

## *Central and Eastern European Review*

**Robert E. Niebuhr (ed.), *When East Met West: World History Through Travelers' Perspectives*. Reading, Massachusetts: Trebarwyth Press, 2010. 207 pp.**

The use of travel books in many areas and levels of academic teaching has increased significantly in the last couple of decades. The current volume of readings forms a very convenient teaching tool in that, rather than providing one detailed account by a single author, it provides short excerpts from twenty different, mostly European, travellers (many well known: Marco Polo, Charles Doughty, Mary Edith Durham), covering a wide variety of regions of the world. Each excerpt is divided by sub-headings to further clarify the texts. Furthermore Niebuhr provides the instructor with a useful sample of questions for students to pursue, following each excerpt. The book is further enhanced a range of contemporary maps and illustrations (though disconcertingly many of the maps are sideways on to the text), and a bibliography.

As a mode of looking at world history, Niebuhr's collected travel accounts focus on business and market development with frequent reference to religious practices, rather than exploration and adventure (the more usual focus of travel books). One of the few American writers, Archibald R. Colquhoun, represented in the book travelled in China specifically on business (silk, jade and porcelain), commenting that only by 'showing the Chinese the effects of a railway, on a large scale, will they be led to open up their country'. Niebuhr comments that although people shape themselves and perceive others through difference, we also have much to share as humans.

The twenty excerpts cover six regions of the world: Eastern Europe, Arabia and the Islamic World, Asia and the Pacific, China, the Americas and Africa, taken from published travel books between 1518 and 1921. Each section is provided with background information and a short commentary. Some of the earliest publications have been amplified and revisited by later writers. For example, Joris van Speilbergen's 1906 book, *The East and West Indian Mirror and the Australian Navigations of Jacob le Maire*, uses Le Maire's 17th century accounts of his journeys ending with entries written in 1616, at a time when 10% of the Dutch population were said to be sailors.

Contrary to 20<sup>th</sup> century lay understanding of 'Eastern Europe' as a Communist era construct, Niebuhr presents it as having originated in the schism between faiths: Orthodox and Roman Catholic, in 1054AD. The excerpt from William

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Lithgow's *The Totall Discourse of the Raree Adventures & Painful Peregrinations of the Long Nineteene Yeares Travayles from Scotland to the most Famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Affrica*, sets out to discuss the 'borderlands between Christianity and Islam' but with a slant towards showing 'a rejection of the Islam's success over the Christian states in Europe'; this despite the Turks' 'infinite number of men, great discipline and force of munitions'. That these borderlands remained interesting is shown by the 'hundreds of thousands of tourists from Western Europe and America annually' who flocked to the Dalmatian coast—noted in 1910 by F. Kinsley Hutchinson; his writing is the most recent of those excerpts in the Eastern Europe sample, covering just sixty years.

Andrew Hammond noted in his 2007 book *The Debated Lands: British and American Representations of the Balkans* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press) that it was colonization, denial of self-rule, and the acceleration of nationalism during the 19th century which promoted much Balkan travel writing, demonstrating British support for the Austrian occupation of the western Balkans; and that the region's development could be an important facilitation to British trade with countries further East. He also noted that early travel writers set out with a sense of pride in their nationality, an urge for self-aggrandizement and felt superiority for their conduct, expecting that their 'inferiors' would wish to emulate them.

In the same way, the early phase of travel writing recorded not only exploration but domination as well as the 'innate moral iniquity' and 'servility of indigenes'. In other words their writing portrayed a disdainful view of alien peoples they encountered and the countries they travelled through, the manners and customs they found, usually comparing them unfavourably to those at home. These views were reinforced by those who travelled, and wrote shortly afterward, quoting from the earlier writers, and furthermore, with such preparation, watching out for proof of denigratory aspects of behaviour or outlook in those they met. Their writing displayed a 'pseudo-scientific conceit of a staunchly racist age'.

