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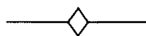


Reflections on Travel Writing

Tourism has all but replaced real travel, and television's roving eye has left few spots on the globe unknown, but travel writing has never sold better than during the last two decades. Dervla Murphy ponders the art and appeal of a mysteriously flourishing genre.

by Dervla Murphy

Things were different when I was young. As I prepared, in 1962, to cycle from Ireland to India, no one thought to ask me if I was going in order to celebrate feminine autonomy, or to get my own country in perspective, or to acquire heroic standing in the public eye. Nobody inquired if I was attempting to escape from a world in which I felt a misfit or to test or find or run away from myself. People just thought that I was crazy and made no further comment. Thirty years ago my sort of travelling lacked glamour. Effortless mass-tourism had recently burgeoned, and sane folk flew to India, quite cheaply, in eight hours.

Therefore I set off happily, on January 14, 1963, unaware of the need for either a convoluted hidden motive or a Serious Purpose. I did of course have a frivolous purpose: to enjoy myself. I had been looking forward to this adventure for 21 years, ever since my 10th birthday, in fact, when my parents gave me a bicycle and my grandfather presented me with an atlas.

It proved to be a stimulating convergence of gifts. The glossy world atlas revealed that there was very little water between Ireland and India; my first bicycle introduced me to the fact that pedalling was an agreeable mode of self-propulsion. For as long as I can remember I had wanted to travel long distances, alone and preferably through mountainous terrain. Five days later I decided to cycle—when grown-up enough—to India, a destination satisfyingly remote and (for one reared in an Irish village) exotic.

Now it is clear that that decision, which was even then a firm *decision*, not a childish whim, foreshadowed the structure of most of my future journeys. Although I was to become a professional writer, I have remained an amateur traveller. By nature I am only interested in wanderings that can be undertaken alone or with my daughter, unshackled by media subsidies or publishers' commissions, independent of newfangled equipment, and free of intrusive publicity. A certain amount of publicity is of course inevitable when books appear, such being the regrettable requirement of modern marketing. But that exposure, coming long after the journey, fails to taint it.

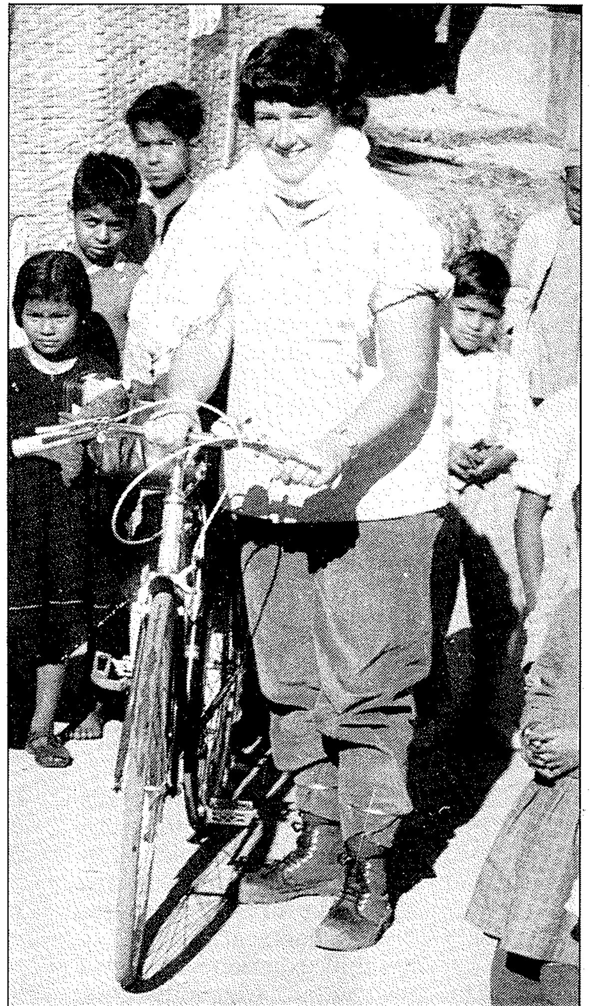
The now-fashionable probing of travel-

lers' motives or compulsions is a tiresome though understandable journalistic device. Interviewers have to earn a living by filling space and time, and since travel writing is now in vogue, they must interview people like me. Not much space or time would be filled, however, were the interviewers content with the honest answer, "I was born with an inclination to travel." It's curious, really. People with other congenital inclinations—stamp-collectors, dog-breeders, gardeners, golfers—are seldom required to delve deep into their subconsciousness to account for their dominant interests. What's different about travellers? Granted, a taste for solitary wandering through remote places is less common than an addiction to golfing or dog-breeding. Yet to me, it is as natural as gardening is to a gardener. Others' reactions have gradually brought me to realize that cycling to India or walking 1,300 miles through the Andes seems, to some, odd. But to me it feels perfectly normal.

