

The Clumsiest People in Europe

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A caustic, cranky, and inadvertently hilarious look at foreign countries and their customs by a Victorian woman who rarely left the house.

No matter who your ancestors were, and where they had the misfortune of living, Victorian children's book writer Mrs. Favell Lee Mortimer had something nasty to say about them. Their faults, according to Mrs. Mortimer, might have amounted to just about anything. The Irish "are very kind and good-natured when pleased, but if affronted, are filled with rage." In Italy, "the people are ignorant and wicked." In Sweden, "Nothing useful is well done...The carpenters and the blacksmiths are very clumsy in their work."

Remarkably, all of these assertions come from a woman who only twice set foot outside of her native England. But lack of personal experience never kept Mrs. Mortimer from dispensing her horrifying wisdom about the evils of just about every nation on earth. Whether describing Europe ("It is dreadful to think what a number of murders are committed in Italy"), Asia ("The religion of Taou teaches men to act like madmen"), Africa ("The worst quality in any character is hypocrisy, and this is to be found in the Egyptian"), or America ("New Orleans is a dangerous place to live in, both for the body and the soul"), Mrs. Mortimer's views are consistently appalling. One hundred fifty years later, three of her forgotten classics have been compiled into one volume, *The Clumsiest People in Europe*, reviving the comically misinformed and startling prejudices of this unique Victorian eccentric.

The Clumsiest People in Europe Details

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Tracey says

I picked up this travel guide/insight to Victorian culture from the local library, thanks to Inner Stickler's recommendation over at the SDMB.

Mrs. Favell Lee Mortimer (1802 - 1878), despite only having twice left her native England (and those trips were brief), penned multiple travel guides aimed toward children, using various (and perhaps questionable) sources. She drew on her expertise as an Evangelical/Moralist children's book author, as well as her own (and her society's) prejudices of the day to write some of the most judgmental, preachy, intolerant, and downright nasty sketches of nations and peoples that I've had the pleasure to read.

Pleasure, you ask? I suppose it's her condescending, didactic tone *"What country do you love best? Your own country. I know you do. Every child loves his own country best."* and unshakable confidence in her opinions (as well as the separation of 150 years) that makes her material a comedic exaggeration as opposed to a sad and frightening commentary on bigotry and xenophobia.

Maybe it's because she writes disparagingly of everyone; not even her fellow Britons get away clean: *"They are not very pleasant in company, because they do not like strangers, nor taking much trouble ... They are too fond of money, as well as of good eating and drinking."* While she abhors slavery (as every good Evangelical did, back in her day) she attacks both rich and poor across the globe - considering both "lazy". She harbors animosity not only toward "Mahomedans" and "Hindoos", but Roman Catholics and Jews as well.

Todd Pruzan's opening chapter provides both biographical and historical context for Mrs Mortimer and her writings. She suffered adversity and overall did not seem to be a happy woman. Prior to each nation's sketch, Pruzan gives a brief history of the area for context. He obviously chose each piece of writing for comedic impact, but it's fascinating (and depressing) to see how many prejudices carry over into modern day, something he also touches on in his opening chapter. While primarily a humorous book, to be read very much tongue in cheek, it also speaks to our modern day experiences with racism, intolerance and "othering".

Sarah says

There's something delightful in the uneasy mix of appalling opinions and charming writing.

Rachel says

Each country that the author covered involved a brief introduction on the current events and history. That's the only good part.

Though informative, this book is heavily filled with prejudices, plain ignorance and often terribly unnecessary bias and opinionated information.

Every nationality had a checklist for Mrs Mortimer:

- Clean or dirty
- Rich or poor
- Idle or industrious
- Brave or cruel
- Wicked or not
- Robbers or civilised

I was excited by the promising blurb:

'Mrs Favell Lee Mortimer set out to write an ambitious guide to all the nations on Earth... The result was an unintentionally hilarious masterpiece.'

The title was largely responsible for the buy; **The Clumsiest People in Europe**.

