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Elisha L. Buffington Diaries

1894 July-Dec.,

2 vols. (0.1 linear feet)

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A twenty year-old from Swansea, Mass., Elisha L. Buffington took a grand tour of Asia with his uncle Elisha D. Buffington and aunt Charlotte in 1894. Spending two months in Japan, the Buffingtons traveled through China and the Subcontinent, visiting the usual cultural and historic sites as well as more unusual voyages to the Himalayas.

Written carefully in two volumes (ca.381p.), Elisha L. Buffington's diaries record the impressions of a twenty year-old from Swansea, Mass., during his first voyage to Asia. Although the diaries do not cover the entire trip, they record details of two months spent in Japan, including an eyewitness account of the Meiji earthquake in Tokyo, and interesting visits to Shanghai and Hong Kong, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and India. The diary ends on December 27, 1894, when the Buffingtons were at Delhi.

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Background on Elisha L. Buffington

In July 1894, Elisha L. Buffington of Swansea, Mass., traveled across country to Vancouver, British Columbia, in the company of his wealthy uncle, Elisha D. Buffington, and aunt Charlotte, and from there, they embarked on a steamer for Asia. Over the course of six months, the Buffingtons took a grand tour wending their way from Japan to China, Sri Lanka, and India, taking in the sights and visiting the round of cultural and historic sites.

A prominent druggist and self-made man with a lengthy Quaker pedigree, Elisha D. Buffington (1836-1900) was an avid traveler, an outdoorsman and art collector, and with no children of his own, it appears that he took a special interest in his nephew, who was just twenty when the trip set out. The Buffington party began their adventure in Yokohama and for two months they visited places from Nikko to Chuzenji, Miyanoshita, Otome Toge, Tokyo, Shizuoku, Nagoya, Kyoto, Yamuda, Kobe, and Nagasaki. Elisha L. was fascinated with what he saw in Japanese culture:

I never yet saw such a well or thoroughly cultivated country every square inch of ground is occupied or cultivated for all it is worth, the soil is volcanic and generally black to the depth of one and a half feet. They raise rice, sweet potatoes, yams and millet and some other kinds of potatoes with some Indian corn. They irrigate to a large extent...the peasant houses are all thatch roofed with a peak...

In Tokyo, the Buffingtons saw the range of temples and parks and bustling streets:

returned to the hotel stopping at a fair on the way they had the queerest assortment of chestnuts, millinery, toys and swords for sale that I ever saw beat an American fair all to pieces... went to Asakura park and went through the booths the entrance was through a street lined on either side with stores, paper stores, millinery stores, tobacco stores and novelty stores all filled with gaudy colors and to cap the climax we were followed by an admiring audience of about fifty people. At the end of the street were temples and more stores...next we went through a theatre street and saw some acrobatic performances by kids eight or nine years old they rolled around standing on wooden globes one lay on his back and balanced a tall pole and another climbed the pole and then he balanced a ladder and a little fellow climbed that...

then went to the Nachi Cho the streets in which the prostitutes of Tokyo live as they have to have a license in Japan and when they get one they have to live in a certain district of this city. This street was about an hours ride from the hotel and is lined with tea houses from end to end with not a store in it We went up into a tea house and looked down on the street quite soon a theatrical performance was wheeled in front of us and some girls dressed in gorgeous costumes danced for our benefit. The dancing was mostly by movements of the body and lasted about ten minutes when that one was wheeled along and after an intermission another came up entirely different from the preceding, then after this one had finished and a longer intermission had passed a group of singing girls came by or rather stopped in front and sang unluckily they stopped for refreshments and as it was getting late we were forced to leave them and came back to the hotel. As they do this free they must get their pay in the number which each individual ropes in for a piece. To look at the people walking by and at the play and finally at the police men present one would hardly imagine in what kind of a company he really was and it seems a little queer that that kind of thing should be protected by law.

The timing of the tour led to one of the Buffington's more unusual experiences: the Meiji earthquake of October 1894 that damaged downtown Tokyo and the neighboring prefectures.

I began to notice that the bed trembled a little more than usual the thumping increased and I came to the conclusion that an earthquake was in progress when suddenly there came a mighty shake which seemed to be a combination of a longitudinal shake and a upheaval from beneath. The entire building seemed to rock from end to end and creak in every joint. I realized the truth of what I had heard a lady say about the bed going clear to the ceiling for I thought I went at least as far as that. Then to add to my excitement or rather amusement people rushed about calling in loud voices after a moment the cry of fire was raised... But I was to meet disappointment as there was no fire to be seen it was only a false alarm. The Earthquake seemed to be as if a giant had taken my bed and gently rocked it backwards and forwards and as a parting touch had given it a heave...

The earthquake was barely a bump in the road, however, and the Buffingtons went immediately back to the work of sightseeing.

After dinner went to visit Geku and on the way took in some wrestling by the Tokyo wrestlers. They are all very large men most of them full six feet tall broad and apparently brought up to the business they are the lowest class with no education and but little better than beasts they wrestle with nothing but a band wound several times around their bodies and start in a catch as catch can way but when they do get hold of each other they make things shake and strain with the force which they show. They wrestle for prizes at one time they brought out about thirty and had them go at it hap hazard the one downing five men to get a prize that was fun and no mistake...

On November 2, the Buffingtons left from Nagasaki for Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Canton, where Elisha found "the Chinese know how to make a bigger noise than we Americans do..." During their brief two-week stay, Buffington sensed some of the tensions

that fed into the Boxer Rebellion four years later. "The boat seems to be rather heavily armed," he wrote, "as they sometimes have a mutiny on board and then they have to look out for their necks as the Chinese sometimes murder everybody on board and run off with the booty..." Leaving that "queer city," Hong Kong, the party traveled on to Singapore and Sri Lanka, visiting the usual tourist destinations of botanical gardens and temples in Colombo and Kandy. Sailing to Calcutta, they next headed north to Darjeeling and the mountain resort, The Woodlands, where Elisha hoped to catch a view of the Himalayas:

When I got up this morning the Mount Everest range of Mountains was in full view ahead. It was a magnificent sight to see their snow capped peaks... We arrived at the end of our journey at about four o'clock and after a short walk up a steep incline which tested the staying powers of the air we arrived at the woodlands where we were welcomed by a nice fire and comfortable rooms. It was here that we got our first real view of the mountains and all their glory which is great. Right across the valley about fifty miles away but looking much nearer stretches a range of icy peaks. Mount Everest itself is not visible being concealed by a range of hills. From the Hotel we can see the plains fifty miles away and seven thousand feet below us but looking much nearer...

After visiting the Monkey and Golden Temples in Benares, the Deserted City and the Rajah's Palace, the Buffingtons headed to Lucknow and Delhi, where they arrived as the year expired.

Scope of collection

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Well educated, young and impressionable, Buffington was fascinated with the seemingly exotic cultures, writing about the people and their activities as much as the buildings and cities.

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The collection is open for research.

Provenance

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Processing Information

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Contributors

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