

Essays on Unfamiliar Travel-Writing

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Off the Beaten Track

By

John Butler

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This book is dedicated with much love to Sylvia

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PREFACE

All travellers, especially those who live abroad for long periods of time, experience displacement. I found this to be very true when I returned to England in the 1980s, having lived in Canada since the mid-1960s (with a brief stint in Nigeria) and, before that, knowing England (after the age of five) only as a private schoolboy for some months of the year with parents “overseas” in the Sudan. Thatcher’s Britain was a lot different than Macmillan’s or Wilson’s, and, of course, being an adult there was a lot different than being a schoolboy. Bills now had to be paid by me, not by someone else, and life was no longer organised for me; furthermore, there had been a drastic shift in social values over the intervening years for which I was completely ill-prepared. There was a pervasive mean-spiritedness about the place that was not there before, and, at least in retrospect, it seemed that people were being encouraged to be greedy and entrepreneurial. I put this down simply to the fact that I now had to deal with an adult world. Returning to the Sudan as an adult in the twenty-first century after having known only a privileged existence there in the 1950s would have been, I suspect, many times more traumatic. I now know that I could live permanently in neither country again, and, after a brief sojourn in the United States (now even more truly the “moronic inferno” of Martin Amis’s travel-account), and three years in Japan, I realised that Canada was now “home.”

Photographs and memories of the past are quite enough at this stage, and the continuing tragedy of South Sudan in particular makes the whole idea of ever going back there as an adult impossible, a non-starter. As an eight-year old I had actually been with my parents to Juba, now a new capital city with around three hundred thousand people, but then a quiet, dusty town with red earth, a few concrete buildings, sandy streets and *tukuls*, the typical thatch-covered mud huts which one still finds all over the Sudan and particularly in the south. Living in the Sudan, even if only for relatively short periods during school holidays, was a wonderful experience for a boy between the ages of five and fourteen, but now the area is one of death, desolation, starvation and internecine conflict. The civil war between north and south had been raging off and on for decades, of course, but now poverty-stricken South Sudan has its own home-made version of it. As Yeats once asked, writing of the bloodshed and tragedy in

Ireland, “O when may it suffice?” Perhaps it never will in South Sudan: baby Independent Moses Nunuh, whose mother and father were ex-child soldiers, the ironically-named first infant born in the brand-new country of South Sudan, was dead of dysentery before his first birthday. The sanguinary struggle continues as I write these words and as the prime minister battles the president for power in yet another futile African civil war. It is, to be blunt, no country for travellers.

A Note on the Selections

The majority of travellers presented here are from the nineteenth or early twentieth century. The main reason for this is the availability of translations, which are either nonexistent or out of print when it comes to earlier times. Some European and Arab travellers (the names of Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Christopher Columbus, Sir Francis Drake or James Cook come to mind) are well-known, but one of the objectives here is to introduce readers to little-known accounts, namely those of non-European travellers or people like Arthur Leared, hardly a household name. It was very difficult to track down even the names of Asian or African travellers, let alone their books, because of language barriers; the name of the Chinese diplomat Zhang Deyi, for example, appeared in an article I was reading about someone else. Unfortunately, his book was unobtainable in English, although a translation had been done in the 1980s. Jagatjit Singh was a complete surprise, too, so much that I can’t remember how I came across him. Of the European travellers presented here, the most obscure, perhaps, was Hendrik Hamel, who surfaced quite by chance when I was looking through a selection of English books in a Seoul bookshop. Even Eliza Scidmore, who wrote a number of quite well-regarded books, was relegated to obscurity; I discovered her by reading about Isabella Bird, and she briefly surfaced again in an article about tsunamis which had come up in a seventeenth-century travel book I was editing at the time.

The travellers presented here come from a range of professions. Some are royal or noble, others include a doctor, an accountant, a journalist and a poet. Most of them are not well-known, at least in the West. They range in time from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century; modern and contemporary travellers’ accounts are numerous and easily available, and although they are sometimes alluded to or cited, too many of them, though of course not all, do not have the interest and excitement that first-time accounts from less technologically dependent times possess. Modern travellers, moreover, sometimes tend to see travel primarily in terms of self-realisation or even self-development, which is legitimate

enough if the book is also autobiographical, such as Alex Kerr's *Lost Japan*. If, on the other hand, these matters become more important than what was observed or the people who were encountered on travels, the book becomes little more than a printed selfie, relating trivial incidents involving the writer or describing in overblown detail how the traveller became a better person through the experiences. At this point it doesn't matter whether the traveller is in Liechtenstein or Liberia. Of course, some of this is necessary to maintain a balance to serious episodes or to inject humour, perhaps with an anecdote which makes the traveller look a bit silly, but a travel account which is the written equivalent of a video of a large talking head in front of a miniscule Eiffel Tower does not tell us much about Paris. It does, however, tell us that the book is all about the author, not about the actual travels. When the first-person narrative is kept to a reasonable minimum, such as in Eliza Scidmore's *Jinrikisha Days in Japan*, readers somehow feels more included, and freer to make up their own minds; here, the narrator presents the journey without intruding on it by stepping constantly into the foreground. I hope this book can do the same thing for its readers, too, as they become a little acquainted with travellers who are not in the mainstream.

