

In Pursuit of the Sunset

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The Long Road West: A Journey in History, by Frank Morley, *New York: The Dial Press, 1971. 416 pp. \$7.95.*

I

THE PRINCIPAL movement of history, as most of us read it, has been from east to west, like the apparent path of the sun. It has not been merely a matter of migrations, invasions and conquests, but also and more importantly of civilizations, cultures, religions and philosophies, and for some centuries at least, of science and technical innovation. This is the movement that Mr. Morley undertakes to follow over almost thirty-two centuries and, counting the various side excursions, across approximately ten thousand miles of land and water. In the latter respect the journey is more than twenty times the distance of the author's earlier exploration of *The Great North Road* (1961) from the vicinity of St. Paul's in London to the vestiges of Hadrian's Wall, though the present book is longer by only eighty-four pages. Even so, the pace is a leisurely one, with a good many pauses for a kind of historical window shopping and an occasional retracing of steps, as when for example the author leaves Columbus, ready to embark at Palos, to go back a century or so to explain how Queen Isabella came by her red hair and blue eyes and her hereditary interest in navigation.

Mr. Morley's journey begins with the flight of the Israelites from Egypt and ends on a California freeway where he was seen

jaywalking and was stopped by a highway patrolman.

"Where's your automobile?" he said. "I haven't got one."

"Thought you must have had a breakdown. What are you doing?"

"Nice day," I said. "I'm just walking."

"Walking?" He seemed incredulous.

"You haven't even got a dog."

That was true. I had no dog.

"Where did you come from?" said the cop.

"Hyatt House."

"Get in," said the cop. "I'll take you back there."

The officer, it seems, was polite and amiable but firm. The roads, he explained, had to be kept safe for motorists. Later that same morning at Burlingame Mr. Morley was on the old Camino Real, which has a sidewalk, and finding a bench, hospitably placed there as he thought by the town fathers, sat down to meditate about the days of Francisco Coronado and Cabeza de Vaca, when a Greyhound bus pulled up beside him.

The door opened. The driver said "Get in."

Startled, I said, "I don't want to get in."

"Sit on that bench and you gotta get in," said the driver.

"Not going to get in."

"Nut," said the driver, slamming his door shut as the bus moved on.

These episodes are narrated in the author's preamble, perhaps to reassure with a touch of the familiar readers who might

be frightened away by the threat of history, especially ancient history, perhaps just to punctuate the cultural *terminus ad quem* of Bishop Berkeley's westward course of empire.

As for the events related in the Book of Exodus, which are Mr. Morley's point of departure, he finds that though "they are engraved on our memories from earliest childhood," the Egyptians themselves gave them little, if any, attention. After all, "plagues in the area of the Delta were regarded rather as part of the general nature of things." The first part of *Exodus* seems to our author like a boys' adventure story.

. . . There is the exultation of escape, of outwitting the enemy (with divine help). Then there are the adventures on the route, and disillusionment and discontent with the leadership as the crowd dragged along, short of water, short of food into a region which was ever worse and rockier. . . .

No wonder perhaps that many looked back longingly on the soft life in Egypt. How was it possible, humanly speaking, that such a people could endure forty years of such conditions? Was it, as one writer cited by Mr. Morley suggests, that the old Egyptian-born generation died off and was replaced by a tougher, desert-hardened progeny? Or is the "forty years" not to be taken literally but rather to signify, like the ages attributed to the patriarchs, "a very long time?" In either case, says Morley, the problem remains of "how a people in any considerable number . . . contained in a grim desert, receiving the while a deliberate tuition in the Law and in all incidental ceremony and discipline" managed not only to survive but to prosper. The evidences of prosperity begin to appear before the end of the long encampment at the base of Mount Sinai.

. . . In the curious episode of the golden calf it is not so much the breaking off of the golden ear-rings that is impressive, as that by that time the idea of

feasting was a natural thought, the sitting down to eat and drink and the rising up to play. . . . Throughout the second part of *Exodus* consider how the material equipment of the Israelites seems to multiply. As the time came for the departure from Mount Sinai, consider the wealth of materials expended on the Ark and the Tabernacle. Are the precious metals mentioned, silver and gold in a quantity transcending a matter of ear-rings—are the rare woods and the trappings to be regarded as a product of poetic license, supplied by scribes a long time afterwards? Or was there substance behind the story of the second part of *Exodus*? Were the Israelites so very much better off in a material way, as well as in a spiritual way, when they had been in Sinai for a lengthy period than when they had arrived?

