

## A MARRIAGE FAILS IN INDIA ELIZA FAY (1756-1816)



William Cowper perceives a journey from Buckinghamshire to Sussex as a fearful undertaking; his younger contemporary Eliza Fay travels four times from Britain to India and once to the newly independent United States of America. In 1779, she accompanies her husband, Anthony, on a perilous journey through France (with which Britain is at war), Italy, and Egypt to India. Here Mr. Fay, who has been called to the bar in London, seeks a legal career in the colony established by the East India Company.

He fails, they separate, and in 1781 she sails back to England. The bulk of her surviving letters comes from this period of her life.

Fay is neither learned nor illiterate—she speaks French, alludes to a passage in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, quotes Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard,” and has read sonnets of Petrarch in the original Italian, but she thinks that to cross the Alps, she only needs to traverse a single mountain. In matters of manners and morals, she is conventional and respectable: she deplors swearing and drunkenness, and in 1784 carefully chaperones four young women, rarely allowing them on deck during a voyage from England to Bombay. Though little interested in politics—she says nothing about the American war—she is patriotic enough to feel the humiliation when French privateers pin English ships in an Italian harbour and British naval vessels in the Mediterranean prove uninsurable. She writes from France of how the exultant display of “the sword of our illustrious Talbot”—a hero of the Hundred Years War—sends “a pang ... across my heart,” but is fair-minded enough to regret Edward III’s “barbarous sentence” on the citizens of Calais.

In religion, Fay is a conventional Protestant, who dismisses the “sacred relics” on display at the Abbey of St. Denis as “absurdities.” When she visits a convent of Ursulines at Madeira, she contemplates the ways in which they occupy their mortal span: “Surely,” she writes, “to consume

it in supine indolence or 'vain repetitions' can never render us more acceptable to Him, who is the fountain of light and knowledge." Her regard for the Reformation is evident in her disappointment at seeing Luther represented in his portrait at Turin as "a homely, and rather vulgar looking man."

In Egypt, the precarious position of the Christian minority is sufficient to make Fay dismiss the Muslims there as "bigotted wretches," and in India she is revolted by temples dedicated to idol worship and by the self-torturing practices of Hindu ascetics. These far exceed, she notes, the austerities of "the holy fathers" of the Church, and she concludes, "Well may we say that, 'life and immortality were brought to light by the Gospel.'" However, she vaguely recognizes that Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the deities of the Hindu Trinity, are "the representations or types of the great spirit Brahma[n] (the Supreme God) whom they also call the spirit of wisdom, and the principle of Truth." Atheism she regards as the creed of the wicked, and her own religious feeling is awakened by the grandeur of the Alps, which, she says, "seemed to communicate new powers of perception to my mind, and if I may so express it, to expand my soul, and raise it nearer to its Creator."

Eliza Fay is assertive for herself and her sex as well as for her country and her religion. At Lyons, she summons a cook to berate him for smothering his asparagus in unnecessary sauce and reduces him to beg in vain to be allowed just a drop of vinegar. She is the driving force behind her husband's quest for success, and after their separation each of her voyages is undertaken in a search for independence. When European men praise Hindu wives for their submissiveness, she protests that husbands "have not failed in most countries to invent a sufficient number of rules to render the weaker sex totally subservient to their authority" and goes on to praise the heroism of the wife

who wages war with a naturally petulant temper, who practises a rigid self-denial, endures without complaining the unkindness, infidelity, extravagance, meanness or scorn, of the man to whom she has given a tender and confiding heart, and for whose happiness and well being in life all the powers of her mind are engaged.

Fay claims that she ventures on the journey to India to watch over her husband, who, she is convinced, would otherwise be undone by "his extravagance and dissipated habits" as well as "the violence of his temper." However, she later admits "curiosity was ever with me a predominant feeling," and curiosity may be as strong or a stronger motive for her journey-

ing. When she first leaves Europe, she is downcast to find that Cairo is not a city invested with all the glamour and opulence of the world of the *Arabian Nights*. Happily, she is able to acknowledge that what she sought in Cairo she finds at Madras. Here, she rejoices,

The free exercise of all religions being allowed; the different sects seem to vie with each other in ornamenting their places of worship, which are in general well built, and from their great variety, and novel forms afford much gratification, particularly when viewed from the country, as the beautiful groups of trees intermingle their tall forms and majestic foliage, with the white chunam and rising spires, communicating such harmony, softness and elegance to the scene, as to be altogether delightful.

