

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Envisioning and the Victorian Woman Traveler

*Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914*. Monica Anderson. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2006. 287 pp.

*Intrepid Women: Victorian Artists Travel*. Ed. Jordana Pomeroy. Cornwall: Ashgate, 2005. 144 pp.

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<1> From Lara Croft, the globe-hopping archaeologist and adventurer of Eidos' computer game fame, to Amelia Peabody, writer Elizabeth Peters' neo-Victorian traveler and sleuth currently in her 18th episode of danger in Egypt, women travelers catch and hold popular attention now much as they did in the nineteenth century. Monica Anderson, in *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914*, and Jordana Pomeroy, in *Intrepid Women: Victorian Artists Travel*, give us the opportunity better to understand the topic of women and travel in the nineteenth century. In the 1970s, the female travelers of yore were often heralded as prototypical feminists and their ability to escape the oppressions of domestic culture was seen as inspirational. More recent work by scholars such as Sara Mills, Susan Morgan, Anne McClintock, Deirdre David, Reina Lewis, and Rita Kranidis has established that Victorian women travelers were often involved in the overall project of empire—its aims as well as rewards. The two books under review extend that important focus.

<2> Identity-as-performance serves as the foundational critical concept in *Women and the Politics of Travel 1870-1914* and in her opening chapter, Anderson points to the embedded nature of the Victorian woman's subjectivity. Women's travel accounts "relied for their point of departure on a set of social, political, and cultural scripts tempered by the tropes of a masculinised Englishness that predated the moment of travel itself" (38). Yet, what is suggested in this chapter is that women's texts are not necessarily different from men's (at least not predictably so) since the culture at large entails interplay between both genders. Anderson argues that we must expect women's compliance with social dictates and, from that point, begin to tease out the moments of deviation from conventional rules and roles.

<3> Isabella Bishop (née Bird), for example, saw herself as "a conforming, properly socialized late nineteenth-century woman" (80). Focusing on Bishop's *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*, Anderson shows us a text ambiguous in voice, wanting both to conform to the quasi-scientific expectations of the travel genre and to interject the personal perspective of the author herself. Anderson writes:

In Bird's texts defamiliarization occurs through the mixing of two particular generic codes, the scientific and the semi-autobiographical diary narrative. That is, Isabella Bird's travel texts are composed of both a recognizably public and a recognizably private narrative. (87)

In this way, Bishop's travel writings illustrate a conflicted attitude toward the differing expectations for women at home and abroad. As one of Bishop's contemporaries wrote of her upon her death, "The invalid at Home and the Sampson Abroad do not form a very usual combination, yet in the case of the famous traveler these two ran in tandem for many years" (Walker qtd. in Anderson 81).

<4> If Bishop's text seems to authorize different roles for women at home and abroad, Florence Dixie, war correspondent and the subject of Anderson's next chapter, sought to master both of these positions simultaneously. Dixie's *In the Land of Misfortune* serves as an example of a woman traveler using performative strategies "to establish a position of personal and political authority in her texts" (121). Anderson points out that, "in her travel narrative we can find the struggle between a gendered individualism on the one hand, and a strong identification with



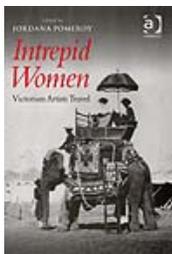
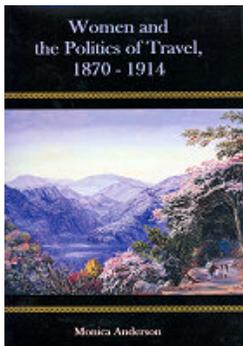
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Britain as the imperial power in South Africa on the other” (119). Dixie evidences what Anderson calls a “literary cross-dressing;” she uses and affirms a masculine colonialist discourse at the same time that she subverts that discourse with more feminine moments of personal expression.

<5> Anderson’s fourth chapter explores the poor critical reception of Kate Marsden’s 1892 *On Sledge and Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers* and her 1921 *My Mission in Siberia: A Vindication*. Here, Anderson shifts her focus to the role that readers themselves play in the creation of a text. Even though the original text reached its twelfth edition in only three years, contemporary critics did not share that enthusiasm, creating a negative climate that Alexandra Allen has described as “a slightly cruel campaign of vilification” (qtd. in Anderson 166).

