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978-0-521-78652-2 - The Cambridge Companion to: Travel Writing

Edited by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs

Excerpt

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PETER HULME AND TIM YOUNGS

## INTRODUCTION

‘There is no foreign land; it is only the traveller that is foreign’

(Robert Louis Stevenson)<sup>†</sup>

Travel has recently emerged as a key theme for the humanities and social sciences, and the amount of scholarly work on travel writing has reached unprecedented levels. The academic disciplines of literature, history, geography, and anthropology have all overcome their previous reluctance to take travel writing seriously and have begun to produce a body of interdisciplinary criticism which will allow the full historical complexity of the genre to be appreciated.

The absence within the academy of a tradition of critical attention to travel writing means that this Companion, unlike most others in the series, whose areas of study are well-defined, has to bring its subject into focus in order to ‘accompany’ it. As a result, our volume offers only a tentative map of a vast, little-explored area. As far as practicable, we have opted for a broad definition of travel writing, with the huge range of potential texts leading us to focus on major shifts, on kinds and forms, on places written about, and on exemplary instances, rather than on particular travel writers. The two major limitations we have worked within are concentrations on the period since 1500 and on travel writing in English and published in Britain. The Anglocentric concentration is by no means exclusive: non-English travel writing has often been influential in Britain, with translations appearing soon after original publication, and travel writing has played an important rôle in recent years in the creation of an international literary field, so it would not make sense to operate rigid principles of exclusion.

The Companion’s structure is tri-partite. The *Surveys* section offers broad coverage on historical lines, the aim being to map the principal shifts in travel writing in English over the last 500 years in five overlapping chapters. *Sites* offers more specific studies, focusing on seven significant places that have been visited by a variety of travel writers. These seven sites – spread

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throughout the world – have been chosen partly because they can be seen as representative of the larger areas with which they are associated and through which they are here approached. *Topics* then returns to some of the larger themes briefly raised in this Introduction, the focus here being the broader issues on which consideration of travel writing has a significant bearing. Finally, the Chronology lists a lengthy selection of travel writing, correlated to relevant historical events, and the Further Reading offers a substantial listing of secondary texts. Our overarching aim is to provide a broad introduction to travel writing in English published in Britain between 1500 and 2000.

### Early forms

Writing and travel have always been intimately connected. The traveller's tale is as old as fiction itself: one of the very earliest extant stories, composed in Egypt during the Twelfth Dynasty, a thousand years before the *Odyssey*, tells of a shipwrecked sailor alone on a marvellous island.<sup>2</sup> The biblical and classical traditions are both rich in examples of travel writing, literal and symbolic – Exodus, the punishment of Cain, the Argonauts, the *Aeneid* – which provide a corpus of reference and intertext for modern writers. In particular, Homer's Odysseus gave his name to the word we still use to describe an epic journey, and his episodic adventures offer a blueprint for the romance, indirection, and danger of travel as well as the joy (and danger) of homecoming. Societal attitudes to travel have always been ambivalent. Travel broadens the mind, and knowledge of distant places and people often confers status, but travellers sometimes return as different people or do not come back at all. Pilgrimages are necessary for Christian salvation, but must be carefully controlled. The Grand Tour (James Buzard's subject in Chapter 2) can lead to education or to dissolution – just like, more recently, backpacking in the 'gap' year between school and university.<sup>3</sup> So the ambiguous figure of Odysseus – adventurous, powerful, unreliable – is perhaps the appropriate archetype for the traveller, and by extension for the travel writer.

Within the Christian tradition, life itself has often been symbolised as a journey, perhaps most famously in John Bunyan's allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678); and the centrality of the pilgrimage to Christianity produces much medieval travel writing as well as the framing device for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In many respects pilgrims were ancestors of modern tourists: a catering industry grew up to look after them, they followed set routes, and the sites they visited were packaged for them. Although today's travel writers will typically seek out the pre-modern, the simple,

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the authentic, or the unspoilt, precisely *off* the beaten track, pilgrimage and its associated writings continue to be influential, in part because their source-directed narratives fit so well with a number of the literary genres, such as romance, which travel writers still adopt.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the themes and problems associated with modern travel writing can be found in two medieval texts which still provoke fascination and controversy. The narratives of both Marco Polo and John Mandeville mark the beginnings of a new impulse in the late Middle Ages which would transform the traditional paradigms of pilgrimage and crusade into new forms attentive to observed experience and curiosity towards other lifeways.<sup>5</sup> Marco Polo travelled to Cathay (China) in the second half of the thirteenth century. On his return to Venice his story was written down by a writer of romances called Rustichello. By contrast nothing is known for sure about Mandeville – even his nationality – but his *Travels* was widely read for several centuries. Although Christopher Columbus's first voyage to America in 1492 is usually seen as a new beginning for travel writing, Columbus was, as a writer, deeply influenced by both Mandeville and Marco Polo: echoes of their words drift through early descriptions of the Caribbean islands.<sup>6</sup>

