

BORROW

Lavengro



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GEORGE BORROW

Lavengro

INTRODUCTION BY
WALTER STARKIE
C.M.G., C.B.E., M.A., LITT.D.



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EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,

and be thy guide,

In thy most need to go by thy side

GEORGE BORROW

Born at East Dereham, Norfolk, in 1803. Went to live in Norwich in 1820 and was articled to a solicitor. In 1824 he worked in a London publishing firm. In 1826 he started wandering through England and the Continent. As an agent to the Bible Society he travelled in Spain from 1835 to 1839. Married in 1840 and lived at Oulton Broad until his death in 1881.

INTRODUCTION

OSCAR WILDE one day when in a reminiscent mood remarked sadly: 'Every great man has his disciples, but it is Judas Iscariot who writes his biography.' That remark, like so many of the *obiter dicta* uttered by the coryphaeus of 'the Tragic Generation,' was prophetic, and in the past half-century we have had a surplus of iconoclastic biographies written by authors who were not content to dethrone a hero of the past—the G.O.M. of his generation—but gloried in exhibiting him, as it were, in his bedroom slippers, with all his cupboard skeletons neatly tabulated for the scandal-loving public.

In an era of debunking it is a relief to turn back to a former hero-worshipping age with such a biography as William I. Knapp's *The Life and Correspondence of George Borrow* (London, 1899). Knapp, we feel as we read, wrote as though fully conscious of being the well-beloved among the disciples, and the one who had laid his head upon the master's shoulder, jotting down Boswell-wise every aphorism and every platitude that fell from his lips. Owing to his arduous researches he had so attuned himself to Borrow's spiritual wave-length as to be able to champion the rights of his dead hero against every Philistine debunker who popped up his head. 'No truer books,' Knapp says defiantly to Borrow's carping critics, 'were ever penned than the *Bible in Spain* and *Lavengro-Romany Rye*. There is no mystery about them if you have the key. And what is the key? Only sympathy! Believe them and read and weep and feel. Believe them and then investigate.'

Nevertheless Knapp, in spite of his hero-worshipping, did not silence the critics, with the result that *The Romany Rye*, 'Don Jorgito el inglés,' Jasper Petulengro's blood-brother, lover of the Wind on the Heath, though classified as an immortal, was left to moulder with his legend on the back shelves of libraries, whence he emerged occasionally to point a moral and adorn a tale.

As Knapp the worshipper believed every word his hero ever said was gospel truth, he did not question the latter's attacks on his critics in the appendix to *The Romany Rye*, and the preface to the second edition of *Lavengro* in which he said:

'*Lavengro* was treated in anything but a courteous manner. Indeed abuse ran riot, and many said that the book was killed. If by killed was meant knocked down and stunned, which is the Irish acceptance of the word . . . they were right enough.' All succeeding writers in monotonous sequence followed Knapp in taking Borrow's word that his two works, *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, had suffered martyrdom at the hands of the English reviewers in 1851 and 1857, and it was only when the distinguished scholar and impenitent Borrowian, Dr J. E. Tilford, took up the cudgels, that a new directive was given to criticism, and the legend of the martyrdom was finally scotched.¹ Tilford discovered that of the criticisms of *Lavengro* which appeared in the eighteen major reviews in England, nine were favourable, some very much so, three were lukewarm, but more favourable than hostile. Six were critical, but more favourable than hostile. Outside Great Britain one French review was enthusiastic, One American review was critical and two were favourable. Likewise it had always been taken for granted that the reception given to *The Romany Rye* had been unfavourable, but Dr Tilford showed that of the three long reviews the book received, one was frankly hostile, but two were frankly enthusiastic. Again the French critics were enthusiastic, and it is significant that the best-balanced biography of George Borrow in recent years should have come from the pen of a Frenchman—René Fréchet in 1956. Incidentally ever since the publication of his books Borrow has received even more penetrating and sympathetic criticism in France than in England, and in America some of the older writers of the nineteenth century, notably Emerson, were genuine Borrowians and quoted him repeatedly in their works.

