INTRODUCTION

Women Writing Travel, 1890–1939

Emma Short
Newcastle University

The rapid expansion of international travel networks toward the end of the nineteenth century resulted in a dramatic shift in women's access to travel. As Sidonie Smith highlights in *Moving Lives*, her comprehensive study of women and the technologies of travel in modernity, "large numbers of women began to leave home for the lure of the road as a result of the emergence of faster, safer, cleaner, and more comfortable machines of motion" (2001: xi). This shift in the availability of travel to a much broader spectrum of the general public—and crucially to women—coincided with the impact of first wave feminism as the women's suffrage movement gathered momentum,¹ and the figure of the New Woman appeared across literature and culture.² The subsequent surge in women's written representations of travel was highlighted by Sara Mills in her seminal *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, in which she observed "the sheer volume of writing" by women on travel during this period (1991: 1), and asserted the importance of further research on these accounts. Following Mills's call, feminist scholarship has since worked to understand the complexities of women's travel writing. Like Mills, many of these critics—including Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (1992), and Mary Louise Pratt (1992)—explore the ways in which such travel accounts were involved in colonialism and implicated in the discourses of imperialism. Others, such as Smith (2001), Avril Maddrell (2009), and Alexandra Peat (2010), have focused particularly on women's written representations of travel published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Central to much of this scholarship are questions concerning the difference between travel writing by men and that produced by women—whether or not such difference exists and, if it does, how this difference manifests in

Introduction

women's written representations of travel. Susan Bassnett notes that these "basic questions ... continue to occupy feminist scholars" (2002: 227), and indeed, they underpin many of the articles included in this special issue. However, the articles collected here in this special issue also move beyond these questions significantly in their consideration of the ways in which women's written representations of travel can reshape our understandings of the gendered experience of the spaces of modernity, and thus make a vital contribution to both the cultural and literary history of the period.

This special issue brings together the latest scholarship on the changing relationship of women and travel, and crucially on that between identity and mobility, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The majority of recent work on women and travel in this period has focused either exclusively on non-fictional travel writing (Bird 2012; Maddrell 2009; Smith 2001), or on travel in fiction (Doyle 2010; Peat 2011). However, this issue covers a range of written forms in order to demonstrate the engagement of women writing about travel in modernity with questions of gender, subjectivity, and embodiment, as well as with issues of national identity, politics, and colonialism. The articles in this issue explore a broad range of texts—from the modernist fiction of Dorothy Richardson, to reportage by Freya Stark, to autobiography by Elizabeth Ross, and to the unpublished archival material of Gertrude Bell—through a range of intersecting theoretical models. In her article, "'The Strange Happiness of Being Abroad': Dorothy Richardson's *Oberland*," Mhairi Pooler foregrounds issues of genre in her approach to Richardson's 1927 novel, *Oberland*, the ninth volume in the thirteen-volume *Pilgrimage* sequence, published between 1914 and 1967. Pooler draws on Richardson's knowledge of travel writing to read the text anew as a modernist travel narrative, rather than as a straightforward novel, in order to answer previous critical opinion of the text "as an odd interlude in the rest of the story." Through this innovative approach, Pooler reveals Richardson's focus on the sensory, physical experience of travel in her writing, and offers a rich and compelling reading of the text's engagement with the relationship between movement, embodiment, and becoming. The notion of movement is explored in a variety of ways throughout this special issue, and to varying degrees the articles all follow Karen Lawrence in their consideration of how these women writers used "the figure of movement to explore pressing issues of personal and historical agency, problems of (and opportunities for) women's cultural placements

and displacements" (1994: xi). In her article, "Modern Women, Mobility, and Maternity," Emily Ridge also engages with notions of movement and embodiment in fictional representations of travel in order to consider "the uneasy relationship between mobility and maternity" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through a focus on luggage, Ridge explores not only the practicalities of travel for women, but extends this metaphor into a unique theoretical approach in order to demonstrate how the imagery of luggage and bags in these texts "provided a figurative locus around which contemporary debates about maternity, but also the question of female subjectivity, could be played out," primarily through analogous comparisons between bag and womb.

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, many of the same concerns of movement, embodiment, and subjectivity are echoed across women's fictional and non-fictional representations of travel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bridging fictional and non-fictional accounts, my article, "'Those Eyes Kohl Blackened Enflame': Re-reading the Feminine in Gertrude Bell's Early Travel Writing," reads Bell's published travel writing and letters alongside her unpublished short fiction in order to reconsider her use of gender in her representations of the areas to which she traveled. Following Mills's claim that women's travel narratives differ from those of men not simply because they are "female-authored," but that they instead "tend towards differences in their production and reception" (1991: 31), the article charts the critical reception to *Persian Pictures* (1894), Bell's first published travel writing, and considers Bell's own anxieties regarding the publication of her work in the light of the gendered nature of the criticism that has since been directed toward it. More crucially, however, through comparative readings of Bell's fiction and non-fiction, the article demonstrates how Bell's use of the feminine subverts the "constitutive tropes of Orientalist discourse" of the East as sexualized, seductive and dangerous (Yeğenoğlu 1998: 73), and instead positions it as an active and informed agent that knowingly challenges and resists western colonial attempts at penetration and/or domination. Women's written representations of their excursions into the Middle East are the subject of the remaining three articles in this issue. This focus on European travel accounts of the Middle East corresponds not only with the recent critical attention on women's travel accounts of the area (Bird 2012; Mills 1991; Pratt 1992), but also with current debates regarding the consequences of Britain's imperial involvement