Perhaps people are simply in search of heroes, daring souls who meet formidable challenges with supreme courage and resourcefulness—as travellers did in times past, when *exploring*. But my sort of travelling is a mere hobby. Alas, no fastnesses remain for the lone traveller to explore. The closest I came to "exploration" was in 1967, in the Tekazze Gorge of Ethiopia's Simien Mountains, where some locals had never before seen a white person. The misperception of my hobby as "daring" is, I fear, a measure of how artificial our mechanized, comfort-obsessed society has become.

My career in travel writing began modestly. Between 1963 and 1968 I wrote my first four books, all well reviewed but none keeping the wolf too far from the door. Then, in 1968, my daughter was born, and for five years I remained Europe-bound, believing she should be given a stable home life until old enough to cope with the wider world. When I returned to the publishing scene, with a book about Coorg in southern India, all had changed. Travel writing was no longer a minority interest. To the contrary, it was well on its way to becoming one of the more popular genres. And in a few years that bandwagon also began to roll in America. Why had public taste so suddenly changed?

And why, I wondered, had travel books become so popular just when they should have become obsolete? After all, on television one can *see* every detail of the remote village—the local costumes, dances, burial customs, musical instruments. At a flick of the dial, one can visit places no normal traveller could ever hope to reach. Helicopter-borne cameramen provide stunningly beautiful views of mountain ranges, rain-



The author, on her preferred means of locomotion, passes through a village on her journey to India.

forests, deserts. Why, then, has there been no decline of interest in the laborious descriptions of travel writers?

There are, I think, two reasons. The first is that many readers relish the intimacy of sharing in the author's reactions to beauty, strange customs, hardship, or eccentric characters. The second is that readers sense the fundamental flaw in the television travel documentary: the fact that the arrival of the crew in a traditional village alters it profoundly, at least for the duration of the film-making and sometimes, even, forever. By happy contrast, the lone writer, arriving on foot, is a bizarre, inexplicable phenomenon—but not a disruption. If careful never to be seen taking notes, which might be misinterpreted in half a dozen different ways, he or she is soon accepted. And what the writer happens to bump into can be quite necessary to the stay-at-home reader. In 1957, in her essay "The Travelling Reader," Freya Stark observed:

> Life in general requires a balanced diet, a variety of ingredients to make it healthy, and books are the easiest means ready to hand for the supplementing of any deficiency there may be.... The travel book opens a new horizon and is the best prescription for all prisoners—and how many of them there are! Not only the inactive, or the sick, but all who are tied down by duty, or riveted to a daily job, however interesting it may be: their diet suffers from constriction.

The reader may have begun to suspect that I do not like motor transport. A well-founded suspicion. In general I don't feel that I have been in a country unless I have propelled myself through it. Only in Madagascar is motoring, for me, an enjoyable experience. There a 390-mile journey can (and frequently does) take three days and two nights, travelling at an average speed of 12 m.p.h.—two miles less than my average cycling speed. In the southern desert, however, there is no alternative to trucking, although other parts of Madagascar, such as the mountainous central highlands populated by some of the world's most loveable people, are a trekker's paradise.

Recently someone asked me, "You've been to Central America?" and automatically I replied, "No." Hastily catching myself, and feeling extremely foolish, I exclaimed, "Sorry! Yes I have, but only by bus from Panama to Mexico in 1979." My companion looked at me a little oddly, yet that first response was *emotionally* true.

It is now much too late for me even to try to adjust to the motor age. In fact my adaptability is strictly one-way. I can effortlessly go backward in time but I cannot go forward from where I started 60 years ago in an Irish village. This is only occasionally a handicap—as for example in October 1991, when I attended Toronto's Harbourfront Readings and found myself incarcerated for eight days in the Westin Hotel. Even the company of such illustrious authors as Doris Lessing, Maurice Gee, Caryl Phillips, Michael Ignatieff, Eric Newby, and Nicola Bouvier could not counteract the misery and apprehension induced by this hotel. The bedroom windows wouldn't open, and before breakfast people with glazed expressions might be observed lifting weights and pedalling stationary bicycles in overheated "keep-fit rooms." Only at the Toronto Westin did I fully appreciate why many Westerners regard my journeys as *odd*.

