

"The Ascent of Pico" by Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Edited by George Monteiro

Introduction

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1822-1911), was, in his time, a Unitarian minister, a military officer, a poet, translator, literary critic, essayist, and anthologist, a writer of fiction and children's histories, the co-editor of Emily Dickinson's first two volumes of poetry, a champion of women's causes, and an abolitionist.

A graduate of Harvard College and the Harvard Divinity School, he was called, in 1847, to Newburyport Unitarian Church. Three years later, however, he was dismissed, mainly for his anti-slavery sermons. In 1855 he established the "free Church" in Worcester, Massachusetts. The church was so called because it was seen to serve a congregation of "radicals" not entirely broken from the Unitarians. During his stay in Worcester, Higginson continued his involvement in anti-slavery disputes, raising money for the struggle against the extension of slavery to the Kansas territories. When the Civil War broke out, he accepted the command of a black regiment comprised of former slaves. He wrote of his experiences in *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1876). At Higginson's death he was survived by his second wife, Mary Thacher, who prepared his biography "after the manner of present-day biographical works," it was observed at the time, "composed almost entirely of extracts from Colonel Higginson's letter and journals" (Channing 9).

It was the chronic illness of Mary Channing, his first wife, however, that

took Higginson to the Azores for half a year in 1855-56. Aboard the *Azor* the Higginsons had as co-passengers the Dabneys, old family friends who were of considerable prominence on the island of Fayal. During the voyage Higginson "used the opportunity to inform himself on the history, geography, and culture of Fayal," reports his biographer, in preparation for the long season in the Azores.

The island, when at last it loomed out of the sea, was one of the great delights of his life. He experienced in its full keenness the sense of discovery which even a transatlantic passenger in the twentieth century can know when the shadow on the horizon is clearly seen to be land rather than cloud. And the foreignness of Fayal life enchanted him from his first glimpse of it. The passengers were put ashore in small boats through high surf, Mary and the other ladies being hoisted over the side into the boats in armchairs with American flags covering their laps. The quay when they reached it was crowded with women in dark blue hooded cloaks and with barefooted beggars. Beyond them the town stretched steeply toward Mount Pico, the narrow, cobblestoned streets lined with windowless houses and high stone walls protecting the gardens. The houses had white plaster walls and roofs of red and black tile, and their entrances were through courtyards where donkeys were stabled and in each of which Higginson expected to meet Don Quixote or at least Sancho Panza.

Higginson's high spirits and customary enthusiasm persisted throughout the ensuing winter months.

He flung himself with characteristic energy into learning the language, climbing Mount Pico, which rose seven thousand feet above the ocean, studying the economy of the island under the Dabneys' benevolent paternalism, and corresponding for the *New York Tribune*. The harbor of Fayal, two thirds of the way across the Atlantic from America to Europe, was always full of ships—merchantmen loading oranges, whalers putting in for supplies and news, men-of-war, Spanish steamships, barques, brigs, and schooners. During the January storms six injured ships took shelter there, and one, bound from Le Havre to New York with a cargo of silks, champagne, and brandy, missed the harbor entrance and was wrecked on the rocky shore. In spite of the heroic efforts of the Dabneys, almost all of her cargo was stolen, even the local parish priest suspending services for three weeks in order to devote himself to systematic pillage. Higginson reported the whole

affair to the *Tribune*, establishing a connection which was to endure for several years. (Wells 94-95)

During his months in Fayal Higginson continued his study of the Portuguese language, along with the history of Portugal, always with the aim of writing about his experiences. To that end he kept a journal and he wrote long, descriptive letters to his mother. He intended that these would form the basis of articles and reports he would put into publishable shape at a later date. Some of his experiences called for immediate exploitation, however, such as the storms and shipwrecks that he not only took note of in his journals but wrote up immediately for the *Tribune*. His account of "Fayal and the Portuguese," drawing generously on his journals and letters, would not see publication for a decade. His Azorean experience contributed, as well, to "The Haunted Window," his first published short story.

