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Leighton and the Middle East website: Leighton and Victorian Travel

Forgotten voices of 19th century travel and exploration

Travel stories – a selective history?

In browsing through libraries and bookshops it might seem on the surface that travel history before the twentieth century was only ever undertaken by wealthy European men. The names of the explorers David Livingstone (1813-1873), Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904) and Richard F. Burton (1821-1890) are well known in Britain and around the world. Even in fiction writing of the nineteenth century, travel is seen through the western male world view. Examples include Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), Henry Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873).

These were among the dramatic adventure stories that young Victorian boys were told in their nurseries. In contrast, Victorian children were deprived of the stories of female travellers and explorers, of which there are many. In addition, Victorian society never imagined that men and women of other nineteenth century cultures could be as equally interested in travel and exploration as they were. Some of the commentaries by eastern travellers to Europe give insightful perspectives on social and cultural practices as seen by a non-Westerner.



View of Constantinople (now Istanbul) and the River Bosphorus, c.1890. Photograph by Sebah & Joaillier (photograph courtesy the Stapleton Collection)

Women Travellers

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), Frances Trollope (1780–1863), Mary Kingsley (1862–1900), Zeynab Hanoum are just some of the great names of women travellers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They challenged the notions of their time that travel was unsuitable for women and should only be done in the company of men. Most were openly criticised for what was seen as ‘forward behaviour’ particularly in centuries where women were expected to stay at home.

In response to such criticisms the writer and traveller Mabel Sharman Crawford (1830-1860), who wrote a book titled *Through Algeria* (1863) responded ‘if the exploring of foreign lands is not the highest end or the most useful occupation of feminine existence, it is at least more improving, as well as more amusing, than the crochet work or embroidery with which, at home, so many ladies seek to beguile the tedium of their unoccupied days’. The vast majority of



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women who undertook travel in the nineteenth century came from wealthy backgrounds and could afford to fund their adventures. This was the case if it was lone travel, with husbands or other family members and applies to both women from the west and east.

Challenging and reinforcing cultural stereotypes

Most travel and adventure fiction writing of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was biased by virtue of the fact that it was written in the so-called 'age of empires'. Therefore, the common theme in British and Ottoman novels sees the hero, usually a man, overcoming obstacles against a savage enemy and ultimately winning the day. In contrast to the fiction stories are the personal accounts of travellers, which offer more realistic descriptions of the lands and peoples encountered. It has to be remembered however, that even these accounts will be tainted with the assumptions of the writer. In Edith Wharton's (1862-1937) book *In Morocco* (1920) she describes the people of the marketplace in Marrakech in the following manner 'fanatics in sheep skins glowering from the guarded thresholds of the mosque ... consumptive Jews with pathos and cunning in their large eyes and smiling lips, lusty slave-girls with earthen oil-jars resting against their swaying hips'. Other accounts are striking in their questioning of traditional assumptions. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who was wife to the British ambassador in Istanbul wrote to her sister in 1717 saying:

I look upon the Turkish women as the only free people in the empire. It is true their law permits them (husbands) four wives, but there is no instance of a man of quality that makes use of this liberty, or of a woman of rank that would suffer it. Thus you see dear sister, the manners of mankind do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe.

Views from the outside

'The French show charity in words and deeds, but not when it involves their money and possessions' wrote the Egyptian scholar Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) in 1834. Al-Tahtawi was one of forty-four students sent to Paris from 1826-31 by Muhammad Ali, ruler of Egypt to study European education and legal systems. He published his records of this experience in 1834 under the title *The Extraction of Gold in the Summarising of Paris*. His account describes the impressive transport systems of Paris and the advances in medicine and education. Although he was impressed with French philosophy he was offended by French claims that 'the intellect of their philosophers and physicists is greater and more perceptive than that of the prophets'.

Over eighty years later the Turkish woman Zeyneb Hanoum wrote in her book *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions* (1912): 'In costume we are on a level with Paris, seeing as we buy our clothes



Photograph of nineteenth century tourists climbing the pyramids with native guides. (photograph courtesy the Stapleton Collection)



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there; and as regards to culture, we are perhaps more advanced than in the West...and yet how little we are known by the European critics'. As with western women travellers at this time, Zeyneb Hanoum came from a privileged background, her father being the minister of foreign affairs for the Ottoman Empire. She is seen by many today as an important figure in the early feminist movement. In a change from not having to wear the veil that was traditional in Turkey, she found elements of western costume equally topical to write about:

One thing to which I never seem to accustom myself is my hat. It is always falling off. Sometimes, too, I forget that I am wearing a hat and lean back in my chair: and what an absurd fashion – to lunch in a hat! Still, hats seem to play a very important role in Western life. Guess how many I have at present – twenty.

Our knowledge of nineteenth century travel between east and west is today limited by what history has chosen to highlight. The assumption that there was a one-way process from west to east is not accurate. As some of the above examples illustrate interactions were taking place on many more levels and between different kinds of people than is usually recognised.

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See also other article in this section:

- *Frederic Leighton's Travels*