extensive areas of the country there were few trees to shelter him from the elements; and fewer *ventas* or wayside inns, where, unless they had the foresight to bring their own provisions, the fare would be very meagre.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham York at [books@gyork.co.uk](mailto:books@gyork.co.uk) may still have stock of this title.

Whether Borrow carried any map with him is unknown. Numerous maps of varying reliability had been published during the period of the Peninsular War, among them those by Stockdale, Faden, and Arrowsmith in London, but it may be assumed that Borrow studied one in advance of his expedition, perhaps acquiring, when in London in 1836, that of the Peninsula recently revised and published by Wyld. But none gave more than very imprecise indications of any but the main highways, and it was not until 1830 that there was a dependable *Guía General de Correos, Postas, y Caminos* available, produced under the direction of F.X. de Cabanes. When Borrow refers to leagues, these would have been standardised by then to a length of slightly less than three and a half miles, although peasants would more frequently estimate a distance by referring to the approximate length of time required to cover it on foot, which often depended more on the contour of the area being traversed rather than the actual stretch of road or track concerned, although it is recorded that they would as often as not walk directly across country, as the crow flies, up hill and down dale.

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On the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 1837 George Borrow wrote from Madrid to his friend John Hasfeld to advise him that ‘the long and adventurous journey’ on which he was soon to embark might well mean several months of silence, for it was his ‘intention to visit the mountainous districts of Spain, particularly Galicia and the Basque provinces.’ Bad weather, a last-minute change of servant, a nasty cough and fever which had laid him low, were to delay his departure.

His new servant was Antonio Buchino, whom Borrow always refers to as Buchini.<sup>2</sup> He had commended himself as ‘a man of many capacities – a discreet valet, an excellent cook, a good groom and a light rider’ – but admitted also that he was ‘tempted to quarrel with the pots and pans in the kitchen.’ Indeed, he was a complex character, as Borrow was to find out during the following months: ‘many the wild adventure ... was he the sharer. His behaviour was frequently in the highest degree extraordinary, but he served me courageously and faithfully.’ Buchino is described as looking younger than his years, which were ‘considerably above forty.’

His arms were long and bony, and his whole form conveyed an idea of great activity united with no slight degree of strength. His hair was wiry, but of jetty blackness; his forehead low; his eyes small and grey, expressive of much subtlety and no less malice, strangely relieved by a strong dash of humour; the nose was handsome, but the mouth was immensely wide, and his under jaw projected considerably. A more singular physiognomy I have never seen.

Of Greek nationality, but probably of Italian origin, Buchino had lived at Constantinople, where, so he said, he had served as janitor to several ambassadors, including an English one, who had to leave in a hurry during the hostilities between the two countries. In a footnote, Borrow suggests that this must have taken place when Admiral Duckworth was attempting to force the passage of the Dardanelles thirty years earlier. Zea Bermudez,<sup>3</sup> who later brought him to Spain, had then employed him, during which time he may have acquired some knowledge of French. Since then Buchino had had a variety of masters, usually serving them as valet or cook, but rarely remained long with any one, for no other reason that he could think of but that he was Greek, and had ‘principles of honour,’ as he was often to emphasise.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May Borrow wrote to the Revd Andrew Brandram at the Bible Society in London to confirm that he was about to set out, having received the necessary letters of credit from Henry O’Shea to his correspondents,<sup>4</sup> and promised to write again from Salamanca. But, in the event, it was not until

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<sup>2</sup> He had been recommended by Andrés Borrego, Borrow’s printer in Madrid, by whom he had been twice employed, the last time only six months previously, and was looking for work again. Henry O’Shea, Borrow’s banker in Madrid, had also once employed him, as cook. He had formerly worked for General Fernandez de Cordova (1798–1840), the Duke of Frias (1783–1851; ambassador in London 1820–23, and later in Paris), a certain Monsieur le Comte, and Zea Bermúdez. Borrow felt obliged to dismiss Buchino eventually, sending him back to Madrid from Seville ‘on account of his many irregularities.’ However, after Borrow’s return to England, Buchino appears to have reverted to his former occupation. In Richard Ford’s letter to Borrow of the 8th of January 1845 with news from Gayangos in Madrid, he is referred to as being cook to General Narvaez (1800–1868).

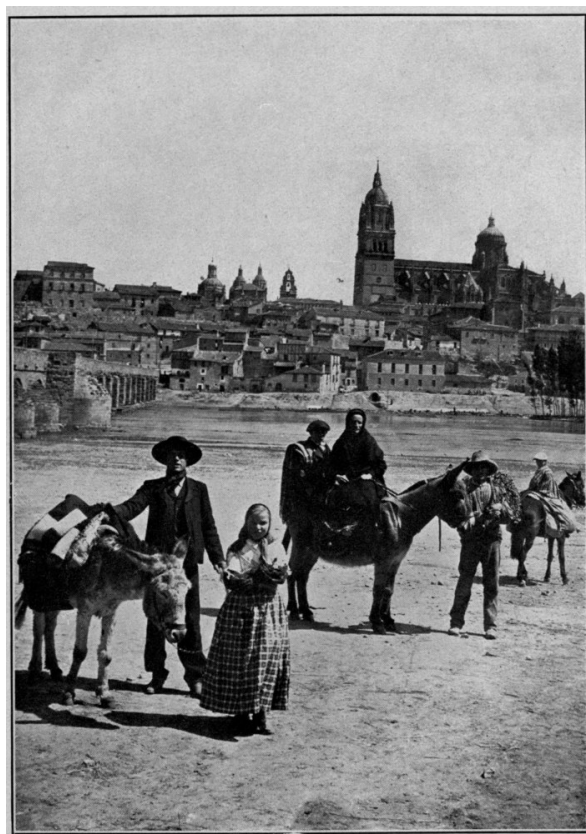
<sup>3</sup> Ulick Burke, editor of the 1896 edition of *The Bible in Spain*, added a footnote stating that this would have been Cean Bermúdez, the art historian (1749–1829), probably confusing him with the merchant turned politician Francisco Cea/Zea Bermúdez who in January 1834 had emigrated to France, where he died shortly after.

