

FROM EXETER TO OXFORD, AND OTHER JOURNEYS THE ENGLISH TRAVEL LETTERS OF WILLIAM GREY, 1840–49

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes several journeys made by an Oxford undergraduate, later an ordained clergyman, through letters written to his father. One describes the sensations of his first railway journey, another the frustrations of coach travel and a third a long sea voyage to Bermuda. Apart from their intrinsic readability, their value lies in the detail they give about how people moved about, and in the attempt by a young man who had never been on a train before to describe his experience to a father who had probably never even seen one.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The letters reproduced below, in full or in part, were written by William Grey to his father, the Reverend Harry Grey, a clergyman living first in Exeter and then Torquay. Harry was the second son of the Hon. John Grey, himself the younger son of Harry Grey, the 4th Earl of Stamford. Although the Rev. Harry was living in Devon, the family seat was at Dunham Massey in Cheshire, and the letters found their way into the Dunham Massey archive, now deposited by the National Trust at the John Rylands Library in the University of Manchester. I am grateful to the National Trust and the John Rylands Library for allowing them to be published.

The letters need only the simplest of introductions for William tells us as clearly as he told his father what he was doing. Although they were written when William was an undergraduate at Magdalen College, Oxford, only one of them gives any detail about his life at the University,

and that simply concerns the papers set in his examinations. The main interest in the others lies in the light that they throw upon travel at the time and in particular the contrast between the age of the stagecoach, which was coming to an end, and that of the steamer and train, which was beginning. This contrast reappears in William's later letters, one of which is also included, for whilst in 1840 his coastal journey was by steamer, nine years later he went to Bermuda under sail, and in 1851 he gave a vivid description of an arriving steamer crashing through the Newfoundland ice.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars had brought many travellers to Southampton, on the Channel Islands and cross-Channel services, as well as locally to the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth. Steamer services developed both as cross-Channel services and as excursions such as those which were run along the south coast to Torquay as early as 1824, to coincide with Babbacombe Regatta. By 1840 the St. George Steam Packet Company was providing a long distance coastal service which ran from London through, ultimately, to Dublin. *Robson's Commercial Directory for London, the Home Counties, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight*, published in 1839, listed two boats, *The Express* under Captain Spiers which left London every Wednesday morning and returned on Saturday, and *The Eclipse* under Captain Russell, which left on Sundays. If we put the formal notice in the Directory and the Company's advertisement together, the points of call were Deal, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight, (Ryde and/or Cowes; they may be alternatives), Torquay and Dartmouth. Pigot's two directories of 1831–32 and 1844 show another service by the *Brunswick* from Portsmouth to Plymouth, running on Tuesdays and Fridays, which William seems to have used on other occasions since there is a

reference to it in a letter of 1855 when he was a curate at Paignton. The 1844 directory shows yet another route from Portsmouth offered by the *Zephyr*, which called at Exeter and Topsham every Thursday. It may not have run as early as 1840, and is not listed in *Robson's Directory* for 1839, but if it were available but not used, the inference would be that the Grey family was in Torquay when William's journey started. It is hard to draw too many firm conclusions from directories, for they could often be wrong. Norton has commented upon the many reasons why many of them were inaccurate, ranging from downright dishonesty in preparation through to the physical difficulties of obtaining information in bad weather conditions, the unwillingness of local residents to co-operate and rapidly changing data. Robson was not without his faults, producing a number of directories in a short time, and Norton summed him up as 'not above borrowing his descriptive text from other sources and his lists bear the marks of hasty and slipshod compilation' (Norton 1950, 18–20, 58–9). Given this background we need not be surprised to find that commercial information was no more comprehensive or accurate then than it is now! Whilst we cannot be certain which of the boats William used, the service had a clear advantage over a long and uncomfortable coach journey.

