

‘The Sights Are Worse Than The Journeys’: Travel Writing At The Mid-Century

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The mid-century is a pale spot on the critical map of travel writing. This is largely the fault of Evelyn Waugh, who in 1945 predicted a long hiatus in the genre: ‘There is no room for tourists in a world of “displaced persons”[:] the very young, perhaps, may set out like the Wandervogels of the Weimar period; lean, lawless, aimless couples with rucksacks, joining the great army of men and women without papers, without official existence, the refugees and deserters, who drift everywhere today between the barbed wire’.¹ Unfortunately literary criticism has taken this statement at face value, attending either to the abundant travel corpus of the prewar years or the postmodern versions of the genre, as if there had been literally nowhere to go and nothing to write home about in the mid-century years. Far from it. These decades are bookended by two substantial classics — Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941) and Wilfred Thesiger’s *Arabian Sands* (1959) — and peppered with international bestsellers in-between.

Yet there is much to ponder in Waugh’s statement: the myth of freedom that travel fosters; the ironic rejection of the tourist-traveller distinction; the modernist horror of the crowd; the traveller’s need for a home; the impact of war on the purpose and circumstances of travel; above all, his sense of nostalgia. Aimlessness had been part of the romance of travel and the declared habitus of a whole generation of dissolute young men and women trying to escape the boundaries of predictable bourgeois lives back home, as Paul Fussell argued in *Abroad*.² In a world in which millions of homeless were ‘drifting’ as a result of political vicissitudes, voluntary wandering seemed rather inappropriate. Hardly anyone who wrote travel books before the war continued to write them after 1945.

¹ Evelyn Waugh, *When the Going Was Good* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. xii-xiii.

² Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

The war had shifted borders and the Iron Curtain erected 'barbed wire'. This radically altered itineraries. Tantalising blank spots on the map were now more likely to be military installations rather than *terra incognita*. According to Peter Fleming,

the horizons of the British have been sharply contracted. The whole of China is out of bounds. Persia would hardly attract the casual traveller. The Indian peninsula, though still accessible, is no longer dotted with a dependable network of Government Houses and Residencies and dark bungalows, hill-stations and cantonments, between which residents and visitors formerly drifted almost without effort. French Indo-China is a battlefield.³

Note that tell-tale prewar description of travelling cropping up once more: effortless drifting. Fleming's sentiment underlined the extent to which imperialism had facilitated travel, adventure and exploration, and vice versa. This 'dependable network' of convenient colonial and exotic locations was fast disappearing. No one drifted into the Malayan Emergency; no one aimlessly wandered into the Mau Mau rebellion. The Cold War and the 'emergencies' of decolonisation radically altered the map and the very nature of travel. This raised important questions: where could one still go without becoming a package tourist?⁴ Where was the British traveler still welcome? What was the purpose of travel in the modern world? The happy union between travel and politics

³ Peter Fleming, 'The Man from Rangoon' (1951), in *Views from Abroad: The Spectator Book of Travel Writing*, ed. Philip Marsden-Sedley and Jeffrey Klink (London: Grafton, 1988): p. 7.

⁴ Modern mass tourism had its humble beginning in May 1950 when Valdimir Raitz, founder of Horizon Holidays, sold the first 'package' to 11 Britons. The 'package' was the combined fixed price for transport and at least one other element, normally accommodation. Raitz's pioneering version cost £32 10s (just over £1000 in today's money) and included a return flight in a decommissioned, unpressurised Dakota DC-3 from Gatwick via Nice to Calvi on Corsica, where the tourists spent a week in tents. Raitz would become one of Britain's biggest tour operators, quickly expanding to Spain. See 'Obituary: Vladimir Raitz', 14.09.2010, www.travelweekly.co.uk.

that had produced so much writing in the 1930s seemed destined to end.⁵ How could writers engage with the pressing political and historical processes of their time if they could (or would) not enter the geopolitical areas in which these changes took place? Was this one of the reasons why, according to Bill Schwartz, decolonisation could be so ‘underdetermined’ and ‘heavily mediated’ in the metropole that it appeared, at home, to be a well-managed and beneficial aspect of colonisation?⁶

