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Exploring European Frontiers: British Travellers in the Age of the Enlightenment

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Author:

Brian Dolan

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Jeffrey Brautigam

Edward Daniel Clarke, the primary British Traveller considered in this book, asked his readers to consider the purpose of travel; Brian Dolan, the author of this book, asks his readers to consider how and why people write about travel. The breadth of these questions and the ingenuity with which Dolan explores them make this book relevant and interesting to a broad spectrum of readers interested in the issues surrounding cultural identity.

Dolan believes that an examination of eighteenth-century travel writing will facilitate a deeper understanding of how and why notions of "central" and "peripheral" were and are created. He takes Said's conception of "Orientalism" in the creation of a "European" identity and brings it closer to home. That is, he asks how much more problematic the process of identity construction was when the "Other" that eighteenth-century travellers and their readers relied upon to construct their notions of "British" and "European" were not the mysterious dwellers of the "Far East," but rather "Westerners" who inhabited the northern, eastern, and southern borderlands of "civilised Europe."

Historiographically, the book is meant to serve as a bridge between Linda Colley's *Britons*, which showed how the eighteenth-century constituents of England, Wales, and Scotland forged both new national identities and a patriotic sense of "Britishness" through collective military and religious opposition to their European neighbours, and John Brewer's *Pleasures of the Imagination* which explained how a burgeoning commercial

culture transformed the market for aesthetic and literary enterprise, marking the appearance of a modern "high culture" in British Society. Dolan attempts to connect the two by providing an account of how the eighteenth-century British grew familiar with and defined "modern Europe" through the exploration and evaluation of their neighbours cultural achievements. Towards these ends, the book explores the travel experience constructed by Edward Daniel Clarke as he travelled the borderlands of Europe in 1799-1801 with his patron and student John Marten Cripps.

Dolan's decision to structure the book around Clarke's travel narratives seems a wise one. Clarke was, as Dolan argues, "exemplary of the new, modern European traveller, travel writer, and pedagogue." Focusing on Clarke's work also give this book a compelling narrative structure, and it allows the reader a close examination of the ways in which a single author constructed an "experience" of these different regions. Relying so heavily on a single author does, of course, cause some difficulties; or rather, it raises some interesting questions. For example, it must be asked whether the narratives that Clarke constructed (and travel narratives in general) were a major source for British understanding of their neighbours' culture, and whether or not they were central to the process by which eighteenth-century Britons fashioned their sense of identity. Additionally, one might ask how Clarke's narratives differed from other eighteenth-century British travel narratives.

Dolan answers the first of these questions to some degree by pointing out that recent scholarship has established that "travel books, being part and parcel of allied subjects such as history and geography, were among the most frequently read books in Georgian Britain." Secondly, travel writers were becoming central figures in the growing profession of letters, and Clarke's narratives were among the most successful of this growing genre. By 1848, six editions of Clarke's *Travels* had been issued and he was often simply referred to as "The Traveller." Dolan tackles the trickier question of whether travel narratives were central to the fashioning of new British and European identities by first arguing that the events preceding and following the revolutionary ferment of 1789 constituted (like those preceding and following the events of 1989) an "identity crisis." That crisis, Dolan argues, in some ways contributed to, and in some ways was solved by, a shift in "the direction of all sorts of scholarship in the eighteenth century." Specifically there was a shift towards comparative analysis as applied in all of the human and social sciences ranging from comparative anatomy to political economy. By showing that the writing and consumption of eighteenth-century travel literature was situated in the context of that shift, Dolan persuades us to read Clarke's narratives as experiments in comparative cultural studies and, therefore, as episodes in the reconstruction of a British and a European identity. Dolan partially answers the question of the particularity of Clarke's narratives by himself adopting the comparative method, comparing Clarke's narratives to a few relevant contemporaries.

So what do we learn from *Exploring European Frontiers*? First, as we follow Clarke north through Scandinavia, we learn that the northern countries, particularly Sweden, were used by Clarke to investigate the rise and fall of a culture's intellectual and political power. Here Dolan offers two interesting comparisons to uncover what is shared and what is unique in Clarke's narratives. First he compares them to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (published in 1796) to show that while both Wollstonecraft and Clarke crafted a view of Scandinavia as a place where climate and natural geography had a therapeutic effect on the culture, Clarke went on to include an analysis of the conditions necessary for a high level of cultural achievement. Specifically, Clarke turned his travel narrative of Scandinavia into a tale of the rise and fall of a modern state, and into a study of the socio-cultural conditions that contributed to that rise and fall.

To flesh out the finer points of Clarke's analysis, Dolan contrasts it with that of Thomas Robert Malthus. Malthus and William Otter (both, like Clarke and Cripps, members of Jesus College, Cambridge) had begun the trip with Clarke and Cripps, but they chose to go their own way soon after arriving in Scandinavia. Malthus was collecting statistical information in preparation for the second edition of his controversial *Essay on the Principle of Population*. So travel in Scandinavia was for Malthus, as for Clarke, an opportunity to refine and seek evidence for an existing political philosophy. Through this comparison we learn that both Malthus and Clarke observed a correlation between the rise, in the seventeenth century, and fall, in the eighteenth century, of government involvement in the promotion of science and medicine and the

level of a country's political and intellectual power. Secondly, while Malthus and Clarke disagreed on the particular effects of specific governmental policies and actions, both of them fashioned narratives in which travel through Scandinavia provided historical lessons regarding how enlightened theories might work towards the making of a modern society. Specifically, Sweden seemed to prove (in contrast to the revolution of the third estate in France) that through proper state support, natural philosophers could provide useful information about, and bring order to, the natural resources upon which national economies relied. When patronage and opportunity flagged, so too did cultural achievement.

