

# Exploration

H.M. Tomlinson

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THE longing began in me through reading Ballantyne's *Hudson's Bay*. The pull of the Magnetic North was felt; I turned to Boothia Felix. I should not like to say how long ago that was; it was when I began to have occasion, in a house of commerce, to consult the *Weekly Shipping List*. That entrancing guide contained such entries as this: "York Factory, Hudson's Bay. *Lady Head*, bk, 457 tons. A. 1. Capt. Anderson. Sailing June 1. South West India Dock."

I was very young then, and so supposed a man went travelling to see what was round the corner; because, as a sage master mariner, later in life, once sadly explained to me in his cabin: When we are young we think all the good things are far away. I did not know, so early, that a man sets out to find himself, and that on such a journey, in a country all unknown, he may get lost. When young Herman Melville shipped in a whaler, he little guessed his voyage would never end, not while men fancy they discern a Great Bear in the night sky from which their brave harpoons ever return to earth.

Ballantyne unsettled me, and Butler's *Great Lone Land* and *Wild North Land* made matters worse; it was the dream that was real. Lake Athabasca and the Mackenzie River were desolate; and how noble were their names! But the Hudson's Bay Company, at whose door in Lime Street, London, I knocked, generously spared my proffered service. It amused me once to hear Joseph Conrad confess it was to my ear alone, and I had made no confession to him that his earliest effort to find employment as a ship's officer was with the H.B.C.; and he, too, failed, for the H.B.C. is Scottish, and most careful and particular. There was not a book on the exploration of North America and the Arctic, in the Guildhall Library of the City of London, for which I did not save or steal time to read. It came to nothing. But the very name, Canadian Barren Grounds, still works a faint reminiscent enchantment; yet resolutely but regretfully I resist the Northern Lights.

The ease with which a man may get into the outer blue, which is uncharted, and is not at all kenspeckled, I learned a little later from *A Week on the Concord*. Once you have started you may find yourself anywhere. The transit may be instant. There is no oracle to warn you where you may be at night. You may be so different that the world itself will be changed. Then what will you do? for do something you must. When your fellows continue as usual to call your burning bush a briar patch, which is what it is, and will remain for most of us, how is that sign to be doused? There is no return.

There must be categories for books, yet I do not think Books of Travel is precisely the place in the index for the *Arabia Deserta*, or Thoreau's *Week on the Concord*, or even for Bates's *Naturalist on the River Amazons*. The right good book is always a book of travel; it is about a life's journey. It does not matter whether the point of view is got from Egdon Heath, Capri, or Kanchenjunga. The *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was to me less Arabia in wartime than Lawrence; the war and its intrigues, the Arabs, the Turks and the Germans and the desert, were incidental;

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they chanced to evoke Lawrence, agents of destiny of consequence to us, for they were the cause of a war of thoughts compared with which the desert campaign was only ugly and common tribal bickering. Revolts of Arabs and others against what enrages them may burn up a little rubbish, and perhaps make more, but a revolt from our traditions and accepted verities by bleakly intrepid thoughts may lead us the deuce of an eternal dance. Is *Moby Dick* a yarn of a whaling cruise? Is *Gulliver's Travels* merely a fantastic diversion? We shall continue to call the *Arabia Deserta* a book of travel, for it is that, though so is the *Pilgrim's Progress*. Nevertheless, it is plain that Doughty, that gaunt and stubborn survival from a pre-Shakespearian England, so much an Englishman that he was a foreigner to the Oxford and London of his day, looms in his book with more startling distinction than the basaltic crags of the Arabian desert. No wonder his spirit held in check the sun-struck fanatics about him, though they wanted to cut his throat. We, too, were in nature as much opposed to him, when we began to read him, but he has subdued us. The stark bergs of his desert are not more enduring than the traveller. But for him, would that burnt region of sand and rock with its dangerous and rhapsodical nomads exist for us? While reading Doughty, you begin to sense something of the origin of the Semitic scriptures; we know that Doughty himself, had he been one in the Exile, brooding on lost Jerusalem, would have bowed to the stripes, but have prophesied apart for all those that must hereafter patiently endure by the waters of Babylon.