The mood that emerges from the travel books of the late 1940s and 1950s is anything but well managed. Even if we consider the hybridity of this genre — its nearly indefinable position in the interstices of memoir, reportage, picaresque fiction, adventure tale, romance quest and pastoral elegy — the overall tone was one of melancholy. Most of the travellers continued to be white, male, upper-middle class, privately educated, heterosexual, and broadly skeptical of Western ‘modernity’, but there were noticeably more women. Many of the new voices would forge a career from travel writing and saw it as a way of escaping the bleakness of austerity Britain while retaining the excitement of wartime foreign deployment: Patrick Leigh Fermor, Wilfred Thesiger, Norman Lewis, James (later Jan) Morris, Lawrence Durrell, and Eric Newby. This canon was often tacitly supplemented by non-British writers such as Alan Moorehead (from Australia), Laurens van der Post (South Africa), or Edmund Hillary (New Zealand), perhaps because their books slotted so seamlessly into the older literary tradition of heroic adventure, ethnographic enquiry and exploration. Onto the British scene ‘drifted’ Europeans with hyphenated existences who wrote in English and for a British audience, or who would eventually make England their home (Sybille Bedford, Arthur Koestler). Like the earlier generations, these writers almost obsessively cited their predecessors in a gesture of continued belatedness, suspecting that any authentic encounter with

⁵ See Bernard Schweizer, *Radicals on the Road: The Politics of English Travel Writing in the 1930s* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2001).

⁶ Bill Schwartz, ‘Introduction’, *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*, ed. Rachael Gilmour & Bill Schwartz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 9.

foreign locales and people was already impossible.⁷ Observing a world irrevocably changed by, and engaged in, conflict many professed doubt over the merits of Western civilization (one of those legitimizing fictions of European expansionism). Bearing witness became as important as realising literary ambitions.⁸ Even if ‘the sights [were] worse than the journeys’, the postwar traveller felt, on the whole, more sympathetic towards the colonial subject and concerned over the fate of indigenous tribes in spite of some ‘deep-rooted imperial instinct’ of racial superiority.⁹ Reflecting on such instincts certainly made way for the self-irony of contemporary travel writing.

Postwar versions of the war abroad

When war broke out in 1939, it put paid to even simple European transit, let alone leisure travel. Its course chased British citizens stranded on the continent from country to country. The war also created British enclaves like Cairo, where writers supported the war effort.¹⁰ After her flight across the Mediterranean, Elizabeth David fetched up first in the cypher office in Alexandria and later in Cairo where she found work in the reference library of the Ministry of Information. She met Olivia Manning, Freya Stark, Norman Douglas, Laurence Durrell, Alan Moorehead, and — equally important — her Greek and Sudanese cooks. Strictly speaking, *A Book of Mediterranean Food*

⁷ By the mid-nineteenth-century, many European travellers felt that they were too late for an ‘authentic’ encounter with the exotic orient and realized that their ideas of this encounter had already been mediated by earlier fiction and travel writing. See Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

⁸ This was certainly the case for Wilfred Thesiger as Mark Cocker argues in *Loneliness and Time: The Story of British Travel Writing* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), pp. 68–81.

⁹ Sybille Bedford, *The Sudden View* (London: Victor Gollancz: 1953), p. 242. (The book was later re-published under the title *A Visit to Don Otavio: A Mexican Odyssey*). Jan Morris, *Sultan in Oman* (1957) (London: Eland, 2008), p. 152.

¹⁰ See Artemis Cooper, *Cairo in the War, 1939 - 1945* (London: John Murray, 2013).

(1950) is not a conventional travel book, but it is an unusually sanguine product of wartime travel and full of literary extracts by the travel writers she met in Antibes, on Syros and in Cairo. It certainly revolutionized the dismal postwar British cuisine through the introduction of such exotic vegetables as aubergines and courgettes. Others translated the experience of the foreign posting or battlefield into fiction: Alexander Baron, H.E. Bates, Nevil Shute, and Evelyn Waugh all wrote novels. Olivia Manning's odyssey would provide the material for the Balkan and Levant trilogies. Much travel writing published during or shortly after the war comes from writers affiliated with British intelligence, as was the case before the war for most Arabists. Freya Stark's wartime journeys from Aden through Egypt, to the Levant and Iraq, published in 1945 as *East is West*, are a good example of the kind of propagandistic war work a professional traveller could do to promote British interests. Skeptical of Jewish Zionism and Arab nationalism alike, she was most interested in the *Effendi*, the young Westernised men of the aspiring middle classes, as the generation most likely to plough a moderate, Anglophile furrow. Her narrative comes alive when she abandons the honours list of deserving Excellencies and directly engages with local people. Then we learn how hard it is to set up girls schools in Syria; how one could circumvent even the most intractable Iraqi customs official by appealing to his sense of chivalry; how a portable cinema opens doors to the women's quarters in the Yemen and offers surprising insights: 'there is no doubt that women boxed up in houses are much more powerful than those of us who roam about outside'.¹¹ Yet, vignettes of female experience are infrequent, as if gender should not matter, and were literally subordinated to her espousal of British paternalism.

