

Chapter 1

Introduction: Defining the terms

a genre in which I don't believe.
Jonathan Raban¹

What is travel writing?

Travel writing, one may argue, is the most socially important of all literary genres. It records our temporal and spatial progress. It throws light on how we define ourselves and on how we identify others. Its construction of our sense of 'me' and 'you', 'us' and 'them', operates on individual and national levels and in the realms of psychology, society and economics. The processes of affiliation and differentiation at play within it can work to forge alliances, precipitate crises and provoke wars. Travelling is something we all do, on different scales, in one form or another. We all have stories of travel and they are of more than personal consequence.

Travel narratives, both oral and written, have been around for millennia. Yet their longevity has made it no easier for critics to agree on how to define or classify them. No discussion of travel writing seems complete without critics remarking on the difficulty of determining their object of study. Carl Thompson remarks that the term 'encompasses a bewildering diversity of forms, modes and itineraries'.² For Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, the genre is 'notoriously refractory to definition'.³ Michael Kowaleski refers to its 'dauntingly heterogeneous character', and notes that it 'borrows freely from the memoir, journalism, letters, guidebooks, confessional narrative, and, *most important*, fiction'.⁴ Charles Forsdick describes 'the generic indeterminacy of the travelogue, a literary form situated somewhere between scientific observation and fiction, while simultaneously problematizing any clear-cut distinction of those two poles'.⁵ Barbara Korte finds that 'the travelogue is a genre not easily demarcated'.⁶ This is in part because, 'As far as its theme and content matter are concerned, the travel account has not emerged as a genre hermetically

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Excerpt

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sealed off from other kinds of writing.⁷ Jonathan Raban, in a comment quoted so often that any discussion of the character of travel writing seems incomplete without it, suggests that, 'As a literary form, travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where very different genres are likely to end up in the same bed. It accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality.'⁸ In a less-often cited extension to his metaphor, Raban alleges that 'critics, with some justification, have usually regarded it [the travel book] as a resort of easy virtue'; he even charges that travel writing is located in 'literature's red-light establishment.'⁹

When Peter Hulme and I edited *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), our task was complicated by our first having to define the object it was meant to accompany.¹⁰ I am now faced with the challenge of making a *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* introduce this stubbornly indefinable form that some critics argue does not constitute a genre at all and that languishes in a house of ill repute. It is difficult to know where to begin.

One step is to identify the importance of the concept of genre. It is not merely a descriptive label but a way of making sense of the structures by which we describe our surroundings and perceive meaning in them. In John Frow's words, 'genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world'; they 'create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science, or in painting, or in everyday talk.'¹¹ They, or what Frow calls 'generically shaped knowledges', are also 'bound up with the exercise of power, where power is understood as being exercised in discourse, as well as elsewhere, but is never simply external to discourse.'¹² We shall turn to the specific relationship between travel and power shortly. When we have arrived at a definition of travel writing, we should bear in mind Frow's assumption that 'all texts are strongly shaped by their relation to one or more genres, which in turn they may modify.'¹³ Fittingly, given that our subject is mobility, genres are not fixed but dynamic. As Frow puts it:

[B]ecause the range of possible uses is always open-ended, genre classifications are necessarily unstable and unpredictable. And this is so above all because texts do not simply have uses which are mapped out in advance by the genre: they are themselves *uses of genre*, performances of or allusions to the norms and conventions which form them and which they may, in turn, transform.¹⁴

Just as Frow acknowledges that his book on genres itself has a 'generic shape, that of the "introductory guide"'¹⁵ so does this *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, which fits both into the series that gives it its name and into the genre

of introductory works on travel writing. The latter have themselves set up their own pattern and expectations, as Dinah Roma Sianturi shrewdly notes:

Recent travel theory books are often introduced in a growing standardized manner. It begins with a reminder of how there has been a resurgence in critical attention to travel writing over the past decades alongside commentaries on how the belated recognition of the travel writing genre has been on account of its “heterogenous nature.” It crosses boundaries and unsettles the conventions of other disciplines. It is both fact and fiction. It was for a long time viewed [as] amateurish and sub-literary until finally the introduction touches on its so called “imperial origins.” And it is here [that] the arguments begin to tread on sensitive grounds.

