

History through Travel and Travelers

The texts contained in the monographic section of this issue of *Culture & History Digital Journal* deal with travel and its protagonists, the travelers, from various viewpoints, at different times and in different places, and also with varying outcomes. All of them, however, share the characteristic of associating some travel experience or activity of a traveller with some subject or matter that, seen as an historical problem, is exemplified through the specific case or cases discussed by each author.

The various texts, from that on the Jesuits in 17th century China to the experiences of a Latin American positivist intellectual in Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East in the early 20th century, including those on the unleashed passions of naturalists in America, the Portuguese empire in the view of European travelers, the representation of the Mediterranean by a soldier and naturalist, and, lastly, the characteristics of the production of traveling artists in America in the 19th century, not only delve into a specific historical event; epistemological, methodological, and historiographic reflections are included supporting the potential of the subject selected for the present issue of *Culture & History Digital Journal*.

Invited to contribute with an original approach, because of the topic discussed or the reflections offered based on familiar subjects, the authors and their contributions also show a wide diversity of analytical viewpoints, sources, and approaches, in an attempt to renew and supplement the historiography on travel and travelers. Although practically all of them, one way or another, are related to the history of culture, in the broadest sense of the concept, and of representation, even of sensitivity. In this context, it is not by chance that such notions and words as experience, representation, interpretation, image, culture and science, sight and vision, perception and prejudice, alterity and identity, empire and nation, passion and emotion, curious and exotic, diversity and unity, progress and backwardness, anthropology and ethnography, appear repeatedly in the works, all associated with the movement of someone in space and time, with the experience of the journey.

Because only man can travel, for animals move by instinct and celestial bodies obey natural laws, travel offers so many possibilities for acquiring knowledge of history. As not only the rationality of the leading character is involved, but also and often above all, his subjectivity, the view of the traveller, his estimation, the description he makes, the interest he shows for some things and not others, are so eloquent, sharp, and astonishing. In fact, the heterogeneous, varied,

and manifold forms in which his experience becomes manifest *vis-à-vis* the novel, the unknown, and the different, is what makes travelers and their notes an object of study and a privileged source for making history, for understanding based on past experiences. This is manifest in the texts that follow; some of which deal with travelers to lands that in their testimonies the leading actors in the adventure described as distant.

What is distant implies an original reference. The adjective helps to realize an essential fact: that travelers have a starting point, a society of origin, therefore values and uses with which they see, describe, and judge what they come to know; whether reality is natural or cultural. From this standpoint and as can be seen in the contributions included in the present issue of *Culture & History Digital Journal*, the experience of travel offers the possibility of knowing both the world from which the traveller comes and the one he visits or explores. It is the journey conceived as an experience through which societies and cultures are linked. Among other reasons, thanks to the curiosity aroused by becoming acquainted with new subjects, customs, and realities. The impulse of travelers is universal, as much as desire or passion, or the urge to tell what they have seen and others do not know. First in a rational -therefore exact- way, then in artistic -therefore subjective- form, as is also shown here.

The supposed scientific objectivity, the rationality of enlightenment too, and many times, were overwhelmed by the subjectivity of the observer, who thus represented worlds stigmatized in many ways because they failed to match what was established or known. The traveling artists, filled with subjectivity, romantic in many ways, were the ones to recover and value the uses, customs, landscapes, and nature of the American peoples, thus limiting the possibility of a judgment thus far usually negative against them. Encouraged by the scenes that their "pictures" showed, Europeans not only appreciated America as a source of wealth, but also as a source of emotions. A trait, by the way, that the traveller expects from his journey, which everyone hopes will be a succession of enduring impressions, though also of cumulative natural and cultural facts, as shown by the instance of the positivist traveller of the 20th century.

Travel literature as a reflection of what is different and the cultural differences of peoples, no matter whether in Asia or America, further implies the existence of a guiding paradigm, that of western Europe, serving the travelers in this volume to define or otherwise "what is different". There are paradoxes here too, for it is possible not only to separate others

from Europe, but also some Europeans from their continent, as proved by the view of certain Anglo-Saxon travelers in respect of Spain and Portugal. Doubtless a form of domination, superiority, and power manifest until the present day. Just like the need to present an image of the Mediterranean as a unit born of the process of modern scientific representation, where the traveller, military man, naturalist, and “anthropologist” also played a part as agent for a model of exploration applied from the first decades of the 19th century in Europe.

At another time and with another protagonist, the positivistic urge and the tale born of the experience of traveling in the world enable us to examine the journey as a program or project for the country of origin of the traveller. The representation of what is one’s own through the view and estimation of what is alien makes it possible to travel there and back, even without returning to the point of departure. Only

through what is abstract, but at the same time so real, as words and their meanings. The same that so often failed the Jesuits in China, thus filling their experience with anguish, but sharpening their perception of gestures and ceremonies, thus appreciating a culture that in many other ways was not only different but also reprehensible, although always captivating. As much as the very fact of traveling, as shown by the texts included here.

Rafael Sagredo Baeza
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Manuel Lucena Giraldo
Instituto de Historia, CCHS-CSIC, Madrid
Editors

Published online: 8 January 2013

© CSIC 2012 This is an open-access document distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-on Commercial (by-nc) 3.0 Spain License.

