

Some Passages from British Diplomat Augustus Henry Mounsey's Trip to Georgia

Otar Nikoleishvili

Doctor of History, Akaki Tsereteli State University, Kutaisi, Georgia

ABSTRACT

Georgia, because of its strategic location and importance, have always been under the special interests of the foreign visitors. One of those persons was a British diplomat and traveler Augustus Henry Mounsey (1834–1882). During his career, Augustus Henry Mounsey served as a diplomat in Portugal, Germany, Austria, and Japan.

He visited our country in the winter of 1865-1866. He described impressions of this journey in his book “A Journey Through the Caucasus and the Interior of Persia, which was published in London in 1872. Besides this, that he traveled around almost whole Georgia, he did not give us the detailed information about cities and regions of our country.

As it known, Augustus Henry Mounsey’s above-mentioned book is not widely studied for the researchers of the history of Georgia. That is why, we can say, that the author’s description and opinions are very valuable for the study of the history of that period of our country..

The history, contemporary existence, and diverse nature of Georgia have always been a subject of special interest for people visiting us from different countries. The proof of this can be seen in the fact that most of the travelers who came to our country were not only satisfied with seeing the big cities but also tried to see individual corners of Georgia.

To clarify what has been said, this time I would like to pay special attention to the information provided by the British diplomat Augustus Henry Mounsey (1834–1882). He began his diplomatic career in Lisbon in 1857, from which he was transferred to work in Hanover in 1861, and continued to work in Vienna in 1862 (6).

Two events have a special place in the diplomatic career of A. H. Mounsey. First of all, we must remember the tragic events that took place in the Iranian city of Barfrouh (today's Babol) in May 1867, in which many representatives of the Jewish community were killed. According to the British official, A. H. Mounsey, who was stationed in Tehran and together with the British Minister Charles Alison was involved in the diplomatic efforts to extend relief and protection to the victims of Barfurush, the exact amount of compensation authorized by Nasir al-Din Shah (Shah of Qajar Iran in 1848-1896 – O. N.) was 16,000 tumans. This amount, however, was ultimately reduced to 3,800 tumans, as most of it was, so we learn, misappropriated by various ministers and officials“ (Yeroushalmi 2009, 288).

A. H. Mounsey witnessed another, also very important, event during his work in Japan. As is known, in 1876, he started his diplomatic activities in this country. On January 29, 1877, during his work in this country, the Satsuma Rebellion broke out on the island of Kyushu and lasted for almost eight months. The character of A. H. Mounsey at that time is also interesting in the sense that he also offers extremely important information about the mentioned event in the book that he wrote and published in 1879 as an eyewitness to all of this.

In 1878, A. H. Mounsey continued his diplomatic career in Greece, and on April 16, 1881, “The Queen (the author means here Queen Victoria, 1837–1901) has also been graciously pleased to appoint Augustus Henry Mounsey, Esq., now Secretary to Her Majesty's Legation at Athens, to be Her Majesty's Minister Resident and Consul General to the United States of Colombia” (The London Gazette 1881, 2342).

“Mounsey F.R.G.S. (it means - Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society – O. N.), arrived at the port of Poti at the end of December 1865, having travelled from London via Constantinople. He travelled on to Tiflis, which he left in mid-January 1866 for Erevan, travelling in atrocious conditions. He then proceeded to his ultimate destination, Persia He began the return journey on 3 July, crossing the Caspian to Baku and eventually proceeding up the Volga to Nizhnii Novgorod and by railway from there to England” (Cross 2014, 242-243). His traveling impressions of that time are described in his book published in London in 1872, “A Journey Through the Caucasus and the Interior of Persia”. Interest in the mentioned work is especially increased by the fact that it is an unexplored historical source from the side of Georgian researchers.

Although the book under discussion by Augustus Henry Mounce does not describe Kartli as one of the most important regions of our country and the cities included in it in detail, and the author provides us with information about them only as a result of narrating various situational episodes, the mentioned work should still be considered significant from this point of view. as one of the written documents.

However, objectivity requires it. Here it should also be said that the opinions expressed by the author regarding our country do not always correspond to reality, and there are quite a lot of factual errors made in the assessments of the British diplomat, which, in my opinion, should be considered as a result of the influence of the current tsarist policy.

Even the fact that Augustus Henry Mounce, under the influence of the standard established by Russian colonialism, considers the term Georgia only for the eastern part of our country and not the entire Georgian state space, should be considered as a clear confirmation of this. As a proof of what I said, I will check the relevant quote from the text:

„The summit of the Suram chain, just surmounted, forms the boundary between Imeritia and Georgia two provinces different as night from day in their natural features. Here we bid adieu to forests and undergrowth and luxurious vegetation, to travel for hundreds of miles over bare brown plains amidst arid mountains and bald peaks-a land where nature sleeps...