The key question that confronts contemporary travel theory involves the very question that launched a long standing investigation [of] the genre. Can it divest itself of its imperial origins? Can it, despite being reminded of its violent beginnings, move forward and achieve discursive maturity?¹⁶

Sianturi shrewdly maps the contours of such discussions. This introductory chapter has inevitably been informed by and follows many of them. Whether and how it deviates from these, and, if it does, what effect the detour will have on future examples will become more apparent later.

The guiding principle of this book is that travel writing consists of predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator. It includes discussion of works that some may regard as genres in their own right, such as ethnographies, maritime narratives, memoirs, road and aviation literature, travel journalism and war reporting, but it distinguishes these from other types of narrative in which travel is narrated by a third party or is imagined. Comparison with these latter narratives aids a clearer understanding of the relationship between forms. The boundary between them is not fixed. The way that texts are read changes over the years. Our understanding of genres is historically as well as textually determined. For example, Herman Melville’s *Typee* (1846) was received as a truthful example of the kind of shipwreck narrative on which it was modelled until the author’s reputation as a novelist became better known and the work’s complex interplay of autobiography, fiction and literary influences was better understood. Likewise, and more famously, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* – or, to give it its proper title, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* by Lemuel Gulliver (1726) – presents itself as a travel narrative but is now known as a humorous work of fiction with political and moral intent; its satire on travel narratives takes second place. Neither *Gulliver’s Travels* nor *Typee* would be

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considered travel writing any longer, but their form illustrates how fiction has borrowed from travel texts. The borrowing happens the other way, too. Travel writers draw on the techniques of fiction to tell their stories. Plot, characterisation and dialogue all play their part.¹⁷ Whereas some travel writers insist on absolute verisimilitude, others readily admit to the manipulation and invention of detail.

Travel and movement (metaphorical or actual) are so fundamental to literary writing in general that, as Peter Hulme puts it, 'There is almost no statuesque literature'.¹⁸ The prevalence of literary journeys – noted also by Casey Blanton, who observes that 'the journey pattern is one of the most persistent forms of all narratives'¹⁹ – leads Hulme to argue that an exclusive definition of literature and of travel writing is required. For texts to count as travel writing, Hulme believes, their authors must have travelled to the places they describe. There is, he insists, an ethical dimension to their claims to have made the journeys they recount. If the claim is later found to be false, the author's work 'is discredited' and the text moves out of the category of travel writing into another such as the imaginary voyage.²⁰ Hulme's distinction is an appealingly straightforward one. Yet, for other critics, it is complicated by the existence of close overlaps between fictional and factual accounts of travel. Each borrows from the other, employing similar narrative structures and literary techniques.²¹ As Kowaleski observes, not only are 'travel writing's affiliations with other kinds of factual writing ... both complex and abiding', but 'travel accounts have historically formed one of the main sources for the novel and travel writers continue to utilize fictional devices such as an episodic structure, picaresque motifs, and (most significantly) the foregrounding of a narrator'.²²

Indeed, some works of literature may even shift from one category to another. I have mentioned the examples of *Gulliver's Travels* and *Typee*, to which another famous addition would be Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Put one way, such cases do nothing to undermine Hulme's case: they simply show that works of imaginative fiction employ some of the methods of travel writing in order to establish and maintain the pretence that the journeys undertaken by their protagonists actually took place. Knowing at the time or later that Lemuel Gulliver, Robinson Crusoe and Tommo are fictional creations, even if their adventures are based on those of real people (Crusoe's on Alexander Selkirk and Tommo's on those of Melville himself), is sufficient to disqualify them as travel writing, according to Hulme's criterion. The status of most texts can readily be judged by that test. Nonetheless, it is difficult to overlook the mutual influence of fictional and factual accounts of travel. An examination of the strategies of both kinds of narrative will show that they have much in common, whether they observe Hulme's rule or not. Even Korte's delineation

of the ‘basic understanding’ of the travelogue’s ‘characteristic features’ that ‘has evolved over the centuries’ does not distinguish between fictional and factual treatments of travel:

[A]ccounts of travel depict a journey in its course of events and thus constitute narrative texts (usually composed in prose). They claim – and their readers believe – that the journey recorded actually took place, and that it is presented by the traveller him or herself. Within this basic frame of definition, accounts of travel manifest themselves in a broad formal spectrum, giving expression to a great variety of travel experience.²³

Korte goes on to note that, ‘As far as the text and its narrative techniques are concerned, there appears to be *no essential distinction between the travel account proper and purely fictional forms of travel literature*’. Defining travel writing by its authenticity, by the criterion that the journey that is narrated did actually take place, depends, Korte remarks, on an assumption that ‘can only be tested *beyond the text itself*’.²⁴