This book is a series of essays, and as such does not attempt to present itself as an experiment in or a cohesive demonstration of any particular literary theory of travel writing. The author is aware of the theoretical side, but has chosen to keep it at a minimum, because the overriding purpose of the essays is to spark an interest in relatively unknown travel-writers, not to prove the efficacy of any particular theoretical approach. In the case of the European travellers, however, there has been some attempt to show that they were often able to approach the subject of "the other" without demonstrating overtly "orientalist" biases concerning colonial, imperial, or racial agendas. The term "orientalists" is taken here simply to mean people who immersed themselves in the culture of the East, and when other agendas are obvious, it is then and then only that the pejorative sense of the term employed by Edward Said and his followers is suggested, and even then there is often no black and white, as many of these theorists would have us believe. Let the travellers and their texts speak for themselves; any biases are just as likely to belong to the author as they are to his subjects.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

We live in an age where travelling can be easy and comfortable, and comes complete with valet services, air-conditioning, drinks with plastic umbrellas and people doing “exotic” dances as we lounge around by the side of a swimming-pool or dine in luxury surroundings. That is not to say, of course, that there are no modern or contemporary travellers who actually enjoy what Susanna Moodie, in her eponymous account of her experiences in Canada, called “roughing it in the bush,” but there are (and always were) many more of us who would rather read about other people doing it. We should be grateful, however, to those who are still willing to endure terrible roads, awful food, bad accommodation and some real danger, especially if they happen to be travelling in places like Afghanistan, the Middle East or Ethiopia. Civil war and sectarian violence, starvation, poverty, police harassment, sexism and bureaucratic intransigence may still be found in abundance, and some travellers may be forgiven for thinking that conditions in certain places have not much improved since the seventeenth century. In 2016 we may add increased instances of terrorism, random killings and kidnapping to the mix of hazards, too, although even these were not entirely absent in earlier times, their equivalents being largely pirates and bandits (they are still with us) as well as hostile tribesmen. Without trivialising the gravity of these things, we may be thankful that it’s still possible to settle back in an armchair with a glass of wine and shudder at someone else’s narrow escape from death, disease or disaster rather than fearfully contemplating our own. We are, so to speak, in the pockets of good travel-writers-going where they go, observing what they observe, even feeling what they feel to an extent, but we are safe and sound. We accept or question their judgment and we share or reject their prejudices; we are frightened for them and we laugh with or at them, but we participate only to the extent that the writer can engage us, and not all travel-writing is engaging, in which case the reader’s imagination has to fill in and make it engaging.

The Question of Displacement

Most travellers do not become permanent residents of the countries through which they are travelling, yet it may be argued that even those

who do still have vestiges of their origins somewhere in their consciousness if anyone cares to delve deeply enough to find them. In a remarkable book entitled *The First Firangis*, Jonathan Gil Harris, himself now a permanent resident of India, tells the story of Niccolò Manucci (1639-1717), who spent many decades in India before deciding that he wanted to go back to Italy in his old age and reconnect with family and the land of his birth. However, Manucci was dissuaded from his plan by a friend who told him that he had by now become so Indian that he would no longer recognise his old home and that he would even, after so many years away, find once-familiar food revolting! Like Martin Guerre or the fictional Rip van Winkle, he would be an unfamiliar revenant lost in what had once been his world but which was now a completely different place. Needless to say, in the end Manucci took the advice to heart, lived out the remainder of his years in India and wrote it all down in his *Storia do Mogor*.¹ In our own times, stories are told of people who were either born in India or stayed many decades there, clinging on to some outdated or idealised form of “home” (England) and either went back to what was now yet another alien land or electing in the end, like Manucci, to remain where they were for fear of what they might find.

The whole question of displacement is, of course, a study in itself; when one first arrives in a strange country one is, obviously, a stranger, but after thirty years does that stage pass, indeed can it, ever be otherwise? The notion of losing one’s own national or ethnic identity can also be the subject of fiction, and the insights presented there can be as meaningful as travel accounts or autobiographies. For example, many English people who had spent years in India talked constantly of “home,” and desperately tried to recreate England in India, but others “went native,” and were probably much happier in their belief that they had somehow “adapted.” In 1777 David Ochterlony (1758-1825), whose family was Scottish but who had been born in Massachusetts, went to India to work for the East India Company. He remained there in Delhi until his death, and was well-known for having several Indian wives or *bibis*, dressing in the Indian fashion, and living in an Indian-style house. He nevertheless rose to the rank of Resident and was elevated to a baronetcy; he never went back to England again. Manucci had obviously decided that he was no longer “Italian,” in the sense that his homeland would now be as strange to him as India was when he first went there. The same would have likely been true for Ochterlony. Long-term residence has inspired significant works of fiction,

¹ See Niccolò Manucci, *Storia do Mogor, or Mogul India 1653-1708*, trans. William Irvine, 4 volumes (London: John Murray, 1907).

too; Paul Scott, the author of *The Raj Quartet*, wrote a curiously poignant novel about displaced British people in India, appropriately entitled *Staying On* (1977). The protagonists in Scott's novel, however, are no Ochterlonies, and find themselves stranded miserably between one culture and another, complaining constantly about post-independence India but unable to return to a changed "home" culture because it was no longer home. What's more, they did not have the intellectual equipment to deal properly with their predicament, a state of affairs which became part of their tragedy. They cannot accept that their lives had changed when India became independent, yet they are dimly aware that England was not what they had imagined it to be.

"When a traveller returneth home," Francis Bacon long ago advised, "let him not leave the countries where he hath travelled altogether behind him,"² but he did not reckon with the cultural displacement caused by long sojourns away from home or with people who didn't want to return at all. He did understand that travellers could compartmentalise; that was "away," and this was "home," and he wisely believed that doing so could detract from the experience of travelling. The experience of travelling should, he suggested, remain in the consciousness of the traveller, whose mind, consciousness and world-outlook would thereby become broadened. To understand "away" is to better understand "home." And of course, if you want to know yourself, go travelling. It is curious that when people live abroad for a long time they somehow assume that if they go "home" they will find things pretty much the way they were when they left, and find it hard to deal with change once they discover it has happened, or, like the people in Scott's novel, they can't go home again because they have no home. England is not the place they left decades ago, but an independent India is not the comfortable place it used to be under the British Raj.