There wasn't even a single clumsy person.

In the book's defense, I may have skipped a part in the 'promising blurb'.

'There were just three problems:

~ She had never set foot outside Shropshire.

~ She was horribly misinformed about virtually every topic she turned her attention to.

~ And she was prejudiced against foreigners.'

Amazingly, I had a favourite quote. If a woman in the mid 1800s could read about the beauty of Switzerland and also agree with my opinion, that it is the most beautiful place on earth - then it truly must be.

"There is no country in Europe as beautiful as Switzerland; it is the land of high mountains, and deep valleys, and bubbling streams, and roaring waterfalls."

Bettie? says

There is a long interesting intro by Todd Pruzan - he is the one that has taken these outrageous snippets from the three volume instruction, written by Mrs Mortimer.

I cannot help but think the Xenophobic Guide series owes much to Mrs Mortimer.

Kay says

In the vein of Daisy Ashford's *The Young Visitors*, here is an unintentional Victorian gem. Mrs. Mortimer, who has a (usually negative) opinion about everything she encounters while traveling on the Continent is hugely funny to read, along with Pruzon's comments, in our "enlightened" age. How someone so bad tempered can be so funny is the chief charm of this droll book.

Christopher Roth says

A dizzyingly misanthropic tour of the world by a bitter, sexually frustrated, angry, bigoted Victorian woman

who never left Great Britain, written for children but with adult levels of intolerance and vitriol. Mortimer is the epitome of the "wogs begin at Calais" Weltanschauung, with a more than medium dose of apopleptic anti-Papism, the result being a text of high comedic and camp value. The editor provides a useful, entertaining, and well-researched introduction. I wish that this had been a complete reprinting of the original texts, though, and not just a best-of. As it is, even the passage that reveals who the clumsiest people in Europe are supposed to be gets left out, unless I somehow missed it. (My vote: the Dutch.) When she got to North America, I was bracing myself for painful passages about African-Americans and American Indians. The section on Indians was, for the era, rather familiar boilerplate, with its mix of romanticism and weirdly juxtaposed ethnographic nuggets; nothing out of the ordinary there. When she got to American blacks, however, it was suddenly the most enlightened view that one could expect from someone of Mortimer's time and place. Aside from a slur of "laziness"—which she attributed to social causes, the disincentives of slavery, and not to biology, as many of her contemporaries did—it was astoundingly sympathetic. Mortimer, after all, for all her intolerances, was an abolitionist, and abolitionism did somewhat soften the hearts and sharpen the minds of even the most retrograde Victorian chauvinists (if only because it was a way of lording English virtue over the moral backwardness of Spaniards, Boers, and American Southern whites). In fact, the only three nations of which she has nothing negative to say are Denmark, Jamaica, and Haiti. Go figure.

Leah Lucci says

This book is a collection of English travel guides, written in around 1855, by a wonderfully judgy bitch named Mrs Mortimer.

No country emerges unscathed.

Some of her criticisms echo stereotypes that we're familiar with:

"The most striking features in the character of the [Native American] Indian are BRAVERY and CRUELTY. The children are encouraged to torment animals. The mother smiles to see her little ones tearing little birds to pieces."

"Though Mexico [City] is so beautiful at a distance, the streets are narrow and loathsome, and the poor people, walking in them, look like bundles of old rags."

"[The Jews] have eyes like a hawk and noses like a beak. They are fine looking men -- such as you might imagine David and Solomon were. The rich Jewesses wear bright turbans, adorned with diamonds and rubies. But all the Jews are not rich. Some are miserably poor. The Jews are not idle like the Poles, but try in every way to get money."

Other criticism contrary to contemporary stereotypes:

"[The people of Spain] are not like the French, lively and talkative: they are grave and silent. They are not active like the Scotch, but cold and distant; nor fond of home like the English, but fond of company. Yet they are cruel, and sullen, and revengeful."