In our century in England it is to the lovers of things Gypsy, who are not content to limit their studies to the Romany texts in libraries, we must turn, if we wish to find genuine appreciation of the life-philosophy of *Lavengro*: to those who still look upon the Romanichals as the Arabs of pastoral England—the Bedouins of our commons and woodlands—not as outcasts of society, and agree with John Masefield's thought:

An' why I live, an' why the old world spins,
Are things I never knowed;
My mark's the Gypsy fires, the lonely inns,
An' jest the dusty road.

¹J. E. Tilford, 'The Critical Approach to *Lavengro-Romany Rye*,' in *Philology*, January 1949.

Among all those lovers of the English countryside George Borrow still remains a favourite long after his former rivals have been forgotten, as we can effectively prove from the Gypsy anthology, *The Wind on the Heath*, compiled in 1930 by Dr John Sampson, which marshals forty-four selections (over five times more than his nearest competitor, Leland) from the author of *Lavengro*. In the introduction Dr Sampson, the true successor of Borrow and Leland as Romany Rye, says: 'Should it be charged against me that there is too much Borrow, it should be borne in mind that such a painter can hardly be over-represented in the Gypsy Gallery, even though he has a tendency to throw others into the shade; just as Turner's single blob of vermilion (affixed to his own picture on varnishing day) obliterated his rivals' work in the exhibition.'

The truth is that the reaction of great minds to the theme of the Gypsy is, as Dr Sampson maintained, an interesting chapter in literary history. It covers a wide field, from the myth-makers of the Middle Ages to the Elizabethans with their merry acceptance of the fortune-tellers and light-fingered Moonmen as part of the multicoloured pageant of life; the judicial or cynical philosophers of the eighteenth century to the kindlier philanthropists of more modern times.

Borrow as a boy paid scant attention to staid academic learning and describes himself as for ever wandering about 'in search of strange crypts, crannies and recesses.' He was a moody, melancholy child oppressed by a strange sensation of fear which occasionally reached the peak of the horrors. He was in fact like a changeling, one touched by the hand of some wild fairy, such as we so often meet in Irish folk tales, and this moodiness set him apart from the rest of the family. Can we wonder that his father the Militia-Captain, Thomas Borrow (who had risen from the ranks), a fair-haired, muscular Christian, and the embodiment of the normal Englishman, did not know what to make of his second son who seemed such a *rara avis*? He quite openly showed a marked preference for the elder boy John, and George describes in *Lavengro* overhearing, when he was about thirteen, the following conversation between his father and mother: 'I will hear nothing said against my first-born, even in the way of insinuation: he is my joy and pride; the very image of myself in my youthful days, long before I fought Big Ben, though perhaps not quite so tall or strong built. As for the other, God bless the child! I love him, I'm sure; but I must be blind not to see the difference between

him and his brother. Why, he has neither my hair nor my eyes: and then his countenance! Why, 'tis absolutely swarthy, God forgive me! I had almost said like that of a Gypsy, but I have nothing to say against that; the boy is not to be blamed for the colour of his face, nor for his hair and eyes; but then his ways and manners! I confess I do not like them, and they give me no little uneasiness.'

As a child George Borrow gravitated by instinct towards tramps, tinkers and vagabonds of all kinds. Some of the most revealing passages occur in the chapters on the south of Ireland in *Lavengro*.

By instinct George was drawn towards the supernatural which manifested itself in the actions of tinkers and vagabonds, like Jerry Grant, the outlaw, who was called a fairy-man, because he was able to mobilize wind, snow and thunder against the British troops who were trying to capture him. What the boy heard from those Irish tinkers and kerns whetted his appetite for the Indian Romanichals and their mysteries. And Jasper Petulengro and his tribe marked him out from childhood as a blood-brother, owing to his powers as a child *sap-engro* or snake-charmer.