As Clarke's narrative moved further north into the still largely unexplored culture of the Lapps, a different sort of boundary was explored. Here Clarke combined his observations with current debates about linguistics, philology, and anthropology to fashion a view of the Lapps as "Asiatic in origin"--as a race of "pigmies." Here Clarke found his boundary between the modern and the primitive.

To eighteenth-century British travellers, Dolan argues, Russia represented the antithesis of Scandinavia; instead of a once-great civilisation in decline, Russia represented "a rapidly expanding empire, conquering its northern, eastern and southern neighbours with apparent ease." Accordingly, travellers' exploration of Russia was guided by questions of whether Russia represented a threat to Western powers, and whether Russia could be counted amongst the enlightened nations of Europe.

Eighteenth-century reader interest in Russia was especially high since Russia was a rapidly emerging power with an expanding empire, an ally against Napoleon, and an increasingly important trading partner. The Russia that readers of Clarke would experience was not a hospitable place. Clarke's account of his experience in metropolitan Russia gave the Russian nobility and cosmopolitans low marks for manners and conduct. During the five-years of Tsar Paul I's reign (1796-1801), Clarke became Britain's most outspoken critic of Russia. Citing "the madness and malevolence of a suspicious tyrant," Clarke condemned "the villainy of the police, public reprimands, physical punishment, bribery and murder as standard elements of Russian life."

Through a brief tour of the other available British travel narratives of Russia, Dolan establishes that, in the eighteenth century, "two broad perspectives [on Russia] emerge in British travellers' accounts. On the one hand, Russian society was ostracised for its Asiatic barbarity in contradistinction to Western, Occidental, and European civility.. On the other hand, some travellers admired its enlightened rulers who pushed though massive reforms, imitated the West and created a society well along the respectable path 'towards civilisation'." Clarke's narratives clearly contributed to the first perspective, and as he publicised the antidemocratic, authoritarian practices of Paul, the more critical of the two perspectives became the dominant one. Rural Russian culture came no closer to passing the Western test of civility. As Clarke travelled out of metropolitan Russia and into the eastern and southern provinces, he found an "expanding population no more civilised than the Lapps." In sum, Clarke and his contemporaries measured civility on progress in reproducing Western literature, classical scholarship and democratic reform; by this test, Russia was not seen as making much progress towards modernity. So much is clear from Dolan's analysis; what is less clear is whether or not this fact made British readers more or less fearful of the Russian Empire.

In the chapter on Greece and the Levant, Dolan takes a slightly different approach - and for good reason. The cultural context of British and European interest in the "ancient civilisations" of the southern Mediterranean was much richer than for Scandinavia and Russia, and the political context was much more highly charged. Clarke travelled through the southern Mediterranean during a high point in Anglo-French conflict there. In March of 1801, British forces defeated the remains of Napoleon's army in Alexandria. In April of that year, Clarke sailed from Rhodes to Egypt. The battles between the British and the French that were fought on the southern shores of the Mediterranean marked a contested imperial frontier, and Dolan argues that British travellers' "expeditions and endeavours [there] were likewise implicated in a type of archaeological imperialism." More specifically, Dolan argues that, in this context of imperial conflict, "both French and British commentators chose to represent ancient civilisation in such a way as to show that they were respectively the inheritors of the ancient principles of virtue, liberty and democracy." And that "narratives about the ancient lands were invoked to make associations between the civility of the ancients and the self-

defined civility of modern imperial rulers." To illustrate his point, Dolan situates Clarke's travel narratives in the context of the eighteenth-century efforts in both Britain and France to build national collections of antiquities in the British Museum and the Louvre. Situated in this context, both the museum collections and Clarke's narratives can be read as exercises in the "fashioning [of] a cultural identity that was highly politically charged."

The concluding chapter looks at the reception given to Clarke and his fellow travellers on their return to Britain, and here Dolan establishes that Clarke was generally praised as an important traveller, collector, and (after 1810 when the first volume of his narratives finally came out) writer. But what Dolan is really interested in is the reception that Clarke received at Cambridge. Soon after his return to Cambridge, Clarke began to acquire academic prestige and honours. In 1803, the University Senate awarded him an LL.D. Degree. In 1806, the new Vice-chancellor of the University and new master of Jesus College, William Pearce, granted permission for Clarke to display the remainder of his minerals, marbles and oil paintings to the public in a lecture room in the Botanic Gardens, and, more crucially, to give public lectures. Through these lectures and exhibits, Dolan argues, a pedagogy in which students would "be empirically stimulated directly by the artefacts" of the ancient world was created. In 1808, the Cambridge fellows gave official sanction and encouragement to this pedagogy by making Clarke 'Professor of Mineralogy's - a loosely defined post that included the charge to continue to "inspect classical texts, antiquarian artefacts and foreign customs." From these facts and an analysis of Clarke's demonstrations and lectures, Dolan argues that they represent "an alternative ideal for a 'liberal education'." As far as Clarke's work at Cambridge is concerned, the argument seems to hold, but one might reasonably ask for more evidence as to just how "new" this pedagogy was, and how significant Clarke and Cambridge were in propagating it.

It is surely true that humans are moved to travel, to write about travel, and to read travel narratives in part by an urge to define themselves and their culture in contradistinction to some "Other." Taken together, the five chapters of *Exploring European Frontiers* provide interesting and important reading for anyone interested in the questions and issues involved in that process. While, *Exploring European Frontiers* offers no new theoretical contributions, it does take those questions and issues to new and under-explored territories and contexts. There is, of course, another obvious reason that people read travel literature; they are often simply in search of vicarious adventure. *Exploring European Frontiers* greatest success may lie in the fact that it tempts us, through the use of perhaps too few gems from Clarke's narratives, to pick up a volume or two of Clarke's *Travels* and read them just for the fun of it.

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