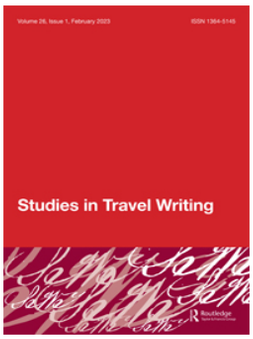

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A short history of humour in travel writing

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ABSTRACT

Until comparatively recent times, travel writing has not been a genre renowned for its humorous qualities. Yet nothing demonstrates the cultural and historical relativity of humour as clearly as the evolution of travel writing from the early nineteenth century onwards. With a focus on three narratives of failed quests, this essay traces the broad developmental arc of humour in travel writing over two hundred years. The narrative of John Ross's Arctic expedition exemplifies the way in which colonial-era writing invites readers to share a comic superiority over simple-minded indigenes. From the mid-twentieth century, Eric Newby's work illustrates a trend towards self-irony and self-mockery whereby humour becomes a versatile expression of the rhetoric of anti-conquest. Finally, Bill Bryson's books typify the increasing reliance in contemporary writing on incongruities of form and content and other strategies consistent with the development of a post-touristic travel stance.

KEYWORDS

Humour; comedy; incongruity; John Ross; Eric Newby; Bill Bryson

It hardly needs saying that there is much amusement to be found in our everyday experiences of travel and tourism: "a funny thing happened on the way to *x*" is a stock phrase for a reason. However, travel writing has not, traditionally, been a genre renowned or lauded for its humorous qualities, at least so far as its more ambitious variants are concerned. There are several obvious reasons for this. In the early evolution of the modern genre there was a drive to dissociate travel and exploration narratives from earlier forms of imaginary travel and the notorious unreliability of travellers' tales, and to establish the credibility of such writing on robust Enlightenment principles of empirical observation and factual accuracy, authenticated through a plain style devoid of rhetorical artifice. It was in that spirit that Francis Bacon, writing in 1615, advised travellers to keep a diary, offered a list of categories to help systematise information-gathering, and urged the returning traveller to "be rather advised in his answers, than forward to tell stories" (Bacon 1867, 354). Romanticism left its imprint on the genre in the form of greater interiority – Barbara Korte speaks of a "shift towards the travelling subject" in travel writing from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards (2000, 53), while Chloe Chard

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argues that the "Romantic view of travel" saw it as "a form of personal adventure, holding out the promise of a discovery or realization of the self" (1999, 11) – but this imposed a new criterion of fidelity to personal impressions and subjective experience without, for the most part, compromising the essential humourlessness of travel writing.

In the nineteenth and then twentieth centuries the various forms of scientific discourse (geographical, anthropological, botanical, meteorological and so on) that had formerly cohabited with travel narratives and given them additional heft, separated off with the emergence of professional specialisms and the formation of academic disciplines. Travel writing survived and continued to evolve but practitioners faced new challenges in their desire to be taken seriously. Indeed, many travel writers have not taken their own travel writing seriously, either rejecting the label of travel writer or branding such texts low-value commercial works in comparison with other parts of their diverse literary output. Bruce Chatwin's insistence on having *The Songlines* removed from the shortlist for the Thomas Cook Travel Award is merely the best-known example of authorial reluctance to be associated with the genre (Shakespeare 1999, 487). In this context, prioritising humorous content over other elements of travel writing such as descriptions of place and social reportage would, perhaps, risk further lowering the status of such works and threaten needless reputational damage.

Of course, over the last two centuries there have been significant attempts to exploit the comedic potential of travel. The "buffoonery" of *Coryat's Crudities* (1611), admired by William Dalrymple for its "mix of humour and accurate detail", is an early example (1990, 184). The exuberant irony and occasionally bawdy humour of Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) stands out in the following century. Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) and Evelyn Waugh's travel books of the 1930s will also be familiar to many. Works such as these that have remained in print and achieved some kind of respectable afterlife represent, however, a slim, albeit notable, tradition. Only in very recent times has the comic travelogue – a work aiming chiefly to amuse, rather than inform, the reader – become a significant phenomenon, and even now such works typically sit at the lower end of the market and may be treated with disdain or indifference by those prepared to defend so-called "literary" travel writing. The clearest evidence that travel writing has a problem with humour is that, after thirty years or more of growth in academic travel writing studies, there is no significant body of criticism – almost nothing at all – addressing this facet of the genre. Carl Thompson's otherwise excellent *Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (Thompson 2016a) fails to identify humour as a topic of interest either in the section on "Key Debates" or the section on "Styles, Modes, Themes". A similar indifference characterises *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Hulme and Youngs 2002), where the index lists just a handful of passing references to humour and comedy. Scott Carpenter's short entry on humour in *Keywords for Travel Writing Studies* is a welcome contribution, but his own acknowledgement of "[t]he dearth of critical essays on the topic" is an accurate reflection of the general state of play (2019, 123).

This essay is an attempt to engage seriously with non-serious aspects of travel writing. Having outlined, in the paragraph above, why travel writing, for much of its textual life, may have had a fraught relationship with humour, I shall try in what follows to assess how that relationship has evolved over the past two hundred years. How has the implied contract between travel writer and reader which allows for situations, encounters, and observations to be considered funny – to make us laugh or smile – changed over

time? In this essay I offer three snapshots of Anglophone travel writing at different stages in the evolution of the genre as the basis for some provisional conclusions. These examples align broadly with the three historical epochs that Paul Fussell identifies in his study of travel writing in the interwar years, namely the age of exploration, the age of travel, and the age of tourism (1980, 38). There are many problems with this crude periodisation, but it provides a handy framework to structure my analysis. The three texts I focus on have been chosen partly because they each pivot on a similar narrative element – a failed quest – which makes the comparison of humorous techniques and effects easier and more fruitful. I do not wish to overstate the extent to which these texts are representative of their epochs, especially given what is often seen as the "bewildering diversity" of the travel genre (Thompson 2011, 1). Nevertheless, as I hope will emerge in my close readings, I believe that there are ways in which they each typify their historical moment, not least in terms of the different levels of cultural and economic empowerment that their authors enjoy and the degree to which their consciousness of privilege shapes their perception of humorous situations and effects.

