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Introduction: Forms of Travel, Modes of Transport

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New spaces, new forms

In her 1927 essay ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’, Virginia Woolf wanders into a second-hand bookshop on Charing Cross Road. A disorganised stack of volumes piled on the floor offers a panoramic view of the print culture of the previous century. Although scholars of the nineteenth century have long thought of the novel as the dominant literary form of the period, Woolf suggests that it is another category – the travel book – that overwhelms all others.

There are travellers ... row upon row of them, still testifying, indomitable spinsters that they were, to the discomforts that they endured and the sunsets they admired in Greece when Queen Victoria was a girl. A tour in Cornwall with a visit to the tin mines was then worthy of voluminous record. People went slowly up the Rhine and did portraits of each other in Indian ink, sitting reading on deck beside a coil of rope; they measured the pyramids; were lost to civilization for years; converted negroes in pestilential swamps. This packing up and going off, exploring deserts and catching fevers, settling in India for a lifetime, penetrating even to China and then returning to lead a parochial life in Edmonton, tumbles and tosses upon the dusty floor like an uneasy sea, so restless the English are, with the waves at their very door. ¹

¹ This introduction has benefited immensely from the informed and generous comments of Gareth Atkins, Rosanna Da Costa, Shinjini Das, Mary Henes and A.V. Seaton.
Alongside Woolf’s affectionate dismissal of the ambitions and achievements of her Victorian forebears, the passage also testifies powerfully to the ubiquity of the traveller’s tale in ‘a period in which it is estimated that travel books came close second in popularity to the novel’. Despite Woolf’s ironic distance, she astutely highlights the range of travel writers and readers (explorers, tourists, spinsters and missionaries) whose voluminous output and voracious consumption ensured that, in the nineteenth century, travel writing reached ‘a position of influence greater than had ever previously been the case and certainly greater than was to be the case after 1914’. As John Pemble has pointed out in his comprehensive survey of British leisure travel to the Mediterranean in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, travel books ‘were one of the mainstays of Victorian publishing. The presses plied the reading public with Sketches, Notes, Diaries, Gleanings, Glimpses, Impressions, Pictures, Narratives, and Leaves from Journals about Tours, Visits, Wanderings, Residences, Rambles, and Travels’. Importantly, Pemble enumerates not only titles here but forms, all of which point to subtle distinctions between categories of traveller. The titles of some travel books carried demonstrable significance and authority. Records, Reports or Intelligence implied professionalism and the rigorous documentation of place. Seasoned expats could allude to their Residence in a foreign country, rather than their Travels through it, staking a claim of authoritative intimacy with an exotic locale. At the other end of the scale, the excursionist could offer a humble Peep at the other in its natural habitat. The abundant variety of these sub-genres demonstrates how a subtle differentiation in mode of address could anticipate the reactions of a sceptical reader, while also helping authors to position themselves on the finely graded scale from explorer to tourist. As Franco Moretti has suggested, the European encounter with ‘new space’ often gave rise to new forms, and the period 1760–1900 saw the rise of both new technologies of movement and new categories of traveller. This volume investigates how the new perspectives, networks and markets enabled by these developments impacted upon literary and pictorial form and how these new media in turn affected the ways in which people travelled.

Over the last three decades, the ideological content of travel narratives has been the focus of extensive analysis, with particular attention being paid to the discursive power play between the traveller-author and the objectified native subject or ‘travelee’. Several pioneering critical studies in this area attest to the emergence of travel writing studies from the related fields of postcolonial theory and imperial history. This close relationship between the critical study of travel writing