

Unusual books about Spain

A presentation
by Christopher North



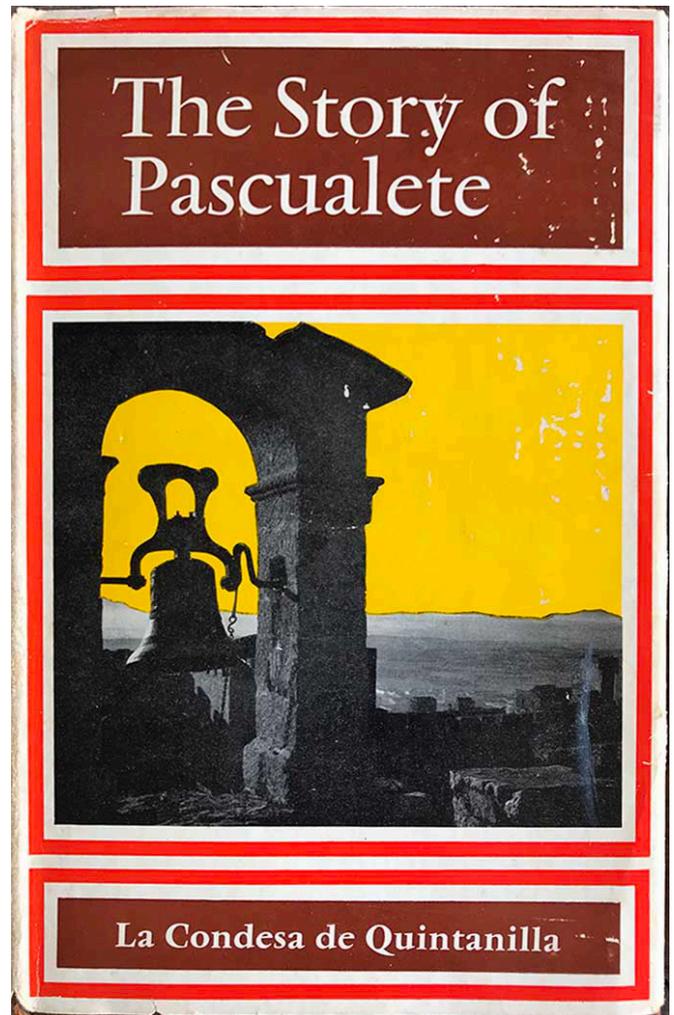
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Introduction

I have had a life-long fascination with Spain. I also have a life-long habit of adding to my hoard of books – so not surprising that I've picked up some oddities on the way. Of course there's a whole library published of books about the Civil war – but I've avoided those in my examples today, although I recommend some in my supplementary list of suggestions.

There are literally thousands of Books by the English, and others, the Dutch, The Italians etc with their reactions to Spain. I've tended to avoid the 'Aren't foreigners funny' tendency with some of them – or the lushly and romantically described visits to Seville, Cordoba etc.

I like books that shed light on aspects of Spain only vaguely realised before – all the four books I've recommended were published initially in English.



This is my opening choice by an America married into the minor Spanish aristocracy.

The Story of Pascualete

La Condesa de Quintanilla - 1963

(Available Abe Books)

This is the story of a move to Spain with a difference. The author an American model recruited by the OSS and posted in Spain during the second World War – where she met and married Luis Figueroa y Pérez de Guzmán el Bueno, grandson of the former Count of Romanones and a minister of Alfonso XIII,

They lived well. Luis inherited his title and several large hunting estates and a mansion house in Madrid. In the first months of marriage they travelled extensively, then set up house in Madrid. She was surprised when her husband did *not* disappear each day to his 'Office'— She became curious and one day asked him about his business affairs. He confirmed that their main income came from the several large estates in South-Western Spain. She asked him how he could improve profit from properties he never visits.

He couldn't see the point – why waste time – the money was coming in without problems, so let's enjoy life.

During the next two years they started their family, but she remained curious about the estates in Estremadura.

One day she called at her husband's office and spoke to her husband's Estate manager saying she would like to visit one of the estates – which one would he recommend? The Manager was shocked murmuring 'Certainly very strange'. He thought the best choice was an estate near Trujillo, 'Pascualete' – but he warned her that 'This is the most backward section of Spain. There are no comfortable places to stay overnight and Inns in these country towns provide miserable food – everything is cooked with rancid olive oil'. Her husband went on to say that there were no bathrooms, and her bed was likely to be filled with rats, bed bugs and cockroaches. No-one from his family had visited the estate for a hundred years.