A gradual descent of five or six hours through a bleak and inhospitable region, and we reach our first Georgian town, Gori, prettily situated on a slight elevation overlooking the vast plain of the Kura, and in full view of the great Caucasian chain, and Elburz, its loftiest peak, where poor Prometheus paid the penalty for being in advance of the world, to the north. Mud walls and square turrets still surround the town, indicative of the insecurity which prevailed before the country came into the hands of its present rulers...

Along the high-roads of the Caucasus there are, at intervals of fourteen or fifteen miles, stations of what may be called mounted rural guards. Chapar, Persian for courier, is the name still given them, and their duties consist in keeping the peace and escorting travellers who can exhibit to them orders to that effect. They are recruited from the natives, I believe, fairly mounted, armed with native-made rifles, which they carry slung in buffalo-hide cases on their shoulders, and the long knife, common to every Caucasian, and they wear the Cossack costume and paposh, a species of low busby, and a huge mantle of buffalo-skin called a bourka. I never had an opportunity of testing their courage, and have always heard that in case of attack, especially by superior numbers, they would make themselves scarce; but they are certainly useful in case of accidents to carriage or horses.

We had six of these gentry with us, and two of them at once cantered off to the nearest village in search of assistance, and soon returned with some twenty or thirty peasants. The horses were taken out and the carriages dragged to the top of the hill, or until we reached even ground and were again enabled to resume our ordinary pace“ (Mounsey 1872, 33-35).

Apart from telling stories related to the journey, the mentioned book by A. H. Mounsey is also an extremely important work in other respects. In particular, it is very interesting to present not only Georgia but also the Russian Empire in general at that time. For more clarity, I will quote the appropriate passage from the book:

„The "telega" is the vehicle generally used in posting. In the Caucasus it may be described as an oblong wooden box of the roughest sort, placed, without springs, upon four wheels, and capable of holding one traveller and his traps most uncomfortably. Even on the best of roads the jolting of such a machine would effectually dissipate all idea of comfort; on the very bad ones of the Caucasus it is simply beyond description... A friend of mine once performed a journey after this fashion from Tiflis to St. Petersburg in nine consecutive days and nights; on his arrival at his destination, he was lifted more dead than alive from his telega: but habit is a second nature, and a journey of sixty or seventy hours in one of these vehicles comes quite natural to a Russian.

An average specimen of the latter contains a couple of travellers' -rooms, each furnished with a wooden tressel, a fireplace or stove, and, exceptionally, a chair and a table. The windows have frames, and sometimes glass in them. The post-master is obliged to supply wood for heating the stove once, at a fixed price; if more is required, at any price he likes to charge. He must further provide a "samovar", t. e. an urn, heated from the centre with charcoal, and the best of all inventions for procuring a speedy supply of hot water. With these luxuries the traveller, whose ideas of travel are indissolubly connected with the well-padded railway-carriage, first-class saloon cabin, and luxurious hotel, will at once feel himself quite at home, and pass a most enviable night!..

Travelling with an A.D.C. of the governor of the country, I escaped some of the discomforts just mentioned, but even under these most favourable circumstances on n'allait pas comme sur des roulettes. Leaving Kutais in a snow-storm on the 27th (of December – O. N.), we were four hours in performing our first stage, and the snow still continuing, and having completely obliterated all traces of the road, it was then judged prudent to await the dawn; so I thus had an early opportunity of becoming acquainted with the wooden tressel and samovar.

Next morning the storm had cleared, and we drove through a beautiful country along winding afluent of the Rion, and through hills, covered, I was told, with rhododendron and azalia, and crested here and there with ruined castles and churches. One stage was over the worst of roads: nothing, it seemed to me, but a series of ruts, holes, streamlets, &c. The jolting, even in my friend's comfortable travelling carriage, was intolerable. After this we began to ascend towards the Col de Suram, a mountain pass, some 3,000 feet high. Henceforward the road was pretty good, though too narrow for much traffic, or, indeed, for the little that exists“ (Mounsey 1872, 28-31).

In the end, I would like to mention once again that the mentioned book by A. H. Mounsey undoubtedly represents one of the most interesting written documents for studying the current situation in Georgia during the relevant period. Although the British diplomat rarely provides a detailed description and assessment of a specific city and region, the information provided by him is, to some extent, more or less valuable material for studying the history of our country during the relevant period.

References:

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