

OTHERWORLDS

VIRAGO TRAVELLERS has republished the 1852 edition of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, with a lively introduction by Margaret Atwood. It's the introduction and the context that reshape the book here. Atwood reflects on her personal connection with Moodie (Classic, Shadow) — also on Mrs. Moodie as history, on women in nineteenth-century Canada, and on the travel-literature conventions which Mrs. Moodie emulated: the ordeal of the journey, the sketch of setting and person, the nascent plot, the "self-perceived lunacy." To the list of parallels Atwood suggests (Traill, Langton, Jameson, all observing Ontario), one might add another context still: that of the settlement journal — which in Western Canada and Labrador, for example — Susan Allison, Elizabeth Goudie — was published years later. This additional filter reshapes the easy distinction between *then* and *now*, and reminds us that "pioneers" not only extend definitions of space but also alter our expectations of attitude and time.

Of review books that have lately arrived on the editorial desk, several take up this proposition, or at least seek to change the filters through which we glimpse the past. They range from anthology to history, biography to critical theory. Alan Ross's *London Magazine 1961-1985*, for example (Chatto & Windus), reads almost as a Who's Who of three generations of writers (R. K. Narayan to Christopher Hope, Malcolm Lowry to Paul Theroux) and reminds us of the constant quality the *London Magazine* has sought to sustain. Eliza Fay's *Original Letters from India (1719-1815)*, ed. E. M. Forster, with a new introduction by M. M. Kaye (Hogarth), is a reminder of a different sense of Empire — one in which London still asserts its supremacy, but in which Calcutta and Mysore ensnare. Literally, for Eliza Fay — who with her persistently incompetent husband was imprisoned on arrival in one of the princely states. But metaphorically as well. These letters (shades of Arabella Fermor, hints of Mrs. Moodie to come) are doughty, witty expressions of the self-confident British woman, and of her fascination with the otherworlds which she can perceive but never quite understand. A book like Naveen Patnaik's *A Second Paradise* (Doubleday) is more striking for its visual record — offering a glimpse of Indian courtly life (through art and architecture, reproduced here in rich full colour plates), and of its rituals of

opulence and power, to which few travellers of Mrs. Fay's time would have had close access.

In Glynne Wickham's *A History of the Theatre* (Cambridge) by contrast, the Empire figures scarcely at all. Except inferentially. A well-illustrated guide to development in European drama from the Greeks to the Expressionists, the book comments on theatrical design, dramatic presumptions, and changing modes of critical approach; it does not shrink from discussions of the politics and economics of theatrical eminence, but it also does not address the politics of omission. That is, when received taste asserts its "universal" standard, it implicitly consigns "other" activities — those which do not fit a category — into a historical dustbin. Hence, here, there are comments on eighteenth-century opera, but no mention of Mrs. Brooke, William Shield, and the popularity of *Rosina*. Sarah Bernhardt is here, but no mention of the significance of her tours abroad. "America" is mentioned repeatedly in that expansive British gesture towards the western hemisphere; but there isn't even a hint that Canada exists as a separate culture, or that there were lively theatrical traditions growing in *all* the colonies. Plainly, they did not impinge on London. Such cavils are, in some degree, beside the point, for they ask a different question from those which Wickham addresses in detail. They call, moreover — inevitably — for another book.

David Mackay's *In the Wake of Cook* (Victoria University Press, N.Z.) probes the economics of eighteenth-century empire in just such an "alternative" way. Subtitled "Exploration, Science and Empire," the book talks of the "rediscoveries" of the world made possible by advances in telescope and other navigational instruments. But basic to European expansion was commodity control: the manipulation of trade in furs, cotton, coffee, tea, pepper, sugar, silk, and slaves (and consequently of food for slaves, which led to various expeditions transplanting breadfruit and other crops from one territory to another). The scientific advances that sustained imperial expression had many less than admirable consequences. But with the whole world as a laboratory, scientists by the end of that century were also on the edge of the integrative theories that in the century to come would sustain a belief both in taxonomic and political order.