<sup>4</sup> O’Shea was later to compile a *Guide to Spain*, published by Longmans, Green & Co. in 1865. Although it had many merits and went into several editions, inevitably, as a work of literature, it remained in the shadow of Ford’s masterpiece.

midday on Tuesday the 15th, when still feeling rather feeble after being bled the evening before, that Borrow mounted his powerful Andalusian stallion, brought round to Maria Diaz's door at Calle de Santiago 16. Antonio had been busy balancing their saddle-bags, containing a small cargo of Testaments – some of the five thousand recently printed in Madrid for the Bible Society – apart from their personal baggage and equipment. Together, they rode forth on the first stage of their long journey 'by the gate of San Vicente'<sup>5</sup> – then in its former position<sup>5</sup> – and on crossing the insignificant Manzanares, they turned to follow the well paved highway – one of several constructed during the later half of the mid 18th century which radiated from Madrid – leading north-west towards and over the Sierra de Guadarrama. At first, this traversed the exposed plateau surrounding the capital, then, as it still is (when not disfigured by urbanisation) largely a 'hideous, grassless, treeless, colourless, calcined desert,' as graphically described by Richard Ford only eight years later in his *Handbook for Travellers in Spain*. Nightfall found them at the village of Guadarrama.

Having ascended to the Puerto de los Leones, the pair descended the far side of the range, and rode on through Villacastín before veering west at Sanchidrián. The plateau of Old Castile is here characterised by numerous huge granite boulders scattered over the undulating plain, across which they proceeded to Peñaranda de Bracamonte.<sup>6</sup> 'We sold a few Testaments in the villages through which we passed, more especially at Peñaranda', wrote Borrow in *The Bible in Spain*; but in his letter to Brandram sent from Salamanca, he only admits to having disposed of five copies *en route*.

They entered Salamanca the following evening, the lofty tower of its 'new' cathedral, below which nestled the Romanesque one, prominent from afar. Leading their horses 'along dark, silent, and deserted streets,' they were directed to the Plaza de la Verdura, flanked by the 'large, gloomy, and comfortless'



*Early view of Salamanca from the south bank of the Tormes, spanned by the Roman bridge (left)*

<sup>5</sup> This stood at the foot of Cuesta de San Vicente, between the north-west corner of the Campo del Moro and the Estación del Norte.

<sup>6</sup> The decayed market town is named after Sir Robert de Brocquemont, a Norman knight fighting in Spain in the late fourteenth century, whose family then settled in the area.

*Posada de los Toros*, the best in the town, which was not saying much. Borrow described its interior, the rooms of which ‘were many and large, floored with either brick or stone, generally with an alcove at the end, in which stood a wretched flock bed.’ He was probably inured to its active insect population, to which he does not refer.

Borrow found Salamanca melancholy: ‘its halls are now almost deserted, and grass is growing in its courts’ and yet, ‘what an interesting, nay, what a magnificent place ... How glorious are its churches, how stupendous are its deserted convents ...’ In his letter to Brandram, discreetly he does not mention the hospitality he received from Dr Gartland, then rector of the Irish College. By entertaining Borrow, he had exposed himself ‘to the rancorous remarks of the narrow-minded native clergy, who, in their ugly shovel hats and long cloaks,’ glared askance as Borrow strode by their whispering groups sheltering below the arcades of the Plaza Mayor.

He soon made himself known to Vicente Blanco, the principal bookseller; who consented to become the Bible Society’s agent, being prepared to take some stock of the New Testament on deposit. Blanco also owned a press, on which the local official *Bulletin* was printed. Somehow, Borrow got him to agree to allow the Testament to be advertised in it, and quantities of his announcement were ‘struck off in the shape of bills ... to be stuck up in various parts of the town,’ an experiment Borrow intended to repeat in other places he was to visit, as explained to the Revd Andrew Brandram in his letter dated 7 June, paragraphs of which he was to reproduce word for word in *The Bible in Spain*. This publicity evidently had some effect, and several Testaments were sold, as confirmed in his next letter, written from Astorga. In this, he remarked that he had had the satisfaction of seeing three bought in less than the quarter of an hour that he had remained in Blanco’s shop.

In the early afternoon of Saturday the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, a dull day, Borrow, accompanied on mule-back by Patrick Cantwell, a member of the Irish College, rode out of Salamanca in a north-easterly direction. None of the party knew the road to Valladolid precisely; indeed, amongst ‘a medley of bridle-paths and drift-ways’ it was not easy to pick one out, but by occasionally asking the way from passing peasants, they reached the village of Pitiegua, ‘consisting of mud huts,’ in fact *tapia* or adobe bricks, the usual form of building material in those corn lands. Antonio Garcia de Aguilar, the priest, who lived in one of superior construction, invited them in. Borrow, ‘with the true eagerness of a bibliomaniac,’ was about to scan his bookshelves, when he was pushed into a large easy-chair, the priest exclaiming that ‘there was nothing there worthy of the attention of an Englishman, for his whole stock consisted of breviaries and dry Catholic treatises on divinity.’ Don Antonio then insisted on offering him cakes and gin, and was quite non-plussed when Borrow admitted that he ‘seldom tasted even wine, but like himself, was content with the use of water.’ Eventually the travellers settled down to a meal of bacon and eggs, while their anglophile host regaled them with the embroidered story that Wellington himself, together with General Robert Craufurd, had sat in that very room after thrashing the French at Arapiles.<sup>7</sup>

While Cantwell returned to Salamanca, Borrow and Antonio continued their journey north-east, reaching the village of Pedrosa [El Pedroso de la Almuña] by nightfall. (This is nearer the present railway line than to the direct road from Salamanca to Valladolid, which is some five miles or so further north.) After some trouble in finding stabling for their mounts, they roamed about the place, where the uncouth peasants – after muttering gruff ‘*buenas noches*’ – would turn into their homes without even inviting the travellers to enter. Such behaviour should not have surprised Borrow: it is to be experienced to this day in such off-the-beaten-track hamlets.