In the streets, the visitor has the pleasure of “seeing Asiatic splendour, combined with European taste exhibited ... under the forms of flowing drapery, stately palanquins, elegant carriages, innumerable servants, and all the pomp and circumstance of luxurious ease, and unbounded wealth.”

Fay’s appetite for viewing new peoples, places, and sights issues in pleasing snapshots of far-flung landscapes and communities ranging from Guernsey and Turin to Madeira and the Cape of Good Hope. She describes wonders ranging from the giant theatre at Turin with a stage that can accommodate “fifty or sixty horses ... with triumphal cars” to “those prodigies of human labour, the Pyramids of Egypt.” Especially intriguing, as the future place of Napoleon’s exile, is her account of the “romantic Island” of St. Helena:

its appearance from the sea is very unpromising, — inaccessible rocks, and stupendous crags frowning every side but one, nor is there any anchorage except at that point — The town is literally an ascending valley between two hills, just wide enough to admit of one street. The houses are in the English style, with sashed windows, and small doors ... but when you once ascend *Ladder Hill* the scene changes, and all seems enchantment. The most exquisite prospects you can conceive burst suddenly on the eye — fruitful vallies, — cultivated hills and diversified scenery of every description.

There is, however, as much hardship as pleasure in Fay’s experience of a checkerboard of scenes. Her first journey to India involves an arduous trek across the desert from Cairo to Suez followed by a voyage to Calicut, where she and her fellow passengers suffer for fifteen weeks as prisoners of Hyder Ali, a Muslim warlord who is trying to make himself master of

southern India. Eliza and Anthony find themselves watched over by sepoys in a house without a chair or mattress, confined in a rat-haunted cell, and only slightly relieved to find their way through a trapdoor into the refuge of a pirate's lumber room. They sometimes go without food and fear for their lives if Hyder Ali, who associates with the French, should enter into open war with the English. Their attempt to bribe their way to freedom by engaging a smuggler fails, but they are released just before the feared war erupts, and from nearby Cochin they sail to Madras and then Calcutta. Mrs. Fay writes nothing of all this to her family until their captivity is about to end.

Unlike Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in Turkey, Eliza Fay makes no serious attempt to explore an alien civilization. While she is distressed by the rigours of the caste system and admits that "the Eastern dresses have infinitely the advantage over ours," the focus of her letters from Calcutta is on the lives of her compatriots. They provide a picture of the British expatriates attempting, like colonists and settlers from ancient Greeks to modern Chinese, to re-create the society and lifestyle of their home country. Alongside complaints about dishonest and uncooperative servants—the Muslims refuse to touch a plate that has held pork—Fay writes of the formal visits, tea-drinking, cards, evening rides, and public balls. The community has even built a theatre for amateur performances; she has good words for a production of Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*. There is an equivalent to the London season, and Fay complains that Calcutta is dull as well as oppressed by heat and insects from which most foreigners have retreated. She has a comfortable residence and enjoys good food and wine, but observes how many of her compatriots fall into the trap of the easy credit extended by Indian moneylenders and European shopkeepers.

People as well as places engage Fay's pen, and her husband is the most prominent of the many characters her letters portray. It slowly becomes apparent that the man has serious defects. On the journey out, after much delay, involving days in an unsalubrious district of Paris, the couple manages to obtain the passports necessary to complete their journey through France, with which Britain is at war, but despite Eliza's remonstrances, Anthony insists on fastening them to a book he carries on horseback; when they are found to have dropped off, he has to retrace their path and luckily recovers them. Although he tries to ease Eliza's pains during their travel and captivity, at Cochin he delays boarding the *St. Helena* that is to carry them to Madras until it is almost too late and then endangers several lives by having the two of them rowed out to the vessel in a high wind. Eliza classes him among those people "who seek to regain by obstinacy, what they have lost through folly." During the ensuing voyage, he quarrels with two amiable gentlemen "about the *merest* trifles" and is, moreover,

“palpably in the wrong.” He challenges them both, and Eliza has to find a mediator to make peace.