This is a fun book to flip through at one's leisure. Each country is a few pages, which one can read in between other activities over time. It'd be a great book to keep in a bathroom. I can't imagine shotgunning this like a novel.

Tamara Rose says

Antique xenophobia from an armchair world traveler. Misanthropy was never more hilarious.

Nostalgia Reader says

This is essentially an edited and snipped version of Mrs. Mortimer's original travel guides. Pruzan's introduction was amusing and certainly sets the tone for the book, but the rest of it is all Mrs. Mortimer's proper, Protestant, incredibly cynical "guide" to the countries and continents of the world. As is expected from a lady of the time (England, mid-1800s), she had never actually travelled the world, instead compiling most of her information from other (many outdated) travel guides, encyclopedias, and other works.

Mrs. Mortimer finds something wrong with every country discussed (including England), usually resorting to shaming their drinking, smoking, and "idle" habits, as well as seriously shaming any religion or beliefs that weren't Protestant--essentially everyone else worshiped idols and/or the devil. Given the time period this was written, there are inevitably some terms and slurs that certainly would be grounds for a scandal today.

For those who are easily offended by any shaming of any other culture (even those that they aren't a part of, which certainly isn't a bad thing), it probably would not be a good idea for you to read this. For those who are less sensitive to this, or simply interested in historical geography, as long as you keep the culture and background in mind, this would be a fun gift book, or simply a quick and amusing read (especially as filler for reading challenges!)

Kirsti says

Mrs. Favell Lee Bevan Mortimer was a bitterly unhappy, possibly suicidal Victorian matron who never traveled anywhere--not even to Wales, although the Welsh border was nine miles from her front door. It is not certain whether by the end of her life she was insane or merely very eccentric. (Such a shame about the drowned parrot.) Naturally, she was a prolific author of history and geography textbooks for young people.

Todd Pruzan was poking around a used-book sale when he found one of Mrs. Mortimer's texts, which is full of sweeping generalizations, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and (interestingly) abolitionist rantings. Fascinated, he researched her life and condensed her writings for a 21st-century audience. Here's a sample:

"The Prussians are not fond of eating, like the Austrians."

About the French: "Not very clean."

Iceland: "It is a pity the churches are not kept cleaner and neater."

"The Sicilians are fierce, violent, and cruel."

About North and South America: "America is never spoken of in the Bible."

"The Pyramids are great piles of stones."

On the Bechuanas of Africa: "They always laugh when they hear of customs not their own; for they think that they do everything in the best way, and all other ways are foolish." (This is rather like Mrs. Mortimer herself.)

"The most beautiful city in the world" is . . . Edinburgh. Hmmm.

About German women: "They are not fond of reading useful books. When they read, it is novels about people who never lived. It would be better to read nothing than such books."

When Mrs. Mortimer isn't insulting pretty much everyone on the planet, she is telling her young and impressionable audience horrifying tales of avalanches, earthquakes, and children being maimed as punishment for stealing.

Mortimer's most famous book may have been *Reading Without Tears*, which Winston Churchill said did not live up to its title.

Mortimer's books had wide audiences for decades, which makes me realize how far we have come with textbooks--and, thank goodness, the Internet, which contains no mistakes.

Lisa says

I thought the republishing of this book was clumsy! While it was quite interesting to read the original author's vitriol -- and very entertaining in a macabre way -- the "new" author didn't seem to do much at all. The chapter introductions about each country were worthless. This was a great topic wasted. Where was the insightful commentary? The introduction was a good start but I think the author fell asleep or something.

Ashley Lambert-Maberly says

Absolutely hilarious, because it's true (not that people are clumsy, but that someone actually wrote this god-awful book in all seriousness). It's not mediocre and bland bad writing, it's truly jaw-dropping I-can't-believe-it-demented prose.

A good illustration of the old adage "if you can't say anything nice, write a travel guide."