As Hammond explained about the phase of travel writing on the Balkans, commencing from the time of the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 1850s, observations on the Ottoman Empire have little appreciation for its earlier period of high culture: for its art, its remarkable architecture, its theatre and music, its culinary arts and material variety, and particularly for its non-commercial, relatively plural, social fabric. Instead the focus is on the dirt and squalor, with an over emphasis on the

inaccessibility of its regions, and self-congratulation at overcoming hardships in reaching them. Mary Edith Durham was exceptional, for her many positive representations, as well as her criticism for Western culture.

Later travel writers, appreciating their break from life at home, became more optimistic in their observations. These writers, with neither commercial nor military interests, tended to choose their favoured country and idealized its peasant utopia, its new beginning or bright future, marvelling at the mystery of what they found, at the same time conveying doubts about their own cultures. The travellers made it clear that they were happiest when fully accepted into whatever society they found themselves (whether wealthy merchants or lowly peasants), particularly enjoying visits within private homes. This point has been very well documented by Božidar Jezernik in his *Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers*, 2004.

However, what had been seen as Balkan savagery, was now interpreted as wholesome bravery, Montenegrin men, in particular, were excused any form of work ‘as a result of their five centuries of warrior status’. (Hammond: 123). Niebuhr’s excerpt from J. Gardner Wilkinson’s 1848 book on the Balkans also has praise for the ‘wild’ Montenegrins. This was a period when Serbia and Macedonia were widely described in laudatory terms for their glorious and heroic, past and present. The term ‘Servia’ was quietly changed to ‘Serbia’ sometime between 1914 and 1915, to avoid the connotation of servility.

There is no explanation of the possible relationship between the editor of the current volume and the writer of the book’s longest excerpt, *Travels in Arabia and other Countries in the East* (Karsten Niebuhr, 1799). The early Niebuhr and companion travelled with large beards in the Arab fashion; and these, with our long robes, gave us a very oriental appearance’. They took Arabic names and claimed that no-one suspected that they were Europeans.

Slavery is a topic covered in several of the excerpts, demonstrating a wide range of opinion on the subject. Several excerpts, like, Thomas Henry Grattan Esmonde’s *Round the World with the Irish Delegates* (1892) are rich in anthropological detail. Esmonde however, is an early critic of the malevolence and self-interest of colonizers. Those describing life in China find an excess of superstition which many Christian missionaries seek to undermine, easing the way for business. Alonzo de Guzman, writing in 1862, describing the life of Peruvian Indians, highlights the fact that they live from the abundance of natural foodstuffs which grow

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without the need even to plant. But he also describes their extreme competence with a variety of offensive weapons, and their ‘most fearful and cruel’ use of them. Niebuhr notes that Western exploration far into inland regions of Africa didn’t take place until well into the 19th century, once medicines for malaria were discovered. He gives a figure of about ten million slaves taken to the Americas before slavery ended in the US in 1808, and in Brazil in 1888. The excerpt from Anthony Benezet’s *A Short Account of that Part of Africa, Inhabited by Negroes* is unusual for its time (1762) in its criticism of slavery.

The material in the book provides immense scope for discussion and further study, and will surely be on booklists for college and high school travel literature classes (which one senses is where this collection derived from in the first place). As a textbook, it seems overindulgent to provide a calculation of the equivalent modern distance at each mention of ‘leagues—more helpful to the students’ own involvement would have been to have emphasised a single equivalence, given in the book’s Introduction to allow them to make the calculation themselves. The only Appendix is a Textual Analysis informing us that the main document of the book contains 56,902 words, though only 9,545 different words, with a 5-page list of all those used in the book. It is hard to discern the value of this, listed not alphabetically, but by the number of times they were used (not even giving page numbers), starting with ‘we 685’ and ending with ‘raped’, ‘perceptions’ and ‘irresponsible’ each only once; ‘interesting 13’ is roughly half way through the list. Niebuhr highlights from this ‘the importance of religion as a driving force in these accounts’.

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