



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

---

Citation:

Burroughs, RM (2019) Travel Writing and Rivers. In: The Cambridge History of Travel Writing. Cambridge University Press, pp. 330-344. ISBN 9781316556740 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316556740.022>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/4338/>

Document Version:

Book Section

---

This material has been published in The Cambridge History of Travel Writing edited by N. Das and T. Youngs <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316556740.022>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use. © Cambridge University Press 2019

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

## Travel Writing and Rivers

Robert Burroughs

### Introduction

From the bed of the Yangtze River at the harbour of Fuling in the Chongqing province of China, protrudes Baiheliang, the ‘White Crane Ridge’. Inscribed on this sandstone monolith over more than 1200 years, words and pictures form ‘a vivid record of the river’s life’.<sup>1</sup> Hydrological annotations, first taking the form of engraved fish eyes, chart low-water levels since 763, the time of the Tang Dynasty. Baiheliang is one of the earth’s oldest records of travellers’ inscriptions of rivers. Engraved on it are not only practical, navigational measures, but also musings on nature and human existence. With a poignant irony to which I will return later in this chapter, one set of dramatic carvings associates the Yangtze with infinity: ‘The River Runs Forever’.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas the mythographer Roland Barthes could declare of the sea ‘that it bears no message’, updating the centuries-old depiction of the oceans as ‘chaos, undifferentiation, timelessness, and abstraction’, rivers serve as guides to the human histories and cultures that have harnessed and been channelled by them.<sup>3</sup> Fresh water sustains life and invigorates mythologies.<sup>4</sup> Rivers foster innumerable traditions, legends, rituals and poetics. Mythic channels leading to the underworld, or springing from paradise, recur in various societies. So too do

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Hessler, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (London: John Murray, 2001), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Hessler *River Town*, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 112; Christopher L. Connery, ‘There was No More Sea: The Supersession of the Ocean, from the Bible to Cyberspace’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 32 (2006): 494-511, at 505.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher L. Connery, ‘The Oceanic Feeling and the Regional Imaginary’, in Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayke (eds.), *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press), pp. 284-311, p. 290.

anthropocentric symbols of the river as a highway, a journey, a healer, and as time itself. Particular rivers have been individually characterised (the Mississippi as ‘Ol’ Man River’, for instance, or ‘Father Thames’) or deified (the Potamoi of Greek mythology, or the Ganga).<sup>5</sup> They have given shape to national and regional identities, and to writers’ careers. For Amelia B. Edwards, venturing beyond the limits of ‘Cook’s tourist’ by reaching the second cataract of the Nile, and by means of a *dahabeeyah* not a steamship, established her sense of the magnitude of ancient Egyptian history and with it her credentials as an Egyptologist.<sup>6</sup> Mark Twain’s reputation was forged on his chronicling of the Mississippi, on the banks of which he had grown up.<sup>7</sup>

While their ubiquitous usage as metaphors, symbols and characters means that writing about rivers flows over many literary genres, not least poetry, this chapter examines nonfictional accounts of real journeys. In modern travel writing, as in fiction and poetry, there is a strong undertow pulling writers toward metaphoric interpretations of riverine experience. However, the documentary origins of this genre mean that it tends to look beyond symbolic meanings toward the social, political and environmental forces that carve a river’s ‘imaginative life’.<sup>8</sup> In the following section I give instances of travel writing’s contribution to the cultural and social currents by which rivers attain their shared and individual meanings. In the final section I examine this process in greater depth by focusing on two pressing concerns in recent travel writing, namely ‘extreme’ physical pursuits and environmental degradation.

---

<sup>5</sup> Nick Middleton, *Rivers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 2; Wyman Herendeen, *The River and the Myth of Geography* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Amelia B. Edwards, *A Thousand Miles up the Nile*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1891), p. 1. See Patricia O’Neil, ‘Destination as Destiny: Amelia B. Edwards’s Travel Writing’, *Frontiers* 30.2 (2009): 43–71.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1883); Thomas Ruys Smith, “‘The Mississippi was a Virgin Field’: Reconstructing the River before Mark Twain, 1865-1875”, *Mark Twain Journal* 53.2 (2015): 24-66.

<sup>8</sup> Ruys Smith, ‘Reconstructing the River’, at 56.

The following discussion ranges over waterways, continents and centuries, but is necessarily selective. I have prioritised some of the major rivers, though clearly experiences of and writing about these differ markedly from smaller channels. More attention might have been paid to the upper Thames, for example, which has, since Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat: To Say Nothing of the Dog* (1889), hosted a tradition of rather twee skiff narratives consolidating an image of genteel England.<sup>9</sup> Even relatively minor waterways have deep histories and emotional soundings, as proven by Alice Oswald's long poem *Dart* (2002), and by Olivia Laing's narrative of a walking tour of the River Ouse, *To The River: A Journey Beneath the Surface* (2011). One of the remaining tasks of literary and cultural studies is to connect literary rivers, their 'imaginative lives', in all their individuality and whether grand or small, to one another and to the larger systems of water to which they belong. In seeking to understand the challenges of such a project, the following section begins by comparing cultural constructions of rivers and oceans.

