CHAPTER VII
THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

THE MODERN LITERATURE OF TRAVEL ABOUT EUROPE AND U.S.A. SINCE 1940

General Features:

The Second Great War, and the days of peace that followed saw the decline of the literature of travel; in recent times the volume of sea and air traffic has increased at a terrible rate, but there is no good literature of travel. The old romantic tradition is dead; there is none to replace R.L. Stevenson, W.H. Davies and Stephen Graham, men do not tramp about, they go in supersonic jets. Humour too is ended, there is none to compare with Mark Twain or Hilaire Belloc.

There is none to write charming books of simple descriptions of simple English sights, there is no W.H. Hudson afoot in England. Even journalistic travel books of the type of Priestley's Rain upon God Hill are no more written. There is none who can replace Dreiser or Hemingway. The only branch of travel literature flourishing today is that of Tourists' accounts; this lost tribe of Philistines is over-running the globe, they are jacks of all trades and masters of none; they are photographers, reporters, political thinkers, lecturers, pleasure seekers, adventurers, picnickers and hitch hikers all combined in one.

Many countries of Europe are behind the iron curtain, and in others the ravages of war are not yet smoothed, none but some old soldier would like to go over to the scenes of blood-shed and wholesale butchery; but even soldiers hate the very thought of it. Europe is like a big Mortuary—the dead and their ghosts shriek blasphemies upon those who live. China too is a closed country, in other places revolutions are bursting out; thus the conditions both social, political
and moral are most unsuitable for the growth of the literature of travel. The people are no more in love with Europe, old and ancient buildings have disappeared, and without some window opening on the foams of the seas in the fairy land they can get no consolation from merely changing their hotels. This in a way explains why the few tolerable books that exist are either about Greece and other ancient lands or about U.S.A. The Globe is no more a dark world, the human imagination is now working its way to the stars; astronauts are the heroes of today, and travel accounts are written by scientists and not literary men.

A. Some books about Greece and the Ancient Lands.


93. Henry Miller (1891 - ) Colossus of Maroussi-1941

Henry Miller's account of Crete and Greece though tolerably good when compared with modern books of travel, is all the same an unsatisfactory work when the old masters are remembered. There is no plan, no proper development, and no regular growth, it is just a fragmentary disconnected rigamarole thing, if there is any beauty it is because the subject is sublime enough to fire even a mediocre writer's imagination. His prose glows, flares up, as it were, intermittently; there is no doubt that he is a lover of nature, a judge of ancient art and architecture, and also capable of narrating all that deserves a good treatment. He has all that goes to the making of talent and almost to the making of a poet; he can see and depict nature, enliven a tale of history, stir up by a happy choice of words a living group of impressions. But the constant feeling of his failing intellectual will power does not leave the reader. He has no characters to paint, no studies of human heart; he has no
profound philosophy and no love of form. But here and there are passages handled exquisitely.

"I caught the full devastating beauty of the great plain of Thebes which we were approaching, and unable to control myself, I burst into tears, why had no one prepared me for this? I cried out. I begged the driver to stop a moment in order to devour the scene with one full sweeping glance. We were not yet in the bed of the plain, we were amidst the low mounds and hummocks which had been stunned motionless by the swift messengers of light. We were in the dead centre of that soft silence which absorbs even the breathing of gods. Man had nothing to do with this nor even nature. In this realm nothing moves nor stirs, nor breathes save the finger of mystery*.1

Nature finds an echoing of the chords of the heart, a true and mystical love which is as old as the first traveller on earth, and the words he chooses are most fitly selected to do full justice to the splendour that is inexpressible.

"The road to Epidaurus is like the road to creation; one stops searching. One grows silent stilled by the hush of mysterious beginnings. If one could speak one would become melodious. There is nothing to be seized or treasured or cornered off here, there is only a breaking down of walls which lock the spirit in. The landscape does not charm, it installs itself in the open places of the heart; it crowds in, accumulates, dispossesses".2

It is a cyclopean world in which he moves; the gigantic sizes of things over-awe the imagination, he relishes such sensation of grandeur and splendour which these ancient sites inspire in the heart of the beholder.