Why we laugh: a theoretical primer

It would probably be useful to begin by putting this discussion into some kind of theoretical context. There is a broad consensus that theories of humour fall into three main camps. First, there is superiority theory, often encapsulated in Thomas Hobbes's observation that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly" (Hobbes 1840, 46). In other words, laughter is an expression of power, of our feelings of superiority over other people: we feel good about ourselves when we find cause to laugh at others. (Hobbes's theory allows for laughing at oneself, in the sense that the part of you that is laughing has dissociated itself from the part of you that is laughed at.) This is the oldest theory and was dominant up to the eighteenth century; it still has its proponents. The idea that humour is grounded in ridicule or derision and requires a butt, whether that be an individual or a social group, resonates with much contemporary stand-up comedy, particularly of the edgier kind, although the situation has been complicated by current controversies around political correctness, freedom of expression and cancel culture. Equally, however, it is easy to demonstrate that there are plenty of humorous instances, including many involving verbal humour, that are not based on feelings of superiority, and many absurd situations that we find funny without anyone being the object of ridicule.

Second, there is relief theory. This has some similarities with superiority theory but is different in focusing more on the physiology or psychodynamics of laughter. Essentially, the theory states that laughter involves the sudden release of pent-up nervous energy, or the release of energy that is suddenly rendered superfluous or is seen to be inappropriate. This theory has notable early expressions, for example in the work of Herbert Spencer, but its best-known modern formulation is, of course, that of Freud – the Freud, that is, of his early work on *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. For Freud, laughter entails the discharge of psychic energy that is normally used to repress mental activity that our everyday conscious selves disapprove of; thoughts and feelings of a sexual or aggressive nature that we normally inhibit are allowed expression in jokes because the mechanisms

of the joke-work (analogous to those used in dreams) render them palatable to our internal censor. Although not germane to the present enquiry, it is fair to note that commentators have found all kinds of problems with Freud's notion of an economy of psychic expenditure. In broad terms, relief theory may appear plausible when applied to certain kinds of jokes, but its relevance is much less clear in relation to other forms of humour, which Freud deals with separately and only very briefly. Freud argues that humour "arises from an economy in the expenditure of affect" (Freud 1976, 293), a saving of emotional energy – pity, for example – that we suddenly realise is not required by a situation presented to us. Although it is plain that such "relief" is not present in many instances of literary humour, the general notion of the cathartic function of laughter is certainly relevant in some contexts.

The third main branch of humour theory is incongruity theory. This focuses more on cognitive processes than on feelings or emotions. The theory has illustrious advocates in past centuries, such as Blaise Pascal, who wrote that "Nothing makes people laugh so much as a surprising disparity between what they expect and what they see" (quoted in Ludovici 1932, 27), and Arthur Schopenhauer, who claimed that the "cause of laughter . . . is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation" (1909, 95). Incongruity, in a literary context, may apply to both form and content: as John Morreall argues, there may be both "incongruity in things" (something comically unexpected or inappropriate in an object or person) and "incongruity in presentation", a category encompassing puns, double entendres, malapropisms and many kinds of more sophisticated verbal humour (1983, 62). Although incongruity cannot explain all laughter situations, and in itself does not necessarily incite laughter (if, for example, some other emotion, such as fear or revulsion, takes priority), I find it the most flexible and capacious of the theories I have outlined and the most naturally aligned to literary-critical needs. Morreall's theory of adult humour, which reduces to a sudden or unexpected "conceptual shift … from what the person would expect a given thing or situation to be like, to an awareness that the thing or situation is not like that" (43), is a version of incongruity theory. Simon Critchley, another leading modern theorist, is on similar ground: humour, he suggests, is "a paradoxical form of speech and action that defeats our expectations, producing laughter with its unexpected verbal inversions, contortions and explosions" (2002, 19). Although elements of superiority theory and relief theory will be found relevant to the discussion that follows, it is incongruity theory that will prove most helpful in illuminating travel writing's troubled relationship with humour.

"This ludicrous scene": John Ross and the "Arctic Highlanders"

With those theoretical coordinates in mind, I now turn to the first of my textual examples. Fussell assigns the age of exploration to the Renaissance, but it might legitimately be extended to include the entire period of colonial expansion. Fussell's notion of "the athletic, paramilitary activity of exploration", in which the explorer "seeks the undiscovered" and "moves towards the risks of the formless and the unknown" (39), certainly fits the expedition narrated in John Ross's *Voyage of Discovery, Made under the Orders of the Admiralty, in his Majesty's Ships Isabella and Alexander*, first published in 1819. Ross's voyage was the first of many Admiralty-backed expeditions in the nineteenth century

that renewed the search (largely abandoned since the exploits of Frobisher, Davis, Hudson and others in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) for the fabled North-west Passage – a navigable sea route between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans along the northern coast of North America that would significantly benefit commercial shipping. Ross's 1818 expedition was a failure: deceived by an optical illusion, he wrongly concluded that Lancaster Sound was just an inlet and further passage was impossible, and made an early return to England. When his explanation was called into question by other members of the expedition Ross's apparent misjudgement became the target of both criticism and ridicule, and publication of his account of the voyage the following year was in part an attempt to salvage his reputation.