In Ireland too he had his first experience of the strange power possessed by tinkers and Gypsies over horses. It was that first ride on the Irish cob at Templemore that awakened his passion for the equine race—a love blended with respect, for as he remarks, 'though the horse is disposed to be the friend and helper of man, he is by no means inclined to be his slave; in which respect he differs from the dog, who will crouch when beaten.' From an Irish smith he heard the strange words that when whispered to a horse can drive him to madness and despair.

As we read on through *Lavengro* we often ask ourselves whether George Borrow was a Gypsy himself. Knapp the biographer indignantly denies that there was any Romany blood, and points to the ancestry of Thomas Borrow and Anne Perfrement, both of whom sprang from solid English and French Protestant stock. If there certainly was no Romany blood in Thomas Borrow, those who read the account of Anne Perfrement find contradictions. If Anne came of Huguenot parents, who had always been reputed to be puritanical and strait-laced, how was she ever allowed to become an actress and go barn-storming from village to village, performing before the soldiers in the garrison towns. How could a girl carefully

reared in a puritanical home ever stand the hardship of the roads and the jolting about in a baggage-wagon, not only when she travelled with the troupe, but after marriage when she became the wife of a sergeant in the militia at two shillings and three farthings a day, and had to give birth to her children by the wayside like a Gypsy woman. The problems of Anne do not seem to have worried the biographers, and it was only when the Gypsy scholar and naturalist, Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, broached the problem that we realized that George Borrow was not so much of an Englishman as he claimed to be. Vesey-Fitzgerald's book, *Gypsy Borrow* (1953), thus makes fascinating reading even if it does not completely convince us that the latter was a Gypsy.

Vesey-Fitzgerald himself, as he says, does not believe that George was the son of Thomas Borrow, but the son of Anne Borrow and a Gypsy lover. Borrow thus, he confidently asserts, was a full-blooded Gypsy, and his father knew it. And others too, including the observant Richard Ford, who, in a letter to Addington, says: 'Borrow is a queer chap. . . . I believe Borrow to be honest, albeit a Gitano. His biography will be passing strange if he tells the whole truth.' But this is exactly what *Lavengro* would not do, in spite of all the cajoleries of John Murray and Richard Ford. During his mission in Spain he could be detached about his own life, for he had created a heroic mask for himself which would enable him to play his part *con elegancia*, as the Spaniards would say, and, moreover, he could, while describing the fatherland of Cervantes, let his pen run on in the style of his beloved *Moll Flanders* which Defoe had imitated from *Lazarillo de Tormes*, *Guzmán de Alfarache* and *Alonso of the Many Masters*. In his wife's cottage at Oulton, near Lowestoft, Borrow had his diary and all the letters he had written to the Bible Society to guide his inspiration and enable him to relive his great adventure, which he had carried through in a spirit of a knight-errant mingled with a liberal dose of Gil Blas.

We can picture him alone in the spacious octagonal summer-house on the lawn that sloped gradually down to the lake, working away busily at the pages which he would give his patient wife to transcribe. Meanwhile at Heavitree near Exeter his friend Richard Ford was working away at his *Handbook for Travellers in Spain* which he had undertaken at the insistent request of John Murray. Richard had no doubts about the genius of 'Don Jorgito el inglés' and urging him to make haste and finish his second book, *The Bible in Spain*, he wrote to

Addington: 'It is a rum, very rum mixture of Gypseyism, Judaism, and missionary adventure, and I have no doubt will be greedily read.' In a letter to John Murray recommending it he stresses that the book will sell, which after all is the rub. 'Borrow,' he adds, 'hits right and left and floors his man whenever he meets him. . . . He really puts one in mind of Gil Blas, but he has not the sneer of the Frenchman nor does he gild the bad.'