"At Mycenae the gods once walked the earth, of that there can be no question. And at Mycenae the progeny of these same gods, produced a type of man, who was artistic to the core, and at the same time monstrous in his passion. The architecture was cyclopean, the ornaments of a delicacy and grace unrivalled in any period of art*.3

2. Ibid.,p.79
3. Ibid.,p.89
Liddell approaches his subject, in the spirit of a textbook writer; all available information and ancient myths and legends are woven into his personal narrative, no doubt he succeeds in creating the effect he desires. It is a sleepy drowsy journey from one Greek island to another, and it is as slow as the voyages in the times of Homer. With one eye, he dreams of the past, and with the other he watches the present day stations and harbours, we live in a double world, two or three films seen to be unrolling together before our eyes. It appears as if his sleepy journey awakens from sleep many an island in the Aegean, and when he leaves they again go to sleep like Vishnu sleeping in the lotus for another millennium after opening his eyes for a few minutes only. Authors, past and present are all known to him, and are quoted at appropriate places. There is a great variety of names, places, information and stories and yet there is a unity in it, the difficulty of the identification of old places creates an affect of the mystery of life. It is a journey to the unknown through the sea of the known. The Aegean is a thing of beauty, and a perpetual delight, it enters the heart to dwell there for ever, in black moods, it cheers the gloomy heart, and warms us when we shiver in the cold and the dark.

"It is another property of Aegean landscape that you can take it away with you. You can live on it in other places and for months and years afterwards. Even if it were no more than a nostalgic place of escape it would be precious in an intolerable world from which a temporary, retreat is so often and so badly needed. So in a dark and bitter winter in hated Finland I closed my eyes and turned them on my heart - closed them on the blizzards of Ostro Bothnia and turned them on the indigo sea of Delos and the smiling and glittering strait of Poros, but that is not all; like any other happy love, any love deep enough to be vital and even happy in the absence of the beloved object (for it can not be total absence) a love of the Aegean is a perpetual source of refreshment, light and peace". 1

His range is so wide that Cos Lettuce and Ezra Pound are brought together, he speaks of Cos island.

"Cos is a household in the name of the Cos Lettuce, I cannot discover that this particularly flourishes there. And the island figures in modern poetry because of its ancient silk trade. The tea rose, the tea gown etc. supplants the mousseline of Cos. Mr. Ezra Pound speaks as if this were rather a pity."

The ghosts of the past move in the moonlight of Delos.

"At night it is ghostly - ghostly too is the barley grass whitened by the moonlight. On a windless night there is not a sound, only the barking of a dog that watches by a sleeping boy under a barley cock, near the sacred port. And then uneasily one listens to the wind getting up."

"He brings together ancient myths and writers and the present day conditions; this three dimensional picture is simply unique. The journey to Trozen is one such quest."

"His style has a calmness and steadiness; he moves assuredly and slowly, he has the slowness of a man who is certain and wishes to linger over the delights he is to leave behind."

"His approach is that of a scholar, his prose is modern, clear, simple, it has no tricks of any kind. It has in it the mellowness of maturity, and the rhythm of a sailing smooth boat, and it reflects the sleepy seas and sunny skies of the Aegean."

95. Mrs. Dily Powell - An affair of the Heart - 1957

It is a simple account of many visits before and after the war to different sites being excavated by the archaeological expeditions. She possesses a fine style, but somehow the theme is handled in a monotonous way. She uses the dialogue to give it a touch of fiction "But though a few of the names may be false all the characters are real, and all the incidents are true". But these real characters never look real, and the incidents are not narrated with
sufficient power to make them memorable. More-over it is a sentimental affair, she goes there in the shadow of her husband Humphry Paine who started excavations in Loutrali in 1929, it is the people of the neighbouring village of Perachora who dominate the story. She loves the calm and peaceful life of those simple men, she covers every thing in a golden halo of memories.

