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The theme of travel runs through all the great literatures of the world—predictably so, since the metaphor of life as a journey is a powerful one that resonates across time and across cultures. In the European tradition, there is the archetypal myth of Ulysses sailing out beyond the known world, beyond the pillars of Hercules, or there is Dante journeying through Hell and up Mount Purgatory into the extraterrestrial realms of Paradise. Great epic poems in many languages recount crusading journeys, knightly quests, fantastical voyages, journeys by sea and on land, journeys that conclude with a homecoming or that go on without end.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that travelers who write about actual journeys they have undertaken are often in some way influenced by that fictitious writing, and indeed the boundaries between fact and fiction in what we shall call the genre of travel writing are often hard to discern. Travelers write about what they see, and their perceptions are shaped by the cultural context from which they come and by all that they have read and experienced in that culture. So the early travelers to the Americas wrote about curiously formed creatures and amazing human beings in terms that often bore stronger resemblances to images familiar to readers of popular romances of the day than to any description that we might recognize as scientific. When trying to describe what was foreign to them, travel writers had to fall back either on the familiar and banal or on the fictitious and fantastical. Hence the difficulties some travelers had in describing creatures that appeared to belong to no clearly definable species, such as penguins or armadillos, and the charming variations on terms for those creatures of the New World known in English as guinea pigs and in Spanish as little rabbits of the Indies.

Equally, travel writers write for a designated audience, whose expectations are similarly shaped by their own context. Travel writing is therefore a particular form of writing, closely akin to translation. Like the translator, the travel writer shapes material in such a way that readers may have access to whatever situations and places, known or unknown, are being described. Sometimes travel-writing conventions lead writers to favor an ethnographical or anthropological stance, at other times travel writers are indistinguishable from novelists or writers of memoirs, but always the object of their gaze is a culture different from their own. Travel writing has built into its very existence a notion of otherness. It is premised on a binary opposition between home and elsewhere, and however fuzzy ideas of “home” might be, ideas of otherness are invariably present regardless of the ideological stance of the writer. Writing about other places, other contexts, involves writing (albeit implicitly) about one’s own context, about oneself. Hence all travel writing exists in a dialectical relationship between two distinct places—that designated by the writer and perhaps also by readers as “home,” and that designated as the cultural other. This is a tradition that goes back
as far as Tacitus, who, in his *Germania*, writes about the matriarchal tribe of the Sitones and as a good Roman male was so appalled by the fact that “woman is the ruling sex” that he remarks tersely that this is a measure of their decline “I will not say below freedom, but even below slavery.”

The essays in this volume trace the complex history of travel writing from its earliest manifestations in the ancient world to the present day. Interestingly, travel writing today is hugely successful, perhaps more so than at any other time, and it is particularly popular in the Anglo-American world. Writers like Bruce Chatwin, William Dalrymple, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Norman Lewis, Jan Morris, Paul Theroux, and Colin Thubron have become bestselling authors on the basis of their travel books, and most bookstores have whole sections devoted to travel writing. It is tempting to speculate that this may have come about as a result of the increase in travel generally, as millions more people fly to distant holiday destinations every year, but it may also be because of the residual colonial history that still remains powerfully present in Britain. The British empire, after all, was built on an export policy of world proportions, whereby British products were manufactured and sold overseas and British culture was exported as part of a civilizing mission. The U.S. melting-pot policy of the nineteenth century and beyond was likewise constructed upon the idea of one preferred cultural model over all others. Both the British and the American models posited their own culture as the most desirable, yet at the same time there was widespread interest in those cultures perceived as less developed, less civilized, and more “primitive.” The explosion of adventure literature for boys in the nineteenth century by writers such as R.M. Ballantyne, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rider Haggard, and G.A. Henty shows how far the popular interest in places beyond the safe bounds of known countries had developed. Joseph Bristow, in his study of that literature, defines the books as stories of “fearless endeavour in a world populated by savage races, dangerous pirates, and related manifestations of the ‘other’ to be encountered on voyages towards dark and unexplored continents” (Bristow, 1991).

Through the pages of adventure stories, boys could explore strange new worlds and experience from the safety of their own homes the thrill of exploring unknown territories. At the same time, their parents avidly read the stream of publications by travelers eager to make their mark on the scientific community and reach the pinnacle of being admitted to the Royal Geographical Society. The latter half of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century saw a great number of such publications by travelers and explorers like Richard Burton, Charles Doughty, John Speke, and Henry Yule, and also by an increasing number of women, such as Isabella Bird, Mary Kingsley, and Lucie Duff Gordon. Public interest in exploration narratives and in travel writing generally was so great that dozens of missionaries, military officers, journalists, diplomats, and many of the wives who accompanied their husbands produced accounts of their journeys.