"Us" and "Them"

In some of the preceding paragraphs readers will note the excessive use of "we" and the slightly less excessive use of "us," two important pronouns when it comes to travel-writing. Most of the travel-books we read come from the "we/ us" point of view as it examines "them," or, to use literary jargon, those ubiquitous words "the other," or, even worse, "alterity." As with any story, travel literature has a narrative point of view, and for those of us in the west the point of view is *ours*, that is, a western

² Francis Bacon, "Of Travel," in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 375.

point of view. Some call it Eurocentric, but insofar as that is concerned it does not take into account that North Americans, in spite of their antecedents, do not necessarily see things quite the same way as Europeans. Paul Theroux and Colin Thubron, to take two contemporary examples, are both western travel-writers, but anyone who reads them carefully will see that Theroux observes as an American and Thubron as an Englishman. Bernard Shaw once remarked that England and America are “two countries separated by the same language,” and one may add that they are also separated, to a degree, by the same cultural norms and their interpretations. Thus I prefer to interpret “we” and “us” as “westerners,” hoping to be more inclusive when it comes to a discussion of bias, prejudice or ignorance. Of course, there is always the fact that if one is born and raised in a particular society, it is very difficult to completely escape from preconceived cultural notions or acquired prejudices of one kind or another. Put simply, how can an African see Europe through anything but African eyes, or an Asian see Africa through anything but Asian eyes? After a while, of course, openness, sensitivity and understanding may emerge from experience, but at the centre will always be the original culture. “I was as full of preconceived notions as Columbus,” Paul Theroux tells us, “you can’t help it, but you can alter such thoughts.” He advises people to “become a stranger in a strange land. Acquire humility. . .listen to what people are saying.”³ This is true for others, too; Alexandre Trudeau writes that “All foreign lands are puzzles. They reduce the newly-arrived traveller to a kind of innocence, a childlike state in which the basics of communication and movement have to be relearnt.”⁴

Now we have to think about “them.” In the case of western travel-writing, “they” are Africans, Asians, Polynesians, aboriginal peoples and anyone else who isn’t culturally “European.” I am hoping, with a number of these essays, to answer the question what happens if “they” become “us,” or if “they” are other people who come under the category of “them” from an eastern viewpoint? To be clearer, how does a traveller from, say, Egypt or Iran view England or France? How did Japanese in 1851 view the United States? How do Asians look at other Asians? Are travellers really open-minded when they travel, or do they go laden with prejudices and preconceptions which are somehow worked out with their experiences? Of course, eastern travellers demonstrate what we might call “occidentalism” almost as often as westerners display orientalism. The

³ Paul Theroux, *Fresh-Air Fiend: Travel-Writings 1985-2000* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000), xxiv.

⁴ Alexandre Trudeau, *Barbarian Lost: Travels in the New China* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2016), 11.

difference is that they usually do not extend it to dreaming of colonial adventures, although they sometimes indulge in racial remarks or dismiss others' beliefs as superstitions. For Muslim travellers, religious stereotypes of western "unbelievers" or "infidels" sometimes intrude into the narratives, and with the Chinese or Japanese there are preconceived notions of westerners as "foreign devils" or "barbarians." Eastern travellers occasionally attempt to assert their own cultural values, too. We find Ibn Fadlan, for example, urging Turkic tribesmen in Russia "to make the women cover themselves from the men while swimming," admitting immediately afterwards that "I did not succeed in my endeavours."⁵ His lack of success in persuading the tribesmen to hide the naked female form, however, did not stop him from attempting to make converts to Islam as he travelled. Asians also extended their prejudices to other Asians, too; we'll see later on how Raja Jagatjit Singh had a very low opinion of the Chinese and Javanese, whom he considered shiftless, apathetic or unpatriotic, and Akiko Yosano certainly intimated in more than one place that the Chinese were backward and unprogressive.

When "they" travel, the same kinds of prejudices, cultural biases and misconceptions appear as when "we" travel, and, if one wished, one could accuse Jagatjit Singh of being "Indo-centric" or a traveller from the Congo as being "Afro-centric." For their part, the Chinese long believed westerners to be mere "barbarians," thus demonstrating a propensity for being "Sino-centric." The Japanese believed the same thing. These kinds of labels make little sense, or at best they are too general. It is a cliché or a truism to state that everyone has a cultural centre from which impressions of the "other" originate, but it cannot be argued that this *necessitates* racism, imperial designs, xenophobia or ignorance. Most good travel-writers are well-aware of their own biases, prejudices and propensity for making generalisations, and those who are not simply demonstrate the strength of these emotions anyway. "The most dramatic example of otherness," Paul Theroux tells us, "occurs when two radically different cultures meet for the first time" (*Fresh-Air Fiend*, xx). It would, therefore, be ridiculous to condemn as merely ethnocentric the Japanese legation to the United States in 1851 noticing that American women had huge noses and big breasts, or that American men appeared to bellow rather than speak. Western writers, like Eliza Scidmore, noticed the delicate build of Japanese women and their quiet voices! The Japanese emissaries were completely unfamiliar with western women; they probably hadn't seen too

⁵ Ibn Fadlan, *Journey to Russia*, trans. Richard Frye (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2005), 57.

many western men, either, unless they had witnessed Commodore Perry's landing or lived in Nagasaki, where Dutch traders had been plying their trade for centuries. Their experiences would be much different from, for example, those of Arthur Young, an eighteenth-century Englishman travelling in France, where differences would have been often quantitative rather than qualitative.⁶ As Goethe once wrote about the pioneering oriental scholar Sir William Jones (1746-1794), "he seeks to connect the unknown to the known,"⁷ and that is what a good travel-writer does, although in doing so bias or prejudice may come through if the writer isn't careful or is not aware of having it. Although we can only view the unfamiliar from our own cultural, ethnic or intellectual centres, once we are aware of what those are we can, to a great extent, free ourselves from them, as Niccolò Manucci did and as many good travel-writers eventually do. Travel-writers should get to know themselves as well as seeking to know others. For some people, that other cliché, T. S. Eliot's "the journey, not the arrival, matters" may ring true, and for others, Manucci among them, the journey and the arrival become the same thing, as the psychological journey or the process of self-discovery begins as soon as the physical one starts.