"In an afternoon still edged with gold we swung down the road to Loutraki and Athens bus. So in one village atleast I thought the war is over. No body speaks of it any more. The Perachorans survived it as they survived the guerilla struggle, and now they go back to their old ways, now they concern themselves with today and tomorrow. They grow old, they die, but they are the same. And I reflected with astonishment, for in imagination it is always oneself who is stable in an inconstant world". 1

96. Emily Kimbrough - Water Water every where -1957.

It is a charming book of humour, fun and frivolity, the whole thing looks fictitious, but it is the real account of a real journey. In a way it is a modern version of Pickwick Papers, with sea and Greece for background, instead of Pickwick and his friends, it is Emily, Sophy, Darn and Luz who record the fantastic journey. It is not easy to crack jokes in a land heavy with associations of great past, but funny Greek names 2 misunderstandings of the language3 her irony4 and her jolly love of life make it a very readable book. The Italian drivers are nicely thrashed.

"He was a good driver as Italian drivers go, though in my opinion they all go like maniacs. I have been told by friends who have studied the matter, that the Italians' method of driving is an expression of an innate and endearing quality, a child-like curiosity that prompts him when approaching an intersection for example to press down on the accelerator in order to see more quickly what might be coming from either direction". 5

3. Ibid.,p.79.
4. Ibid.,p.32.
5. Ibid.,p.32.
There are funny things which can happen only to women and not to Pickwick or Snodgrass.

"Darn's is also a conservative nature, and only wind blew her so out of character as to declare she would sooner dress like Raymond Duncan from sandals to burlap, to gas, than go sight seeing in Greece with her skirt up over her head. That is what the winds did to her skirts". 1

"The word for the egg plant dish is Moussaka; what Darn had ordered with painstaking care, of each syllable was Moustakia. A Moustakia is a gentleman with a moustache". 2

The style suits the matter, it is a light gentle affair compared with Mark Twain's thudding mischief or Dickens loud gossip of the street.

97. L.G. Pina - THE MIDDLE SEA

Pine traces in this book the different civilisations that have dominated this area. It is a historical tour- or rather a tour of the past. It cannot be called a travel book, he never gives any personal experiences, and it is a blunder to call it literature. The sub-title of the book is highly misleading.

98. Compton Mackenzie (1883 - ) Gallipoli Memories-1929
Gallipoli Memories

These are the memories of a young subaltern of 21, invited by Orlo Williams to join the Mediterranean Expeditionary force. There are comic and funny incidents like that of the arrest by the passport people at Alexandria for carrying with him the pistol of a Spaniard friend, there are heroic accounts of the grave looking Sikh warriors fighting the Turks hand to hand, all hit by bullets while advancing, and lying on their faces, none of them wounded in the back. The claims he makes in his Preface are not fulfilled in the book.

2. Ibid, p.79 3.Gallipoli Memories,p.3

---

---

---
"I cannot imagine more richly tragical, comical, and farcical characters than I actually met. Even the time I spent at Gallipoli seems to compose itself into a tale."

The truth is that a very rich mine of material has been handled indifferently. It has no beauty of form, no vigour, no charm of style; Compton Mackenzie is expected to do much better work. The explanation is not for to find. Somehow the book does not leave so vivid an impression as he claims, his youthful imagination, his experience of writing novels, and his general interest in literature should have enabled him to give a better account of this great period of history.

**GREECE IN MY LIFE:**

Greece in my Life is an account of his return to Greece for seven magical weeks in the autumn of 1958; the return was made possible by B.B.C. because he did the talking in the television films called "The Glory that was Greece". Also he gives in it an account of his trial at the Guild Hall because his original account of it in the third volume of Greek Memories was suppressed under official secrets Act. This book too is a simple affair, although the opening gives high hopes. The book rises to heights very rarely; it generally keeps to the level of everyday life.