After the glamorous success of *The Bible in Spain* George Borrow found it difficult to take his mind off Spain, for it had been the great adventure of his life, and writing about his life of action there had reawakened his nomadic instincts, and deepened his dislike of the domesticity at Oulton. He was fortunate to have Richard Ford always at hand ready to give the moody author advice and to write to the author's parsimonious publisher glowing letters, saying: 'Borrow will lay you golden eggs and hatch them after the ways of Egypt; put salt on his tail and secure him in your coop, and beware how any poacher coaxes him with raisins out of the Albemarle Preserve.'

The years dragged on and Borrow became dispirited as he wrote *Lavengro*, But Richard Ford, still battling with good humour, wrote the following words of excellent advice: 'Avoid fine writing and poor scholarship and stick to personalities. Never fear the "rum and rare." Make the broth thick and slab. Never mind niminy-piminy people thinking subjects low: things are low in manner of handling. Draw nature in rags and poverty, yet draw her truly—and how picturesque. I hate your silver-fork, curly-hair school; one cuckoo note is better than many commonplace conventionalities. *Hechos! Hechos!* Lay about you boldly, manfully, and your good ship will sail over these puddlestones.'

For a moment these encouraging words were to cheer the glum author to further writing, but again he relapsed into moodiness, and wrote to Ford: 'You cannot think how I miss you—the wine, now I am alone, has lost its flavour.'

Finally, in 1851, *Lavengro*, subtitled 'The Scholar, The Gypsy, The Priest,' was published, and to those of us who consider it one of the great books of the nineteenth century it is disappointing to observe the deflated attitude of the usually optimistic Ford, who even went so far as to write to Borrow saying: 'I frankly own that I am disappointed at the very little you have told us about yourself.' Such a letter was enough to

drive the Rye desperate and deliver him over to the herd of *duendes* or goblins that were always hovering over him in his octagonal summer-house, waiting to attack him. Borrow, like many Gypsies and many Celts, also had a black soul which appeared at certain moments when he was unable to wear his mask of knight-errant-missionary and Romany Rye. He had nerved himself to the task of creating a special *genre* of his own, an amalgam of autobiography, novel, poem and tract which would draw together all the strands of his complex existence into one work of art, and still permit him to maintain his own Gypsy independence and roam through the world on his own secret errand. Where he had the right to expect deeper understanding was in his publisher, John Murray, and in his friend, Richard Ford. Instead all he found was opaque dullness and incomprehension. They played the same game as the popular reviewers in showing pique and disappointment because the author did not admit them to his secret hide-out in the forest. If he had only left them clues they would have started the hue and cry and pursued him over hill over dale to find his secret, and they would have made him a celebrity, a tame lion in fact, but Borrow was of too great a stature for such a fate.

Hence the many anecdotes given by the biographers of his behaviour when guests came to his house. He would be unbelievably rude to women who had arrived there, attracted by his books. Nobody made more enemies, and yet he had beneath the forbidding exterior a kind nature, and there are many testimonies to this—not only from his wife and stepdaughter but also from others such as Watts-Dunton and Edmond Hake, who for years strove to vindicate him.

Lavengro-Romany Rye therefore must not be considered an autobiography, as the author makes his explicit denial, nor is it a 'mere novel,' as the *Athenaeum* of February 1851 scornfully labelled it. As Shorthouse, the author of *John Inglesant*, said: 'It certainly is not a novel, but it is something better. We feel it is a real man living, and that the education of his life is going on all the while.' To quote Dr Tilford, we should approach *Lavengro-Romany Rye* as we do James Joyce's autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, wherein the self-character of the work is bound to have some interest, but it is an interest apart from appreciation of the artistic intent and values of the work.

WALTER STARKIE.

