



## Transcript for “Travel Writing”

An Audio Program from *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*

Interviewer Maiben Beard and Dr. Christopher Keirstead of Auburn University discuss travel writing in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Ms. Beard: Welcome to *This Goodly Land's* audio program about travel writing. I'm Maiben Beard. We are talking today with Dr. Christopher Keirstead of the Auburn University Department of English. It's good to have you with us, Dr. Keirstead.

Dr. Keirstead: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Ms. Beard: Let's start our discussion by trying to understand just what we mean by “travel writing.” What is the difference between travel writing and guidebooks?

Dr. Keirstead: I think the best way to think about that is to consider when guidebooks first emerged as a particular type of publishing and how that differs from what we consider to be travel writing now. The first guidebooks emerged in the middle of the Nineteenth Century when you had a rise in income that allowed many people to start traveling on their own.

With that rise in social circumstances, you begin to see travel guides, much like the ones we have today such as *Fodor's* or *Let's Go Europe* or something like that, and these were meant to cater to people who were actually traveling. They're meant to go somewhere and [supply] needed information about hotels, train schedules, food, other things like that, and so they're written specifically to these travelers. Very rarely would they be signed by authors or things like that, they were usually known by the publisher's name and, to a large degree, travel guides are still like that. You'll seldom see an author's name, you might see a short essay written by a particular author, but it's still largely the same kind of book.

Now what's generally understood to be travel writing is something that's not really geared toward people who are going to the place that the traveler is writing about. In a lot of ways, what is considered to be travel writing is more about the journey that the author is taking and the author's encounter with this culture. So it is about the place that they're traveling to, but it's more about the author's journey and not so much intended to help people who are going to that location.

Ms. Beard: Is there any difference between travel writing and a diary or memoir?

Dr. Keirstead: There is a difference, but the similarities are also quite interesting. In many cases, most of what we understand to be travel writing is a sort of memoir. It's usually one person writing about a specific time period in their lives in a particular location. Now, it's usually different from a diary in that a diary tends to record everything that you do, it has something about every day, and a travelogue is almost more of a narrative (it may be helpful to think of it in comparison to a novel) where things really happen. You're actually weaving a kind of story, so you're leaving a lot out. You're not making things up, but you're creating a journey in some ways, and you're adding some literary elements to that, which is often the case.

Ms. Beard: Is it possible to do travel writing about your own home state or region? Would this be travel writing or just "local color"?

Dr. Keirstead: That's a good question and, in a lot of ways, what is understood as travel writing isn't really about people writing about their own locations, although that is starting to become more prevalent and to start to take off more in its own right as a genre. Usually when someone's talking about travel writing, it's someone from one region going to another region and writing about it, but I think what you're starting to see now is in keeping with the general interest that people have in becoming more rooted, understanding more about their own communities, even eating local foods and things like that. There might be more of an interest now in sort of rediscovering your own home location. Even though they wouldn't be recognized as travel writing, they are sorts of travel writings you might see in magazines or newspapers and, like I said, I don't think that gets a lot of attention from people who talk about travel writing, but that might be starting to change.

Ms. Beard: How has travel writing changed over time?

Dr. Keirstead: Well, it's changed in two primary kinds of ways. The first kind of travel writing was usually done by people who had some specific reason to travel. They might have been traveling on behalf of a king or a government, often going to a place that was little understood by the home culture that the person was leaving. Think of Marco Polo or Columbus doing those kinds of travel writing. That kind of exploratory travel writing was pretty much the norm up until the Eighteenth Century, where you start to see a change. You still have these exploratory kinds of purpose-driven travel narratives right up through, and even into, the Twentieth Century, but you also start to see emerging travel writing that is more about the author him- or herself.

They'll be talking about a region, but it's also about the transformation that the author undergoes as an individual, the author's opinions about the culture that they're encountering, with less of a factual and objective orientation and more towards what we might think of now as creative nonfiction, where it's still an actual journey, but it's more about the author in some ways. And, on that note, I should say that there has always been a very interesting crossover between fiction and nonfiction in travel writing. For instance, some of the earliest novels in England were also travelogues in some ways, like *Robinson Crusoe* would be an example, and there's a lot of interchange between these two genres. And then, I think, by the Nineteenth Century, we start to

see more of a clear break between other genres and nonfiction travel writing as we think of it now.

Ms. Beard: Let's talk about travel and travel writing in the Nineteenth Century. What was going on at this time?

Dr. Keirstead: In the Nineteenth Century, you still have, as I was saying, more exploratory kinds of travel writing: people for instance in England going to different locations in the British Empire and writing about the geography of the location, the natural history, and the peoples of the location. And, at the same time, you also have travel writing where people are going to destinations that are already known, for instance, the Grand Tour (as it was known throughout much of the Renaissance and later) where usually someone of noble birth or wealth would travel through Europe. That kind of journey continues, but this idea for instance that you could write about it and share it with other people begins to take on even more popularity, I think. So you have writers writing about their journeys within Europe or British travelers going to the United States, for instance. So the Nineteenth Century is interesting in that you have a lot of different types of travel writing going on, for many different kinds of purposes as well.