East Goes West: Africans, Asians, and Others

The essays in this book have a number of purposes. The first is to introduce readers to unfamiliar narratives from unfamiliar travellers. The second is to present some travellers who are coming *to* us, not *from* us, thus reversing the accepted concept of alterity, or at least expanding it. What happens when "we" become "them?" Of course, there is nothing new in this; readers will be familiar with travellers like Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9), whose writings are available in English, but probably not with many more, outside perhaps the Japanese in the United States, thanks to studies like Masao Miyoshi's *As We Saw Them*, a revealing and fascinating account of the first official Japanese embassy to the United States. The third is to work with not-so-familiar itineraries; many Europeans went to India, China, or Japan (especially after the Meiji Restoration), but

⁶ Arthur Young (1741-1820) was an English agriculturalist and traveller. His *Travels in France during the years 1787, 1788, 1789* has become a minor classic. He gives a lot of information about farming in France, but also moved in high society, and is a good source for information on life in France just before the Revolution.

⁷ Cited in Michael J. Franklin, '*Orientalist Jones: Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist, 1746-1794*' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

few to Korea (Isabella Bird was a notable exception, as of course was Hendrik Hamel in the seventeenth century), and available accounts of Asians travelling to other Asian countries such as Java or Mongolia are practically uncharted territory, hence the accounts of travellers like Jagatjit Singh or Akiko Yosano are particularly revealing, as are the impressions of Asians travelling in Europe, such as Zhang Deyi's *Record of the First Embassy to the West* (1877). A very interesting anomaly, too, is the diary and records kept by king Kalakaua of Hawaii, the first monarch of any country to circumnavigate the world (1881), and probably still the only one to have done it in one voyage.

Insofar as Africa was concerned, the great age of exploration on that continent was the nineteenth century, and, of course, imperialism was writ large, although it should not be forgotten that even here, as in Asia, earlier centuries were concerned with trade (including, of course, the slave trade) and exploration, not colonial expansion. Travellers opposed to what they saw in various areas of Africa nonetheless often started out with preconceived notions and agendas, but they were by no means all related to some imperial scheme or plan. Moreover, as Luke Gartlan, whose subject is western visual representations of the east, notes, whilst “the cultural values and preconceptions of every travel-artist mediated their response to distant lands and societies,” we cannot, as too many contemporary critics do, assume “a common denominator of imperial adventure and career opportunism.”⁸ Exactly the same words may be applied to travel-writers, even those who were writing in the nineteenth century, when imperialism reached its zenith. Explorers such as Mungo Park in the 1790s had been in Africa only for geographical purposes and some others for love of adventure or curiosity.

On the other hand, Joseph Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* (1898) serves, for some readers, as one of the greatest indictments of Belgian colonialism under Leopold II, actually worked for that monarch when he commanded a boat on the Congo river, and probably did not realise at first what he had got into. Reactions to his book still point to controversial aspects of Conrad's depictions of Africans, who have, admittedly, little direct voice in the work and are seen through the eyes of the narrator Marlow (often assumed, not wholly correctly, by critics to be Conrad's mouthpiece) as primitive, dangerous and frightening savages. For most Europeans in earlier centuries, “Africa had always been the dark continent,”

⁸ Luke Gartlan, *A Career of Japan: Baron Raimund von Stillfried and Early Yokohama Photography* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 29.

Christopher Hibbert states, “reluctant to reveal its secrets.”⁹ Yet, as some critics fail to remember, Conrad’s early days were spent in exile because of his father’s nationalistic activities, so he would have had some experience or empathy with the plight of the colonised, Poland at that time being under the often tyrannical rule of the Russian Empire. In the end *Heart of Darkness* becomes an indictment of the colonisers, and is not meant to be a sympathetic portrait of the Congolese, except as they are seen through Marlow’s limited, although not quite conventional, Eurocentric outlook. It is the oppressors and their minions that Conrad gives us, just as Scott gives us the expatriate English in a rapidly-changing India rather than the Indians themselves. In *Heart of Darkness* Kurtz is probably an amalgam of a number of rapacious and bloody Belgian administrators working for Leopold II, whose private fiefdom the Congo then was.¹⁰ On the other hand, explorers such as David Livingstone, Sir Richard Burton and Mary Kingsley had no imperialistic designs on Africa, although it may be argued that Livingstone, as a missionary, had an ulterior motive. The fact that he only converted one person (who reverted to his old ways) seems to have escaped many writers’ notice, but he is much better-known for his discoveries, his toughness under the most horrific conditions, his earnest desire to end slavery, and for being “found” by Henry Morton Stanley, whose motives for travelling were altogether different from Livingstone’s, and who also, incidentally, supported Leopold II’s imperialist ventures in the Congo.

As for Africans travelling overseas, the earliest account we have is second-hand, given originally by Giovanni da Carignano (1250-1329) in a lost work which was summarised by Filippo Foresti (1434-1520), an Augustinian monk usually known as Jacobus Philippus Bergomensis. Carignano, an early mapmaker, had managed to get an interview in Genoa with some of the thirty envoys to Europe sent over in 1306 by the emperor of Ethiopia, Wadem Ar’ad (r. 1299-1314), and Foresti included the redaction in his *Supplementum chronicarum* (1483). There is also the fascinating but historically unsubstantiated story of emperor Mansa Abu Bakr II of Mali (r. 1310-11), who was said to have sent an expedition of two hundred ships on a quest for the limits of the Atlantic; only one ship returned, and the captain told the emperor he had discovered a great river.

⁹ Christopher Hibbert, *Africa Explored: Europeans in the Dark Continent 1768-1889* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1984), 13.