'[T]he natural highways of all nations'

In the twenty-first century, seas and oceans have come to the fore of literary and cultural studies, promising the advent of a 'blue humanities'. The new 'Oceanic Studies' speak to 'unbounded examples' of transnational 'relatedness', distinct from 'landlocked' 'methodologies of the nation and the postnation', in the words of Hester Blum.<sup>10</sup> Rivers have attracted less attention, perhaps because of their affiliation with society on land. Historically rivers have been more individuated by circumscribed projects of empire, nation and self than have the oceans, in

---

<sup>9</sup> See also Robert Gibbings, *Sweet Thames Run Softly* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1945).

<sup>10</sup> Hester Blum, 'The Prospect of Oceanic Studies', *PMLA* 125. 3 (2010): 670-7, at 671. See also John R. Gillis, 'The Blue Humanities', *Humanities* 34.3 (2013). At: <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities>.

particular, the *mare liberum* beyond sovereignty. According to Nick Middleton, ‘no less than three-quarters of the world’s international boundaries follow rivers for at least part of their course’.<sup>11</sup> Rivers do of course traverse national boundaries. The Danube, which has freedom of international navigation much like the high seas, is celebrated as a cradle of art, literature and philosophy in works such as Claudio Magris’ *Danube* (1989).<sup>12</sup> But rivers also help define peoples, their changing physical properties helping to create cultural differences between neighbouring peoples. As borders, rivers give shape to the ‘imagined community’ of the nation and its cultural and political divisions, just as people have named and defined rivers.<sup>13</sup> Having served both as a fulcrum of Civil War and in ‘help[ing] to foster a nascent sense of reunion’, for example, the history of the Mississippi demonstrates that rivers can simultaneously define inclusive and separatist national identities.<sup>14</sup> Travellers on this river navigate their place in these competing visions long after their original political impetus has subsided, as I will discuss.

In 1849 Henry David Thoreau mused that rivers ‘must have been the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travellers’. For those who live near them they provide a constant ‘lure’ to ‘distant enterprise and adventure’. They are then for Thoreau ‘the natural highways of all nations’. However, the faraway enticements that Thoreau proceeds to detail, ‘the most interesting scenery, the most populous portions of the globe’, and the sites ‘where the animal and vegetable kingdoms attain their greatest perfection’ are all terrestrial,

---

<sup>11</sup> Middleton, *Rivers*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Middleton, *Rivers*, p. 69. See also Nick Thorpe, *The Danube* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edn (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Ruys Smith, ‘Reconstructing the River’, at 24, 40.

as opposed to maritime, destinations.<sup>15</sup> These comments are instructive, for it is as guides to the nation or region, and as servants to human enterprise, that travel writing has usually inscribed rivers. Throughout colonial times and beyond it, the Ganga (or Ganges), for example, has been an emblem of ‘Eternal India, exotic land of spirituality, poverty, and death, its essence untouched by the modern world’.<sup>16</sup> If occasionally punctured by the danger of Thugees or by rites deemed offensive, colonial travellers deployed a rhetoric of the ‘picturesque’ Ganga which fixed in time and generalised Indian culture as an aesthetically pleasing and even moving backdrop to European progress.<sup>17</sup> More recent travel discourses on India’s most sacred river -- Ganga is both the name of the river and its deity -- continue to describe its divine meanings and purifying powers, while examining these critically in the face of social inequality, or industrial pollution and other environmental threats. Julian Crandall Hollick, for instance, frames his journey with two questions capturing a ‘paradox’: ‘How can Indians pollute Ganga yet at the same time worship her as a goddess? How can so many millions take a “holy dip” every morning to wash away their sins in a river that is polluted by so much waste, both human and industrial?’<sup>18</sup> As with other observers, Hollick’s travels reveal to him not the answers to these questions but a sense of their inadequacies, and the complexities that underlie the apparent paradox. Still, modern travellers tend to share their colonial-era forebears’

---

<sup>15</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1911), p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Fanny Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim, in Search of the Picturesque, during Four-and-Twenty Years in the East; With Revelations of Life in the Zenana*, 2 vols. (London: Pelham Richardson, 1850), vol. 1, pp. 91-95; Honoria Lawrence, ‘Letter to a Friend’ (1980), in Assa Dorm, Richard Barz and Barbara Nelson (eds.), *An Anthology of Writing on the Ganga: Goddess and River in History, Culture and Society*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 70-8; E.B. Havell, ‘On the Ganges’ (1905), in *Writing on the Ganga*, pp. 79-84.

<sup>18</sup> Julian Crandall Hollick, *Ganga: A Journey Down the Ganges River* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2008), p. 1.

expectation that the river can be a guide to broad, national questions and characteristics.