And so she makes the trip in 1950, with a clutch of society friends and her reluctant husband.

After many diversions, they finally arrive at the Palacio Pascualete:

'Several oil lanterns lit up the crowd under the stone arch and, as we approached, a ray of light fell on a tall lean man with a lined, dark, handsome face and a mop of unruly black hair. The bone structure clearly marked under the dark leathery skin and the piercing black eyes brought to mind the faces in El Greco's paintings. A crumpled hat was grasped in his hand and as we approached and were introduced, I was particularly impressed by his quiet air and dignity.'

'This is Primitivo' Juan explained, 'the guard of the Señores Condesa. He was born here at Pascualete, as were his father and his grandfather, all of whom have been the head guard of this ranch for many, many years...'
years...'



The Contesa with Primitivo discussing the harvest.



Finca Pasucalete

The book goes on to describe how the Condesa developed and restored the estate – eventually, although not described in the book – it became one of those exclusive places aristocrats and celebrities seek out, in her case the likes of Prince Rainier of Monaco and Grace Kelly, Lola Flores, Orson Welles, Audrey Hepburn, Mel Ferrer, Ava Gardner and Salvador Dali, the Duke of Windsor, Richard Nixon, Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Jackie Kennedy, even Donald Trump were all guests there. She became a close friend of Wallis Simpson. But all this is in another book.

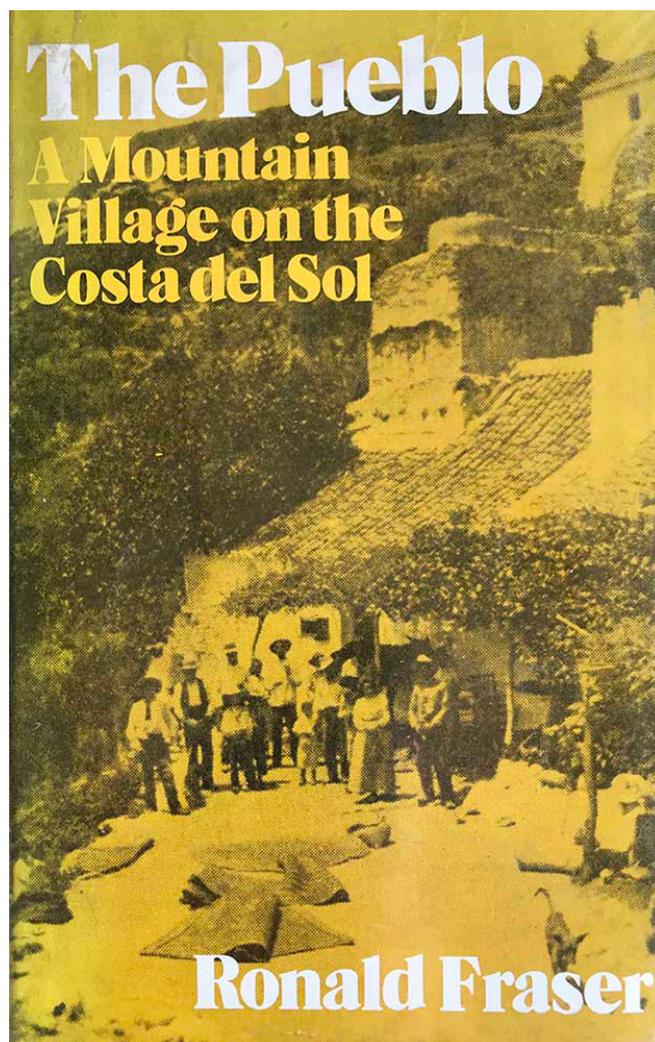
Interesting to read of how such places come into being and there are some interesting digressions into the history of Estremadura as she researches the past history of the estate.

The Condesa lived to the age of 95 – at 93 she started to write her autobiography. After her death in 2017, sadly a huge battle took place over inheritance. The Pascualet estate now produces a revered cheese:



The Pueblo – A Mountain Village on the Costa del Sol

Ronald Fraser
(Available Abebooks)



Some of you may remember a best seller in the 1960s early 70s, Ronald Blythe's 'Akenfield' – which was made into Peter Hall's much-praised BBC version. Essentially that book is a portrait of an English Suffolk village via monologues from the inhabitants – the villagers tell their story and by inference, the village's story.

