



Writing Home from Around the World, 1926–1927

A keen and amused observer, Tom Johnson is an articulate and conscientious letter writer. The reader has the feeling he was writing for himself as much as his family as he makes sentences and paragraphs of his impressions of the world at the height of colonialism.

By THOMAS H. JOHNSON

Edited with an introduction by LAURA JOHNSON WATERMAN

My father, Thomas H. Johnson, the writer of these letters, was born in 1902 on the Connecticut River Valley farm known as Stone Cliff, located one mile north of the village of Bradford. In 1926, upon his graduation from Williams College, Tom Johnson embarked on a world cruise that was to last the length of a school year—September to May. He had been invited to teach Elizabethan Drama and American Literature (subjects he soon found to be not particularly relevant) on the first ever student travel experiment. This was launched on a large scale with over fifty faculty and four hundred and fifty students, one hundred and twenty of them women. A. J. McIntosh, president of the University Travel Association, saw this as an opportunity to combine formal education with travel, and organized the adventure by reaching out to colleges across the country. The project became known as the Floating University and was considered

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LAURA JOHNSON WATERMAN is the author of *Losing the Garden* (2005), a memoir of thirty years of homesteading in East Corinth, Vermont. She co-authored with her late husband, Guy Waterman, five books on the history of climbing the mountains of the Northeast and related environmental issues, among them, *Forest and Crag* (1989), *Backwoods Ethics* (1993), and *Wilderness Ethics* (1993).
Vermont History Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2008): 149–180.

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important enough to be covered nearly weekly by the *New York Times*, as well as other newspapers from coast to coast. “The most significant movement in modern education,” ex-governor Henry Allen of Kansas called it, who was in charge of the course on journalism.

Tom Johnson took with him a brand new typewriter with the intent of documenting this marvelous opportunity for his family, who at that time lived on Marvin Street in Montpelier. In all he wrote thirty-four letters, the first begun on Sunday afternoon, September 19, 1926, “First day at sea,” Tom writes, “. . . new typewriter . . . glorious weather . . . so glorious that even a confirmed but rapidly-becoming-educated land-lubber almost doesn’t feel the heavy swell.” The last was penned from the Strand Palace Hotel in London on Easter, 1927, after attending Bach’s St. Matthew Passion where he had recognized the Rev. A. Reginald Crewe, the minister from Bradford, who having left some years ago in apparent disgrace, was now without clerical collar and living in London. My father did not spell out what had happened to the Rev. Crewe nor did he speak to the minister as was his initial inclination, yet this unexpected encounter with one from home must have made the world feel surprisingly and suddenly smaller.

All the letters are addressed to his mother, Myra Burbeck Johnson, and were meant to be shared with the family. This included his father, Herbert Thomas Johnson, Adjutant General of the State; his younger brother Edward (“Ned”), headed for a military career, but who was to die tragically of illness in 1928; and his older sister Ruth, married and the mother of twin girls—“the babes”—as they are called in the letters.

A keen and amused observer, Tom Johnson is an articulate and conscientious letter writer. The reader has the feeling he was writing for himself as much as his family as he makes sentences and paragraphs of his impressions of the world at the height of colonialism: the politics and religions of these far-flung places with a much broader sweep of history from the home scene he has left behind. Tom gives his family much more than a travelogue. He gives them a world view in the letters he posts from every port as the ship makes its way from New York to Cuba, through the Panama Canal to stop at Los Angeles providing Tom with an opportunity to visit his Avery relatives, Vermonters now living on the west coast. From there the ship struck out for Hawaii and on to the Far East, spending from November to January in Japan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Bangkok where the whole Floating University were special guests of the king. Then on to Java, Ceylon, and India before leaving the East for Aden, Cairo, and Jerusalem, with the last three months spent in Europe. Wherever they went they were

entertained royally, often by royalty, and made welcomed by government and university officials. At the end, Tom writes of feeling “that new forces of adjustment were at work.” He writes of the “ambitious self assurance of such countries as Japan, Italy, France and probably Germany,” and sees these countries, as well as the United States and England, aligning themselves in a way that would spell World War II.

Tom Johnson went on to a lifetime of writing, scholarship, and teaching. His field was Colonial Literature, though his primary contribution was as editor of Emily Dickinson’s poetry and letters. He taught from 1937 to 1966 at the Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

The letters presented here are selected for their color, readability, and connections to Vermont, as Tom sought images from home, like the Bradford Fair, to bring what he was seeing to life for his family.¹

MANUSCRIPT

Thomas H. Johnson’s letters to his family, addressed to his mother, September 1926 to April 1927. Ms. letters; size varies; some handwritten, but most are typed. The collection is arranged in one flip-top archival box and consumes .5 linear feet of shelf space. Aside from the letters, there are clippings from the *New York Times* and photographs.

These letters are part of the Thomas H. Johnson Papers, 1916–1933, MSA 441. Ethan W. Bisbee prepared the finding aid.

Gift of Laura Johnson Waterman, East Corinth, Vermont, September 2006.

THE LETTERS

The S.S. Ryndam left New York on Sunday, September 19, 1926, heading for Miami as first port of call and just missing a hurricane, about which Tom writes,

Going through Panama Canal, Tuesday
Morning, 27 September 1926

In the first place, if I had thought soon enough, I would have cabled you from there [Havana], because probably you were worrying about us on account of the Miami tragedy. I really don’t know what happened, except what appeared in the ship’s paper, and that was only a statement of figures, which seemed very awful; the papers that we got in Havana were much too interested in the coming Dempsey-Tunney fight to give space to a mere hurricane.

Leaving Havana the ship passes through the Panama Canal and into the Pacific to dock next in Los Angeles. Here Tom visits his Avery relatives

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who had moved from Vermont across the country to California before he was born.

16 October 1926

They [Aunt Mary and Uncle Albert] were so glad I had come and were so eager to hear about Vermont and the families. He hadn't seen Father since Father was 7 years old, and spoke of him as a pretty little boy. Aunt Mary is a very dear woman. She said "You know, it's very hard to love people if you've never seen them, but afterwards you can". Once Uncle Charlie [Tom's father's brother] had gone there with Grandma Johnson [Tom's grandmother on his father's side], so they did know him a little. Aunt Mary is small and quick and the subtle manager, very intelligent and very lovable. Uncle Albert looks very much I imagine like his father; he is getting blind and says that could he see he would come to visit Vermont, but he can see so poorly now that to come would be a distinct disappointment. They have a very pretty house, and seem to be nicely off. Uncle Albert was very nicely dressed and very



"Leaving New York, September [19], 1926." Photographer unknown. The caption on the reverse (not in Thomas Johnson's handwriting) incorrectly dates the photograph as September 18. This and the following photos are from the Thomas H. Johnson papers, Vermont Historical Society, Barre, Vt., MSA 441, folder 06.

straight for his eighty-five years: thin white hair, smooth shaven except for a drooping white mustache. Aunt Mary has two school teachers there – women she enjoys – as roomers, because she says – and I remembered hearing this before – the house seemed so empty that she couldn't stand it unless she could hear people coming and going and helping to keep her in contact with the world. They have given up all their farming and have just hens enough for what they want, and fruit trees enough for their needs. Originally they were on the outskirts of the city, but now they seem to be near the center, and his land must be quite valuable. Cities spread out so in California. Of course he took me out and showed me all around. I picked an orange from a tree in his back yard, peeled [sic] and ate it there – a unique experience. Hazen's death [Aunt Mary and Uncle Albert's son] was about the heaviest possible blow and they never have and never will recover from it; for now there is no more Avery family, since he had no children, though his widow comes to see them occasionally and is not remarried. They want so much to have you visit them, and feel that you should go out there. As far as that goes, so do I and I know you will sometime – only don't wait too long. Southern California (and people speak of it as an almost separate state from northern) is a very very beautiful place. There are no hills there, only mountains that are mountains, rising out of very desert looking plains. Where there is irrigation, the foliage is rich green and beautiful to see. But quite honestly between us, I would hate living there. Even Los Angeles itself, which is a lovely place, of growth not too rapid to be substantial, has no attraction for me. It is incredibly enormous in extent, and takes hours to go from one place to another, even in the center of the city. I can understand how they feel that the East is cramped. But then, I am an Easterner. To visit it is delightful beyond necessity. The movies have made Hollywood and Pasadena residences among the most beautiful that I have ever seen (of course the architecture is generally of the low, stucco Georgian or Spanish variety). But for myself, and I am speaking perhaps as a person of 24 rather than as one of your generation (though I am sure You will agree with me), New England, godbless all her horrid inclemencies, is worth twenty Californias: where all you can do is gape in aw-struck [sic] wonder and say Aint Nature Grand. As I read Wordsworth, and as I think of Vermont, I feel a kind of inner tear of joy in picturing the mists rising on gorse hills in the changing October, and feel the real nearness and the real livableness of trees that turn, and the colors of grey and brown and yellow and red and purple that are far too subtle for the mind not trained in New England to feel. California is made for the minds that need the spectacular to impress them. I am sure there is very

good reason why New England has been the home of so many Thoreaus and Emersons.