Where the Ganga has been viewed by travellers in terms of sacred traditions, other rivers and riverine populations have been assumed to lack cultural inscription prior to the arrival of westerners. Travellers have charged themselves with making sense of these uncharted waters. Typically such writings emerge from contexts of empire, first taking the form of exploration narratives. The Amazon has an especially long history of such voyages, dating back to the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Exploration of the African interior in the nineteenth century, a prelude to European colonisation, similarly was achieved by river navigation. Locating the sources of the major waterways advanced European geographical knowledge, created inroads for mercantile and missionary expansion, and imposed Eurocentric traditions. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Niger was, for Britons, synonymous with a roll-call of voyagers seeking its inland sources--Mungo Park, Hugh Clapperton, Richard and John Lander, and more--whose supposed dutiful sacrifice marked the region and its waters as a 'white man's grave'. Popular interest in the contest to "discover" the sources of the Nile meant that the high-profile expeditions of Richard Francis Burton and John Hanning Speke (1857-58) and Speke and James Augustus Grant (1863) arguably outstripped the geographical significance of their findings. Livingstone's journeys along the Orange and Zambezi rivers encouraged new generations of explorers to emulate the Scottish missionary. For Henry Morton Stanley, the "finding" of Livingstone himself was a famous accomplishment.

---

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Smith, *Explorers of the Amazon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). See also Lesley Wylie, *Columbia's Forgotten Frontier: A Literary Geography of the Putumayo* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

Stanley would go on to traverse the entire continent from east to west by following the River Congo to its Atlantic destination. Stanley's expeditions also connect exploration to empire: his final work in Africa was the founding of King Leopold II of Belgium's Congo Free State.<sup>20</sup>

African exploration texts are typically free of the picturesque appreciations of Ganga travellers. Late-nineteenth century voyages in particular are dominated by practical and political dangers or puzzles, though even in Park's early, Romantic-era example of the genre, aesthetic appreciation of the 'majestic Niger' quickly gives way, upon its first sighting, to the scientific revelation that it flows eastward.<sup>21</sup> While Victorian Britain fostered a saintly image of Livingstone, to give another example, David and Charles Livingstone's *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries* (1866) is by contrast a hard-headed, sober account of various personal challenges amid the persistence of Indian-Ocean slave trafficking. Understood in geographical and navigational terms, rivers are conceived prosaically as routes and obstacles. In Stanley's self-consciously sensational quest narrative *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), the river takes on the role of an antagonist. Steering past a whirlpool at the Congo cataracts leads Stanley to contemplate the movement of water in unusual detail. His 'terrified eyes' witness 'rising [...] mounds' of liquid making a 'stunning uproar' and replaced by a 'fatal pit' which 'angrily yawned behind the stern of our boat'. Subsequent accounts of the whirlpool as it

---

<sup>20</sup> David Lambert, *Mastering the Niger: James MacQueen's African Geography and the Struggle over Atlantic Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa* (1799) (Edinburgh: A and C Black, 1858), p. 162.



‘yawned’ and ‘belched’ reinforce its monstrous form. In this Victorian odyssey the Congo rapids form no lesser an adversary than Charybdis.<sup>22</sup>

Stanley’s epic framework is surpassed by the Darwinian timescales of Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Conrad had travelled up the Congo by steamship and recorded his impressions in a diary.<sup>23</sup> In *Heart of Darkness*, the protagonist’s journey upstream on the (unnamed) river is, in one famous passage, likened to ‘travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.’ The emptiness and quiet of the ‘impenetrable forest’, ‘warm, thick, sluggish’ air, and the ‘deserted’ and ‘gloom[y]’ expanses of water ‘bewitch[ed]’ the traveller into an encounter with ‘one’s past [...] but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence’.<sup>24</sup> More than an adversary, in *Heart of Darkness* the river becomes symptomatic of a broader threat of degeneration through environmental conditions. As many critics argue, so too are African peoples depicted in terms of a barbarism that Conrad also associates with the (European) unconscious mind. Perhaps it is the generalising and vague nature of Conrad’s descriptions of peoples and places in central Africa which have encouraged many subsequent voyagers, in the Congo and beyond, to appropriate aspects of *Heart of Darkness*, sometimes challenging its racial bigotry even as they confirm its influence.<sup>25</sup> Conradian aesthetics overwhelm

---

<sup>22</sup> Henry Morton Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Bros), vol. 2, pp. 395, 402. Youngs notes Stanley’s debt to the classics in ‘Africa/The Congo: The Politics of Darkness’, in Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 156-73, p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Conrad, ‘Congo Diary’ (1890), in Conrad (Robert Kimbrough, ed.), *Heart of Darkness* (1899) (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), pp. 159-66.

<sup>24</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>25</sup> Youngs, ‘Africa/The Congo’.

knowledge of local specificities. Of his journey to Bunce Island, in the Sierra Leone River, Caryl Phillips recalls a familiar temptation for travellers: ‘I tried hard to push the word Conradian from my mind, for I understood it to be imbued with all kinds of ambiguous connotations,[...] but truly this was a Conradian world that I was entering.’<sup>26</sup> By resisting the influence of Conrad, Phillips ironically echoes Conrad’s sense of the river journey.