Perhaps because his expedition was truncated and so unproductive of genuine new geographical discoveries, Ross elaborated on topics that might nevertheless add something to the sum of human knowledge as well as appealing to the general reader. In particular, he devoted several chapters to the expedition's dealings with an Inuit community, christened the "Arctic Highlanders", encountered at a northerly point on the west coast of Greenland. After an initial approach by his interpreter, Ross describes his personal first contact with the indigenes thus:

> Our arrival produced a visible alarm, causing them to retreat a few steps towards their sledges; on this Sacheuse called to us to pull our noses, as he had discovered this to be the mode of friendly salutation with them. This ceremony was accordingly performed by each of us, the natives, during their retreat, making use of the same gesture, the nature of which we had not before understood. In the same way we imitated their shouts as well as we could, using the same interjection, *heigh, yaw!* which we afterwards found to be an expression of surprise and pleasure. We then advanced towards them while they halted, and presented the foremost with a looking-glass and a knife, repeating the same presents to the whole, as they came up in succession. On seeing their faces in the glasses, their astonishment appeared extreme, and they looked round in silence, for a moment, at each other and at us; immediately afterwards they set up a general shout, succeeded by a loud laugh, expressive of extreme delight, as well as surprise, in which we joined, partly from inability to avoid it, and willing also to show that we were pleased with our new acquaintances.
>
> The impression made by this ludicrous scene on Sacheuse was so strong, that some time afterwards he made a drawing of it […] (1819, 86–87)

A coloured engraving of the drawing referred to here, entitled "First Communication with the Natives" and credited to "John Sackheouse", was one of several much-derided illustrations included in the sumptuous quarto first edition of Ross's narrative. Sacheuse, an Inuk also known sometimes as Hans Zakaeus, arrived in Scotland in 1816 on a whaling ship, probably as a stowaway (rather than an abductee, the fate of several of his people taken forcibly by Europeans as "scientific" specimens). There he made friends in high society, learned a little English, and had his portrait painted by Alexander Nasmyth, who also gave him art lessons. He met up with Ross while the ships were being fitted out at Deptford and joined the expedition as official interpreter. After their return, Ross recommended him to the Admiralty for further employment, but Sacheuse died of typhoid a few months later at the age of 22 (Figure 1).

Sacheuse's drawing depicts the Isabella and Alexander moored to the edge of an ice-sheet, with the tail fins of a couple of whales poking improbably out of the water alongside. On shore, Ross and his second in command, William Parry, engage with the Inuit,

Figure 1. First Communication with the Natives of Prince Regents Bay, as drawn by John Sackheouse and Presented to Cap[t] Ross, Aug[t] 10 1818 (1819). Library and Archives Canada.

who have arrived on dog-sledges. Sacheuse portrays the reaction of the Inuit to gifts of knives and looking-glasses, and to seeing their faces in mirrors for what we assume is the first time. It is a scene of mirth: they laugh, and Ross and his companions join in, "partly from inability to avoid it". These artefacts are not the only sources of humour: Ross goes on to describe the amusement generated by the Europeans' clothing (notably a red cap, which the "natives" try on in turn) and how the "colour of our skins became […] a subject of much mirth" (88); when the "Highlanders" are invited to board the Isabella, they laugh "heartily at seeing Lieutenant Parry and myself drawn […] on the sledges, by our seamen" (89). Theorists of humour point out that children will often laugh when confronted for the first time by something outside their limited prior experience: the shock of the new causes a pleasant psychological shift productive of laughter. Interestingly, Morreall argues that the closest parallel to this in the adult world is when "so-called primitive peoples are exposed to Western technology and customs for the first time" (1983, 44) – as illustrated by "First Communication", perhaps. In the context of Ross's narrative, though, it is worth noting that the Greenlanders' amusement is tempered by fear: they cling to their belief that the ships are mighty creatures because they have seen them "move their wings" (84).

On the face of it, the fact that Ross and his companions "join in" the Inuit laughter is proof of the common observation that laughter is contagious: this is a moment of shared, spontaneous merriment. Laughter is transmitted from indigenous travelee to British traveller, and presumably, implicitly, to the reader too, who is invited to find this situation funny. But the quality of the mirth changes in transmission: Ross's laughter is already different from the native's laughter, in that it is partly a deliberate ploy "to show that we were pleased with our new acquaintances" (just as he and his crew imitate the shouts "*heigh, yaw!*" despite having no idea what they mean); the reader's laughter, divorced from any context of human interaction and consuming Ross's

account at a vast geographical (and perhaps historical) remove, may well assume the character of ridicule – an example of what Ronald de Sousa calls "the evil element in laughter", where laughter presupposes identification with morally questionable attitudes (1987, 238). Although the humour in this passage might plausibly be explained in terms of incongruity – a mismatch between the Greenlanders' response to Western goods and the banality of the reader's implied response – the episode as a whole resonates more with the superiority theory of humour outlined above: readers are encouraged to enjoy their feelings of superiority over the simple-minded and credulous natives, who appear too easily pleased with such insufficient objects.

Ross's contemporary readers were accustomed to look for both "instruction" and "amusement" in travel narratives – those were the basic generic requirements, reflected and reiterated in countless periodical reviews of works in this genre. Here, as in so many other texts from the colonial era, or age of exploration, it is people Swaralipi Nandi (in a rare and suggestive engagement with comedic aspects of travel writing) denominates the "ludicrous "Other"" who supply the amusement, reinforcing in a humorous register the traditional "power hierarchy" (2014, 265). It is hard to say to what degree Ross is consciously crafting a humorous episode to enliven his writing (his style generally is utilitarian at best); it seems just as likely that he is faithfully recounting a laughter-generating incident and merely assumes that his audience will find it funny too. What is much more certain is that present-day readers will find this passage an uncomfortable reading experience and will resist the invitation to share in such superiority-based humour. As Critchley observes, humour tends to reinforce social consensus. "Joking", he says, "is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules" (2002, 4), and the same goes for humour more broadly. The "rules" of the "game" have changed radically since Ross's time and the "joke" that he unreflectingly shared with his contemporary audience is an unlamented casualty of that historical process.