"Imogen sailed along the austere coast of Skyros during the afternoon. On the craggy island Achilles was hidden by his mother among the daughters of Lycomedes, and hence by sight of arms, and" odysseus lured him away to join the expeditionary force against Troy. Here was murdered Theseus whose ghost in full armour led the van in Marathon. And in April, a new legend had troubled the island with immortality, for Rupert Brooke was buried there."

Most of the book is devoted to an account of official duties, on the whole it is a disappointing book.

1. Gallipoli Memories-London-1929, Preface IX.  
2. Ibid.,Preface IX.  
4. Ibid., p.33.
Some books about U.S.A.


99. **Douglas Reed - Far and Wide - 1951**

Douglas Reed went to America as a political explorer, but his book is a delightful narrative of his journey, he depicts the face of America with the gifts of a painter, and probes into the heart to find where the trouble lies. His humour and irony, his vividness and sprightly realism, are the main features of his narrative. He has a poetic vision but his romanticism is suppressed at the sight of the great skyscrapers, and barren rocky look of cities; this lack of romanticism is compensated by his love of history, and of Biblical events and characters. The second part of the book is a discussion of the political and social problems, the results he draws are significant in their own way.

"The first part of the book contains the visual picture of America as I saw it at the fateful mid century during a very long overland journey, my experience is that you need to travel a country far and wide before you try to understand it. The second part contains for what they are worth, the conclusions which I brought away". 1

The outward pictures of America which he gives are more accurate and just than those of Priestley or Kipling or other English visitors, he has something of Dreiser's gift, but he does not concentrate just upon one city, his object is, too big to be achieved satisfactorily, but his achievement is not a contemptible one.

"From these decks I looked in spell bound conjecture at New York's silhouette, if it is beautiful, it may be New York's one beauty. It is arresting, bizarre, exotic, wonderful, as Babylon was wonderful. It rises like a mountain range without foot hills. Its huge but impotent fingers point at or appeal to heaven". 2


2. Ibid., p.70.
Washington does not fare much better.

"A great city gleamed softly ahead in the haze and roads curved towards it between green expenses in that dulcet early morning light it might have been Camelot, but for the clamant throng of the four wheeled traffic which gave it the look of an anthill, and made me halt while afar off, like a foraying commander in a strange land to consider how I might best enter". 1

He gives a fine picture of busy American life, their rush and bustle, noise and incessant activity. It is a fine caricature, like a cartoonist he captures the salient features, and leaves the rest to the imagination.

"With a companion I visited the bank, which in America is often placed high among seaworthy things (as the Germans say). It seemed full of telephones, iced water, machines and busymen in large hats from whose mouths cigars pointed like anti-air craft guns. They incessantly picked up telephones and spoke into them atonce as if the instrument automatically connected them with the folk they wanted, and between them they visited the iced water machine. I thought I caught them talking into iced water machine or trying to drink from a telephone, but may have been confused". 2

He has a clear insight into the life of the common American people, they are constantly drifting, particularly salesman and other business adventurers. He meets a salesman who has served in the army, and has lived with a beautiful girl in Italy.

"He fell silent, and we both watched the floating logs. The movement of those endless, unformed logs, drifting down stream was impressive, it looked like destiny at work".3

He has clarity, vigour, spiritual insight and mastery of words, he can roll out words one after the other, and with every line they gather more and more momentum.

100. Rom Landau -Among the Americans 1953.

Rom Landau went to U.S.A. in connection with the Moroccan question which was due to come up in the U.N. and availed of this opportunity to tour the country for six months.

His style and approach is very much similar to that of

1. Far and Wide -London-1951, p.41
2. Ibid., p.14
3. Ibid. p.87
J.B. Priestley, irony satire and outright condemnation of social evils make it a provocative hook. Imaginative touches, poetic effects, rhetorical passages, and other literary tricks are absent; he is clear and concrete everywhere, he has no love for abstractions; he looks at life as it is, and presents it without any decoration. The analysis reveals a robust mind firmly resolved to shake off all false values, and go to the heart of the matter, in a rather rough and indelicate manner; he is always sound, but is unmindful of fine shades; he is animated by a logical will. Thus the outcome is clear-sighted wisdom, the outcome of moral modesty. He shows the inward rotten-ness of the new unstable noisy civilisation of America which is still in the process of development, but he labours under no illusion that they are going to accept his views. American Universities come in for much adverse criticism.