## Writing and travel in the modern era

During the sixteenth century, writing became an essential part of travelling; documentation an integral aspect of the activity.<sup>7</sup> Political or commercial sponsors wanted reports and maps, often kept secret, but the public interest aroused by stories of faraway places was an important way of attracting investment and – once colonies started – settlers. Rivalry between European nation-states meant that publication of travel accounts was often a semi-official business in which the beginnings of imperial histories were constructed, a process William Sherman discusses in Chapter 1. The greatest impact of the new world of America on English writing in the early sixteenth century is seen in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), in which the fictional traveller, Raphael Hythloday, is said to have journeyed with Amerigo Vespucci to the New World. Like a handful of later fictional texts (particularly Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), *Utopia* then became a foundation for subsequent travel writing, influencing the form of both expectations and reports.

Against this background, the English editor of early travellers, Richard Hakluyt, argued for a history of travel which relied on the testimony of travellers themselves: in other words he looked mostly to eyewitness accounts – even though his practice was inconsistent since in the second edition of his *Principal Navigations* (1598–1600) Mandeville was excluded as false but the Arthurian legends remained. So distinguishing fact from fiction was

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important for at least some sixteenth-century readers, even if the process was made much more difficult by the *topos* of the claim to empirical truthfulness so crucial to travel stories of all kinds, both factual and fictional.

Even within the construction of national epics such as Hakluyt's, however, it was recognised that the real power of travel writing lay in its independence of perspective. The claim to have been there and to have seen with one's own eyes could defeat speculation. Samuel Purchas, the second of the English collectors of travel texts and an enthusiastic proponent of a national ideology, emphasised the power of this individuality in the 1625 introduction to his *Purchas His Pilgrimes*:

What a World of Travellers have by their owne eyes observed...is here... delivered, not by one preferring Methodically to deliver the Historie of Nature according to rules of Art, nor Philosophically to discusse and dispute; but as in way of Discourse, by each Traveller relating what is the kind he hath seen.<sup>8</sup>

For Purchas's contemporary, Francis Bacon, the travellers of the Renaissance had discovered a 'new continent' of truth, based on experience and observation rather than the authority of the ancients; and it was in effect travel writing which provided the vehicle for the conveyance of the new information which laid the foundations for the scientific and philosophical revolutions of the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> John Locke, a representative figure in these revolutions, owned a vast collection of travel writing on which his philosophical texts regularly drew.

Locke in fact features as a character in Richard Hurd's 1763 dialogue essay, 'On the Uses of Foreign Travel'. Locke is made to be critical of the limited value of 'sauntering within the circle of the grand Tour', generally preferring what can be learned at home, although he ends with a sudden vision of the world beyond Europe: 'to study HUMAN NATURE to purpose, a traveller must enlarge his circuit beyond the bounds of Europe. He must go, and catch her undressed, nay quite naked, in *North America*, and at the Cape of *Good Hope*.'<sup>10</sup> At the same moment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau – another enthusiastic reader of travel writing – was calling in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* for observers of the calibre of Montesquieu, Buffon, and Diderot to travel to the far-flung parts of the earth in order to enrich our knowledge of human societies.<sup>11</sup> Despite this enthusiasm, neither Locke nor Rousseau travelled very widely, which meant that they had to rely on information provided by others, usually less well-educated than themselves.

As a result, all kinds of interested parties – including scientists, philosophers, and sponsors – issued instructions to travellers about how to observe and how to write down their observations, and the history of such instructions runs unbroken into the early twentieth century and the foundations

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of anthropology: Joan Pau Rubiés's essay (Chapter 14) explores these connections. Alexander von Humboldt's travels to the Americas right at the beginning of the nineteenth century marked a turning point in travel writing, setting an example that would be followed by major figures such as Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, also scientists whose travels were fundamental to their research.<sup>12</sup> Neil Whitehead's essay (Chapter 7) touches on Humboldt and Wallace in the Amazon, which was one of the great scientific laboratories of the nineteenth century.