¹⁰ For a complete (and horrifying) history of the Belgian rape of the Congo, see Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998). Conrad also kept a diary when he was in the Congo; see *Heart of Darkness and the Congo Diary*, ed. Owen Knowles (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

The following year the emperor decided to lead his own expedition, but he never returned; some scholars think that the Malian sailors may have discovered North America, but no physical evidence of African artefacts has ever been discovered on that continent,¹¹ which may relegate this idea to the realm of wishful thinking or to those theories which suggest that the Chinese settled in Canada.

Ibn Battuta, whom we have already met, was from Morocco, and, as he is probably the most famous of all African travellers, there is no lack of translations of his book, so his extensive travels need not be rehearsed here. Another well-known traveller was Leo Africanus or al-Wazzan (c.1494-1551), who was actually born in Granada but whose family moved to Fez the same year, and who always considered himself “African.” He travelled to Timbuktu in 1510, and by 1517 was in Constantinople. Captured by Spaniards on his way home, he became a Christian and a protégé of the Pope, whose name he took. Leo travelled quite extensively in Italy, and wrote the *Description of Africa* (1550), based, he claimed, on his travels in that continent. Otherwise, we have available mostly slave-narratives such as the West African (he was probably from what is now Nigeria) Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), which was first made available to modern readers as *Equiano’s Travels*, although it is more of a slave-narrative than a travel account, given that Equiano’s travels were not exactly voluntary. A number of Egyptians travelled to Europe in the nineteenth century, but their writings are mostly unavailable in English.¹² More modern African accounts are even more elusive; a short book by H. Martin Kayamba (1891-1940), *An African in Europe*, written in 1932, was published posthumously by the United Society for Christian Literature in 1948, but is no longer in print, and, more recently, there is Prince Bamgbola Akinsanya’s *America! Candid Impressions of an African: A Comparison of Two Cultures* (1992), also currently unavailable outside libraries.

Arab travellers to Europe were also quite active from early times and a number of them left written accounts of their journeys. The names of al-

¹¹ See, for example, Garikai Chenju, “Before Columbus: How Africans Brought Civilization to America,” *Global Research*, 2015. <http://www.globalresearch.ca>, n. p. n.

¹² See, for example, Paul Starkey, “Egyptian Travellers in Europe,” in Paul and Janet Starkey, eds. *Travellers in Egypt* (London: Tauris Parke, 1998), 280-87, and Ed de Moor, “Egyptian Love in a Cold Climate: Egyptian Students in Paris at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century,” in Geert Jan van Gelder and Ed de Moor, eds. *The Middle East and Europe: Encounters and Exchanges* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 280-87. Several students wrote accounts of their experiences.

Jubayr and Mas'udi, for example, are familiar to many western readers and available in good English translations. Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who was born around 877, travelled from Baghdad to the Volga in 922, and left the first account of the Vikings (Rus) by an easterner. He witnessed such things as ship burials and the accompanying human sacrifices as well as being shocked by the (to him) loose morals of the women.¹³ Perhaps lesser-known is Abdul Hamid al-Garnati (1080-1169), a Spanish Muslim from Granada, who journeyed quite extensively in Europe, including excursions to Bulgaria and Hungary, as well as all over the Middle East. On the way to Egypt, he travelled to Sardinia and Sicily, and became the author of two travel books.¹⁴ We now have an increasing body of knowledge about the relationship between the Muslim east and Christian west which goes far beyond the hostilities of the Crusades or even beyond the scientific revolution which originated in Muslim countries over the centuries preceding that conflict. In modern times, there was the Lebanese-born novelist (he wrote in English and Arabic), poet, philosopher and political writer Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), who, like his friend and better-known fellow Lebanese writer Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), moved to the United States with his family at an early age before travelling extensively in the Middle East. He published a number of books and lectures about his travels;¹⁵ as an American citizen Rihani was, in part, attempting to rediscover his roots by travelling, and he was very much concerned, as a person with dual identities, about establishing a cultural understanding between the east and west.

We might have expected, given the relatively long history of contact between India and England after the founding of the East India Company in 1600, that there would be travel-accounts from Indians. This isn't, unfortunately, the case, although Indians, mostly servants and merchants, and later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *ayahs* (Indian nannies

¹³ Ibn Fadlan, *Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveller from Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener, 2005), 34-35 (women), 67-71 (Rus burials). For a good general account of Arab travellers, see Nazik Saba Yarid, *Arab Travellers and Western Civilization* (London: Saqi Books, 1996), or Gerald MacLean, ed. *Re-Orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹⁴ See Ingrid Escanilla and Louis Werner, "Travelers of Al-Andalus, Part II: Abu Hamid Al-Garnati's World of Wonders," *Aramco World*, 66 (2015), <http://archive.aramcoworld.com>, n.p.n.

¹⁵ See Nijmeh Hajjar, *The Politics and Poetics of Ameen Rihani: The Humanist Ideology of an Arab-American Intellectual and Activist* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010). Rihani died the unfortunate victim of a bicycle accident.

or nurses), were of course travelling back and forth. A fascinating example of a “what might have been” was the story of Mariam, the daughter of one Mubarak Khan, a Christian woman (likely of Armenian descent) from the court of emperor Jahangir. The emperor offered her as a bride to William Hawkins, an emissary sent by James I in 1607 to negotiate trade relations with the Mughals. The emperor liked foreigners and was curious about the outside world; he even bestowed the title of “khan” on Hawkins and treated him as a personal friend. Unfortunately, the latter died in 1613, and Mariam then took up with one Gabriel Towerson (d. 1623), a merchant-captain on whose ship she had sailed to England. This marriage, although it produced two children, was ultimately unsuccessful, and Mariam ended up returning to India and staying with her family in Agra when Towerson went off on his own. It would have been wonderful to have had something from Mariam herself about her impressions of England, but, as it turned out, “no direct evidence has survived about her views on her passage as a wife from the Mughal court to London ... husbands and other colonial officials recorded aspects of her life.”¹⁶

