

***Travellers in the Great Steppe: From the Papal Envoys to the Russian Revolution***

**Nick Fielding**

(Oxford: Signal Books, Ltd., 2020), xv+320pp. £16.99 Hardcover.  
ISBN 978-1-909930-865.

Nick Fielding offers up a potpourri of accounts left by travelers to Central Asia. Ten chapters comprise the book. In the first chapter the reader is briefly introduced to thirteenth-century travelers—papal envoy Laurentius of Portugal (who never returned), John of Piano Carpini, William of Rubruck, Chaplain Robert, and Marco Polo—before the rest of the short chapter is devoted to Anthony Jenkinson’s sixteenth-century travels. Chapter 2 focuses on the travels of John Castle, an ill-tempered Englishman whose adventures included visiting the Khan of the Junior horde in 1736. The subtitle advertises that the book’s historical sweep ranges from the Papal envoys to the Russian Revolution, but as is the case with many strictly academic books that offer similarly broad chronological coverage, the bulk of the accounts are from the nineteenth century.

Chapters 3 and 4 follow the remarkable story of Thomas (1799–1861) and Lucy Atkinson (1817–1893). Thomas was an Englishman who, in the wake of profound life crisis, set off for Russia, reinventing himself as a traveler-artist. In St. Petersburg, he fell in love with an English governess in a Russian noble household, Lucy Atkinson née Finley, who left her station to marry and travel Central Asia with him. She gave birth to a child in the remote outpost of Alatau and left her own account. Taken on its own terms, the story is delightful (as eye-popping as Owen Lattimore’s wife finding him on foot in Siberia, which is not part of this book). Fielding is attentive throughout to the travels and writings of women on the steppe.

Chapter 5 groups diverse accounts of men who traveled to Khiva: Vassili Mikhailov (b. 1741—early nineteenth c.), Nikolai Nikolaevich Muravev (1809–1881), Eugene Schuyler (1840–1890), Januarius MacGahan (1844–1878), David Ker (1842–1914), Fred Burnaby (1842–1885), and Robert L. Jefferson (1866–1914). Fielding draws on recent doctoral dissertations to tell the story of Vassilii Mikhailov, a boy who was born into a Persian family south of the Caspian Sea in 1741, was sold into slavery due to his family’s desperate straits, was bought and baptized by an Orthodox priest, and eventually found himself in Cossack ranks.

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He was caught up in violence amidst the Great Kalmyk Migration of 1771 and found himself again enslaved, by multiple owners of varying harshness. The next vignette is devoted to Russian army officer Nikolai Nikolaevich Muravev, the former employer of Lucy Atkinson and brother of a Decembrist who on his travels was on the selling side of slave transactions (131). Travels of two Americans, diplomat Eugene Schuyler and journalist Januarius MacGahan, are featured next, followed by a brief account of the British journalist David Ker, who in 1873 sent plagiarized dispatches from Tbilisi about events in Khiva (156); this account is followed by the British adventurer Fred Burnaby, and then by the American bicyclist Robert Louis Jefferson.

Chapter 6, "Russians in Central Asia," attempts to narrate Russia's push eastward in 23 pages. The chapter contains an interesting cameo of Shokan Shyngghysuly Walikhanov (1835–1862) a polyglot Kazakh noble who endured an arguably stymied career in Russian service before resigning in protest over General M. G. Cherniaev's brutality toward local populations.

Chapter 7 is devoted to late nineteenth-century French travelers to Central Asia. Fielding focuses attention on women again here, with the accounts of Adele Hommire de Hell (1818–1883) and Marie de Ujfalvy-Bourdon (1842–1904), who, like Lucy Atkinson, accompanied their husbands and wrote about it. Ujfalvy-Bourdon's book, "despite its sometimes-condescending tone" was "a pioneering piece of travel writing by a woman" (219). Many of the travelers in this book attempted to describe Kazakh life. Many were quite sympathetic, yet often regarded Kazakhs in a manner one might expect in an age of Romanticism and idealized Noble Savagery. The "sometimes condescending" Mme de Ujfalvy-Bourdon offered a less sympathetic characterization: "The Kazakh is a born nomad... By becoming civilised he loses his frankness and honesty and becomes a coward, cruel and sly, the defects that characterize the sedentary population of Central Asia." (216).