Higginson also saw himself as something of a "scientific" observer. At the request of Louis Agassiz, the Swiss-born American scientist teaching at Harvard, Higginson collected specimens of "corals, starfish, and sea urchins" (Wells 96). Upon his return to America, he presented his hoard to Agassiz, adding notably thereby to the Agassiz Collection, with duplicates eventually finding their way to the Worcester Natural History Museum, of which Higginson had been a founder. The same "scientific" spirit motivated Higginson to climb to the top of Pico, the mountain dominating the island to which it gives its name.

The Ascent of Pico¹

Wednesday morning, Apr. 7. I sailed for Pico, furnished with shawl, indiarubber sack, & basket of two days provisions;—José d'Oliveira the guide having happened to come over that morning & returning with me. The great boat was filled with returning men women & children, sitting on long thwarts across the open hold which was filled up with merchandise & live stock. There was great jabbering as we pushed off (each having just been carried through the surf on a man's shoulders)—but presently the two great lateen sails were spread, and we shot across the five miles to Arealarga. José sat by me & talked in very imperfect English; the people soon discovered that I spoke a little Portuguese, & also that I was going to make the ascent, both of which were exciting facts to them, & brought a flood of questions from the simple people. When José told them I was a Padre, the surprise deepened. "But he isn't dressed like one," they complained, on which José informed them that American Padres didn't wear any particular dress. "In what language does he say Mass," was the next inquiry. "He doesn't say it at all, American Padres never do," said the experienced José who had once been as far as Sippican, a seafaring place near New Bedford. "Then what do they do?" "O they pray & preach & read out of a big book." The interrogator then turned to me. "Probably the Senhor Padre came here to say Mass every Sunday at the house of Senhor Carl Dabney"? I denied the imputation entirely. Then why did I come? I told them I came with my wife, who has sick. My friend's eyes opened wide, in perfect bewilderment & he turned to José for explanation. Didn't you know, said he with dignity that American Padres were married,—& it's a great deal better they should be (*muito melhor*)—to which the rest assented with a decision which quite surprised me. After this they gave me a good deal of advice about the ascent, mostly unintelligible, & then I relapsed into a humbler position & they talked & laughed among themselves & showed their purchases & one bright girl, Maria, bandied repartees with old & young & seemed the ruling spirit of the boat. Arrived at the narrow little black cove of Arealarga, it was most picturesque to see the women clustering to meet us old & young in the same picturesque dress—blue jacket, blue or white skirt, white waist with gay handkerchief crossed over the heart, & straw hat with or without a burden on top. Just as the men had staggered through the foam with us, somebody exclaimed, "O barco da casa"! & looking round I saw Sam Dabney's dashing little boat,

which had almost overtaken us, & brought Mr. Lothrop to join me, with a basket twice as big as mine, & twice as many cloaks & shawls. These we piled on the tall head of João, our second assistant, & with him & José behind us (who had already partaken of a parting glass of wine & asked me to join them) we walked along the sea road southward. We ate our luncheon as we walked & admired the bare black rocks & white surf, till presently we turned up into the barest & blackest of narrow village lanes, leaving the few white country seats of the Fayal gentry below us. There is nothing in Fayal so ugly as that street, or so picturesque as the women who pass along it. The Pico men, as I have seen them in Fayal, are tall spare straight creatures, with bundles above their little round caps, homespun jackets & trousers, & sandals of raw hide. They have simple rustic faces but no beauty; while a wealth of beauty is lavished on the girls, at which one gazes astonished. Even the complexions have often much bloom & even delicacy, despite their dark hovels, & the eyes, teeth, features & figures are often models for painters. Pausing to rest once, four girls went by us, with baskets on their heads over whose contents I draw a veil, & I thought that we might search through all Worcester & not find four such figures, they were abt sixteen, great as palm trees, full, vigorous, pliant & graceful from head to foot, not a muscle undeveloped, & thus we met them by the dozen, & all just the same, in their pretty dresses with the white parts wonderfully white.

