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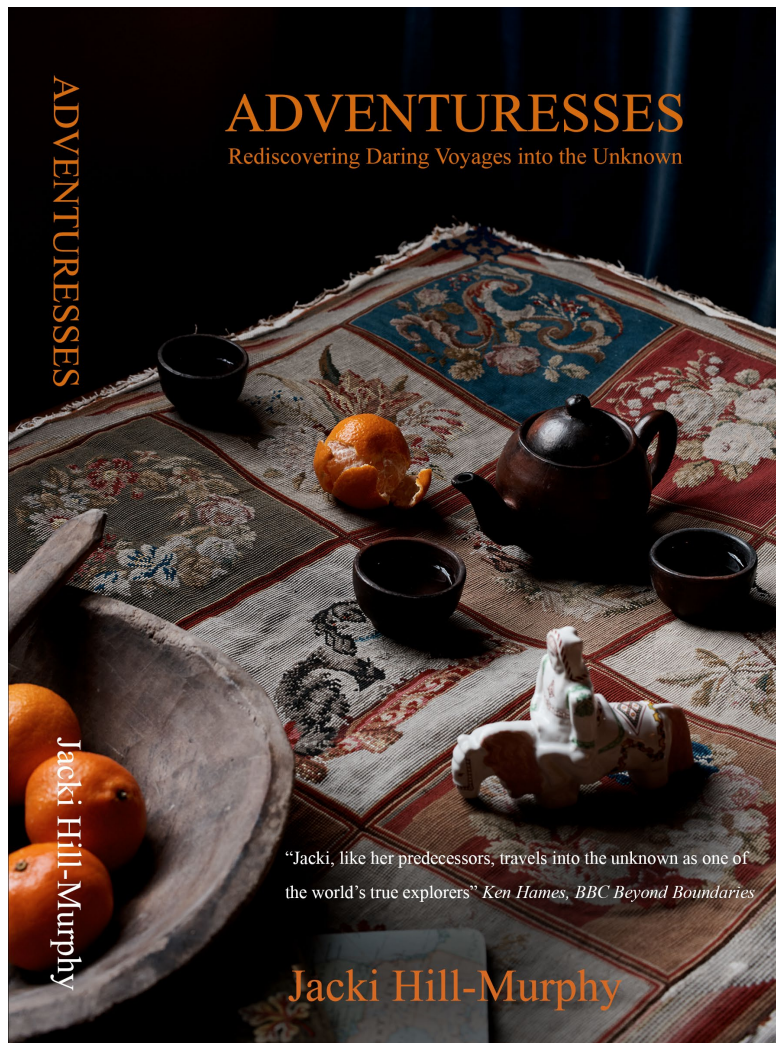
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In the Footsteps of: The Challenge of Recreating and Reflecting on the Writings and  
Achievements of Historic Women Explorers

Jacki Hill-Murphy

University of Westminster School of Humanities



A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University  
of Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Published Work

UNIVERSITY OF  
FORWARD  
THINKING  
WESTMINSTER

October 2023

## Abstract

This thesis analyses and explains the approach I took reflecting on the journeys and experience of four female travellers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Isabela Godin, Mary Kingsley, Kate Marsden and Isabella Bird. Recreating their journeys enabled reflection on their achievements and experiences at a time when their aspirations were disdained, they struggled to find sympathetic publishers, and had to use various literary devices to gain an audience. My second journeys showed how the world and the societies they encountered has changed in the intervening years, and prompted me to develop a methodology for linking the two journeys - theirs and mine - in the same piece of travel writing through the use of dual narrative.

I acknowledged the achievements of my subjects, constantly mindful of the value of their books and the hardships and dangers of the journeys they made. My own journeys in their footsteps were heuristic means of understanding their experiences and struggles. I used a 'time-travel illusion' in one text to enable me to imagine a dialogue with Kate Marsden, a complex and persecuted woman, in an attempt to understand her motives and, for the first time, bring out the full impact of her challenging journey. These techniques were employed to break the fourth wall and use my body and experiences as a narrative devices.

This commentary has drawn on my auto-ethnographical reflections linking my intellectual journey with my physical ones to show how this interweaving creates layers of texture and meaning. This has done more than simply highlight the achievements of these brave pioneers of female exploration. In employing this perspective I have engaged the senses to enhance my 'In the Footsteps' approach. Site-specific locations were not enough, I felt the mountain wind, I tasted the bitter tea and I travelled dangerous rivers. I made sacrifices for my art - just as they did.

