

Letters of George Borrow to the British and Foreign Bible Society

by

George Borrow

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Letter 1: February 10th, 1833

To the Rev. J. Jowett
WILLOW LANE, ST. GILES, NORWICH,
FEB. 10TH, 1833.

REVD. AND DEAR SIR, - I have just received your communication, and notwithstanding it is Sunday morning, and the bells with their loud and clear voices are calling me to church, I have sat down to answer it by return of post. It is scarcely necessary for me to say that I was rejoiced to see the Chrestomathie Mandchou, which will be of no slight assistance in learning the Tartar dialect, on which ever since I left London I have been almost incessantly occupied. It is, then, your opinion, that from the lack of anything in the form of Grammar I have scarcely made any progress towards the attainment of Mandchou; perhaps you will not be perfectly miserable at being informed that you were never more mistaken in your life. I can already, with the assistance of Amyot, TRANSLATE MANDCHOU with no great difficulty, and am perfectly qualified to write a critique on the version of St. Matthew's Gospel, which I brought with me into the country. Upon the whole, I consider the translation a good one, but I cannot help thinking that the author has been frequently too paraphrastical, and that in various places he must be utterly unintelligible to the Mandchous from having unnecessarily made use of words which are not Mandchou, and with which the Tartars cannot be acquainted.

What must they think, for example, on coming to the sentence . . . APKAI ETCHIN NI POROFIYAT, I.E. the prophet of the Lord of heaven? For the last word in the Mandchou quotation being a modification of a Greek word, with no marginal explanation, renders the whole dark to a Tartar. [Greek text which cannot be recorded]; APKAI I know, and ETCHIN I know, but what is POROFIYAT, he will say. Now in Tartar, there are words synonymous with our seer, diviner, or foreteller, and I feel disposed to be angry with the translator for not having used one of these words in preference to modifying [Greek text]; and it is certainly unpardonable of him to have Tartarized [Greek text] into . . . ANGUEL, when in Tartar there is a word equal to our messenger, which is the literal translation of [Greek text]. But I will have done with finding fault, and proceed to the more agreeable task of answering your letter.

My brother's address is as follows:
Don Juan Borrow,
Compagnia Anglo Mexicana,
Guanajuato, Mexico.

When you write to him, the letter must be put in post before the third Wednesday of the month, on which day the Mexican letter- packet is made up. I suppose it is

unnecessary to inform you that the outward postage of all foreign letters must be paid at the office, but I wish you particularly to be aware that it will be absolutely necessary to let my brother know in what dialect of the Mexican this translation is made, in order that he may transmit it to the proper quarter, for within the short distance of twenty miles of the place where he resides there are no less than six dialects spoken, which differ more from each other than the German does from the English. I intend to write to him next Thursday, and if you will favour me with an answer on this very important point, by return of post, I shall feel obliged.

Return my kind and respected friend Mr. Brandram my best thanks for his present of THE GYPSIES' ADVOCATE, and assure him that, next to the acquirement of Mandchou, the conversion and enlightening of those interesting people occupy the principal place in my mind. Will he be willing to write to the Gypsy Committee concerning me? I wish to translate the Gospel of St. John into their language, which I could easily do with the assistance of one or two of the old people, but then they must be paid, for the Gypsies are more mercenary than Jews. I have already written to my dear friend Mr. Cunningham on this subject, and have no doubt that he will promote the plan to the utmost of his ability. I must procure a letter of introduction from him to Joseph Gurney, and should be very happy to obtain one also from Mr. Brandram, for in all which regards the Gospel and the glory of Christ, Joseph Gurney is the principal person to look to in these parts. I will now conclude by beseeching you to send me as soon as possible WHATEVER CAN SERVE TO ENLIGHTEN ME IN RESPECT TO MANDCHOU GRAMMAR, for had I a Grammar, I should in a month's time be able to send a Mandchou translation of Jonah. In the meanwhile I remain, Revd. and dear Sir, your most humble and obedient servant,

G. BORROW.

Letter 2: 18th March, 1833

To the Rev. J. Jowett
18TH MARCH, 1833,
WILLOW LANE, ST. GILES, NORWICH.

