

A CLERGYMAN ABROAD

'But for the sea, and perhaps I may add the pass-ports, a week is much better spent in looking at foreign places than at English'. This was the verdict delivered in 1847 by a Welsh clergyman after a rough crossing and one night in Holland.

Charles Williams, born in 1807, was the son of William Williams, the Master of Cowbridge School for nearly 60 years. He passed from the school to Jesus College, Oxford, was ordained, and himself became a schoolmaster in 1833 when he was appointed as Headmaster of the Free Grammar School at Ruthin. At the time of his trip abroad he was perpetual curate of Holyhead, but ten years later he returned to Oxford as Principal of his old college, where he stayed until his death in 1877.

His visit to the Low Countries began at ten o'clock one Saturday morning on a steamer from Blackwall *'the most rapid mode of getting to Holland'* but still entailing a journey of 28 hours to Rotterdam, including a detour of five hours caused by the ship missing the tide over the bar. Also on board were three other clergymen and a family with whom Williams struck up an acquaintance, *'Hon. Mr. R. is 31—his wife pleads to 39, looks a little more. I had a good deal of talk with him and he told me her age ... she has points like Mrs. Newcome; finds ladies tedious ... discusses Bonaparte and Marshal Ney'*. Almost all the passengers suffered from the effects of the swell and the fresh breeze, but a couple of hours on land was enough to restore Williams' appetite. He sat down among a party of 20 English to dinner: *'Soupe à la Julienne—excellent beef-steak ... mutton—fricandeau à l'oseè (—i.e. veal dressed in sorrel, I write the French from ear—) beans (haricot) au naturel, chicken a little over-roasted—a rich lemon pudding—chocolate cakes—very small, cherries—were a large portion of what they gave us'*; if this was not enough, cold meat, salad and potatoes were also offered, all accompanied by vin ordinaire under the name of *vieux medoc*.

After the service in the Church of England chapel (it was Sunday evening), sightseeing could begin. Williams was impressed by the canals and quays crowded with shipping, the tall narrow houses whose frontages were almost entirely filled with windows, the well-mannered and well-dressed people. The same impressions were strengthened when the next day he took the train to The Hague: *'very handsome houses; more stylish and finished than in England. They all have pediments at the top intercepting the roof, and the Dutch miroirs wh. you no doubt have heard of to teach them what is going on in the street without ... The Hague is a very interesting town; very lofty, but in proportion to the height of the houses, very narrow streets ... trees wherever there is room'*, but the canals were not without faults, *'... a blue puddle—often actively disagreeable and never giving any notion of freshness or coolness.'*

Williams always writes 'English' but he seems to have been Welsh-speaking. As proctor for the clergy in the diocese of Bangor, he opposed a Bill which would have given Welsh bishops the power to order English church services in Welsh-speaking parishes. In Holland he noted *'the Dutch language is very guttural—one man whom I asked about a word was astonished that I cd. pronounce a guttural as well as a Dutch man'*; this was probably just as well: *'the Dutch who could not talk French seemed to think ... that those who cd. not talk their language had not much business in their country.'*

Picture galleries and the art collections of the royal palaces were popular with the tourist. He admired some animal paintings for their realism while being surprised at their value, but 'The Anatomy Lesson' by Rembrandt where a surgeon dissects a corpse before a group of onlookers *'was enough to make me ill ... The pupils were separately very handsome pictures, but they looked too old and too fully dressed and too little interested for students of anatomy.'*

The next destination was Amsterdam; Williams travelled by train, arriving late at night. His enthusiasm may have begun to flag for he did not view the king's palace or the New Church, and was dismissive of the Old Church after he had seen it. The spin-house or workhouse led him to comparisons with similar English institutions. It must have been an impressive place: the dormitories for men and women each contained 320 beds, and the occupants appeared contented to be objects of charity; they worked hard and enjoyed the privilege of walking for half an hour in an enclosed court, while the extensive gardens were reserved for the managers of the house.

After half a day it was again time to move on, to Haarlem, and what seems the highlight of the tour, a demonstration of the organ. This cost 12 florins (which Williams reckoned to be the equivalent of £1) for the organist, and one florin for the blowers; the expenses were shared with an English family whom Williams had met, and with an Italian. From his instrument the shirt-sleeved organist produced imitations of tinkling bells, the human voice (so realistic that Williams at first thought that the performer was singing *'till Miss A. told me it was the vox humana pipe'*), birdsong, *flutes, violincellos, etc.*, and to crown it all, a thunderstorm, *'the most astonishing thing I have come across in my four days travels'*, and probably very different from what might be heard in the cathedral of Bangor.


Rotterdam and Antwerp were quickly passed; then a crowded second-class train to Ostend, a ship to Dover (presumably calmer than the outward voyage, as it raised no comment) and the London express returned the traveller to his hotel in Covent Garden a week after he set out. He arrived back shortly before a General

Election and was able to report on another journey when he found himself travelling on the train up to Oxford (to vote for a member for the University) in the same carriage as Sir Robert Peel, formerly prime minister, but then out of office. *'His conversation voice has the somewhat artificial and methodical character that public speaking often gives. He is much less corpulent than I had heard, and does not look a harassed man of business at all—He seemed to me more like a deliberate easy-going gentleman rather advanced in years, read with spectacles and held the list of trains at arm's length to enable himself to see'*. If Peel's career was drawing to a close, one of the successful candidates at Oxford, and one who received Williams' vote was a rising star, W.E. Gladstone.

Charles Williams' impressions of his crowded holiday and the following weeks are given in a series of letters to his sister Harriet, the wife of Thomas Edmondson of Cowbridge. The letters survive as copies on tissue paper with the writing case, stylus and 'carbonic papers' that were supplied with 'Wedgwood's Patent Manifold Writers'. He wrote at length *'if I were where I had any thing to do, I might not have troubled you with six pages'*. Later letters describe his care for a typhus victim in Holyhead, but for a while he was free from his parish duties and able to take advantage of the steamboat, the railway train and the omnibus, and to enjoy a time when a clergyman and a lady might discuss Bonaparte and the Marshal Ney.

Michael Wilcox

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