

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley**  
gets away from it all.

The history of humankind is the history of migration. It seems we have always had itchy feet. But the idea of travelling just for the sake of it really seems to have taken off in Europe in the 18th century. As the affable Laurence Sterne says, 'Nothing is so perfectly amusing as a total change of mind'. And in a society addicted to vicarious amusement, what could be better than to sit comfortably at home and read about the discomforts and adventures endured by others?



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But there are always two journeys for the travel writer. One is external: the discovery of new lands and people. The other is internal: the discovery of oneself. And for the reader of travel writing, the pleasure and interest of discovering the writer is perhaps equal to that of the journey itself. Travel writers tell us a lot

about themselves through their reactions to the landscapes, the events and the people they describe.

## ***Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes***

In *Travels with a Donkey*, Robert Louis Stevenson shows himself to be the most good-humoured and genial kind of traveller. His journey takes him across some of the wildest and most inhospitable landscapes in France. He sets off alone on foot with his faithful, though sometimes wayward donkey, Modestine. He sleeps rough some nights, glorying in lying under the stars. Other nights he spends in the discomfort of wayside inns, often sharing with other travellers. He encounters misfortune (as when his saddle pack goes full circle and ends up under Modestine's belly), gets lost and meets hostile peasants, but nothing affects his optimistic take on life and his enthusiasm for the road and the sense of utter freedom it gives him. He stays in a Trappist monastery, Notre Dame des Neiges, which leads to extended discussion of religious and other spiritual concerns. He also describes the great revolt of the protestant Camisards, which had raged across this part of the Cévennes in the previous century, and

which adds poignancy to the places he passes through. In 1964, Richard Holmes re-traced Stevenson's steps, and his account of this in *Footsteps* adds to our appreciation and understanding of Stevenson's journey, which was undertaken partly to clear his mind about his love affair with the married woman who was later to become his wife. The inner journey is sharpened by the external one. Stevenson would have been a congenial companion, I feel.

## ***Between the Woods and the Water***

Patrick Leigh Fermor must have been an absolute charmer. In 1934, at the age of 19, he turned his back on university or Sandhurst, and breezily set off to walk from London to Istanbul, the place he continued to call Constantinople. *Between the Woods and the Water* is the second volume of an intended trilogy (he never completed the third part). It covers his journey from Esztergom on the Slovak-Hungarian border, through the great plains of Hungary, over the Carpathians into Romania and down to the Iron Gates on the Danube. He seems to have had a good nose for free bed and board, no doubt aided by his silver-tongued charm, enthusiasm and gift for languages. For

the most part, he travelled from one comfortable country mansion to the next, passed along by recommendation. The book is a fascinating glimpse into a world which has disappeared for ever – a world of horse-drawn transport, manual agriculture, wild landscapes and a society rich in linguistic and ethnic diversity and steeped in myth and history, where memories of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires were still fresh in people's minds. All this lay in the shadow of impending war and occupation, first by the Nazis, then by the Soviets. His enthusiasm for everything along the way seems boundless: languages, history, architecture, folklore, dress, landscapes, birds, animals, trees and flowers, food and drink, sounds, tastes and smells ... all are documented in enormous detail. Here are *'cloud events at sunset that are dangerous to describe: levitated armies in deadlock, and riderless squadrons descending in slow motion to smouldering and sulphurous lagoons where barbicans gradually collapse ...'* For some readers, this torrent of verbal description may be off-putting. His style is sometimes reminiscent of eating sugar plums in clotted cream, and some of his historical and cultural digressions may seem over-detailed. But for sheer, youthful enthusiasm, he is hard to beat. For all my reservations, I found myself surrendering to his vision of this lost world and to the poetry of the descriptions. And I left this charming and impetuous traveller with regret.