Like many British travellers, Stark could still rely 'on that dependable network' of government houses and was hardly ever without an entourage of servants: mentioning 'my Somali driver, his two aides, my Yemeni cook and Syrian servant' all relativise claims about intrepid adventure.¹² Ursula Graham Bower, undertaking anthropological research and photography among

¹¹ Freya Stark, *East is West* (London: John Murray, 1945), p. 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the Naga tribe in a far corner of North East India, also claimed to be ‘a woman alone’ when war broke out, and rather close to where the Japanese were soon dropping bombs from across the Burmese border. She, too, could employ local porters, a cook, a gardener, and a general servant. District Officers, however, generally frowned on unattached females. She was ordered to abandon her ‘jungle work’ and run a refugee kitchen in Lumding and later a Watch and Ward scheme on the Barak river. *Naga Path* (1952), unlike so many travel books, does not include a map and this tends to disorientate the reader. It underlines how remote British outposts could be and how hidden the tribes they encompassed. It is also an important reminder of the support colonial subjects and indigenous people gave to the British at war.

It is easy to forget among the volumes of pre-war travel writing how rare any kind of foreign travel would have been for the ordinary (let alone working-class) Briton. Despite the Baedeker and Murray guides, this was not yet the age of real mass or package tourism which really took off in the late 1950s and 1960s. Travel had remained the privilege of the (mostly male) upper-middle classes who also had the education so often implied in travel books’ intended audience, and which sometimes accounts for the genre’s *longeurs*: modern languages, Greek and Latin, ancient history. Those who had languages and local knowledge were more likely to be posted in the intelligence service abroad: Patrick Leigh Fermor on Crete, Freya Stark in the Near and Middle East, Norman Lewis in North Africa and Italy, and Wilfred Thesiger in the Sudan and Syria. But how did the millions of conscripted military personnel negotiate the foreign experience that war entailed, the unfamiliar climes and cultures of Burma and Malaya, Egypt and Libya, Italy and Iraq? Little preparation seems to have gone into this, as if the troop environment had to provide a sufficiently portable home. ‘To have an inkling of the political situation of the country in which we found ourselves would have been useful but none was given, and we trod the hard road of trial and error’, commented Norman Lewis about the shoddy organisation of the Field Security Service, when he

edited his notebooks in 1978 as *Naples '44*.¹³ As an exemplary demonstration of the intersection of war writing and travel writing in which the immediacy of the present tense and the diary form are retained, *Naples '44* tells us — as much as *Naga Path* does — that being stationed abroad involved a lot of contact with local civilians. Working as a military police officer, Lewis had to contend with local smugglers and military black marketeers, the camorra's vendettas and honour killings alongside partisan fights and rampant prostitution. His subtitle, *An Intelligence Officer in the Italian Labyrinth*, dryly summarises how bewildering the mixture of systemic local violence, wartime sexuality and Allied ignorance must have been. Yet he still he finds time — as if this were a conventional travel book — to describe the eruption of Vesuvius, marvel about the local wine and remember eating eels in Amalfi. Perhaps the era's most interesting literary epiphenomenon is that travel writing's anthropological curiosity (who are these people?) informs ethical questions about war (why did they do this? why did we do that?). Rebecca West's *Greenhouse with Cyclamens* (1946–54) and Sybille Bedford's *The Faces of Justice: A Traveller's Report* (1961) are unthinkable without this fruitful conjunction.

Foreign Office provision *was* made for part of the European theatre of war in publications that borrowed heavily from the traditional guide book. *Instructions* booklets were available for servicemen in France and Germany ahead of the Normandy invasions. (The United States War Department had issued similar booklets for American Servicemen in Britain and Australia in 1942). These booklets contained short descriptions of foreign manners and cuisine, historical précis, maps, social customs and taboos, as well as a list of stock phrases. These were of course ideological commentaries on national stereotypes aimed at bridging cultural differences for the benefit of military cooperation (France and the USA) or cementing them to avoid fraternisation or pity (Germany). Here the private learnt that the 'Germans are not good at controlling their feelings' and

¹³ Norman Lewis, *Naples '44* (London: Eland, 2002), p. 8.