Well, enough. You will accuse me of homesickness or, worse, of “boosting”. Neither I think is honestly the case. The fact that Panama and Southern California did impress me so, and the fact that the Orient will, I know, and Egypt, is proof that I want to live where I am not continually shouted at by a glittering or thunderous or torrential God. I am vaguely afraid I will lose my heart to Italy and England – probably England – because I know already how I will feel, as Browning did, about “that gaudy melon flower”.

But California is gorgeous and the depravity of the way in which it lavishes its flowers and its vistas upon you is positively immoral. . . .

By the way, I almost forgot one interesting bit of news. The old expression that the world is a small place after all proved true in Los Angeles. Several of us went to hear Luise Homer at the opera Friday night, and while I was walking in the foyer I passed a woman unmistakably my former ancient history teacher Miss Shute. [Tom had attended the high school in Montpelier and this is probably what he is referring to.] She is now a Mrs. Dwight and still teaches school though her husband, a plain person, farms. She didn’t recognize me at first, but after all, I hadn’t seen her for several years and there was no reason why she should. She inquired for everyone and particularly wished to be remembered to you and Ruth. She looks exactly the same, but wondered where I came from, naturally enough.

By early November they have seen and left Hawaii and truly entered the Far East. Tom writes on 4 November 1926, “This morning I got up very early, because we are supposed to be coming into port sometime late today, and I found it very hard to act really natural on the day that I go to Japan!” In Japan an incident happened that very nearly ended the cruise and Tom gives a full account:

13 November 1926

Five hundred boys cooped for fifteen days on the ocean would be a problem in any country. In a foreign country they made a considerable one. I will leave the description of the country and my own wanderings to tell a story and moralize. I have no idea really how much the American papers played up the fact [It was unsparingly covered in the *New York Times*.] that as soon as the boat docked and the boys had time, many of them proceeded to get drunk and disgrace themselves, the Cruise and the nation. What happened was this. One of our trips took us by rail – a four hour journey – to Nikko, the center of beauty in Japan. I can conceive of a different beauty, but of no greater beauty. But I mustn’t

digress. Many drank considerably on the trains or at the stations where it can be bought on the platform. The result was that one or two when they were being shown a certain crypt which no human hand or foot had touched for 900 years not even the Emperor's, jumped into it. No one knows exactly who it was that did it, because few happened to be there at the moment, and those who do know of course say nothing, but it made a terrific consternation among the priesthood. If it had happened in a country as fanatic in religion as India the man couldn't place much value on his life, but Japan is different. That was not all. Some-one took an image from one of the shrines. Some being entertained in private families, took other little "souvenirs". The result was that on the Sunday that we went from Yokohama to Kobe a mass-meeting was called. By this time the deans had managed to get Phelps [Unable to identify; possibly with the University Travel association.] to promise unlimited support: that is, to allow them to send boys home if they so chose. Yesterday in the charge of one of the Phelps force, nine were started back to the United States. As might be expected these were the nine most troublesome on the scholastic score, and contained some whom the deans had wanted to send back from Havana, but couldn't at that time because Phelps wouldn't allow it. I do not blame Phelps. He knew nothing about college discipline and had to learn exactly as all have to, by the experience of it. Another year all this could never happen. But the worst thing was that we were guests of the Japanese. The Japanese have been the most perfect hosts imaginable, lavishing everything upon us without stint and with the utmost goodwill and generosity. The government put the railroads at our disposal; the universities her students as guides and her professors as lecturers. Some of the most distinguished men in the country gave their time to come to certain places to lecture. In fact you see it was a pretty rotten way to treat them – and of course such treatment came from a very small minority: probably all the damage was done by the nine that were sent back, but that didn't help us much. For a time we were afraid we couldn't continue to Kobe. The conduct of the drunkards was nothing to the desecration of the shrines or the filching of "souvenirs" by guests of families. And in Japan it is a very unusual thing for the home to be open to strangers. Moreover it seemed that the general effect on the Japanese students must be a terrible disillusion, for the Japanese student has always held American colleges and universities in great reverence. The height of their ambition is to go to an American college; the only language spoken in general besides Japanese is English, and they are all crazy to learn it. I have come to have a feeling that they really do look up to the United States, and all this talk of Menace is a darned sight farther off

than common belief has it. Well, you might think that I had exaggerated the effect of the work of these few if it weren't for the fact that the American ambassador sent word to Gov. Allen [Ex-Governor Henry Allen of Kansas, in charge of the course on journalism and editor of the paper published daily on shipboard and sent to forty-eight U. S. newspapers.] that that vandalism had done more to hurt the relations between the two countries than anything that had happened for fifteen years. Oh, we may talk of Huns and of the Yellow Peril and of Barbarians of any sort you wish, but I have now such a shame because of my own countrymen that I shall in the future boast with care. To be sure there is another way of looking at it which I think is correct: We are the richest country on the earth. We have all the mechanical advantages of all the ages summed up at our finger tips. We are by nature aggressive – eager to see things and do things and experiment. In consequence of all these facts, certain of us have had a chance to do an entirely new thing – in a body travel around the world as a group of some sort of standing – as a University. But it is a fact also that with money and machinery and desire to experiment does not necessarily come wisdom or sense of responsibility or regard for the rights of others. It can probably be said that the best of us are among the finest that ever lived, and that among the worst of us are some of the worst. But with the advantages which the worst have (and they are the same advantages as the best) they are capable of doing a damage that can impede the progress of civilization and peace and international goodwill [for] at least a generation if not for a century. The problem of such a cruise as this is to weed out with every possible dispatch those who have not developed and who will not develop a sense of responsibility. Unless we grow spiritually and mentally at the same pace we grow mechanically we will be destroyed by the same machines that we have made, and that is a fact. To my mind the profanation of that shrine was not caused by drunkenness. People do not do when they are drunk anything which is a violation of all that is best in them; that they never intended to do consciously or subconsciously when they were sober. The person that did that is a person, I feel, who has nothing fine in him, who has no true feeling for holiness of beauty. If you could only see Nikko you would appreciate what I mean. Wasn't it Bryant who said that the woods were God's first temples. The Japanese know it; feel it. On a hillside thickly studded with those trees nearest related to the red-woods, called cryptomeria, they have erected various temples with a care for good taste and loving zeal, that make the spot one of the present seven wonders of the world. In order to reach the place, you must walk some distance – that is, make a pilgrimage – and when you have reached it you find the silence of all

time to turn each man's thought upon himself and on eternity. Gorgeous birds are there, and in some of the temple spots sacred deer run in large flocks as tame as sheep. The workmanship in the temples is an example of the best from a country where nothing but the best is satisfying. In fact it makes our garish Catholic and Episcopal churches look pretty tawdry. Always in good taste; never too much; love of the simple effects; understanding that natural surroundings are the most moving medium in [which] to place the things they hold sacred; all these things the Japanese feel and express. At Nikko the temples happen to be Shinto. At another place it might be Buddhist – as at Kamakura. In some places their shrines may be more ordinary; their worship may be perfunctory and superficial, but tell me, has that not occurred in Christianity? The important thing is that it is theirs, they love it, and in some cases rather, in many cases, the places of worship are divinely beautiful and the man who does not feel it is either a bigot or an imbecile. After all, how severely can you censure a boy for taking a God Buddha from a shrine when an ordained Protestant minister says to a student standing near the box where the worshippers [sic] come to toss their hard earned pennies: "Toss me one; I'll take it to my congregation to show them how the heathens get their collection". Well, I have aired my feelings on that matter. I will only add that to me it was great good fortune that we were to have three more days in Japan in which to redeem ourselves if possible from the stigma of ingratitude, theft and irreverence toward a people who had received us eagerly and with both hands; and I really feel that as far as restitution can be made it has been, and as far as a new type of conduct could condone for the past, it has been made to do so; however, the consul at Kobe said that if one other act of depredation were reported while the Cruise is on, the boat would be recalled immediately to New York by the United States government. With which decision I am in hearty agreement, but I have hopes now for this "cross-section of American life": and heaven knows the members of the cruise are that all right.

