

## From the Diary of Bishop John Francis Norton – 1925

### Inscription....

*Diary kept for my dearest Mother  
on the P. & O Steamer "Mongolia"  
by John F. Norton  
With the Australian National  
Pilgrimage to Rome & Lourdes 1925.*



### 11<sup>th</sup> May

We were at anchor in Suez early this morning. After breakfast at 6.30am (I had said Mass about 5.30am) we left in a launch for land. A special train was waiting for us and after a short delay we set off on our trip to Cairo. Immediately around the town the fresh water canal has made a desert lose its weary aspect and palms and trees are in profusion. But soon we left these behind and we entered the desert. The heat, as well as the dust and the glare of this, made things very unpleasant for a while and we began to think that those who did not undertake the trip were wise in their generation. But our courage was soon rewarded, because when we left Ismailaya and the canal zone we entered the famous irrigated area of the delta of the Nile. Mile after mile of intensely cultivated country was passed - wheat, cotton, maize, rice, sugar, onions and bercime (clover). There did not seem to be a spare foot of land in which something was not growing, and this state of things continues all through the 6,000 square miles of the Delta. Everywhere there were people working in the fields, some reaping, others planting, others in charge of flocks of goats and sheep. Frequently we crossed the little canals that distribute the wonderful Nile water over the district. Then constantly there were bullocks working the old fashioned water wheels that lifted the water out of the canals into little channels or drains that brought it to the crops. Then there were oxen tramping round and round threshing the corn in the old way. The whole thing was fascinating. Such industry! Such expert husbandry were in themselves worth coming to see.

Of course there were scores and scores of villages and several large towns – Zagazing and Binha being important centres for the ginning and pressing of cotton. We just got a glance of the beautifully kept little cemetery AbTel-el-Kebir.

The next important item was lunch-served in the dining car, and served well, and the food was beautiful. Just at one we reached Cairo. Motors were waiting for us and each party of five set off at once in charge on one of Cook's dragomen or guides. There is no use my trying to describe the city. We move through miles and miles of streets, some wide and long and modern, more narrow and twisty with houses nearly meeting overhead. Sometimes we stopped to visit a native bazaar with its wonderful wealth of lovely things and its profusion of colour. All the time the streets were simply packed with people, Egyptians, Arabs, Greeks – now and then a European. Veiled women (white veil showing that they were unmarried, black married) passed by with graceful carriage, carrying water pots or other burdens on their heads. All the time our driver had to keep his horn going and it is a wonder to me that some of the nimble urchins who darted from under the very wheels of the car were not run over. The guide showed us Mosque after Mosque, and palace and other public buildings till my eyes were bewildered at the whole thing, like being at a picture show when the operator turned on the wheel too fast. Finally we drove up to the Citadel, a Scottish Regiment sentry at the gate and we were at the famous mosque of Mohammed Ali. It is modern when compared with the other mosques of the city, but it is the most beautiful of all. When slippers had been put on our feet at the entrance, we went in. Words fail to describe the beauty of the interior for the walls and pillars, and the beautiful dome overhead, are all alabaster. The floor is covered with the richest Turkish carpets, while from the ceiling are suspended hundreds and hundreds of crystal lamps, Oriental magnificence, of the highest order, is here in its grandest form. Little wonder that Mohammed nearly bankrupt his kingdom in building it! From the terrace near at hand there is a magnificent view of the city - and way beyond we could see the Pyramids. Before we left the Citadel our guide showed us the narrow lane in which Mohammed Ali's soldiers massacred entrapped Menlook's and the parapet from which the sole survivor made his desperate horseback leap for safety. The next part of the programme was a visit to the Pyramids. To do so we first motored past the beautiful botanic gardens, then crossed the Nile by a great steel bridge with a pair of lions on the piers at either end grinning down on the passers-by with doubtful carnivorous affability. Shortly afterwards we were delayed for a while at the bridge of the great irrigation canal which was being opened for the passage through of some barges with their weird looking sails. Next there was a military barracks with English soldiers playing cricket in the square. The streets soon gave way to a beautiful road lined with magnificent residences and shortly we were in the

