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## Gifford Palgrave

(1826-1888)

I am a part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.

Tennyson, *Ulysses*

On 30 September 1888 William Gifford Palgrave, the most mysterious of all the English explorers of Arabia, died at Montevideo where he held the post of British Minister. In due course obituaries appeared in the English papers. They were pervaded by a note of unease which was summed up by the *Athenaeum*: 'Certainly those who knew Gifford Palgrave's special qualifications would not have expected that a man with such complete command over Eastern matters would have ended his days as official representative of the British government in South America.'<sup>1</sup> Like Burton, Palgrave was a brilliant failure, but he differed from Burton in that his career began with a blaze of conventional academic glory and in that he left little of lasting value behind.

He sprang from one of those formidable Victorian families which produced more than their fair share of the country's able and intellectual men. His brothers were Francis Turner Palgrave, compiler of the *Golden Treasury* and Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Robert Harry Inglis Palgrave, editor of *The Economist*, and Sir Reginald Palgrave, clerk to the House of Commons and author of a biography of Oliver Cromwell. His father was Sir Francis Palgrave, the distinguished mediaeval historian and founder of the Public Record Office. Gifford Palgrave was considered by some to be the most abundantly gifted of this able and successful family, but instead of proceeding along the expected smooth, well-travelled

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path his career lurched along with dramatic twists and turns, and when he finally entered the public service at the age of forty it was only to fill a succession of minor diplomatic posts.

He must have been a disappointment to his father. Sir Francis Palgrave was one of the optimistic Victorians – pious, industrious, a believer in progress, self-help, and the vitality of the English social system. The great strength of English national life, he wrote in *The Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth* (1832), lay in the aristocracy's willingness to recruit new members on the basis of 'desert and industry . . . thus increasing the energy of the State without endangering its stability . . . This is true equality; for it is the only equality which is conformable to human nature, and acceptable to mankind. Where it exists, as in England, it imparts contentment to each individual, and vigour to the Commonwealth.'<sup>2</sup> Sir Francis himself was an example of this felicitous process; he was knighted in the year *The Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth* was published.

Sir Francis's rise was the result of talent allied to ambition. Born Francis Cohen, the son of Meyer Cohen, a wealthy member of the Stock Exchange, he displayed remarkable intellectual precocity as

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