As they appeared to be neither members of the Irish community at Salamanca, nor French merchants *en route* to Medina del Campo, their hosts at the humble hostelry assumed that they must surely be either Jews or heretics, and accordingly would be charged extra, to pay for the expense of purifying the house on their departure. As they mounted next morning, curiosity brought a group of rustics to the door, who,

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<sup>7</sup> This was a village and the name of two flat-topped hills in the vicinity of Salamanca, after which the Spaniards called the great battle fought almost exactly twenty-five years earlier, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1812. In fact, Craufurd had been killed at the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo, which had taken place six months *before* the battle of Salamanca, but obviously his reputation as commander of the Light Division had long outlived him. It is a little surprising that Borrow makes no reference to the battle when describing Salamanca itself.



*Muirhead Bone, The Market at Medina del Campo*

at the very sight of such strangers, and in case of possible contamination, devoutly indulged in the ceremony of crossing themselves!<sup>8</sup>

Medina del Campo, ‘the city of the plain,’ the former emporium of Old Castile, which they were to enter that afternoon, was a town of fallen fortunes, having espoused the cause of the Comuneros in the early sixteenth century, when it was sacked and slighted; but the famous market, one of great antiquity, had survived. Next day they continued north-east across the dreary steppes, which reminded Borrow of Russia, occasionally shaded by groves of umbrella pines, to cross the Duero ‘by a handsome stone bridge,’ probably that at Puente Duero.

Valladolid, which had given Henry Swinburne, passing through the place several decades earlier, the impression of being ‘a large rambling city ... run up in a hurry,’ still contained numerous magnificent buildings, such as the *Parador de las Diligencias* appeared to be, at which Borrow and Antonio put up for their first two nights. But finding the accommodation wretched and the *posadero*, although ‘a leading man amongst the national guard’ with ‘an assumed military air,’ so uncivil, they moved to the *Caballo de Troya* – still existing although much remodelled – in the Calle de Correos, where their more welcoming hostess was a Basque. (In October, when Borrow passed through Valladolid on his return journey to Madrid, he found the *Parador de las Diligencias* ‘in other and better hands, those of a Frenchman from Bayonne,’ his predecessor having ridden off on hearing of the threatened approach of a band of Carlists. The 1845 edition of Ford’s *Hand-Book* refers to it as being kept by La Bilbaína.)

It would have been during the next few days that Borrow made an excursion to several neighbouring villages, but only admitted to doing so in his *Account of Proceedings in the Peninsula made to the Committee of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, when in London during November the following year, as being among those ‘incidents which I have hitherto kept within the privacy of my own bosom and which I have confided to none; they were but experiments, which at that time I had no wish to repeat, nor to be requested so to do.’

I twice sallied forth ... on horseback ... bearing a satchel of books ... I proceeded to the market-place, where I spread out a horse-cloth on the ground, on which I deposited my books. I then commenced crying with a loud voice: ‘Peasants, peasants, I bring you the Word of God at a

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<sup>8</sup> I recall the incident, only fifty years ago, when my wife, having parked our car in the Plaza Mayor of Plasencia (in the days one could do such things), crossed the sun-scorched *plaza* wearing ‘slacks’, became the subject of intense curiosity by huddles of women, both young and old, pointing at her and muttering. It would seem that they had never seen a female either at the wheel or dressed in such ‘unmentionables’. Whether they crossed themselves physically, I remember not; but until finding shelter in an adjacent bar, we fully expected to be stoned: how times have changed!



cheap price' ... I thus went on till a crowd gathered round me, who examined the book with attention, many of them reading aloud. But I had not long to tarry; in both instances I disposed of my cargo almost instantaneously, and then mounted my horse without a question having been asked me ... This occurred ... near the towns of Santiago and Valladolid.

In his letter dated the 25 July Borrow stated that he found 'literature of every description ... at the lowest ebb' at Valladolid; nevertheless, assisted by the local bookseller, Julian Pastor, 'a kind-hearted, simple man,' some twenty copies of the Testament were sold 'during the five days' [sic] that he was there. In *The Bible in Spain*, Borrow notes that it was after 'a sojourn of about ten days.' Ford was to recall that, in 1843, Pastor was also the publisher of a *Compendio Histórico Descriptivo* [of Valladolid], a useful compilation.



*The Colegio de los Ingleses, or English College, in Valladolid*

Borrow found time to pay his respects to the rector of the Colegio de los Escoceses, although he found him a dour and suspicious character, unlike the Irish at Salamanca, in spite of having brought a letter of introduction from them. Among other establishments visited was that of the Philippine Missions, which then stood beyond the town gates. He was also escorted round the flourishing Colegio de los Ingleses, with an impressive picture gallery and delicious walled garden, which he refers to characteristically as 'the English Popish seminary.'