Introduction

in the region. In her article, “The Adventures of Miss Ross: Interventions into, and the Tenacity of, Romantic Travel Writing in Southwest Persia,” Barbara Cooke reads Elizabeth Ross’s memoirs of her time spent working as a doctor to the women of the Bakhtiari tribe of Southwest Persia from 1909 to 1912. Cooke positions Ross’s account as a domestic ethnography—a “largely ... female genre,” according to Billie Melman (2002: 111–112), that redresses the “eroticisation of the unfamiliar” (Bassnett 2002: 229), which is so often found in the masculine travel narrative. Through her careful analysis of the ways in which Ross depicts the women with whom she lived and worked, Cooke demonstrates how the relationship between Ross and her “subjects” is one of “interplay,” rather than of observer/observed. As such, Cooke reveals Ross’s travel writing as that which “represents a break with,” and a decisive intervention into, the British imperialist tradition.

While the majority of the articles collected here engage with women’s travel narratives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—in the period leading up to and during World War I—the final two articles move beyond this chronology to explore women’s representations of travel in the latter part of the interwar period, from 1929 to 1939. The writings covered by both articles again depict European women’s travel in and through the Middle East,³ though each article demonstrates a discernible shift in interwar women’s travel narratives to a more explicit and sustained reflection on national identity, and particularly that of the home nation. In her article, “Autobiography, Journalism, and Controversy: Freya Stark’s *Baghdad Sketches*,” Mary Henes reads Stark’s depictions of her time spent in Baghdad in order to highlight her resistance to British colonial attitudes, and reveals how Stark portrays “the British ruling class as anachronistic imperialists with rigid social structures.” In particular, Henes discusses Stark’s concern with the efforts of British colonial society to restrict feminine mobility, and thus reveals Stark’s awareness of “women’s differential, gendered access to the positionalities of imperial discourse” (Lewis 1996: 4). Stark’s written representations of the areas to which she traveled can therefore be read, Henes argues, as a direct challenge to, and critique of, the archaic and highly gendered nature of the British imperial effort. The final article in this issue, Sara Steinert Borella’s “Humanitarian Ideals between the Wars: (Re)Constructing Switzerland through Travel Writing,” explores the respective accounts of Swiss travelers Ella Maillart and Annemarie Schwarzenbach of their drive from Switzerland to Afghanistan in late 1939, shortly before the outbreak of

World War II. Steinert Borella highlights the ways in which the travel narrative here again offers an opportunity to reflect on the state of the home nation, as she demonstrates how Maillart and Schwarzenbach's narratives "reveal as much about cultural norms prevalent in Switzerland in the late 1930s as they do about the actual journey to Afghanistan." More crucially, however, Steinert Borella's politically informed reading locates the travel narratives of Maillart and Schwarzenbach as integral to the development of the discourse of human rights that was to become so intrinsic to Switzerland's international identity during and following World War II.

The articles presented in this special issue showcase the most up-to-date scholarship on women writing travel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and demonstrate that thinking about women's travel narratives needs to be approached historically through a range of intersecting theoretical models. Through their innovative approaches, the authors included here intervene in ongoing debates concerning the politics of gender and space in modernity. Individually, each of the articles in this issue demonstrates the complexity of women's written representations of travel during this pivotal moment of international social, political, and technological change. Taken together, these articles reveal that women writing both fictional and non-fictional travel narratives across the time period covered were all engaged in a similar project of exploring and negotiating the shifting relationship between mobility and identity. This issue shows that, through exploring their own encounters with the foreign, the other and the unknown, each traveler considered in these articles begins to re-examine concepts around nation, gender and class to formulate her own range of identifications as a political and social agent, a real *modern* woman.

Notes

1. The first effective nationalization of the women's suffrage movement took place in 1897, with the formation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies by Millicent Fawcett. This was closely followed by the foundation of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903.

Introduction

2. As Sally Ledger observes, the New Woman “was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late-nineteenth century women’s movement” (1997: 1). She notes further that, while the term “New Woman” was not coined until 1894, “with the publication of a pair of articles by Sarah Grand and Ouida,” the emergence of the phenomenon can be traced back to at least “1883, with the publication of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*” (Ledger 1997: 2).
3. I here use the term “Middle East” to denote the group of countries and territories included in the current G8 definition of the Middle East.

References

- Bassnett, Susan. 2002. “Travel Writing and Gender.” Pp. 225–241 in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bird, Dúnlaith. 2012. *Travelling in Different Skins: Gender Identity in Women’s Oriental Travelogues, 1850–1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chaudhuri, Nupur, and Margaret Strobel, eds. 1992. *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Doyle, Laura. 2010. “Geomodernism, Postcoloniality, and Women’s Writing.” Pp. 129–45 in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers*, ed. Maren Tova Linett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawrence, Karen. 1994. *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the Literary Tradition*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Ledger, Sally. 1997. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Lewis, Reina. 1996. *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*. London: Routledge.
- Maddrell, Avril. 2009. *Complex Locations: Women’s Geographical Work in the UK, 1850–1970*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

- Melman, Billie. 2002. "The Middle East/Arabia: 'The Cradle of Islam.'" Pp. 105–121 in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, Sara. 1991. *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Peat, Alexandra. 2010. *Travel and Modernist Literature: Sacred and Ethical Journeys*. London: Routledge.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Sidonie. 2001. *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Yeğenoğlu, Meyda. 1998. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.