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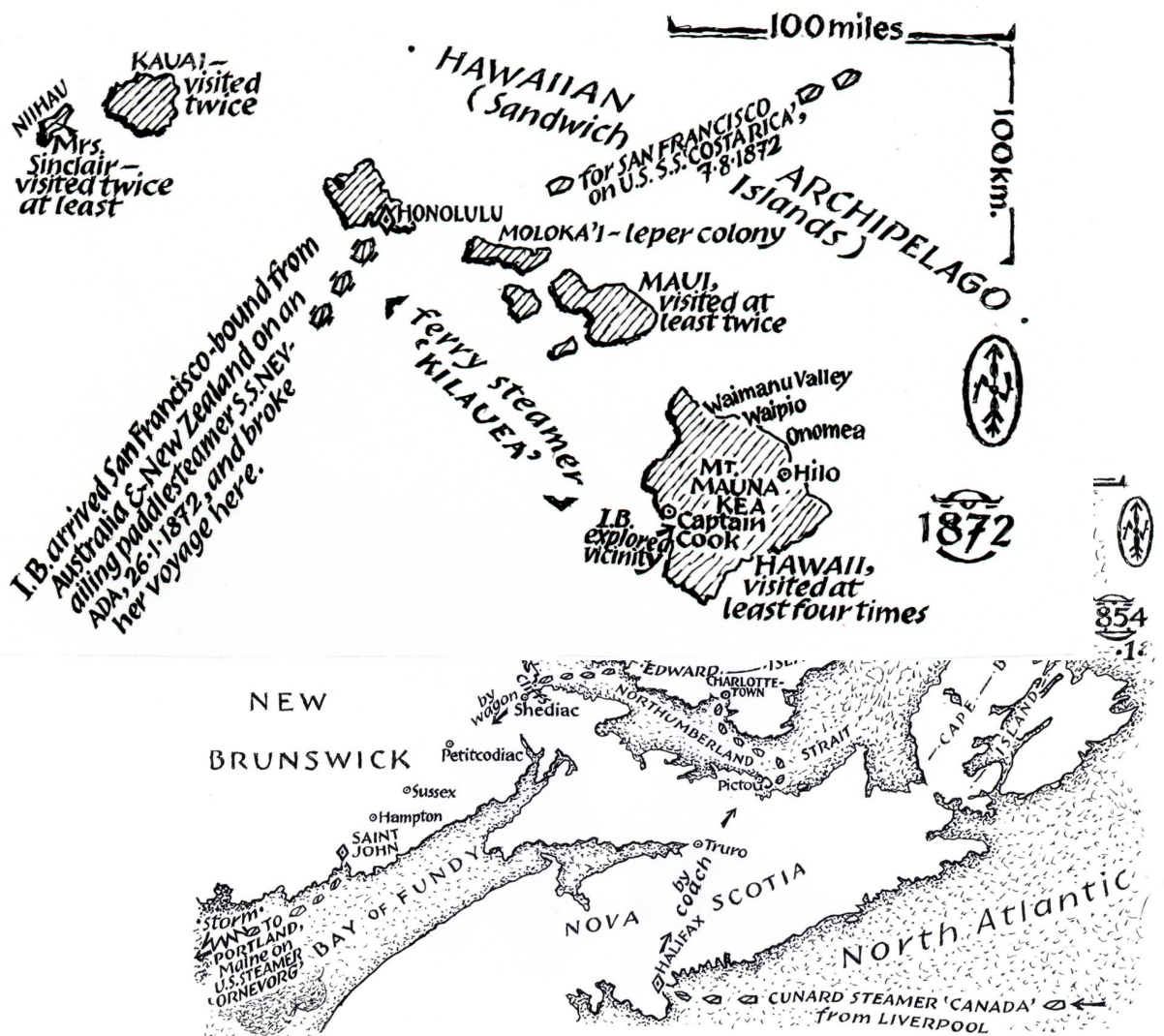
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Accompanying Material