Laughter and violence: Eric Newby's *Short Walk in The Hindu Kush*

We move on to the so-called age of travel, when the world has been comprehensively explored but mass tourism has yet to take hold, when it is supposedly still possible for adventurous souls to plot their own itineraries and travel by a variety of independent means. The interwar years are usually taken to be the high-water mark of this era and authors such as Robert Byron, Peter Fleming, Graham Greene, D. H. Lawrence and Evelyn Waugh considered some of its most respected travel writers. Fussell sees the traveller as occupying the middle ground between two extremes, "retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration, and fusing that with the pleasure of 'knowing where one is' belonging to tourism" (1980, 39). When Waugh writes, in *Ninety-Two Days*, of "the difficulties of getting from place to place", and of how if

> one travels in the manner of the country, taking horses or cars where possible, walking when necessary, getting rations and labour where one can, using regular services of transport when one comes across them and fitting out expeditions of one's own where no facilities exist, one identifies oneself with the place one is visiting in a way that is impossible

to "those who travel in aeroplanes", he embraces the persona of the traveller defined in such fashion (Waugh 2011, 255–57).

Developments in the use of humour in travel writing of the interwar years might well focus on Waugh, whose four travel books of the 1930s have much in common with (and contributed material to) his comic novels of the same period. Mention should also be made of Robert Byron, whose masterpiece, *The Road to Oxiana* (Byron 1981), is something of a niche interest now but is well-known as the book that inspired Bruce Chatwin's influential postmodern travelogue, *In Patagonia* (1977). Of particular importance in the current context is Byron's inclusion of numerous lengthy (and, no doubt, partly fictionalised) passages of comic dialogue, set out almost as miniature playscripts, as a key element of his complex technical montage. However, the text I shall briefly examine in this section, Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (Newby 1974), is from a slightly later period. Appearing just twenty years after Byron's, Newby's book belongs to the post-war era of decolonisation rather than that brief interval in which the British Empire reached its greatest extent, yet stylistically it has much in common with its predecessors of the 1930s. As Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan note, Waugh believed that the end of World War II "signalled the end of the golden age of travel writing", yet in writing the preface to *A Short Walk* praised its author as the latest representative of that same "whimsical tradition" (1998, 27). Newby suffers a keener sense of belatedness than writers of Waugh's generation and is therefore arguably prone to "fitful delusions of imperial grandeur" (Holland and Huggan 1998, 36), but *A Short Walk* shares many comic traits with those earlier writers and exemplifies key strands in twentieth-century travel writing before the more radical reinvention and democratisation of the genre in modern times.

Following a public school education and military service in World War 2, including spells in prisoner-of-war camps in both Italy and Germany (Ure 2010), Newby worked in his father's London dressmaking business for several years before setting off, with his companion Hugh Carless, a British diplomat, to climb a 20,000 foot peak in Nuristan, a remote province in northeastern Afghanistan. *A Short Walk* narrates their journey, largely on foot and horseback, and their ultimate failure to scale the then unclimbed Mir Samir (19,058 ft). The demoralising abandonment of their quest ("Both of us were nearly in tears" (Newby 1974, 181)) tempts comparison with Ross's truncated mission, but Newby's self-presentation and his treatment of events before and after their attempt on the mountain could not be more different.

The confession that neither Newby nor Carless had any mountaineering experience and the inclusion of an early chapter describing a hastily arranged weekend crash course in Wales to acquire basic climbing skills, establish the comic frame of the narrative and the persona of the author as someone hopelessly ill-equipped to complete the challenge he has taken on. It quickly becomes apparent that, in a way that is symptomatic of much travel writing of the period, much of the humour in this book is directed not at funny foreigners but at the author himself. Newby models a certain kind of increasingly outdated Englishman abroad: slightly eccentric, happy-go-lucky, willing to try anything in a cheerfully amateurish fashion, blundering around in strange lands and among strange people for which his upbringing and experience have provided scant preparation, his misadventures and ignorance of local customs sugar-coated by a bottomless capacity for self-ridicule. The impression he gives of his and Carless's naivety and incompetence may well be exaggerated, but is seemingly confirmed at the end of the book by their encounter with veteran explorer Wilfred Thesiger, who dismisses them as "a couple of pansies" when they start blowing up their air-beds (248).[1] Ben Cocking has argued

that, whereas Thesiger sees himself as a lineal descendant of the great nineteenth-century explorers and suffers from a melancholy sense of belatedness, Newby's playful staging of the Englishman abroad persona "constitutes a form of mimicry" that implicitly acknowledges the end of empire (2011, 105). Holland and Huggan provide a harsher interpretation of the same phenomenon, suggesting that "[s]elf-parody offers self-protection" to Newby, camouflaging his privilege while giving him a "license to perform" his "idealized, thoroughly class-bound idea of Englishness" (1998, 35, 32). However judged, the incongruity of Newby's comic persona, in a geographical context recalling Britain's participation in the Great Game of nineteenth-century diplomatic warfare, both underlines and disguises the increasingly anachronistic character of his quest by turning heroic failure into farce.