In 1616 an Indian child, renamed Peter, was baptised in London; he had been brought to England by one of the East India Company’s chaplains and had been given his name by king James himself. His exact origins are not recorded, but he grew up to learn English and eventually returned to India. Like Mariam, he left few written traces,¹⁷ and, like her, must have had some interesting impressions, especially after he returned home. Indians did travel to England and Europe; there are accounts by Mirza Shaikh I’tisam al-Din (1730-1800), who was in England from 1766 to 1768, and, three years later, by one Munshi Ismail, but these are not available in English.¹⁸ One remarkable exception was Sake Dean Mahomet (1759-1851), whose two-volume *Travels of Dean Mahomet* appeared in 1794; he was the first Indian to write in English, and became a very successful businessman in England, even opening an Indian restaurant. A few years later (1797) came Mirza Abu Talib Khan, who, like Dean Mahomet, landed in Ireland, where he found the people there

¹⁶ Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain 1600-1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 29. Mariam’s complete story may be found here (21-29).

¹⁷ Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 1-2. The same author has also written *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

¹⁸ See Michael H. Fisher, “Early Asian Travellers to the West: Indians in Britain, c.1600-c.1800,” *World History Connected*, 10, 1 (2013), 1-15.
http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu.10.1/forum_fisher.html.

much more tolerant of his attempts to speak English than those he would meet in England itself. He, unlike Dean Mahomet, returned home, visiting Greece, Malta, Turkey and Persia on the way. His account of his travels is more extensive than Dean Mahomet's, which is concerned mostly with his earlier life in India, and was translated in 1814.¹⁹ And lastly, later Indian visitors to England who put some of their impressions into writing included Mohandas Gandhi and the eminent mathematician Srinavasa Ramanujan.

Of earlier Western women travellers in India we might mention the name of Jemima Kindersley (1741-1809), who in 1764 journeyed to Teneriffe, from where she then went on to Brazil and India. She also had the distinction of being the earliest Englishwoman to venture to South America. Her book, *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope and the East Indies*, was published in 1777. There was also fiction; the essayist Elizabeth Hamilton (c.1756-1816) produced a fascinating book, *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), which purported to be impressions of a sojourn in England by an Indian prince, and bears some resemblance in character and purpose to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. Hamilton, whose brother Charles was an orientalist, used the background to discuss such current issues as the role of British rule in India; the author, who had never met a real Indian prince, spent most of her life in Scotland and died in England.²⁰

The Persians, too, did some European travelling before Nasr al-Din Shah made his grand tour in 1872. Their first ambassador (1599) was Hossein Ali Beg, sent by Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) in the company of Sir Anthony Sherley, who had, with his two brothers, made a career serving the Persian ruler. During this time Uruch Beg (1560-1604), Hossein Ali's nephew and one of the ambassador's staff, "defected" to the West, and would write an account of his travels and experiences under his baptismal name, the *Relaciones de Don Juan de Persia*.²¹ He had been

¹⁹ For Mirza Abu Talib, see Tabish Khair, Martin Lear, Justin Edwards and Hannah Ziadeh, eds. *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2006), 327ff. His book is *Travels of Mirza Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe During the Years 1799 to 1801*, trans. Charles Stewart (London, 1814; repr. New Delhi: Sona Publications, 1972).

²⁰ Hamilton's book has been edited by Shannon Russell and Pamela Perkins (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1999). Kindersley's letters are not yet available in print, but may be found at <http://travel-letters.org/kindersley/items>.

²¹ The *Relaciones* was based on notes taken in Persian, and then translated into Spanish with help from Don Juan's friend and mentor, Alfonso Remon. It has been

personally converted to Christianity by the King of Spain, Philip III, but unfortunately ended his days in a Valladolid street brawl. This was followed up in 1609 with the visit of Sir Robert Sherley, who, incidentally, had married a Circassian Persian, Teresa Sampsonia. Another embassy under Sherley was despatched in 1624, which led to a reciprocation of the visit by Sir Dodmore Cotton; a lengthy account of this was included by Sir Thomas Herbert in his *Travels in Africa, Persia and Asia the Great* (1627 and subsequent editions). A further embassy to Europe was sent by Shah Hossain in 1715 and caused a great stir at the court of the old and ailing Louis XIV. The result was the establishment of a Persian consulate in Marseille, but, perhaps more interestingly, Mohammad Reza Beg's lavish ambassadorial lifestyle and apparent predilection for getting to know the local female populace led to an outbreak of sensational "oriental" romances and probably influenced the writing of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1725), purporting to be written from his sojourn in Europe by a Persian nobleman.

Nostalgia: "Looking for the Lost"

A recurrent theme, found especially in western accounts of travellers to Asia is what we might term "looking for the lost." This phrase, taken from the title of Alan Booth's book on Japan, implies that when travellers go somewhere, they are not so much seeking what actually *is* there, but what *was* there, or at least what they already knew about their destinations. And it is often not the destination as they find it; a number of travellers make the assumption that time somehow has stood still, and that they are about to experience something they have read about in literature, history, or older travel-accounts; in other words they approach their destination looking nostalgically back at a past they hope to experience. Fergus M. Bordewich, a veteran American traveller in Asia, revisited China in the 1980's, having experienced the immediate post-revolutionary days of the 1940s and 1950s. As post-Mao China struggled to reinvent itself and connect more with the West, Bordewich noticed not just the "grim, gritty, and xenophobic" aspects of Maoist China, but also "traces of yet another China, this one more sensed than seen." He continued: "the Chinese past tantalized, but it was impossible to misunderstand the determination of

twentieth-century China to escape it.”²² He tells us that what “seduced” him was “Cathay,” a place “shaped by mandarins and scholar-poets. . . where men believed a wisp of mist might be a sage’s spirit incarnate.”²³ Bordewich is not interested in modern China as much as he is in “Cathay,” the old name for the region used by medieval travellers such as Marco Polo, and subsequently a construct of western minds, rather in the mode of “Xanadu” in Coleridge’s poem or the mystical land of Shangri-La in James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* (1933).