Despite the early predictions of a significant freight trade which inspired the construction of a railway line between London and Southampton, the main call turned out to be for passenger traffic and it was not until freight prices were reduced in 1845 that there was a surge in volume, if not immediately in revenue (Patterson 1965, 125; Williams 1968, I 221). The line was built in sections and had only been completed in May 1840, shortly before William's journey (Patterson 1966, 127–31). Once the link between Winchester and Basingstoke had been finished, a fast train, under favourable conditions, could accomplish the whole journey in about three hours. Clarke was critical of the information provided, asserting that whilst the timetables gave the times at which the six trains started for London daily, 'they remained prudently silent concerning the time of arrival' (1910, 119–20). This must be incorrect, for Williams reproduced one timetable dating from November 1840 which gave details of eight weekday trains that completed the whole

journey, including that which William and his friend must have taken (1968, I, 43). Unfortunately, he did not give a reference for it. It is possible that Clarke was relying upon handbills or advertisements or that he had confused the information provided before the line was completed with that given afterwards, for timetables held in the Hampshire Record Office, which refer to the service when part of the journey was still by coach, are imprecise. One, which must date from the summer of 1840, merely promises arrival in London 'in the short space of five hours' whilst another, dated November 1839, gives no arrival time at all (references 9M49/Z230/2, and /4). In style, both seem more appropriate to the coaching age than to that of the railways, in contrast with that reproduced by Williams. There was no ambiguity about our William's train, which was scheduled to leave Southampton at eleven and arrive at Nine Elms at two in the afternoon (Williams 1968, 43). By his account it must have arrived on time.

The expanding railway network quickly killed the coaching trade, but before it was completed travellers still had to rely upon the older stage coach services, sometimes with disappointing results. Even before the coming of the railways, the services could be inadequate, with long gaps between coaches, so that by 1840 there was only one coach a day between Southampton and Oxford, and, according to Pigot, that left at a quarter past nine in the morning. Patterson (1971, 9) charted the decline in coaching, noting that even that service had closed by 1845. The prospect of a day's delay made the friends take the train, so that they were able to arrive at their colleges by evening. William's letter suggests that he did not know the departure time in advance, for he expressed surprise that the coach had gone. There was a similar disappointment the following April in the gap in services from Wimborne to Southampton between the morning coach and the night mail in the late evening. William cannot have been the only traveller to be faced with a full coach and to find that waiting for the next would involve arriving in the small hours in what must have been extremely uncomfortable conditions. It was as well that he had plenty of youthful energy! By contrast, the railways were able to offer more frequent trains and more passenger accommoda-

tion, both being a logical if not inevitable response to the cost of building the railroad.

Although the increasingly reliable steamers captured the shorter cross channel and coastal markets, longer journeys, like William's to Bermuda, were still made under sail for some time to come. Southampton was a beneficiary of all of this increasing trade and for this reason, the 1849 voyage is included in this little collection. It also introduces us to another side of William's life, for he spent some years abroad, going from Bermuda to Newfoundland, where, rather to his surprise, he became Principal of the Theological College at St. John's. In between these two places, in July 1849, he married Harriet, mentioned in his letter, the daughter of another clergyman, the Rev. F H White, and their son, another William, born in Newfoundland in 1850, was to become the ninth Earl of Stamford, after a failure in the elder lines and a celebrated succession dispute.

The young William, born in 1819, was very much the budding clergyman, though occasionally his pious interjections may be a sly dig at his father's sayings. His letters were intended to be

those of the 'Dutiful Son' as he always described himself and his vocabulary can be a bit limited – there are too many 'most beautifuls', especially in the later letters describing Newfoundland. Despite all that, he had a descriptive and lively pen, a good eye for topography and a refreshing energy and enthusiasm that had him rising to watch the dawn over the English coast, and moved him to identify and describe all the different sounds made by the train as it crossed differing features of the landscape. The sight of an oncoming train on the same route, in the dusk, particularly impressed him. We are used to all these features, but to the early railway travellers they must have been novel and perhaps even frightening sensations. For all their faults, these letters give a rare and entertaining insight into travel at the start of the mechanical age.