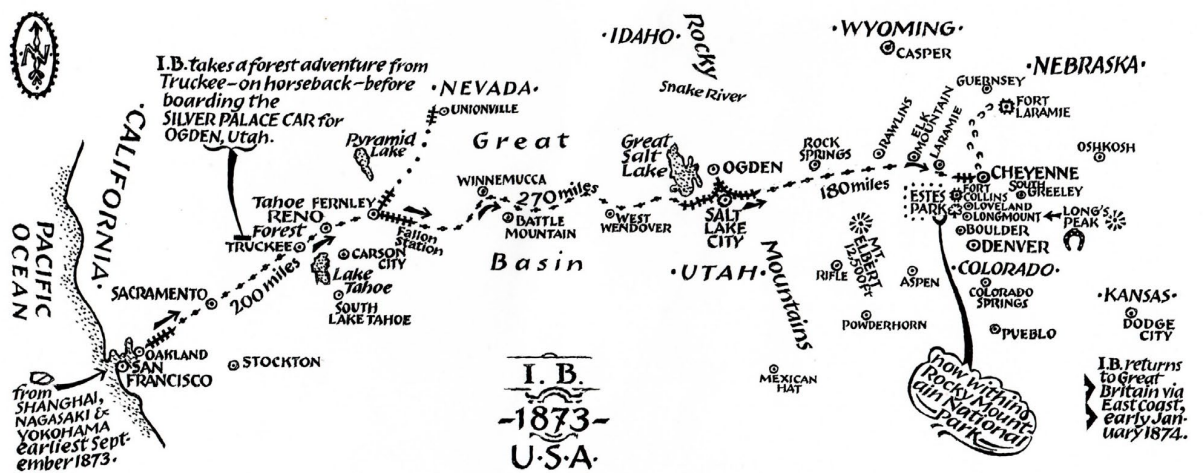
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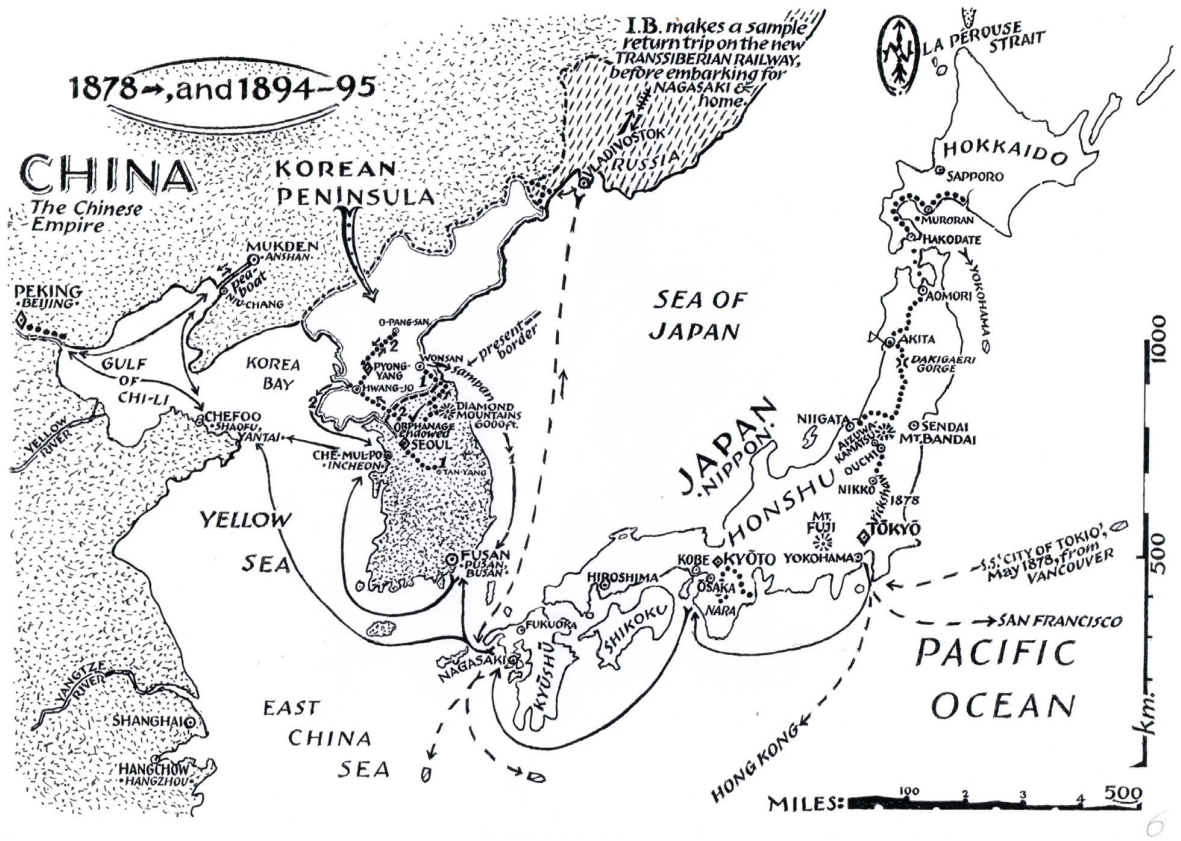


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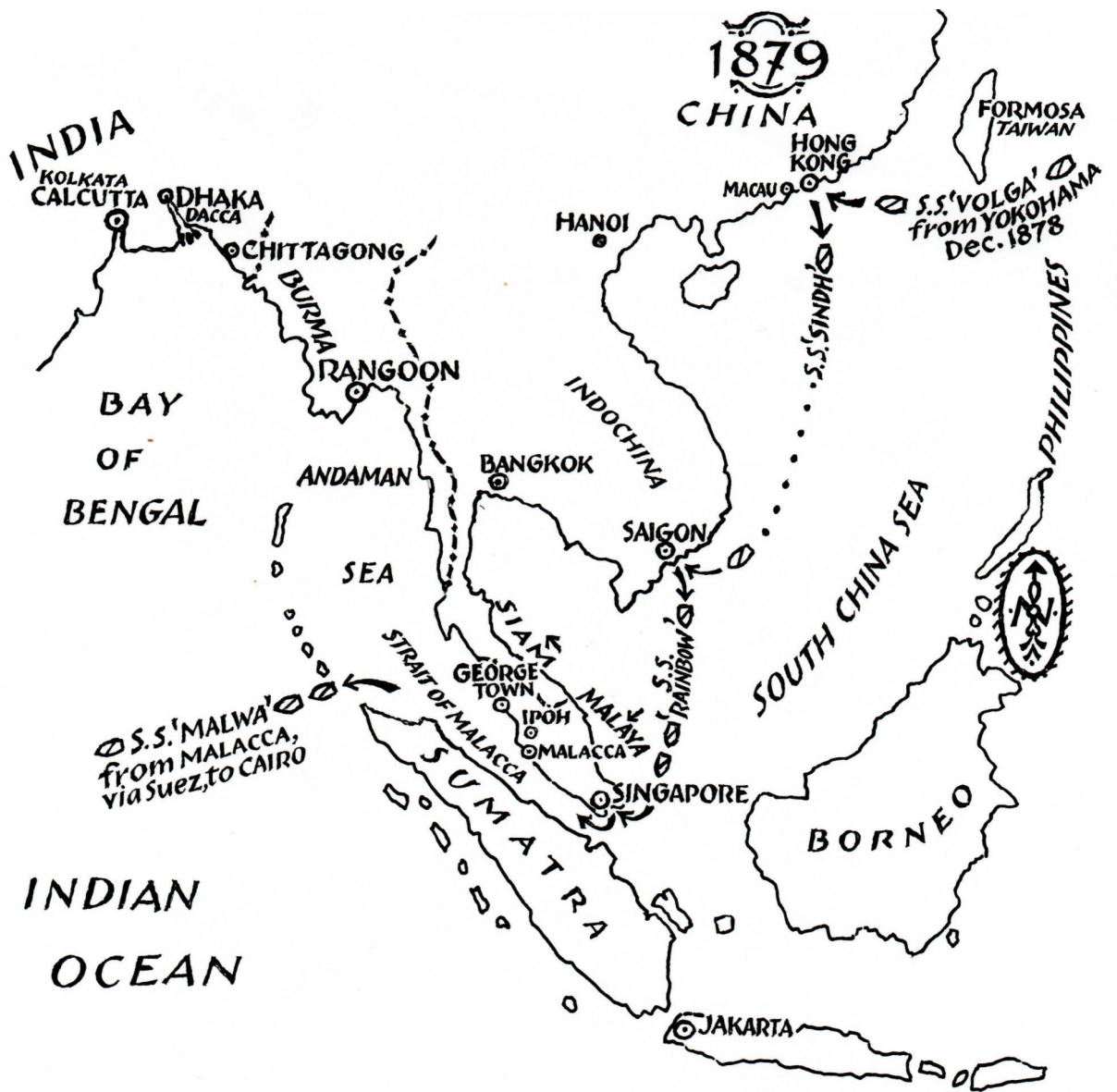