This is exactly the feeling expressed by Akiko Yosano as she travelled in the China of the earlier twentieth century and of Eliza Scidmore in Japan. The contradiction of past and present might seem a little silly to a reader; after all, does the fact that farmers in Egypt use camel-powered waterwheels or *shadufs* to irrigate their fields somehow make Egypt more exotic? Indeed it does, especially if the writer reminds us that the *ancient* Egyptians used them, once, too. Behind those simple water-wheels lurk the pyramids, the pharaohs, and all the romance of older times and glorious eras. In many cases, the present seems tawdry, dull, pedestrian. If the poet François Villon had read some of these travel-accounts, he would not have needed to ask himself that famous question, “*Ou sont les neiges d’antan?*” The snows of yesteryear were in the hearts and minds of Akiko Yosano and Eliza Scidmore, and they were very much alive, at least in their abstract, Platonic form, as something which would, somehow, never fade away. There was disappointment, even sadness, when it became clear that they had, in many cases, vanished, and there was elation when, on occasion, they were found to be there still, albeit much more difficult to locate.

This question of nostalgia for a quasi-utopian past never actually experienced outside books comes up, as we have seen, in more than one of the writers discussed in this book. It usually takes the form, or a variant, of what is often termed “restorative nostalgia,” which involves re-creating the past. Here is a contemporary example from Alex Kerr:

²² The author experienced the same feeling in Korea on two visits (1998, 2003); no-one seemed to be interested in showing us the old royal palaces, which we found were barely maintained, and I am told that one of them has since been demolished to make way for a tower block. In the last few years, however, interest seems to have been revived; a movie has been made about Queen Min, who was murdered by the Japanese, and the coronation of King Kojong has been re-enacted. Thailand, perhaps because it is still a monarchy, is very proud of its past, as is Cambodia.

²³ Fergus M. Bordewich, *Cathay: A Journey in Search of Old China* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1991), xx-xxi.

Even now, when I travel back to Iya, I feel as though I've left the world behind and entered a magical realm. This feeling is stronger now than ever before, because whilst the towns and plains below have been completely modernized, Iya remains little changed. Near the entrance there stands an Edo-period stone monument inscribed at the command of the Lord of Awa. . .²⁴

The difference between the usual experience of restorative nostalgia and that which occurs in travel-writers such as Akiko Yosano or Eliza Scidmore is that in everyday life we are ourselves involved in the process—autobiography and our own experiences are woven into it. We usually attempt to relive special moments in our past which actually took place, as Kerr does above; he has actually been to Iya, and in fact it was his first Japanese home. However, some travel-writers are seeking a past which they have never themselves experienced, that is re-created as a “memory” derived from reading about the past. As we shall see, “old Japan” was what Eliza Scidmore sought, and “old China” was never far away from the imaginative mind of Akiko Yosano. Similarly, as Denton Welch walked through spittle-spattered Shanghai streets, he probably found it hard to remember that he was in the land of Confucius. At the same time as he is aware of the present, Alex Kerr still feels that he is in that “magical realm” of old Japan, which of course now largely exists only in his imagination as restorative nostalgia, activated by old objects or customs. The stone monument, unaffected by time, serves as a solid, visual link with the past, much as the Egyptian pyramids had done for generations of travellers. The use of words like “back,” “magical,” “little changed,” “Edo-period” serve to reinforce the presence of the past as being somehow more important and meaningful than that of the present. Scidmore and Kerr are by no means alone in their quest to find identification with the past; in the Edo Period the poet Bashō (1644-1694), looking at an old stone monument with an inscription on it (after scraping off the moss), observed in *The Narrow Road to Oku* (1689):

Time passes and the world changes. The remains of the past are shrouded in uncertainty. And yet, here before my eyes was a monument which none would deny had lasted a thousand years. I felt I was looking into the minds of the men of old. “This,” I thought, “is one of the pleasures of travel. . .”²⁵

²⁴ Alex Kerr, *Lost Japan: Last Glimpse of Beautiful Japan*, trans. Alex Kerr and Bodhi Fishman (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 14.

²⁵ Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to Oku*, trans. Donald Keene, illus. Miyata Masayuki (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1996), 75.

History, Stereotypes and More Preconceptions

Western travellers were often obsessed with the history of the places they visited, or at least with a romanticised preconception based on history and literature. Much, though of course not all of the latter, was written by people who had never ventured out of their own countries. Shakespeare never left England, but his portrayal of the eponymous hero in *Othello* (1603) reflects common prejudices about “Moors,” such as their connections with the Devil as well as their rampant sexuality. Charlotte Dacre (1771-1825) wrote her popular romance novel *Zofloya, or The Moor* (1806), set, incidentally, in fifteenth century Italy, also without leaving England or ever meeting anyone from Morocco. Zofloya the Moor turns out to be Lucifer himself in disguise, a “black” demon lover fit for the evil and sex-obsessed heroine Victoria, whom he of course destroys in the end. The Middle East was often perceived through the veil of works such as *The Thousand and One Nights* or the stereotyping we have mentioned above. For example, the English novelist and traveller Julia Pardoe wrote in *The Beauties of the Bosphorus* (1839) that she wanted to have “adventures as numerous and romantic as those of the *Thousand and One Nights*,” as she travelled in Turkey.²⁶ Other literary works, too, contributed to travellers’ fantasies; along with “geographical books and maps,” René Caillié credited Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) with exciting his “youthful imagination,” and went on to say “I was impatient to encounter adventures like him.” As well, Caillié’s obscure background (his father was a poor baker who ended his days in prison) evidently spurred him on to make a splash in the world: as a teenager, “I already felt an ambition to make myself famous by some important discovery,”²⁷ he tells us. Alexandra David-Néel, who first journeyed to Tibet in 1914,

²⁶ Cited in Barbara Hodgson, *Dreaming of East: Western Women and the Exotic Lure of the Orient* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2006), 19. Julia Pardoe (1806-1862) was a poet, novelist and historian who travelled to Constantinople with her father (1836) on the way to Egypt. Her non-fiction books included *The City of the Sultan* (1836), a biography of Marie de’ Medici and *The Court and Reign of Francis I* (1849).