Sesana says

It's kind of fascinating to read this. Poor Mrs. Mortimer is so incredibly earnest in her complete and total lack of respect for any culture that isn't identical to her own. Is this a glimpse into the mind of the average, middle

class, Victorian era Englishwoman? Her works apparently sold quite well, so maybe so. After fifty pages or so, it did start to drag. I get it, she hated every country, especially the ones she'd never seen. And it's the same thing over and over. If you believe her, nearly every person on Earth was shockingly filthy.

Pruzan's additions add almost no value. His collection of facts about each country are just trivia, and don't really relate that much to Mrs. Mortimer's writing. I started skipping them fairly early on in the book, and I don't think I missed anything. That said, I think he did a pretty good job of editing down the original work. I can't imagine how tedious this might have gotten if it hadn't been cut down.

I love history, which is probably why I enjoyed this as much as I did. It could be quite funny at times, always unintentionally so. Mrs. Mortimer meant well, probably, but she's was very much a product of her time.

Wealththeow says

As Pruzan says in his introduction, "No matter where your ancestors had the misfortune of living--no doubt smoking too much, or taking snuff, or reading useless novels--Mrs. Favell Lee Mortimer had something nasty to say about them." Mrs. Mortimer had a successful, forty-year career writing Victorian children's books. Here's an example of her style from her bestselling *The Peep of Day or a Series of the Earliest Religious Instruction the Infant Mind is Capable of Receiving*:

"God has covered your bones with flesh. Your flesh is soft and warm...How easy it would be to hurt your poor little body! If it were to fall into a fire, it would be burned up. If a great knife were run through your body, the blood would come out. If a great box were to fall out of a window, your neck would be broken. If you were not to eat some food for a few days, your little body would be very sick, your breath would stop, and you would grow cold, and you would soon be dead." Children's books were written just a tad differently, back in the day.

Mrs. Mortimer wrote a number of books about other countries, despite having only been outside England twice--once to Brussels and Paris, and once to Edinburgh. Hardly a world traveler, and yet she churned out chapter after chapter. To no reader's surprise, her descriptions of other nations are wildly inaccurate and viciously prejudiced. Pruzan has collected some of his favorite chapters and pulled them together with a little preface of what was actually going on in that region. I enjoyed this book a great deal, but it's hard to read in one sitting. This would make an excellent bathroom book, or joke present.

Jason Mills says

Mrs Favell Lee Mortimer wrote prim, 'instructive' books for children in Victorian times. Three of her books formed a sort of guide to the world - though at the time of writing them she had only left England once, getting no further than Paris and Brussels. Consequently her perceptions are gleaned from other, unspecified sources.

Todd Pruzan in 2005 gathered a selection of her commentaries into this single volume. He introduces each country with his own potted picture of its circumstances at the time - a smattering of facts that are no doubt accurate, but also kind of random.

Then Mrs Mortimer lets rip, blithely generalising about millions of people that she has never set eyes on:

The Poles love talking, and they speak so loud they almost scream.

No people in Europe are as clumsy and awkward with their hands as the Portuguese.

Though the Bushmen are counted among the most stupid of men, yet they can do many things better than any other Hottentots.

The Egyptians are hypocrites, the Japanese wicked, the Chinese selfish and unfeeling... Vague anecdotes from anonymous "travellers" stand as 'proof' of the failings of entire peoples. Her evangelical christianity blinds her to the ironies in her condemnation of other religions. Why are the catholic Irish told not to read the bible?

Because these ministers or priests tell them a great many wrong things, which are not written in the Bible, and they do not want the people to find out the truth... It is a kind of Christian religion, but it is a very bad kind.

All this is good sport, the complacent bigotry of another age; but it gets a bit wearing after a while, and I was glad the book was quite short. And to be fair to Mrs Mortimer, putting aside her blinkers and her curiously sadistic asides ("while the hyenas were feasting upon his wife's dead body"), she does actually mean well. She is staunchly against slavery, for instance, and as often (if as wrongly) ascribes positive qualities to whole populations as she does negative. She is ultimately a creation of her time, and perhaps too easy a target for the reader's laughter to be sustained.