After the village we passed the vineyards, stretching up the hillside & black as coal, the vines now being spread upon the little squares of stone wall by which each is surrounded, till the grapes are almost ripe. We kept before the guides & often had to wait for them. Sometimes our path lay between bands of earth, like those at the Caldeira, overgrown with mosses & lycopodium. It was very warm & Pico was cloudless before us, which was more than we had dared expect, as the morning was threatening as to cloud at least, & we came only in a sort of desperation. At 1¼ 4, having left at 11 1¼ we came to a wicket gate, the transition from vineyard to the Serra, a wide belt of acres of pastureland containing multitudes of small cattle & still more of long-wooled sheep, of the whitest white & the blackest black. It is very uneven, covered with soft turf, out of which lava occasionally appears, & broken into many small hills, some with craters on the top, & all a great contrast to the region of black walled vineyard below. Halfway across this lay our abiding place for the night—only too near—but first José took us a long detour to see certain caves wh. were indeed remarkable, specimens of those of which

the island is full. One was deeper than we dared penetrate without a torch, & when we returned fr. the darkness to the entrance the hanging ferns & mosses looked as if the most gorgeous of illuminations lit them up. This was my first experience of such a cave, & was quite exciting, as also another series wh. I went through alone, obliged to crawl with difficulty sometimes & made to jump quite a height over a little precipice among stalagmites of lava. No stalactites equal to those wh. were given me from another cave. The top & sides of the cave were coated with a singular glutinous matter, in large cells or bubbles, with which the mosses were mingled.

At 5 we reached a little stone building, two storied, with a flight of stone steps, leading us to the second story, of whose door José at last found the key beneath a stone—a singular piece of iron. [A sketch of "The Key."] The lower story was occupied by five small cattle, who were carefully locked in. An upper story was about eight feet square, with an opening, secured by a shutter. It looked rather dark & damp but was very habitable—only we wished to go farther on—but José stoutly assured us that it was the best place we could occupy, that beyond were only huts for the "cow's sons" (calves), with the cow's sons in them, & the other man averred that farther up there was "no shelter but Christ." We thought also of camping out, there being everywhere hills & hollows & protecting hedges of wild myrtle, but it blew strong & cold & the men were very unwilling to do it, so early in the season, & José assured us that 1/4 hour wd. take us to the end of the Serra, & an hour & a half to the mountain top, which was "a mile" he said—all being lies as we knew, but larger than we could have thought possible, & so we staid & lived to regret it.

We had our waterproof cloak spread on the ground behind one of the numerous bits of ledge which protect the ground from the winds & unpacked our basket for dinner: setting our attendants to work to cover the floor of our 2d story with branches of wild myrtle, intending to take our turn afterwards while they dined. But on our return we found the bed made, a pole across the loft decorated with my little indiarubber sack & Mr. L's spare shoes—and a general air of having gone to housekeeping. But when I praised the bed to João, he made the usual Portuguese reply "Paciência."

The guides had brought as usual their own rations of cornbread, & whatever we gave was extra, especially Mr. L's bottle of wine, wh. they drank & we didn't. While they were busy we ascended a strange little hill, a narrow ridge with deep craters on each side. Here we screened ourselves fr. the wind &

looked around us. The peak on which we turned our backs was still clear, rising with sides much steeper than anything we had yet reached. All below was clear, except that a series of dense purple clouds hung over Fayal, so solid & so deep as about to extinguish the island below, especially as a drift of softer clouds was flitting between us & it, sometimes lifting to show the white houses of Horta, & at other times bringing up Castello Branco into astonishing size & isolation. Of the bank of clouds we saw the upper side; while Fayal saw the lower—it spread beyond the island on each side & in fold on fold across its higher ground. The sun sank behind it, while the long shadow of the island gradually came toward us over the water from the Espelarmarla side. At last the sun set at 1/4 7 leaving Pico behind us still in rosy glow. There were a few moments of stillness, when suddenly a little dome raised itself behind the cloud rapidly—then turned over like a porpoise and went under, while another appeared behind it, & so on. It grew dimmer, the wind blew furiously—below us were hills & small craters, Pico above us, & the Serra around us dotted white & black with reposing sheep.