that French men ‘may relieve nature rather openly in public’.¹⁴ Their often patronising tone is a reminder of the sharp class distinctions that marked British society and of the cultural anxiety that surrounded wartime sexuality. The *Instructions* booklets, then, as guidebooks for encounters of military personnel with European civilians, are a testament to the British government’s recognition that such (mass) experiences had to be managed because their scale was socially unprecedented. In this respect France and Germany fared better than Greece and Italy, for which no *Instructions* were issued, as if all that Greek and Latin and those reams of ancient history were any use in a war that was not the *Iliad*.¹⁵

Sic transit: new ruins, new nomads

Among those who travelled through the ruins of Central Europe are the same politically engaged writers one encounters in the 1930s: George Orwell, Storm Jameson, Steven Spender and W.H. Auden. Like Lewis in Naples, they found moral bankruptcy exacerbated by shortages of everything. So many sights and sites were unprecedented, challenging writers’ ekphrastic skills and readers’ imagination alike. The *loci terribiles* that became the early postwar tropes for the rupture of civilization – the camp and the bombed city – were each so extreme that they required visual evidence to enter into the cultural imaginary. Only war correspondents and military personnel

¹⁴ *Instructions for British Servicemen in Germany 1944* [abridged] (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2005), n.p. *Instructions for British Servicemen in France 1944* [abridged] (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2005), n.p.

¹⁵ Alongside Lewis’ retrospective dismissal and Waugh’s sarcasm in his *Sword of Honour* trilogy, neither Edmund Wilson (*Europe without Baedeker*, 1948) nor Henry Miller (*The Colossus of Maroussi*, 1941) were impressed by the colonial habitus of British Officers in Europe.

witnessed the camp liberations.¹⁶ Their laconic accounts often send the reader back to the photographs but are invaluable because these sites changed very rapidly, either because they were disease-ridden and had to be razed (like Belsen) or the occupation forces pragmatically requisitioned them as firewood or for housing troops, prisoners or Displaced Persons. The bombed city, however, remained ruined for sufficiently long to be turned from a site into a sight for literary writers. The sheer scale of material destruction took everyone's breath away, hence the frequent incomparability topos (a staple of travel writing) as here in James Stern's panoramic view of the medieval city of Nuremberg:

What you saw from here you could not compare to anything you'd ever seen, not even to a dream, for dreams are too detailed, and here the sight was too vast, too overwhelming for the eye to rest on details. I have seen moving pictures of the remains of Hiroshima. Nürnberg from the Burg bore no resemblance to them, for the Japanese city appeared almost flat, and the German one was nowhere in as clean a state. [...] From the Burg, to the limit of vision in every direction, and that was a long way with long sight, you saw — with the exception of the Gothic towers — an endless unbroken brickscape of jagged walls.¹⁷

Ruinous 'brickscares' feature prominently in early postwar travel writing but they are no longer picturesque or romantic even if they make for spectacular chiaroscuro settings in the films of the period.¹⁸ Stephen Spender on visiting bombed Cologne warned his British readers: 'Everything has

¹⁶ The BBC's Richard Dimbleby was present at the liberation of Belsen on 15th April 1945 and his brief account for radio is available on the BBC news website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/4445811.stm, accessed 29.01.2016.

¹⁷ James Stern, *The Hidden Damage* (1947) (London: Chelsea Press, 1990), p. 288.

¹⁸ Ruined cities are part of the 'set' for Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) and Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Germany Zero Hour* (1948).

gone. In this the destruction of Germany is quite different from even the worst that has happened in England (though not different from Poland and from parts of Russia)'.¹⁹ The European city was not London after the Blitz; something had been irrevocably lost: 'The people who live there seem quite disassociated from Cologne. They resemble rather a tribe of wanderers who have discovered a ruined city in a desert and who are camping there, living in the cellars and hunting amongst the ruins for the booty, relics of a dead civilization'.²⁰ The flattened city was a paradoxical chronotope for Spender, as much an indicator of technological advances and large-scale military co-operation as a complete throwback to the neolithic state of nomads, troglodytes and hunter-gatherers: communities degenerate into 'tribes', city dwelling into makeshift 'camping', and commercial activity into 'hunting for the booty'. Violence is the common denominator across this temporal spectrum. We remember Waugh's discomfort at rubbing shoulders with Displaced Persons and refugees drifting between barbed wire. Spender's description sits uneasily between witnessing and spectatorship. This self-doubting, compromised gaze at the modern world frames postwar travel writing much more strongly than its antecedents.