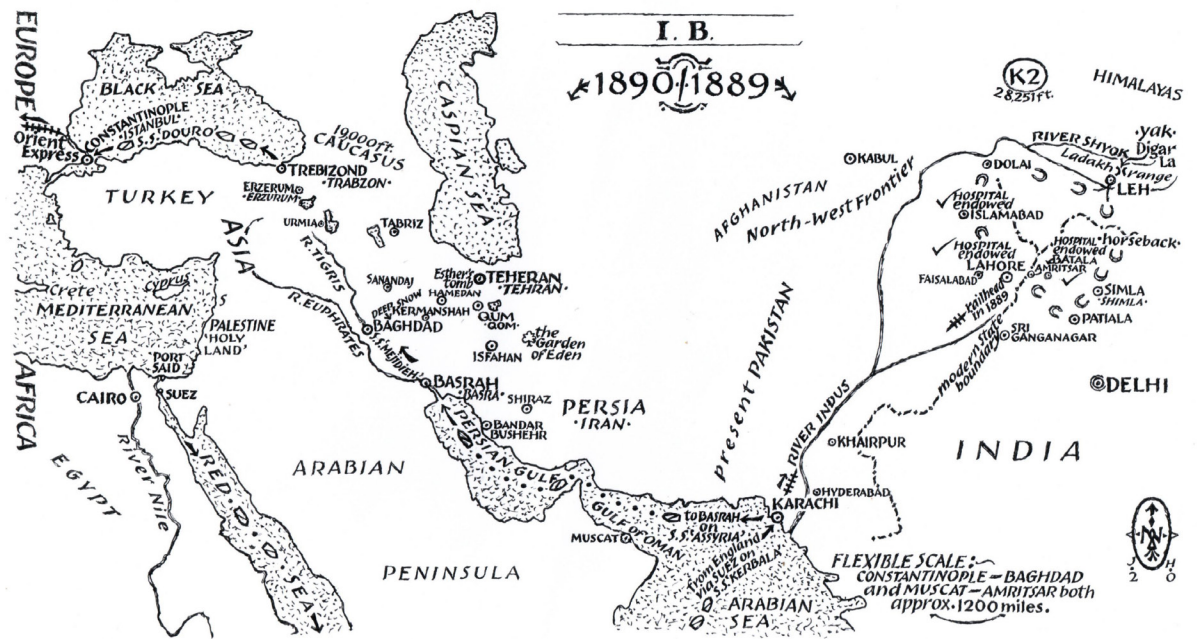
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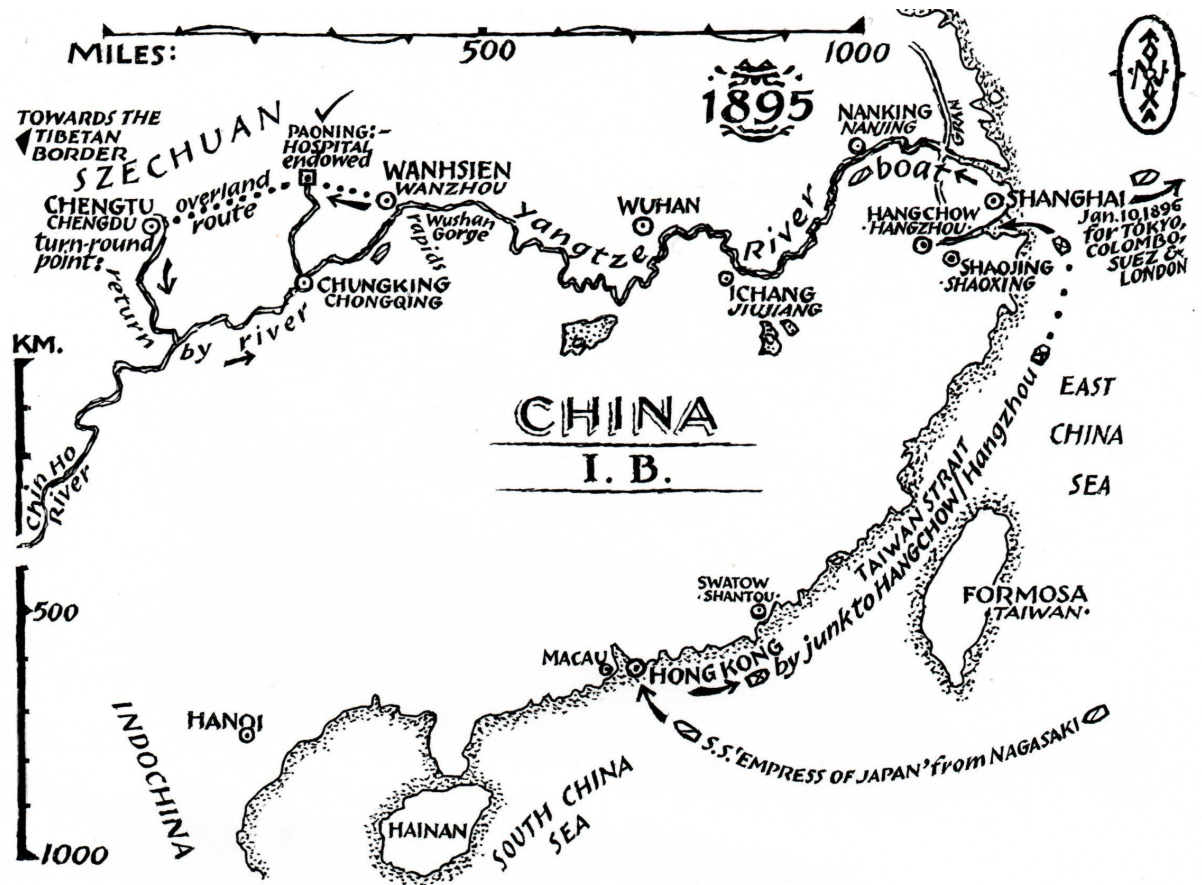
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