Other books offer different glimpses past the conventional paradigms of received history. The papers from a 1983 conference of Australian aboriginal writers, for example (*Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed. J. Davis and B. Hodge, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies), hints at the oral dimensions of native Australian literature, and at the Fanonian politics of writing an aboriginal literature in "white forms." (The continuing *Handbook of North American Indians* series from the Smithsonian Institution — vols. 8-11 are now available — probes similar issues, though more formally, and in contexts involving the analysis of artifact, mythologies, and living patterns.) "An Emigrant Mechanic's" *Settlers and Convicts* (reprinted from the 1847 edition by Melbourne University Press,

and attributed here to Alexander Harris) is a narrative observation of the “Objectionable and mischievous conduct” of certain classes of Australian. Implicitly judgmental, and as marked by the nineteenth-century travel sketch conventions as is Mrs. Moodie’s journal, it translates the perspectives of the “rebels” through the eyes of orderly desire. What constitutes “rebellion” depends, that is, on the angle of political commitment. On ethnicity, gender, class, power, speech.

Katherine Middleton Murry’s “unknown life” of her father, *Beloved Quixote* (Souvenir Press), is a loving testament, a reclamation of John Middleton Murry from the critical enclosure (“husband to Katherine Mansfield”) to which literary history has generally consigned him. *Ocean of Story* (Viking) recovers some 35 uncollected stories by Christina Stead, reminding us of the degree to which reputations still rest in booklength publications, and of the disservice this critical shortcut does to writers who work in shorter forms and journals. By contrast two volumes from larger series (vol. 5 of *A History of Australia* and vol. 9 of *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, both from Melbourne University Press) suggest a massive effort to deal with detail, but resist being assessed individually. In these cases it’s the accomplishment of the whole that matters. Finally, Rolston-Bain (of Windsor, Ontario) has published a treasure: vol. B-8, Colección “Documenta Novae Hispaniae,” ed. David Marley, is a facsimile Spanish/French edition of the 1763 Treaty of Paris. It’s a potent reminder of the role of the Spanish (too long neglected) in European-Canadian history. It’s also a nicely phrased diplomatic dialogue of an unrepentant political standoff, between “El Rei Christianisimo” and “el Rei de la Gran-Bretaña,” unquestionably polite, and indisputably registering a mutual disdain.

But is this a “final” boundary after all? There are innerworlds, innerfilms, for which still other writers seek expression, and they, too, reconstitute the way we perceive. A. J. Hassall, writing of Randolph Stow’s extraordinary books in *Strange Country* (University of Queensland Press) speaks of the many worlds “peopled by visitants, . . . strangers and afraid, in landscapes which are alien, and yet which reflect that strangeness they also find when they look inwards. . . .” Van Ikin’s historical collection of *Australian Science Fiction* (Academy Chicago) begins in monsters and stellar invasions and ends in the economics of shadows, pursuing a parallel quest for meaning beyond the definitions of the tangible. It’s a context of sorts in which pleasurably to read Umberto Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), a collection of essays on waxworks and holograms and some of the ideas they suggest: the idea of idealism, the absolution (and absolutism) of falsehood, the American craving for opulence, the approximate realities of museum artifacts. Americans live not for fantasy, Eco argues, but for a trip to Fantasyland; one sign of the current fascination with the past is the often unthinking millenarianism that governs contemporary politics; the “inconceivable” happens every day, therefore what explains the passive deter-

mination among so many people to define themselves apart from experience? These are lively, provocative essays, on subjects that range from Islam to *Superman* to Marshall McLuhan. To what end? "Sometimes you speak," Eco writes, "because you feel the moral obligation to say something, not because you have the 'scientific' certainty that you are saying it in an unassailable way." Yes, indeed.

W.N.

LETTERS TO MARY

Yvonne Trainer

I.

Mary you are the one who writes first
though I know you curse me
because I promised to
How quickly I open the envelope
sealed with the extra scotch tape
My hands sticky with excitement
or is it from the nights I clung to
the doorhandle the dash the armrest
while you passed every car on the highway
after some guy
who dented your fender
or gave you the finger
or yelled at you out the window It is evening

You write to ask what I'm doing
You write to ask if I'm writing poetry
You write to say you've taken up hang-gliding
just for the exercise

I walk corridors
The rooms magnified mailboxes
Remembering the happy faces
the upside down sad faces
you painted on the wall
Bottles you kept on the sill
Footsteps you inked in red on the dull ceiling
above the door out the window It is dark
I scuttle hallways