Tom loved Japan and, despite the disrespect shown by some of the students, had a wonderful time there, or perhaps because of it, or how the Japanese handled it. Here is how he ended his letter:

I have already told you of going to Nikko – the glorious shrine spot of Japan. It is there that the Red Lacquer Bridge is situated. On this bridge only the emperor ever rides. It is the last word in simple but extravagant beauty. I haven't spoken of Nara which we saw two days ago. This is the quietest, most livable town in Japan, and considered by the Japanese the spot they love best; and no wonder. When Rome was a



“Nikko, Japan, Sacred bridge—Lacquer.” Photo and description by Thomas H. Johnson.

desert, sacked by Huns, Vandals, Goths, etc. ruled by vicious popes, when France was a feudal land without unity, governed by counts and impotent king, before Charlemagne brought to it education, or enlightenment, while England was still Saxon and ruled by the legendary Arthur, before the American continents had even been dreamed of by an unborn Columbus, Nara was the center of one of the greatest civilizations that the earth can boast. This was in 720-760 A.D. and here was Japan’s first capital. Only one building remains to connect the ages, fire and storm and earthquakes have done their worst, and the buildings remaining are very new – built some of them, as late as 1600 perhaps! But the contours of the land, of the hills and forests are the same, preserved that way, and the dust that you must flick from your boots, or the mud you must scrape, is the same as that which the weary pilgrims have dusted and scraped from them for many, many generations. In the park there are thousands of these tame deer, called by a bugle to their meals, and here is an atmosphere of worship that comes as much from veneration of what has been, and the thought of what others have loved, as from its own divinely pastoral self. The famous Buddha there is, I think the largest figure in the world, weighs tons, and is filled with gold and silver to unbelievable value, but it is not impressive. Quite the contrary is the Namakura Daibutsu (Dy-boot-zu). You may find pictures of it. It is enormous but so perfectly proportioned that its size is not realized. It sits against the sky, brooding, seeing into past, future, eternity, calm,

serene, and ages may come and go, men may struggle, live, die, but this figure will always remain as the symbol of spiritual permanency. I think I shall see no other that will appeal to me so much.

On coming into Manila Bay on Friday, November 26, Tom begins: "I don't wonder that Dewey picked a fight here; it is just the place to do it; all kinds of room and placid water." Admiral George Dewey was born in Montpelier in 1858. Twenty-eight years before the cruise arrived, Dewey had directed the spectacular victory over the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, thus transferring control of the islands to the United States. Tom would have had a particular interest in this since his father had led a regiment to Cuba in 1898 during the Spanish-American War.

The letter Tom writes between Bangkok and Singapore seems the heart of the collection in the sense that the experiences Tom Johnson has in Siam (present day Thailand) at the end of 1926 could never again be duplicated. Time is about to sweep away absolute monarchs as well as a world that permitted a tour like this one.

10 December 1926

Our guides were either young men from court or chaps who had been at some time sent to America or Europe to study and therefore could speak perfect English and were highly educated. I have never seen better organization for three days than was evident there. That may be the result of an absolute monarchy and where there is one person in charge. Everything from the beginning went like clock work – not an easy thing to have happen in dealing with five hundred students. I will say for the students that they were properly impressed enough to realize the importance of good behavior. The plans had been made to house the students in the dormitories of Vajiravudh College, giving the Siamese students an early Christmas holiday so that all the facilities of the college might be at the disposal of the students. The college itself is a former palace of the king's turned over for the education of the Siamese. Naturally it is a delightful spot and though small in comparison to some total colleges in America, large for the Orient and beautiful in structure. There meals were served to the students and they were waited on by the Boy Scouts of the City – called Tiger Whelps – who arrived each morning between three and four to do it. We were all of course, the special guests of the king, and as such got most astonishing attention from the people. No merchants were allowed to come around to the hotel where the faculty were, or the college to annoy or make the students feel, as it was expressed, any obligation to buy things. We of the faculty were quartered in the Phya Thai (Pee-ah Tie) Palace Hotel. That is a special hotel of the king's; also a former palace – used in fact

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up until two years ago as the official residence of the late Rama VI who died a year ago. It is of marble, which means a great deal in this part of the world, and is a beautifully built thing. Our rooms were the sort you would expect in a palace, enormous and luxurious. In the rear of the building was a miniature garden of Versailles, with certain Oriental touches, such as fountains of demons and dragons rather than fountains of graces and cupids; statues of Buddhas rather than of Jove or Apollo, though the scheme of the place was western in influence. We arrived from Paknam in time for a late tea. I wish you could have seen us piled into the train. The engines are tiny things that burn wood and go like the devil. The cars are also tiny – so little that with our bags there was scarcely room for us. I sat on my bag on the forward platform right next to the engine. Though they went fast there seemed to be a certain leisureliness about the trainmen – one stood near me and carried on a long conversation with the engineer over the wood box. The road bed lies over a country as wild and jungly as you can believe. The fact is that



“Mr. Howes took this in Bangkok in the gardens at the rear of the Phya Thai Palace hotel. I have several others but I’m only sending these of myself. The statue is of some Buddhist deity and the monument is in distinctly Siamese style—the decorations on it, I mean. Just in back of the fence is a very muddy, tropical stream—the one we got a native to row us about on to see the houses, fishing natives, etc.” Description by Thomas H. Johnson.

jungles spring up over night if they are not kept down constantly. The farther east we have gone the narrower the bridges have seemed to get. They were as narrow as I ever want to see them there. The streams are hopelessly muddy, yet the people bathe in them and live by them all their lives. The country is foremost in rice growing, which means that there is a great deal of arable land always under water (this is the dry season, so there wasn't quite so much). Hence the mosquitoes are in their glory there. It is very lucky that they are not disease carriers or we would all be dead – I have never been bitten so much. They don't begin till evening – too hot for them in the day – but at the dinner table it is terrific. Most of the women are given bags to put their feet in; men are supposed to have trousers long enough, but they just fail and the two inches between shoe and cuff contain a very sufficient hell. But mosquitoes aren't all. There is every variety of moth and other bugs that ever lived. Two or three in your glass mean nothing, nor are you to be surprised when you see the chameleon lizard, four inches long crawling along the walls and ceiling near the lights. Our meals were all served there – and many courses.

That evening – Saturday evening – various entertainments had been arranged at the university for 21 o'clock (9 pm). A marionette play on the Punch and Judy order, called *The Hun*, or marionette, was given in one booth. It's a very old art there and very excellently studied. I have no idea what the plays given were but that really didn't make any difference. Another type was also given. You see they had the whole campus divided up into booths where all of these was [sic] taking place at the same time and we were supposed to move from one to the other. There was the Nang or Shadow Play which gave two very old plays that are seldom presented called "Takrau" and "Krabee Krabong". A large screen is erected with lights so arranged to throw the shadow of certain manipulated objects onto it. It was not as entertaining to me as I imagine it would have been had I known the science of the art, its excellence or the stories. In addition to these entertainments, stalls were erected here and there for the different kinds of music of Siam. I have come to find Oriental music enormously fascinating. The whole basic structure is different from western music and arresting as you become accustomed to it. It is not sinuous, but it is complicated and requires a study and talent and an ear for a peculiar type of rhythm even, as I suppose, American jazz does.