EDITORIAL

The letters themselves are largely self-explanatory and I have restricted myself to a few introductory notes, necessary to fill out the background.

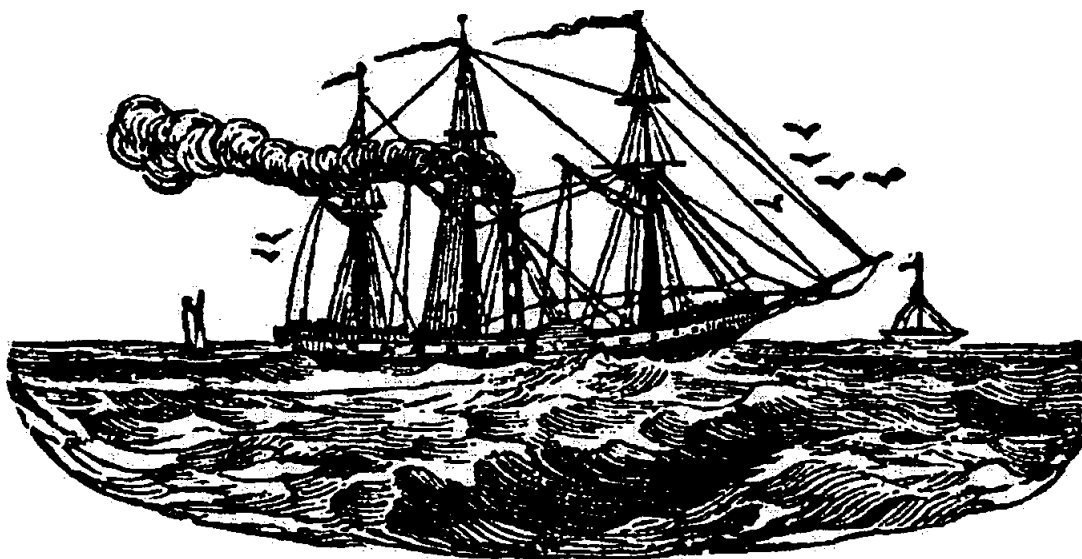


Fig. 1 This illustration of a typical steam packet of the period is taken from Pigot's Commercial Directory of 1834. The advertisement was by a company which owned three ships plying between Liverpool and Glasgow and it boasted of excellent cabin accommodation.

William wrote in ink in a hand which is generally clear so that there are few problems in reading the text. The letters themselves are in excellent condition though faded in places and inevitably a few words are hard to decipher. Where this occurs, my readings are in square brackets. Apart from ship's names, which I have put in italic lettering, all round brackets and other underlinings, abbreviations and punctuation are original. For identification, the John Rylands Library reference is given at the head of each letter.

LETTER 1 [EGR 4/6/1/4/4]

We do not know why William started from Torquay. Since the letter was addressed to his father at Exeter, there is a presumption that he started by going about twenty-five miles in the wrong direction, but from the advertisements it seems likely that the steamer did not call at or near the mouth of the Exe. It may also be that the family was temporarily in Torquay anyway, as suggested above. Given the duration of the alternative coach service, the diversion was presumably worth making.

Although the letter implies that the boat called at Southampton, all the evidence is that the friends would have been obliged to disembark at either Cowes or Portsmouth and take a coach or more probably a local ferry the rest of the way. This is possibly the reason that they missed the only Southampton coach, which left for Oxford at 9.15 am. It may in fact have been a scramble to catch the 11.00 am. train. They could not have caught a train anywhere but Southampton for the branch line from Bishopstoke (Eastleigh) to Gosport was not opened until November 1841 and trains did not reach Portsmouth itself until June 1847 (White 1961, 116–19).