At Dueñas, where they briefly baited *en route* to Palencia, Borrow's horse was rigorously inspected by a group of cavalymen stationed there, whom he soon recognised as also being Gypsies, who attempted, unsuccessfully, to sell him a baggage pony. Having admired the cathedral at Palencia, and been shown the paintings it contained, some incorrectly accepted by Borrow as being by Murillo – and he was not connoisseur enough to argue the toss – and tired of rambling about the town, the travellers retired early to their *posada*. During the next two days they bore north-west across the baking Tierras de Campos, where the inhospitality of the 'ignorant and brutal' peasantry was such that they were refused a glass of water, at least unless prepared to pay for it. Their route lay through the crumbling old town of Sahagún, where stood a Franciscan convent among other relics of its past importance; and from there across the *meseta* towards León, its approach crowded with people converging on the city for the Midsummer Day's fair. It was there that the curious incident took place, so well described by Borrow, when a group of Gypsies, accused of causing hysteria among the horses and attempting to steal some in the confusion, were hustled off the field.<sup>9</sup>

With the exception of its noble Gothic cathedral, Borrow found León, like Salamanca, gloomy – as it can be under a leaden sky – and he had hardly been there three days before being racked again with fever.<sup>10</sup> Luckily, he had already persuaded the local bookseller to distribute his posters. While the reactionary clergy were immediately up in arms, threatening dire consequences, the bookseller, far from being

<sup>9</sup> George Borrow, *The Zincali*, part 2, chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> Where they found accommodation remains uncertain: Ford refers to a 'tolerable' *posada* on the Rastro, and also *La del Sol*, the *Meson del Gallo*, and *de Cayetanon* (?).

intimidated, retaliated by affixing a copy of the advertisement to the cathedral gate itself, and some fifteen copies of the Testament were disposed of during the next few days.



*Muirhead Bone, A scene by the Cathedral apse at León*

At 3 o'clock on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, although Borrow was still weak, they set off again, soon to be overtaken by a violent thunderstorm, eventually entering the suburbs of Astorga, but covered with mud and dust, their tongues cleaving to their palates with thirst. With the arrival of the Madrid coach, they were dislodged from their miserable rooms in the *posada*, although permitted to shelter in a ruinous outbuilding, where, for the most part of the next three days, trying to shake off his fever, Borrow lay stretched out on a tester bed, solicitously cared for by Antonio. No bookseller could be found in Astorga, nor anyone willing to stock Testaments.



*A Maragatos couple a century ago*

Borrow incorporates here a description of the Maragatos, a characteristic community inhabiting several villages further west, said to be descended from the Berber highlanders which had settled in the neighbourhood formerly, and with whom much of the carrying trade of north-west Spain was then entrusted. They wore zouave-like breeches, while the jewellery worn by their women was also of peculiar design. Borrow refers to the wooden statue of a Maragato named Pedro Mato, forming a weather-cock, still to be seen on the cathedral at Astorga. A Maragato couple are prominent also on the belfry of the Ayuntamiento.



*An early photograph of the Ayuntamiento at Astorga, with a function taking place*

After ascending past Manzanal, to the north-west, Borrow and Antonio dropped down through the eastern edge of the Vierzo, a delightful district within a bowl of mountains, to traverse Bembibre, a village of slate-roofed hovels and, leaving Ponferrada to the south, approached Cacabelos at dusk. But being refused entry to its inn, they had little alternative but to stumble on through the night, their way spasmodically lit by flashes of sheet lightning, to Villafranca. Ford refers to the village as truly Swiss-like, although ‘an abode of dirt, misery, and poverty,’ rye bread forming the scanty staff of life to a squalid population. As it was, a baker, who was still up and about, led them to the *posada* (*La Nueva?*), where, fortuitously mistaken for another traveller the landlady would have been pleased to see, they were let in.

One wandered around in the dark at one’s peril. Young Robert Southey, who had passed that way forty years earlier, had noticed that the local beehives were made out of hollowed tree trunks about three feet high and covered with a slate, and tells the story of an English traveller, who going behind a *posada* one moonlight night and seeing one, ‘congratulated himself that people there were so far advanced as to have made such a convenience ... and was in a situation very unfit for making a speedy retreat when he took off the cover, and out came the bees upon him.’

Borrow and Antonio proceeded north-west next morning, first threading an umbrageous gorge before commencing the long and laborious ascent up the rugged valley of the Valcarse.<sup>11</sup> Borrow well described

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<sup>11</sup> Borrow makes a topographical error in referring to it as being the ‘far-famed pass of Fucebadon,’ or Foncebadón. This was indeed on the former pilgrimage road to Santiago, but in the opposite direction, and lies not far west of Rabal del Camino, on the direct road leading almost due west from Astorga to Ponferrada, now the LE142.



the occasional villages, 'with low walls, and roofs formed of immense slates, the eaves nearly touching the ground ... Everything here is wild, strange, and beautiful ... [in many of] the hanging fields or meadows ... the mowers were plying their scythes, though it seemed scarcely possible that their feet could find support on ground so precipitous;' and there a cart 'drawn by oxen ... its nearer wheel ... actually hanging over the horrid descent,' etc.

From the Puerto de Pedrafita do Cebreiro, where Borrow's stallion shed a shoe, they descended gradually into Galicia, being lucky enough to find a blacksmith with one remaining horseshoe which served, for there were only ponies in the province, and they were able to ride on to picturesque Nogales [As Nogais], where stood a tolerable *posada*.<sup>12</sup> In the early hours they were awoken by the arrival of a caravan of travellers taking advantage of an armed escort to defend them from the robbers and Carlists said to infest the road. While they briefly halted, Borrow decided, uncharacteristically, that it might be wise to join the party, and their mounts were hurriedly re-saddled.

Several travellers in the past have referred to this sometimes unconscious habit in Spain of individuals and small groups congregating together when setting out on a journey, as being less likely to be attacked by *bandoleros* lurking along the route as much as for company. The motley crowd wended their way through isolated villages: 'mostly an assemblage of wretched cabins, the roofs thatched, dank, and moist, and not infrequently covered with rank vegetation. There were dung-hills before the doors, and no lack of pool and puddles. Immense swine were stalking about, intermingled with naked children.' Such scenes are not so very different to this day in some remote localities.



*A sector of the Roman walls of Lugo prior to the removal of adjoining buildings*

Lugo was entered early next afternoon, and they put up at a large *posada*, almost certainly the *Meson de Aguiar*, just without the massively bastioned Roman walls of dark slate encircling the town, as they still do, although the numerous buildings, which formerly abutted many stretches of the exterior, no longer clutter them.<sup>13</sup> Pedro Pujol, a wealthy bookseller in the Plaza Mayor, who was prepared to sell Testaments, relieved Borrow of his remaining stock of thirty, which were all disposed of in one day. Two of them were bought by the bishop himself, much to Borrow's satisfaction.