Instructions issued by those who stay at home have not always been followed by travellers and travel writers. One of the Royal Society's directions for seamen actually instructed them 'to study *Nature* rather than *Books*', an instruction they doubtless applied to the book containing this instruction.<sup>13</sup> Travellers will usually follow their instincts and opportunities, rather than directions from home, and it is travellers' eccentricities and extravagances – in the literal sense of wanderings off – which have attracted many readers to the genre of travel writing.

The idiosyncrasy that marks much modern travel writing has its early modern precedents in books such as John Taylor's *The Pennyles Pilgrimage* (1618) and Thomas Coryate's *Crudities* (1611). Taylor describes his walk to Edinburgh, dependent on his guiles and the generosity of strangers for support. Waterways and stagecoaches were at this time increasing the ease and reliability of travel within the kingdom, just as improvements in ship technology and navigation had – more partially – increased those to other shores. Coryate's gastronomic title – prefiguring a long history of relating travel to food – is made clear in the full version, which continues: *Hastily gobbled up in five Monethes travels in France, Savoy, Italy, Rhetia commonly called the Grisons country, Helvetia alias Switzerland, some parts of high Germany and the Netherlands; Newly digested in the hungry aire of Somerset, and now dispersed to the nourishment of the travelling Members of this Kingdome*, a title which hints at the combination of extravagance, self-parody, and adventure still prevalent in much popular travel writing. Coryate's journey – discussed in Chapter 1 – was also a precursor of the Grand Tour.

Two particular modes of writing – forgery and its respectable cousin, parody – have specially close, even parasitic, relationships with travel writing, since the lone traveller bearing far-fetched facts from remote climes offers the perfect alibi for the forger and a tempting target for the parodist. Lucian's *True History*, written in the first century AD, was so supremely wrought that most subsequent travel parodies are mere variations on its themes: *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is perhaps the most significant modern version. Forgery's associations with fiction continue to pose pointed questions. Some texts, such as *Madagascar: or Robert Drury's Journal, during Fifteen Years Captivity*

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*on that Island* (1729), still cause scholars problems about their authenticity; others – even accepted as ‘forgeries’ – continue to exert fascination and to cast light on their legitimate brethren.<sup>14</sup>

Prose fiction in its modern forms built its house on this disputed territory, trafficking in travel and its tales. Early modern European novels are full of traveller-protagonists such as Jack of Newberry, Lazarillo de Tormes, Don Quixote, and Robinson Crusoe; and many of their authors – pre-eminent among them Daniel Defoe – were skilled at exploiting the uncertain boundary between travel writing and the fiction which copied its form. Travel writing and the novel, especially in its first-person form, have often shared a focus on the centrality of the self, a concern with empirical detail, and a movement through time and place which is simply sequential. Interestingly, though, while Defoe was happy to exploit the ambiguities attendant upon writing about faraway places, his own travel writing was cast in more conventional mode: *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1726) offers a picture of the kingdom, a form of descriptive statistics which relates back to the Elizabethan surveys and chorographies and forward to modern tours such as Jonathan Raban’s *Coasting* (1987) and Paul Theroux’s *The Kingdom By the Sea* (1983). The relationship between the genres remains close and often troubling. Many readers still hope for a literal truthfulness from travel writing that they would not expect to find in the novel, though each form has long drawn on the conventions of the other, an often cited example being Laurence Sterne’s difficult-to-categorise *A Sentimental Journey* (1768).

Defoe was interested in commerce and civility, but by the end of the eighteenth century many travellers, under the sway of Rousseau and Romanticism, were in search of various forms of ‘the primitive’ which, it had been realised, could also be located within Britain and its neighbouring islands – a development which forms the subject of Glenn Hooper’s essay (Chapter 10). Samuel Johnson accompanied Boswell on a trip to the Scottish Highlands and Islands in the 1770s, within living memory of the final defeat of the Stuart rebellion at the Battle of Culloden. But, like many other travellers, Johnson and Boswell concluded that they had arrived too late, that change and decline were already advanced: ‘A longer journey than to the Highlands must be taken by him whose curiosity pants for savage virtues and barbarous grandeur.’<sup>15</sup> Other travellers, led by William Gilpin, journeyed to these kinds of places – Scotland, South Wales, the Lake District – in search of types of scenery that became known as ‘picturesque’ or ‘romantic’ or ‘sublime’. Modern tourist sites were being defined at this time, but travel was still for the rich and the hardy: it took ten days by coach from London to Edinburgh and a further week to get into the Highlands.