Ms. Beard: Tell us about some of the people who were publishing travel books then.

Dr. Keirstead: Well, there are a lot of different types of people, sometimes people that you wouldn't expect now to be doing travel writing. For instance, oftentimes people are surprised to see so many women travel writers in the Nineteenth Century, because we tend to think of it as a time period that's very restrictive in terms of what women could write. But women were given some authority as observers, in particular of domestic situations. For instance, you would have books such as *Domestic Manners of the Americans* by Francis [or Fanny] Trollope from [1832]. So, as long as they wrote within what was considered their proper sphere such as the family, and nature was also acceptable but not necessarily in a scientific capacity, these books would be quite popular.

And you also, of course, had men doing what was called natural history or what we now call nature writing, such as Philip Henry Gosse coming to Alabama. And while this was scientific writing, it was also geared towards the general public. That sort of clear dividing line we have now between a scientist going and doing botany or zoology and writing about it and popular science, those distinctions weren't quite as clear in the Nineteenth Century. For instance, Darwin as well was doing what was seen as science but was also seen as travel writing.

Ms. Beard: Tell us about the audience for travel writing in the Nineteenth Century. Who were the people reading the newspaper articles and buying the travel books?

Dr. Keirstead: I would say that anyone who was educated enough to read and had enough income to afford newspapers would be the same people who would be reading travel writing. So much of the novel-reading public, the same people in Great Britain who were reading Dickens or Thackeray or other popular authors, these would also read travel writing. In fact, one clue to that is, if you look at books from this time, in the back where they often had advertisements for the publishers, right alongside novels and poetry you would see ads for, say, *So-and-So's Travels* in

a particular country. Someone like Dickens, who we know as a novelist, also wrote travel writing, and he would advertise those works along with his other works.

Ms. Beard: What was the relationship between travel writing and other forms of literature during the Nineteenth Century?

Dr. Keirstead: That's another good question. I was just mentioning Dickens, and you start to see authors known for other genres doing travel writing, but I should say that it was still understood as something maybe sub-literary. It was more in keeping with his journalism, and so, while it was also very popular, it was not understood to be the same type of thing.

Ms. Beard: Are there specific literary themes that occur in travel writing of this period?

Dr. Keirstead: I think one theme in particular that you would expect to see is (in novels you have what are called novels of development or *Bildungsroman* is the German term for it), you have a character going through the journey of life, let's say, often developing as they go from one day's destination to the next. In the Nineteenth Century, you have this going on in novels and in poetry, too. The growth of the self, the growth of the individual imagination, was one of the great themes, and it was also connected to national identities as well.

You explore yourself through exploring particular regions, very true in American literature. For instance, some of the great novels of the period were also about travel to particular regions, usually out in the West. So, when you have actual travel going on to real places and situations, these two kinds of themes dovetail with each other in some ways, and again, Twain is a great example of that. His novels are in many ways about travel, and he's also writing *Innocents Abroad* about his travels to Europe and to the Middle East. So, even though they're understood as separate genres, there is a lot of crossover in theme and subject matter, too.

Ms. Beard: Can we see any differences between the travel writing done by American authors and that by British authors?

Dr. Keirstead: In terms of British authors writing in the United States, I'd say yes, you can see many differences. Often the British authors are much less self-congratulatory than a lot of American writers would be about their own country. This is true of the Nineteenth Century and is true up until the present day in a lot of ways. But you could say there's a sort of dual reaction to the United States.

This goes back even to Francis Trollope who I mentioned earlier or Dickens who also wrote about the United States. They could be very critical of the United States, but I think, in a lot of ways, because they held it to such a high ideal: Dickens, for instance, coming to the United States expecting to find almost the antidote to all the social strife that he sees going on in Victorian England. And when they don't discover what Dickens called "the republic of my dreams," you get a certain amount of disillusionment and disillusionment sometimes with the natural landscape as well. They're coming, in many cases, with a European romanticized idea of what a beautiful landscape is, so for instance they love Niagara Falls, because it matches paintings and poetry that they're familiar with, and other kinds of American landscapes such as

the Mississippi and flat landscapes, when they don't see [what they expect], it is almost as if they can't relate in some aspects.

In the Nineteenth Century also, social issues come up such as slavery. Most British authors who came to the United States were abolitionists, such as Dickens, and they had difficulty negotiating that with American ideals of liberty and individualism.

Ms. Beard: What about travel writers from other countries, de Tocqueville for example?

Dr. Keirstead: Well yes, most of my examples so far have been British and American writers, which is my particular field of expertise, but, yes, other countries in Europe for instance often had travelers traveling to the United States in the Nineteenth Century. And in the Twentieth Century, writers from all over the world made the United States a subject of their travels.

In particular, since you mentioned de Tocqueville, there was recently a French author who published a book in [2006] replicating de Tocqueville's journey; it was called *American Vertigo*. Sometimes what you see, particularly among French authors because they don't share the same history that the British and American countries do, there's a greater sense of shock or alienation from American culture, but also, because it's so different, maybe we could say there's more excitement about it. There's less of a sort of "America needs to be judged against what it's done to British identity or the English language" for instance, which is a constant theme among British travelers to the United States. So, while you might expect it to be more critical, you also get a different kind of perspective.

