

**RALPH
FITCH**
ENGLAND'S
PIONEER
TO INDIA

**HORTON
RYLEY**

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RALPH FITCH



QUEEN
ELIZABETH
AND HER
COUNSELLORS



RALPH FITCH

England's Pioneer to India and Burma

HIS COMPANIONS AND
CONTEMPORARIES

WITH HIS REMARKABLE NARRATIVE
TOLD IN HIS OWN WORDS + +

BY

J. HORTON RYLEY

Member of the Hakluyt Society

LONDON
T. FISHER UNWIN
PATERNOSTER SQUARE
1899

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PREFACE

SO much has been written of recent years of the history of what is generally known as the East India Company, and so much interesting matter has of late been brought to light from its earliest records, that it seems strange that the first successful English expedition to discover the Indian trade should have been, comparatively speaking, overlooked. Before the first East India Company was formed the Levant Company lived and flourished, largely through the efforts of two London citizens, Sir Edward Osborne, sometime Lord Mayor, and Master Richard Staper, merchant. To these men and their colleagues we owe the inception of our great Eastern enterprise. To the fact that among them there were those who were daring enough, and intelligent enough, to carry their extraordinary programme into effect we owe our appearance as competitors in the Indian seas almost simultaneously with the Dutch. The beginning of our trade with the East Indies is generally dated from the first voyage of James Lancaster, who sailed from Plymouth in 1591. But, great as his achievement was,

and immediately pregnant with consequences of a permanent character, he was not the first Englishman to reach India, nor even the first to return with a valuable store of commercial information. To keep to the chronological order of events, the Rev. Thomas Stevens, S.J., went out in 1579 to join the Jesuit establishment founded at Goa under the Portuguese, doubled the Cape of Good Hope, and ended his days in the neighbourhood of the Indian settlement. The honour of "Pioneer Englishman," however, justly belongs to Ralph Fitch, who, as the survivor of a small party of men who carried with them Royal missives to India and China, returned with some practical, if not diplomatic, results of the mission. Sailing from the Thames on board the historic ship *Tyger*, in 1583, and arriving in India as the prisoner of the united crowns of Portugal and Spain, Fitch eventually crossed the Peninsula, pursued his investigations to Burma and Malacca, and, after spending some time in Asia Minor, returned home within a month of Lancaster's first departure.

The wide public interest in the world's pioneer voyagers and empire builders—to make no further reference to the literature of the subject, more or less cognate—has been sufficiently exemplified during the last two years. France, in 1897, celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dupleix, as "the Conqueror of India"; in April, 1898, Florence was *en fête* in honour of the fifth centenary of Paolo Toscanelli and Amerigo Vespucci; the four hundredth anniversary of the passage of the Cape by Vasco da Gama was commemorated in May, both in

London and Lisbon; and in September, the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of North America was marked by the opening of a tower erected at Bristol in memory of John and Sebastian Cabot. Under these circumstances it is remarkable that the story of Ralph Fitch, embodying as it does, the first English account of the great resources of India and the Further East, should have escaped adequate attention. Passing references to his adventurous journey are made by all the modern authorities; Professor Monier Williams, in the *Contemporary Review* of April, 1878, writing of the narrative and, assumedly, of the letters sent home by Fitch and his companions, says, "The account they published of their travels (preserved by Hakluyt) would well repay republication in a modern form, especially if illustrated and annotated like Colonel Yule's 'Marco Polo.'" The account of the voyage is here presented in full, with one small excision, which is duly indicated, for the first time since Hakluyt gave it to the world three centuries ago.

Whether the ideal set forth above has even been approached in this work the reader must judge; the writer puts forward no claim in regard to it, except that which may be founded on the love of his task. The plan of the book has been to introduce the account of the arduous journey by an historical summary, drawn from authoritative sources, designed to illustrate the circumstances under which it was entered upon; to borrow every additional light obtainable, either from the letters of Fitch and his companions, or the statements of those who came in contact with

them ; to furnish a series of pen-portraits of the men concerned ; and, finally, to give a very brief account of the preliminary proceedings of the first East India Company, in which Ralph Fitch himself took no small part. Some deviation from this procedure occurs in reference to Burma, the most interesting British possession in the East and one which, without any doubt, will occupy a most conspicuous place in the history of the future. The notes and references, the author ventures to suggest, have not been unduly amplified, the object of this book being less to offer aid to the student than to present a popular and yet reliable account of a somewhat obscure, though fundamental, phase in the history of England's expansion.

Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy of India, has described the origin of our power in that empire in a single sentence. In an eloquent sympathetic speech, delivered at a farewell banquet given to him by the Royal Societies' Club on November 7, 1898, he said that, "The casual stone which was thrown into the sea of chance by a handful of merchant adventurers two hundred years ago had produced an ever-extending circle of ripples, until at the present moment they embraced the limits and affected the destinies of the entire Asiatic continent." The story of the handful of men, and of the "casual stone," is told in the following pages, but it has been necessary to add a century and more to his lordship's retrospect.

The author has many grateful acknowledgments to make for the generous, and in some cases spontaneous,

assistance rendered him during the progress of his undertaking. First, to Mr. William Foster, B.A., of the India Office, Hon. Secretary of the Hakluyt Society, for numerous most valuable suggestions, and for advice readily and freely given; also to the President and Council of the Society for permission to copy several of the rare illustrations contained in their various publications, which was most cordially granted. To Sir Owen Roberts, D.C.L., who placed the resources of the Clothworkers' Hall at his disposal; the Rev. J. A. L. Airey, M.A., Rector of St. Helen's, Bishopsgate; the Rev. A. Keble White, M.A., Rector of Great Saxham, Suffolk; Mr. W. Griggs, publisher of the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, "The Rulers of India and Chiefs of Rajputana," and many other luxurious works in relation to our great Empire; Mr. S. Colvin, M.A., of the Print Room, British Museum; and the officials of the British Museum Reading Room, the Record Office, and the Guildhall Library, whose willingness to assist the literary inquirer is beyond all praise. The engravings in the Museum were photographed, by permission, by Mr. Dossetter, of Acton; Messrs. Walker and Boutall, of Clifford's Inn, kindly consented to the reproduction of their photograph of Coello's fine painting of Philip II. in the National Portrait Gallery; the Osborne and Staper photographs were specially taken by the London Stereoscopic Company; and that of the Eldred bust was furnished by Mr. Spanton, of Bury St. Edmunds. References to the various works drawn upon for information will be found in the footnotes and, generally, in the body of the volume,

but particular mention is due to Hakluyt's "Principall Navigations," 1599-1600, which is the foundation of this book, Sir W. W. Hunter's "Imperial Gazetteer of India," and to Sir Arthur Phayre's small but unique "History of Burma."

London, 1899.

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