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
<i>Introduction</i> by Walter Starkie	v
Author's Preface to the First Edition	1
CHAP.	
I Birth—My Father—Tamerlane—Ben Brain— French Protestants—East Anglia—Sorrow and Troubles—True Peace—A Beautiful Child — Foreign Grave — Mirrors — Alpine Country Emblems—Slow of Speech—The Jew—Strange Gestures	5
II Barracks and Lodgings—A Camp—The Viper— A Delicate Child—Blackberry Time—Meum and Tuum—Hythe—The Golgotha—Dane- man's Skull—Superhuman Stature—Stirring Times—The Sea-Board	13
III Pretty D——— The Venerable Church — The Stricken Heart — Dormant Energies — The Small Packet — Nerves — The Books — A Picture — Mountain-like Billows — The Foot-print—Spirit of De Foe—Reasoning Powers—Terrors of God—Heads of the Dragons—High Church Clerk—A Journey— The Drowned Country	19
IV Norman Cross — Wide Expanse — Vive l'Empereur—Unpruned Woods—Man with the Bag—Froth and Conceit—I beg your Pardon — Growing Timid — About Three o'Clock — Taking One's Ease — Cheek on the Ground—King of the Vipers—French King—Frenchmen and Water	27
V The Tent — Man and Woman — Dark and Swarthy—Manner of Speaking—Bad Money — Transfixed — Faltering Tone — Little Bas- ket — High Opinion — Plenty of Good — Keeping Guard — Tilted Cart — Rubricals — Jasper — The Right Sort — The Horseman of the Lane — John Newton — The Alarm — Gentle Brothers	34

CHAP.		PAGE
VI	Three Years—Lilly's Grammar—Proficiency—Ignorant of Figures—The School Bell—Order of Succession—Persecution—What are we to do?—Northward—A Goodly Scene—Haunted Ground—Feats of Chivalry—Rivers—Over the Brig	43
VII	The Castle—A Father's Inquiries—Scotch Language—A Determination—Bui Hin Digri—Good Scotchman—Difference of Races—Ne'er a Haggis—Pugnacious People—Wha are Ye, Mon—The Nor Loch—Gestures Wild—The Bicker—New Town Champion—Wild-looking Figure—Headlong	49
VIII	Expert Climbers—The Craggs—Something Red—The Horrible Edge—David Haggart—Fine Materials—The Greatest Victory—Extraordinary Robber—The Ruling Passion	57
IX	Napoleon—The Storm—The Cove—Up the Country—The Trembling Hand—Irish—Tough Battle—Tipperary Hills—Elegant Lodgings—A Speech—Fair Specimen—Orangemen	61
X	Protestant Young Gentlemen—The Greek Letters—Open Chimney—Murtagh—Paris and Salamanca—Nothing to do—To Whit, to Whoo!—The Pack of Cards—Before Christmas	67
XI	Templemore—Devil's Mountain—No Companion—Force of Circumstance—Way of the World—Ruined Castle—Grim and Desolate—The Donjon—Old Woman—My Own House	71
XII	A Visit—Figure of a Man—The Dog of Peace—The Raw Wound—The Guard-room—Boy Soldier—Person in Authority—Never Solitary—Clergyman and Family—Still-Hunting—Fairy Man—Near Sunset—Bagg—Left-handed Hitter—Irish and Supernatural—At Swanton Morley	75
XIII	Groom and Cob—Strength and Symmetry—Where's the Saddle—The First Ride—No more Fatigue—Love for Horses—Pursuit of Words—Philologist and Pegasus—The Smith—What more, of Aglah?—Sassanach Ten Pence	83