Sunday morning – it seemed the least like Sunday of any day in my life – we started on the real excursions. We visited a rice mill, a hospital – which is part of the Rockefeller foundation and the Wat Arun. A Wat is a Siamese Buddhist temple. It is often circular, decreasing in diameter

as it rises, till it comes to a point at the top, a hundred and fifty feet above the ground. In a flat country of low buildings, these wats are remarkably impressive, largely because you have little expectation that they will be. They are solid and correspond to the Japanese pagoda. Generally there are steps going up to a considerable height from the outside, and there you can see over the city. Wat Arun is nearly as old as the city of Bangkok – which is very young – only 150 years old. It is of some cement composition with this remarkable addition: that all over its very extensive surface small bits of colored, unevenly broken china have been attached in pattern, giving it from a distance the appearance of a shining jewel or a vast dome of many colors. We were taken to the Pasteur Institute and the Chulalongkorn Hospital. The latter is named for the present king's grandfather, a famous old warrior of the old school, and the founder of the more modern Siam. These were chiefly interesting for the modernity of their equipment, and I heard the dentist and doctors go into ecstasies over them. Here they keep a large pen of cobras for manufacturing a snake antitoxin. They were a horrible sight. While we were there one of the doctors entered the pen and extracted some venom. He would grab a snake with a forked stick in back of its head, then squeeze the venom onto a little glass dish. All the doctors have to learn to do it. One boy dropped his camera into the pen, and I don't think ever did recover it. Cobras are as common there as mice are in America. About a thousand people are bitten a year, but not a life has been lost since the discovery of the antitoxin. With the King Cobra it is a different matter. Fortunately there are almost none in the country; but they grow to a length of from 15 to 20 feet and do not wait to be disturbed to attack. When they come their head is reared four or five feet above the ground and their bite is inevitably fatal. That afternoon there was also a trip to Wat Benchamabopitr (as it looks so it's pronounced). That is built in a typically Siamese style – roof edge rising above roof edge, steeply, with the corners flared and pointing upward – to impinge the demons and evil spirits as they fly about. Now comes one of the really thrilling events: an audience with the King.

At five o'clock that day all the faculty assembled in the Throne Hall a large marble hall built in the style of the Congressional building, in Renaissance architecture and barrel vaulting. I felt only one regret: that Siam has tried to bring western architecture there rather than magnify its own extraordinary type, but the past recent kings have greatly admired western things and have been eager to imitate I suppose. Outside the students and tourists were arranged in a semi-circle. We of the faculty stood in a long line waiting for the curtains at the far end of the room to part and for the king and queen to come out. It was exciting I

can assure you. At last they came. He is a very small man, we were told a consumptive (the royal family has intermarried for so long that physically it is in a bad way and all of them die quite young) but very intelligent looking and both he and his wife speak excellent English. He came down the line with Dean Lough [Dean Charles Edwin Lough of New York University] to introduce us to him, and both he and the queen shook hands with every member of the faculty. Then he passed out onto the lawn where he addressed the students in a very charming manner – they gave a cheer for “The King” then for “The Queen”, and the afternoon was over. But it is rare for him to grant audiences and he never does it to crowds. The queen is a pretty little woman who always dresses with extreme simplicity and prefers western cut clothes to Paris creations. The kingdom, as I said before is an absolute monarchy, and in the hands of the family that has held the rule for several generations, is by far the most successful sort that could possibly be used there. Though his word is law in theory and in fact, and though he is head of church as well as state, the king is wise enough to have a great number of all kinds of advisors whose opinion he respects, and in whom the people have confidence. He has voluntarily cut his own salary in half – no doubt a great sacrifice! – and is always very generous in public matters; on the whole a very wise and capable ruler much loved and respected by the people and the foreigners as well. The country appropriated I was told 25,000 ticals (about \$12,000) for our entertainment, and the king feeling it wouldn’t be enough will add what is necessary from his own income. On Sunday evening we went to the assembly hall of the University where certain lectures and movies were presented. Raymond Stevens, Esq., the king’s advisor lectured on the government of Siam. He is by the way a Vermonter² – I find them in every port – (there was also a D U [Delta Upsilon, Tom’s fraternity at Williams] who has been there for several years) and the successor to the lawyer that married one of Wilson’s daughters, I can’t think of his name – a Williams man. The king has always had for many years as legal advisor an American. You see of the great nations, United States is the only one really disinterested there. The British in India and the French in Cambodia cancel each other and don’t get along any too well diplomatically there. Then too United States has been the first to make certain advantageous ratifications in diplomatic relations to Siam which the other nations have followed, and that makes it better too. The Siamese are really the one Oriental nation I have seen in which you feel that “never the twain shall meet” is not true. They seem to think and be fundamentally constituted as westerners are. Though I loved the Japanese, they are eons apart from us. Not so the Siamese. They don’t make you feel that in going

west to study, they are merely taking what the west has to offer for their own particular advantage, but because they like it and can be benefited in their own individual natures better by it than anywhere else. There was also a lecture on the rice industry and one on teak, with movies to illustrate it. The evening closed with cinemas (as they call it) of the coronation of the present king which took place almost a year ago to the day, and of the Royal Cremation of the late king, which occurred last March. Can you imagine the particular and unnamable feeling on seeing pictures of such oriental splendor, which at ordinary times would seem ever and ever so far away, in the very spot on which it took place, amid the people who participated in or witnessed it? Furthermore in our trip through the Museum we were taken to the stables where the magnificent and very old funeral carts – the ones we saw in the movies are kept. The Cremation ceremonies are as elaborate and important as the Coronation apparently.

The next day the government railways were chartered for taking us into the interior to Lopburi, the ancient capital of Siam – a spot to which tourists almost never go, about 150 miles from Bangkok. That was the capital from about 500 A.D. till 1650. Today it is a ruined city being excavated from a jungle. Wild (though tame) monkeys play about in a huge banyan tree, and the sense of a vanished though never greatly impressive court, is everywhere about. It was a nine hour train trip (both ways counted) and really not worth it, compared to the Nikko trip, etc. but it is not fair to say so, for it was a special desire of the king that we should go there and there is a great beauty in the place if considered merely as a ruin. I will not go into a description of it except for saying that it was in the period when Buddhism was beginning there and the images are strangely mixed up with Brahmin influences from Indo-China and Cambodia – it is sometimes spoken of as the Cambodian period – with Buddhas sitting on coiled cobras whose five heads fan out even as their hoods do, and forms a back and covering for the seated Buddha. There are numerous images in all stages of preservation. Many of the ruins are not yet dug out and so remain huge piles of rice-made bricks and mortar. Some of the temples have been in the process of excavation only the last month that they might be ready for our visit – such is the hospitality of kings. . . .

The two next events I shall describe were, I think by far the most impressive things we did there, and each alone would make a trip around the world worth while. Of course after this journey to Lopburi we were tired – it was so hot and nine hours on a train anyway – well, it was a Royal entertainment given at the command of the king in the royal theater which is never used except at his command and in which very few

foreigners have ever been entertained. It is not large – that is, about the size of the regular New York theater, but of course beautifully decorated, richly, not ornately. What we would call the stage is used only for the orchestra – women all simply dressed uniformly in blue sitting cross legged. It was the peculiar Siamese music at its best, given by the best players in the land. The actors, who interpret all the action by means of highly specialized dancing, appear on a dais much lower than the apparent stage which extends open on three sides into the center of the theatre with the seats for spectators arranged around and above it in boxes. The king and all his court were there – a very great honor – with all the diplomatic corps present. One of the princes addressed a few words at first, explaining how the plays were given, their great antiquity, the fact that no word is spoken by an actor but is sung or chanted by specially [sic] vocalists who are part of the orchestra. It is the actors duty merely to interpret the thought in dance. Before all this started the Glee Club sang, and at the king's request, two members of the cruise danced the Charleston for the audience. It received a great ovation and had to have an encore.