What I have observed, particularly about French and German travelers coming to the United States, you see that same disillusionment you see with British writers, but because (it could be because of linguistic differences, or they don't have that close history that British authors do) they come with a different critical eye, in some ways looking for different kinds of things, they can be more critical, but also because it's so different, have a keener fascination in some ways. So de Tocqueville's attitude in many ways is one of awe, in some ways an appreciation for how America is different from France.

Ms. Beard: Now let's talk about the Twentieth Century. How were things different, in terms of travel and travel writing, from the Nineteenth Century?

Dr. Keirstead: In the Twentieth Century, around the turn of the century, you begin to see the emergence of what we might call the professional travel writer, whose main income and main work as an author is to do travel writing. That picks up speed, I would say, around the end of World War I, and then, after World War II, you had many writers who were just doing travel writing, in part because that beginning of the rise of popular travel I mentioned in the Nineteenth Century just keeps growing as the middle class continues to gain wealth and as the technology of travel improves, with railroads, steamships, and of course the automobile at the turn of the century.

So you have more people traveling, more of a market for travel writing, both as books and with the magazines and newspapers, so you start to have more of those writers and at the same time

you start to see a trail-off in the exploratory/imperial kinds of writing that you see. Probably the last manifestation of that writing was the polar narratives, people going to the North and South Poles. There was a big vogue for that around the turn of the century. You could say that was maybe the last hurrah of the people traveling to where no one had gone before or doing that sort of exploratory writing. That afterwards becomes mainly the province of anthropologists and other scientists.

So you start to have professional travel writers, people who gain a reputation for having a particular mindset or perspective, just as particular novelists appeal to certain tastes. You start to have authors like Paul Theroux or Bill Bryson; these are authors today who are just sort of known as travelers.

Ms. Beard: How were these differences reflected in the relationships between travel writing and other forms of Twentieth Century literature?

Dr. Keirstead: Well, I think one thing that happens is, even up until the Nineteen Fifties, the Nineteen Sixties even, travel writing is still seen as a kind of sub-literary genre, and perhaps it always will because it is a form of nonfiction and therefore dates itself in some ways. But I think what you start to see is people read literature with growing interest not just in the aesthetic properties, but in the social properties, the cultural issues that are raised, interest in how cultures, the West for instance, interact with non-Western peoples. Travel writing has always had a stake in that, so I think what you start to see is readers, literary critics, starting to recognize that hey, this kind of thing is going on all along in travel writing, but it hasn't gotten a lot of attention. So I think [these] new attitudes among readers and critics, the rise of post-colonial criticism for instance, which is interested in, again, how do Western writers represent non-Western peoples, that helps travel writing, and you also start to have people from (we think of travel writing as mainly something done by Western authors either within the West or going outside the West), you start to see people from these formerly colonized countries, now they're doing travel writing and they're writing about the West.

Ms. Beard: What kinds of literary themes do we see in this period?

Dr. Keirstead: Well the Twentieth Century, you can of course continue to have themes of the self, development of the self, but what I think you also start to see is reflection of some of the themes you would see in literature at the time: a sort of crisis of culture, this idea that a once cohesive culture is now becoming fragmented.

Now, in travel writing, a lot of times what would happen is people would become disillusioned with their home country, and they would travel elsewhere, searching to find a more authentic, a more natural, kind of environment, and you know there's lots of travel writing like that in the Nineteenth Century and in the Twentieth Century. Even recently you can think of some of the most popular travel books such as *Blue Highways* by William Least Heat Moon. He's sort of traveling within the United States trying to recover an authentic sense of America.

So you have that project still going on but oftentimes you have what you would call post-modern type of travel, people maybe searching for that kind of authenticity or wholeness and not finding

it and then making the loss of that the subject of their travel writing.

Ms. Beard: We talked earlier about the differences between American and British travel writers. Can we see similar phenomena with writers from other former British colonies?

Dr. Keirstead: Yes, I think you can. The last point I was just making about a more fragmented self or a sense of discontinuity that the traveler has, you see that in a lot of cases from former colonial subjects writing about England and sometimes coming to the United States. For instance, there's a traveler, a black English traveler named Gary Younge, who came to the United States and retraced the Civil Rights [era] route of the [Freedom Ride] that was happening there.

That's a new kind of perspective that you get there, the realization that we have writers who want to react against the colonial identity that was given to them. But you also see a recognition now of what you might call a cosmopolitan identity, how can we incorporate elements of a native culture that has been suppressed but not be in a state of continual antagonism against British culture or Western culture. That's one of the new directions that travel writing is taking now.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Keirstead.

Dr. Keirstead: Thank you.

Ms. Beard: We've been talking about travel writing with Dr. Christopher Keirstead of the Auburn University Department of English.

This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*, a website connecting Alabama and its writers. Visit us at [www.alabamaliterarymap.org](http://www.alabamaliterarymap.org) where you can find additional resources on this topic.

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