I could not enjoy travelling where one has to depend for survival on organized support from one's own world. Being dependent (while never sponging) on local people is quite different—an essential ingredient of a satisfying journey. Dependency is the fastest breaker of barriers. Depending upon the local people for finding food, drink, shelter, an approved place to defecate and urinate—needs as familiar to Afghan nomads as to European aristocrats—establishes a common ground. Yet dependency must never be total. Failing to arrive at some village by sunset, you must

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have with you a tent and emergency rations. Unpredictability is the seasoning without which travel would be, in my view, insipid and almost pointless. To set off at dawn, having no idea where—or with whom—the dusk will find you is incomparably exciting, the best feeling in the world. Perhaps those who call me "a romantic traveller" are not far wrong.

Yet "romantic travelling" engenders its own problems. Because my first published book described cycling to India, my public image has remained indelibly CYCLIST, despite the fact that all my other major journeys were made on foot, with a pack-animal—in Ethiopia, with a mule; in Baltistan, a pony; in Mexico, a horse; in Peru, a mule, and in Cameroon, a horse.

Pack-animals involve an almost daily quota of stress. You may not care where you are when the sun sets, but your companion does. A suitable human campsite, offering level ground, clear water, and ample fuel, can be a disaster area for a hungry pack-animal. So you must press on, often to a place hardly fit for humans but providing adequate grazing for the beast. You can survive on half a tin of sardines, knowing that next evening, with luck, it will be possible to Eat Big in a village. So you do the mind-over-matter bit, while resolving never again to let supplies run so low. But your animal companion doesn't have that sort of mind. If there's no fodder at 6:30 P.M. on October 17, he cannot have consoling thoughts about stuffing it in at 6:30 P.M. on October 18. There is nothing more harrowing and guilt-provoking than seeing a pack-animal who has worked hard all day, *for you*, being denied sustenance.

Ninety-nine percent of my hate-mail is focused on my ill-treatment of pack-animals: How can I be so cruel! It's easy to visualize those letter-writers. Their dogs will wear cozy plaid jackets from October to April and be given chocolate drops, detrimental to canine health, thrice daily. Their cats will luxuriate on bean-bags in front of pseudo-log fires and wear bells to thwart their natural inclination to kill birds. Yes, I'm sometimes cruel to my pack-animals, because that's what life is like out there. But I always put them first. Whenever life is rough for them, it's even rougher for me. We have a nasty time together, as humans and animals have, travelling as partners in challenging territory, for millennia.

Plainly, travelling for fun and writing only travel books cannot be a lifetime's occupation. If it were, one might indeed have some of those neuroses for which media interviewers so hopefully grope. But labels are hard to avoid. For 30 years I have been labelled, "Travel Writer: Female." My second and third books were mainly about working as a volunteer, an untrained medical helper, in Tibetan refugee camps in India and Nepal, but the settings were sufficiently unfamiliar for both volumes to be counted as hybrids—semi-travel books. Yet I have also written books about Northern Ireland's "Problem," about Britain's race-relations (based on personal observations while living for a year in two inner-city ghettos), and about the nuclear power controversy. Still, I am known as "Travel Writer: Female."

Indeed, when asked, "Which is the more important to you, travelling or writing?" I know the answer. Five years of confinement to Europe after my daughter's birth didn't frustrate me. The new joys and worries of motherhood easily compensated for this restriction. But to stop writing—an activity I have regularly engaged in since the age of eight—would be impossible.