Magdalen Hall October 17 [1840]

My Dear Father,

Here I am safely arrived by Divine protection at the old place – When I left Torquay we had a most delightful sail to Southampton. I sat up for a couple of hours on deck until the coast of Torbay had vanished from my sight and then went down

to my berth. I got up at 4 o'clock in the morning and saw Portland light far astern while St Albans Head was beautifully lit up by the moonshine, distant about 5 miles. After some time a faint glow arose in the E. which increased more and more. In the meantime we were going close to a wild rugged shore with high perpendicular cliffs of chalk occasionally mixed with a line of yellow and red sand stone – afterwards we turned Durlstone Head near Swanage where a most magnificent coast [view] burst upon us. We saw on our left a beautiful bay with high sandstone cliffs, or red and yellow sand¹ mixed – Then came the [sweep] of Swanage bay with its dark rocks, and terminated by the beautiful chalk headland of Handfast Point, whose white shapes of rock standing out like huge square pillastres from the face of the cliffs, cast fine dark shadows; while all the rest was brightly illumined by the bright morn – Beyond this again, the cliffs that bound Poole Bay stretched off far to the E/West² until they were lost in the obscurity of the twilight – In the mean time the glow in the east had extended itself – the sky in that part was a delicate yellow near the horizon in which floated some earthy pink clouds, which were of a purplish hue as they were nearer the zenith. This yellow blurred above into orange and so on until it had assumed the deep dull blue that the sky wears at twilight – Gradually this delicate yellow began to assume a glowing golden color, and then at last the glorious sun arose from his watery bed rejoicing like a giant to run his race. We sailed close to the Needles and afterwards coasted the shore of the Isle of Wight going about a gunshot from the coast. It was a most beautiful sail all the way to Southampton. When I got there, I found that the coach was gone, and as there was no way to get up to Oxford by coach that day, I was obliged reluctantly to go by railroad. However, I had a companion with me, – his name is Knowles of Queens Coll., a friend of Ian Clarke's³ and a very nice man.³ He had come with me from Torquay in the steamer – we set off at 11 am and got in to London at 2 pm, a distance of about 72 miles. It was a horrible [whiz] – when in the county it was Puff. Puff. Puff – when between high banks it was a rattling roar – under a bridge it was a loud [sudden] roar – under a tunnel it was like crashing thunder

mixed with all kinds of other noises, deafening and indescribable. But the worst is facing another train, especially if it is dark (which was the case in the Great Western Railway when we approached the end of the journey). It is a fearfully violent rush accompanied with a glare of red light, and unpleasant smell, and a powerful current of wind right through the carriage. Strange forms are whirled before your eyes, and that within a few inches of you; while your ears are stunned by a chaos of unnatural sounds, roarings, whirrings, puffings, rattlings, etc., etc. I saw very little of the country, for you go the greatest part of the way below the level of the ground. My head ever since has been flying through the air in every direction. So much for the railroad, and I hope that I shall have nothing more to do with it. I was rather agreeably surprised with the country about London. It is more countrified than I expected to see it and the great city itself is not such a wonderful place as I thought it was. One generally forms magnificent ideas about these much talked of places. The Principal I find has been very ill; but is now better. He is now at Clifton¹, and is expected back in a fortnight or 3 weeks; so that you may see him if you go to Clifton. I am now with all my things in confusion but write that you may get this at Exeter in time. Could you let the good people at [lor]² know of my safe arrival here; and with best love to them and to yourself, Believe me, your affectionate and dutiful son,
William Grey.

Rev'd. Harry Grey, 7 St Anne's Terrace, Exeter.

- 1 The reading is uncertain. It could be *band* or *land*.
- 2 The manuscript has been altered – William was confused between East and West; it must surely be the latter.
- 3 The fact that his friend Knowles also took the boat indicates that it was a normal way of travelling for those who could afford the fare, and not just an excursion.
- 4 At the time Clifton was regarded as the healthy or convalescent part of Bristol. For the eighteenth century attempt to turn it into a spa town to rival Bath, see Little (1954, ch. X), and for a briefer outline of its decline, Pevsner (1986, 444–5).
- 5 This is a quite illegible contraction; it could be *In*; but is probably intended to be *hm* = *home*.

