

REGINALD HEBER

Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India

London: John Murray, 1828. First Edition. Two volumes.

One of the most substantial and perceptive British accounts of India published during the first half of the nineteenth century, Reginald Heber's *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India* occupies an unusual position between travel literature, ethnographic observation, ecclesiastical history and the documentary record of India during the transitional decades between Company and Crown. The first edition appeared from John Murray in 1828 in two substantial quarto volumes and was sufficiently successful to be followed by further editions almost immediately.

The Bishop as Traveller

Reginald Heber (1783–1826) was already an accomplished poet, scholar and churchman when he was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. The title understated the extraordinary geographical extent of his diocese: Heber's ecclesiastical responsibilities effectively encompassed Britain's expanding territories in India and neighbouring regions.

Rather than administer this enormous jurisdiction principally from Calcutta, Heber travelled through it.

His great northern journey, undertaken in 1824–25, carried him from **Calcutta through Bengal and the Gangetic plain, Benares, Allahabad, Cawnpore, Lucknow, Delhi and the Himalayan foothills, and eventually westwards towards Bombay**. His subsequent travels took him to Ceylon and, in 1826, through Madras and southern India. He died unexpectedly at Trichinopoly on 3 April 1826, aged only forty-two. The journals and letters he left behind were prepared for publication by his widow, **Amelia Heber**, and issued posthumously by John Murray.

The resulting book is considerably more than the diary of an episcopal visitation.

Heber travelled with intense curiosity. Cities, temples, mosques, palaces, landscapes and ruins appear beside observations concerning agriculture, languages, caste, religious practice, dress, animals, political administration and the circumstances of ordinary people. The first edition follows his journey through places whose names have become inseparable from the history of nineteenth-century India—Calcutta, Dacca, Patna, Benares, Lucknow, Delhi, Jaipur and Bombay among them.

An India Observed Before 1857

The particular historical importance of Heber's *Narrative* lies partly in its date.

He travelled through India more than three decades before the uprising of 1857 and the subsequent abolition of East India Company government. His is therefore a description

of a recognisably different political and cultural landscape: princely courts remained important centres of authority; Mughal Delhi retained the emperor and the vestiges of imperial ceremony; Company rule was powerful but not yet the formal Raj of the later Victorian imagination.

Heber was certainly a man of his own time and position, and the assumptions of an Anglican bishop and British traveller necessarily accompany his observations. Yet his writing is often distinguished from more doctrinaire contemporary accounts by its willingness to observe before judging. He displayed considerable interest in Indian religious traditions, architecture and social customs and frequently recorded admiration where less inquisitive travellers saw only difference.

This gives the *Narrative* a particular documentary value. It preserves the impressions of an educated eyewitness moving across an immense portion of the subcontinent at a moment of profound political transition.

A Major Illustrated Travel Book

The first edition was published in London by **John Murray, Albemarle Street, in 1828**, in **two quarto volumes**, rather than the three-volume format adopted for subsequent editions. Bibliographically, this distinction is important: the original edition comprises xlvii, 631 pages in the first volume and vi, [1], 515 pages in the second.

It was also conceived as an illustrated work. The first edition contains engraved plates derived largely from Heber's own drawings, together with a portrait after **Thomas Phillips**, engraved by **Samuel Cousins**, and a map engraved by **J. Walker**. The other engravings were executed by **Edward Finden**, one of the accomplished British engravers associated with the great age of illustrated travel publishing.

Its substantial quarto format, illustrations and original publication price of £4 14s. 6d. made it a serious and expensive production. Its reception was considerable: reviews appeared during 1828 in such journals as the *Quarterly Review*, *Edinburgh Review*, *British Critic* and *Eclectic Review*, while successive editions followed rapidly.

The Vansittart Copy

Of particular interest in the present copy is its distinguished and remarkably appropriate nineteenth-century provenance.

It bears the finely engraved armorial bookplate of **Augustus Arthur Vansittart (1824–1882)**, his name appearing in the older separated form, **“Augustus Arthur Van Sittart.”** Above it stands an elaborate heraldic achievement dominated by the displayed eagle and accompanied by the motto:

GRATA QUIES

—approximately, “Welcome Repose” or “Pleasant Rest.”

The identification is independently corroborated by **Cambridge University Library**, which records another volume bearing precisely the same bookplate—"Augustus Arthur Van Sittart, with 'Grata Quies'"—and identifies its owner as probably Augustus Arthur Vansittart, barrister of Lincoln's Inn, President of the Cambridge Union, who matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1842.

The provenance is particularly sympathetic to the subject of the book. The Vansittart family had deep connections with British India, most famously through **Henry Vansittart (1732–1770)**, Governor of Bengal during the formative years of Company power in the eighteenth century. Although it would go beyond the available evidence to claim that Augustus Arthur acquired Heber specifically because of these family associations, the conjunction is striking: a major nineteenth-century narrative of India preserved in the library of a member of a family historically associated with Bengal.

The armorial plate also transforms what might otherwise be an anonymous surviving first edition into an identifiable library copy. It establishes a documented nineteenth-century ownership history and places the volumes within the cultivated world of a Cambridge-educated Victorian barrister and bibliophile.

Significance

Heber's *Narrative* deserves to be regarded as one of the key British travel accounts of early nineteenth-century India. Its importance derives not from a single discovery or expedition, but from the extraordinary breadth of the country it records and the intelligence of its observer. Heber encountered India as landscape, civilization, religious world and rapidly changing political society.

For a collection concerned with the books through which India was encountered, studied and interpreted in Europe, it consequently occupies an important position. It stands after the pioneering eighteenth-century works of travellers and Orientalists, but before the increasingly institutionalized scholarship and imperial literature of the later nineteenth century.

This first edition, retaining the tangible evidence of its ownership by Augustus Arthur Vansittart, combines bibliographical importance, visual presence and an unusually resonant provenance. The association of Heber's great Indian journey with a member of a family whose own history had been entwined with India gives this particular copy a character extending beyond the text itself: it is both a record of India in the 1820s and an object from the intellectual and collecting culture through which that India continued to be remembered in Victorian Britain.