Beginning with brief mention of eighteenth-century academic-explorers such as Peter Simon Pallas and Johann Georg Gmelin, and touching on Alexander von Humboldt's explorations, Chapter 8, "Science in the Steppe," relates the accounts of lesser-known scientists Johann Peter Falk (1732–1774), Herbert Wood (d. 1879), and the indefatigable snail hunter William Bateson (1861–1926).

Chapter 9 features the Reverend Henry Lansdell (1841–1919), whose mission was to distribute bibles. The final chapter features a collection of early twentieth century travelers: butter merchant–mountaineer Samuel Turner, who attempted to summit Mt. Belukha in 1903; E. Nelson Fell

and J. H. Wardell, British mining company expatriates of the Spasskii mine in what is now Kazakhstan; and British revolutionary–famine relief worker Ralph Winston Fox (1900–1936), who fled Russia amidst the Russian Civil War. Wardell left a fascinating account of childbirth among Kazakh women (293).

Fielding consistently follows the itineraries of the travelers. For someone interested in tracing the specific journeys through space (as this reviewer is), this was a welcome feature. In fact, more maps, or a map with different-colored lines tracing particular itineraries, would have been a nice addition. Fielding himself points out that travelers often followed routes of previous travelers; a visual representation of that might be revealing.

This is popular history. As such, the author is effectively “off the interpretive hook.” It is enough to offer as a connecting glue for these accounts, “I do not think the steppe culture described so vividly by travelers in these pages will ever fully disappear.” It is we historians who are obligated to seek meaning out of the historical record with all its contradictions and unevenness.

The book is a lively read that presents fascinating details in a digestible scope. I would consider assigning it to undergraduates, but certain framing remarks and occasional gaffs give me pause. For example, describing incredulous thirteenth-century Europeans who “could not comprehend that there was a ferocious military power greater than theirs existing in the world” when the “ruthless” Mongols struck is a statement that projects Western superiority erroneously back to the thirteenth century (1). Completely disregarding substantive mapping efforts of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Fielding concludes his account of Jenkinson by writing: “It would be several hundred years before mapmakers returned once again to the Great Steppe. And then they came as traders, not emissaries” (17). Similarly, he writes that “commercial opportunities in the steppe would not attract Western Europeans again until the late 19th c.,” replicating old tropes about Central Asian decline and the supplanting of overland trade by maritime (41). Those looking for a critical view on empire or its functioning will not find it here: tsars grant and forbid travel with caprice; restrictions to contain movement are thwarted; Russian conquests bring order to the region (178, 189, 234), and nomadic cultures are simultaneously romanticized and regarded as the problem. Those looking for a systematic ethnography of Kazakhs or Cossacks will not find it here, even though these groups are often part of the accounts featured.

In some ways the above criticisms are uncharitable—such framings, for the most part, are not the substance of the work under review, but merely rhetorical segues. Fielding is not a trained historian and casual framings that essentialize notions of timeless Western superiority or perpetuate uncomplicated renderings of empire will irk some scholars. To the book's credit, the reader *is* treated to glimpses of all the above. Fielding does not treat his subjects using critical analysis but rather reports on their accounts. So many of the stories scratch the surface of general themes and particular events that scholars are quite interested in—geopolitics, indigenous nomadic societies, religion, imperialism and responses to it, slavery, violence, knowledge networks, patronage—without probing them in any academic sense. Nonetheless, the book is clearly based on copious research—informative, engaging, and often quite knowledgably, if cursorily, contextualized. Written with sensitivity and verve, it introduces to readers the content of a substantial selection of texts and could serve as a valuable point of departure for a researcher looking for texts to study more closely.

For popular history, it seems to be sufficient to feature the fascinating details, with which this readable book overflows. The author's goal is not to make an interpretative intervention, but to present stories that "will stimulate further exploration of this beautiful and exciting region" (312). In this, it may well succeed. Having read this book with great interest and learned much from it, I am itching to return to the Great Steppe.

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