As for being a traveller, I find myself in 1992 resigned to becoming a dinosaur, doomed to extinction because unable to adapt to our fast-changing physical environment. In the past quarter century the world has been so "opened up" by motor roads that my natural habitat is becoming scarcer and scarcer. It's still there, to be sure. As late as 1987 I found it in Western Cameroon, where for three months I trekked with a splendid Fulani stallion as my pack-animal. But the rate of its shrinkage is alarming. The multinational tourist industry loses no time. Political changes and new highways expose areas previously shielded from that industry's depredations. Now tens of thousands of tourists-pretending-to-be-travellers are shepherded annually to regions that used to be the exclusive preserve of real travellers. Superbly illustrated brochures offer "Adventure in Nepal: 17 days from £1798." (Any sensible traveller could

live in Nepal for at least six months on £1798.) Or "23 Days by Jeep from Islamabad to Kashgar. Ideal Tour for the Adventure-Seeker. £1055 Land Only." Or "England to Kenya by Truck: Overland Adventure! From £1360: See 5 countries in 6 weeks!" (Who in his right mind *wants* to see five countries in six weeks?) Or, most pathetic of all, "A new program of independent walking from inn to inn through the most beautiful countryside in Europe—the Hautes Vosges! We blend superb walking with pre-booked accommodation, while your baggage is transported safely to your next destination. 7 days from £431. Inns are set 10–12 miles apart."

Tourists, following in the footsteps of Charles Darwin, annually flock to the Galapagos Islands to peer at wildlife up close.

By contrast with the traveller, whose rewards are hard-won, the tourist merely pays for a privilege that is inexorably destroyed by being attained—and destroyed for everyone. Hence we travellers sulk impotently when our natural habitat is invaded by jeep-loads of consumers. And we feel remorseful if, as writers or photographers, we have helped to draw attention to hitherto little-known regions. Tourism is intrinsically incompatible with travelling. The traveller's rewards are natural beauty—and silence, space, solitude—and also, no less importantly, spontaneous human-to-human contact with the locals, free of exploitation by either side. The traveller merges temporarily with a region and its people, as tourists cannot do.

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Like many travel writers, including Freya Stark and Jan Morris, I have never found "conventional" travel books—the sort I write—of much interest. Even as a youngster, when I was a would-be traveller thwarted by domestic ties, I enjoyed reading only supremely well-written accounts or those by authors for whom I felt a special affinity such as, among earlier travellers, Mungo Park and Isabella Bird Bishop and Mary Kingsley.

During the past few decades, while reviewing hundreds of contemporary travel books, I have witnessed the genre breaking its bank and flooding out to include anything that doesn't happen in the author's native land—and some things that do happen there (like transplanting one's family from a city to a mountainside). An anthropologist among the equatorial pygmies, a sociologist in Rio de Janeiro, an archaeologist in the Trucial States, a philologist in Ban Mong Pong, a gynecologist in Palaycottai, a paleontologist in Karabudakhent—all are considered to have written travel books. And such authors evidently rejoice in the freedom which this new non-genre permits them. The travel book, then, has become a vehicle for conveying any combination of hilarious mishaps, spiritual reflections, political obsessions, ecological crusades, and autobiographical musings so long as the material is set in odd climates and on unfamiliar terrain. Thirty-five years ago, Freya Stark saw this trend beginning: "The handing on of promiscuous fact, which made the charm of the earlier travellers, is degenerating into the travelogue."

Recently I was asked whether I could name, among this swelling flood of travel books, the five 20th-century travel writers I think the best, the most excellent. I could not comply. My list of "the best" runs to 30 or so. Revealing my five favorites is easier, personal prejudice being implicit in the word "favorite." A travel writer's personal-

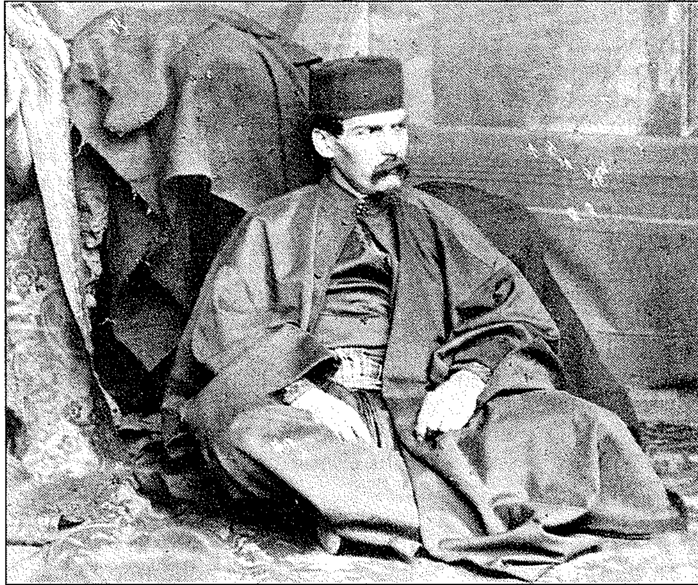
ity, as it emerges in his or her books, is more obviously important than the personality of a biographer, historian, or novelist. On page one we embark on a long journey with a companion whose temperament must be essentially congenial. If not, even the finest writing will bring on boredom. So my five favorites have little in common as travellers, although it may be no coincidence that they all combine conventionality, adaptability, and muted eccentricity in a way that is peculiarly English.