DEAR SIR, - As yourself and Mr. Brandram expressed a desire to hear from me occasionally concerning my progress in Mandchou, I now write to inform you that I am advancing at full gallop, and am able to translate with pleasure and facility the specimens of the best authors who have written in the language contained in the compilation of Klaproth. But I must confess that the want of a Grammar has been, particularly in the beginning of my course, a great clog to my speed, and I have little doubt that had I been furnished with one I should have attained my present knowledge of Mandchou in half the time. I was determined however not to be discouraged, and, not having a hatchet at hand to cut down the tree with, to attack it with my knife; and I would advise every one to make the most of the tools which happen to be in his possession, until he can procure better ones, and it is not improbable that by the time the good tools arrive he will find he has not much need of them, having almost accomplished his work. This is not exactly my case, for I shall be very glad to receive this same tripartite Grammar which Mr. Brandram is hunting for, my ideas respecting Mandchou construction being still very vague and wandering, and I should also be happy if you could and would procure for me the original grammatical work of Amyot, printed in the MEMOIRES, etc. Present my kind regards to Mr. Hattersley, and thank him in my name for his kind letter, but at the same time tell him that I was sorry to learn that he was putting himself to the trouble of transferring into Mandchou characters the specimens which Amyot has given in Roman, as there was no necessity for it in respect to myself, a mere transcript being quite sufficient to convey the information I was in need of. Assure him likewise that I am much disposed to agree with him in his opinion of Amyot's Dictionary, which he terms in his letter 'something not very first-rate,' for the Frenchman's translations of the Mandchou words are anything but clear and satisfactory, and being far from literal, frequently leave the student in great doubt and perplexity.

I have sent to my brother one copy of St. Luke's Gospel with a letter; the postage was 15s. 5d. My reason for sending only one was, that the rate of postage increases with the weight, and that the two Gospels can go out much cheaper singly than together. The other I shall dispatch next month.

I subjoin a translation from the Mandchou, as I am one of those who do not wish people to believe words but works; and as I have had no Grammar, and been only seven weeks at a language which Amyot says ONE MAY ACQUIRE IN FIVE OR SIX YEARS, I thought you might believe my account of my progress to be a piece of exaggeration and vain boasting. The translation is from the Mongol History, which, not being translated by Klaproth, I have selected as most adapted

to the present occasion; I must premise that I translate as I write, and if there be any inaccuracies, as I daresay there will, some allowance must be made for haste, which prevents my devoting the attention necessary to a perfectly correct rendering of the text.

I will conclude by observing that I believe myself at present competent to edit any book in Mandchou, IF THAT BE WHAT IS WANTED, and beg leave to remain, dear Sir, your obedient humble servant,

GEORGE BORROW.

Letter 3: 9th June, 1833

To the Rev. J. Jowett
JUNE 9TH, 1833
WILLOW LANE, ST. GILES, NORWICH.

REVD. AND DEAR SIR, - I have mastered Mandchou, and I should feel obliged by your informing the Committee of the fact, and also my excellent friend Mr. Brandram.

I assure you that I have had no easy and pleasant task in acquiring this language. In the first place, it is in every respect different from all others which I have studied, with perhaps the exception of the Turkish, to which it seems to bear some remote resemblance in syntax, though none in words. In the second place, it abounds with idiomatic phrases, which can only be learnt by habit, and to the understanding of which a Dictionary is of little or no use, the words separately having either no meaning or a meaning quite distinct from that which they possess when thus conjoined. And thirdly the helps afforded me in this undertaking have been sadly inadequate. However, with the assistance of God, I have performed my engagement.

I have translated several pieces from the Mandchou, amongst which is the . . . or Spirit of the Hearth ([GREEK TEXT]), which is a peculiarly difficult composition, and which had never previously been translated into a European language. Should you desire a copy, I shall have great pleasure in sending one.

I shall now be happy to be regularly employed, for though I am not in want, my affairs are not in a very flourishing condition.

I remain, Revd. and dear Sir, your most obedient humble servant,

GEORGE BORROW.

Letter 4: 3rd July, 1833

To the Rev. J. Jowett
WILLOW LANE, ST. GILES, NORWICH,
JULY 3rd, 1833.

REVD. AND DEAR SIR, - Owing to the culpable tardiness of the post-office people, I have received your letter so late that I have little more than a quarter of an hour to answer it in, and be in time to despatch it by this day's mail. What you have written has given me great pleasure, as it holds out hope that I may be employed usefully to the Deity, to man, and myself. I shall be very happy to visit St. Petersburg and to become the coadjutor of Mr. Lipoftsoff, and to avail myself of his acquirements in what you very happily designate a most singular language, towards obtaining a still greater proficiency in it. I flatter myself that I am for one or two reasons tolerably well adapted for the contemplated expedition, for besides a competent knowledge of French and German, I possess some acquaintance with Russian, being able to read without much difficulty any printed Russian book, and I have little doubt that after a few months' intercourse with the natives I should be able to speak it fluently. It would ill become me to bargain like a Jew or a Gypsy as to terms; all I wish to say on that point is, that I have nothing of my own, having been too long dependent on an excellent mother, who is not herself in very easy circumstances.

I remain, Revd. and dear Sir, truly yours,

GEORGE BORROW.

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