"As many of the students were in their late twenties or even early thirties whereas some of the faculty members were rather young I was often unsure whether I was talking to a pupil or teacher. Even without the age overlap I should still have been at sea, for the deference which the taught still pay to the teacher in the British and Continental Universities is not conspicuous in American academic life". 1

The noise and restlessness of American University life is unbearable for a mind used to continental quiet. 2 Like J.B. Priestley he has little or no respect for the modern American woman; he spares no irony to ridicule this new type of creature.

"The café was really over five blocks away, and in the opposite direction from the T.V. Station. During our drive I enquired how my cicerone liked her job. "I love it", she said", it is thrilling meeting celebrities every week of your life. But I guess that after a while you discover that celebrities too are only human". Not being privileged to meet celebrities every week of life I could only assume that her prognosis was correct". 3

1. Among the Americans -London-1953 p.25
2. Ibid., p.28
3. Ibid., p.41
It is a fine realistic study of American life, in this restless world of change, bustle and struggle, the only ray of certainty comes from Aldous Huxley, who lived in that notorious corner of the world, Hollywood, a veritable St. Simeon Stylites, in a world of sex and libido.

"What seemed to me essential to his true stature was not his literary achievement nor even the cultural inheritance of which he was so impressive a legatee. It was rather the stability of core of assuredness at the still centre of his personality - an assuredness that can have stemmed only from awareness of reality. This is not a symptom of culture, it has little to do with the writing of excellent books". 1


It is in a way John Audubon's ornithological biography; like Thomas Nuttall he goes in the footsteps of the great master on a pilgrimage of Zoological devotion, the forests and birds of America from the theme of the book. The different chapters begin with charming titles - Forests to the sea, Swallow clouds, The Autumn Stars, Butterflies in the wind, Mystery Sleep, Craters of the Moon, and the Golden Squirrel. It is a journey of 20,000 miles, not a mile of which is ever dull, imagination is kindled by a strange poetic touch given to every ordinary scene or incident, he is equally well-acquainted with the wisdom of Audubon and Solomon2. A sense of mystery and an effect of long hoary time, inhabits these forests, his style has the force and ruggedness of the wild life in it. He manages his sentences with a sure touch, they seem to roll like the rise and ebb of the tide. He is seeking a philosophy in nature like the Lake poets, he is studying nature itself; but Nature has an inner meaning, a rhythm of regularity the very Principle of life which one can see face to face if one goes to the woods with an open mind.

"The tide rose to full, and made its turn. And all across the continent behind us another tide, a greater tide - the tide of seasons - was also at its turn". 1

"A pebble rolled away down the incline before me. What vast stretches of history were encompassed by the span of that pebble lying since glacial times, it had been warmed by the springs and cooled by the autumns of ages of time. "How much of human life and plover life and grasshopper life had passed away while its insensate existence had gone on and on. Yet surely, better a single moment of awareness to enjoy the glory of the senses, a moment of knowing, of feeling, of living intensely, a moment to appreciate the sun-shine and dry smell of autumn, and dust born clouds above - better a thousand times even a swiftly fading ephemeral moment of life than the epoch long unconsciousness of the stone". 2

Besides its technical importance the book holds its own in so far as the merits of style are concerned, he belongs to the line of scientific writers like Tyndall and Bates who combined science with literary style. He is not a mere populariser of science, he stands out as a man of originality; his horizon is wide, and his materialism has in it the colour of mysticism. He has greater love of the common place than even Thoreau.3

102. Louise Dickinson Rich - We took to the Woods -1942.

This is a typical book of travel sufficiently popular and sold in good numbers, but it is meant for tired housewives, and exhausted businessman, it has no literary beauty worth the name. It is a simple description of the joys of nomad life, but her interests are simply those of a common woman.