The first three are regarded as regional specialists: Freya Stark (b. 1893) on the Middle East, Dorothy Carrington (b. 1910) on Corsica, Patrick Leigh Fermor (b. 1915) on the Balkans. Colin Thubron (b. 1939) and Redmond O'Hanlon (b. 1947) represent the generation who, though collaborating in the world of documentaries and newspaper sponsorship, have carefully preserved their integrity as writers.

"Specialists" today are professional academics, but Freya Stark, Dorothy Carrington, and Patrick Leigh Fermor acquired their specialist reputations almost by chance, as the result of irresistible personal bewitchments. Freya Stark, who had no formal education, settled in the poorest quarter of Baghdad in the late 1920s to study Farsi in preparation for her journey to Luristan in Iran. (She had already mastered Arabic.) To supplement a meager private income, she wrote articles for the local English-language newspaper, and when these were noticed by Leonard Huxley, editor of *The Cornhill,* he exclaimed, "Here is someone who really can write!" After the publication of a collection of those articles, she remarked to a friend, "I find it's hard work to write to order and am not at all good at rapid modern journalism." The success of *The Valleys of the Assassins* (1934), describing her explorations on horseback in the gorges of the Pusht-I-Rūd, released her from journalism. Subsequently, in *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (1936), she roamed the Hadramawt on camel with her beloved people of the desert, developing a rare understanding of the Bedouin spirit. In *The Arab Island* (1945), she tells of working as an undercover agent during the Second World War. Equipped with film-projector and diesel engine, she insinuated herself, using a well-tried blend of guile and charm, into a Yemen ostensibly closed to foreigners. After the war, in *The Lycian Shore* (1956), she sailed around the coast of Asia Minor in a tiny boat, dreaming of the voyages of Greeks and Persians. And, in *Alexander's Path* (1958), as an historian-sleuth she rode in the hoofprints of Alexander through Pamphylia and Chelidonis, attempting to unravel the significance of his friendship with the Queen of Caria. At the age of 83 she published the last of her 18 books, *A Peak in Darien* (1976), a collection of exquisitely crafted essays serenely reflecting on the final journey: "The explorers have an advantage in the fact that the thought of a frontier allures them . . . ."

Dorothy Carrington, a polymath of the old school, led a very different life. Corsica so enchanted her during a casual holiday visit that she made it her home for some 20 years and then published *The Granite Island: A Portrait of Corsica* (1971). She perceived that Corsican culture spanned the millennia between the neolithic age and the 18th century in one unbroken arch. She was able to study folk art and traditions not with the absurd solemnity of a modern anthropologist doing "field work" but simply by observing the daily lives of people she loved and respected. In 1948 Corsica still formed a preindustrial rural society; each village was an exceptionally tight-knit community of aloof individualists whose friendship had to be patiently earned. As a portrait of a place, *Granite Island* is as close to flawless as any human creation can be.

In 1933, when Kings's School in Canterbury expelled Patrick Leigh Fermor, he decided to spend the next three years walking from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople—for him an incomparably more educational experience than a university could have provided. From the perspective of middle age, in *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), Fermor circles like an eagle over the remembered landscapes of a Europe that soon was changed forever. These books are also fascinating for his journey through that other, inner landscape, his own self. When the Second World War broke out, Fermor became a liaison officer in Albania before



His ability to adopt native language and dress allowed 19th-century explorer Sir Richard Burton to be the first European to survive visits to the Muslim shrines of Mecca and Harer.

parachuting into German-occupied Crete. There his linguistic talents enabled him to survive for two years, disguised as a shepherd, while he organized the Resistance and finally the capture of the German Commander, for which the city of Herakleion made him an honorary citizen. Those years sharpened his curiosity about remote communities and obscure linguistic problems, a curiosity he has spent most of his life satisfying. He is shamelessly self-indulgent as a writer, leaving his narrative to wander down byways of lightheartedly learned speculation about the headgear of the Phanariots, the music of ancient Greece, or the derivation of Sarakatsán. His admirers lament his low output—eight books, of which three are slim—but perhaps this accounts for the unrivalled beauty of his prose. Or is "unrivalled" too strong? Many consider Colin Thubron his equal.

