

Any Time for *Medicine*

Toast to 'Borrovians The World Over'
during the bi-centennial George Borrow Memorial Dinner,
on 5 July 2003 in the *King of Hearts* Hotel, Norwich
by Peter Missler

My Lord Mayor, Lady Mayoress, Ladies and Gentlemen,

When our President, Ann Ridler, asked me to offer this toast, I was very glad to accept. Because I think that, after 200 years, it is high time to answer that all-important, but oft forgotten question:

Did the Great Man himself DRINK?

Now, before I continue, I should clarify what I mean to ask. When I say 'Drink', I am not thinking of that weak and watery stuff that you English call *Ale*. We need not bother with that. As some of you will remember, Sir Angus Fraser took care of that little matter in his 1989 'Toast to the Immortal Memory', called 'A Time for Ale'.¹ There, Sir Angus managed to cite, from the pages of *Wild Wales* alone, nearly 50 instances of Borrow swallowing that feeble brew. So no more needs to be said about *Ale*.

No, what I have in mind when I say 'drink' is the real stuff: true, honest, manly, throat-burning and stomach-aching, 80 proof *booze*. Did George Borrow drink that?

Well, opinions about this matter are divided; and not just those of the scholars who have studied George Borrow's works, but also those of George Borrow himself. Yes, indeed: I am using the plural here. *Opinions*. For Borrow's own statements upon this matter are, to put it mildly, a little contradictory.

Here is a man who in his writings invariably presents himself as abstinent; as a most saintly teetotaller. And yet, in moments of inattention, or when he figures that it may pay off to boast a little, we see him swallow *gallons* of the stuff; of every kind of liquor that he can possibly lay his hands on.

¹ *Proceedings of the 1989 George Borrow Conference*, ed. G. Fenwick, Toronto 1990, Appendix 1, p. 79-82.

I am glad to illustrate this with one of the rare occasions where my own native country, the Netherlands, contributed something to George Borrow's writings, namely his visit to the house of Don Antonio Garcia de Aguilar, the countryside priest of the village of Pitiegua, which Borrow describes in chapter 21 of *The Bible in Spain*.



The church of Pitiegua (photograph by Trish Gurney)

Don Antonio, you may remember, had invited Borrow to stop over at his cottage when travelling from Salamanca to Valladolid. Borrow did so. And as soon as he was seated, the priest placed on the table before him 'a number of large uncouth glass bottles,' which contained a drink Borrow calls *Schiedam*, and which I, as a Dutchman, am proud to identify as one of the most marvellous inventions with which my fatherland has blessed mankind: Old Dutch Gin.

'In those bottles', said the priest, 'there is Hollands thirty years old (...) Fill, my friends, and drink, drink it every drop if you please, for it is of little use to myself, who seldom drink aught but water.'

Of course, Borrow would not be outdone in abstinence by a Popish priest. So what does he do? He merely contents himself with tasting it, and then explains to Don Antonio that he 'seldom drank ardent spirits' and 'seldom tasted even wine, but like himself, was content with the use of water.'

His pious readership must have appreciated so upright an attitude in their missionary. But it is just as well that they did not know *what kind* of 'water' the fellow had in mind.

As you may know, the Spanish word ‘aguardiente’ means ‘Burning Water’. Well, here we have a man who, on his way Finisterra, has breakfast in a Galician tavern on a chunk of maize bread and sturdy glass of Galician aguardiente, one of the strongest liquors in the world.²

Water... The word Whisky goes back to a Gaelic phrase meaning ‘Water of Life’. And here is a man whose family of three, that is to say: himself and two modest ladies, manages to consume 14 litres of whisky in the course of only two months in 1854.³

Oh, of course, you got to understand: all of this was purely *medicinal*. It was to cure himself of disease. For instance: in Cadiz in December 1836, Borrow says he ‘became very unwell’ and thought he had caught the cholera. What does he do? He drinks an unknown quantity of ‘oil mixed with brandy’ and instantly recovers.⁴

Was that the petty sin of youth? Not at all! Half a life later, in 1873, his stepdaughter Henrietta writes that she feels sick. Borrow immediately proposes a miracle cure for her illness, even though he has no idea what she suffers from. He urges her to buy some medicine, which he generously offers to pay: namely 6 good bottles of port wine.⁵

The same lame excuse we see repeated on the boat from Spain to Morocco. He writes: ‘I had a bottle of Cognac, which I had brought with me as a preventive to sea sickness.’ (Not even a cure, a *preventive*!) And not only he lurks on this bottle himself, but he even goes so far as to tempt a pious Jewish traveller, who has no inclination whatsoever to drink strong liquor, into trying the stuff. And then, having seduced the poor man, he typically begins to admonish him about the evils of drinking cognac, saying that ‘*More danger lurks in this bottle than in a tun of wine*’.⁶

And let me end this Borrovian ‘water-fall’ with the most telling example of all. On Christmas day of 1836, Borrow, after a long ride through the winter cold, reaches the Spanish town of Aranjuez. Predictably, it is time for some *MEDICINE*. ‘I got into the house of an Englishman,’ he writes ‘where I swallowed nearly two bottles of brandy; it affected me no more than warm water...’⁷

² *BiS* chapter 29.