Some theorists will agree with Korte and regard appeals to biography an irrelevant distraction. Others will consider the requirement that travel writing record actual journeys a reasonable test. Texts are not read in a vacuum. Korte’s point, however, is that both authentic and fictional works employ similar literary devices to achieve their effects. In Korte’s words, ‘The actual experience of a journey is reconstructed, and *therefore fictionalized*, in the moment of being told’.²⁵ Her statement that ‘reports of travel necessarily *re-create* the experience of the journey on which they are based’²⁶ superficially resembles what Hulme tells his students: ‘All travel writing – because it is writing – is *made* in the sense of being constructed, but travel writing cannot be *made up* without losing its designation’.²⁷ Yet Hulme is adamant that ‘travel writing is certainly literature, but it is never fiction’.²⁸

Mindful of dissenting voices, the focus of this *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* is on travel writing as Hulme defines it. It will follow Hulme’s premise that travel writing must relate a journey that has been made by its author. Discussion of iconic figures such as Mandeville and Marco Polo, about whom there is still uncertainty and argument, inevitably involves caveats. Some prominent examples of fictional travels are noted, but the emphasis is on texts that narrate real rather than imagined journeys, although there is some consideration of how travel writing and other types of literature (factual and fictional) are interlinked, sharing motifs, themes, settings and techniques.

The distinction between travel writing and other forms of literature that deal in part with movement should not, however, lead to an assumption that

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travel writing itself is homogeneous. The opposite is true. Not only is it the case that ‘travel writing employs a range of concepts of otherness,’²⁹ but, as Korte reminds us: ‘Works of “non-fiction” also treat the journey in various forms.’³⁰ Guidebooks, manuals, itineraries, reports and other factual accounts have their own characteristics and these may differ by, among other factors, period or location. For Korte, the ‘particular attraction’ of travel writing ‘lies in its very heterogeneity in matters of form and content.’³¹ It is that quality, along with travel writing’s long history, that has contributed to the problems of definition. The genres from which travel narratives borrow, or of which they are composed, stand in their own right: the scientific report, the diary, autobiography, correspondence, the novel, journalism and so on.

The presence in travel writing of features associated with other literary forms leads many critics to regard it as lacking an identity of its own. Holland and Huggan refer to it as ‘this most hybrid and unassimilable of literary genres.’³² For them, ‘Travel writing ... is hard to define, not least because it is a hybrid genre that straddles categories and disciplines.’³³ Korte writes of its ‘generic hybridity and flexibility.’³⁴ To Jan Borm, ‘it is not a genre, but a collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel.’³⁵ More specifically, Jill Steward writes of ‘the fluidity of the boundaries between [travel] literature and journalism.’³⁶ A near-consensus has developed that travel writing is a mixed form that feeds off other genres. There are other points of view. A rare dissenting voice is that of Guillaume Thouroude, who cautions that ‘it is misleading to consider travel writing as a quintessentially hybrid genre *as opposed to* other presumably “pure” genres.’³⁷ Thouroude mounts the very interesting argument that:

As a work, or as a group of works (i.e. a genre), it is obvious that no strict limitations can be accepted when categorising travel writing and its forms, and that hybridity is constitutive of it. But a shift in theoretical perspective, which allows us to regard travel narratives as a generic category (mode), leads us to question this hybridity, and to detect a fundamental attitude connected to travel, displacement and territories in contemporary literature.³⁸

Thouroude suggests that rather than view travel writing as hard to classify because of its generic admixture, we should accept that this is what actually characterises it. It is a genre whose intergeneric features constitute its identity. Adoption of this position would certainly save much critical agonising and reduce the number of circular discussions (like this one) about the make-up of travel writing.

Yet a further problem of definition lies in determining the point at which travel narratives become ones of sojourn or residence. Book titles may refer to

a particular number of years, or, more rarely, weeks or months spent in a place, but there is no fixed period at which an account of a journey becomes one of settlement. In such cases it may be helpful to apply Kowaleski's statement that 'No matter how much "inside" description a traveler employs in evoking another culture and its people, a crucial element of all travel writing remains the author's "visitor" status. He or she remains, as the reader's surrogate, a cultural outsider who moves into, through and finally beyond the places and events encountered.'³⁹ Or we may decide that what makes the difference in such cases is the degree of openness shown by the traveller towards the host culture and the extent to which the visitor is assimilated by it, regardless of length of residence. It is easy to think of the monolingual, culturally unadventurous expatriate as remaining more of an outsider after decades of residence in his or her new country than the short-term visitor who speaks the host language and is familiar with its culture.