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Increasingly, too, travellers were defined, or defined themselves, against the figure of the tourist. Modernity is a deeply contested term, but its original form – as Baudelaire's *modernité*, dating from an 1863 essay – ties it closely to notions of movement and individuality which, in the aristocratic figure of the *flâneur*, or stroller, stand out against the democratisation of travel marked by the appearance of Thomas Cook's first tour in 1841.<sup>16</sup> By this time the literature of travel and exploration was in full flow. Travel writing in English had started much later than its Spanish counterpart but had soon produced all kinds of accounts – scientific travel, voyages of exploration and discovery, descriptions of foreign manners – about almost all parts of the world. Roy Bridges (Chapter 3) here provides the general context for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Billie Melman, Neil Whitehead, Rod Edmond, Tim Youngs, and Kate Teltscher (Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11) focusing on some of the key locations: the Middle East, South America, the Pacific, Central Africa, and India. By this time, also, the USA had become an independent country and had realised the national imperative to extend its continental boundaries, including the resonant journey westwards, studied here by Bruce Greenfield (Chapter 12).

The twentieth century began with the race to the poles, and subsequent journeys across the Arctic and, especially, the Antarctic caught the public imagination with their stories of danger and endurance, of heroism and tragedy. Many participants wrote about their experiences, but one book, Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922) is often seen as consolidating the qualities of them all in his remarkable elegy to a world-view that had been blown to pieces in the trenches of the Great War.<sup>17</sup>

Polar writing reinforced travel writing's growth in popularity, already evident in the late nineteenth century. But whereas scientists and explorers would inevitably – to use an old shorthand – put content before form, literary writers were also beginning to travel and to write about their travels: Dickens, Trollope, Stendhal, and Flaubert had done so earlier in the nineteenth century; but now writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and D. H. Lawrence began to commit large amounts of time to travelling and travel writing. Travel writing was becoming travel *literature* and was therefore taken with a new seriousness – as discussed in Chapter 4 by Helen Carr.

Travel writing gained new prestige from the standing of its authors, and was still immensely popular – Peter Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure* (1933) was reprinted nine times in twelve months following its publication; but critical attention was lacking, perhaps because literary modernism valued fictional complexity over mimetic claims, however mediated. The culture of the 1930s,



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looking both outward to the world of politics and inward to the world of the unconscious, was a rich decade for literary travel writing with works by Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice; but the travel books were still seen as adjuncts to and illuminations of the authors' main craft of prose or poetry, while political travel writing, such as George Orwell's, was valued and discussed but not considered appropriate for critical analysis as travel writing. This state of affairs did not change until well after the Second World War.

### Contemporary issues

In Chapter 5 Peter Hulme suggests that the last significant shift in travel writing can be dated to the late 1970s and associated with a trio of books, the best-known of which is Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* (1977). *In Patagonia* appeared just a year before Edward Said's *Orientalism*, usually seen as the beginning text for postcolonial studies: Chatwin interestingly contributes an early postcolonial speculation about the origin of Shakespeare's character Caliban, from *The Tempest*. *Orientalism* was the first work of contemporary criticism to take travel writing as a major part of its corpus, seeing it as a body of work which offered particular insight into the operation of colonial discourses.<sup>18</sup> Scholars working in the wake of *Orientalism* have begun to scrutinise relationships of culture and power found in the settings, encounters, and representations of travel texts. Mary Baine Campbell's essay (Chapter 15) discusses this development and its consequences in detail.

Another impulse behind recent work in travel studies has been provided by feminism. Applying to travel writing principles developed in women's literary studies more generally, scholars have both rescued some women travel writers from obscurity and investigated the reasons for the popularity of others. The relationship between women as observers and as observed has come under a scrutiny that is informed by critiques of ethnographic narratives, and the position of women travellers vis-à-vis colonialism is vigorously debated. Both within and outside the colonial context, the question of whether and how women travellers write differently from men remains central. Sara Mills's *Discourses of Difference* (1991) took this as its major theme, helping to generate a dialogue about the relative weight of textual and historical determinants and approaches.<sup>19</sup> Some of these developments are discussed by Susan Bassnett in Chapter 13. The huge number of publications in the past few years on Mary Kingsley's late nineteenth-century travels in West Africa exemplifies the directions and energy of this scholarship. Biographies, and critical studies produced by geographers and historians of science, have turned Kingsley, with her confidently self-deprecating humour, into a



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symbolic figure, but have also led to a genuine revision of male (travellers' and academics') views of African exploration.<sup>20</sup>