avenue of lebbek trees, on the side of which runs an electric train. On the fine asphalt surface our driver let the car go, and in twenty minutes we had reached the beautiful Mena House Hotel which is almost at the foot of the Pyramids and at the edge of the desert. About four or five hundred yards separated us from the object of the trip, as this was done as was fitting, by the mode of locomotion used when the Pyramids were built – on camels. Some rode on donkeys- but they can be ridden if they don't object, in many lands. My camel was a most docile animal, except when he took it into his head to vary his long swinging stride into a short trot did I find the slightest inconvenience in staying in the capacious saddle. I was a little disappointed with the Pyramids, for I thought they were more vast, but it is said that one must see them often before their immensity comes home to one's imagination. Nearby is the Sphinx and the temple of the Sphinx whose origin history is too young to have cognisance. A few of the more venturesome of them entered the Pyramids and with Guides made our way through the narrow passages that lead to the Queen's burial chamber, and then into that of her daughter and the King himself. In this last mentioned is the granite coffin in which Cheops' mummy rested. Who he was or what he did I fear I am grossly ignorant of, but of this I think I need not be unduly ashamed of, for he lived so far back in the twilight of fable that little is known of him, except that he built for himself this colossal tomb, hoping no doubt that his ashes would be safe from desecrating hands. We cannot help thinking of his vanity, but we must acknowledge his veneration for the dead and wonder at the mind of a man who could conceive so vast a monument designed clearly to last till the crack of doom.

Returning to Mena House we could not but be struck forcibly by the extraordinary contrast of the desert and its sandy hills and blinding glare, reflecting back in an uncomfortable way the rays of the sun, and the hotel standing on the edge of the irrigated area, with its green patches and its intense cultivation. Within such a short distance of each other, are buildings erected when the world was young, and a hotel modern in every way. Extraordinary contrast!

After the heat and glare of the sand, it was just beautiful to sit on the hotel verandah, shaded by lovely gardens, and have some tea. Such lovely tea too – I drank three cups one after the other.

When we had rested for a while we motored back to the city and stopped at the Church of St Joseph- a magnificent building in charge of the French Franciscans. I went up near the High Altar and said my prayers. Just in the front bench there were a number of children who were being taught their catechism by a little girl of fifteen or so. She was wonderfully intent on her task and never took her eyes off her charges to look at us. Her hands were wonderfully expressive and with them she seemed to be driving home the rapid volume of French of her explanation. "Those who instruct others unto justice shall shine as stars for all eternity."

At ten we went to Cook's where I had some business to do. They had been in charge of the day's trip and right well did they manage everything. It augurs well for the continental part of the pilgrimage.

It had been arranged that we should assemble at Shepherd's Hotel- the leading one in Cairo. Here we got rid of some of the day's dust and rested for a while on the spacious verandah, and watched the traffic of the city surging past. Back then to the Railway station and our train left at seven. A pleasant half was soon after spent at dinner, just as well and appetisingly served as lunch had been. Our route was over the same line as in the morning till we reached Ismaliya, where we turned North, and the rest of the time we were running along the Canal. A few ships passed as we raced along in the night. Port Said was reached at 11am and the launch was waiting to take us back to the "Mongolia". We found that she had a most trying passage through intense heat and a blinding sand storm. At one time there was a most anxious moment, for a strong gust nearly ran her ashore, and the pilot swung her back so fast that he was nearly into the opposite bank. So we were fortunate to be away from all this, even though we were prevented from seeing this wonderful piece of engineering by day. The Captain told me afterwards the dues for the ship in the Canal were L3,400 (reckoned on tonnage by a special system of their own). So ended a most interesting day.