## Golden Earth: Travels in Burma

The voice of Norman Lewis conveys an amused, self-deprecating detachment, full of human warmth towards the Alice-in-Wonderland world he describes in *Golden Earth*. This is Burma in 1952, a confused patchwork of warring political and ethnic struggle and bandit-infested jungles, still reeling from the Japanese occupation. It is a dangerous and uncertain place, where every journey, even of a few miles out of the capital, is fraught with danger. Yet Lewis makes light of the dangers, and somehow manages to travel, by ship and riverboat, by air, by road and even by rail, from the south to the extreme north along the Chinese border and back with imperturbable aplomb. His sympathy for the peoples of Burma is patent, and his observations and descriptions sharp and humorous: *'... a shop licensed to sell*

*beer ... the customers went in under the eye of the kind of people who gather when an accident has happened.'* His description of chewing betel for the first time: *'The taste was at first sweet and sharp, and afterwards slightly soapy, with a faint childhood recollection of the taste of bathwater on a sponge.'* Lewis is a delightful travel companion, with astute insights on every page, expressed in an engaging style.

The journey, whether it is overseas or simply a walk in the countryside, can form the basis for students' own writing



## In Patagonia

With Bruce Chatwin, we are in a very different world: that of a writer with a more withering eye. *In Patagonia* recounts the journey he undertook in 1974 to the southern provinces of Argentina and Chile. Ostensibly, it was sparked by his wish to hunt down the source of a piece of skin with hair attached of a mylodon (giant sloth) found in his grandmother's glass cabinet in England. The overwhelming impression he leaves of the lands he passes through is of bleak despair. The landscapes are drab and the climate inclement. The people he meets have the desperate hopelessness of people uprooted from their homes in faraway Wales, England, Italy or Russia ... and flung down at random in these desolate settlements. *'Today, their farms are on the verge of bankruptcy but are still smartly painted up. And you can find, nestling behind windbreaks, herbaceous borders, fruit cages, conservatories, cucumber sandwiches, bound sets of "Country Life", and perhaps, the visiting archdeacon.'* He has a caustic eye for the revealing detail: *'... the waiter wore white gloves and served a lump of burnt lamb that bounced on the plate.'* *'In the British Club at Río Gallegos there was chipped white paint and not a word of English was spoken.'* And he has a whimsical take on the bizarre nature of whoever he encounters. *"No," Mrs Davies said, "Euan hasn't married yet, but he sings instead."* He weaves narratives of the past into his present wanderings: the fate of the Indians,

Butch Cassidy, the earliest explorers like John Davies and the socialist workers' uprisings and massacres, His departure is characteristically bleak, yet surreal: *'As we eased out of port, a Chilean businessman played "La Mer" on a white piano missing many of its keys.'* Chatwin succeeds in capturing these unkind places with uncanny skill. You cannot fail to be saddened by it, but there is always a grim smile hovering.

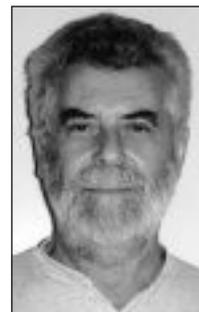


Besides supplying texts which are interesting and thought-provoking in themselves, travel writing is something students relate to readily. As Stevenson says in his dedication, *'... we are all travellers in ... the wilderness of this world'*. Our students learn a language partly as an aid to their own travel, and we as language teachers often travel, and often settle elsewhere, too. In fact, the learning of another language is a kind of voyage of discovery in itself. More practically, the journey, whether it is overseas or simply a walk in the countryside, can form the basis for students' own writing. Some of the best student writing I have seen is in the form of *haibun*\* – a blend of prose and short poems based on a walk. Try it. And if I have not reviewed your personal favourite here – Jack Kerouac, Eric Newby, Paul Theroux, Wilfred Thesiger, or whoever – I apologise. 

Chatwin, B *In Patagonia* Picador 1977  
Holmes, R *Footsteps* Penguin 1986  
Leigh Fermor, P *Between the Woods and the Water* Penguin 1988  
Lewis, N *Golden Earth: Travels in Burma* Eland Books 1983

Stevenson, R L *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (accessed from [www.gutenberg.org/catalog/readfile?fk=1442746](http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/readfile?fk=1442746))

\* For details of haibun, see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haibun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haibun).



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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