The traveller's ambivalence about ruins continues for much of the mid-century. In the light of Albert Speer's monumentalism, ancient architectural ambition now looked more suspect. For Norman Lewis the vastness of Angkor Wat pointed to the political nature of the Khmer empire as 'nothing if not totalitarian'.²¹ Similarly, Sibylle Bedford found the colossal Zapotec ruins at Mitla 'entirely successful, entirely frightening': 'If the Nazis had not been so cheap, had their taste been better and their instinct for self-dramatisation been less Wagnerian, this is the way they would have built'.²² As Rose Macaulay put it dryly in 1953: '*Ruinenlust* has come full circle: we have had our fill'. She reminded her readers that even if 'Monte Cassino put on with wreckage a new dignity',

¹⁹ Stephen Spender, *European Witness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946), p. 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ Norman Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent* (1951), *Norman Lewis Omnibus* (London: Picador, 1996), p. 213.

²² Bedford, *The Sudden View*, p. 231.

much of our cultural response to ‘jagged walls’ had been softened by art, poetry and the passage of time. War, revolution, and conquest had ravaged earlier ages who produced their own seemingly ‘staunchless grief’ before we naively proclaimed the remnants picturesque.²³ Elizabeth Bowen, perambulating through Rome in 1959 and no stranger to rubble herself, reflected on the unnerving quality of a temporally vertiginous cityscape of ruins for the first, eighteenth-century British tourists:

Rome was the archetype on which those generations had been brought up — that it fell they knew, but it had not really fallen until they saw it: the brutish actuality of a scene of violence. [...] they saw, of course, very much more of a mess than we see now — indiscriminate, tottery, overgrown [...] blotchy façades, weed-grown *piazze*, foetid alleys. The palaces in which they were entertained (if they had introductions) were dark as catafalques inside, cobwebby, musty. [...] Much of antiquity could not be got at — carved doorways, capitals, columns, scraps of inscription, portions of arches had got themselves embedded into the Ghetto, amid flapping black rags and a stinking fishmarket. *Sic transit*.²⁴

Bowen shows that the difference between remnants and ruins, rubble and relics lies in the eye of the beholder as much as in artifice. Augustan Romans’ scant veneration of antiquity had not yet promoted the excavation, preservation and presentation of the past as cultural capital for the tourist gaze. The synchronic architectural ‘mess’ of the eighteenth-century city underlined the perturbing fact that all Empires fall precisely when Britain’s was ascending and expanding.

When Bowen and Macaulay reflected on the transition from rubble to ruin, the British Empire was indeed in sharp decline. Lawrence Durrell’s *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* (1958) is one of

²³ Rose Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1953), p. 454.

²⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, *A Time in Rome* (1959) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 104.

the few books to engage with independence movements. Less a travel book than one of foreign residence in the years of Cypriot *enosis* (the island's independence movement from 1953–6) it deplores the British administration's shortcomings. The pejoratively abbreviated 'Cyps' of colonial parlance did not even enjoy 'the amplitude of our own civic and cultural resources' – universities, swimming pools, rail networks, cricket grounds, libraries – leading Durrell to join a number of mid-century travellers who cast doubt over the cultural life promulgated by Fleming's 'dependable network'.²⁵ Durrell was exasperated by the British colony that 'lived a life of blameless monotony, rolling about in small cars, drinking at the yacht club, sailing a bit, going to church, and suffering agonies of apprehension at the thought of not being invited to Government House on the Queen's Birthday.'²⁶ For the same reason Leigh Fermor slated Barbados as 'parochial and grey and fiercely Anglo-English'.²⁷ Blameless monotony in colonial outposts also drove Elizabeth David and Diana Shipton to distraction; the realisation that Kashgari women smoked like chimneys among themselves is the social climax in *An Antique Land* (1950). Wilfred Thesiger was so frustrated about his isolation from local life in the Sudan that he resigned. Even after Burmese independence, when colonisers had become expatriates, Norman Lewis saw how the racial seating order on his steamer on the Irrawaddy was strictly maintained. In this 'enclave of diehard Englishry' everyone would 'boastfully display their ignorance, their contempt and distaste for everything about the country'.²⁸ In contrast, Durrell's vignettes about his neighbours in the village where he was building a house, were replete with sozzled anecdotes and vibrant characters whom he portrayed with unflinching affection. For Stark, who visited Durrell on Cyprus, it took *enosis* to reflect on the premise and *durée* of imperialism: sailing along the Turkish Coast tracing Alexander's journey (and describing ruin after ruin), she wondered: 'the only way to establish lasting empire anywhere was

²⁵ Lawrence Durrell, *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), p. 132.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁷ Patrick Leigh Fermor, *The Traveller's Tree* (1950) (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 154.