The subjects of 'race', colonialism, and gender cut across any single discipline, and within the academy evidence of the centrality of travel is the spread of its study across several fields. Interest in the rôle of travel and exploration literature in contributing to and reflecting the colonial past has been joined by a growing sophistication of textual readings based on an understanding of the operation of narrative conventions and by an acceptance that claims to truth and objectivity are not always reliable. Outside literary studies and women's studies, the three disciplines that have engaged most with travel writing are anthropology, history, and geography, while sociologists have extended these concerns to the study of tourism and of other travel practices and metaphors.<sup>21</sup> Translation studies has brought another dimension to travel, giving thought not only to translation between languages but also to translation between cultures.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps because of its surface resemblances to travel writing, for most of the twentieth century anthropology kept its distance, emphasising its seriousness of purpose, its professional ethos, and its scientific method; although many of the key sites for anthropology duplicated those for travel writing – sometimes for the same reasons of cultural isolation and distance from the centres of modernity. However, anthropology's theoretical turn in the 1980s opened it towards other disciplines, with the idea of travel central to that dialogue, especially in the work of James Clifford, whose tellingly entitled *Routes* takes a short travel account by Amitav Ghosh as its iconic text.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, anthropology discovered a more reflective and personal mode, which brought it closer to travel writing: Hugh Brody's *Maps and Dreams* (1981) is emblematic of this move.

But it is not only new critical approaches that have been responsible for the recent and increasing interest in travel writing. Since the late 1970s travel texts have often reflected on contemporary issues while sometimes experimenting with the conventions of the genre, drawing inspiration from the restless example of Bruce Chatwin. Chatwin's work was, for example, a prime exhibit in the first *Granta* magazine special issue on travel writing in 1984, which did much to bring the 'new travel writing' to a wider readership. Bill Buford, in his Introduction, celebrated what he called travel writing's 'wonderful ambiguity, somewhere between fact and fiction'.<sup>24</sup> It is telling that Ian Jack, introducing a reprint of the same volume in 1998, could suggest that none of the writers in the anthology would be very happy with Buford's description. '[W]hen I first read writers such as Chatwin and Theroux', Jack says, 'I needed to believe that the account was as honest a description of what had happened to the writer, of what he or she had seen and

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heard, as the writer could manage'. And he still does. He says that we need to believe that the travel writer '*did not make it up*' (p. xi). Much contemporary travel writing has been written by journalists who have a deep investment in maintaining their credibility: Colin Thubron admits the travel book to be 'postmodern collage', but the mosaic of different pieces is still 'prescribed by the traveller's experience on the ground';<sup>25</sup> Robyn Davidson complains in her Introduction to *The Picador Book of Journeys* about the fibbing that goes on in travel writing – though she excuses Chatwin as a consummate fibber who did not want to be labelled a travel writer.<sup>26</sup>

But the experiences and impressions of travel are never easy to capture, and contemporary travellers sometimes make the phenomenology of travel an aspect of their work. Davidson's Rajasthan travel book, *Desert Places*, begins with the disconcerting words: 'Memory is a capricious thing. The India I visited in 1978 consists of images of doubtful authenticity held together in a ground of forgetfulness'.<sup>27</sup> Stephen Muecke's *No Road (bitumen all the way)* (1997) reflects on cultural theories as well as the experience of travel, its short chapters and jumps in subject making it a relatively rare example of experimentation in the form and structure of travel writing. And Stefan Hertmans's *Intercities* (2001) interweaves philosophical meditations on modern identity with fragmented stories of his travel through cities of Australia and Europe.

If formal experimentalism is still unusual in travel writing, there can be no doubt that the range and ethos of the genre are growing in exciting and vital ways. Like the post-colonial novel, travel texts are demonstrating a 'writing back', from the example of Ham Mukasa's account of his travels with Ugandan Prime Minister Sir Apolo Kagwa to England in 1902, through Caryl Phillips's travels in white Europe, to Gary Younge's journey to the American South the better to understand, via the scenes and participants of the civil rights movement, his identity as a young black man in Britain.<sup>28</sup> Involuntary movement from Africa to the New World through the slave trade, as well as more recent journeys around the Black Atlantic, are the subject of Alasdair Pettinger's substantial collection *Always Elsewhere: Travels of the Black Atlantic* (1999). Travels neither from nor to the imperial 'centre' include Pankaj Mishra's *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India* (1995) and Rehman Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey* (1993).

In putting together this Companion we have strengthened our sense that travel writing is best considered as a broad and ever-shifting genre, with a complex history which has yet to be properly studied. Our final paragraphs convey some sense of recent developments, but just as the ways and means of travel are constantly changing, so travel writing will continue to