LETTER 2 [EGR 4/6/1//4/5]

This is only a part of a longer letter, reproduced to show another side of the young William's fondness for journeying. He undertook a number of walking holidays, and had already in 1840 written to his father about Grimspound on Dartmoor. He was later to write about a tour of Northamptonshire-Lincolnshire. Those letters are not included. After the extract I have given, William wrote another two pages on the budding joys of spring linking this to a conclusion on the glorious light of the Resurrection. The whole letter amounts to a miniature sermon, and the envelope is endorsed, in probably his father's hand, in ink, 'God's Glory seen in his works March 1841, and in another, in pencil, 'Exquisite'.

Magdalen Hall, March 13, 1841.

My dear father,

.... Our Easter vacation is now at hand – I am thinking of spending a part of it in a little walking tour through Sussex as I want to [taste] the fine sea breezes of the South Downs before I get to reading again. One of our men has asked me to spend a Sunday with him at Hooe near Battle¹, which offer I have accepted. The vacation commences next Thursday the 18th. inst. When I hope DV to start: and I think I shall return in about a fortnight. Besides the coast views, Sussex is one of the richest counties in remains of ecclesiastical architecture; so that I shall amuse myself in inspecting these. It is now what my servant calls 'Heavenly weather' – winter has retired and blooming spring trips onward. The sun shines out in unclouded splendour gladdening the heart of man and beast

- 1 Inland from Bexhill

LETTER 3 [EGR 4/6/1/4/6]

There was no formal start to the letter.

Wimborne Dorset, Wednesday evening. [April 1841]

'Haloo there boy! catch up my luggage and run

off after me to the 'New Inn'; the Forrester is just come in' 'Well, coachman, have you got an outside place for me, this fine day?' 'No, Sir' - 'An inside then?' 'Full inside and out then' I observed inquiringly. 'Yes Sir' replied the knight of the whip 'Full inside and out. We have refused many before you, Sir'. Rather vexatious thought I, as I sneaked back again, with the boy at my heels carrying my luggage. However there is nothing like making the best of a bad job, and so this afternoon I have been exploring the country hereabout. But I must go back a little. I got safely to Exeter, and had just time to run down to Harry's lodgings, but found that he was 'out of town', and was not expected until the following afternoon (today). Where he was gone to I could not learn. Pray let me know as soon as his affairs are settled - Well I mounted the [livid] coach and got in safely here at half past three in the morning. I rode outside till Axminster and then got inside. I know not how it was, but my cold seemed much better for the drive, and still continues to improve - The magnificent bell of the Minster had struck 4 when I jumped into bed - I woke again at 7½, had breakfast and then proceeded to the Minster. After rubbing down good king Ethelred I attended Divine Service which is performed there every day. The prayers were read by the Dean of the church, a baronet, but I forget his name, a very old man; and he read them with a great deal of feeling - After this I took off a few other things, and then had dinner and awaited the coming in of the Forrester. How I fared then I have just told you: but I put a good face in the disappointment, as it was wisely ordered, no doubt, although we, through our blindness, cannot see wherefore such things should be. Indeed, I have rather enjoyed my day as it is; for I had a most delightful walk to Canford, a lovely little village, with a most exquisite church, near which is the seat of Lord Morley. But I have managed to turn off most shabbily an old and tried friend - my old walking stick. I put it between the luggage on top of the [livid] when I left Exeter, & looked [many?] a time to see if it rode safely, but when I got to Axminster it was gone. I must say that I mourned its loss, for it was one of my oldest friends and was become quite endeared to me. And now I am writing from the Crown Inn here, have first had tea, and hope

(DV) to be off about half past 9 by the Poole Mail, for Southampton, where I hope to be in about 12 at night. Then tomorrow up to Oxford¹. For the present then farewell & with best love to all at home, Believe me your Affectionate and Dutiful son, William Grey.