Explanations for this rejection of Marsden’s works include simple disbelief in her reported accomplishments, suspicions that her travel to a leper colony was an atonement for homosexual behavior, and the accusation by one reviewer that the journey was an insult to Russia because it suggested that the nation could not take care of its own people. However, Anderson’s theory is that Marsden’s “lack of success” was “due to a general public perception that her story was faulty in both composition and result” (196).

<6> Anderson’s final chapter, although not without its merits, is uncomfortably joined to the rest of the book. In it, she discusses “a figurative colonialist language of dress” (199) a topic that comes as a bit of a surprise. This kind of awkward fit appears at various points in the book. Each chapter is divided into a number of smaller sub-sections on differing topics, and it can be difficult to discern why topics are shifting as well as to predict where they are leading. A tighter focus might have made the study’s many very good ideas easier to find, appreciate, and respond to.

<7> Jordana Pomeroy’s *Intrepid Women: Victorian Artists Travel* focuses on aspects of Victorian women’s travel that has heretofore received little attention. As Curator of Painting and Sculpture before 1900 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Pomeroy first conceived of the subject as an actual exhibit. The end result is a collection of essays that begins to fill the gap left by scholarly neglect of artists such as Charlotte Canning, Marianne North, and Frances Anne Hopkins.

<8> Two features make this an especially strong collection of essays. The first is the contributors’ willingness to avoid oversimplified analyses of women travelers. Here, they are not simply feminists or heroines but artists, travelers, and Englishwomen. Victorian women could not simply throw off the cloak of national identity upon setting foot on foreign soil. Neither could they suddenly develop the ability to sympathize with indigenous peoples or to recognize similarities between their experiences as women in the patriarchal West and the experiences of those groups being subjugated by one or another European empire. A superior alternative to facile interpretations is the very delicate and meticulous work of studying individual women in their particular circumstances. Pomeroy’s collection achieves that goal.

<9> The second feature is the volume’s openness to addressing written as well as visual texts. The goal is not to divorce completely the visual and the written, but rather to examine the interplay between the two media. Several essays in the book juxtapose the distinction between written/visual to that of feminine/ masculine. The point is not that one pairing relates directly to the other, but rather that each term in each pair supports, enforces, and defines its partner. It is an attitude devoted to closing gaps and incorporating parts so that the study of women is the study of women in a world including men, and the study of visual texts is the study of images born of and connected to words.

<10> In her contribution to the volume, art historian Susan P. Casteras writes, “For female artists fortunate enough to travel extensively, the voyage itself became a metaphor for life and art, inscribed with meaning about what they experienced and chose to remember or record” (24). Casteras uses as a starting point Mary L. Gow’s 1875 painting *Listening to the Sea*, evidencing as it does the tension between the domestic and the exotic. Casteras offers us four important points for analysis of Victorian women’s artistic renderings of non-British locales: how much the artists may or may not have sanitized their visions of the Other, how much they focus on the domestic while abroad, why they tend to screen out the less tasteful aspects of travel and place, and the degree to which they participate in the gaze. On this final point, she concedes that there was, in fact, a female gaze that operated to support imperialism, but she somewhat dilutes that fact by noting that these women “didn’t play critical roles within the masculine hierarchies of power”

(22).

<11> Maria H. Frawley's contribution illustrates how travel writing helped women redefine their societal roles back home in Britain—where they were simultaneously lauded for making use of those opportunities provided by empire and cautioned that, while wandering is good, straying too far is bad. This chapter exemplifies the kind of focus on the visual—evident also in essays by Shteir, Gates, and Rosen—which emphasizes the interconnectedness of the visual and written. Frawley discusses how the writing of the period features “two related tropes, both of which have imperialist overtones: the traveler's encounter with that which cannot be described and the encounter with that which has not yet been described” (32). Through writing as well as accompanying artistic media, including the works of Amelia Edwards and Isabella Bird Bishop, women were able to embrace more of the world and provide more of it for those at home.

<12> Since watercolor painting required no heavy equipment and was quick to dry, it was an especially suitable media for the traveler. From Frances Anne Hopkins' *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs* to Charlotte Canning's watercolor spice gardens, Jordana Pomeroy, writing in her essay in the volume, shows us the many and varied ways that Victorian women “expanded the conventional recreational uses of watercolor into a medium for recording the unusual, the exciting, and the banality of quotidian life abroad” (48). She likens the growing appreciation of watercolor to the growing appreciation of women's contributions and points out that although almost always articulated within the language of the picturesque, women's watercolors expressed an impassioned connectedness with the “here and now” of their new and foreign surroundings.