²⁸ *Golden Earth* [1952], *Norman Lewis Omnibus*, pp. 330, 360.

and is to bring to a nation a pattern of civilization whose intrinsic merits it can feel to be better than its own'.²⁹ What were those merits now? What would remain?

Nostalgia, Anti-Modernity and the Perma-War

If imperial decline and the crisis in Western civilization produced a more consistently elegiac mood, travel writers' nostalgia was tempered by a quest for authenticity and a quasi-curatorial need for witnessing people, customs, and ways of life that were about to vanish. Some titles of the era — *The Last Grain Race*, *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, *Tristes Tropiques* — captured their chagrin. Other indicators of exhaustion were anthologies of prewar travel writing such as Alec Waugh's *The Sugar Islands* (1949) or Evelyn Waugh's *When the Going Was Good*.³⁰ However, some of the best-selling travel books were picaresque narratives of failure: Sybille Bedford's *The Sudden View: A Mexican Journey* (1953) and Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958). Enduring bumpy detours, eating horrifically indigestible food, being marooned on awful trains in torrential rain or stuck below the summit after weeks of struggle and dismissed as a 'couple of pansies',³¹ are all exasperating experiences chivalrously endured. Yet as critics have observed, the role of the antiquated lady or gentleman traveller comically battling obstreperous 'natives', incomprehensible

²⁹ Freya Stark, *The Lycian Shore* (London: John Murray, 1956), pp. 84f., 145.

³⁰ The past tense was also the mood of E Lucas Bridges' *Uttermost Part of the Earth* (1948), Arthur Grimble's *A Pattern of Islands* (1952) and Gerald Brenan's *South from Granada* (1957), in which they described journeys and residencies undertaken decades ago.

³¹ Eric Newby, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958) (London: Picador, 1974), p. 248.

customs and adverse circumstances often masks a ‘residual feeling of moral superiority’ concomitant with the imperial instinct.³²

Exploration used to have an aim; postwar travel seemed like a faintly absurd quest for melancholic nomads. Consumption and machines made globalisation and modernisation more palpable. The most modern form of transport, the aeroplane, held virtually no narrative potential and was seen as a particularly faceless agent of violence. Flying over Indo-China in 1950 (a region that would be engulfed in war for three decades) Norman Lewis observed smoke billowing from the villages and mused, ‘what an aid to untroubled killing the bombing plane must be’.³³ The more humble motorcar also featured as an unreliable, even hazardous mode of getting about, often accompanied by the soft sibilants of deflating tires or the screams of people being run over. In fact, the failing automobile was the objective correlative for humankind’s ongoing battle with nature or natives. Freya Stark required locals to mend her overheating engine and flat tyres in the Persian desert. Mexican topography was so challenging, and roads so poor, that the broken down car is virtually a character in Sybille Bedford’s narrative. James Morris, traveling in convoy with the Sultan of Oman, realized that half the royal entourage was pererennially detained by fixing something vehicular, and getting ‘left behind’ screaming for attention was the prank *du jour*. The screaming started almost immediately for Eric Newby, whose overland journey from Turkey to the Hindu Kush got off to a bumpy start when his companion ran over an Armenian nomad and only narrowly avoided arrest. The modern traveller’s desire for relentless speed and motion often caused consternation.

³² Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 36.

³³ Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent*, p. 14. Stacy Burton also noted the plane as an agent of violence in Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. See *Travel Narrative and the Ends of Modernity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 136f.

Speed and motion needed fuel. All travellers to the Middle East from the 1930s onwards realised that oil prospecting and Arab nationalism would change the region for ever. Yet as Billie Melman states, this inevitable and rapid change was rarely read as an opportunity for self-determination, prosperity, urbanisation and development that Arab governments were capable of managing.³⁴ Instead, accounts of the Middle East in particular are tinged with what Renato Rosaldo has called the paradox of ‘imperialist nostalgia’, a wistful reminiscing about an authentic mode of life now corrupted by contact with the West, a process for which the European (writer) took no responsibility.³⁵ Jan Morris is perhaps the best example for this attitude and a notable historian of the British Empire and its hegemonic heydays of Pax Britannica (the relatively peaceful imperial century 1815 - 1914). Loyal her own imperialist instincts, she endorsed British colonial practices as ‘knavery beneficial’.³⁶ Thesiger was much more skeptical of British influence in the Middle East, and his romanticism has to be read as a fierce anti-modernity in which he elevated the doomed Bedu to a noble victim. Setting out for the Rub’ al Kali in 1945 with a ‘belief in [his] own racial superiority’ he soon felt ‘like an uncouth, inarticulate barbarian, an intruder from a shoddy and materialistic world.’ He returned humbled from his desert journeys: ‘Among no other people have I ever felt the same sense of personal inferiority’.³⁷ Thesiger’s journeys form an existential quest for ascetic, homosocial companionship and some quintessential experience of freedom. His are not erudite Arabist volumes, but empirical books: sympathetic encounters not with artefacts, ruins, libraries and scholars but primarily with a unique landscape and a vanishing people. Compare his remarks to how Morris concludes *Sultan in Oman* (1957): ‘in all honesty I did not think of