Interest in travel writing grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century, fueled by the rapid expansion of tourism as an increasingly profitable industry. The idea of the “tourist” as distinct from the “traveler” is still current in travel literature, though when the term *tourist* was first coined in the late eighteenth century it did not have the derogatory connotations it quickly came to acquire. Paul Fussell, one of the leading experts on travel writing, defines the difference as follows: “Tourism as not self-directed but externally directed. You go not where you want to go but where the industry has decreed that you shall go. Tourism soothes you by comfort and familiarity and shields you from the shocks of novelty and oddity. It confirms your prior view of the world instead of shaking it up” (Fussell, 1987).

Travel writing trades on this idea of difference, and there is a whole subgenre of travel writing that describes the hardships and traumas of travel, as if to reinforce the gap that divides the “true” traveler from the armchair traveler, who can only ever aspire to become a tourist. There is an elitism here that at times can be disturbing for the reader, though the best travel writing avoids this pitfall either through self-deprecatory
humor, as is the case with Eric Newby, Redmond O’Hanlon, and Dervla Murphy, or through sheer energy and exuberance, as in the writings of Isabella Bird. Guidebooks of the 1990s have gone a long way toward eradicating the artificial traveler-tourist divide, and series such as the Rough Guides and the Lonely Planet Guides serve both as sources of information and as travel books in their own right.

The earliest travel accounts were produced to provide essential information on other cultures for political or diplomatic purposes. Marco Polo’s account of his travels across Asia is one of the classic texts of early travel writing, but equally interesting is the account of a similar journey undertaken as part of a diplomatic mission by Friar Odoric of Pordenone in the early fourteenth century. In the same period, Ibn Battuta wrote an account of his travels in Asia and Africa, an extraordinary journey that took him some seven years, covered 75,000 miles, and led him to become the only known person of his time to have visited the lands of every Muslim ruler.

The age of exploration resulted in large numbers of travel accounts being produced. Antonio Pigafetta wrote a firsthand account of Magellan’s epic voyage around the world, while Bernal Díaz de Castillo and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas left detailed records of the Spanish conquest of Latin America. At the same time, another strand of travel writing was emerging, exemplified by Fynes Moryson’s chatty, highly personal, eccentric book, full of minute details about food, inns, and local customs, An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travels thorow Twelve Dominions, published in 1617. What we might loosely term political and personal travel writing developed along parallel tracks, and by the latter half of the eighteenth century, with the growing popularity of the Grand Tour, dozens of young men, mostly English, were writing their own accounts of their educational journeys. One such account, not published until 1930, is An Englishman at Home and Abroad 1792–1828 with Some Recollections of Napoleon: Being Extracts from the Diaries of J.B. Scott of Bungay, Suffolk, an entertaining book that tells us a great deal about what the Grand Tour meant to a fairly typical young Englishman who obviously saw the journey as the highlight of his life.

The age of the Grand Tour was also an age of changing sensibility, and with the advent of Romantic ideas came new perspectives on landscape and travel. Byron’s Childe Harold epitomizes the new sensibility, seeing beauty verging on the sublime in scenery that a previous generation would have found unpleasant or even threatening. The Alps, the Scottish Highlands, and the fells of the Lake District all acquired a dignity and splendor for the Romantic mind that find their way into travel writing. The two best-known European volcanoes, Etna and Vesuvius, which had traditionally been described in terms of hellishness and perceived as symbols of nature’s most ugly, threatening aspect, were transformed into symbols of nature’s power and grandeur. Throughout the nineteenth century, travelers were to seek out such landscapes, with Iceland proving particularly popular. The description of the Serbian forest in Alexander Kinglake’s Eothen; or, Traces of Travel Brought Home from the East (1844) is a good example of the way in which the Romantic imagination could be utilized to create an impression of brooding uneasiness:

Endless and endless now on either side the tall oaks closed in their ranks, and stood gloomily lowering over us, as grim as an army of giants with a thousand years’ pay in arrears. One strived, with listening ear, to catch some tidings of that Forest World within—some stirring of beasts, some night bird’s scream; but all was quite hushed, except the voice of the cicalas that peopled every bough, and filled the depths of the forest through and through with one same hum everlasting—more stilling than very silence. (Kinglake, 1982)

Voyages outside Europe proved a rich source of travel literature, as the expansion of education to the middle classes resulted in widespread interest in new scientific discoveries. Captain Cook’s journals, Alexander von Humboldt’s personal narrative of his travels in the Americas between 1799 and 1804, Charles Waterton’s detailed descriptions of the flora and fauna of the Americas in the early nineteenth century,
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and Charles Darwin’s epic *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) are but a few of the dozens of books that fueled popular interest in science and exploration, while a series of publications on archaeological finds in the Near and Middle East had an impact on the burgeoning tourist trade. Thomas Cook organized his first excursion in 1841, shepherding 570 people from Leicester to nearby Loughborough to attend a temperance rally on a specially chartered train. The advent of the railways gave Cook the opportunity to develop his schemes for organized travel, and in 1855 the first Cook’s tour to Europe took place. Much of the expansion of travel in the nineteenth century followed technological developments, and the advent of mass railways led to much greater freedom of movement for ever larger numbers of people.