Already in his first book, *Mirror to Damascus* (1966), Thubron was writing with the assurance of a master, with a depth and breadth of erudition. Books on Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus followed, the author's personal adventures taking place against a rich, beguiling tapestry of fable, religion, architecture, archaeology, ethnology. Novel-writing explains the nine-year gap between Colin Thubron's 600-mile walk around Cyprus and his 10,000-mile journey, in a decrepit motor-van, from the Baltic to the Caucasus. *Among the Russians* (1983) is a uniquely—a word I never use lightly—perceptive and compassionate account of everyday life in the Soviet Union. Then came *Behind the Wall* (1987), which tells us rather more about its gentle, modest, sensitive author than about China. As usual, Colin Thubron travelled alone and frugally, covering thousands of miles in prodigiously overcrowded, hard-bench trains. Disarmingly he shares with the reader his confusions, repulsions, and illogicalities, his abandoned preconceptions and new prejudices. For all its personal revelations, there is in fact no better travel book about contemporary China than *Behind the Wall.*

Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* (1984) and *In Trouble Again* (1988) are the funniest books, in any genre, that I have ever read. My junior favorite was elected a Member of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History in 1982, by which date he had published *Changing Scientific Concepts of Nature in the English Novel* and *Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin: The Influence of Scientific Thought on Conrad's Fiction.* It seems he then felt an understandable need to relax; so off he went in 1983, accompanied by his rash poet friend, James Fenton, and three Sea Dyak trackers, to find a mountain range untouched by any white man's foot since 1926. Their six-week journey in a small boat in Borneo extinguished for ever Fenton's exploratory instinct but inspired O'Hanlon to seek more of the same on a four-months trip up the Orinoco River and across the Amazon Basin. These books dexterously blend three ingredients: a remote rain-forest offering the hourly possibility of sudden (or worse, *lingering*) death from

one of a multitude of grotesquely horrible causes; an immense variety of flora and fauna rarely if ever glimpsed before by any Western eye; a small cast of local eccentrics whose interactions with the author afford much scope for hilarious dialogue. For all his humor, O'Hanlon does not discard his mortarboard. Original reflections on the relevant pioneers of natural history are interspersed with superb descriptive passages and much riveting information about the hoatzin, the Screaming Piha, the matamata, anhinga, dickcissel, cotinga, bocachico, yellow-handed titi, and coatimundi—to name but a few of the creatures observed en route.

One gift that unites this disparate quintet is sensuousness. It is obligatory for travel writers to describe how things *look*. But if readers are to be successfully transported to unfamiliar places, our other senses must be courted as well. We need to be made aware of a region's distinctive smells, sounds, and tastes; of the feel of the sun or the wind, the rain or the snow; of the sensations of stone or sand or mud or turf underfoot. All my favorites are graphically sensuous.

Another of their shared gifts may point to the mainspring of good travel writing. Each takes the reader along into *her* Arabia or Corsica, or *his* Greece or Russia or Armenia. This mysterious power has little to do with what reviewers like to call "the immediacy of the writing"—something not unusual among competent authors and journalists. It is, I suspect, a result of the good travel writer's passionate involvement with the places and people written about, whatever one's obsession may happen to be. Several acclaimed modern travel writers seem failures to me simply because they lack this sense of involvement. To them a country and its people are merely raw material, to be detachedly observed and then fashioned into a book. They are indeed good *writers*, often quite knowledgeable, yet they are bad *travellers*, never allowing themselves to be absorbed and influenced by the unfamiliar. All writers are egocentric, but good travel writers spontaneously become less so during their journeys.

One final similarity unites my quintet: They do not tailor their material to fit "the market." I think of what Freya Stark wrote in *Beyond Euphrates*: "Even in my poorest days, finance has had nothing to do either with the planning or the writing of my books. What they have brought was welcome, but they were written for their own sakes, nor have I ever debated whether this thing or that might be what the public wants.... I think of the public as friends, who are to like me for myself alone, and not as a Cerberus to whom cakes must be given to soothe it from biting."

Those words should be drawn to the attention of all young authors—travel writers or otherwise—to encourage them to keep the flag of integrity flying in the battle against "market forces."