The Author of 'The Pueblo', Ronald Angus Fraser who died in 2012, was also specialist in Oral histories. He started young. His first was based on the servants in his Berkshire family's country house. Perhaps his best known book, 'Blood of Spain', was published in 1960 containing first hand accounts of Action in the Spanish Civil via interviews from combatants on both sides – a work highly praised by such critics as Tariq Ali and Paul Preston.

He moved to Spain in 1957 as a correspondent for Reuters. He pioneered Oral History as a technique and in his book 'The Pueblo – a mountain village on the Costa del Sol', he gives the village the name 'Tajos' as well as also giving misleading names to neighbouring villages. He clearly wanted no interference from outside. The village would be unrecognizable nowadays, as my researches confirm that it is Mijas.

In lots of ways that's unimportant – I think Fraser is suggesting that this village is typical of any in Southern Spain in the early 60s. Tourism was already an element in the lives of the villagers – it's their description of life before tourism and their reactions to the arrival of the first tourists that's interesting.

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Here is the account of Josefa Alarcon, a young Shop-girl. I've chosen this because it echoes my experience when first in Spain meeting Marisa's family in 1967 – though I might add Marisa had a very different attitude:

"I haven't a novio, one hasn't come my way. Hardly any of my friends have one, and if they do the boy is usually from outside the village. The young men here think only of the foreign girls and forget us. They go down to the coast and the young from Posados come here. Sometimes I go all Sunday evening without being invited to dance. I come away fed up. But the next Sunday I get invited and forget what happened the week before

"One day I'll get a novio and get married. I'm not worried about it. I'll only start worrying if I reach twenty-five or twenty six and no one comes my way. I hope it'll be before that.

"When I marry I want to stay at home, I think that's what most women want, to stay at home and wait for their husbands to come back from work. I'd like my husband to take me out more than just Sunday evening. If he said that that was the only day we could go out together I suppose I'd have to accept it but I'd try to persuade him differently. It's the man who has to give the orders after all. I don't know who said it, but a women who bosses her husband about is an ugly sight.

"I'd like two or three children; four at the most. I wouldn't want any in the first year of marriage. But God will send the number He wants. Maybe it's because I've seen so many children at home-eleven in all, eight girls and three boys. I've seen how hard my mother has had to work. Because nine of my brothers and sisters are younger than me and I had to leave school at thirteen to help in the house. I 's rather stay at home than go out to work but my job helps with the money. I've only

been working three months and I give all my 3,500 pesetas a month to my mother. It's very little really.

"But I don't have any worries. I'm not bored. After closing the shop at eight I go out shopping for my mother; sometimes my girlfriends and I stop for a coca cola at 'El Portón'. Then I go home until the next day's work. My father and elder brother get angry if I stay out after 10.30. There's not much for the young to do here anyway. The village is dead at ten o'clock. I wish there was a library. Well there is one but when I went once, it was closed. I haven't seen it open for months. Or a youth club, something like that.

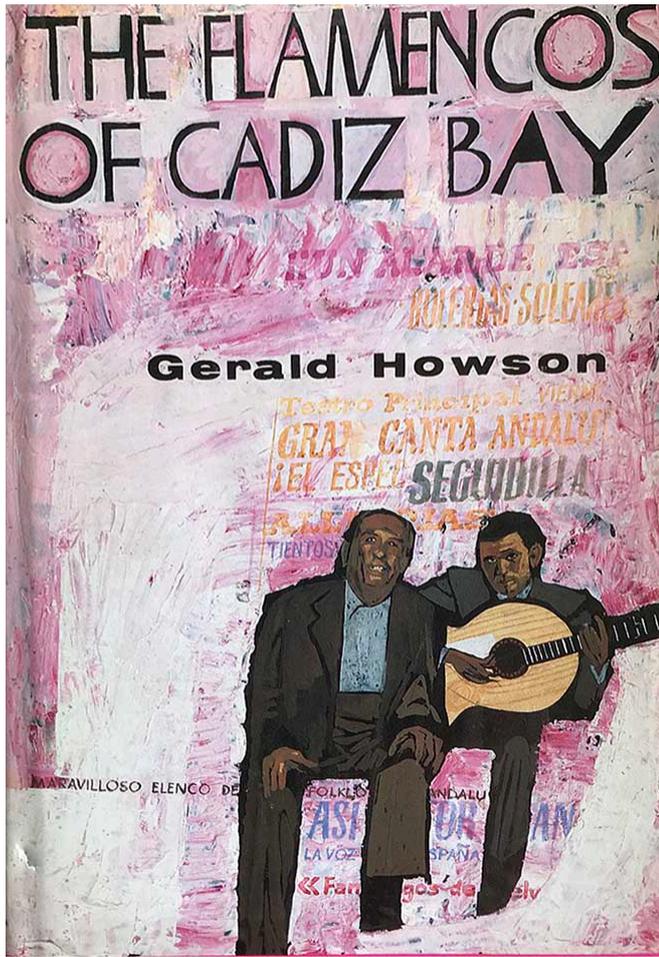
"I spend my time with my girl-friends. Yesterday a whole group of us hired two taxis and spent a few hours at Posadas. All girls; I don't like that very much, it's more fun when there are boys. But where are they? With the foreign girls who are freer than us. I suppose they don't have to ask their parents if they want to go out. It would be nice to have a bit more freedom....but not to go out after supper, no, I don't want that because there's nowhere to go here; I don't need it.