After several days, Borrow and Antonio set off for Betanzos, again joining an escorted party, until, impatient at their slow pace, they imprudently rode ahead, meeting two armed robbers near the bridge spanning the Mandeo at Castellana, west of Guitiriz, but were able to scare them off. From Betanzos they were obliged to lead their mounts, Borrow's having been bled the previous evening. Their road traversed vineyards and fields of maize to approach the bay of Corunna, where several ships were riding at anchor. These turned out to be part of an English squadron, which as their informant remarked: 'have doubtless some designs upon Galicia. These foreigners are the ruin of Spain.' Spanish memories were very short in several respects, particularly when it came to admitting to any obligation, as, in my experience, they often

<sup>12</sup> It was the same one in which Moore had briefly lodged during his retreat to Corunna, according to Ford.

<sup>13</sup> Ford refers to a decent inn outside the town, on the Astorga road in the Barrio de San Roque, which it may well have been. Although Ford had passed through Lugo himself, we find him writing to Borrow in June 1841, when compiling the practical part of his *Hand-Book*: 'Have you kept the names of any of the Inns in any towns, or have you merely put down 'la posada'? If you have any, especially in the Lugo country, pray give me a list of them.' It would appear that Borrow had not noted such details, or had forgotten the actual name of the *posadero*.

are to this day. Hardly three decades had elapsed since Sir John Moore had died in the Canton Grande after the battle at Corunna, when his army, sent to the defence of Spain after Napoleon's invasion, had perforce to retreat to the coast, in part along the very same road that Borrow had ridden from Astorga, but in a bitter January, not July. Much of his narration of this part of the journey, as sent in a letter to Brandram, was copied verbatim in *The Bible in Spain*, including the description of Moore's tomb.

Finding an excellent inn in the Calle Real – presumably the *Fonda del Comercio*, run by a Genoese married to a Basque – Borrow decided to make Corunna his base of operations in Galicia, and from the five hundred Testaments sent ahead from Madrid and awaiting him at José Maria Perez's bookshop, he would supply its main towns. On the 20 of July he was able to report to London: 'the work enjoys a tolerable sale – seven or eight copies per day on the average.' He added that since his arrival he had heard from Señor Pastor at Valladolid that the forty copies left there had been sold already, and that he had ordered another fifty to be sent up from Madrid. It was all very satisfactory.



*Sir John Moore's tomb in the Jardin de San Carlos, Corunna*

By early August Borrow was in Santiago de Compostela, again having chosen to join an escorted party. And yet he does not appear to have been particularly worried about riding alone to the villages in its vicinity to sell Testaments, when repeating the experiment made at Valladolid. At Calle de la Azabachería 16, a short distance north-east of the cathedral, stood the 'very splendid and commodious establishment' of Rey Romero, who was to take a great interest in distributing Borrow's Testaments: indeed, frequently he sent home a customer with that slim volume rather than the title they had entered his shop to acquire. He was referred to by Ford as 'a good bookseller for those about to start on Spanish travel,' and indeed very different from the usual Spanish bookseller as characterised by Ford. Too often, he would be 'a queer uncomfortable person for an eager collector to fall foul of. He sits ensconced among his parchment-bound wares, more indifferent than a Turk ... He scarcely notices the stranger's entrance: neither knows the books he has, or what he has not got; he has no catalogue, and will scarcely reach out his arm to take down any book that is pointed out; he never has anything which is published by another bookseller, and will not send for it for you, nor always even tell you where it may be had,' etc.

Borrow remarked, after one of his many perambulations of the town with Rey Romero, on the 'spirit of localism,' and on the citizens' antipathy to Corunna, which was unbounded. It would seem that as long as Santiago flourished, they didn't care a damn if all other towns in Galicia were to perish: in this respect also, times have hardly changed. One evening, when strolling through the granite streets and along the *alameda*, Borrow caught sight of an extraordinary shuffling figure advancing toward him, that of Benedict Mol, who had that moment entered the town. He had walked all the way from Madrid where, in the previous year, Borrow had first met him, on which occasion this strange character, who had lived in Spain for forty-five years, had introduced himself as having been a former member of the Walloon guard, although he was now a soap vendor. Already, he had recounted to Borrow the improbable story of the *Schatz*, the treasure he would find one day in Santiago, where in a large copper kettle below the granite flagstones of the sacristy of San Roque, just north of the enceinte, was buried a hoard of gold and diamonds. The site had been described to him in detail by a former companion among the guards when on his death bed, and the fact had just been confirmed by a *Haxweib* or witch. Now, as he explained to the

incredulous Borrow, he would dig up the *Schatz*, and then would ‘purchase a coach with six mules, and ride out of Galicia to Lucerne,’ his birthplace, and where his father had been hangman. The matter was well advanced already. The canon to whom he had confessed and disclosed his project had not only shown great interest, but advised him that all he need do now, before excavating, was to obtain the necessary permission from the Captain-General, which in the event was not to be such an easy matter.<sup>14</sup>

After about a fortnight in Santiago, Borrow and Antonio rode south through Padrón and Caldas de los Reyes [Reis in Gallego] to Pontevedra, which, surrounded by its wall, impressed him as a town., as it did Richard Ford, who described it as being clean, well-built, and well-paved. Whether Borrow put up at what he described as the ‘decent *posada* in the Calle del Puente,’ is uncertain. Señor García, a local notary, but also a bookseller and recommended by Rey Romero, befriended Borrow, and introduced him to Claudio González y Zúñiga, a copy of whose *Descripción Económica* of the province, published three years earlier, he thrust into Borrow’s hand as they parted. But the same provincialism was experienced here as at Santiago, for García did not care a fig ‘if Vigo was burnt, and all the fools and rascals within it’; while although it was true that there had once been a bookshop in Vigo ‘kept by an insane barber,’ it had been broken up and the fellow had vanished, and certainly ‘Any foreign power ... has the right to attack Vigo’ (as the English had done in 1585 and 1589 under Drake, under Ormonde in 1702, and Cobham in 1719).

