

***Trading Companies and
Travel Knowledge in the Early Modern World***

Aske Laursen Brock, Guido van Meersbergen and Edmond Smith, eds.

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This edited volume is the fruit of the Hakluyt Society's 2017 symposium on travel writing and early modern trading companies. Given that Richard Hakluyt (1553–1616), the famous writer, translator, and compiler of travel writing, was himself a one-time employee of the English East India Company (EIC), the two subjects feel like an obvious match. Aske Laursen Brock, Guido van Meersbergen, and Edmond Smith further spell out the case for considering travel writing and trading companies together in their clear and concise introduction. A key starting-point for their argument is the adoption of a more capacious concept of 'travel knowledge' rather than more restrictive definitions of 'travel writing' that confine it to a specific literary genre. In doing so they draw on earlier work of scholars such as Joan-Pau Rubiés, but their originality consists in applying this insight to the voluminous collections of travel knowledge generated by the activities of trading corporations. Indeed, as companies were repositories of such knowledge, and often exerted considerable efforts in attempting to organise, control, and even censor knowledge in ways that were essential to their operations, they present an opportune site for such an approach. This offers the chance for a reappraisal of both travel writing and trading companies. As the editors point out (11), the former has largely focused on individual travellers, yet adopting a corporate perspective permits the consideration of more collective forms of travel writing, as well as non-textual sources. Seeing the corporation as a vehicle for the creation of travel knowledge, meanwhile, 'throws new light on the internal uses of information by corporate actors and the ways they engaged with, relied on, and supplied various external publics' (6).

The volume is organised into three loose themes, 'Managing information', 'Multiple actors and perspectives', and 'Company lives.' As the editors readily acknowledge, the coverage is not intended to be comprehensive. In fact, all but two of

the chapters treat either the Dutch or English/British corporate experience.¹ This Anglo-Dutch monopoly is somewhat leavened, however, by the inclusion of some of the smaller trading companies beyond the usual suspects of the EIC and the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company (VOC), including the so-called *voorcompagnieën* (the precursor companies of the VOC), the Levant Company, and the Massachusetts Bay Company. South and South East Asia provide the dominant geographic focus, with some Atlantic excursions as well as the aforementioned Levant Company's experience of the Ottoman Empire. Temporally the chapters are principally orientated around the seventeenth century, with the later eighteenth century also finding some representation. As is the case with many edited volumes emerging from conference proceedings the themes are not always as tightly or cohesively followed in the individual chapters as one might hope for. However, a looser organising principle does arguably help to accommodate chapters treating such a diverse array of 'travel knowledge'.

The first two chapters of the 'Managing information' section share a similar concern in excavating the particular circumstances in which documents involving travel were produced, used, and on occasion, misused. Djoeke van Netten's innovative contribution looks at how maps and coastal charts were actually employed in practice during the voyages of the *voorcompagnieën* undertaken in the late sixteenth century. An especially fascinating anecdote (35) sees one Dutchman interrogated by a local interlocutor in Bali about the relative proportions of his own nation compared to China. With a map (later brought before a local ruler), he was able to misleadingly show that Holland was much bigger, expanding its borders to include Germany, Eastern Europe, Norway, and some of Russia for good measure. Guido van Meersbergen and Frank Birkenholz's chapter delves into the daunting world of VOC record production, including reports on local polities and cultures recognisable as travel knowledge. Their piece is brilliantly evocative of the reams of paper that tied the VOC's world together, encapsulated in the example of a memorandum issued to Company employees on how to write memoranda. Another strength of this chapter is its comparative treatment of the EIC's forms of record production (49).

Moving on from the Dutch, the second two chapters of this section approach the theme from a different angle. Giorgio Tosco's chapter presents a welcome exception to the Anglo-Dutch focus, comparing the little-known transoceanic trading ventures of Genoa and Tuscany. Tosco foregrounds the transnational networks that helped produce the travel and trade reports deployed in the promotion of these ventures, reminding us of the emulative nature of trading companies. Edmond Smith's chapter provides an intriguing counterpoint to the overall thrust of the volume, showing how individuals in the North American context might outmanoeuvre

¹ Felicia Gottman and Phillip Stern have recently made the case for the importance of other European nations' trading companies as well as their mutual entanglement, see their 'Introduction: Crossing Companies,' *Journal of World History* 31, no. 3 (2020): 477–88, doi:10.1353/jwh.2020.0028, and the other articles of this special issue.

corporations such as the Massachusetts Bay Company in their acquisition and control of local knowledge. Given Smith's remarks about the importance of the North American context in determining corporations' relative success in such matters (92), it would have been interesting to hear more about his thoughts on how his examples compare with the Asian contexts that predominate in the rest of the book.