To examine more closely the complexities of Newby's humorous self-presentation, consider the episode in which he and Carless cross the Chamar Pass into Nuristan and meet local tribesmen for the first time. The title of the relevant chapter, "Over the Top", with its ironic connotations of trench warfare, immediately signals to the reader that their final entry into this little-known region will be no less equivocal a display of British fortitude and resolve than their trials on Mir Samir. What follows is a narrative in which assertions of "natural" authority are constantly undercut by scenes of ignominious discomfiture or embarrassment. Carless's success in persuading their local drivers (who complain that the Nurastanis are "idolatrous unbelievers who would murder us all" [185]) to continue the journey by claiming close acquaintance with a fictitious military leader who will not look kindly on their dereliction of duty is followed by a scene in which Newby, whose struggles to operate his camera with bandaged hands are compared to "trying to eat asparagus with boxing gloves on", is warned that photography is "against the religion" (187). When the rest of the party gets excited at the distant sight of an ibex, Newby desperately claims to be sharing the spectacle ("'There he goes,' I said. 'I can see him now.'"), only to be told that the creature is "not moving" (189). When Newby and Carless are offered hospitality by the Nuristanis, the former finds himself force-fed with a large ladle "as though I were senile", but the polarity of infantilisation is quickly reversed as their telescope becomes a source of naive wonderment: "I found it very agreeable to meet people to whom it was possible to give pleasure so simply" (193). In what might be taken as a rolling demonstration of the relief theory of humour, it is as though every micro-aggression or manifestation of apparent British superiority has to be counterbalanced by a reaction formation of self-ridicule or self-abasement.

This episode reaches its denouement with an extended performance of comic victimhood. With his belongings "ransacked" and "inquisitive fingers prying about" his person, Newby attempts to take back a degree of control of the situation by offering up his watch:

> It was the pride of my heart (I, too, am easily pleased) – a brand-new Rolex that I had got in Geneva on the way out from England and reputed proof against every kind of ill-treatment.
>
> "Tell the headman," I said to Hugh, "that it will work under water."
>
> "He doesn't believe it."
>
> "All right. Tell him it will even work in that," pointing to the cauldron which was giving off steam and gloggling noises.

> Hugh told him. The headman said a few words to the young existentialist who had the watch. Before I could stop him he dropped it into the pot.
>
> "He says he doesn't believe you," said Hugh.
>
> "Well, tell him to take it out! I don't believe it myself!" By now I was hanging over the thing, frantically fishing with the ladle.
>
> "It's no good," I said. "They'll have to empty it."
>
> This time Hugh spoke somewhat more urgently to the headman.
>
> "He says they don't want to. It's their dinner." (193–194)

This scene has remarkable similarities with the passage from Ross's narrative discussed in the previous section: the asymmetric relationship between Western traveller and unsophisticated local people; the fascination with Western technology; the deliberate attempt to ingratiate oneself; the language barrier. The main differences are the parenthetical reference to being as "easily pleased" as the locals, which (coming right after the statement about how easy it was to give pleasure to the local people) affects to blur the transparent cultural and economic divide between them, and the fact that Newby comes off worst – the joke is at least partly on him, most obviously in his frenzied activity with the ladle.

As this scene further unfolds, the watch is extracted from the cauldron and is found – testimony to the supremacy of the West! – to be still going. (Newby again subtly attempts to level the playing field by stating that this "made an immense impression on everyone, myself included" [194].) However, the man who retrieved it has disappeared with it by the time Newby and Carless decide to move out; in a prolongation of the farce, he is reported to be continuing the experiment by immersing the watch in the river. Eventually Newby tracks down the "skulking" man and literally forces him (he prises open his clenched right hand) to return the Rolex. This too is a parodic rewriting of a familiar scene in colonial-era travel literature, in which perceived theft by native people of European explorers' property typically earns harsh reprisals, sometimes with fatal consequences. There is no such outcome here. But this final awkward oscillation between hapless victimhood and cultural self-assertiveness is typical of Newby's rendering of his journey and interactions with local people. The watch-thief laughs when confronted yet has about him an "air of scarcely controlled violence" (196). Once again, a baffling duality ascribed to a foreigner might equally be read as an involuntary reflection of Newby's own behaviour, veering as it does from embarrassing pratfalls to the use of physical force. Newby, along with other travel writers of the period, has been accused of imperialist nostalgia. But if there are "imperial fantasies" in this work (Holland and Huggan 1998, 34) they are played out as farce, with Newby's comic misadventures constituting a necessary adaptation, conscious or otherwise, to the emerging postcolonial world. The multiple incongruities of his travel persona – not least his apparently absurd unfitness for the role of explorer as traditionally defined – present a version of "anti-conquest" appropriate to this age of transition, a representational strategy incorporating a persistent strain of self-mockery and a willingness to portray one's own discomfiture in humorous situations that warns the reader not to take his pretensions too seriously, even as his cultural and economic privilege is paradoxically affirmed.[2]

Walking with a wardrobe on your back: Bill Bryson on the Appalachian trail

The age of tourism, as discussed (and dismissed contemptuously) by Fussell, is our own modern age of industrialised recreational travel, facilitated above all by cheap international flights. For Fussell, as for other anti-touristic travel theorists, tourism involves a herd mentality and the passive consumption of a standard repertoire of sights and attractions, overdependence on guides, guidebooks, and tour operators, and a lack of interest in, and respect for, local cultures. Fussell assumes that this is the end of history as far as travel is concerned, declaring provocatively that "[w]e are all tourists now, and there is no escape" (1980, 49). Subsequent developments in travel writing studies have nevertheless established the concept of "post-tourism". In an early formulation, Chris Rojek states that the post-tourist "is aware of the commodification of tourist experience" but instead of "abhorring it in the manner of the tourist […] treats it playfully" (1993, 177), while Carl Thompson summarises that the post-tourist will "often reject and mock the rhetoric of authenticity that has been so conspicuous in travel writing of the past" (2011, 126). The popularisation of the comic travelogue in recent times reflects both the realities – including the serious ethical implications[3] – of modern tourism as well as the evolution of post-touristic attitudes.