³⁴ Billie Melman, ‘The Middle East/Arabia: “the cradle of Islam”’, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 118.

³⁵ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 69.

³⁶ Morris, *Sultan in Oman*, p. 154.

³⁷ Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 38, 329.

[Muscat's Gwadaris] as quite the same species as the administrator or myself [...] some deep-rooted imperial instinct within me kept me rigidly apart and divided from them'.³⁸

Such rigid divisions were breaking up. However eurocentrically Ursula Bower framed the remote Zemi tribe in *Naga Path*, her protective attachment to them is abundantly clear. They, in turn, thought of her as family. Her talent, like Thesiger's and Lewis', lay in narrative vignette and visual characterisation; all took extraordinary pictures, worked from notebooks, and benefitted from the editorial process of memory. Here is a tantalising chapter opening from *Naga Path*: 'At half past ten on a bright October morning Degaland the dog-boy eloped with Dinekamba's sister'.³⁹ Who would not want to read on? Unsurprisingly given her anthropological remit, she is fascinated by courtship, disease, spirituality and ritual. The reader is most curious about Namkia, her manservant throughout her stay in India, and his negotiation of her role as both white British woman and 'sister'. That the travelling companion and the local guides and helpmates are no longer written out of the narrative or lumped together as 'natives' but given a name, characterisation, a voice and a history becomes more important.⁴⁰ Not only does it acknowledge the journey as a collective effort rather than fashioning it as a singular adventure; it also underlines the subjectivity of the experience through the overt literary devices used to bring these characters into the narrative. The reader easily remembers Bin Kabina of the Rashid from *Arabian Sands*, the Nuristanis Abdul Ghiyas and Badar Khan in *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, Lewis' Burmese guide U Tun Win, or the discreetly abbreviated 'E.' (Bedford's lover Ethel Murphy) from *A Sudden View*.

One would not imagine that reading about a fairly desolate landscape traversed with the most basic means — on foot and on camels — could be utterly engrossing. Yet Thesiger's *Arabian*

³⁸ Morris, *Sultan in Oman*, p. 153.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴⁰ This is not always true for the writer's gender politics: Thesiger cites male predecessors such as T.E. Lawrence, Philby or Thomas but completely ignores the writing of Gertrude Bell or Freya Stark, who were Arabists and had also travelled through the Hadramaut.

Sands is enlivened by many authoritative albeit respectful anthropological observations about the Bedu and attentive ekphrastic passages about a surprisingly varied landscape. We learn that sand comes in a myriad of colours and ‘sings’; that across a vast terrain the Bedu recognise the tracks of each camel and every tribe; how bread is ‘baked’ in the desert; the different taste of water in each well; how one keeps clean without washing; what the rites of circumcision are for each tribal community. The narrative form thus enacts the ponderous progress of the journey and tells us what a more ‘natural’ pace enables us to perceive:

there was time to notice things — a grasshopper under a bush, a dead swallow on the ground, the tracks of a hare, a bird’s nest, the shape and colour of ripples on the sand, the bloom of tiny seedlings pushing through the soil. There was time to collect a plant or to look at a rock. The very slowness of our march diminished monotony. I thought how terribly boring it would be to rush about this country in a car.⁴¹

A very different pace propels Jan Morris, who in 1955 rushed about this country in a car and wrote almost immediately about it (note the fourteen years that lay between Thesiger’s first journey and its publication). The distinct personalities of people and camels that animate Thesiger’s narrative are dots on the horizon in Morris’ book. In fact, speed makes the dust-encrusted *Sultan in Oman* ‘terribly boring’ for the reader interested in the people of Oman but it propels into the foreground Morris’ imperial instincts. At the end of the journey the benefits of Pax Britannica can be stripped of ideological cotton wool to its capitalist bedrock: ‘For the first time the British in the Middle East began to see themselves [...] simply as people making money’.⁴²

Elsewhere, the West’s consumerism invaded. On Haiti, Leigh Fermor noticed that the ‘fabric of romantic dilapidation festered into an American drugstore or a milk-bar, and everywhere,

⁴¹ Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 60.