When we went back I peeped into a cave close by, just large [enough] to admit a man & saw the smiling face of João who had made a bed of wild myrtle boughs, & had curled himself in to sleep. We told José however that they had better come inside, to which he was well agreed. He was however unhappy for tobacco, with which we could not supply him. In fact José was rather greedy, rather selfish & an uncommon liar, even if he is not the same guide unpleasantly characterized in Bullock's book. His English was very imperfect & he never understood anything he did not wish to. Thus when after building a crackling fire of Jamojo boughs (wh. was seen at Fayal) we retired to our two story cowhouse, & when José & João crept in after us in the darkness, it was impossible to make the former understand that we wished the small window left open. At last however after a brief but decided verbal contest he fumblingly agreed [to] it & the two nestled down, with much rustlings & crushings, apparently covering themselves with the husks & boughs wh. strewed the floor. It was a queer night. Clear & cold without, & the wind whistling through the thin walls, supplying abundant ventilation. Within profoundly dark, & I who usually sleep profoundly on all such occasions, was soon put broad awake by an incursion of small insect tormentors, & kept awake by a slight chill, which wd. probably hv. been much less by a fire in the open air, where I never failed to sleep. The floor too was very insecure & Mr. L. & I agreed we should probably find ourselves smash-

ing down upon the cows' sons below, before morning. Fortunately they were very small ones, whose uneducated & youthful lowings sometimes added to the heavy breathing of the guides, or their rustling as they screwed themselves deeper into the couch. But I had some hours sleep, & as for the couch, it was sufficiently comfortable.

Before José went to sleep, we dimly saw him sitting up & when Mr. L. asked why, he indignantly replied that he was praying & then coolly added, "I can pray in English, this way" & then proceeded to repeat, "Now I lay me down to sleep," with some peculiar modifications. We afterwards found this to be one of his regular accomplishments.

We had meant to rise with the dawn, but the window was surreptitiously shut & we slept till four. Emerging then we found a clear cold windy morning, "plenty & cold" José declared. After a slight ablution in a small spring, we breakfasted without milk, which I had hoped to obtain, as the cows are only milked in the mornings. Singularly enough, the clouds over Fayal were almost precisely as the night before, though the bank was narrowed & elongated & there was the same driving land between. We set forth at 1/4 5 & soon saw the early rays light up the white houses of Horta, gleaming beautifully through the mist. The wind blew furiously & it was a wonder how our tall João could stride over stone walls with the large basket on his head. An hour brought us to the end of the Serra, where we ought to have camped. We were then at the foot of the real cone, which it took us three hours to climb.

Two thirds of the way were steep regular crags of black lava rock, overgrown with low bushes & wild thyme, packed closely in among the rocks, & the furious wind (in addition) made it the hardest work I ever did. Repeated pauses were necessary, after some of wh. it seemed almost impossible to go farther. The gale was seldom in our faces, but coming at one side, making a double effort of the knees necessary, to maintain our footing. For the first time, I found a staff useful. Gradually the clouds had collected below us, & whenever we looked down, it was at a glorious spectacle—a vast horizon of perfectly level white cloud, a vast floor, concealing everything below it, except where to the North a tract of ocean was lifted up to a seeming level with the cloud, so that it appeared like an Arctic scene. It was like the scene Thoreau describes above Williamstown, & we thought that no landscape could have been worth this. As we got still higher, there were slabs of lava, a sort of fragmentary pavement, with sometimes a "Mysterio," & sometimes a slide of disintegrated lava. Suddenly we came upon a white ravine—the first snowdrift!