Verbal humour, or the systematic exploitation of incongruities of form and presentation, is a conspicuous feature of many travel books taking the comic turn. Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, a book-length account of his failure to begin writing a study of D. H. Lawrence in various Lawrentian locations including Paris, Rome and Mexico, specialises in comic digression and circumlocution. "Perhaps the inability to decide where to live which I saw as one of the factors in preventing my making any progress with my study of Lawrence was actually part of my preparation for beginning to write it" (Dyer 2012, 13): this single sentence presents a microcosm of the ever-extensible and often self-unravelling style that mirrors Dyer's endless procrastination as author. J. Maarten Troost is in very different geographical and rhetorical territory in *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*, which narrates a two-year stay in the island nation of Kiribati as the partner of a woman working for a regional NGO. Here, against a long tradition of European writing about the South Seas portraying earthly paradises and noble savages, there is considerable effort to avoid demeaning primitivist clichés about Pacific islanders. Troost nevertheless extracts maximum humour from hyperbolically straining the mismatch between expectation and reality, or between Western norms and the readjusted perspectives of island life: "Onward to the power station, which was a diesel generator in a small tin warehouse capable of meeting the electricity needs of, optimistically, three average Americans, provided that they didn't use a refrigerator and a hair dryer concurrently" (2004, 37–38). These are just two examples of a sub-genre that features many different rhetorical signatures; it is arguable that they, along with many other such books, foreground style over substance, generating humour primarily from their *way of talking* about the author's experiences and securing acclaim by turning certain idiolectal traits into a recognisable and popular authorial brand.

The writer I shall focus on in this final section is, however, Bill Bryson, American born but long-time resident in the UK (since 2015 he has held dual citizenship), whose comic travelogues have enjoyed huge commercial success while receiving surprisingly little critical

notice. Unlike most travel writers, Bryson is happy to call himself a tourist. This does not mean that he does not sometimes fulminate about other tourists, of his own as well as other nationalities, but he is not as preoccupied as more self-consciously "literary" travellers with the vexed distinction between traveller and tourist; he is content, as Debbie Lisle puts it, with trying to be a "good" tourist as opposed to a "bad" one (2006, 82).

One striking characteristic of Bryson's output over his thirty years as a travel writer is the extent to which he has limited his travels to developed, First World countries: with the exception of one ill-advised foray into Africa his books avoid throwing the reader (and himself) into realms of difference where he would be confronted by extremes of poverty and inequality: he explores the UK as an American emigrant (*Notes from a Small Island*, *The Road to Little Dribbling*) and the USA – in "return of the native" mode – as a naturalised Brit (*The Lost Continent*); he also roams around Continental Europe (*Neither Here nor There*) and tours Australia (*Down Under*) – the latter being the only one of his books to receive significant attention from critics. The obvious explanation of these preferences is that they stem the undercurrents of belatedness and guilt that trouble much postcolonial travel writing. Bryson does not have to face difficult questions about how Western societies have negatively impacted the Global South.[4] But his "safe" geographical choices also raise an interesting question about ethnic humour. He removes any temptation to make jokes about the inhabitants of former colonies of a kind that might be deemed racially or culturally offensive. But he thereby opens up an alternative field of possibilities. The standard modern scholarly study of ethnic humour (by Christie Davies) focuses on certain types of joke that translate readily from one setting to another, maintaining the same form but altering the specific content. For example, most dominant groups tell jokes about another ethnic group who are seen as stupid, and another (different) group who are seen as "canny" (for the English, the Irish and the Scots have traditionally filled these roles). These "butt" groups may well be people on the margins of their society but not necessarily subject to real prejudice and discrimination. They are similar in many ways to, yet different from, the dominant group, and this is the crucial factor: Davies argues that "it is the incongruity of people like us behaving not like us that is funny, and comic superiority over similar or comparable groups that is most enjoyed" (1990, 314). Bryson adapts this joke technique by translating it into an unthreateningly international dimension, generating unlimited humour at the expense of the English, French, Germans, Italians and white Australians, while, as we shall see shortly, diversifying the category of internal butt group when dealing with his fellow Americans.

With regard to style, Bryson's travelogues exemplify the increasing reliance on verbal and situational humour in contemporary travel writing described above. With an equal predilection for irony and hyperbole he cultivates the multiple incongruities of form and content, and in terms of narrative strategy revels in discrepancies between expectation and actuality. An early passage in his British travelogue, *Notes from a Small Island*, in which he regrets that the big national experiment in communism was left to the Russians when the British would have managed it so much better, is representative of his approach:

> All those things that are necessary to the successful implementation of a rigorous socialist system are, after all, second nature to the British. For a start, they like going without. They

> are great at pulling together, particularly in the face of adversity, for a perceived common good. They will queue patiently for indefinite periods and accept with rare fortitude the imposition of rationing, bland diets and sudden inconvenient shortages of staple goods, as anyone who has ever looked for bread at a supermarket on a Saturday afternoon will know. They are comfortable with faceless bureaucracies and, as Mrs Thatcher proved, tolerant of dictatorships. […]
>
> Please understand I'm not saying that Britain would have been a happier, better place under Communism, merely that the British would have done it properly. (1995, 48–49)

Even this edited extract demonstrates a typical Bryson technique: the listing of evidence – some of it reasonable-sounding, some of it facetious – amounting to the cumulative "proof" of a comically indefensible proposition. Here, interestingly, there is no punchline or "rug-pull" sentence subverting what has gone before (another much-used tool in this writer's humorous repertoire), rather a plangent reassertion of the original thesis. The passage rehearses elements of a familiar national stereotype in a way that is unlikely to cause offence, even to his British readers, while the reference to Thatcher invokes a spirit of liberal camaraderie shared with his implied audience. The fact that *Notes from a Small Island* was voted the book that best represents England (in a poll organised for World Book Day in 2003) shows how successfully Bryson has navigated both the cultural self-identity and the propensity for self-mockery of his UK readers.