First and last a poet may write only of himself. The world exists because he sees it. That can be all he knows of it. What then, is he? For the validity of the world depends on the kind of man he is. Whether it is Europe shaken by the French Revolution, or the deserts of Asia, or Walden Pond, the seer is the consummation and reality. His broomstick, if he travel astride of that, may range over deeps as dark as the gulfs in the Milky Way; and yet another kind of traveller may convert the region which holds the culture of the Chinese into a mere album of photographic snapshots and interlined facetiousness.

Seeing is of faith, for faith is not blind. There can be no faith without light. What we do not see may condemn us. What traveller would dare to interpret the world which he thinks he sees to-day? There is harder travelling now than kept Marco Polo so long from his home. There is no simple problem of a Grand Khan now. There is no Tartary. Cathay is a republic, complete with civil strife, western ideas, and the machinery of industry. Communists interrupt the railway service of Java. Messer Marco Polo in all his wanderings saw nothing stranger than that, nor more difficult to read. Instead of Venice and Canton we have London and New York. A man flew to Baghdad and back the other week in contemptuously few hours; and Persia weaves prayer-mats, not to point to Mecca, but to help the sentiment of English suburban villas. One may buy Burmese gems by the pint by taking a penny bus from Charing Cross; there is no need to voyage to Cairo, Calicut, and Peking, to see the Orient. It is mostly in the Cutler Street warehouse, by Houndsditch. The Underground Railway serves the Orient.

But we are not satisfied. A vague desperation is suggested in our tours round the world. Something is missing from our civilization. Perhaps we think that the farther we go the more likely we are to recover whatever it is we have lost. It is possible that the Communist risings in the Garden of the East come of the same disquiet which sends rich westerners circling the globe. Why should the Hindus and Javanese revolt? Their lives are more secure now than they were under their old emperors and rajahs. And why should rich men shut up their ancestral country seats, and go to the South Seas for the simplicity which began to die there as soon as Watt learned the way to harness steam? The affliction appears to be world wide. It is felt in Benares, Peking, and Park Lane. The lions of Africa are being displaced by sisal fibre, just as speedways and coal-mines are destroying Kentish orchards. We read that an imaginative traveller, instead of gratitude for his seclusion in a tropical forest, considered that the trees were growing to waste; they ought to be turned into natural resources. He was a modern traveller. He did not call the forest *Green Mansions*, nor see Rima there. He saw a potential reservoir of wood-pulp.

That may be our trouble. The faith may be dying which sees beauty in the world, and without knowing it that may be why we are desperate to escape from our toils. We are no longer able to wonder, even at our own ingenuity. We are not as little children, so the kingdom is lost. It is useless to voyage to Papeete to look for the kingdom. The Venetian noble, Nicolo de Conti, early in the fifteenth century, when his ship was in the Red Sea, was surprised to see elephants equipped for war; but he would have been still more surprised had he heard at night

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voices that were speaking in Venice; as I heard one night, off Cape Bon, the movements of dancers in a London hotel through the sough of the dark, far at sea, I could hear London shuffling its feet; and that thought, if sufficiently examined afterwards when one was by the bulwarks alone, was enough to give pause to the heedlessness of idle feet. The very empyrean was listening. It might not be safe to entertain even idle thoughts, for heaven only knows what registering mystery may hear those as readily as the shuffling of dancers. A poet once cryptically reminded us that we cannot pluck a flower without troubling a star. No doubt it will be difficult to persuade us that Aldebaran cares the least for our dandelions; yet when the gift of reason inclines us to observe only a larger circulation of cheap newspapers in fir woods, or alcohol in a tropical forest, one begins to fear that the sweet influences of Pleiades are then loosened to a slight degree. Perhaps when we trample the bloom off the earth, and replace it with smoke, clinker heaps, and hovels, the bands of Orion remain as fast as ever; yet the dread that the deliberate darkening of our own star may affect the Galaxy, though that dread does not arise from any logic that we know, may not be without reason.