³ Phyllis Stanley, ‘Conviviality at Llangollen’, in: *George Borrow Bulletin* 23, Spring 2002, 89.

⁴ Letter of 5 December 1836 to Brandram, in: Darlow, T.H., *Letters of George Borrow to the British and Foreign Bible Society*, London 1911, 186.

⁵ Letter to Henrietta of 6 March 1873, in the Symington Collection of Rutgers University Library, ref. B737vii. I owe my knowledge of this letter to Ann Ridler, who - as she explained in a personal communication - found ‘this and another letter to Henrietta of about 1873 inside the bound ms volume of ‘Songs of Scandinavia’.’ Ann, whose help in writing this article was as invaluable as always, kindly allowed me to use her research for this iconoclastic little speech.

⁶ *BiS* chapter 54.

Ladies and gentleman, did any one of you ever drink two bottles of brandy? I must confess that many years ago, when I was still young, strong and reckless, I once did. I can assure you, from personal experience, that it does most certainly cause some effect.

And to tell you the truth: it also had its effect on George Borrow. To show you which, we must return for a moment to the house of Don Antonio Garcia where we started. Purely for sake of politeness, Borrow does take a few tiny sips of the old Dutch Gin. And what happens next? Does it get him drunk? Of course not. A man who drinks brandy like water does not get drunk from a few sip. No, it make him... *tolerant*. VERY tolerant. For here is a Catholic priest, a species of men whom Borrow utterly dislikes. But what does he write about him later? Why, a eulogy! He sings the man's praises. He begins to *appreciate* this Popish fiend!



Dutch Medicine...

Allow me to quote: 'I soon saw that I was in the presence of one of those remarkable men who so frequently spring up in the bosom of the Romish church.' (Is this really *George Borrow* talking???) Don Antonio, he says, combined 'child-like simplicity' with 'immense energy and power of mind.' He calls him a 'hospitable curate'. He points out that the priest is rich, but lives as modestly as a saint. That all the money he saves from his benefice is 'devoted entirely to the purest acts of charity'. That he feeds the hungry wanderer, and sends him on his way with meat in his wallet and a peseta in his purse. That he lends money to his parishioners, and neither expects nor wished it to be returned. And he concludes it all with the remark 'I shall not speedily forget the truly good presbyter, Anthonio Garcia de Aguilar, Cura of Pitiegua.'

⁷ Letter of 26 December 1836 to Brandram, in: Darlow, op. cit., 194. In *BiS* chapter 18, these 'two bottles' are piously reduced to 'a pint'. Note that ever since a tender age, Borrow seems to have considered drinking on this scale as evidence of upright manliness. Did he not write, in his famous 'Lines to six foot three' that it was a fine thing to be able to

*Drink at a draught a pint of rum
And then be neither sick nor dumb?*

Old habits die hard....

Ladies and Gentlemen, if that was the effect which a few small sips of good Dutch Gin had on George Borrow... If half a glass of healthy *Schiedam* liquor turned a cranky, judgemental, intolerant man, into a mild, understanding, humane person who even opened his heart to a Catholic priest, then the question is no longer: *Did George Borrow Drink?* But: *Did George Borrow drink enough??*

Well, seeing that later in life Borrow grew ever more cranky and more of a misanthrope, I'm afraid that he did not. Sadly, he let that cup pass him by. Or better said: he passed that cup on. He passed it on to us, who are, in a way, his heirs, his spiritual children. We Borrovians, we drink in his honour. We drink *because* of him. We drink *for* him. (Some of us, I have noticed this evening, drink quite an astonishing lot because of him and in his honour. But those are of course the more gentle, tolerant and humane friends that we have with us here today...)

That is a most extra-ordinary legacy, a gift for which we should be very grateful! After all, take good notice of this: *normal people* drink to *forget*. We Borrovians, on the on the hand, we drink to *remember*.... Our toasts are dedicated to the *Immortal Memory*. That makes us quite a special bunch of people; and we have George Borrow to thank for that.

And so, Ladies and Gentlemen, to make sure that today nobody is forgotten who deserves to be remembered among us, I now ask you to rise and raise your glasses with me in a toast to

'Borrovians the world over'.