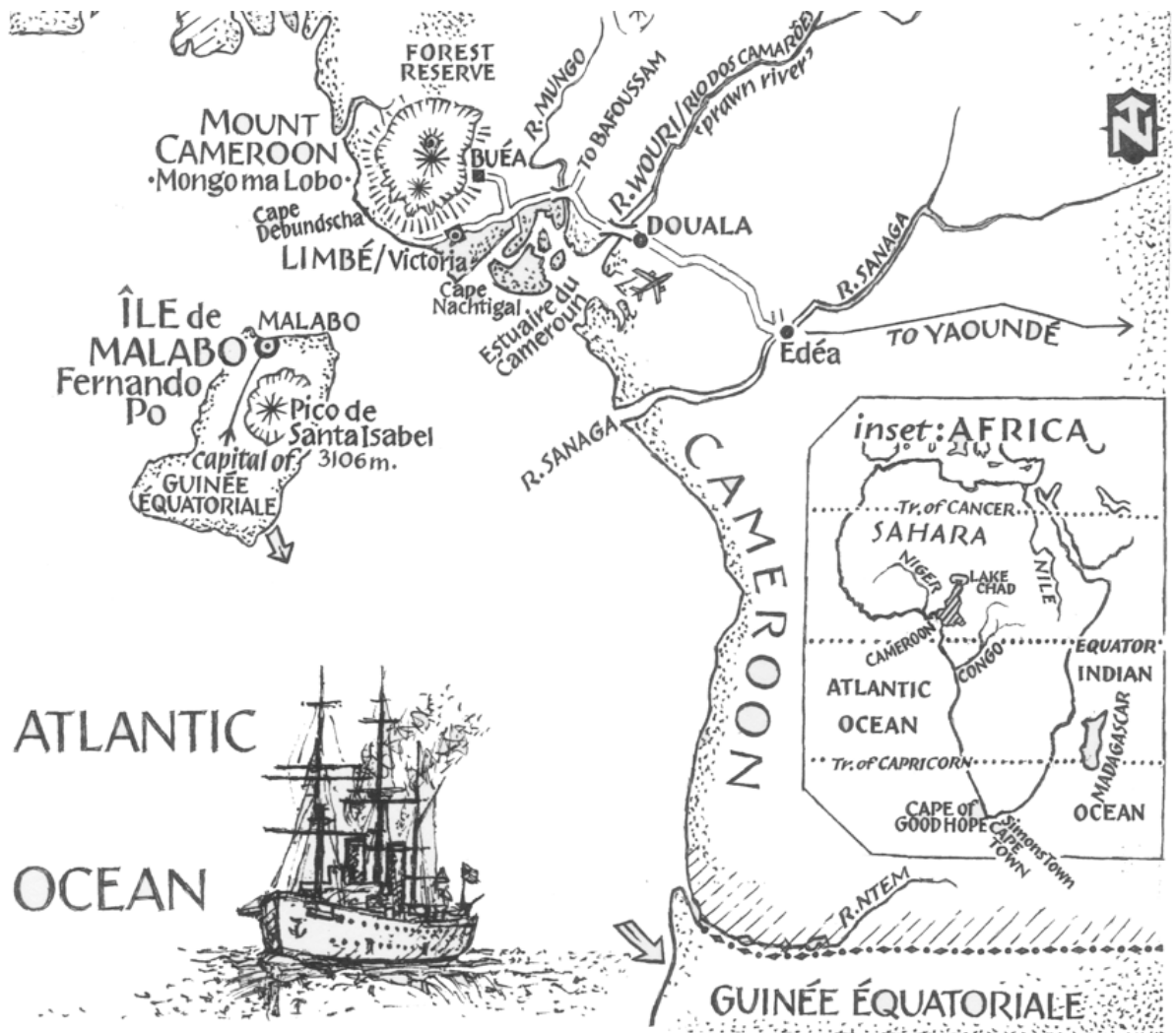
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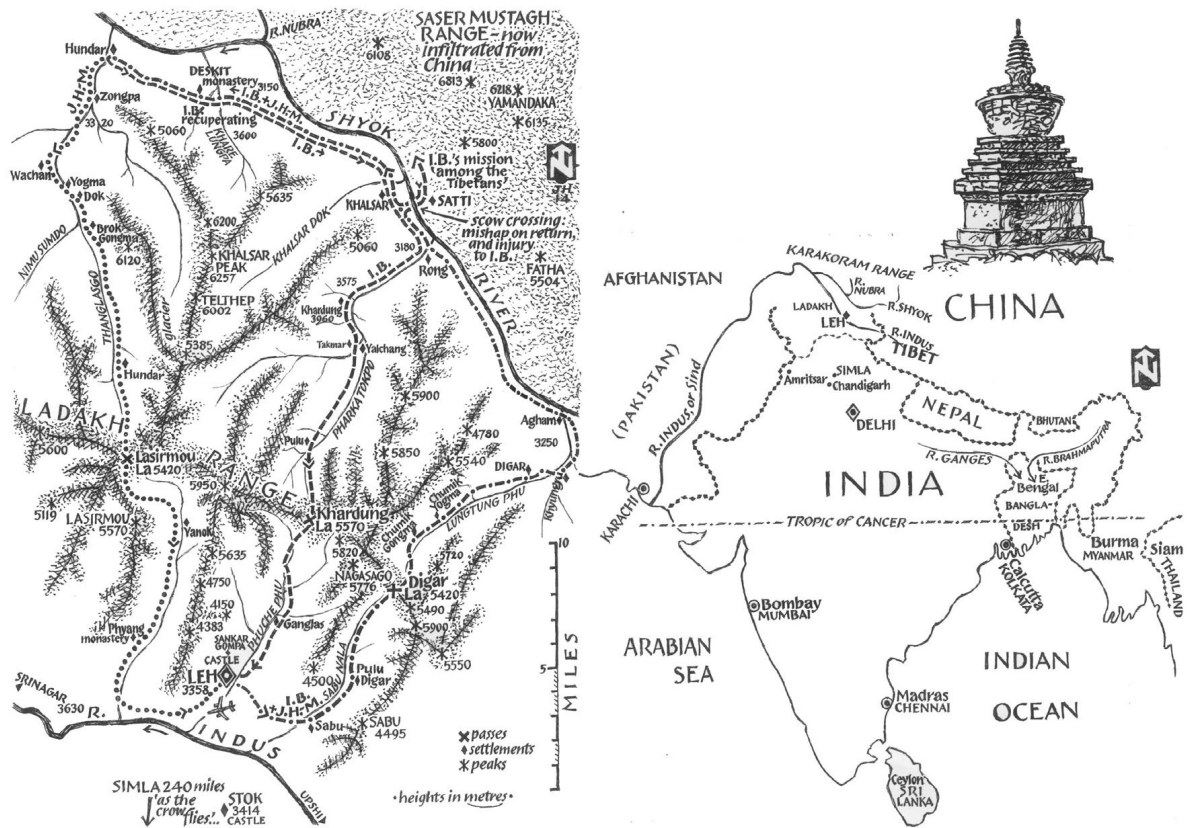