<13> Romita Roy analyzes the ways in which Victorian artists reconceived Indian landscapes to suit their own sense of beauty. The visual interpretations and translations that these artists make reflect their ability (or inability) to understand and appreciate the culture as well. Marianne North's paintings of the Taj Mahal serve as the central focus of this analysis. The Taj's immense size and shape resulted in North's relative negation of it. Rather than coping with its true appearance, she modifies it into a “surprise ‘hidden’ in a garden” (53). Her envisioning of the Taj adheres to an ideological tradition that determines how to “see” the structure and its environs. The garden itself serves as a kind of icon to the English home; those gardens created in India constituted spaces in which all that is foreign, different, and threatening is domesticated and made familiar.

<14> In her chapter on women and botanical art, Ann B. Shteir discusses the ways Victorian women working in less exotic locales nonetheless used the resources available to them to improve the quality of their lives. Natural history “provided pathways to intellectual satisfaction, spiritual connection, the pleasures of sociability, and, for some, the prospect of an economic livelihood” (68). Sciences like botany and natural history were of general interest in the Victorian era, and by virtue of this informal existence, women could involve themselves more extensively than in fields requiring educational training not available to them. Botanical knowledge constituted a kind of international language wherein women were suddenly able to take part in greater discussions on home, history, and the world.

<15> Barbara T. Gates explores the ways in which one woman traveler, Louisa Anne Meredith, expressed her interest in natural science, art, and writing. Gates points out that women artists and scientists were uniquely able to translate the new knowledge being imparted in actual scientific realms. Louisa Anne Meredith wrote several books on Tasmania, one in particular for English children that included fictional characters and stories revolving around plants and animals indigenous to the area. Through first-hand experience and a dedicated, discerning eye, Meredith was able to produce popular science books that rivaled those of her more authorized and credentialed male counterparts. As one who traveled and observed the actual sights, Meredith worked diligently to correct misinformation written by those who had not.

<16> Caroline Jordan discusses Emma Macpherson's work within the context of her “claim to fame as an artist of colonialism” (90). A squatter's wife in Australia, Macpherson traveled with her husband and brother and had very specific ideas concerning what she wanted to see. Macpherson was most interested in seeing Aborigines, gold fields, and Illawarra—experiences that had already been illustrated in J.S. Prout's *Dioramic Views of Australia*. Even though her specific exposure to such materials prior to her trip has not been established, Macpherson seemed to have “formed ideas of what there was to see in Australia before she arrived” (94). Of particular importance in this chapter is a discussion (that one might wish were longer) on Macpherson's attitude toward complaints about settler violence. Macpherson “freely admits her husband took

part in guerrilla warfare against Aborigines in opening up the northwest to white settlement some years before” (103). She defends her position against unnamed critics by pointing out that the Aborigines “would find ways to survive without ownership of the land: they could still hunt, and if not, labor for Europeans would always support them” (104).

<17> The final chapter of the book is an analysis by Jeff Rosen of a “crisis of representation” experienced by Julia Margaret Cameron while trying to photograph Marianne North. North stayed with Cameron for several days during a trip to the Royal Botanic Garden of Ceylon and agreed to sit as subject for her. According to North’s own diary, the sitting was partly a failure. Cameron tried multiple times to create the photograph she desired:

It seems that in order for that to occur, for a believable representation of ‘nature’ to be recorded satisfactorily, Cameron required a native subject, one who was more convincingly portrayed as ‘at home’ in her primitive surroundings. (121)

Further exploring the relationships between the primitive and the picturesque, Rosen demonstrates the ambivalence of the traveler. Referencing the work of Homi Bhabha, he writes, “such articulations disclose the intermixture of fear and desire, mimicry and difference, and obedience and independence in the imagery, expressing the artists’ constant struggle with their status as colonialist outsiders” (123).

<18> *Intrepid Women: Victorian Artists Travel* is an excellent collection. The essays are smart and well-grounded and they interact with and support and expand upon each other in interesting and helpful ways. The contributors address general trends and influences of current interest to scholars of their subjects even as they elucidate the particulars of their own analyses. I wouldn’t be surprised to see this book referenced again and again in future scholarship.