During the next few days Garcia was to sell the eight Testaments left with him, while Borrow disposed of another four in Vigo, where, despite the notary’s slighting remarks, Borrow found an excellent *posada* (probably *de los Vizcaínos* or *La Vizcaína*), next morning having his breakfast looking out onto the Plaza Mayor, but whether this was from the same establishment is uncertain. Later, in the hope of getting a better view of the bay, in which ‘the proudest man-of-war might lie within a stone’s throw of the town ramparts without any fear of injuring her keel,’ he climbed up the steep hill side behind the port; but viewing scenery was a hazardous occupation in Spain. Within minutes, Borrow was arrested for ‘taking observations,’ and escorted to the neighbouring fort for interrogation, although released with a caution soon after.



*The Ponte Nafonso, north of Noia*

It had long been Borrow’s intention, while in Galicia, to make his way to Cape Finisterre, taking with him his remaining Testament. It was in part a personal pilgrimage, for he well remembered having escaped

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<sup>14</sup> Although Borrow had stated at the end of Chapter XXII of *The Bible in Spain* that the history of Benedict Mol might be ‘easily authenticated’, this was certainly not so, and for many decades there remained serious doubts as to the reality or otherwise of this curious character, despite the efforts of the late Sir Angus Fraser and Antonio Giménez among other Borrovians. It was not until 2010, with the publication of Peter Missler’s exhaustive investigations under the title *The Treasure Hunter of Santiago*, that the mystery was eventually resolved as satisfactorily as is possible. (See <http://www.durrantpublishing.co.uk/Treasure/index.html>)

shipwreck on the treacherous rocks of this 'Land's End' of the Peninsula the previous November, when sailing from Falmouth to Lisbon.

On re-entering Padrón, Buchino was sent back to Santiago with the horses, while Borrow hired a little black pony, and set out on the expedition, having engaged 'a strange-looking figure of the biped species,' with an immense head placed clean upon his shoulders, and with a powerful wrestler's body supported by 'a pair of short but very nimble legs,' as he thus described his ex-mariner guide.

From the convent of Esclavitud, just north of Padrón, they proceeded north-west across country via Los Ángeles [Os Anxeles], with a distant view of the castle ruins of Altamira, later bearing south-west to cross the Tambre by the fourteenth century bridge of Don Alonzo [Ponte Nafonso]. Borrow refers in error to Noyo [Noia] being to his right, not his left. There was then no coast road. Working their way across the hills, Borrow and his guide sheltered in a *choza*, a rustic hut, as they were still some two leagues from Corcubión when night descended. They rode through the town next morning before skirting a beach of dazzling white sand to approach Finisterre itself. The ancient settlement of Duyo, to which Borrow refers, is shown on an earlier map of Galicia as being on the west side of the promontory, lashed by Atlantic breakers.

After a meal, they examined a dismantled fort before clambering up a ridge for the sea view. On returning to rest at the village house where they had left their mounts, Borrow was suddenly 'seized roughly by the shoulder, and nearly dragged from the bed' by a huge bewhiskered fisherman wielding a rusty musket, and conducted through the crowded street to where the *alcalde* and his cronies, seated on barrels, were impatiently waiting. They had already detained his guide. In his letter of the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, written to the Bible Society on his return to Corunna, Borrow states that they had been 'seized as Carlist spies', which in *The Bible in Spain* becomes elaborated as having been apprehended as 'Calros' [sic], Don Carlos, the Spanish pretender, and his nephew, the Infante Don Sebastian.

The municipal councillors needed little convincing of that certainty: who else could they be? It was useless to argue, for when Borrow pointed out that he hardly had the appearance of a Spaniard: and, anyhow, was nearly a foot taller than the pretender, the *alcaide* conclusively retorted: 'That makes no difference; you of course carry many waistcoats about you, by means of which you disguise yourself, and appear tall or low according to your pleasure.' The idea that Borrow had ridden so far merely to see prospects, was inconceivable. The *alcaide* had lived there for forty years: it had never entered his head to climb the mountain: obviously Borrow had done so 'to take altitudes, and to mark out a camp.'

Years later, Richard Ford remarked on the similarities between Borrow's arrest and those of both Viscount Porchester when in Galicia only a decade earlier, and of Widdrington in 1843. But, as he emphasised, when a stranger 'arriving in a remote district – nobody knows who, or why, or whence – begins digging the earth, tapping rocks, sketching country, ascending commanding heights – can it be wondered at that he should himself become the observed of all observers, and set down as a spy ... the cry, he is mapping the country, taking plans, awakes the Alcalde from his siesta. The geologist, in searching for a mine of gold, has discovered a lost treasure: the artist is making a chart to facilitate the removal.'

It was at this point that Antonio de la Trava, who had been listening intently to the interrogation, intervened. 'El valiente de Finisterra,' as he was known – having formerly, when the French had invaded, killed three of them, and who had then served with the English fleet and even claimed to have seen Nelson die – was able to convince the *alcalde* that Borrow could well be an Englishman, and advised caution rather than shooting him out of hand. Would it not be better to take him to Corcubión, where the *alcalde mayor*, Don Laureano Maria Muñoz, a *señorito* from Madrid, not even a Gallego, and 'very learned,' might continue the investigation. And, of course, Don Laureano, who was conversant with the works of 'the Grand Baintham' [sic], which he studied day and night,<sup>15</sup> realised immediately that here was nothing else but a ridiculous example of mistaken identity on the part of the ignorant fisherfolk of Finisterre, and set them free. But noticing the one Testament which Borrow still grasped (and which he was to present to *el valiente* for his timely support), he cynically remarked: 'How very singular that the countrymen of the Grand Baintham should set any value upon that old monkish book.' To what extent, one might well wonder, might this have been Borrow's own private opinion also!