The study of travel writing

Popular with the reading public, travel writing has been taken seriously in universities only in the past three or four decades. Indeed, the public enthusiasm for travel writing may be a reason for the slowness of academics to give it the attention they bestow on other literary forms or historical documents. Korte is right to point out that 'literary studies have taken comparatively little interest in travel writing until fairly recently ... unless it related to "recognized" works of literature.'⁴⁰ Kowaleski also hardly exaggerates when he complains that, 'There is a venerable tradition of condescending to travel books as a second-rate literary form.'⁴¹ That condescension may be a cause of the denials from prominent authors of travel books that they are in fact travel writers. To name only two among many, Bruce Chatwin did not like the label and Jan Morris is reported as saying at the 25th Thomas Cook Travel Book Awards that 'I've never thought of myself as a travel writer. The term travel writing seems a bit demeaning.'⁴²

Jonathan Raban has gone beyond the standard rejection of the label. One of the most novelistic of travel writers, Raban has stated that he does not believe in the distinction between fact and fiction. The travel book, he remarks, 'is a genre in which I don't believe. I just don't believe that it exists. It isn't as though I think I do something more than write travel books – it's just that I don't believe in the travel book as a legitimate form.'⁴³ Related to Raban's comment is the question of the veracity of the narrative. Even if the text recounts a journey that did take place, there are disagreements over the degree to which

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it may be embellished. One prolific British travel writer, Geoffrey Moorhouse, acknowledges that ‘the travel narrative is indeed in a rather special category of literature: it can include topographical description, history, autobiography, reminiscence about almost anything under the sun that you think your readers will tolerate as having some relevance to your journey or your disquisition on a particular place’. As far as Moorhouse is concerned, however, this variety should not extend to invention. What Moorhouse describes as the ‘almost all-embracing freedom’ of the range of elements, ‘should only be enjoyed ... within a very exacting discipline. And that is to tell the truth. Why? Simply because *that*, I think, is what your readers expect you to be doing when they read your account of some distant place and your experiences on the way.’⁴⁴ The expectation voiced by Moorhouse is similar to William Dalrymple’s idea of a compact between author and readers that places a responsibility on travel writers not to breach the trust invested in them. Dalrymple draws parallels with the obligation on journalists to tell the truth.⁴⁵ Significantly, Moorhouse and Dalrymple, like many travel writers, also practise journalism. For such figures, any alteration of experience for the sake of the story must be minimal. Moorhouse reports that the furthest he has gone in his travel books is ‘to edit some conversations which, if repeated verbatim, would have bored *me* stiff, let alone my readers. Beyond that I have always found I cannot go, because I would feel uncomfortable about the deception’⁴⁶ (Of course, the excision of boring detail is itself an editorial compromising of reality.) Moorhouse does admit, however, when recalling an earlier book whose self-exposure now makes him feel awkward, that ‘I can see how it is that most authors may prefer to write themselves into fictions, so that while telling the sometimes painful or embarrassing truth about themselves, they can nevertheless enjoy the illusion of concealment’.⁴⁷ We shall return later in this volume to the distance between author, narrator and protagonist, a matter essential to an understanding of travel texts as constructions – as *made*, in Hulme’s terms.

Some travel writers, on the other hand, are more comfortable than Moorhouse and Dalrymple with embroidering. In the late 1990s, Dea Birkett and Sara Wheeler proclaimed: ‘Travel writing has made a new departure. A generation of writers who push the limits of the genre has emerged from the old adventure school. ... Travel writers have become more literary and less literal. This fusion of biography, memoir and fiction – let’s call it New Travel Writing – is among the richest literature around’.⁴⁸ In this new travel writing, what matters is ‘not *what* we see, but *how* we see’.⁴⁹ The aphorism ‘more literary and less literal’ may be catchy and the coinage of the new neat, but these stereotype both the old and the new, exaggerating the dominance of types in each. There are plenty of counter-examples in the new and in what came before it.

