

New Horizons: Reassessing Women's Travel Writing, 1660- 1900

Chawton House Library,
Hampshire, UK
10-12 July, 2014



A lady an explorer? A traveller in skirts?
The notion's just a trifle too seraphic.
Let them stay and mind the babies
Or mend our ragged shirts;
But they mustn't, can't and shan't be geographic!

Punch magazine, 1893

Since the 1990s, researchers across a range of disciplines have amply demonstrated the inaccuracy of this complaint in *Punch*. We now know that 'travellers in skirts' were in plentiful supply in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with an ever increasing number of these women venturing into print and thereby becoming 'travel writers in skirts'. The recent feminist recovery of women's travel and travel writing has thus categorically refuted *Punch's* suggestion that the woman traveller and travel writer was a rarity before 1900. Yet at the same time, this recovery has often unwittingly maintained some of *Punch's* gendered assumptions. In particular, scholars have frequently followed the magazine's lead in assuming that women travellers in this period 'mustn't, can't and shan't be geographic'. Women's travel writing, the received wisdom runs, was usually just a literary exercise, typically undertaken under the rubric of the 'sentimental' or the 'picturesque'. Only male travellers, it is assumed, were licensed to take the role of 'explorer', and to position themselves as travellers whose activities and writings made substantive contributions to knowledge and to contemporary intellectual and cultural debate. As Megan Norcia has recently written, 'women simply have not been written into the history of geographic travel, and when they do appear, it is as genteel travellers rather than geographers'; and the same tendency can be observed in many other disciplines and discourses, including anthropology, sociology, political economy and natural history.

This three-day conference at Chawton House Library, organised in conjunction with Nottingham Trent University's Centre for Travel Writing Studies, invites proposals for papers on all aspects of women's travel writing before 1900. However, it is especially concerned to interrogate the assumed exclusion of women travel writers from contemporary networks of knowledge production and intellectual authority. To this end, we especially welcome papers that explore:

- the extent to which female-authored travelogues were intended and received as contributions to knowledge;
- the forms of knowledge and cultural commentary articulated in women's travel writing;
- the genre's role in the intellectual development of both women writers and women readers (in relation, for example, to language acquisition and other appropriately 'feminine' attributes);
- the participation of women travellers in wider intellectual communities and networks;
- the part played by women travellers and travel writers in the emergence of disciplines like geography, sociology and botany.

Papers will be delivered in English, but we welcome contributions relating to non-Anglophone travel writing. Please send proposals to Carl Thompson (carl.thompson@ntu.ac.uk) by the deadline of March 1st 2014. For any other queries, or to register for the event, please contact either Carl or Gillian Dow, Director of Research at Chawton House Library (g.dow@soton.ac.uk)