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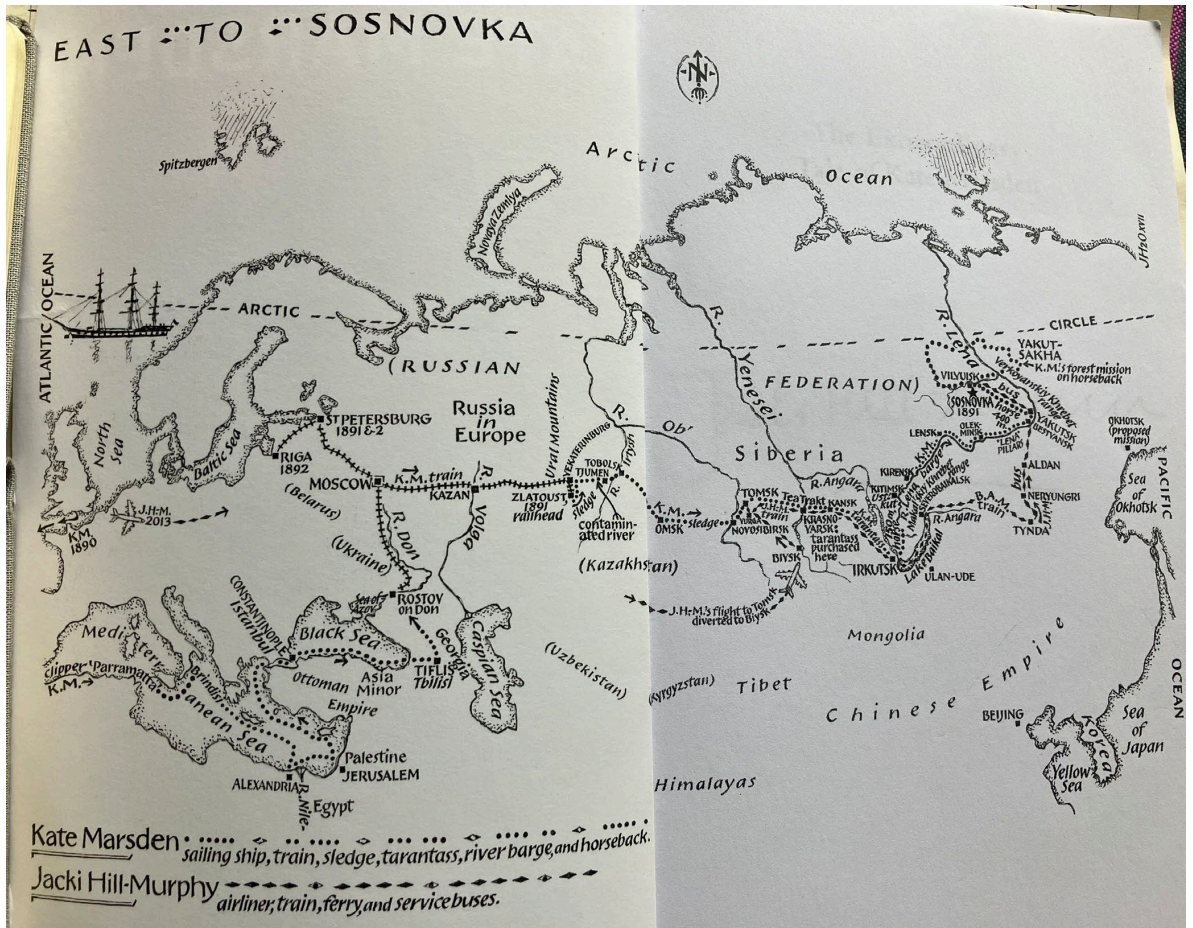
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All maps by John Harris