It is in part because of the new – or newly designated – women's and post-colonial travel writing in particular that the study of travel writing has become more established since the 1980s. True, some literary scholars contend that scrutiny of the genre is more the responsibility of cultural than of literary studies, believing its interest to be primarily sociological and its aesthetic value less than that of the novel, poetry and drama. That perception owes much to the fact that the new academic interest in travel writing can be dated, like many developments in colonial and postcolonial literary studies, to the publication in 1978 of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said's text generated a wave of studies that looked at the ways in which travel writing, particularly of the nineteenth century, represented other cultures. Whereas Said's focus was on the Middle East, his identification of the connections between travel, representation and empire continue to influence countless works on travel to other areas of the world. Perhaps Said's major contribution in this context has been to show that travel writing does not consist simply of individual or disinterested factual accounts. Rather, travellers have already been influenced, before they travel, by previous cultural representations that they have encountered. Thus, they never look on places anew or completely independently but perceive them instead through an accretion of others' accounts. Said's influence, and that of postcolonialism, is evident in Blanton's prefatory remark that her method of proceeding in her survey of travel writing became easier once she understood 'that travel books are vehicles whose main purpose is to introduce us to the other, and that typically they dramatiz[e] an engagement between self and world'.⁵⁰

Postcolonial theory's recognition of the connections between travel, empire, capitalism and racial ideologies gave an important impetus to travel studies. It broke the illusion that travel texts are ideologically neutral and objective, but it also had the unfortunate effect of making travel writing seem essentially a conservative genre, complicit with the forces of patriarchy and imperialism. Debbie Lisle, for example, writes that 'colonial relations are constitutive of both the historical development of the genre *and* its general poetics'.⁵¹ That is a partial view, ignoring a range of travel texts that do not fit the pattern. For one thing, there are works of domestic travel that do not venture beyond the borders of the nation in which they are produced (although in some cases, processes similar to those witnessed in overseas travel texts are evident, especially in the construction of class and gender).⁵² These often raise challenging questions about economic structures, political governance and social arrangements. For another, there are works that are radical in their politics – challenging capitalist and colonial expansion – and radical in their aesthetics, too.⁵³ Such texts have received far too little notice. Lack of awareness of them produces a skewed sense of the genre.

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Postcolonial and other theories demonstrate that ‘The biggest fiction ... is travel writing’s own claim to being an objective genre. What does anyone really know about a foreign place that isn’t partly his or her own creation? We’re always choosing what we see, what we don’t see, and whom we meet; we’re always inventing our destinations.’⁵⁴ All sorts of factors contribute to that lack of objectivity and to the invention of the places we visit. In addition to the processes noted by Said that involve our prior exposure to cultural representations, there are also psychological, technological, aesthetic and material aspects. These obstacles to a neutral, direct experience of a destination are reinforced by the existence of many other points of intervention between the acts of travel, writing, publication and reading. Scholars such as Roy Bridges and Ian MacLaren have examined and attempted to classify the different stages of written account, from fieldnotes through written-up journals, to edited copy and the finished, published work. Travel writers such as Robyn Davidson have talked about the gap between the journey and its narrative; between the travelling self, the narrated self and the author.⁵⁵ Commercial considerations also come into play alongside generic convention: writers generally want to sell their work and publishers need to sell books. Hence, for example, the proliferation of titles that follow a popular formula (e.g., Tony Hawkes’s gimmicky *Round Ireland with a Fridge* [1998] or the ‘footsteps’ motif).

Travel also entails cultural and linguistic translation. These displace meanings from their original context into another. Not only is accuracy at stake, but also the process of transference that heightens the sense of movement, of contingency. Michael Cronin and Loredana Polezzi are among the translation and comparative literature scholars who have written about these issues specifically in relation to travel writing.⁵⁶ Like travel itself, translation can produce violence or cooperation, conflict or exchange. It also leads to the creation of an intermediate ground on which newly formed meanings find their own space. Translators and travellers may be seen as liminal figures moving between cultures, not quite or wholly belonging to any one exclusively. The subject of translation and travel will be discussed further in Chapter 11.

One of the questions running through this book, then, is: what happens between the experience of travel and the perception, representation and the reception of it? Key to this is the ‘foregrounding of the narrator’, which Blanton regards as ‘central to an understanding of the travel book’.⁵⁷ Once we attend to that, we will be able to move towards a greater appreciation of the literariness as distinct from – or even as opposed to – the documentary function of travel writing.

In recent years, much work has been done on the rediscovery of the travels of non-Europeans; of accounts from the so-called periphery to the centre. This