

BARCELONA

James Howell (c. 1594–1666)
to Sir James Crofts

Barcelona, 24 November 1620

I am now a good way within the body of Spain, at Barcelona, a proud, wealthy city situated upon the Mediterranean and is the metropolis of the Kingdom of Catalonia, called of old *Hispania Tarraconensis*. I had much ado to reach hither, for besides the monstrous abruptness of the way, these parts of the Pyrenees that border upon the Mediterranean are never without thieves by land (called *bandoleros*) and pirates on the sea side, which lie skulking in the hollows of the rocks and often surprise passengers unawares and carry them slaves to Barbary on the other side.

The safest way to pass is to take a bordon in the habit of a Pilgrim, whereof there are abundance that perform their vows this way to the Lady of Montserrat, one of the prime places of pilgrimage in Christendom. It is a stupendous monastery, built on the top of a huge land rock, whither it is impossible to go up or come down by a direct way, but a path is cut out full of windings and turnings. And on the crown of this craggy-hill there is a flat upon which the monastery and pilgrimage place is founded, where there is a picture of the Virgin Mary sunburnt and tanned, it seems when she went to Egypt. And to this picture a marvelous confluence of people from all parts of Europe resort.

As I passed between some of the Pyrenean hills, I perceived the poor *labradors*, some of the country people, live no better than brute animals in point of food, for their ordinary commons is grass and water, only they have always within their houses a bottle of vinegar and another of oil. And when dinner or supper-time comes, they go abroad and gather their herds, and so cast vinegar and oil upon them, and will pass thus two or three days without bread or wine; yet they are strong, lusty men and will stand stiffly under a musket.

There is a tradition that there were diverse mines of gold in ages past amongst those mountains. And the shepherds that kept goats then, having made a small fire of rosemary stubs, with other combustible stuff to warm themselves, this fire grazed along and grew so outrageous that it consumed the very entrails of the earth and melted those mines, which growing fluid by liquefaction, ran down into the small rivulets that were in the valleys and so carried all into the sea, that monstrous gulf which swallows all but seldom disgorges anything. And in these brooks to this day some small grains of gold are found.

The Viceroy of this country¹ has taken much pains to clear these hills of robbers, and there has been a notable havoc made of them this year, for in diverse woods, as I passed I might spy some trees laden with dead carcasses, a better fruit far than Diogenes' tree bore, whereon a woman had hanged herself, which the cynic cried out to be the best-bearing tree that ever he saw.

In this place there lives neither English merchant or factor, which I wonder at, considering that it is a maritime town, and one of the greatest in Spain, her chiefest arsenal for galleys, and the scale by which she conveys her monies to Italy. But I believe the reason is that there is no commodious port here for ships of any burden, but a large bay.

I will enlarge myself no further at this time, but leave you to the guard and guidance of God, Whose sweet hand of protection has brought me through so many uncouth places and difficulties to this city. So, hoping to meet your letters in Alicante, where I shall anchor a good while, I rest yours to dispose of.

Joseph Jacobs, ed. *Epistolae Hoelianae: The Familiar Letters of James Howell* (London: David Nutt, 1892), I:57–58.

¹ Fernando Afán de Ribera y Téllez-Girón (1583–1637), Duque de Alcalá de los Gazules, Viceroy of Catalonia (1619–1622)