On water as on land, the prior inscription of place is central to modern travel writing, enabling dialogue across texts and contexts as travellers venture in the wake of precursors. Dominant iconographies are tested by individuals seeking to define their own journeys through their similarity to or (more often) distinction from their forebears. The Mississippi’s identities were established in US travel writing primarily through the works of white men, not least the fiction and non-fiction of Mark Twain.<sup>27</sup> In *Old Glory* (1981), Jonathan Raban states his desire to experience the Mississippi, which ‘is more an imaginary river than a real one’, owing to his childhood fascination with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).<sup>28</sup> Accidentally leaving his copy of Twain’s novel in a hotel room at the start of his journey proves to be not ‘such a bad augury after all’ but a moment of initiation: ‘This was a voyage I was going to have to make alone’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed Twain’s writing proves to offer no obvious guide to people and place. Raban finds that the locals do not read Twain, and observes the irony that even memory of Twain’s own ‘angry masterpiece’, *Huckleberry Finn* has in a

---

<sup>26</sup> Caryl Phillips, ‘Sierra Leone: Bunce Island’, in *Colour Me English* (2011). Qtd. in Yvonne Reddick, “‘This was a Conradian world I was entering’: Colonial and Postcolonial River-Journeys beyond the Black Atlantic in Caryl Phillips’s Work’ *Wasafiri*, 31. 3 (2016): 34-41.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Ruys Smith, ‘The Mississippi River as Site and Symbol’, in Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 62-77, , pp. 70-2.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Old Glory* (1981) (London: Picador, 1985), p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Raban, *Old Glory*, p. 66.

sense been lost to tourism, the ‘profit-making [...] sentimental kitsch’ of Twain’s place of origin, Hannibal, Missouri.<sup>30</sup> Even so, *Old Glory* imagines kinship with Twain, or rather his famous fictional creation, when Raban’s abrupt return to the river from the sterilities of Hannibal sounds ‘odd, weighty echoes of Huck Finn’s escape from St. Petersburg’, Twain’s proxy for his childhood home.<sup>31</sup>

Planning his canoe journey down the Mississippi leads Eddy L. Harris, in *Mississippi Solo* (1988), to an historical perspective which stresses connection and at the same time multiplicity:

the blue line [on the map] blurs and fragments until there is more than one Mississippi River. There is the river of legend, the Father of Waters. The river of steamboats and gamblers. The river flowing with tears and sweat of slaves. I can hear the beating of Indian drums and the singing of slaves resting in the shade of plantation willows on the banks of the old man river.<sup>32</sup>

In his ‘river quest’ Harris ponders his place in a history of unlike experience brought together by the flow of water. His repeating personification of the river as a father and his emulation of Ernest Hemingway (not a renowned Mississippi traveller) claim kinship with the ‘river of legend’. Numerous passages of *Mississippi Solo* update traditional representations ‘of rugged and capable masculinity’ exemplified by Twain’s evocation of the steamboat pilot.<sup>33</sup> In one episode Harris places himself in this tradition by successfully racing in his canoe against a sailboat captain.<sup>34</sup> As a Black American, however, Harris is also forced to confront the racist

---

<sup>30</sup> Raban, *Old Glory*, pp. 218, 303.

<sup>31</sup> Raban, *Old Glory*, p. 308.

<sup>32</sup> Eddy L. Harris, *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (New York: Nick Lyons Books), pp. 7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Ruys Smith, ‘Reconstructing the River’, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, pp. 106-10.

grounds on which he might be barred from the river's traditions, when, in a moment of ill-judged humour, an otherwise sociable interlocutor calls him 'River Nigger'.<sup>35</sup>

The merging of personal and cultural histories is again poignantly rehearsed in another record of Mississippi travel, Mary Morris's *The River Queen: A Memoir* (2007). Exploring both the river and her feelings toward her recently deceased father, Morris arrives at Hannibal. She seeks to verify her father's claim to have once lived next door to the house in which Twain was raised. Much of the town is given over to Twain tourism, and her father's house no longer stands. As in so many other respects, the legend of the famous author threatens to blot out alternative viewpoints on the river, as well as Morris's family past. However, in the gift shop Morris discovers a photograph of Twain from 1902, the time of his final return to Hannibal, in the margins of which her father's house is discernible. From within the 'Mark Twain theme park' the traveller restores personal history: 'I know that my father walked here. He stood on this street and looked at the river.'<sup>36</sup> Perhaps unwittingly, Morris writes truly in the spirit of Twain, whose account of his own return to Hannibal in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) explores memory and loss. Twain returned as if a ghost, 'one who returns out of a dead-and-gone generation', and spends his time rather like Morris, 'recognizing and metaphorically shaking hands with a hundred familiar objects which no longer exist'.<sup>37</sup>

Perilous journeys and environmental dangers

---

<sup>35</sup> Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 70. See also Harris's *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Mary Morris, *The River Queen: A Memoir* (New York: Picador, 2007), p.189.

