

## **ISABELLA BIRD**

**Traveller and writer, born in Boroughbridge in 1831, died 1904**

Isabella Bird's books: *An Englishwoman in America* (1856), *Six Months in the Sandwich Islands* (1875), *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880), *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883), *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* (1891), *Among the Tibetans* (1894), *Korea and Her Neighbours* (1898), *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (1899). She not only paints fascinating word pictures of the countries she visits but brings to life the characters she meets whether they are her expatriate countrymen, rough-riding mountain men, diplomats, or the Afghan guide who was arrested as he posed for her sketch pad. Biographies: *The Life of Isabella Bird* (1906) by Dorothy Middleton, *A Curious Life for a Lady* (1970) by Pat Barr (Secker & Warburg)

Isabella Bird, the daughter of a Victorian clergyman, was in her forties when she defied the conventions of her times to travel the world alone. Her restless spirit took her not on the conventional grand tour but to the Hawaiian Islands, remote areas of the Rocky Mountains, Japan, Persia, Malaya, Kashmir, Tibet, China and Korea. Her travels and adventures would have been remarkable enough for a lone female today but was unheard of a century and more ago. Her modes of transport included yak, elephant, mule, junk, sampan...

She climbed mountains and volcanoes and rode thousands of miles on horses and mules. Yet this was no Amazon but a woman in poor health, who suffered from a constant debilitating weakness following the removal of a spinal tumour, and who stood less than five feet tall.

Born at Boroughbridge Hall

Her father, Edward Bird, married Dora Lawson of Boroughbridge Hall where Isabella was born. Isabella had no formal schooling but was instructed in literature, history and art by her mother. She later extended her studies into the sciences by her own endeavours.

Her first book *An Englishwoman in America* was published in 1856 and tells of her first journeyings abroad – through Canada and the United States. It is rich in anecdote and observation and gives an early indication of her talents as a travel writer – but it was to be almost two decades before she embarked again upon her serious journeyings and developed those descriptive talents to the full.

In 1872 she set sail for Australia, but this was a country which depressed her so much that she moved on rather quickly to New Zealand – where she fared little better. In Auckland she boarded an ancient paddle steamer bound for California.

A change of plan

The ship's tired engines constantly threatened failure, and the voyage was further enlivened by a hurricane which threatened to engulf the limping vessel – and the indomitable Isabella suddenly felt much better.

When the vessel reached the Sandwich Islands (now the Hawaiian Islands) she disembarked and was charmed into staying by the smiling, welcoming natives and the hospitable settlers.

She became the guest – and quickly friend – of an American family. Although she had ridden horses at home her back problem and the side-saddle had made it an uncomfortable business. Here she was introduced to the Mexican saddle and “full Turkish trousers” which, together, allowed her for the first time to ride straddle-fashion and in comfort.

Her riding habit was completed by New Zealand boots, Mexican spurs and an Australian hat. Thus equipped she travelled the island widely, making many new friends and enjoying many adventures. She also met the King of the islands who helped with her luggage when she took the local steamer to nearby Waimea where she stayed on a sheep station. A proposal from a local settler prompted her to flee back to Honolulu and then to Kauai.

With William Green, a shipping agent, she climbed 4,000 ft to the active crater of Kilauea and followed that with an expedition up the 13,650 ft Mauna Loa, which few men had climbed at that time — and many who had tried had not returned.

#### Riding in the Rockies

In August 1873 she at last resumed her journey to California and, arriving in San Francisco, she quickly took a train to Greeley, Colorado. With her eyes set firmly on the Rocky Mountains she continued by cart and horseback until she reached the remote and beautiful valley of Estes Park. Here she slept on a haybed in a log cabin and met and enjoyed the company of one Jim Nugent.

“Rocky Mountain Jim” was a legend in Colorado. “With one eye, one long spur, his knife in his belt, his revolver in his waistcoat pocket... his rifle laid across the saddle in front of him... as awful looking a ruffian as one could see” but “with a grace of manner which soon made me forget his appearance”.

#### Good Company

Jim wrote poetry and essays and Isabella eagerly took up his offer to guide her up the 14,700 ft Long’s Peak. Afterwards she joined a cattle drive and also spent several days and nights on a solitary exploration of the Rockies during which she met the notorious Commanche Bill and, sharing his bread and venison, found him to be “good company”.

Returning to Estes Park she had to gently dissuade an amorous “Rocky Mountain Jim” before leaving for New York, Liverpool and home – where she received a letter saying Jim had been shot dead.

In 1878, only two decades after Japan had opened its ports to the West, she was on her way. Although her travels there provided the material for another book they did not provide the excitement and stimulation she was looking for and which always seemed to improve her health (she improved her impression of the country on subsequent visits) and she was relieved when the time came to move on – to Malaya.

#### Dining with apes

While in that country she recalls being sat down to dinner at a table elegantly set for three only to find her companions were two apes (pets of the absent owner) which ate off porcelain plates. “What a grotesque dinner party” she wrote “What a delightful one!”

In 1881, back home once more, she married Dr John Bishop who died only five years later.

In 1889 Isabella sailed for Kashmir and Tibet. Forging the Shyok River in Tibet while it was in full flood, her horse, attempting to jump out on to the bank, fell backwards on to Isabella forcing her under the torrent. She was dragged to safety suffering from bruises and a broken rib – but her mount was drowned.

In Persia she travelled in freezing conditions for which she required six layers of wool for a face mask and three pairs of gloves on her hands. The trail passed the corpses of five muleteers shrivelled by the storm.

Before she returned to Britain she had financed the setting up of hospitals and orphanages in various parts of the East.

#### Good works

Back in Britain she espoused the cause of the Armenian and Syrian peasants she had seen being persecuted by the Kurds and oppressed by the Turks – in pursuance of which she dined with and was questioned by Prime Minister Gladstone.

In 1894 she returned to the East and spent the next three years travelling Japan, China and Korea. Financing her travels in Korea brought an unusual problem because it took six men or one pony to carry the Korean equivalent of £10.

Soon she found herself in the middle of the Japanese invasion of Korea and was ordered out by the British Vice-consul and arrived in China with four cents in her pocket.

A royal messenger

She returned to Korea six months later and was granted an audience with the King and Queen. She was subsequently summoned to their presence on three further occasions on the last of which she was entrusted by the King with a secret message for the British Foreign Secretary.

Returning home in 1897 Isabella lectured to the Royal Geographical Society and to audiences around the country. *Korea and Her Neighbours* was published in two volumes in the following year and went to a second impression in only ten days.

In 1900, at the age of 70, she left for Morocco where she embarked upon a 1000-mile six-month journey through that country and became the only European woman ever to have seen the Sultan of Morocco.

In this her last adventure she was pursued by armed bandits to the gates of Tangier. On her return to Britain her health deteriorated and she spent her last years in one nursing home after another. She died on 7 October 1904. — Ronald Walker