²⁷ René Caillié, *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuktu, and across the Great Desert, to Morocco, performed in the years 1824-28* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), 1, 2. Caillié (1799-1838) first started travelling in Africa when he was only sixteen. In 1824 he returned with a British expedition and journeyed to the Senegal River. His most famous exploit was becoming the first European to reach Timbuktu and get back alive (1828), a feat he recorded in his *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuktu* (1830). Upon his return to France he contracted tuberculosis, from which he died, having never returned to Africa again.

noted that “I never asked my parents for any gifts except books on travel, maps, and the privilege of being taken abroad during school holidays.”²⁸

To the West, China and Japan were “cruel,” “mysterious” or “inscrutable,” Japan often being decried as “the Yellow Peril,”²⁹ with China, “the heathen Chinese” (the phrase originated in a narrative poem by the American writer Bret Harte and was not meant to have racial overtones) represented in literature, for example, by the deviously evil (and, naturally, inscrutable) scientist Dr. Fu Manchu in the novels of Sax Rohmer (1883-1959), also known as Arthur Ward, for part of his life an innocuous English civil servant.³⁰ India, on the other hand, was a land of mystic sages on the one hand, the *Kama Sutra* (translated by Sir Richard Burton in 1883) and decadent maharajahs practicing it with sensual *devadasis* on the other. People in Polynesia or the West Indies lived in an “innocent” pre-lapsarian state of nature and nudity³¹ (rather like a Gauguin painting), whilst Africa was “dark,” “savage” or “untamed,” the proverbial “white man’s grave” which rendered one either stark raving mad or dead. Sexuality of one kind or another often, of course, lurked in the background, as it had in *Zofloya* and many other literary works, both fact and fiction. How many times was the Turkish or Arabian harem imaginatively portrayed in art, the African jungle or desert in literature or film, and Chinese or Japanese villains represented as evil schemers plotting the downfall of innocent westerners or world domination? Few travellers, even in the sixteenth century, could have been unaware of these stereotypes, nor could they have escaped the “positive” side of stereotyping, the romanticised, idealised view of the other typified by the

²⁸ Alexandra David-Néel, *My Journey to Lhasa* (New York: Harper, 2005), xxi. David-Néel (1868-1969) was the first foreign woman to have reached and entered Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. She was a French journalist, singer, traveller and student of Eastern religions, who visited Tibet five times, at one time disguised as a male beggar-pilgrim and accompanied by her adopted Tibetan son.

²⁹ This name probably represents the paranoia some Europeans felt after the catastrophic naval defeat of Russia by Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1902-04, the first such defeat inflicted by Asians on a European power.

³⁰ Rohmer doesn’t stop with demonising only the Chinese. In *The Quest of the Sacred Slipper* (1919), an archaeologist discovers the slipper of Muhammad, which he decides to keep. The evil Muslim fanatic Hassan of Aleppo hatches a plan to destroy England if the relic is not given back.

³¹ An example of this may be found in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave* (1688), a prose narrative set in Surinam, a place which was probably familiar to the author from her childhood or early teens. Native people are described as if they lived in a kind of Eden, innocently free of clothing and European-imposed culture, with an early example of the “noble savage” as its eponymous protagonist.

“noble savage” or the Indian guru sitting in a lotus-position dispensing wisdom. When they read history books, travellers sometimes fused fact and fiction, and indeed some historians who had never been to the countries whose stories they chronicled might have done so, too. Like René Caillié, the young Joseph Conrad read books and pored over maps; when he finally reached his destination in the Congo, one wonders whether he made comparisons between what was and what he wanted there to be. Was that the simple secret of Kurtz’s downfall in *Heart of Darkness*—that Africa was not what he thought it was, or even perhaps that it was more than he thought it was?

Escaping and Other Motives

A further aspect of travelling is the wish to escape from something. Isabella Bird, for example, was probably glad to get away from having to care for her chronically-invalidated sister, and, in the case of many women travellers in particular, escaping from a constricting society or a bad marriage was also a factor. Others, both men and women, wanted to escape from society’s “progress,” or had political reasons; they often did not much like the modern world they lived in and were looking for something akin to what Ella Sykes called “that joy in living, a joy which our civilization has done its best to improve away” (Cited in Hodgson, *Dreaming of East*, 17).³² Sometimes a traveller simply wants to experience what it is like being, for a change, the “other,” or, as Paul Theroux puts it, “always somewhat at sea, and, like such a castaway, faced with unusual, unexpected problems” (*Fresh-Air Fiend*, 17). This is escape from the familiar, the exit from the proverbial “comfort zone” of popular parlance. In 1896 Jane Dieulafoy’s friends urged her to stay at home in France, and listed all the fun things she could do if she did. “I could create new kinds of marmalades and sauces,” she wrote; “I could darn socks,” and in the afternoons, she joked, listen to “the delicate conversations of women, where, after having slit the throats of their closest, they refresh themselves in chatter about toilettes, pregnancies, and breast-feedings.” She concluded bravely, “I knew how to resist all of these temptations” (Cited in Hodgson,

³² Ella Sykes (1863-1939) travelled twice to Persia (1894, 1896-97) and wrote a well-received book on her journey, *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* (1898). She later travelled to Canada (1911) where she worked as a housekeeper and wrote about the experience in *A Home Help in Canada* (1912). She subsequently travelled to Turkestan (1915).