



The Golden Journey to Samarkand **By Reverend Nicholas Mercer (SH 76), Rector of Bolton Abbey**

Earlier this year, I was on holiday in Uzbekistan with my wife and were enjoying the magnificent spectacle of the three madrasahs of the Registan in Samarkand. Whilst looking for postcards in the Ulugh Beg Madrasah, I stumbled across one, part in English and part in Uzbek, quoting two verses by James Elroy Flecker (M 1901). Despite his death in 1915, the line “We make the Golden Journey to Samarkand” was seemingly immortalised, if not in this country, but in central Asia.

The reason Flecker and his immortal line had stayed in my mind was that, once upon a time whilst at Uppingham, I was the Secretary of the Flecker Society and I used to arrange play reading evenings, which was the purpose of the Society. Guided by Casey O’ Hanrahan, we would spend many a pleasant evening reading plays. I also recall Flecker’s play Hassan being performed at the School Theatre in 1984 when I myself was asked to play the part of Hassan.

James Elroy Flecker went to Uppingham in 1901 before going up to Oxford and then Cambridge University, where he studied Oriental languages in preparation for a career in the Consular Service. He was sent to Constantinople in 1910 and transferred to Smyrna in 1911, after a period of ill health, before going to Istanbul and then on to by Beirut. His ill health continued to plague him and he spent the last eighteen months of his life in Switzerland, dying in Davos on the 3rd January 1915. He was buried in Cheltenham. His death was described as “the greatest premature loss that English literature has suffered since the death of Keats.”



Despite his untimely death, Flecker was a prolific poet and was influenced by the Parnassian poets who selected exotic and neo-classical subjects as their subject matter. I don’t think that Flecker ever visited Samarkand, or indeed Uzbekistan, but I found many of the references in his poetry reassuringly accurate. Indeed, we found “*Indian carpets dark as wine*” together with “*broideries of intricate designs*”. Spices were piled high, and we were able to purchase some dark red Afghan saffron. The calligraphy was exquisite and, in Bukhara, we purchased some scissors engraved with storks who make their nests on the houses. Apes and crocodiles were however, a little farfetched. The finest line of all for me was the reference to “*sweet jams meticulously jarred as God’s own prophet eats in paradise*”. A wonderful array of fruit abounded in the bazaars and markets stalls, as well as gracing our hotel breakfasts.

Pomegranates, Siyob Bazaar, Samarkand

The American philosopher and educator James Dewey said that “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” I probably did not pay enough attention to James Elroy Flecker whilst I was at Uppingham, but he was part of my education and then something that came to enrich my own life many years later.

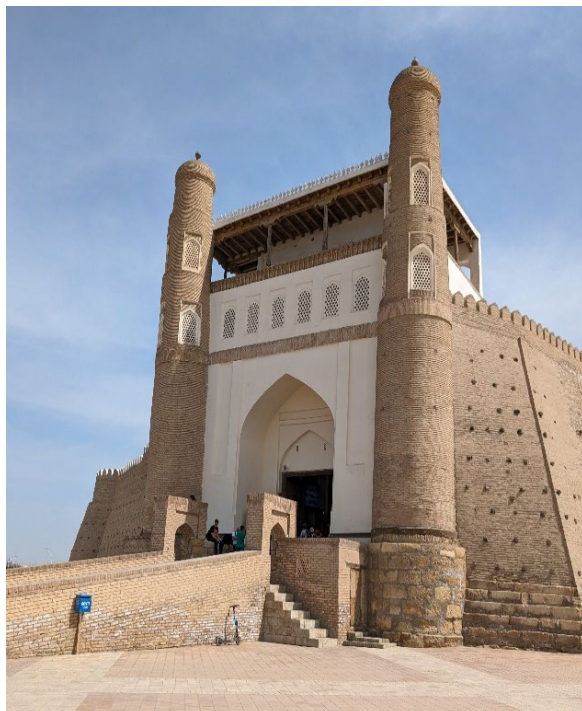
Who would have thought that a School society, so little known then and possibly now, would enhance and embroider a holiday in Uzbekistan over 40 years later?



Registan Square, Samarkand



Hassan the Potter



The Ark of Bukhara



The Mausoleum of Amir Temur

*“For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We make the Golden Journey to Samarkand.”*

James Elroy Flecker 1884-1915

"The Golden Journey to Samarkand"