This leads Mr. Morley into various speculations, one of which is that the Israelites might have found themselves athwart a caravan route where they were in a position to profit "either by barter or piracy."

II

THE MOVEMENT of Moses and his followers after leaving Egypt was southward; after Sinai it was northward to Kadesh, where they prepared themselves for the final assault on Canaan. The westering impulse really comes with those neighbors and allies of David and Solomon, the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians and their kindred the Carthaginians seem to fascinate Mr. Morley; for though they were long credited with having invented the phonetic alphabet,¹ though they supplied the ancient world with paper (papyri) for its books and gave the name to our Bible,² they seem to have left almost no written records of their own. They were the ancient world's most skillful and daring seafarers and traders; our author believes them to have been the first and only people of antiquity to have passed

beyond the Pillars of Hercules into the dread River Ocean, as no doubt they must have done to fetch the tin from Cornwall and elsewhere that was needed in Egypt for the making of bronze implements. There is some archeological evidence that sailors of the Minoan sea empire had also crossed those straits and ventured even farther in the Atlantic, but evidently Mr. Morley has given it no weight, for he even surmises that it was on Phoenician ships that the bulls were transported to Crete for those mysterious performances by the girl and boy acrobats that are pictured on the walls of the palace at Knossos.

It was also the Phoenicians, we are told, who with a view to retaining their monopoly of the trade, invented those eerie tales of ship-devouring monsters and other mortal perils that awaited voyagers in the western Ocean; hence the warnings uttered by Pindar, and by Homer before him, against trespassing beyond the "utmost verge" of the Mediterranean. Only one Greek, so far as is known, ever defied the tabu. This was a certain Pytheas of Massilia (now Marseilles) who in 300 B.C. or thereabouts made a voyage along the northwestern coast of Europe to Thule, which has been variously identified as one of the Orkneys or Shetlands, as the northernmost tip of Scotland and as Norway or Iceland. He wrote an account of his cruise which was considered by most Greeks, including the geographer Strabo, as nothing but a romantic fraud.

From Phoenicia also came the famous Tyrian purple, the dye derived from a shellfish called the murex; it was very expensive stuff, as were the garments on which it was used, such as the official robes of the Athenian archons and the togas of Roman magistrates. Indeed, Tyre seems to have been to the earlier Mediterranean world what until recently Paris was to ours—the grand center of *le ton* and *le chic*. To the Jews, at any rate those around King Solomon's court, Frank Morley thinks, the Tyrians and Sidonites must have seemed "wealthy, smart, citified, sophisticated, secure in their self-confidence and immensely worldly-

wise." But the attitude of envy and admiration was by no means universal: one thinks of that fastidious Phoenician princess, the Lady Jezebel, spouse of King Ahab of Israel, whose luxurious tastes, arrogance, household idols and retinue of heathen priests so aroused the wrath of the prophet Elijah and the vengeance of Yahweh.

. . . A point well noted by Daniel-Rops is that when the time eventually came for Jezebel to meet her predicted doom, she met it with dignity. She was true to her Tyrian standards. Hearing the news of Jehu's arrival, this woman of fashion, no longer young, kept him waiting until she had "painted her face and tired her head." Only then, when properly made up, did Jezebel go to the window to greet her murderer.

There was that other, more amiable Phoenician princess, the Lady Dido, who sailed west to become the Queen of Carthage, there to meet a destiny no less tragic and infinitely more moving than that of her putative kinswoman, Jezebel. Mr. Morley imagines her to have been accompanied by a small fleet laden with emigrés from Tyre and supposes, somewhat contrary to legend, that their departure to found a new city had something to do with the aggressive Assyrian power then threatening the homeland. As for her guest Aeneas, who loved and then deserted her, he is perhaps the archetype of all the westering heroes—"the pilgrim father of antiquity," Mr. Morley calls him. Patrician Romans were fond of boasting their descent from Aeneas or from one of his Trojans. Whatever the truth of that may have been, it seems pretty well established that the Etruscans at least had come west from Lydia or some other place in Asia Minor. From prehistoric times onward Italy seems to have been a melting pot for immigrants or invaders from points somewhere east—Picines, Villanovans, Atestines, Comacines, Etruscans, Greek Italiotes, and so on. At about the beginning of the second century

of our era we find Juvenal complaining that there were more Asiatics in Rome than Romans.