For a closer look at Bryson's humour, though, his 1997 account of his attempt (along with companion Stephen Katz) to walk the Appalachian Trail, *A Walk in the Woods*, offers an appealing comparison with Ross's and Newby's narratives. Like Newby, Bryson presents himself as ridiculously ill-suited to the expedition, blindly purchasing "enough equipment to bring full employment to a vale of sherpas" and consequently trying to walk more than 2000 miles "with a wardrobe on [his] back" (1997, 9, 6); like both Newby and Ross, he fails to reach his ultimate destination – to complete the "quest" that Chatwin claimed was a necessary ingredient of all successful travel writing.[5] I shall focus in particular on the final stages of the walk leading up to the realisation that Bryson and Katz will not fulfil their mission.

Following the technique described above, Bryson generates humour at the expense of various recognisable sub-categories of his fellow Americans encountered on the Trail: They include "foolish" American tourists who, for example, fail to take elementary safety precautions in relation to bears, such as the woman who smeared honey "on her toddler's fingers so that the bear would lick it off for the video camera" (95). There are also lazy, car-dependent Americans who take a lot of convincing that Bryson and Katz are "using our legs to proceed across the landscape" (161). There are petty-minded American officials (or, in British parlance, "jobsworths") like the security guard at a zinc mill who treats Bryson as a criminal for simply "looking at [a] hill" (197); stupid Americans like "Chicken John", who constantly gets lost on "the most clearly defined, well-blazed footpath imaginable" and once walked for three days back the way he had already come (217); and technophilic Americans like the walker who carries no waterproof clothing but has an "Enviro Monitor" that measure eighty values "to three decimal places" (224). Just before they embark on the final, toughest section of the Trail, the Hundred Mile Wilderness in Maine, Bryson and Katz encounter a couple of ultra-religious Midwesterners.

When asked if they had never thought of giving up during their 141-day hike, the woman is initially lost for words:

> Her partner came to her rescue. "We had a couple of low moments in the early phases," he said, "but we put our faith in the Lord and his will prevailed."
>
> "Praise Jesus," whispered the girl, almost inaudibly.
>
> "Ah," I said, and made a mental note to lock my door when I went to bed. (264–265)

Here, as with the other home-bred satiric targets I have itemised, Bryson encourages readers to identify with his own educated, self-aware, more cosmopolitan travel persona and dissociate themselves from a more one-dimensional version of the national character that he holds up for ridicule. In exactly the way that Christie Davies suggests, he invites his audience to enjoy a comic superiority over some of their fellow citizens, delighting in the incongruity of people so like themselves in many ways – people who are, for instance, in the privileged position of being able to indulge in several months of recreational travel – yet seemingly so alien in the way they think and behave. The commercial success of *A Walk in the Woods* in the USA demonstrates his skill in fashioning a community of readers who enjoy his relentless satire while refusing to believe that it applies in any way to themselves.[6] The throwaway final sentence in the passage above, which conjures up an image of someone who cannot even deal with other walkers, let alone the dangers of the Trail, is another typical Bryson manoeuvre: his pretend self-emasculation is another brick in the wall of an all-enveloping protective irony which urges the reader not to take his criticisms of others any more seriously than he seems to take himself.

Having entered the Hundred Mile Wilderness, Bryson and Katz separate for a while (Bryson is the faster walker) but fail to rendezvous, and Bryson only comes upon Katz (who had left the Trail in search of water and got lost) the next day after considerable toing and froing in both directions. The dialogue that ensues, which borders on real distress and recrimination, brings about the anticlimactic termination of their quest:

> "I thought I was done for. Lost, no water – and you with the chocolate chip cookies."
>
> "So how did you get back to the trail?"
>
> "It was a miracle, I swear to God. Just when I was about to lie down and give myself to the wolves and bobcats, I look up and there's a white blaze on a tree and I look down and I'm *standing* on the AT. At the mudslick, as a matter of fact. I sat down and had three smokes one after the other, just to calm myself down, and then I thought, 'Shit, I bet Bryson's walked by here while I've been blundering around in the woods, and he'll never come back because he's already checked this section of trail.' And then I began to worry that I never would see you again. So I really *was* glad when you turned up. To tell you the truth, I've never been so glad to see another person in my whole life, and that includes some naked women."
>
> There was something in his look.
>
> "You want to go home?" I asked.
>
> He thought for a moment. "Yeah. I do."

> "Me, too."
>
> So we decided to leave the endless trail and stop pretending we were mountain men because we weren't. (281–282)

While not a comedic highpoint of *A Walk in the Woods*, this passage helps underline some key facets of Bryson's writing. Here he gives the best lines to Katz. The concluding reference to chocolate chip cookies in Katz's speech at the beginning of the passage, with its ironic suggestion that comfort food was uppermost in his mind in a life-threatening situation, is an example of the rug-pull technique mentioned earlier whereby a pithy final phrase or unexpected swerve in the argument defuses any tension and legitimises the reader's insensibility. The same technique is used at the end of Katz's much longer following speech, where the allusion to naked women, so out of key with a confession of genuine anxiety and distress, punctures the whole ballooning narrative that precedes it. There is no better illustration of Henri Bergson's observation that "[l]aughter has no greater foe than emotion" and that comedy demands "something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (1980, 63–64): readers may feel concern for Bryson's and Katz's misadventures, but are not allowed to feel *too much* concern, with the rug-pulls – triggers, perhaps, of the cathartic function posited by relief theory – reassuring them that an emotionally disinterested response is the most appropriate one.