<sup>37</sup> Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, p. 524.

As Steve Mentz observes of maritime travel, while humans have sought to profit from the efficiency of waterborne travel, human bodies cannot long endure submersion in water. For Mentz, these two conflicting points establish the corpus of literary sea voyages around risk and exhilaration.<sup>38</sup> Such feelings are at the forefront of many accounts of river journeys as well, above all in the numerous canoeing narratives published in the twentieth century of which *Mississippi Solo* is an example.<sup>39</sup> Whether at sea or on rivers, however, the word ‘exhilaration’ might be inapt should we consider dangerous journeys that have been forced upon travellers. The former slaves Olaudah Equiano and Samuel Ajayi Crowther would, in 1789 and 1841, respectively, describe the Niger riverine system as a portal ‘into another world’ generating feelings of awe, astonishment, and also familial loss, cultural dislocation and suicidal despair.<sup>40</sup> Many of the forced migrations in world history involve travel on water, though firsthand accounts are rare. The desire to reimagine these many lost journeys is one defining aspect of postcolonial travel writing.<sup>41</sup>

Danger has long been important to many voluntary journeys on rivers, too. Tales of adversity entice readers with sensational scenes of prowess, bravery, and sacrifice. According to Margaret Cohen, the travel genre (and subsequently prose fiction itself) emerges out of ‘remarkable occurrences’, particularly

---

<sup>38</sup> Steve Mentz, ‘The Sea’, in Carl Thompson, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016). pp. 454-63, p. 454.

<sup>39</sup> Classic canoeing narratives include John Graves, *Goodbye to a River: A Narrative* (1959) (New York: Vintage, 2002). Twenty-first century additions to the subgenre include Kira Salak, *The Cruellest Journey: 600 Miles by Canoe to the Legendary City of Timbuktu* (London: Bantam Books, 2005); Jennifer Kingsley, *Paddlenorth: Adventure, Resilience, and Renewal in the Arctic Wild* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Crowther (J.F.A. Ajayi, ed.), ‘The Narrative of Samuel Ajayi Crowther’ (1837), in Philip Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 298-316, p. 309; Olaudah Equiano (Werner Sollers, ed.), *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), chap. 2.

<sup>41</sup> See Reddick, “‘This was a Conradian world’”.

mishaps, as recorded in ships' logs.<sup>42</sup> Carl Thompson highlights the centrality of the suffering traveller to Romanticism, and a romanticised yearning to escape the trappings of industrialised society features in accounts of river adventure.<sup>43</sup> Harris, for one, views his journey as an antidote to modern life which has been '[c]omputerized, mechanized, itemized, formalized, and most dangerously, standardized'.<sup>44</sup> In other writings, however, travellers suffer in pursuit of wealth, empire, and fame.. Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* is an example of colonial travail. The Congo cataracts that Stanley described in Homeric terms claimed the life of Frank Pocock, Stanley's deputy. Pocock is represented as an ideal English coloniser-in-the-making whose most brazen request to the Welsh-American Stanley is that he and his fellow deputies be allowed to 'make a small British flag to hoist above our tent, and over our canoe on the lakes'.<sup>45</sup> Marking his place in a pantheon of fallen explorers, reportage of Pocock's death imagines Britain's stake in Africa to be pitched on virtuous self-sacrifice.

Eighty years or so after Stanley, the *Traveler's Guide to the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi* (1956) spelled out the explorer's connection between *The Odyssey* and the Congo cataracts in its account of 'Hell's Cauldron, the formidable whirlpool immediately below Matadi, compared with which Charbydis and Scylla are insignificant'. No longer regarded as a formidable opponent, however, their significance is as an 'attraction' which proves 'thrilling'.<sup>46</sup> In its modern forms, 'extreme' travel can view the obstacles posed

---

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 66-72.

<sup>43</sup> Carl Thompson, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent*, vol. 2, p. 402, vol. 1, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Tourist Bureau for the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, *Traveler's Guide to the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Brussels: Information and Public Relations Bureau, 1956), p. 644.

by riverine travel as the goal of the journey, rather than a means to other ends. Peter Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure* (1933) marks a transition between purposefulness and pleasure. Fleming signed up to an expedition to relieve Percy Fawcett, a British colonel lost in the Amazon rainforest. As the mission descended into farcical in-fighting and failure, Fleming's narrative takes the form of a race back down-river against the expedition leader, in which little more than his own pride is at stake. The 'achievement' of winning the race rather heroically against the odds is both 'intrinsically valueless' and 'absolutely satisfying'.<sup>47</sup>

Fleming is at pains to query popular reportage of 'the Terrors of the Jungle'.<sup>48</sup> Usually, however, literary accounts of 'extreme' journeys tend to prioritise physical risk and endurance, sometimes at the expense of historical and cultural insights or personal reflection. Phil Harwood's account of the 'first source-to-sea descent' of the Congo acknowledges somewhat superficially his repeating Stanley's journey.<sup>49</sup> Harwood graciously concedes that a rival work, Tim Butcher's *Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart* (2008), is the more substantially researched alternative to his own book: '[i]ndeed I wish I could write like that'.<sup>50</sup> Still, Harwood's account of his canoe romp reinforces the association of 'extreme' journeying with particular parts of the globe where extremity is tied to Eurocentric notions of geographical remoteness and cultural dissimilarity as well as to war, and political and environmental instability. In their marketing, in particular, these books somewhat awkwardly conflate dangers

---

<sup>47</sup> Peter Fleming, *Brazilian Adventure* (1933) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 363.