Finally the plays started. There were two. One was called the Lagon performance and is given by a company of actresses and a Corp de Ballet. These girls were all very young and very lovely. They are trained, and the reason is not hard to guess after seeing the great intricacy of the dances, from childhood. Their costumes are elaborate and rich beyond anything I have ever seen off the stage or on. In fact, that greater reality may be given to the whole thing, their costumes are sewed onto them – a process which requires two hours and expert seamstresses. It would require a better understanding than I have to interpret the dances to you so you would understand them, but I can say that the combination of music and costume and dance, as presented there by these consummate actors was a thing that probably can never be duplicated in my experience again. One woman who is on the cruise and who has spent her life traveling said that in all her life she had never witnessed a more royal, courtly, or kingly entertainment than that nor did she believe it could be duplicated or equaled by any living ruler today. The second performance – and heavens knows it was only the tremendous impressiveness of the whole thing that kept me there for we had risen at five-thirty that morning and the plays did not end till twelve-thirty – was called a Khon performance. This while possibly less beautiful – if a comparison can be made – than the first, had more action and is a play almost never given, and again only at the command of the king – you see what was done for us. It presents a portion of the Ramayana, one of the very oldest bits of drama in existence, peculiar as there given, to Siam,

and rarely given because it is so expensive to give. It originally was given only as a part of the Coronation ceremony, but more recently has been used as amusement rather than religion. The posturing requires great muscular training and finesse – years, in fact. . . . In Japan if you remember, women do not act in the best theaters. In Siam, both men and women do, but not together in the same play. The second play was given by a company of men.

The last day we went to the museum and the palace temples. I am surprised that writers have not made more of the place than I had been able to find. I have learned that the reason is that most tourists are not admitted there. In one of the more common Wats where all can go there is the famous Sleeping Buddha – 150 feet long, of bronze covered with gold; it is startling but not graceful or impressive – merely enormous. But in the Palace temples – the temples in which only the royal family worships – there are some of the most superb bits of craftsmanship ever come from the hand of man. The intricacy, richness, color, size, minuteness of designs, general good taste and essential artistry of the whole place is maddening. No adjectives can be used. You are really and completely overcome. The variety is endless. It is a miniature city of gold and silver and precious stones; actually true too, for instance, one large floor has a matting of silver thread and that sort of thing. The most famous jewel there is a Buddha about the size of a large doll called the Emerald Buddha. It has been stolen often, but I guess they have it fairly safe this time. The amusing thing is the way it has three changes of clothes for the spring, summer, and winter seasons. It is now wearing its little winter suit of gold, and a cunning little cap to keep its ears warm. Even the Siamese seem amused, but their attitude is much like mine: what difference does it make anyway, and if the thing has been done for generations why change. It ceases to be childish – it is really childlike, and why make it grow up since nothing better can be done anyway. Finally we were granted the summum bonum of honors – we were admitted to the Coronation room – the room in which the first and most private of the Coronation ceremonies are performed by the Brahmin court priests. There is no Brahmin religion in Siam, but these priests are a hold over from a very early time when there was. We were told that only two Americans had ever been in the room before and very few foreigners. It was not a remarkable room – merely rich and full of the tradition of kings. The little coronation chair is pathetically plain and simple, and the seven tier umbrellas under which the king sits at the time seem very old and frayed.

We went through the museum so rapidly, and by this time had seen so much that I will have to refer to the catalog later to remember what I

saw there, but I think we all left feeling that it had been an entertainment which may never be duplicated, given us with perfect hospitality and taste from the king down to the meanest of his subjects. We were told that as his special guests, all citizens of Bangkok had been asked to watch out for us, see that no one got lost or in anyway mistreated and wherever possible accorded privileges.

. . . That afternoon we set out for Singapore, and this week I have been giving final examinations, studying Buddhism and have read Morley's "Thunder on the Left". My letter from Singapore may not have a great deal to say; to all appearances it is an uninteresting city – particularly so after what we have had: entertainments as guests of one of the few Absolute Monarchs in the world.

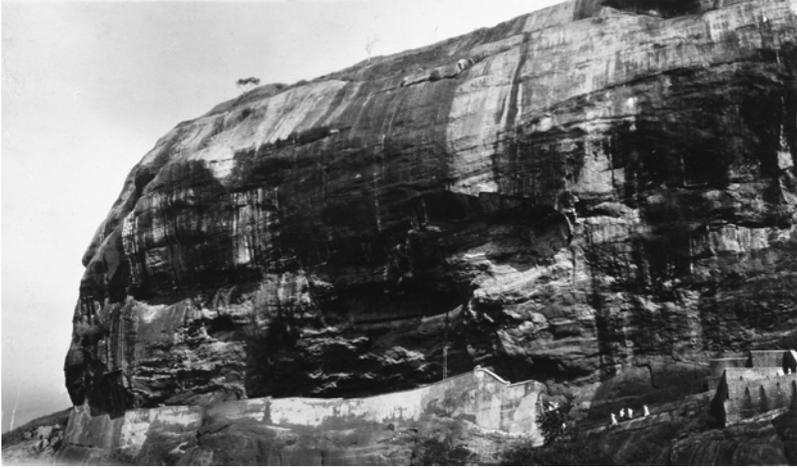
The cruise spent Christmas on the Indian Ocean, between Batavia and Columbo, and Tom writes on 23 December 1926, "But I suppose you realize too how odd it seems. This is not the Christmas part of the world." One doesn't have to read too far between the lines to catch a bit of homesickness. . . .

I occasionally wake up mornings to wish that I might see a newspaper that is new; I wonder what can be going on at home, or in Williamstown or in New York, and I am more and more certain that the United States is the only place I want to live. You see, they do things there the same as I like to do them, and they speak the same language and they aren't odd, with funny manners and customs and dress, and it isn't hot there at Christmas time, at least in New England, and they have families there that belong to you and friends as well! But this is just what I am thinking and doesn't mean that I would change under the circumstances for a minute – or perhaps for only a minute. I think it would be a little better if I could get some more mail; there was none in Batavia and I haven't heard since Manila . . . we have been the last few weeks in that part of the world where it takes longest for a letter from America to go – they average from forty to forty-five days.

But all trace of homesickness is gone when he writes on New Years Day, 1927, of his experiences in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the trip he makes to Sigirya to see the famous and ancient Rock Fortress:

We were at Ceylon during the very best time of year, and I have become so accustomed to the heat that it really only seems warm to me when I discover that the temperature is ninety in the shade. A gentle and steady monsoon always gives a breeze, and that means everything. I went directly there by train, instead of returning from Kandy with the group, and was met there by three other boys who had come by auto

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“Sigiri Rock (close view). Where King Kasyapa ruled at Sigirya about 40 miles south of Anuradhapura. The younger son of King Datu Sena, he rose against and murdered his father (A.D. 511). Sinhalese= ‘sinha’, a lion. In the national chronicle, the Mahawaura [Mahavamsa—more accurately, the Culavamsa, or “Lesser Chronicle,” written in the 13th century, A.D.], is said that Kasyafa “built galleries in it (Sigiri) ornamented with figures of lions, wherefore it took its name of Sihagiri [Singha Giri](the Lion Rock). View showing stairway winding around toward the north and the projection on which the ‘Lion’s Mouth’ was built.” Photo and description by Thomas H. Johnson.

from Colombo and they brought my mail up, so I had the unique experience of feeling particularly near home there, seeing the ruins, enjoying the sun and air and atmosphere of the place with your letters in my hand reading snatches as we rode from place to place – to the annoyance of the rest – but I had to read the letters. We had a very early lunch and set out from there in the car for Sigirya and the very famous Rock Fortress. We four were the only ones to get to Sigirya, and that in itself was a triumph. I think you can follow the course we took on the map I sent from Colombo, and you have a picture of the great boss of rock as it rises out of nothing to its great height. The story of it is very thrilling. Though once all the country about was cleared, today, as far as you can see from the summit stretches jungle; we had to ride through a hundred miles of it to get there: with every now and then monkey bands scurrying across the road in front of us, every sort of bird imaginable around, water buffalo wallowing in mud holes, the hot sun making a