The chapters of the second section, 'Multiple actors and perspectives', are perhaps more united by their common concern with the EIC rather than their organising theme, which is admittedly quite vague. Amrita Sen examines travel accounts in the context of the Bengal famine of 1770, replete with terrible stories of human suffering. As she argues, these helped to prompt metropolitan criticism of the EIC's regime in Bengal. Jyotsna G. Singh's chapter on William Hawkins' presence at the court of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) draws a pleasing contrast with Sam Ellis' chapter on the EIC's expeditions to Nepal in the late eighteenth century. Singh's chapter examines how William Hawkins, an English ship captain for the EIC, ended up being assimilated into Jahangir's court as an 'English Khan' and married off to an Armenian woman from the emperor's harem. Ellis' contribution, meanwhile, details the service and writings of Maulvi Abdul Kadir Khan, a Bengali ambassador for the EIC sent to Nepal, who also produced reports on topography and nomadic peoples for the colonial state. From different perspectives and periods, both pieces evoke surprising cross-cultural influences, agencies, and mediations that could manifest in such encounters, seeking to complicate older interpretations, rooted either in ideas of cultural 'incommensurability' (118), or reductive applications of Edward Said's notion of Orientalism (161, 178).

The chapters of the final section focus on 'Company lives'. A common feature of the first three chapters are the various disputes and feuds in which these individuals became embroiled. Stefan Halikowski Smith offers a thoughtful and erudite treatment of the controversial Jesuit priest Guy Tachard (1651–1712), whose writings he situates between the French *Compagnie Royale des Indes Orientales*, and that other famous global 'company'—the Jesuit order. Halikowski Smith's contribution is especially welcomed in bringing a missionary perspective on travel literature that also pays attention to the specifics of the French imperial and corporate context (192, 194). One minor quibble, however, concerns his claim that 'there was no real genre of French company travel narrative' (202). At least by the eighteenth century, one can choose from a decent selection of published narratives, with many yet unpublished.² The two following

² For some published examples of travel writing by employees of the French *Compagnie des Indes*, see JEAN-BAPTISTE CHEVALIER, *Les aventures de Jean-Baptiste Chevalier dans l'Inde orientale (1752-1765): mémoire historique et journal de voyage à Assem*, ed. JEAN DELOCHE (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984); INDRANI RAY, 'Journey to Cassimbazar and Murshidabad: Observations of a French Visitor to Bengal in 1743', in INDRANI RAY, *The French East India Company and the Trade of the Indian Ocean. A Collection of Essays*, ed. LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1999), 121–143, and MARC-ANTOINE CAILLOT, *A Company Man. The Remarkable French-Atlantic Voyage of a Clerk for the Company of the Indies. A Memoir*, ed. ERIN GREENWALD (New Orleans: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 2013).

chapters deal with travel writings produced by employees of the Levant Company. Eva Johanna Holmberg contrasts two very different works of autobiographical travel writing to tease out some of the contradictions and gendered strategies lurking beneath the surface of such works. The gossipy account of John Sanderson (c. 1561–1627) is especially compelling, as Sanderson constantly falls out, argues, and even comes to blows with his colleagues. Another contentious Levant Company employee is the subject of Aske Laursen Brock's chapter, which also adds an additional legal dimension, based as it is on a 1697 pamphlet accompanying his bankruptcy case. Souvik Mukherjee's chapter, on the digital archive created from a Dutch cemetery in Chinsurah in Bengal, bears perhaps the most tenuous relation to the volume's theme. Nonetheless, he brings to light the interesting local history of this little-known Dutch colony through some of its notable residents.

Overall the volume succeeds in its stated aim of demonstrating the historical entanglement of early modern travel writing and trading corporations, and the fruitful results of treating the two together. Its coverage and themes are not necessarily cohesive or comprehensive, and a wider consideration of how the relationship between trading companies and travel writing changed over time might also have expanded the book's impact and argument. Nonetheless, the volume represents an important contribution to the study of both early modern companies and travel literature, especially for those working on the English or the Dutch. In her afterword Nandini Das gives a wonderful quote from the famous English ambassador to the Mughal court Thomas Roe (1581–1644) in which he complains that the letters he received from EIC employees were,

‘nothing but a bundell of contradictions [...] wherein I saw they tooke more pleasure to Argue then to execute, and to showe their witt and authoritye then to yield to anything not of their owne propounding, their reasons being a mist of errors.’ (290).

The contributions in this volume skilfully unknot such ‘bundells of contradictions’, delving beyond the often self-serving rhetoric of early modern travel writing to reveal the complicated and ambiguous experiences of cross-cultural interaction that accompanied and facilitated long-distance trade.