"If we get the deer early in the season before it is cold enough to freeze the problem of keeping it is considerably complicated. The liver and the heart are first eaten by me, Ralph won't eat what he inelegantly calls guts. Then we save out two or three of the choice cuts to be eaten fresh, and I have to can the rest". 3

Such books only nourish the love of travel which may lead to some creative work of real value.

2. ibid., p.88.
3. Ibid., pp.262-263.
C. SOME OTHER BOOKS OF LITTLE MERIT.


It is an account of a journey from Bayonne in France to Bilbao in Spain; her object is to study the mystery of the Basque race, it has neither scientific nor literary merit. It only shows with what ease women trot over the globe, life has changed for women.


It is not a book of travel though he travels to all the monastries of Europe, it has no personal touch, no imagination, no narrative or descriptive beauty, he has really visited all these places, but has visited them and listed them, beyond that he has done nothing.


The book has a very fine introduction, and nothing else to command, it is a general description of the country in the spirit of the guide books, the views given in the introduction are too cynical to be modern, only Swift or Johnson could have said it.

"There are only two good reasons for going abroad. The first is for the satisfaction during the journey of pointing out the deficiencies of foreign countries as compared with one's own. The second is for the satisfaction after returning home of describing to less travelled acquaintances the unique attractions of the places one has seen. For such purposes few countries are better qualified than Italy".


This much admired book cannot be given a place in the literature of travel; he is out to compare India and England in preconceived terms and turns of thought. This is a clever book but beyond that it has no significance as a book of travel.

The book has a proud and florid title, he says that it is evocative of elephants, turtles and Camelopards, in a formal but opulent countryside. He begins with great fan-fare.

"To begin a book is in any case to embark on a long and perilous voyage, to begin in particular a volume of travels doubles the sense of starting on a journey. William Blake, when urging his countrymen to build Jerusalem cried, 'Bring me my bow of burning gold'; what words in all humility can I employ when about to try to build anew— for so the name of this book may suggest the whole world, much of it already lost". 1

There is little of travel in it to record, insignificant obscure personal memories, of distant childhood and extremely vague impressions of misty places in the most foggy words— cannot be considered travel; certainly these are discursions, but not on travel at least.

108. Clifford King - Barcelona with Love-London-1959

George Allen and Unwin.

It is a fine book in its own way; it is a simple narrative, it is full of accurate information of great variety, it is a beautiful concentrated study of Barcelona. He gives fine character sketches of different types of people. He gives a many dimensional picture of the city. Early Morning, Mid-day Evening, Night and Early Morning again from the different colours in which this city is seen by this lover of Spanish life. His attitude is that of affection, rather deep amorous love for this city, and his prose, simple, restrained, poised— really vibrates with this undertone of emotion.

"The process of falling in love with a city, as with a woman, may be a gradual adaptation to her appearance and personality that is, in fact, so gradual that it is unnoticed until the day dawns when without knowing why, the lover knows that she has become indispensable. Being, as they say in the North of England, smitten, usually begins it, but that is only the beginning, as, if he hangs about for long enough, he finds out". 2

This book by Denis Johnston is an example of how war and terrors of war affect style and expression. There is something fitful and feverish about this book; it is an agonised soul writing in a tortured style. Calmness and peace do not exist in this world of the war reporters. He begins by a grand proclamation, "So now I speak at high moon and from the Dome of the Rock," but very soon he speaks from the ditches at midnight, and the roar of the guns often drowns his own voice. As a war record it will have real importance, but if his style is to be judged, it must be considered a mediocre book written by an excellent author. His trick of misplacing the Preface - after two thirds of the book is finished - cuts no ice; it is only a whim of a war weary author. Imagination somehow does not soar, it burrows.

Alamein is a great name today, but the reality is different.

"A small Railway Station set in the midst of some hundreds of miles of nothing whatsoever - that is all there is at Alamein. What is it there for and who uses it in peace time no body can say. There was nothing to be seen there and nothing to be done".2

1. Nine Rivers from Jordan - Boston Toronto-1955 p.22
2.