On the couple’s arrival at Calcutta, where the legal system is independent of the East India Company, Anthony is welcomed by the judge Sir Robert Chambers, a friend of Dr. Johnson and formerly Vinerian Professor of Law at Oxford, and by the Chief Justice, Sir Elijah Impey. Soon he is well supplied with briefs, and on 29 May 1780, Eliza assures those at home, “as his abilities have never been questioned, I flatter myself that he has every reason to look forward to ultimate success.” Five months later, she is less confident: “Mr. Fay has no reason to complain of business falling off; if *he* fall not from it, all will be well.”

Unfortunately, dissension rages in Calcutta between the party of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal, who seeks to put government on a sound footing, and the party of Philip Francis, the author, in all probability, of the verbal assault on George III in *The Letters of Junius*. Hastings and Francis even fight with pistols eliciting Mrs. Fay’s protest, “What a shocking custom is that of duelling!” To Eliza’s distress, Anthony not only fails to pay “the necessary attention to persons in power,” but, despite her upbraidings, ostentatiously allies himself with the opposition until “The attorneys are positively afraid to employ him.” By mid-July, he is engaged to carry a document to England to promote the impeachment of Sir Elijah Impey. “The duty of a wife,” Eliza laments, “which is paramount to all other civil obligations, compels me silently to witness what is beyond my power to counteract.” A month later, she admits that her husband’s extravagance and reckless borrowing have led to the repossession of articles unpaid for and goods pledged as collateral, and she is left with nothing but her clothes and the legal separation she has requested. Luckily, she has a kind patroness in Lady Chambers. There is a further blow that she seems to disclose only many years afterwards: Anthony has fathered an illegitimate son, for whom, in 1786, she arranges an education in England, though he perishes in a shipwreck on the way. “I could not,” she writes, “abandon him, though he was deserted by his natural protector.”

During the course of the letters, the picture of Anthony is filled out like that of no other character but the writer herself. However, she has a distinct gift for sharing her perception of the people she meets. Thus a Franciscan friar on the ship to Egypt tries to convert her; she admires his handsome figure and regrets “that so noble a mind, should be warped by the belief of such ridiculous superstitions, as disgrace the Romish creed” — until she complains about the excessive heat, when his face assumes “a most malignant expression” and he exclaims, “aye you will find it ten thousand times hotter in the Devil’s House.”

Differently vicious is Captain Ayres, one of the European adventurers entering the service of Indian leaders who are carving out principalities from the disintegrating Moghul Empire. The Fays encounter this English former highwayman as a willing tool of Hyder Ali, whose prisoners they then are. Eliza believes him responsible for such atrocities as having noses and ears of his employer's enemies cut off, and hears that he planned the murder and plunder of wealthy natives. She sees his face as the countenance of a thieving crow and describes his ugly triumph after he slaughters a cow that trespassed in his garden: "You cannot imagine said he, how *sweetly* the sword did the business." While bribes induce him to let the other prisoners walk in comparative freedom, he advises that a diet of dry rice in a remote place will persuade the well-built Anthony to enlist in Hyder Ali's army. Meanwhile, he is not above using the prospective soldier as a drinking companion.

The man who advises Ayres that Mr. Fay is an insignificant fellow whose abduction will bring no response from the British Government is among the passengers who have sailed from Suez to Calicut. This ugly little barrister, John Hare, is a snob who disdains the world of commerce and "would faint at the thought of any thing Plebeian." Eliza accuses him of ingratiating himself with her and her husband early in the voyage to disguise his intention of stirring up a faction against them. When the ship reaches Calicut, he hails Ayres as a fellow countryman and is unfeeling enough to make witty remarks to the Fays about their close confinement. However, his boasting about his "property, *valuable* property" soon leads him to share their fate, and Eliza writes, "I must own, (blame me if you will) that for a short time I *did* feel satisfaction in this stroke of retributive justice."