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<sup>15</sup> Although his works were not translated into Spanish in their entirety for another few years, a good part of Jeremy Bentham's writings had been published in Spain between 1820 and 1837.



On returning to Corunna, Borrow was able to report to Brandram that about one hundred Testaments had been disposed of at Santiago itself, and forty-eight at Corunna. He then sold his Andalusian horse as being unfit for the mountainous journey they was about to undertake, and crossed the bay by launch to the former naval arsenal of Ferrol. Perhaps the *Posada de San Felipe*, if that was the one at which he put up, later referred to by Henry O'Shea as being tolerable, was some compensation for the state of the port, described as being in a state of 'misery and degradation,' and teeming with beggars. Here he purchased a pony. Antonio Buchino had meanwhile taken the landward route, his mount loaded with Testaments collected from their depot at Corunna.

Together, they proceeded north-east, taking with them a guide who turned out to be entirely ignorant of the road they intended to follow. This led first to the Puente Noval, which Borrow writes as Novales, spanning the Río Mera, beyond which they skirted the Ría de Santa Marta, later crossing the valley north of Coisa Doiro [Couzadoiro] and then the Sierra de Faladoira. Wading the Río Sor, they eventually reached Viveiro late at night, soaked to the skin. With the morning sun 'gilding the wild moors, and shining upon the waters of the distant sea,' they proceeded east, dossing down in a cottage next night. At noon the following day, having boarded the ferry at the mouth of the Ría de Foz, they entered Ribadeo, and a barge carried them across the Eo estuary (then known also as the Miranda, as flowing through the old 'Tierras de Miranda') to Castropol, from which a track parallel to the shore led them to Navia.

They were now in the Asturias, where, as Borrow was assured, one 'may travel from one end of it to the other without the slightest fear of being either robbed or ill-treated,' which was 'not the case in Galicia, where we were always in danger of having our throats cut.' And here, at Luarca, they found a comfortable *posada*, very likely the *Posada de las Cuerdas*, in the Calle del Crucero. Then on via Caneiro [Canero] to approach 'Las siete bellotas',<sup>16</sup> as the seven wooded hills descending abruptly towards the coast were called. Between each ridge rushed a torrent, and around each wound their rugged road, as it still does. They stumbled on to Soto Luino [Soto de Luiña], buffeted by wind and drenched by driving rain, eventually reaching Muros de Nalón, where a blazing fire, perhaps in a house between the *plaza* and the Calleja de Arango, soon dried them out. From here they trudged on via Velez [Avilés] to Gijón, there turning inland. Antonio rode to Oviedo, while Borrow – for a change – 'proceeded thither in a kind of diligence,' which ran daily between the two towns.



*The Palacio de Santa Cruz, Borrow's hostelry in Oviedo*

At Oviedo, a scantily furnished room was found at the *posada* in the Calle de la Rúa, formerly a palace of the Santa Cruz family.<sup>17</sup> Although they had arrived safely at Oviedo, as he reassured Brandram in his

<sup>16</sup> Correctly, Las Ballotas. A *bellota* is an acorn, and the hills here have been compared to them in shape. In an eighteenth century map there is a Santa Maria de Vallota [sic] printed in their vicinity. While Bs and Vs were then virtually interchangeable. It is also possible that Borrow's Gallegan guide, on asking the name of the district, and being told in the local dialect that it was known as the 'valles altos', misheard this as *ballota*.

<sup>17</sup> I have not established whether it was that *de La Tinaña*, or *de La Catalana*, mentioned by Ford; or *de La Vizcaina* or even the *Fonda de Madrid*, both referred to by O'Shea, which stood in this street.



letter of the 29<sup>th</sup>, they had done so ‘barefoot and bleeding ... for during all this journey, which amounted at least to 130 miles, we went on foot, the poor horses being scarcely able to carry our books and baggage.’ Borrow was startled late at night by nine gentlemen bursting into his room unannounced, each grasping a book in his hand, and naturally assumed that he was under arrest yet again. But no, they had come merely to thank him for introducing the Testament to them, just acquired from Nicolás Longoria, the local bookseller at Calle de la Herreria 4, with whom Borrow had earlier that evening deposited forty copies. A postscript was added to his letter next day, stating: ‘twenty Testaments have been sold,’ but whether this included those purchased by the *caballeros*, he does not say.

What should be read into the statements made in Samuel Widdrington’s *Spain and the Spaniards in 1843*, published in 1844, who when in Oviedo in search of old books, had noticed a pile, which he was told ‘were Bibles left on consignment by Mr B[orrow], but that they were totally unsaleable, being imperfect from want of the Apocrypha, and that even if asked for, they durst not dispose of them.’<sup>18</sup> This observation was included gratuitously in a section Widdrington had devoted to the Church in Spain, in which he comments on Borrow’s labours in disparaging terms: ‘hardly any Spaniard I mentioned the subject to has ever heard either of the expedition or the individual,’ adding that ‘as to the object of the undertaking, it was not only a most complete and utter failure, but of such a nature as entirely to defeat any future attempt of the same kind,’ etc.

But who should turn up two or three days later but Benedict Mol, having cut across country from Corunna to Mondoñedo and had then skirted the coast likewise. They were to meet once more, in Madrid, the following June or July, when Borrow tried his best to persuade him to give up any ideas of discovering treasure; but still bewitched, Mol insisted that he accomplish his destiny. ‘To-morrow to Compostella. I shall find it – the *Schatz* – it is still there – it *must* be there.’ It was not until late June 1839 that Borrow heard the sad end of the story, when in correspondence with Rey Romero, who reported that ‘The German of the Treasure’ had in fact been there the previous year, but despite bearing letters from the Government, had been flung into prison by the incensed local authorities, who, after walking in solemn procession to San Roque, had been made to look foolish. Not surprisingly, no treasure had been found, and when the floor had been broken up, all that arose was a horrible fetid odour, which had almost overcome the expectant gathering. Poor Benedict Mol had been carted off to Corunna, and then brought back to Santiago, since when no one knew what had become of him.