That dread, and we are beginning to feel it, is no less remarkable than wireless telephony. It is a thought new to the world of men, though the squalor with which we continue to disfigure our place in our efforts to make it fruitful is as ancient as man's activities. Pero Tafur, who began travelling and adventuring about 1425, reports for his day a Europe which in most respects is inexplicable to us. There was no New Learning then. When Tafur entered France, Joan of Arc had been dead only seven years. The English had been driven out of Paris, but were still in Rouen. The Mediterranean was still the centre of gravity of European commerce; not then had Portuguese navigators made the discoveries which would shift that commerce to the Atlantic seaboard; though, curiously enough, Tafur shows that one mart of Flanders was then richer than Venice, and the shipping of Sluys enormous in its tonnage. America was unknown. The Turks were encamped about Constantinople, where the Eastern Empire was about to fall. The Pope was an exile. The plague was in France, and that land was desolate with the wars of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. We cannot, with those reminders, picture such a Europe. But in some chance ways, and without conscious design, Tafur does that for us. It is the wayside incidents of his story which betray a Europe we know quite well. He had been astonished by the riches of Bruges, and he went to Sluys to see the ships. At Mass there a woman approached him in secret, and wondering, he went home with her. There she offered him one of her two young daughters. The family was starving. All that commercial activity of Flanders and its wealth of luxuries, and this family had nothing to eat! How far, since Tafur's day, have our many inventions taken us? Have we got any distance, in our flying machines?

Even while a doubt about our progress begins to disturb us, old habits compel the consideration of the conversion of beauty into still more starvation and smoke. We are not sufficiently afraid of troubling the stars when darkening the splendour of our planet; yet a doubt grows that what we think and do may not be inconsequential beyond the orbit of the earth. In that space beyond, where we cannot go, it is possible that some emanation from our liveliness finds its way, and not fortuitously. We may make a mark without knowing it. It is irrelevant to the story, no doubt, that one night at sea we chanced to hear revellers at Charing Cross, yet it was a warning not easily quieted. We have now learned beyond question that our various noises are indeed registered where we had supposed there was nothing but the impersonal sough of the dark.

There was a sometime Archdeacon of Westminster, Richard Hakluyt, who celebrated the earlier English seamen and travellers. His tablet in Bristol Cathedral reads: "His studious Imagination discovered new Paths for geographical Science and his patriotic Labours rescued from oblivion not a few of those who went down to the Sea in ships to be Harbingers of Empire, descrying new Lands, and finding larger Room for their Race."

That tablet is but just to Hakluyt. Yet consider its implications. The Westminster Archdeacon, without meaning to do it, who desired instead to light an imperial desire in an adventurous people, did much to prompt the pall over the Black Country. His patriotic labours at length poured out as smoke from our factory chimneys; an odd outcome of a pure and selfless personal devotion. That dark sign of profit to an imperial people was the inevitable result of the valour and enterprise of Elizabethan seamen. Those harbingers of Empire and their celebrant, as now we see them, were moved in their age by an influence which stirred even its poets; they were compelled by a law

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of growth in a changing world, we may suppose, to which their community had to respond as though it had no more conscious control of its destiny than the annual flowers of the field. All these men together gave our country, gave the civilization we call Western, a mighty shove towards the place where now we find it. The glorious flower of the civilization which romantically they predestined for us unfolded vast and strange at the end of a factory chimney.

Thus so different may be man's pure intent from its issue. Drake, returned from the shades, we will imagine, with Hakluyt, to view what substance we have given to the dreams they had of other lands and seas, would have to agree with the poet of their own day that there is a destiny which shapes our ends whatever ardent measures we take. Hakluyt, while contemplating, as a shade, our motor-ships, our problem of credit, our bickering over the size of the guns we shall use against each other, and the difficulties involved, as in India, in that larger Room for the Race and the air route to the East, might recall his visit, as a boy, a visit evidently so fruitful, to his cousin, a Gentleman of the Middle Temple. It was a trivial incident, that half-holiday visit, to have had its casual part in shaping the problem of the protection of British trade routes without giving America a cause for war. For his cousin but gave him a first lesson in geography. Young Richard found lying in that chamber of the Middle Temple "certaine bookes of Cosmographie, with an universall Mappe."