⁴² Morris, *Sultan in Oman*, pp. 153, 72.

in tin and plastic and cardboard, were symptoms of the Coca-Cola plague'.⁴³ This is a lovely example of Rosaldo's imperialist nostalgia combined with British postwar anxiety about American cultural imperialism. Surely the metaphor of Westernisation — or Western patterns of consumption — as a disease is rather problematic in a geographical area whose British and French plantations were made profitable by transported African slaves and, later, Indian labourers. The scourge was European colonialism-cum-slavery, yet its material ruins constitute 'romantic dilapidation' whereas American commodities produce mere litter.

In a world of restricted travel, popular authors borrowed from travel books. Ian Fleming, for instance, quoted from Fermor in *Live and Let Die* (1954) and Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) was surely indebted to Norman Lewis's bestselling *A Dragon Apparent*. For Peter Hulme, Lewis' career defined mainstream postwar travel writing, but I think in his era he was rather exceptional in anticipating the links between decolonisation and the Cold War.⁴⁴ French planters had conscripted the ethnic tribes of South Annam into virtual slave labour and the ensuing shortage of hands on their own farms caused starvation. Contact with US missionaries and French anthropologists embarking on social experiments in model villages deprived them of their religion, dress and ancient social structures. Chinese-sponsored nationalist guerrillas under the Viet Minh requisitioned what food was left both from indigenous tribes and Annamite villages. Chinese traders moved in and grew rich selling to all sides. Gradually, punitive massacres by Foreign legionnaires against the locals drove them towards the Viet-Minh. However joyless the re-education programmes, communism simply offered a better life than exploitative colonialism. In retrospect Lewis's book explains why this region would sink into a state of permanent warfare that would last for decades: colonial powers economically dependent on plantations in South East Asia but threatened by independence movements would convince the anti-colonialist USA that their

⁴³ Fermor, *The Traveller's Tree*, p. 231.

⁴⁴ Peter Hulme, 'Travelling to write (1940-2000)' in Hulme & Youngs (eds), *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 88.

intervention against insurgents was a legitimate anti-Communist containment strategy.⁴⁵ Small wonder that journalists reporting on the Vietnam war rated Lewis so highly. Unlike Thesiger, he did not ennoble the ethnic tribes by seeing them in isolation from their political context or turning the squalor of their living conditions into some prelapsarian freedom. In fact, he was unsentimental about all the groups he found, most notably the French settlers who regarded their plantations as the ‘principal show-places the country has to offer; only slightly less spectacular, perhaps, than Mount Fuji from one of its accepted viewpoints, Niagara Falls, or the Grand Canyon’.⁴⁶ Colonialism as natural wonder; tribal life exhibited in model villages. No one is possessed of that disastrous Jamesian innocence Greene embellished in *The Quiet American*. Lewis predicted the ‘phantasmatic Indochina’ of the French cultural imaginary: a Kipling-esque nostalgia for a neverland of lush flora, peopled with submissive Asians in a soft-focus setting of serene affluence, spiced with languid late afternoon passions predictably played out under whirring ceiling fans.⁴⁷ His drab Saigon is far from Marguerite Duras’ exoticised erotic fantasy in *The Lover* (1984). Here he cuts through such Orientalist romance: “Laos-ized Frenchmen are like the results of successful lobotomy operations — untroubled and mildly libidinous”.⁴⁸ Graham Greene diagnosed a similar state of affairs among the bungaloid miseries of Britain’s African colonies in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) - an unpopular book, Lewis found, with French colonials keen on projecting their own version of ‘blameless monotony’.

Mid-century British travel writing, then, performed a difficult transition from the imperialist habit of the past to a more uncertain, and seemingly diminished, future. Nostalgia and anti-modernity, the symptoms of postwar exhaustion and declining empires, informed its tone. Yet, as

⁴⁵ See Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 155f.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent*, pp. 135-6.

⁴⁷ See Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent*, p. 268.

we see with Lewis' account of Indochina above, in the rare instances when these symptoms became the genre's *objects* alongside foreign people and locales, this critical awareness paved the way for the self-irony of postmodern and postcolonial travel writing.