vivid glister on the foliage, and strangely, with most excellent dirt roads to ride on. The story of the rock is important. In 511 A.D. Kasyapa, the younger son of the reigning king at Anaradhapura, King Datu Sena, murdered his father and for fear of the vengeance of his elder brother fled the city. It is supposed that the reason his brother pursued him instead of setting up to rule in the capital was because Kasyapa took with him the symbol of kingship, the Sacred Tooth – the one which reposes in the last of the Sinhalese capitals, Kandy. Kasyapa seems to have been able to gather quite a following and went with it into the jungle – to the place now called Sigirya. That word in Sinhalese means Lion's Mouth, and it was only recently that archeologists have discovered the reason for the name. He conceived the idea, this king, of building a fortress which would be well nigh impregnable, on the top of this enormous rock, and apparently with the best engineers of the time set about doing it. To this day the whole process remains a marvel, for they seemed to know the only possible way of erecting means of getting to the top and on the top they built an enormous palace – a thousand feet above the low lying lake, on a plot of ground covering over four acres, and covered the whole of it. Now there remains only quantities and quantities of disintegrating bricks, figures carved in the living rock, baths sunk into it, seats and steps to make passages from level to level; above it all was probably a superstructure of wood, since there is nothing to show of the buildings themselves. At the base of the Sigiri Rock are the foundations, also in living rock, of halls, baths, reservoirs, pulpits. Half way up is a natural platform, which before the work of reconstruction was undertaken about 1890, was covered with falling bricks and stone crumbled somewhat. When the workers dug that out they discovered whence the name, for beneath it appeared the claws, done in brick, of a mammoth lion and it was between these and up through the lion's mouth that men must go to reach the top. And this was the only way. Only the claws now remain, and they have had to be restored in part, but the effect is startling and one has good cause to feel a thrill as he goes between them. Here the King Kasyapa ruled all that there was to rule of the land of Ceylon, and the great jungle vistas of today were cleared land then, with lakes (so the land formations show), rich with flowers, formal gardens, tribute cities and parks. They were among the glorious days of Ceylon civilization, and it is probable that civilization was higher there than at almost any other spot on earth. In the year 511 England was under the rule of Arthur, the Briton king who was trying to help a hardy race to self government and fight the barbarians from the north, a task in itself. Clovis, the founder of the Frankish kingdom has just died, and his four sons were attempting to set up a unified state. They

failed. There was no Germany, nor even yet a Holy Roman Empire. Scarcely thirty years before Odoacer had sacked the last of what remained of the Roman Empire, and Rome was a desolate enough place with no rule except what the reigning pope, St. Hormisdas, could establish in the city. What did remain of Rome, as we understand the term, was then under the rule of Justin the first, at Byzantium, a sorry enough place by then. Japan, with its Nara kings and rule was not yet to come for two hundred years, and the only two spots where civilization might be said to flourish were in parts of India and China. I mention this historical background, not to mix you up, but to show that at the very lowest ebb of world civilization, there was a robber, murderer king, living in despotic grandeur, surrounded by the best scientists of the day (not mean ones at that), living in true luxury, on the island of Ceylon. But as is apt to be the case where men gain power by such means, he had but a short and probably very uneasy time. He ruled for 18 years only, when he was killed, either by his own hand or that of his brother in a fight with his brother, at a time when he had been forced to come down from his rock. But as I sat on the rock seat which overlooks a view unequalled, which had been built for him no doubt (some say as a council seat to receive his subjects – I am more inclined to surmise that he built it for the view and for meditation) it seemed to me that connection between the past and the present was very close, and very necessary, too; that all



Thomas Johnson at Sigiri Rock, Ceylon. "so-called Audience Hall or seat where king received visitors on the summit." Description by Thomas H. Johnson.

that is worth living for is a tradition and that we have failed unless we can harvest the stupendous richness of experience, example of the lives before us that have made our lives possible; that mere contemporaneity is a chance happening and that it is quite possible and in some cases much more worth while to make the past, or phases of it, as vital as things that happen to us every day.

Tom's next letter, typed on the ship between Bombay and Aden, describes his experience in India, especially his pilgrimage to the Taj Mahal.

13 January 1927

I will not enter upon a description of it – there are already too many accounts of its sheer radiance, its gem-like qualities, of its simplicity and freedom from the usual ornateness of such times, of its profusion of inlaid jewels, of the canopy of pearls which were laid over the catafalque each year in memory of her [Mumtaz-i-Mahal, the young and beautiful wife of Shah Jahan, who left bereft by her death, built this mausoleum.] birthday. The pearls have long since disappeared, and the gems have even here been replaced by stones of no quality, but its dignity and beauty do not need them. It alone, as all people say, would be worth a trip around the world to see. It can never, it should never, be duplicated. Pictures of it give you its form and structure, but no picture can quite show you the perpetual sapphire of the Indian sky over its minarets and domes, its burning whiteness in the noontime and its silver at sunset or under the stars. We were at Agra from six that morning till ten that night, so had a chance to see it in all moods. My first view of it was from the Fort where it lies shrouded in a faint mist a mile away. From there no details are visible, but the mass of it unforgettable. One can understand how Jahan could love it and want to see it every day, and die content. And one does muse a little, wondering how much truth Mumtaz-i-Mahal's mother must have felt in the prophesy of a gypsy before her nomad daughter was born that the daughter should be the wife of a king and that her memory would be eternal. Thus does fate play with mortals. But as I looked at it, now steadily, now at intervals, now from a distance and now closely, I wondered at its power. In the first place, I suppose it is perfect; and for every spire, minaret, and dome placed here, there is another identically placed there. Its themes in the octagon are repeated endlessly inside and out. The marble screen, two inches thick that surrounds the tomb looks more like delicate lace, flawless, than stone. The proportion and balance and rest of it are impeccable – almost that is its weakness. Its restraint and taste in luxurious magnificence are its glories, but I am rather sure that the very first view of it tells all that it has to say. It has not the brooding rest, the Oriental rest,

the rest of Nirvana – it is not Oriental. Neither is it Western. The Greeks would have demanded more movement of it – even though it is a tomb; the Lombards or the Normans would have preferred some slight incompleteness: to show that the aspiration was greater than the power of achievement; and the true Oriental would have made way for some shadow, some darker line or stone to relieve the scintillating brilliance of its polished marble. But, after all, we westerners reason too much, and demand too much for the mind, and surely this is the one building in the world which must not, cannot be reasoned about.

In early January the cruise sails into the Gulf of Aden and stops at Port Said, the entrance to the Red Sea and the Near East. Tom gives his impression of this hot, primitive place, and closes this letter with a discourse on the colonialism he had been witnessing in the last several months:

Aden is said to be the hottest spot on the earth, though this month is its one bit of relief. They say that in the British army, two years there equals three anywhere else, and you can understand it. The town, or city, or whatever you can call it must have existed from time immemorial, for its location makes it a strategic spot – connecting the Occident with the Orient. Rain falls there only once in two or three years and then it falls in torrents. There is absolutely no sign of vegetation, and as it happens, the point on which the town is located is a long since extinct volcano, so that earth cliffs rise out of the water. Located at random and on different levels are the buildings – they look for all the world like shacks in the movies of a Montana mining town. The Red Sea is so briny that salt is manufactured here – salt for all the world, I guess, and water is so scarce that it has to be imported from Cairo and costs the Europeans, the few that are there, fifty dollars a month. I had imagined there would be nothing for us to do or see there (It is a coaling station, though the ship didn't coal) but the American Consul arranged two trains to carry us into the real Arabian desert to an oasis city twenty miles inland, called Lahej. Like so many things we have done, it was unique. Tourists never go there, and this was a special arrangement for us. The British control there has only a fifteen mile limit, and outside of that is a sort of Arabian No-Man's-land. Lahej is ruled by a local sultan. Since the law is so primitive, they wouldn't let us get off the train, for if anything happened nothing very much could have been done about it. We are supposed to be the first foreigners that have ever been there in anything like numbers and I have no doubt that it was a great day in the lives of the Arabs. I can't tell you how primitively they live. They have nothing and live on it. Every bit of cheap jewelry they owned they brought down to sell, rings, anklets, daggers (and all carry and wear

them). It is seldom safe for Europeans to venture out there alone, for there seems to be no love lost between the races. As it was, someone had to go there the day before to tell them we were coming and were not going to disturb or fight them. I happened to go in the afternoon group, but in the morning the sultan had received some thirty of the faculty, and talked to them with an interpreter. It must have been interesting for both sides. Why the railroad runs there, I can't find out. It only goes seven miles further anyway and is seldom used for anything. The Arabs won't let it go farther for fear of British encroachment and because they don't want it anyway. If there were Arab horses around, I didn't see them, but you do see dozens and dozens of camels – just like a picture, with a turbaned, brown skinned Mohammedan riding him, or leading him with a load of some sort on his back crossing the sands. And this sand extends in every direction as far as eye can see looking just the same: It would be too easy to be lost in the desert to be funny. It was at Aden, they tell me, that three thousand years ago the Queen of Sheba came to meet Solomon. How the British have every strategic spot in the world. They have concessions in Shanghai, they own Hong-kong, Singapore and part of Borneo. Besides India, they have the Mediterranean and the Red Sea bottled at both ends. Where ever you find them, you find them hated by those they rule, but you always find a cleaner, healthier spot. The people ruled by the English feel just as the Filipinos do, that even though they are better off materially, they would rather have less and go to hell in their own way. My sympathy is with the natives as far as their desire for self determination goes, and as far as they are right in feeling that the foreign nations want them merely as a tool, but on the other hand, the world is getting so small now, and so close together, that a federation of some sort is necessary for the mutual benefit, and assurance of international safety of life. No one can be a dog in the manger any longer. But the point where helping to free the world from the dog in the manger attitude leaves off and imperialism begins is not a straight line easy to see at all times.