There were also philosophic and religious imports from the east. The great philosophical systems that so influenced the Roman educated classes of late republican and early imperial times—Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism—were of course from Greece. The popular mystery cults, which the Senate made intermittent but largely futile efforts to suppress, were mostly from the Levant—that of Isis from Egypt, of the *Magna Mater* (Cybele) from Phrygia and Syria, of Priapus from Asia Minor. But there was also Christianity from Palestine; and the journey of St. Paul from Caesarea to Rome, described by St. Luke in the *Acts of the Apostles*, was the most momentous westering of them all.

III

THE EARLY ROMANS appear to have been a race of landlubbers, but during and after the Punic Wars they took to the sea in some numbers, though apparently without great enthusiasm for it, and Ostia at the mouth of the Tiber, where the Emperor Claudius built a famous lighthouse, became a great seaport. "I would imagine," says Morley, "that adventuring for the sake of adventuring was a performance of small social standing. The products of shipwork, though, provided social standing. Rare foods, hauled across the sea to Rome, are much discussed." Like the Greeks, the Romans never dared the terrors of the Atlantic. The imperial drive was to the east, for that was where the wealth and the plunder awaited the conquerors. One gathers from Mr. Morley that the conquest of Britain (by way of Gaul) was mainly for the sake of oysters.

. . . Everyone knows that British oysters were shipped from Rutupiae [Richborough] and eaten by epicures in Rome. The mystery comes in, if you ask how the oysters got there. . . . The jour-

ney from Britain was a long one, 1,200 miles or so, yet some of the oysters appear to have reached Rome more or less alive. . . . British oysters in Rome remain a puzzlement. Part of the esteem, no doubt, was that they were a rarity. . . . The oysters of Portugal were green, the oysters of Brittany not much better; very well, oysters then from England, shipped from Richborough. What a ridiculous amount of trouble over a minor curiosity! At the time Seneca was talking of a new world (*nova orbis*) at the other side of the Atlantic! If Seneca had suggested there were oysters in the new world, the Romans might have raided it.

IV

THE VIKINGS of course had no tabus or inhibitions about sailing the Atlantic, but since the purpose of their voyages was plunder, or occasionally conquest and colonization, they seldom went very far out of sight of the coasts of Europe. It was not until about the end of the tenth century that Leif Ericson got over to the northern littoral of North America and the place called Vinland. More than four hundred years earlier, the Irish St. Brendan and a few companions, monks like himself, had set out in one or maybe several of those flimsy coracles still used by the fishermen of Kerry and Galway and had reached—well, nobody knows quite what it was that they reached, except that it was "a fair island full of flowers and herbs and trees" and sweetly singing birds. There are some who think it might have been one of the Canaries or Azores, others that it might well have been one of the Florida keys, still others that it must have been somewhere in the Mexico of the Toltecs. Wherever it was, though, it was well to the west of westernmost Erin. "The value of Brendan to my story," says Mr. Morley,

is that he links Ocean [i.e., the Atlantic] with the Church; and so, for my

story, I become interested in the Church and the Courts of Chivalry insofar as they are the agencies within which an intelligence develops to snatch from Islam that part of Islam's science which applies to Ocean.

The good Brendan, who died in 577, had never heard of Islam, but what the author is referring to in this long chapter on the conflict of "Cross and Crescent" are, among other things, the system of ciphering with nine figures and a zero that the Saracens themselves had picked up in India and the rudimentary type of mariner's compass they had borrowed from the Chinese.

V

WITH THE GREAT exploratory voyages of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the road west leaves the Mediterranean world and divides. The southerly branch follows the wake of the *descubadores* and *conquistadores* into what became Hispanic America, and to their heroisms and cruelties, exploits and disasters Mr. Morley devotes something over a hundred and forty pages. This long story begins, as it should, with the arrival in Portugal in 1476 of a shipwrecked young Genoese seaman, Christopher Columbus. It takes him through his subsequent struggles, pleadings, rebuffs, triumphs and miseries, largely with the help, one gathers, of Professor Morison's famous biography of *The Admiral of the Ocean Sea*. It is a most tragic story for the Indians of Hispaniola and the other islands of the Caribbean with whom the Spaniards traded plagues—smallpox, measles and tuberculosis from the Old World for syphilis from the New. This perhaps is not the only reason why the islands soon lost their attraction for the more restless adventurers and why they transferred their enthusiasms to the mainland. There, however, many fared even worse.