Beside the scientific interest in travel, another strand of travel writing continued to be highly personal. This form of travel writing was focused on the exploits of one individual, and the establishment of that individual’s credentials of authenticity was of great importance. Claims that travelers and explorers might make had to be verified; the bitter clash between Burton and Speke over the source of the Nile following their troubled expedition of the 1850s shows all too clearly what could happen even to distinguished men who failed to produce concrete evidence to validate their claims. Fraudulent travel accounts abound, and Burton’s *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah* (1855–1856), in which he insists that he managed to travel to the holy city of Mecca in disguise, is still the subject of debate today.

In the twentieth century, travel writing came to be an object of study in its own right, and the last two decades have seen a steady stream of publications that have sought to map out the history of travel writing, to theorize it, and to investigate key questions of ethics and issues of identity. Mary Louise Pratt’s important study of colonial landscape, the work of James Clifford, James Buzard, Paul Fussell, the growing number of studies deriving from work in cultural geography, representation theory, and postcolonial studies have resulted in a rich fund of secondary materials that complement the primary texts produced by travel writers. Of particular significance is research into issues of gender and travel writing.

In her controversial book *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, Gillian Rose argues that the academic discipline of geography has always been dominated by men. In this respect, it mirrors the history of travel, for this too has been predominantly a man’s activity. The voyages of discovery, the mapmaking and surveying that were the objectives of so many journeys, were almost all undertaken by men alone. Almost no women were elected to the prestigious Royal Geographical Society in London until 1913, and only a small percentage were elected thereafter. Yet the contribution of women travel writers has been considerable, from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose commonsense account of life in the Turkish harem of the Sultan of Istanbul in the eighteenth century should be set against the erotic fantasizing of male writers denied entry to all-female spaces, to Sara Wheeler, writing in the 1990s about being a lone woman traveling in the male-dominated world of Antarctica. What is particularly interesting about the writing of women like Isabella Bird or Margaret Fountaine is the disparity between their lives in bourgeois British society and the freedom of movement, both physical and psychological, that they were able to enjoy when traveling. Many of these writers bring their own particular subjectivity into their writing, allowing us insights not only into the places they visited but also into their personal responses to events and to people. That subjectivity is increasingly present in men’s writing also, as exploration literature becomes less prominent and a more self-reflective writing appeals more strongly to readers. Such writers as Jan Morris and Colin Thubron move at times close to lyrical writing, elsewhere close to metaphysics. Here is Jan (formerly James) Morris creating an evocative portrait of Venice in a single beautifully crafted sentence: “It is a gnarled but gorgeous city: and as the boat approaches through the last church-crowned islands, and a jet fighter screams splendidly out of the sun, so the whole scene seems to shimmer—with pinkness, with age, with self-satisfaction, with sadness, with delight” (Morris, 1960).
Venice has been the subject of travel writing for centuries, but other places have featured more or less prominently at different times. In the seventeenth century, accounts of travels in the Americas or the Indies were popular, while Australasia became fashionable after the voyages of James Cook. The nineteenth century is, to a large extent, dominated by accounts of explorations to Africa, though expeditions to lesser-known parts of the globe, such as the Amazon jungle or the polar regions, were also popular subjects. Three regions have perhaps been more consistently romanticized than any others—the North and South Poles, the deserts of Arabia and Persia, and the expanse of plains and great mountain ranges of central Asia, the Hindu Kush, and Tibet. All are places where human endurance is tested to its limits; all are also places where boundaries are hard to define and where past and present are fused in the nomadic lifestyles of the inhabitants. In the 1990s there was a sharp increase in books about Antarctica, the Northwest Passage, and central Asia, with one traveler after another writing about their experiences in these, the least urbanized areas of the planet. Perhaps the popular desire to read more about such places reflects a nostalgia for a world before globalization, or perhaps the travel writers are tapping into an atavistic desire for Xanadu, for caverns measureless to man or for spaces of total whiteness on which no human imprint can be seen.

The contributors to this volume in their essays trace many different patterns in travel writing across the ages. No single volume could ever hope to cover the vast range of texts that have been and continue to be written about travel, but this book does at the very least succeed in drawing a map for all those armchair travelers who seek to enlarge their own horizons by reading about someone else’s journeys.

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