P. S. Please to tell Mrs. [Misted] that I called on her on Monday to wish her good [day] but did not find her in. I had intended to call in the evening but had so much to settle and do that I had not time.

Rev'd. Harry Grey, Tormoham, Torquay.

- 1 Presumably he intended to catch the coach he had missed in the previous letter.

LETTER 4 [EGR 4/6/1/4/7]

This is only part of a lengthy letter, the rest of which related to William's examinations at Oxford. Despite William's revulsion at the train journey the previous year, his younger brother George apparently had no qualms about using it himself, or entrusting their sister to it.

No heading or date. 1841

My dear father,
It is high time for me to answer your letter of the 11th. It should not have remained unanswered for so long; but one thing and another has put me off. I came back most thoroughly tired and disappointed from Southampton on Saturday evening having got there just 2½ hours after Mary¹ had left the place. After two hours hunting from one inn to another I at last formed this intelligence. George, it seems, took her off by railroad & not by sea as you mentioned. I cannot imagine how it was that I never heard from him of Mary's arrival, for he said positively in his letter of 22nd ult.; 'when she arrives I will inform you and arrange a meeting at Southampton'. I was waiting in daily expectation of being called off; & at last heard by a mere chance that the steamer had arrived & set off immediately but Mary was gone! Well, disappointments must happen.

- 1 Mary was the sixth child and eldest daughter; George was the fourth son, two years younger than William.

LETTER 5 [EGR 4/6/ 1/4/11a & b]

This letter is included, although it takes William out of England, for its intrinsic interest and because the voyage started from Southampton. William had been ordained on 12 March 1843, as he wrote to his father in a letter the next day [no. 8 in the collection].

On board the 'Severn' Jan'y 8th 1849

My dear Father,

I have been keeping a letter going for some days past for Harriet, on the chance of being able to send it home by some ship, or at any rate as soon as I get to Bermuda, & I must do the same for the benefit of the good circle at Babbicombe. George would tell you of all our doings up to my sailing, and of the mutual cheers which greeted our departure. We sailed at 3 pm from Southampton on the 2nd and cleared the Needles about dark. 3rd A fine E wind behind us driving us rapidly out of Channel. Made the Start about 4 am, sighted no land afterwards. Cleared the Channel in the afternoon. 4th Morning broke wet; but the day was lovely, temperature much warmer. Saw several vessels all round us, spoke one ... the Virginia, an Italian. 5th. Weather most delightful, sky a deep ultra-marine colour, such as I never saw in England, sea calm. 6th. Beautiful weather with the same glorious sky. Thermometer 61. Saw several grampus round the ship. I made a curious discovery today. As George and I stood on the deck at Southampton, we saw coming alongside a much smaller steamer with the Mails, and an Admiralty agent in charge of them. This agent turned out to be Lieut.: Ray, of Weymouth. We were both much astonished to find out each other. He has been on this service for the last 3 years. 7th Sunday. I read prayers to the ship's company & preached. There are about 100 seamen & (firemen?), a dozen passengers, & about as many officers. My congregation was very well behaved and attentive. Fine weather