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Pippa Catterall for agreeing to supervise my Ph.D. by published work thesis. I have learnt so much during the process and it has been a wonderful experience. Pippa has coaxed me into writing as an academic with a strong focus on my own journey and without her vision, none of this would have been possible.

I would also like to thank her for spending her precious time helping me present my work in a way that would offer interest and intrigue to other people involved in the study of exploration.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr Monica Germana for playing the role of Second Supervisor and for her kind advice and support during the submission of my Ph.D. by published work thesis.

## Author's Declaration

I declare that the three publications listed in the author's original contributions and my thesis are my own work.

In the Footsteps of: The Challenge of Recreating and Reflecting on the  
Writings and Achievements of Historic Women Travellers

By Jacki Hill-Murphy

Introduction

- I. Selecting a Style
- II. Second Journeys
- III. An Ethnographical Perspective
- IV. Development
- V. Parallel Experiences
- VI. Struggles

Envoi

*Introduction*

It was a tough six-hour trek to the summit of Mount Cameroon. At the summit, I pulled out a long crepe skirt from my pack but the cold, harsh wind and thrashing rain tried to snatch it from my grasp. It waved around in the thick mist, wanting to free itself and fly down into the fiery mouth of the dragon lurking dangerously close by. Once on, it felt wet, tight and restrictive, but I needed to wear it; I was paying my respects to Mary Kingsley, who had climbed up that mountain alone over a century earlier, in 1895.

I kissed the wind to her and wished, above all else, that the thick fog would lift long enough for me to see both the nearby volcanic crater and the sparkling blue waters of the Gulf of Guinea 4,000 metres below.

Mary had a similar regret, writing: 'The weather has robbed me of my main object in coming here, namely to get a good view'.<sup>1</sup>

This was a key moment of re-enactment that brought me closer to Mary Kingsley. I had wanted to have a sense of her struggles to reach that point and for her to speak to me from the past as her modern equivalent authenticating her achievements. This endeavour gave the mountain greater impact for me. Fusing history and geography, it both made the climb matter and led me to consider my relationship to this Victorian predecessor.

This drive to understand the lived experiences of my subjects through following in their footsteps was the inspiration for my texts:

*Adventuresses: Rediscovering Daring Voyages into the Unknown* (2014, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2020);<sup>2</sup> *The Extraordinary Tale of Kate Marsden and my Journey across Siberia in her Footsteps* (2017); *The Life and Travels of Isabella Bird: The Fearless Victorian Adventurer* (2021).

What the first two works share is a qualitative approach to ethnography. By recreating the second journey as faithfully as possible, I sought to uncover my subjects as women and to reflect on their experiences as well as their journeys. My purpose was also to engage my readers' feelings by using my own body and experiences to make their journeys relatable in a twenty-first century context.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 594.

<sup>2</sup> Next is *Further Adventuresses*, about Florence Baker (Nile), May French Sheldon (Tanzania), Julia Pardoe (Constantinople), Maria Graham (Chile) and Isabela Brookes (Ecuador).

### i. *Selecting a style*

If there is a 'presumed exhaustion' of original places to visit,<sup>3</sup> it is not surprising that reiterative journeys that leave the usual travel routes have gained popularity. But when a text of a historical journey is used as a 'pretext and pre-text', it can be viewed negatively as cashing in on the popularity of the original traveller. My motivation for adopting this style did indeed stem from an interest in 'rescuing travel writers risking obscurity, paying homage or a wish to stand in the exact spot of a predecessor',<sup>4</sup> but it was much more too. To quote Bea Uusma from *The Expedition*, 'For over fifteen years I have been unable to stop thinking about the Andrée expedition... The more I learn about their story, the more real it seems, like a black and white photograph gradually filling with colour.'<sup>5</sup> I could have written these words; my schmaltzy obsession with Isabela Godin had niggled me for that long and Uusma and I each had a historical story of an overlooked, phenomenal human-achievement to unpick. This impelled me to travel along the longest river in the world, with its many hardships, to give me the authority to tell Godin's story. Ungerer & Schmid held that 'people rely on models of the concrete world in order to understand abstract phenomena'.<sup>6</sup> Godin was an idea, a story, a dream to me: could the reality of being there conjure up the past and make it more credible. Would I then *believe* that this really happened to her?