"I'd like to travel, go to Portugal, London, Paris. In what country is Paris? I haven't the faintest idea. London? No, I don't know. I wouldn't want to work abroad, oh no. I can't imagine spending my life away from here. I've always want to come back to my village because this was where I was born."

Other accounts come from the three sons of the one wealthy family in the village, as well the Parish priest, an Esparto and firewood gatherer, a Tavern owner, etc. What evolves is an extraordinary detailed Photograph of an Andalucian village in the early 60s.

The Flamencos of Cadiz Bay – Gerald Howson

(Available Abebooks – but expensive, better order direct from the Publishers ‘Bold Strummer Press)



I have always been stirred by Flamenco and I have a number of flamenco small-press books – but this one stands alone – basically because of the quality of the writing. It is considered a classic of flamenco writing. Even if Flamenco is not your thing – this is an interesting read.

It is the story of the writer’s immersion in the late 50s world of Flamenco in Cadiz. He befriends a Guitar teacher ‘Efrén’ and throughout the book his understanding of cante jonde and the older traditions of flamenco deepens. What makes this a compulsive read however are the characters he meets.

Here a favourite passage. Howson is invited to spend Christmas Day with Efrén and his family:

‘I was late at Elfrén’s house. Still clutching the records, the Christmas card and a copy of Lorca, I held my breath as I ran through the frightful entrance, released it in the courtyard, climbed the staircase and entered Elfrén’s room.

Elfrén was seated at the table looking more like a bad-tempered gorilla than ever. The family were jostling around him, shouting at the tops of their voices. Their hands were red and sticky with blood; there was blood on their arms, their clothes, their faces and their hair. Great pools of it were on the floor and it was smeared over the pig-sty gate affair that served as a front door..

On the table was a pile of banknotes. Elfrén was trying to keep control over the situation by striking out with his fists and by heaping indignities on his ancestors of his mother and his wife and cursing his two young daughters, who were pulling each other’s hair over a wad of notes they had got hold of.

An enormous turkey, their Christmas dinner, was standing on the bed gobbling to itself and opening and closing one wing like a vulture. On the bed also was Elfrén’s youngest daughter, aged five, lying huddled and silent, with a small black dog.....

“Ola Gerardo Come on in! You’ve come on a lucky day. My girls found a tunny fish on the beach, we just cut it up and sold it... you can try some tuna with your salad...”

.....Later he is invited to play the guitar whilst they prepare lunch. Elfrén comes in:

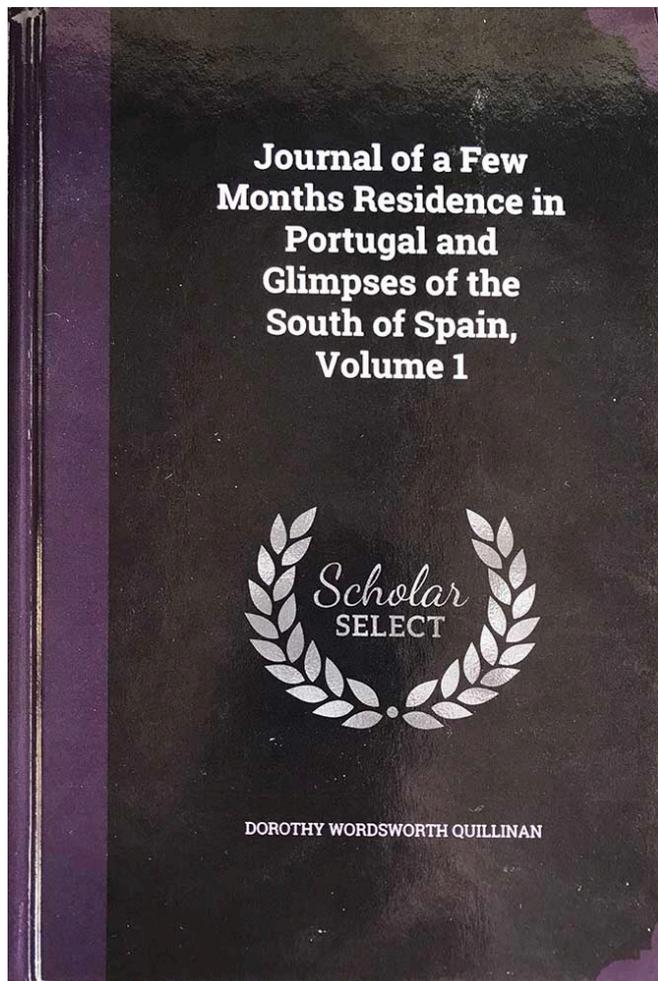
“You’re not playing that in time!” Elfrén came bounding round from the table, seized the guitar roughly from me and, propping himself on one leg, played the passage through – once, twice, three times.

I had never ceased to be amazed at the sensitivity and artistry with which Elfrén played, nor at the beauty and purity of the variations which he improvised upon the traditional themes. It was not as if I had never heard his falsetas before – yet with Efrén it was rather like that. Every time he played through the old well-worn flamenco melodies it seemed to me that I’d never really heard this music before.’

And as a final suggestion, a book acquired recently:

Journal of a few Months Residence in Portugal and Southern Spain

– Dorothy Wordsworth/Quillinan



It's a curiosity. I'd read Juliet Barker's biography of William Wordsworth and was struck by Wordsworth's attachment to his daughter Dora, subject of his poem: 'Address to my Infant Daughter'

*Hast thou then survived,
Mild Offspring of infirm humanity,
Meek Infant! among all forlornest things
The most forlorn, one life of that bright Star,
The second glory of the heavens?*

Born in 1815, she grew up to become part of his settled life in Rydal Mount near Grasmere when he was Poet Laureate but writing dull poems that, generally speaking, no-one now reads. Dora had ambitions above serving as a "living staff" and aman-uensis for most of her life, being one more woman in Wordsworth's house of women.

Despite her father's objections, she married the son of an Irish wine merchant based in Portugal, Edward Quillinan – a military man, novelist and intense admirer of her father. He was a widower with two children when he met Dora. But Dora's general ill-health was a problem and her new husband decided to take her on a rest cure holiday to Portugal and Southern Spain.

This they did sailing to Oporto in 1845. The book is Dora's journal of that trip.

It is a curious read – copies are quite difficult to find – My edition is a facsimile 'Scholar Select' version from the USA – a reproduction of the 'Journal of a Few Month's Residence in Portugal and 'Glimpses of Southern Spain' It was originally published in two volumes by Edward Moxon of Dover Street London in 1847- the facsimile edition is available from Amazon - \$27

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For the most part the journal is concerned with forays into Portugal on horseback. But in the second volume she goes to Andalucia – Gibraltar (which she refers to as 'Calpe'), breakfast there comprising tea, coffee, red mullet, devil's chicken, mutton chops, eggs and capital bread of every possible sort, English, French, Spanish...) and also to Malaga and Granada – I would like to quote her reactions to her visit to the Alhambra:

She was very influenced by Richard Ford's 'A Handbook for Travellers in Spain' published a year or so before her trip. She may well have read Washington Irving's 'Tales of the Alhambra' as well.

What surprises is the quality of her Alhambra experience despite foregoing years of neglect – repairs were begun in in the 1830s.