Not all the memorable characters in the letters are villainous. The Fays' suffering in captivity is eased by the kindness of Mr. Isaac, a rich old Jewish merchant in the good graces of Sudder Khan, Governor of Calicut. A letter of introduction the Fays have received from a co-religionist of Isaac, Franco of Leghorn, earns the goodwill of this aged man. With his long white beard and "countenance benign yet majestic," he seems to possess, but for his bright eyes, an exact resemblance to "the Patriarch whose name he bears." His negotiations with the authorities eventually procure the release of the Fays, and at his house, they enjoy his hospitality and that of his two talkative, lavishly adorned wives. Fortunately, during the voyage to Calicut Eliza has studied some Portuguese, the only language in which these women can converse. "The name of *Isaac the Jew*," she exclaims, "will ever be associated with the happiest recollections of my life," and she grieves to think how "the name of this once distinguished people should have become a term of reproach." It is no wonder, she feels, if con-

tempt and separation have led many modern Israelites to “evinced more acuteness than delicacy in their transactions.”

More fully portrayed than the lightly sketched wives of Isaac is a woman to whom Eliza takes a strong dislike early in the voyage from Suez. The supposed wife of Mr. Tulloh, Eliza is “credibly informed,” is “one of the very lowest creatures taken off the streets in London,” and “her supreme delight consists in rendering everybody around her miserable.” Mrs. Fay feels “repeatedly compelled (for the Honour of the Sex) to censure her swearing, and indecent behaviour.” Later, when Isaac sends the Fays a tea set in their captivity, she seizes the kettle and refuses to release it, leaving Eliza to boil water in her teapot. Another side to this woman becomes visible when apparently hostile vessels approach their ship near Calicut. The Captain determines on at least “a *shew* of engaging,” and while Eliza takes refuge below, Mrs. Tulloh, who nourishes “a passion for some romantic danger,” insists on sitting on deck deeming the spectacle “the next best thing to escaping from shipwreck.” Months afterwards a letter from her husband describing the extreme hardships his party has endured since leaving the Fays behind at Calicut elicits the comment, “Mrs. Tulloh has now seen enough poor woman to satisfy her taste for adventures.” How far prejudice contributes to this and other pen portraits is impossible to determine, but it is worth noting that Mr. Tulloh, whom Eliza stigmatizes as being as malicious as his partner, does plead for the Fays’ release when their late fellow passengers leave Calicut, and does so again to Hyder Ali himself.

The short Part II of *Original Letters from India* concerns Mrs. Fay’s life during the first fifteen years after her separation from her husband. Apart from the opening remarks addressed to Mrs. L—, it reads more like a journal than a series of letters as it records the writer’s painful struggle to attain through a series of business ventures the prosperity that eluded Anthony.

In time, Mrs. Fay becomes prosperous enough to acquire the ownership of an ocean-going vessel, but she then suffers a series of misfortunes: a levy of £60 to free and return to Bengal a badly behaved servant girl whom she had left with a woman on St. Helena and who, contrary to a promise given, has been sold into slavery; liability for a man’s goods damaged on board her ship when the Captain, who is primarily responsible, is unable to pay; a delay in reaching port till the good time for marketing is past; and the destruction of her own fine muslins when water floods a cabin in heavy seas. The culmination comes in 1796, when she arrives in the United States to find it in a deep depression: “I approached,” she states, “another people and another world, which was eventually the grave of that property, for which I had toiled so long.”

*FROM FAMILY TO PHILOSOPHY*

Little is known of Mrs. Fay's later years, but her last venture is to repair her fortune by reclaiming and publishing her letters, which have been kept by her sister. She dies insolvent before her preparation of the volume is complete, and her heirs cannot or will not add to what she has left. At the heart of the book, with its array of scenes from across half the world and its passing parade of rogues, bullies and kindly folks, is the slow uncovering of Anthony Fay's capacity for vice and folly and the spirit of his wife, who refuses to be cowed by cruel hardship or repeated ill luck.