The short exchange at the end of this passage is the moment at which the reader learns that Bryson, like Ross and Newby and many other travellers before and since, will not accomplish the goal he has set himself.[7] It may be that this is the logical destination of any contemporary travel book embarrassed by the genre's historical and cultural baggage – that this is the endgame of a process in which authors "'play the fool' in order to poke fun at the sense of superiority enjoyed by their colonial predecessors" (Lisle 2006, 101). But it is worth noting Stefano Calzati's counter-argument that a discourse of difference is constitutive of all travel writing, and that constant recourse to irony – as exemplifed by Bryson – is a strategy that "permits the travel writer to become aware of the distance separating him or her from the world" as well as to write about himself – in many ways, in Bryson's case, a foreigner in his own country – "from a more distanced point of view" (2015, 427, 430). As his abandonment of the Trail makes clear, Bryson's travel persona occupies a carefully delineated middle ground: he sets himself apart from a variety of comically limited characters (both on and off the Trail) who typically manifest inflexible or repetitive behaviour (Bergson argues that humour derives from a human being behaving in a machine-like way, that "what is essentially laughable is what is done automatically" [1980, 155]), but he also distinguishes himself from the most single-minded, hardcore travellers – the "mountain men" who share the humourless perseverance and indifference to hardship of colonial-era explorers. It is on this middle ground that Bryson generates the post-touristic ironic humour that characterises his prose, exploiting his superiority over the automatised eccentricities of his fellow walkers, or travelees more generally, while consistently highlighting through gentle self-mockery the sheer incongruity of his having set out to do what, ultimately, and almost inevitably, he fails to accomplish.

Conclusion

My discussion of key moments in three narratives of failed quests from very different eras has attempted to represent the broad developmental arc of humour's place in travel writing over the past two hundred years. It has taken us from a time when humour could reside chiefly in racist caricature to a time when its ostensible content may all but evaporate into self-regarding stylistic exuberance. In Ross's narrative, the comic superiority in which readers are invited to participate at the expense of simple-minded indigenes was taken as paradigmatic of the limited humorous potential in straightlaced works of the "voyages and travels" genre. The trend evident in Newby's *Short Walk* towards self-ridicule and self-irony, whereby the heroism of the explorer is systematically undermined and humour emerges as a versatile instrument of the rhetoric of anti-conquest, typified the so-called age of travel in the 1930s-1950s and was turbocharged by post-war decolonisation. Bryson's dominance among contemporary, popular travel writers was explained by his skill in combining the satiric treatment of "safe", more egalitarian "others" with the development of an idiosyncratic prose style and the cultivation of a playful, post-touristic ironic commentary on his quest, his fellow travellers, and the world at large. Without wishing to make exaggerated claims about the extent to which these texts are representative of their epochs – each characterised by the diversity of their travel literature – I hope that my analysis has begun to map the territory and offered profitable lines of enquiry for future research.

Many travel writers, it is true, still largely eschew humour (at least in its grosser forms), since it risks thwarting their genuine desire to explore and describe alternative ways of life and pictures of the world. For others, though, it is the readiest way to disown the imperial attitudes of their precursors, lighten the historical baggage encumbering the Western travel writer, and infuse new life into writing that may otherwise struggle with feelings of redundancy or belatedness. One conclusion to be drawn from the above survey is that the critical *omertà* on humour in travel writing is indefensible in view of its increasing importance to this protean, resilient genre. For John Ross, humour was an inessential ingredient of his narrative and arguably an entertaining way of distracting the reader from the humiliating failure of his mission. For Eric Newby, by contrast, it was an indispensable resource in adjusting travel writing – and the version of himself that he chose to present to the reading public – to the emerging postcolonial world. For Bill Bryson, figurehead of what Carl Thompson notes in passing is now a "flourishing tradition of comic travel writing" (Thompson 2016b, 209), it has been the defining matrix of his work and the passport of his carefully calibrated appeal to readers on both sides of the Atlantic. It is surely time to talk more about this subject. The funny thing about travel writing is that no one who studies it seems to see the funny side of it.

Notes

1. Thesiger's later account of his expedition describes Newby and Carless in unflattering terms: "exhausted, desiccated, wind-chapped, lame, with bandaged hands, they looked in thoroughly bad shape" (1998, 135). It is, however, worth noting Thesiger's comment to biographer Michael Asher that the "pansies" remark was "only meant as a joke" and that Newby and Carless were "both fairly tough characters" (Asher 1994, 445–46), which may indicate the

degree to which Newby's amateurish persona is a textual construct for the purposes of entertainment. I am indebted to one of this journal's anonymous reviewers for the Asher reference.

2. Mary-Louise Pratt introduced the term "anti-conquest" to refer to a range of representational strategies whereby explorers render their activities as benign and non-invasive, "secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (1992, 7). With her focus on nineteenth-century narratives, humour was not one of the strategies that Pratt considered.
3. The ethical and political issues raised by modern mass tourism include its impact on indigenous peoples, which have led to its being branded the "new colonialism" (Lovelock and Lovelock 2013, 149), and its impact on the natural environment.
4. The obvious exception is Bryson's slender engagement with the indigenous population of Australia in *Down Under*, the subject of an interesting essay by Robert Clarke. Clarke argues that for Bryson, as for most tourists, "Aboriginality in the form of Aboriginal people is absent from everyday, 'ordinary' Australian spaces" (2002, 78).
5. Chatwin may well have said something similar in print but I am referring to a remark he made in an extract from an interview included in Nicholas Shakespeare's television documentary, *In the Footsteps of Bruce Chatwin* (Shakespeare 2010). "I think you have to have a quest" in a travel book, Chatwin says, even if "you have to invent one".
6. Bryson has said that *A Walk in the Woods* was so successful in America that his publisher was desperate for him to undertake another long-distance walk: "They would have given me a fortune because they can sell the same book over and over again" (*Guardian*, 14 March, 2015).
7. Bryson has, in fact, already missed out a very large section of the Trail and filled in parts of it in New England through a series of day hikes, but in joining up again with Katz in Maine he seems to believe that crossing the Hundred Mile Wilderness will allow them to say that they have "done" the Appalachian Trail.

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