<sup>48</sup> Fleming, *Brazilian Adventure*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Phil Harwood, *Canoeing the Congo: The First Source-to-Sea Descent of the Congo River* (Chichester: Summersdale, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Harwood, *Canoeing the Congo*, p. 156.

of the natural world and the political sphere as if these are all part of the same experience whose coexistence need not be explained or considered in depth. As Harwood declared in one publicity statement:

The Congo has suffered horribly throughout its history, and due to generations of foreign exploitation, political instability, corruption and civil war, not to mention a prevalence of crocodiles, hippos, waterfalls and huge rapids, the river seems to have been given a wide berth. But if you're looking for a true adventure travel destination, then look no further – the Congo has it all!<sup>51</sup>

Given that this form of travel often depends on rivers retaining their natural wildness, however, contemporary narratives of canoe voyages have observed changing natural and environmental conditions, including ecological diversity. In modern river narratives problems of pollution become unavoidable, as testified to by Harris while drifting through miles of ‘foamy scum’ around the mouth of the Arkansas River.<sup>52</sup> As noted previously, human and industrial pollution has become key to the topoi of Ganga travel, posing problems for the traveller seeking to marvel at the river’s sacred power or its picturesque beauty. Yet more immersed in the problem of pollution than the canoe journey is the swimmer’s narrative. Roger Deakin’s *Waterlog: A Swimmer’s Journey through Britain* (1999) is one of the first books to explore the trend for wild swimming in the UK. In it, personal intimacy with water and observations on the human shaping of nature are wedded. Deakin’s decision to swim in the natural

---

<sup>51</sup> Phil Harwood, ‘Canoeing the entire Congo river... and living to tell the tale’, *The Guardian*, 27 January 2012. In truth, as the *Traveler’s Guide to the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi* of 1956 suggests, there is a long history of tourist travel on the Congo – often pitched in terms of its own ‘extremeness’. For earlier examples see also Stephen Donovan, ‘Touring in Extremis: Travel and Adventure in the Congo’, in Tim Youngs, ed., *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces* (London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 37-54.

<sup>52</sup> Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 212. See also Graves, *Goodbye to a River*.



waterways of Britain is motivated by a good-humoured but heartfelt wish to evade the sterilities of mainstream English society. His is a powerful ode to the art of travelling to find new vantage-points—in this case the perspective from close to the surface of water. While he is mainly in search of natural or historic sites, there are moments of invective against river management. The rerouting of the River Lark in Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, into ‘an outsized concrete canyon’ to safeguard a Tesco carpark is a ‘public humiliation’ over which Deakin weeps.<sup>53</sup> *Waterlog* belongs to a tradition of ‘[s]wimming as transcendental experience – a spiritual, originary, mystical, or purifying exercise [...] corresponding in the West exactly to the high period of industrial capitalism’, and to its romanticised rejection.<sup>54</sup> Deakin explores the sensuality of water, as well as the physical vulnerability which he shares with natural waterways: ‘When you swim, you feel your body for what is mostly is – water – and it begins to move with the water around it’. Wild swimming places the traveller ‘in nature, part and parcel of it’.<sup>55</sup>

Deakin, though, seems to be less comfortably merged in the social body. As with many other nineteenth- and twentieth-century representations of aquatic recreation, *Waterlog* rejects popular pastimes in favour of privileged absorption in the natural world.<sup>56</sup> Dipping in his own private moat, he notes: ‘It certainly beat Phil Collins over the PA at the swimming pool.’<sup>57</sup> While the final third of his book explores Deakin’s serious reflections on his attempts at an extreme, dangerous swim, the spectacle of a gang of motorbikers perilously diving

---

<sup>53</sup> Roger Deakin, *Waterlog: A Swimmer’s Journey through Britain* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 67, 68.

<sup>54</sup> Connery, ‘Oceanic Feeling’, pp. 294-5.

<sup>55</sup> Deakin, *Waterlog*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>56</sup> See Connery, ‘Oceanic Feeling’, p. 293; Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002), p. 108.

<sup>57</sup> Deakin, *Waterlog*, p. 73.

(without their bikes) from a bridge at Ingleton, North Yorkshire, which he witnesses in one of his few forays to the north of England, is a comic interlude, if ultimately ‘inspiring’.<sup>58</sup> With its interest in the natural world directed by an understandable avoidance of swimming in unclean waters, *Waterlog* could be called a neo-Victorian travelogue, reimagining British waters on nineteenth-century terms ‘around [...] simple attractions: the beach, the bathing, a spot of fossil hunting’.<sup>59</sup> It locates its futures, if anywhere, in an imagined Arcadia that rewards personal isolation with nature.