& then others; it was like home to see them, they were white & hard & glittering, with many superficial thawings & freezings, no doubt. We eat greedily of them, nibbling also a little bread or cake, which greatly refreshed us, & instead of feeling any inconvenience fr. the rarified air, found in it the greatest invigoration. Suddenly to our surprise we found ourselves at the edge of the Caldeira! [A sketch of the caldeira appears here.] It is of course small compared to the great Fayal Caldeira, being perhaps 50 feet deep instead of 1500 & half a mile round instead of 5 miles, but on every side was heaped up a glittering snowdrift, almost to the edge, & the wild wind & the cold bleak sun above us, gave to it an impress of strange desolation. Stranger yet, on our right rose far above our heads, a bare black narrow, needle like peak, perhaps 150 feet high, which was the goal of our pilgrimage. The guides however entirely protested. João was a volunteer, since the point where the basket was hidden; he had declared on the way up that he would not for forty dollars hv. come in such a wind, & now that he would not for ten dollars ascend the small peak. José also objected to going declaring that we should be blown off & also frozen; whereupon I told him that I did not care whether he did or not, & walked off expecting him to follow, but he didn't; Mr. L. however did, & reached the top first. We climbed over rocks & cinders, it was perfectly practicable, but for the gale which seemed doubled, & at the very top I really shrank a moment—it seemed like standing in a gale of wind on the apex of a steeple or the mainmast of a frigate, for the top is not large enough for six persons to stand together, & we literally had to hold on by the rocks while we deposited our rocks upon a cairn which is being gradually erected. Before retreating I glanced over the other side, & it looked so warm & sheltered that I climbed over & found an Italian climate: the sun shone warm & vapor curled up from between the stones at the side of a little crater which is formed even there (marked x). Off to the East, moreover, there was open sea & St. George's, but nothing else, no Terceira, only the great flow of white level cloud over all the world. Pocketing the lichens & mosses which grew there, we crossed the airy peak & fronted the tremendous gale again & slid & clambered down. This was nine o'clock; it was too cold to remain long at the Caldeira especially in the uncertain weather & we soon began our descent. We had observed that José took quite a circuit & coming down we proposed to cross the Caldeira & cut it off, but we presently found it was the snow from which they shrank with their sandaled feet so we let them go round and crossed it ourselves—but the sloping drift was so slippery that I had one

involuntary slide, after which we made holes with our heels & staves & crossed the drift more carefully. The only thing we missed seeing there was a remarkable cliff, which I shall always regret.

Down we came with long leaps over the steep sides, till our knees & backs were weary; a cloud of mist & drizzle soon swept round us, & the guides lost the way several times, rather to my surprise, for landmarks were always visible. In the Serra it was pretty to see the white sheep gleaming far away, as they nestled in sheltered nooks, & sad to pass where lambs had been killed & half eaten by dogs. Except a few shepherd boys girls & dogs, we saw nothing else till we came down among the vineyards; we attracted much attention as we came down with gaping boots and limping feet; & sometimes stopped the girls in their procession of water jars, to remove the branch of faya which keeps the water cool, & take a drink from the cow's horn, in which they scoop it fr. the shallow wells. We reached the shore in 4 1/2 hours (perhaps 15 miles) & had to answer many questions fr. men at the landing, (as well as fr. the men & women, returning fr. Fayal market-day with pigs & cattle to fatten on the Serra.)—& after a delicious bath beneath an arch of ocean rock, & a nap at the Dabney Priory, we saw a boat fr. Horta dashing over in the gale to meet us, as promised, just as we had given it up. After an exciting trip of only 40 minutes we landed in the Key at 6 P.M.

Three things we had at Pico which no American mountain could have given. 1. The ascent of the whole literal height of the mountain fr. the level of the sea. 2. The aspect of the sea seen in gaps of the cloud that covered all else. 3. The vapor which made the central heat henceforth a reality to us.

Note

¹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Manuscript Journals* (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts). Quoted with the consent of the Library.

Works Cited

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