still. Therm'r 62. Latitude at noon (4hr 29N) Long 19.7 W. About 7 pm was a beautiful (linear) rainbow. 8th. Foggy morning and evening, but fine day. Therm'r 65. 10th. Thick and damp, but fair wind; we are making a very good run, going to the N of Gracioso - one of the Azores, which we saw distant ab't 12 miles, and to the S of [Corvo] & Flores. 11th. Heavy squalls of wind and rain. Therm'r 66. I begin to feel this heat - it makes me unwilling to exert myself, and I long for a good Newfoundland frost. Squally, wind & sea rising. Ther: 67. 13th. Squally morning, fine evening: some whales were blowing and playing near us ab't 8½ am. Ther: 65. 14th. Fine day & fair wind, the sea looking beautiful: it comes on with a long roll, of a deep green colour, each wave crested with white foam, lit up by a bright sunshine. About 3 pm we saw a singular rainbow: it [just] covered us in a considerable arc - more than a semi-circle & seemed to touch our stern on either side. Just at the same time, I observed for the first time the peculiar light brown sea-weed brought up by the Gulf stream, showing that we have just come within range of that singular current. Latitude at noon 36. 38. Long: 44.17. Ther: 65. I held service again for the ship's company. 15th. The first really fine morning wh. we have had yet. The sun rose in a bright unclouded sky, & the day has been lovely. Ther: 62. 16th. Just such a day as yesterday. Ther 70. 17th. Fine day. Ther: 64. 18th. Fine, strong W breeze. Ther: 69. 19th. I was alarmed this morning, when first out of bed, by a great outcry, and a running together upon deck. I soon distinguished the words 'a man overboard': it gives one a thrilling sensation, when a sudden lurch of the ship threw him off his balance, and he slipped under the rail into the water. Nobody saw him in the act of falling, but he was seen once rising to the surface & was heard crying for aid. A considerable sea was running at the time, which made it hard work for the boat. The ship was put about; but after almost an hour had been spent in the search it was given up as useless. The day has been fine with a strong breeze from the NNW. Ther: 58. 20th. We made the Bermuda light at ten minutes before midnight; but lay off until daylight for a pilot to take us across the dangerous reefs

which encircle Bermuda. I came early on deck to have the first sighting of this hitherto to me terra incognita, and I was especially surprised by its beauty. I saw before me a rocky coast – the rock a sort of purple with white veins, crowned with cedars and dotted all about with white houses [and ... by] *such* a sea as I have never seen before as to its colour, which is a singularly light greenish blue. We landed our mails at St. George's, and then beat on to the dockyard at [Ireland¹] where we passed the *Wellesby* 74 – Lord [Dundonald's] ship, and the *Scourge*, & learned to our dismay that the *Avon*, the packet wh sailed on Dec. 2nd., & by which I wished to come here, had not arrived, nor has been heard of. In about an hour's time of our coming alongside, a boat came into the harbour, in which I recognised [Frith], an old Oxford contemporary of mine. I guessed his errand – it was to greet me in the Bishop's name, and to offer me his house as my home. Very soon my luggage was on board his boat, and we set sail for Hamilton, about 5 miles distant – a most lovely sail – cruising about the numberless islands which compose this group. It was delightful to set foot on shore again. Frith's house is built on the rock overlooking a beautiful sound, which is dotted with islets, each with its cluster of cedars. The air is quite scented with the cedars, and our path (strewed) with geraniums,

nasturtiums, aloes, and many other plants quite new to me, and others which I have only seen in hot-houses in England. We have taken a short stride this afternoon, and find these islands much more beautiful than I expected to find them. But I must reserve a more particular account for a week or so. I am in hopes that this will go by the *Scourge*, the vessel that brought Mitchell here, which worthy we saw as soon as we got into harbour, in a hulk, where he lives as a gentleman doing nothing at all. I hope to see the Bishop on Monday – he is 15 miles off at St. George's. My address will be 'Hamilton, Bermuda'. Here I am, pleasantly and safely across the wide Atlantic, thank God for it. I must therefore creep into bed; it will be rather strange not to be *rocked* to sleep as I have been for the last 18 nights. Adieu for the present, and with my love to all believe me, my dear Father, your affectionate and dutiful son,
William Grey.

- 1 The manuscript looks like Inland but is most probably Ireland [Island].

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Mrs. P Peskett and Mr S Hynard of Winchester for providing information on local railway services.

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