




BOOK REVIEW

**Brian P. Cooper. *Travel, Travel Writing, and British Political Economy: “Instructions for Travellers,” circa 1750–1850***

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The popularity of travel writing during the long eighteenth century has been long-established and, as Brian Cooper notes in his introduction, the genre has spawned a broad diversity of methodological and conceptual approaches in the last twenty years. Of these studies, many note in passing contemporaries' emphasis upon the utility of travel writing as a means of gathering valuable information relating to trade, commerce, manufacturers, and raw materials in other countries as well as reinforcing a comforting sense of British patriotism in demonstrating the superiority of home over any other country. The connection between travel writing and political economy, however, has seldom been explicitly addressed. It is the reciprocity in this relationship that Cooper sets out to explore: how did political economists draw on the (often unreliable) facts presented in travel literature for the evidence from which they derived their universal principles? How did travelers adopt those same principles as a framework through which to see, analyse, and interpret the societies that they encountered? To what extent did travel become an exercise in validating, refining, or rejecting those principles? And what does a focus upon travel literature tell us about the histories of observation and scientific objectivity?

Cooper's selection of travel writing focuses on writers from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the discipline of political economy became established as a science, and includes both men and women; this is not just a nod toward recognizing female writers but allows him to explore the extent to which their gender shaped travelers' observations and society's perception of their credibility as writers. Women were conventionally associated with the domestic economy—the business of household management, for example, and getting things done; the rational principles of political economy derived from the aggregated data of observation were part of the masculine intellectual domain. Women such as Maria Edgeworth, Maria Graham, and Harriet Martineau, however, defied such gender norms, using the language of political economy in their observations, and, in the case of Martineau, helping to define it as a science. As he shows, both male and female travelers addressed similar questions and used similar methods to establish the credibility of their accounts. Women, however, faced by far the greater challenge in being taken seriously as observers.

In a substantial introductory chapter, Cooper provides an overview of the longer history of travel writing and its importance in early information gathering. This is valuable context, of course, but more specifically Cooper highlights the close relationship between political economy and stadial history that developed over the eighteenth century. The framework of stadial history, with its assumption of a progression toward civilization, fostered, indeed

depended upon, the comparative observation by travelers of societies in different stages of development and provided the foundation upon which the science of political economy was built.

In the remaining substantive chapters, Cooper focuses upon case studies of male and female travelers in Europe, India, Spanish America, and North America, all of whom deployed the principles of political economy and used a stadialist framework of the progress of civilization in their observations on other countries. Thomas Malthus features as both travel writer in Scandinavia and political economist. Malthus rejected attempts to evaluate the relative happiness of societies in primitive and advanced stages of development, preferring the more apparently reliable statistical evidence of births, deaths, and marriages through which the contours of life and death could be objectively measured. The question of happiness, how to measure it, and its relationship to wealth and civilization, was not resolved, however, and was one to which other travelers would turn.

Cooper devotes the central portion of the book to Spanish America, exploring the writings of Alexander von Humboldt, Maria Graham, John Miers, Joseph Andrews, and Francis John Head, the latter three being particularly interested in the region's potential for British investors. Spanish America posed a particular challenge to political economists: how to explain how countries that were so rich in resources were in a state of such poverty? In addressing this question, principles of political economy were tested and their limitations laid bare. Humboldt, for example, was skeptical as to the epistemological value of statistics to reveal any hidden truths and his comments exposed the reductionism of political economists who engaged in armchair travel. The constant tension between universalizing principles and the observed reality on the ground was also a recurring theme in travelers' observations. Cooper's analysis is illuminating in showing how the assumptions and questions of political economy shaped the tenor of observations, the recording and marshalling of information, and the interpretative framework that travelers then supplied. However, one might also note how the diagnoses of South America's problems (the lack of security of property, the supposed malign influence of Roman Catholic church, and the apparent indolence of the people) reproduced eighteenth-century critiques of the Spanish economy: how much of this was new thinking and how much derived from much older prejudices, many of which antedated the emergence of political economy are not explored.

Cooper's final chapter is devoted to Harriet Martineau, focusing chiefly on her writings on North America and her publication *How to Observe. Morals and Manners* (1838), which addressed issues of bias, prejudice, and credibility in travel writing and proposed methodologies for comparative analysis of different societies. Throughout her life, and despite overt hostility from male reviewers, Martineau insisted on the value of travel literature, not simply in terms of its entertainment value, but as being productive of new information for the social sciences and all social analysis.

Cooper is a historian of political economy, rather than travel literature as a genre or travel as a behavior, and this shows. Tellingly, the index contains no place names in its entries. Travel writing here is used as the means to an end: a way of discussing key questions about the evidential basis for political economy and the status of facts, the role of the observer, the relationship between political economy and other sciences. These are all important questions, which Cooper addresses with considerable depth and insight. A contribution to the history of travel, however, this is not. Historians of travel might also wonder whether all the sources surveyed necessarily constitute travel literature: for example, does the correspondence between two static individuals (Maria Edgeworth and David Ricardo), albeit in different countries, constitute travel writing? The mobility of the bag of potato starch that Edgeworth sent to Ricardo does not really compensate for the lack of mobility on the part of the correspondents.