Contents

XV

CHAP.		PAGE
XIV	A Fine Old City—Norman Master-Work— Lollard's Hole—Good Blood—The Spaniards' Sword—Old Retired Officer— Writing to a Duke—God help the Child— Nothing like Jacob—Irish Brigades—Old Sergeant Meredith—I Have Been Young— Idleness—Only Course Open—The Bookstall —A Portrait—A Banished Priest. . . .	89
XV	Monsieur Dante—Condemned Musket— Sporting—Sweet Rivulet—The Earl's Home —The Pool—The Sonorous Voice—What dost Thou Read?—Man of Peace—Zohar and Mishna—Money Changers	96
XVI	Fair of Horses—Looks of Respect—The Fast Trotter—Pair of Eyes—Strange Men—Jasper, Your Pal—Force of Blood—Young Lady with Diamonds—Not Quite so Beautiful . . .	102
XVII	The Tents—Pleasant Discourse—I am Pharaoh —Shifting for One's Self—Horse Shoes—This is Wonderful—Bless Your Wisdom—A Pretty Manœuvre—Ill Day to the Romans—My Name is Herne—Singular People—An Original Speech—Word Master—Speaking Romanly .	107
XVIII	What Profession—Not Fitted for a Churchman —Erratic Course—The Bitter Draught— Principle of Woe—Thou Wouldst be Joyous— What Ails You?—Poor Child of Clay . . .	114
XIX	Agreeable Delusions—Youth—A Profession —Ab Gwilym—Glorious English Law—There They Pass—My Dear Old Master—The Deal Desk—Language of the Tents—Where is Morfydd—Go to—Only Once	118
XX	Silver Gray—Good Word for Everybody—A Remarkable Youth—Clients—Grades in Society—The Archdeacon—Reading the Bible	124
XXI	The Eldest Son—Saying of Wild Finland—The Critical Time—Vaunting Polls—One Thing Wanted—A Father's Blessing—Miracle of Art —The Pope's House—Young Enthusiast— Pictures of England—Persist and Wrestle— The Little Dark Man	128
XXII	Desire for Novelty—Lives of the Lawless— Countenances—Old Yeoman and Dame—We Live near the Sea—Uncouth-looking Volume	

CHAP.		PAGE
	— The Other Condition — Draoitheac — A Dilemma — The Antinomian — Lodowick Muggleton — Almost Blind — Anders Vedel .	133
XXIII	The Two Individuals — The Long Pipe — The Germans — Werther — The Female Quaker — Suicide — Gibbon — Jesus of Bethlehem — Fill Your Glass — Shakespeare — English at Minden — Melancholy Swayne Vonved — The Fifth Dinner — Strange Doctrines — Are You Happy? — Improve Yourself in German .	139
XXIV	The Alehouse Keeper — Compassion for the Rich — Old English Gentleman — How is this? — Madeira — The Greek Parr — Twenty Lan- guages — Whiter's Health — About the Fight — A Sporting Gentleman — The Flattened Nose Lend us that Pightle — The Surly Nod .	147
XXV	Doubts — Wise King of Jerusalem — Let Me See — A Thousand Years — Nothing New — The Crowd — The Hymn — Faith — Charles Wesley — There He Stood — Farewell, Brother — Death — Sun, Moon, and Stars — Wind on the Heath	154
XXVI	The Flower of the Grass — Days of Pugilism — The Rendezvous — Jews — Bruisers of England — Winter Spring — Well-earned Bays — The Fight — Huge Black Cloud — Frame of Ada- mant — The Storm — Dukkeripens — The Barouche — The Rain Gushes	160
XXVII	My Father — Premature Decay — The Easy Chair — A Few Questions — So You Told Me — A Difficult Language — They Call it Haik — Mis- used Opportunities — Saul — Want of Candour — Don't Weep — Heaven Forgive Me — Dated from Paris — I Wish He were Here — A Father's Reminiscences — Farewell to Vanities	167
XXVIII	My Brother's Arrival — The Interview — Night — A Dying Father — Christ	174
XXIX	The Greeting — Queer Figure — Cheer Up — The Cheerful Fire — It Will Do — The Sally Forth — Trepidation — Let Him Come In	176
XXX	The Sinister Glance — Excellent Correspondent — Quite Original — My System — A Losing Trade — Merit — Starting a Review — What Have You Got? — Stop! — Dairyman's Daughter — Oxford Principles — More Conversation — How is This?	180