
IT IS DIFFICULT to compare these two publications as they have different objectives and deal respectively with a broad range of travel writing on the one hand, and a single text on the other. Literary historian Lydia Wevers’ Country of Writing is a ‘chronological sweep’ through the archive of nineteenth-century New Zealand travel literature. The book is not a comprehensive study of this immense archive, but instead ‘suggests the principal interests at work in travel writing, the different categories into which it falls, and the print culture generated by travel’. Of these two books, Country of Writing best explores the inter-textuality of travel narratives: navigating the junctions and fissures between text, author and place. Wevers also probes the interior of travel texts — their themes, tropes and topoi — as well as their status as tactile material objects. While Wevers’ book is selective in terms of the texts it discusses, its definition of travel writing is more expansive. Texts about the observations and experience of travel, as well as those composed in transit are gathered under the broad rubric of ‘travel writing’.

Taking inspiration from the work of Roger Chartier, Mary Louise Pratt and Benedict Anderson, Wevers’ objective is to ‘decipher’ the archive of travel literature and to explore ‘the constant play of projection and reflection, of cultural tension and anxiety, that both produces and characterizes books by travellers, suggesting something about why travellers write books as well as the forcefulness of a print-based culture’. Country of Writing comes out of the Print Culture project, and is in a sense, a companion volume to Wevers’ recent anthology of travel writing, Travelling to New Zealand (2000). The focus of Country of Writing, however, is on reading travel texts as narratives of description and records of subjectivity, where the texts often reveal more about the author than the subjects of their enquiry. Wevers examines those texts constructed around particular events, such as the Boyd incident in 1809, and William Colenso’s botanical journeying, through to the 1870s and beyond, when wide-eyed tourists followed the increasingly popular trail around New Zealand’s scenic wonders. Historical events, particular sites and persons occasionally provide the stage or the context for discussion, but they are not the central focus of this book. The chief concern is with the creation and dissemination of texts, and the process and power of writing. Wevers also suggests, after Paul Carter and J.G.A. Pocock, that the experience of writing captures the temporal and spatial dilemma of the traveller: moving through time and space, the act of writing captures thoughts, perceptions and observations as they occur. Of course, as Wevers points out, all writers write with some audience in mind, and a text which claims to offer genuine impressions composed en route is simply adopting a common literary device. In his Adventures of a Surveyor (1853), John Rochfort offers one such example, declaring that his book ‘is but a journal, written in leisure moments, sometimes under a burning sun, and at others during a storm, with the waves running mountains high and the wind whistling through the riggings’.

However, Country of Writing is clearly speaking to an international readership: surprisingly little attention is given to the work of New Zealand commentators, especially the work of Peter Gibbons, whom Wevers briefly cites, but does not engage with his analysis of non-fiction travel writing. There is little commentary on the ‘silences’ in these texts, and moreover, of their negative impact in terms of colonization. In sum, it is difficult to grasp the essence of the book, save for the suggestion that travel writing is neither a transparent nor innocent medium, and that the stories within these texts thus merit re-examination. Those readers wanting fuller descriptions of the content, motivation
and impact of encounters between travellers, people and the land will not necessarily find it here. But what they will get is a well-written, critically informed and careful analysis of a body of work that, in many respects, made ‘New Zealand’ — both as we know it and as it might have been.

While ostensibly addressed to the genre of travel writing, *An Account of the Pelew Islands* has a different purpose. The book examines a single text, whose story is worth briefly summarizing. In 1783, a British East India packet (literally a ‘mail ship’), the *Antelope*, under the direction of one Captain Henry Wilson, was wrecked off the islands of Koror, Palau, in the Western Caroline Islands. All souls survived and subsequently spent 13 weeks in Palau constructing a vessel that would eventually transport them to Canton and then home. The British sailors quickly allied themselves with Ibedul, the paramount chief of the island, and even supported him in his battles and skirmishes with neighbouring tribes. When the crew finally left, they took with them Lebuu, the son of Ibedul. He was fêted in London society and caused a stir in genteel circles before his premature death from smallpox. But the impact of the British visit to Koror also had long-term consequences. The close relationship forged between Ibedul and the British (and the trade that accompanied it) upset the political and economic balance that had existed between Ibedul’s people and the rival village of Melekeok, which affected both communities for some time.

The narrative of this sojourn was first published in 1788 as *An Account of the Pelew Islands, Situated in the Western Part of the Pacific Ocean; Composed from the Journals and Communications of Captain Henry Wilson, and Some of his Officers, who, in August 1783, were there Shipwrecked, in the Antelope, a Packet Belonging to the Honourable East India Company*. It was written by George Keate, and based on the journals of Captain Wilson, told the story of the shipwreck, the experiences and observations of the British, and of Lebuu’s ill-fated visit to London. This present volume is part of the series, ‘The Literature of Travel, Exploration and Empire’, devoted to making available previously unpublished or lesser known texts, as well as publishing new editions of more well-known works. Pelew’s *Account* is jointly edited by anthropologists Karen L. Nero and Nicholas Thomas, who present an accessible and informative introduction (aptly titled ‘Bridging Worlds’), situating the work within recent historical, anthropological and theoretical developments in the field of travel and cultural representation. Specifically, Nero addresses the Palauan context, while Thomas focuses on the significance of the Pelew Islands in terms of British culture. In addition, annotations throughout the main text provide relevant contextual information and critical commentary.

Both Nero and Thomas suggest that Keate’s *Account*, like many other travel books, has a double identity. On the one hand, it emerges from an established tradition of writing, and is an expression of eighteenth-century European curiosity about the Pacific. On the other hand, it is based on a ‘true story’, and reflects, at least in part, certain aspects of eighteenth-century Pacific ‘realities’. The *Account* does not record Palauan history and society in a neutral or unmediated fashion as it carries with it certain metropolitan preoccupations. Yet, Keate’s narrative is not wholly fantastical either — ‘a specimen of “colonial discourse” that is unconnected with encounters and experiences that took place on particular islands at particular times’ — but a valuable ethnohistorical record, as well as a document redolent with European cultural assumptions.

Taken together, these two books encourage us to re-think the nature of cross-cultural encounters — and most especially, the role played by language, texts and the processes of writing (and reading) in those moments.

GISELLE BYRNES

*Victoria University of Wellington*