There is no doubt the Westminster scholar was awakened by his cousin. The subject of geography was given, even on a holiday, quite a cheerful appearance; but the year of that lesson, we must remember, was little more than a decade after Sir Hugh Willoughby tried to reach Cathay and the Moluccas by the Siberian coast. From the map the Gentleman of the Middle Temple turned to the Bible, and directed the boy to read the 107th Psalm. Young Hakluyt did so, and his own contribution towards the industrial era and his country's imperial destiny was at once made certain.

"Which wordes of the Prophet together with my cousins discourse (things of rare and high delight to my young nature) tooke in me so deepe an impression, that I constantly resolved, if ever I were preferred to the University . . . I would by God's assistance prosecute that knowledge and kinde of literature, the doores whereof (after a sort) were so happily opened before me."

We are told that a civilization must grow to its height and then decline, like a flower of the field in its due season. Yet unlike the weed, a civilization passes through its predictable phases to its sere, though to no harvest: it only dies; its seed is potent for no future spring. The philosophers do not explain what lunar influence governs its rhythmic rise and fall; they tell us largely but of powers which bring a civilization to its height, from which it shall lapse till only the barren sands show where its hearths used to be warm, and its priests to chant to its gods. It has its pioneers, its early explorers and prophets; then its period when the profit-makers are assured of a bounteous continuity through a special favour of Providence, for they know they are more worthy than the lesser breeds; and follow them its patriots and celebrators, who praise the familiar scene, now flushed in a serene autumn that is everlasting, as they hope and believe. Will not their assurance of their own worth hold in perpetuity the splendour of the after-glow? No. We see now there never was and cannot be an empire on which the sun shall never set. All civilizations and empires must make their predestined curves and fulfil their cycles.

Yet theories, though they seem flawless, should not sink us into mournful brooding. No theory can be right which satisfactorily encloses all that is known. We do not know all. Little alien and unimportant items are left out of the reckoning, forlornly overlooked and unaccounted, yet presently to make the balance and fulfilment of a perfect formula as useless as a net when there are no fish. It is the way of a mystery that its bottom is no sooner viewed than it falls out. Old night is still below.

It is true that the relative objective world may be almost anything a philosopher desires to name it, yet occasionally it does break into his subjectivity with an extrinsic brick, as it were, an interruption which causes him to surmise that something must have thrown it at him. We have been forced of late to develop theories explaining this age of machines, and to see omens of its impending doom. When our machines stop, so shall we.

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Civilized man, it appears, has passed out of the phase of imaginative exploration and experiment; he has created engines to do his work for him, but his soul has lost its daring, and he is now a subdued captive, chained to the wheels, a helpless slave in the mechanical establishment he created.

But maybe the urgency of this mechanistic age will slow down. Some Doughty may explore its polished and efficient desert, and his word may begin to rust it; its impulse will falter and its wheels go not so fast. Though man now can fly to explore the skies, he may cease to want to anyhow, for the reasons which now lift him from the earth. After all, it is certain that in time man will see that the relentless cranks and wheels, for which he never had more than a boyish and fevered love, are only the thoughts of his youth. He got those wheels because he wanted them. Does he want them now? Presently we may pause to consider this devotion of ours in a temple which is a factory, where the dynamo is the presiding god, the ritual exacting and numbing and engineers the priests. That would be natural enough. The theory of the rise and fall of a civilization may be able to stand all known tests as easily as a bright and perfect machine accurately revolving; but suppose we change our mind about it? The machine stops. The subservience of men to the despotism of the polished steel rods and the ordained revolutions of the wheels may weary. The boy may tire of his engine.

Mankind is not of the automatic stuff to worship any god beyond the period of the god's most severe exactions. In the long run men and women cease to do what gives them no fun. Over goes Dagon when he demands more than his worshippers care to give. He will be lucky if he gets much attention after he has compelled that crisis. His late worshippers are sure to discover another world beyond his temple, for it exists; and then down falls the theory, all too neat, of a civilization's inevitable doom. It begins anew. There will be more adventuring and exploring, and in another direction. Life, we may find, has other probabilities and meanings. There may be fairer temples to gods more gracious.