

Travel Writing and the pluralising of history. A case study from New Australia, Paraguay.

A PhD in Communication (via creative portfolio)

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Abstract

The academic discipline of history writing is currently experiencing an era of rethinking (Jenkins 2003, Ankersmit 2009, Partner 2009). The call to broaden the scope of academic history stems, in part, from the discipline's past reluctance to endorse a wider range of contributions, in spite of the continually-felt pertinence of post-structuralist and 'post post-modernist' critiques (Jenkins 2009). As a strategy for considering possible ways forward for history writing, we can observe the rethinking of ethnography which has occurred over the last forty years in response to a not-dissimilar dilemma. A new generation of ethnographers has successfully established a place for the contribution of more creative expressions within the discipline (Pratt 1992). One of the modes for this rethinking and refashioning of ethnography has come from travel writing, which uses subjective, immersive and narrative-based techniques (for examples of its uptake among ethnographers see Taussig 1986, Fichte 1996, Jackson 2012). The aim of this thesis is to test the counter-intuitive hypothesis that travel writing, conducted at the level of the scholarly PhD, might contribute to a renovated practice of history writing as well.

Travel writing and history writing might seem discrete; but, in fact, many travel books, from guide books through to book-length, first person accounts, feature extensive treatments of the past as part and parcel of their descriptive project (e.g. Marshall 2000, Kremmer 2002, Dalrymple 2009). What is more, travel writing as history writing presents a unique perspective on history to the reader, offering an embedded and local point of view as an alternative to the grand narratives and their perspectives on the same history. In this it comes tantalisingly close to recent, celebrated attempts to write history 'from below' (Ginzburg 1980 and Darnton 1984). Furthermore, scholarly work is innately experiential. As Grafton has recently argued (1997), history writing requires two stories – the written history, on the one hand, and the footnotes or research, which detail for the reader how the writer arrived there, on the other (see, for a similar argument as to the importance of the historian's proof of their right to know, Berkhofer 1997). I will argue that the best contemporary travel writing implicitly shores up its stories with a not-dissimilar appeal to the author's experientially-based truth claims. My thesis attempts to think through how such features can be brought to the fore. In the process it constructs a set of suggestions for how we might judge the sort of creative, non-fiction travel writing that comes closest to making a genuine contribution to knowledge, both in my chosen field of travel-based history writing, and more generally.

My PhD portfolio also includes an example of such work, in the form of a book-length narrative of my travels to discover what was left of the New Australian Colony in Paraguay. New Australia was founded in 1893 by a group of utopian socialists fleeing labour unrest around Queensland in the pre-Federation years. One of the colony's early citizens was the poet Mary Gilmore, who now features on the Australian ten-dollar note. Within a decade the colony had lost its rigid structure and many departed for Australia and elsewhere, though some remained, leading to the 2,000 descendants who still live as Australian-Paraguayans today. I spent six months in Paraguay engaged in field-work so as to produce a book that would work within the received genres of contemporary travel writing, but also stand as ethnohistory in its own right. The resulting manuscript was published as *Ticket to Paradise: A Journey to Find the Australian Colony in Paraguay Among Nazis, Mennonites and Japanese Beekeepers* (ABC Books: 2012). A revised version appears as the creative component of the thesis.

Preface

I ask the Wood clan what they think of the decision of their grandfather 116 years ago, which stopped their family from growing up in Maroochydore or Palm Beach, and instead diverted them to a life in the South American grasslands.

Roddie nods. 'I spoke to Dad about what they did and their decision to leave. We always agreed that they should've done something in their own country first. Australia is a big place ... they had a lot of land to choose from, rather than travelling 15,000 kilometres in a boat to a different world.' I ask if he is ever angry at the choice they made for him and he shakes his head.

'I'm very proud of them. They made a decision without thinking of the consequences.'

I cite this anecdote from the 'New Australia' colony in the Paraguayan jungle for it suggests something of the potential relationship between travel writing and the writing of history. While not all forms of travel writing need to be historical, the travel writer has the ability to conduct a form of investigation which is largely unobtainable to the regular historian— due to the immersed and subjective perspective of the traveller's genre. It is this perspective that I will focus on within this thesis. I will suggest that the possibility of an academic rendering of travel writing providing a new contribution to the historiographical corpus lies here.