For the majority of travellers, the problems facing natural waterways cannot be so easily escaped. Throughout many parts of the world, rivers are subject to industrial-scale projects of irrigation, channelling, redirection, and damming. ‘In Europe today,’ observes Middleton in 2012, ‘almost 80% of the total discharge of the continent's major rivers is affected by measures designed to regulate flow, whether for drinking water supply, hydroelectric power generation, flood control, or any other reason’.<sup>60</sup> The many side-effects of mass human exploitation include problems of runoff and erosion, and pollution by chemical and other contaminants (not least sewage), prompting conservation projects and environmental schemes. Management of rivers has had several escalating adverse effects, ranging from threats to native species of fish and the blossoming of toxic algae to resettlement of human populations and flooding. The construction of reservoirs and dams along the upper reaches of China’s Yellow River and the USA’s Colorado River have challenged their ability to reach the sea, starving the North Pacific and the Gulf of California of fresh water

---

<sup>58</sup> Deakin, *Waterlog*, p. 223.

<sup>59</sup> Deakin, *Waterlog*, p. 171.

<sup>60</sup> Middleton, *Rivers*, p. 84.

and sediment.<sup>61</sup> Levels of salt, oxygen and temperature all are thought to have been altered by river-damming on modern, industrial scales. Fresh water is an increasingly prized and unequally distributed resource. In some parts of the world droughts are expected to increase owing to human-induced global warming. Conflict over access across and within national borders is predicted to escalate in future. Cleansing and basic sustenance must be balanced against disposal of waste and the by-products of other human activities. Perhaps the pervasive image of the river as a ‘highway’, as used by Thoreau and others, has helped encourage blindness to the vulnerability of waterways to human activity and of the connection between rivers and all other water. In industrialised areas, seldom do rivers run the colour of the ‘blue humanities’. Intimately connected to economic development in the global south, particularly the booms in Brazil and India, rivers can guide travel writers and readers alike to confront the murkier waters in which ecocritical and postcolonial sensitivities meet.

This last point leads me to return to Baiheiliang in the Fuling River, and a most insightful river travel book. Published on the eve of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, Peter Hessler’s *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (2001) observes life before the displacement of communities, the submersion of landscapes and landmarks—the latter including Baiheliang—and the transformation of a flowing river into ‘all that stagnant water’.<sup>62</sup> A century before Hessler, Isabella Bird had complained on her approach to Chongqing (which she transliterated as ‘chung-king’) that ‘the rush of the fast-rising river carried us all too swiftly past much that was worthy of observation’, but

---

<sup>61</sup> Middleton, *Rivers*, pp. 95, 100.

<sup>62</sup> Hessler, *River Town*, p. 124.

nonetheless paused her relentlessly factual narrative for relatively unusual descriptions of the region in its ‘infinite picturesqueness’.<sup>63</sup> Today, Baiheliang is housed 30 metres below the Yangtze’s surface in China’s first underwater museum, with some of its carvings removed to the Three Gorges Museum in Chongqing.<sup>64</sup> By Hessler’s own measurement, the river had risen just two inches in the 1234 years between its first recording and his visit in 1996.<sup>65</sup> *River Town* is now curiously akin to Bird’s *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* of 1899) as a testament to a flooded culture, and in 2013 Hessler updated his own part in this story in the pages of *National Geographic*. Travel writing as a genre is prone to wistfulness and the desire to record endangered cultures, and this is reflected in some writings about rivers, such as Harris’s descriptions of the ‘enslaved’ Mississippi,<sup>66</sup> Twain’s recollections of the steamboat era, or Deakin’s lament for the Lark. Whereas most other narratives featured in this chapter describe journeys along rivers, *River Town* is primarily an account of residence besides a river, of careful observation of its passage, and of the peoples who live near it. Hessler’s spell of residence affects his perspective. His is an even-handed assessment of the cost of ‘progress’ as measured by the Chinese with whom he speaks, in which the fate of the Yangtze signals the direction of the nation in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. If ‘the river runs forever’, according to one inscription on Baiheilang, then human interventions irrevocably can change its flow, and with it the course of history.

---

<sup>63</sup> Mrs J. F. Bishop (Isabella L. Bird), *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (London: John Murray, 1899), pp. 481, 485. See also 501.

<sup>64</sup> See Peter Hessler, ‘Return to River Town’, *National Geographic* (2013). At: <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/03/fuling-china/hessler-text>

<sup>65</sup> Hessler, *River Town*, p. 94.

<sup>66</sup> Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, p. 57.

### Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edn. London: Verso, 1991.
- Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972.
- Bishop, Mrs. J. F. (Isabella L. Bird), *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*. London: John Murray, 1899.
- Blum, Hester, 'The Prospect of Oceanic Studies', *PMLA* 125. 3 (2010): 670-7.
- Butcher, Tim, *Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart*. London: Vintage, 2008.
- Cohen, Margaret, *The Novel and the Sea*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Connery, Christopher L. 'The Oceanic Feeling and the Regional Imaginary'. In Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayke (eds.), *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996, pp. 284-311.
- . 'There was No More Sea: The Supersession of the Ocean, from the Bible to Cyberspace.' *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006): 494-511.
- Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988.
- Crandall Hollick, Julian, *Ganga: A Journey Down the Ganges River*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2008.
- Crowther, Samuel, 'The Narrative of Samuel Ajayi Crowther' (1837). Ed. J.F.A. Ajayi. In Philip Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans in the Era of the Slave Trade*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967, pp. 298-316.
- Deakin, Roger, *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey through Britain*. London: Vintage, 2000.

- Donovan, Stephen, 'Touring in Extremis: Travel and Adventure in the Congo'. In Tim Youngs (ed.), *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces*. London: Anthem Press, 2006, pp. 37-54.
- Driver, Felix, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
- Edwards, Amelia B., *A Thousand Miles up the Nile*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1891.
- Equiano, Olaudah, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789). Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.
- Fleming, Peter, *Brazilian Adventure* (1933). London: Jonathan Cape, 1984.
- Gibbins, Robert, *Sweet Thames Run Softly*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1945.
- Gillis, John R., 'The Blue Humanities', *Humanities* 34.3 (2013). At: <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities>.
- Harris, Eddy L., *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest*. New York: Nick Lyons Books, 1988.
- . *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.
- Harwood, Phil, 'Canoeing the entire Congo river... and living to tell the tale', *The Guardian*, 27 January 2012.
- . *Canoeing the Congo: The First Source-to-Sea Descent of the Congo River*. Chichester: Summersdale, 2013.
- Havell, E.B. 'On the Ganges' (1905). In Assa Dorm, Richard Barz and Barbara Nelson (eds.), *An Anthology of Writing on the Ganga: Goddess and River in History, Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 79-84.

Herendeen, Wyman, *The River and the Myth of Geography*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1986).

Hessler, Peter, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*. London: John Murray, 2001.

---. 'Return to River Town'. *National Geographic* (2013) At:

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/03/fuling-china/hessler-text>

Jerome, Jerome K., *Three Men in a Boat: To Say Nothing of the Dog* (1889). London: Penguin Classics, 2004.

Laing, Olivia, *To the River: A Journey Beneath the Surface*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011.

Lambert, David, *Mastering the Niger: James MacQueen's African Geography and the Struggle over Atlantic Slavery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Lawrence, Honoria, 'Letter to a Friend' (1980), in Assa Dorm, Richard Barz and Barbara Nelson (eds.), *An Anthology of Writing on the Ganga: Goddess and River in History, Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 70-8.

Livingstone, David, and Charles Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries*. London: John Murray, 1865.

Magris, Claudio, *Danube*, trans. Patrick Creagh. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

Mentz, Steve, 'The Sea', in Carl Thompson (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, pp. 454-63.

Middleton, Nick, *Rivers: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Oswald, Alice, *Dart*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.

Morris, Mary, *The River Queen: A Memoir*. New York: Picador, 2007.

- Parkes, Fanny, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim, in Search of the Picturesque, during Four-and-Twenty Years in the East; With Revelations of Life in the Zenana*, 2 vols. London: Pelham Richardson, 1850.
- Park, Mungo, *Travels in the Interior of Africa* (1799). Edinburgh: A and C Black, 1858.
- Raban, Jonathan, *Old Glory* (1981). London: Picador, 1985.
- Reddick, Yvonne, ““This was a Conradian world that I was entering”’: Colonial and Postcolonial River-Journeys beyond the Black Atlantic in Caryl Phillips’s Work’, *Wasafiri* 31.3 (2016): 34-41.
- Ruys Smith, Thomas, ‘The Mississippi River as Site and Symbol’, in Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 62-77.
- . ““The Mississippi was a Virgin Field”’: Reconstructing the River before Mark Twain, 1865-1875’, *Mark Twain Journal* 53.2 (2015): 24-66.
- Sekula, Allan, *Fish Story*. Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002.
- Smith, Anthony, *Explorers of the Amazon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Stanley, Henry Morton, *Through the Dark Continent*, 2 vols. New York: Harper and Bros., 1878.
- Thompson, Carl, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Thoreau, Henry David, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1911.
- Thorpe, Nick, *The Danube*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.



Tourist Bureau for the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, *Traveler's Guide to the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Brussels: Information and Public Relations Bureau, 1956.

Twain, Mark, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). London: Penguin Classics, 2006.

---. *Life on the Mississippi*. Boston: James R. Osgood, 1883.

---. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). London: Penguin Classics, 2014.

Wylie, Lesley, *Columbia's Forgotten Frontier: A Literary Geography of the Putumayo*.

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

Youngs, Tim, 'Africa/The Congo: The Politics of Darkness', in Peter Hulme and Tim

Youngs (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 2002, pp. 156-73.