We have now left the Orient and what is the impression? Well, somewhat chaotic. Japan is nearly westernized politically; they have seen what they want at last and are going to get it, but if they become aggressive it will be in China and nowhere else. Their problem is much what England's was centuries ago – how to assure staple products to themselves for an increasing population on an island that is nowhere near to supplying the demand. They have in addition a problem that is their own more or less – what to do with a population that is increasing at a terrific rate. Governor Allen whom I have talked to and who knows as much about the subject, I think, as any man convinces me that if there is any

clash it will be with China in Mongolia, for even there, westward the course of empire goes. China is in too great a state of upheaval [to] be able to think clearly. The Young China is breaking out, so to speak, even as Young India is; it is the attempt to reach a stable equilibrium in a world that has so changed in the last three centuries that the old order simply broke down. It will be many centuries I believe before they have found it, for they are a combination civilization and barbarity that is found scarcely anywhere else – and they must be unified in spirit before they can be in government. Siam is unique. Geographically they have nothing to offer other nations seeking a strategic foothold and so have been left alone. With the French in Cochin-China and the English on the other side of them in India, they are beautifully fixed to play them off against each other. Naturally they are happy and well to do. They love their king and have no food or population problem. They are satisfied to have their king an absolute monarch and he is wise enough to know how to be one. I shall always think of Siam as the best spot on earth from one point of view. Java, under the Dutch, is just beginning to be self conscious, as is the Philippines and India. Though the Dutch won't leave for a long time yet, it is interesting to note that that feeling of nationalism is in evidence in almost every spot in the world. We were there at a time when it was highest – I believe there were some demonstrations just before or just after we left, though of a peaceful sort – but it is brooding. Ceylon is at present in complete rest. It is perfectly contented with British rule and lives to itself apart; but it might be noted here that Ceylon and Siam are the only two countries in the world that are entirely Buddhist. They have seemed to be able to unify themselves, even with the coming of modern and different ideas, without a struggle and a need of a new equilibrium. What does it all mean? Well, who knows – just living I suppose – and how interesting, how vitally interesting it all is.

From Cairo he writes on 20 January 1927:

Today I shall have one of my early wishes gratified – have my fill of mummies – and the *best* mummies!!

On January 30, writing from the Sea of Marmora Tom begins:

I am positively in a state of dreading to write letters to you from now on. The task seems insurmountable. When we were in Japan or even in Siam and Java, it seemed as if I could scarcely begin to knock the bloom off the geographical and historical peach, so to speak, but here we are in the very cradle of the world, with so much necessary background for an intelligent survey or thought about things that I have almost given

up the task. In Egypt I thought it was bad, but when I got to Palestine and realized that I didn't know my Bible any better than I did, and now that we are getting to Greece and the Aegean Sea, where every one of the myriad islands through which we are passing has a history as vital as life itself; where you need to know your classics and your religions and your archeology, etc. it's impossible to try to keep a head above water. I spent the forenoon trying to look up the history of the Galipoli Campaign while we were passing through the Dardenelles – oh, the feeling about it! we could see the graves of the valiant Anzacs they were so near the water – vast cemeteries to stand as long as the world does to the memory of the greatest and most glorious defeat in the history of men; and from that to the traditional site where Leander swam the Hellespont, and we could see too, dimly, the ruins that are being uncovered of great Troy. I was driven to find Rossetti's "Troy Town", and then to read again Byron's "Bride of Abydos" and the lyric from Childe Harold: "The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece: Where burning Sappho loved and sung . . .", past Rhodes and Tenedos, Paphos and Patmos (where Revelations was written, wasn't it?) and so on endlessly. But tomorrow we will be in Constantinople. It is evening now; I just went on deck to see the lights of the city in the distance glimmering through the clear cold air (The days are chilly now) and wonder still how it is so possible to thrill to things as I did at the beginning – even more perhaps!

In his previous letter, written from Jerusalem, he provocatively had begun, "In one way I rather think a man could remain a better Christian by staying away from Jerusalem than by coming here." He explains why in his January 30 letter:

My first seeming disappointment of the trip came when I saw the Christian churches that have been built over the holy spots in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. It seems that several hundred years ago, in the sixth century, Queen Helena, the mother of Constantine, got the Discovering Bug. She had a great deal of money to spend, and it evidently seemed to her that she would be able to enjoy it all much better if she could corner the rock, for instance, from which Christ got his send-off when he went to Heaven. I ask pardon for this vulgar way of speaking about it, but when you see, not the rock at all, but a great many flamboyant Christmas tree hangings and cheap lamps and candles in a dim and smelly cavern, when you ought to see – well, what? nothing. But perhaps, that is the impression that you feel those people had when they went to work preserving the places. It is in one sense as far from anything you feel as sacred as anything could possibly be. Thus have they preserved the manger, Calvary, in fact, every holy spot. And

the Mediaeval Crusaders needed just that tangibility, just that necessity for having a spot cataloged to touch.

I realize that in every case the edifice has nothing whatever to do with the ideal qualities of the religion or with its vitality or with its essential aspiration; it has only to do with the people whose talent or taste have erected the Church, and *their* interpretation of salvation and union with a deity. I marvel that the great cathedrals of Europe – or even Santa Sophia here in Constantinople – are so glorious when I realize that much of this taste came with the Crusaders, and that many of these foundations of tangibility were laid by the mother of Constantine. But after all I find that where once I might have thought it less that all this city and taste for its churches was fought for and built with the sword and fire, I now think it more. Isn't it essential in religion; isn't it the same spirit that prompted the Thracian women to roam the Greek wilds in frenzy, with a torch in one hand and a bit of raw meat in the other? But for us who love the Palestine hills that still bear the little town of Bethlehem asleep forever as it was nineteen hundred years ago, that have rebuilt the most distressed Jerusalem twenty times, that have furnished the greatest prophets and the greatest Savior and nurtured them against the teeth of every adverse wind, for us there is not the need to have the mere churches there appeal to us; we can like the sects and the squabblings and the bad taste still raging there for the same reason that we love any conviction of spirit even when we feel that the purpose to which it is put is unworthy or abortive; it is for us and will remain for our children's children a shrine that turns our hearts fervent in spite of, perhaps because of, what we find unnecessary. There could be no greater test of vitality.

What I have said I am afraid is not canonical; I don't feel about it as I expected, though as I think it over, I think it means much much more to me than I had ever imagined. I am sick, as many of us are, of sentimental pap in religion. There is, I am sure, as much real holiness in the frenzy of the Greek women as there is in any human emotion; it was wrongly directed perhaps, but no more so than much of ours. The basis of holiness in religions is not in its ethics, though surely ethics are important; nor is it in art; though that is equally important; it is in the heart's attitude toward God which can experience fear, bravery; love, hate; ecstasy, depression; majesty, abasement; deep thought, mystic contemplation, at various times, with equal force, forever. Such has been, such continues to be, in its varying stages the contribution of Palestine to the Western world. I'm all for it.

The cruise is now in Europe where they will spend the next several months. Tom writes on February 2 from the ship traveling between

Constantinople and Athens, "It will probably seem to you that I am just around the corner now you are getting letters with some regularity – it does to me when I find one from you at every port."

The cruise crisscrosses the Mediterranean, stopping in Venice, Malta, and Naples, as well as the North African ports of Trieste and Algiers, with visits to Gibraltar and Malaga in Spain. In his letter penned on February 22 from the Fischer's Park Hotel in Rome, Tom writes about passing up an audience with the Pope: ". . . some of the Cruise went to have an audience with the Pope – I could have gone, if I had made arrangements before hand – but I didn't and don't feel I missed much, except something to talk about afterwards – and that doesn't attract me."