At Darien the actions of [Davila] Pedrarias caused him to be called *furor Domini*. . . . Balboa got across the Isth-

mus, gazed upon a South Sea, managed even to build some brigantines but was too gentle to the Indians and his head was cut off by Pedrarias. (The soldier sent to bring Balboa for execution happened to be Francisco Pizarro.) News of that kind, but of no good kind, was relayed from the mainland . . . until the news from Cortés about Mexico. Now for the first time even the most skeptical had to appreciate that the fabulous had really happened, and Pizarro was inspired to find yet another empire as wonderful as that of Marco Polo. This was news not only of instant wealth, but of wealth that would continue. The gorgeous treasures of the treasure-houses in stone cities proved what reserves there were within the mountains. Pizarro, having murdered an Inca, was in his turn murdered; those deeds, it seemed, could be forgotten—what was more important was the more and more new-built brigantines sailing from Panama.

VI

THE OTHER BRANCH of the road is that taken by the English settlers in North America and continued by their descendants across a wide, wide continent in the days after the Louisiana Purchase and the expedition of Lewis and Clark. Mr. Morley retells in his own way, drawing his own morals, the oft-told tales of the westward expansion of the United States—the winning of Texas and California, the acquisitions after the Mexican War, the Mountain Men, the Gold Rush, the wildernesses brought under the plow, the long march of the Mormons from Nauvoo to Deseret. Mr. Morley, it turns out, has much admiration for the Mormons and for their prophet, Joseph Smith, who reminds him of William Blake,

I cannot argue that because Mormons accepted . . . Joseph Smith, that they would never have destroyed what scientists now call the "ecological repose" of their surrounding wilderness. I can,

though, argue that from the point of view of present-day conservationists the madness of the poet Smith was far less crazy than the madness of the poet Whitman. For Whitman the American continent was not so much "God's country" as, in his words, "large, unconscious scenery." There is little awareness of any responsibility toward habitat in Whitman.

Of life immense in passion,
 pulse and power,
 Cheerful, for freest action,
 form'd under laws divine
 The Modern Man I sing
 The cheerfulness is splendid, but there is a feeling that under his laws the land is there to be raped.

From this and some other passages it will be seen that the journey's end finds Mr. Morley rather dispirited about the technological wasteland to which the road has led him. The two main branches of the road had after long separation intersected near the point where he sat on the bench reserved for passengers of the Greyhound bus line. In deciding to extend the Camino Real all the way from Mexico City to San Francisco the Spaniards, for once, were not hoping for more gold and silver or even for profitable trade. "There were two purposes: the lesser one was military." In the eighteenth century José de Gálvez

had been sent direct from the King to oversee the banishment of the Jesuits and to improve Spain's percentage of revenues from New Spain . . . and, at as little cost as possible, to defend the King's rights. José de Gálvez . . . listened to a rumor that alien white men—

Russians—were landing on the coast of Alta California. All other nations were attacking Spain—and now the Russians! The answer that occurred to Gálvez was to have a watch tower at the far-off Golden Gate. How to provide for such a distant watch-tower and communications to and from Mexico City, at minimum cost to his King called for further imagination. Here, de Gálvez could count on the zeal of a fifty-five-year-old lame missionary, the Franciscan friar, Junipero Serra. Serra could not be bribed to make a mission trail for military purpose; but Serra was already, and of his own zeal, planning a chain of missions a day's ride apart. Where Franciscan missions went, a King's highway (at no cost to the king) would follow, José de Gálvez saw reason to applaud Serra's work for the particular mission trail which would in time become El Camino Real of California.

Mr. Morley's book is an impressive, engrossing piece of work. It can be opened at almost any page and the attention immediately arrested. It is perhaps too generous of detail, and the style at times a bit too prolix, to be read through comfortably at a sitting. It is not exactly a work of scholarship in the sense that it embodies much in the way of original research or historical discovery. What Morley has given us are rather the reflections, musings and conjectures of a scholarly, keenly intelligent and well-furnished mind, not only on the researches and discoveries of others but also on many gaps that historical scholarship has thus far failed to fill. And after all, as Mr. Morley says very wisely, "history is too serious to be left exclusively to the professionals."

¹From Byblos, a center of papyrus culture north of Sidon; whence Gr. *biblion*, a small book; plural *biblia*.

²The discovery of the Sinaitic alphabet, so called, revealed a single source for all the Semitic alphabets, and the names and shapes of the letters,

Aleph (Ox), Beth (House), Gimel (Camel) etc., clearly show their hieroglyphic origins. The calligraphic "square" letters of the Hebrew, which Mr. Morley compares to the "careless and scratchy" Phoenician, are said to date from the captivity and to have been influenced by the cuneiform characters of the Babylonians.