Some extracts:

The Alhambra

We descended the hill, and entered the Alhambra by the Patio de la Barca, which, Ford tells us, ought to be ' Berkah ' court of blessing ; and from thence to the Court of Lions. But here again I must refer myself and my readers to Ford. His description is as accurate as a patient and observant eye, with time and opportunity to study, and, above all, a scientific knowledge of his subject, can make it. And a pen like Ford's, and drawings such as I have seen, can give you a most distinct picture of the form and fashion of the place; but the Alhambra must be visited, and

visited, too, on a day in May such as we were favoured with, if you would understand and feel the spirit of the place. High as were my expectations, the reality far, far surpassed aught.

The views from the different rooms, especially from the window of that most exquisite apartment, the Sala de las Dos Hermanas, are enchanting; and what a fairy window from which to look down upon such a prospect ! What superb views, too, from the open gallery leading to the tocador the dressing-room of the sultana and, above all, from the Torre de la Vela, whereon the Christian flag was first hoisted and might be descried from the Sierra Nevada as far as Loja, by all the dwellers on that vast rich plain, or along the grand mountain range that guards the vale. And what a guardian is the Sierra Nevada, lifting her pure white head to the very skies ! All this sublime beauty in the distance is mingled with much of the stern and bold among the lower heights;

Nothing can be a stronger proof of the wondrous effect of the peculiar beauty of the Alhambra than the utter disgust with which, on emerging from this enchanted palace, you involuntarily turn your eyes from that huge, pompous pile of unfinished building which Charles V. intended for a palace that should eclipse it. A large portion of the Alhambra was destroyed to make way for this coarse Brobdingnag monster, which has far less claim to affinity with its Moorish neighbour than a Flanders cart-horse with an Arab barb.

We lingered about the Alhambra, going from room to room, and from court to court, and always thinking the thing last seen the most magical with one exception, the mezquita (the mosque) ; that disappointed me. But it was never built to bear the burden of that ugly altar at one end, and that hide-ously tawdry gallery for the orchestra at the other. The niche in the ante-room, where the Koran was kept, is perhaps for its size the most exquisite specimen of stucco-work in the whole building. But beautiful as is this work in plaster, it is the delicacy of the arches and pillars of dazzling white marble, and the flat roofs, and the conical roofs, that delight my eye most, and the floors, and the fountains, and the what not ? The stern simplicity of those plain, square towers and turrets has an indescribable charm. And how fine the building looks from the Alameda de Darro, crowning the wooded precipice, at the foot of which the Darro runs to tell to the busy, baking city of the cool, calm quiet of the Alhambra ! We, too soon, were obliged to do as the Darro does hasten to the city ; for the clock was on the stroke of four.

After dinner we went forth again, to see the sun set from the chapel of Saint Michael, which stands on the top of a hill that rises above the old town, and is considerably higher than the one on which the Alhambra is built ; so that the chapel-yard commands a perfect view of this vast structure, running round the very edge of the hill, and rising and falling with the natural rise and fall of the ground. Enough of the old walls remain for a stranger to see at a glance the enormous extent of ground which the palace and its gardens, &c. covered. Our road to the San Miguel took us through a great part of the old town, where almost every house is Moorish, and every well is a Moorish well, very simple in construction, built of brick or stone, much in the form of a bee-hive with a large door. Moorish houses and Moorish wells ; but what a contrast do these wretched-looking brick and mortar hovels offer to the marble palaces and fountains at Seville ! and they, too, are Moorish. Ford explains this, which otherwise to me would have been a puzzle : * Granada was built by impoverished, defeated refugees ; not, like Seville, by the Moor in all his palmy pride. 'Yet what Moor was ever lodged so proudly in Spain as the Lord of the Alhambra ?

On her return to England via Cartagena, Alicante, Valencia and Barcelona, her notes are brief. Alicante is dismissed:

'The same barren coast still! Fine outline of mountains rising abruptly from the sea, crowned by a castle and fringed on each side by its walls and towers. Under this hill lies the town and its shipping which is now considerable as Alicante has taken the place of Cartagena as a port of call. WE did not land, the weather was unpromising and we were assured we had the best of the town from the sea; for we would not have had time to go about , hunting for leave to enter the gate, and that tower , or to examine churches etc.

Some of the passengers however did land at Alicante at the earnest request of our French friend who had come into the cabin, imploring someone to go à terre with him, as he was half-dead with sea –nausea... '

Sadly Dora died two years after the journal was published. Her father was so distraught he planted a whole field of daffodils beside Grasmere church where she is buried and he died three years later.