He goes on to recount his experiences in Nice and Monte Carlo, and describes an encounter that was of more interest to him—meeting Mussolini.

3 March 1927

Dean Lough had some time previous suggested to the American Ambassador, Mr. Fletcher, that we would like to meet the Italian Premier and Mr. Fletcher had replied that the thing was impossible; that it would be easier to get an audience with the Pope or the King than with Mussolini; but when Governor Allen was told that, he said something about probably that could be taken care of, so he arranged it himself. As Professor Brown (editor of the *Binnacle* and professor of journalism in Dartmouth – he came there the year I left) said Gov. Allen has much more influence everywhere than any private citizen has any right to have. He had been over in Europe four or five years ago to attend the international opium conference. He is a man that never fails to pull the right string and never fails to tie a knot in any piece of string that he may get hold of. He is a politician of the better sort, though a politician nevertheless. I don't think he is a statesman. He never makes enemies and he makes friends with all. That comes as near a reason for distrusting him essentially, as any. No man can do that and either Be Himself, or have an essential honesty. I admire him for his canny instincts, but I don't find him an interesting man – merely a valuable one as a means toward an end. He remained in Italy for two days after we left, as a guest of the Italian government and to be there for the opening of parliament. I have to smile when I think that there are many people who would spend months and try to pull all kinds of wires to meet Il Duce, and who perhaps never will, while I, who didn't particularly care about it, had the chance thrust upon me. He allowed himself to be photographed with us, and I find I am in the picture – I shall get one of course – they are quite too rare not to have to pull out casually and say Well, when my friend Mussolini and I were photographed together . . . All

sorts of precautions were taken however. All Italian houses of any size are called palaces, and he lives in one called the Chigi (Kee-gee) Palace. The rooms are extensive, the walls hung with paintings and tapestries, and frescoes. We all gathered in the courtyard below, to start with and there were enough guards there to discover any suspicious looking persons. Some had to open up their cameras or declare any packages they may have had. Then we went upstairs. We passed from one room to another, always with people at the doors to look the entrants over. Two of the deans stood at one to be sure that only members from the Cruise got in. There were several Americans unconnected with it, who tried to pass with us, but I think they were sent back. Finally after innumerable windings through various outer rooms we came into one particularly large where Mussolini stood, quite unconcernedly shaking hands, sometimes looking at the person received, and sometimes not. His left hand was posed on thigh, elbow akimbo, feet wide apart – always the individualist. When all had passed, he walked very jauntily over and stood in front for the picture. In it, his head is thrown very high, for the man has his Roman vanities only too obviously. After the picture, he stepped out from the line, both hands on his thighs turned toward us most theatrically, and raising one arm above his head to give us the Roman salute, said Goodbye, and that was all.

On March 10 Tom writes, “We are back in the Atlantic now—after five and a half months of other waters.” He describes Lisbon and cruising up the coast of France to arrive in Paris. From the train between Rotterdam and Hamburg he writes about his time in Paris, concluding, “Were anyone to tell me that I had to live there, I would be very disappointed because I have no desire to but the hope of going back will always be strong.” Always interested in politics, Tom continues this letter, written on 25 March 1927, by predicting World War II.

It is common knowledge that Italy and France are waiting only for the right moment to go at each other's throats and I really feel convinced that such will take place within an incredibly short time. I have little doubt of another world war in less than ten years and I think a nation blind that chatters peace. Nations are always healthiest when they are at war, and the damage done by the last one has had the least stultifying effect upon the European continent of any. The world was far worse off after Napoleon, and certain plagues than it is now. I have felt all through the Orient that new forces of adjustment were at work; the last war was only a prelude, like an earthquake before a volcanic eruption. You can't see the needs, the health and the ambitious self assurance of such countries as Japan, Italy, France and probably Germany

even today, without realizing that the person who talks peace, without at least preparing for war is allowing the wool to be pulled over his eyes in the most simpleminded fashion. There are going to be very interesting things from now on – in fact they have already begun to happen – such as France and Italy not interested in any more peace conferences – why? because their minds are pretty well made up, and why go through the unsettling and foolish process of talking peace when they have nothing to gain and everything to lose by it. Personally at such moment I feel a great anger at both those countries, and a feeling that I am glad I happen to be an American and a member of one of the really powerful nations of the world. If things don't ultimately and very shortly line up with Japan, France and Italy against England Germany and the U.S., I shall badly miss my guess. Ah, well . . . but even if I am talking through my hat, I am as sure that everyone else is, and I am equally sure that peace talk never was more out of place in the world than today, or that the world needed a man who understands things. . . . Well, enough of this. I'd like to know how Dad feels about it.

From Germany they traveled to Denmark, then to Great Britain with a stop in Edinburgh and on to London for Easter. Tom writes from the Strand Palace Hotel on April 15, "London is Boston & Philadelphia thrown together, added to, and made three times as old."

The last letter, handwritten on Easter after attending Bach's St. Matthew Passion, breaks from his travelogue-with-commentary format to recount a single anecdote. Tom knows he will be seeing his family soon but he has one last story. . . .

Dear Mother

I have one of the nicest little pieces of gossip that is likely to be my lot or experience for sometime to come. It's the sort that you will eat up, and, if I had more to say about it, might sit down after, like a full meal, to digest and regard in retrospect – think over and digest, saying that such another is not due you for at least the year. Are you excited?

There are scarcely any preliminaries and when I have finished, there will be no post mortem. Two ships, as it were, have passed in the night, and the one knows not the destination nor the port of departure of the other.

. . . about six, planning to walk back to the car stop where one gets the bus going to Greenwich (we are moored there) I noticed as I passed a certain church that at 7. Bach's St. Matthew Passion was being sung. Not being able to resist the wiles of Bach (you know my weakness for his wails – very good ones too) I decided to drop in. I did. I took a seat and watched various faces as they entered, when one face suddenly

caused me to stop meditating – stop thinking, in fact, because it was so real to me. I had even thought about that face before that day, wondering if London still contained it; where it was; what it was doing. No other person than the reverend Reginald Crewe had taken the pew in front of me!³ My first impulse was to speak to him but the service had begun, and I must wait. He turned around soon and looked at me. I had expected some sort of recognition. There was none. Then I remembered that it had been ten years since he had seen me, and I was then considerably more of a lad. The more I thought about it, the more I began to wonder what I would say if I *did* speak to him. I couldn't talk Bradford history. It might be painful to him. At least, if it wasn't it should be; I couldn't mention Mrs. Crewe or Muriel – and after all, what was there?

So before the *Passion* was over completely, I slipped out to avoid the meeting and shall never know what he is doing or why or where.

Details about him? Well, he is younger looking if possible with hair just as black as ever and a face now *slightly* inclined to be full – slightly. His hair, which he used to wear full in back now is quite clipped – more than is necessary even for a business man. The clerical black has given place to lighter tones – a sporty grey hat and coat – in fact, so much of my childhood recollection was altered that I felt quite sad about it.

There is no question but that it was he. The same nose and eyes and mouth – the same smile and voice – and when he opened the Bible to follow it was done as by one who knows it well. Ah me, sic transit gloria mundi.

Tom

NOTES

¹I would like to thank Larry Coffin of Bradford for the note on the Rev. Crewe, the Librarians at the Vermont Historical Society for the information on Raymond Stevens, and Michael Sherman for his expert editorial counsel.

²Raymond Bartlett Stevens was born in Binghamton, NY, then moved with his parents to Lisbon, NH. Harvard Law School trained, he enjoyed a distinguished career in the practice of law, was a member of the State house of representatives from 1913 to 1915, delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1920 and 1924 until appointed advisor in foreign affairs to the King of Siam. Accident of his birth aside, Stevens appears a New Hampshireman through and through. Tom was apparently incorrect to call him a Vermonter.

³A. Reginald Crewe was the minister of the Congregational Church in Bradford between 1912 and 1917. Tom attended that church with his family and would have been fifteen when the Rev. Crewe left. The scandal was his leaving with a woman who was not his wife. Muriel was his daughter.