From Oviedo, Borrow proceeded north-east, passing close to the ancient monastery of Valdediós, through Villaviciosa, to Colunga. By the following evening they reached Ribadesella, and Llanes by noon next day, after skirting the ruins of the eleventh century monastery of San Salvador at Celorio. They passed that night at Santo Colombo [Colombres], and the following day crossed the long granite Puente de la Maza, spanning its *ría* at San Vicente de la Barquera, but ‘in some parts in so ruinous a condition as to be dangerous.’ They reached Santillana early next morning, halting at a *venta* near its entrance, but there was no sign of the two hundred Testaments which Borrow had ordered to be dispatched there to await his arrival. It was not until reaching Madrid that he learned that, due to Spanish dilatoriness, the consignment had only left the capital on the 30 October, the day before he entered it. Perhaps his instructions had gone astray. It was all very frustrating. The exhausting journey along the Cantabrian coast from Oviedo had been in vain. Not that he felt in any condition to carry on for much longer. He had been suffered from dysentery ever since leaving Corunna, was also troubled by ophthalmia, and felt in need of professional medical attention, not so easy to find in Santander. It was while dining at the principal inn here, kept by a Genoese, probably the *Fonda de Boggio*, that he made a brief acquaintance with George Dawson Flinter, an Irish soldier of fortune, whose recent experiences, before making a daring escape from a Carlist prison,<sup>19</sup> only confirmed that the neighbouring Basque provinces (into which Borrow had planned to make an expedition) were still seething with civil war. Very sensibly, having made tentative arrangements with the local bookseller, should the expected Testaments turn up eventually, he decided to call it a day.

Having exchanged his pony for a small horse, he and Antonio prepared for the long ascent through the Cantabrian mountains onto the plateau of Old Castile. Their route ran through Puente Viesgo and Ontaneda and across the Puerto del Escudo, beyond which they veered south-east, entering the upper Ebro valley near Oña (not Oñas) before bearing south-west at Briviesca to approach Burgos.

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<sup>18</sup> These may have been part of an undocumented consignment of full Bibles (rather than Testaments) sent over from England at Borrow’s request, as explained on p. 54 of Peter Missler’s *A Daring Game* (Durrant Publishing, Norfolk, 2009): see <http://www.durrantpublishing.co.uk/DaringGame/index.html>

<sup>19</sup> In the September of the following year, having been relieved of high command due to the duplicity and animosity of the Isabelline government, Flinter, in a fit of depression, was to cut his own throat.

On re-entering Valladolid, Borrow gave instructions that all unsold stocks of the second consignment of Testaments should be sent on to Burgos. Fifty more would be dispatched to Valladolid, and, encouraged by the reaction of its *caballeros*, a still larger quantity to Oviedo.

The perilous six-day ride back to Madrid, running the gauntlet of ‘robberies, murders, and all kinds of atrocity... perpetrated before, behind, and on both sides of us,’ is described in his letter dated 1 November to Brandram, penned the day after their safe return to the capital and the welcoming arms of Maria Díaz. This letter was followed up by another dated the 20th, detailing the main expenses on the twenty-four-week tour, emphasising that he had not specified numerous other amounts such as gate dues for the books, the printing of advertisements, and ‘particularly’ farriers’ bills, for the poor horses were continually ailing from over-work, bad provender and falls received amongst the mountains. Nor had he yet received payment for Testaments disposed of at Lugo and Santiago. However, only a week earlier he had heard that the forty copies left at León had been sold, and that the money was in readiness, and so had already dispatched a further fifty to his agent there. Meanwhile, he was expecting another order from Salamanca daily, thus ‘as the circle widens in the lake into which a stripling has cast a pebble, so will the circle of our usefulness continue widening until it has embraced the whole vast region of Spain.’ Borrow felt he had good reason to congratulate himself on the result of his strenuous efforts during that long summer, for now the Testament was ‘enjoying a quiet sale in the principal towns,’ and he ‘had secured the friendly interest and co-operation of the booksellers of those parts.’

Well may he have wondered to what extent Brandram and other members of the committee of the Bible Society taken his exertions for granted. Had they any real comprehension of all that had been entailed? Some, at a later date, did have a greater appreciation of what Borrow must have been through, foremost among them being Richard Ford. As he put it when writing to John Murray: ‘I have ridden over the same tracks without the tracts, seen the same people, and know that he is true, and I believe that he believes all that he writes to be true.’ Ford well recognised the impact that Spain had made on them both, as he was to emphasise in a long article on *The Bible in Spain* contributed to *The Edinburgh Review* of February 1843. It was a country where,

under the most favourable circumstances, the wayfarer must arm himself as for a campaign. Spain is indeed a weary land; how cheerless are her elevated central plains, storm-blown and frost-bitten in winter, arid and calcined in summer ... few and far between are the miserable hamlets, ill-appointed are the roads, deficient in everything except danger and discomfort; lofty, rugged, and impracticable are the sierras – the fastnesses of men indomitable as themselves and over these steppes and these Alps did our pilgrim bend his steps. Often did his Herculean frame sink under the hardships of which he has given a most graphic account.

As Ford recapitulated: throughout Borrow’s remarkable narrative,

a constant reference to a serious soul-absorbing end, concentrated attention; long and solitary rides in lonely Spain, throw a man on himself, and engender a reflective communing habit; facts and things are fixed, and associated with each other, the slight and single threads by which each particular is tied, are drawn up one after another until, thickening into a rope, they raise a whole existence from the deep wells of memory.