I came to this doctorate in the course of my travels. I was writing about what remained of the New Australian colony set up by socialist utopians in 1893. I am a travel writer (I write feature articles and stories for publication in first person where an exploration of place is a central concern), with ten years publishing experience for *ABC Books*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian Geographic*, *Rough Guides* and *Meanjin*. This work has led me across six continents to write travel narratives from 500 to 80,000 words long. It was in the course of researching my own family archive for stories of my ancestors that I discovered my great-great-great grandfather, William Peat, was the foreman on the ship *The Royal Tar* that sailed the New Australians to South America. I wanted to find out what was left of their utopia after more than 100 years and to hear the stories of the Australian- Paraguayan descendants who still lived there. My creative work in this dissertation is a travel writing narrative focused on just that with an additional

exegetical reflection and reference list at the end of each chapter to demonstrate the clear double-story (the evidence of my research within the text) of my creative work.

The question of history comes in at this point. For this travel writing project involved a great deal of investigation in the archives of libraries and of relevant history texts. After initially reading the previous works on the colony, *A Peculiar People* (1967) by Gavin Souter, *A Paraguayan Experiment* (1984) by Michael Wilding and *Paradise Misland* (1997) by Anne Whitehead, I examined the archival material in the National, Mitchell and University of Sydney libraries in Australia and the National Library in Paraguay to understand the conditions in Australia and Paraguay in the 1890s leading up to the descendants' departure. I also studied the relevant Mestizo, Guarani and recent Paraguayan histories. This historical research was a necessary preliminary to give my immersion a sense of authenticity that might inform the way I told the story of the descendants.

I was also engaged in a form of ethnographic investigation. For, as a travel writing project, writing *Ticket to Paradise* necessarily involved being in the field as a sort of participant observer talking to people like Roddie Wood above. I had to establish contacts and Guarani interpreters to help with my acceptance into the communities and I found that it was necessary to utilise my Spanish language skills to speak to the majority of contacts for the duration of my stay alongside using notes and recorders.

But most pertinently, I started to realise that the investigation I was carrying out as a travel writer was allowing me to treat the topic in ways that were absent in the previous accounts. I started to learn information not in the texts I had read before arrival because of my six months immersion and my extended contact with the descendants. The immersion allowed for a more open dialogue with the inhabitants and it established me as a trustworthy narrator for readers. The community had the time to also hear my stories and see me each day in the street, which confirmed my place in their lives. From my research and perspective I noticed that I wasn't just writing travel, I was capturing the history of the descendants of New Australia in a way that I had not seen before— which included recording oral accounts from Guarani Indians facing a hybrid existence as their modern values and their traditions collide. It seemed to me that I was performing a more patient

and intimate written consideration of these descendants and how the ‘history’ of their ancestors was now shaping their lives in comparison to the three previous works mentioned above. I learned that none of the other authors, who had written as journalists, historians and novelists, had immersed themselves in the one spot for longer than a few weeks at a time, as a travel writer often does. This presented a unique opportunity for me to explore New Australia and its continuing history in a valuable way.

Furthermore, I realised that what I was doing, far from being trivial genre work, might not only relate to major trends in the discipline, but also speak to current questions about how to pluralise the telling of history. As the history discipline faces a re-evaluation (Jenkins 2009) it has begun to consider other forms of representation. As we will see within the thesis, travel writing has found a place in the rethinking of ethnography over the past forty years and my hope in this dissertation is that it can be established that certain forms of travel writing that use research methods to establish their rigour and truthfulness in ways not dissimilar to scholarship, can act as valuable forms of historical investigation and even contribute to the re-imagining of the discipline into the future.

So I devised the thesis that travel writing might have a serious place within the history discipline. I realise this is probably a counter-intuitive position. Even aside from the question of history writing, travel writing is often maligned as a cheaper form of non-fiction narrative exploration; As Jonathan Raban says in the *New Granta Book of Travel*, “Travel narratives are a loose and mongrel form, generally better liked by readers than they are admired by critics” (2011, p.vii). While this is true for some works of travel writing, it certainly does not define the genre. On the contrary, it could well be possible to consider travel writing, which has a historically strong position within numerous disciplines, as a potentially legitimate form of historical research within academia. In short, I believe this is an area warranting further investigation.