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<sup>3</sup> M. L. Leavenworth, *The Second Journey: Travelling in Literary Footsteps* (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 2010), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Leavenworth, *The Second Journey*, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Bea Uusma, *The Expedition: Solving the Mystery of a Polar Tragedy* (London: Head of Zeus, 2015), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Ungerer and Hans-Jorg Schmid, *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1996), 121.

My approach is slightly different to Uusma's text, which is a fascinating melange of lists, letters, original diary entries, autopsy reports and her own snatches of personal narratives, all strung together with a sinewy thread of frustration that the truth is so hard to disentangle: 'Now I'm standing here. I'm in exactly the right place, but at completely the wrong time.'<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Uusma's subjects, Godin and my other travellers returned to tell their tales. Following in their footsteps was both a way of revisiting their journeys and achievements, and of telling my own. This led to an interwoven dual narrative. As I typed my first words, I became woman number five and joined them, with a critical self-evaluation of why I was there set against their stories. On one hand, as Uusma writes 'I have to walk in their footsteps. I have to reach into their inner pockets.'<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, as Katherine Gypson found, recreating those footsteps can be challenging. Of Freya Stark's Kabul she wrote: 'The Kabul I know is framed by car windows and life on the streets takes place in the lulls between my car getting stuck and then speeding up.'<sup>9</sup> Very often a second journey can be a great disappointment, when you can't get close to your subject and fully connect to the place that's been running around in your head like a movie for years; but when it does, it's very much like reaching into their pockets and finding a crumb.

Bird and Kingsley wrote dramatic imagery of places in their texts that I found motivating, urging me on to carry on with my searches for more journeys that crackled with authenticity. My observations and reflexivity

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<sup>7</sup> Uusma, *The Expedition*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Uusma, *The Expedition*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Gypson, 'Freya Stark's Afghanistan' *Literary Traveller* 20 January 2024: <https://www.literarytraveler.com/articles/freya-starks-afghanistan/>. (Accessed 22 May 2024).

are recorded in journals, carefully noting the climate, the landscape and the people I encounter, along with my feelings of discomfort within certain environments. Sadly, I could not compare my notebooks with those of Bird, Marsden and Kingsley which are presumed lost.<sup>10</sup>

Leavenworth sees early travel writing as a map for the second journey. She states that 'First and second journeys become increasingly intertwined, the one seen as a reflection in the other and "epiphanic moments" occur when past and present seem to completely amalgamate.'<sup>11</sup> I could identify with that:

In this manner then, Isabella Bird and I came to be standing on the same elevated ground, 122 years apart, both watching concernedly while pony men adjusted the baggage.<sup>12</sup>

Rosemary Brown uses this narrative style in *Following Nellie Bly*, which records her replication of Bly's record-breaking circumnavigation of the world in 1889. Their parallel journeys were marked by major shifts in the nature of travel: Rosemary never experienced a ticket office or a ship's timetable. Nonetheless, the picture she paints of Bly demonstrates a deep connection with her as a fellow investigative journalist: 'For the very first time, Nellie and I are in the same room.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Extensive research has failed to uncover any journals of Bird, Marsden and Kingsley. Any archive material belonging to Marsden and Kingsley appears to have been destroyed by Second World War bombing. All of Bird's letters are held in the Murray Collection at the National Library of Scotland but do not include diaries.

<sup>11</sup> Leavenworth, 'Footsteps' in Alasdair Petting and Tim Youngs (eds) *The Routledge Research Companion to Travel Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 87.

<sup>12</sup> Jacki Hill-Murphy, *Adventuresses: Rediscovering Daring Voyages into the Unknown* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Adventuress Publishing, 2020), 143.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Brown, *Following Nellie Bly* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2021), 30.

Frederick Ober experienced different disappointments while attempting to retrace the footsteps of Columbus.<sup>14</sup> He writes that second journeys are a chance to learn history on foot, terming them 'an ambulant gloss',<sup>15</sup> but despondency sets in when there is only fading evidence remaining. Nevertheless, it embraces anticipation which adds excitement to a text. Bernard Levin's *Hannibal's Footsteps*, for instance, culminates with his rueful acknowledgement that 'I realised that by now any evidence that Hannibal passed this way would be deeply buried, recoverable only by an archaeological dig'.<sup>16</sup> Tim Mackintosh-Smith experienced similar disappointment when following in the footsteps of Ibn Battutah. With limited visual evidence left, Smith spent many months following the route, struggling to find even a trace of Battutah's world, beyond the occasional tomb. He comments of the sites he encountered that, too often, 'Tourism has made it a pseudo-place like Eurodisney or Riyadh'.<sup>17</sup>

Kate Marsden was not the easiest companion to guide me on a journey by public transport across Siberia. When I began writing *The Extraordinary Tale of Kate Marsden*, I couldn't feel close to her. The negative correspondence and newspaper articles I had trawled through interfered with my attitude towards her. Kate's reputation had been sullied early on in her career by adverse publicity in published newspaper articles and society gossip. There were no press controls and an American journalist called Isabel Hapgood, whom Kate never met, particularly vilified her. The Royal Geographical Society (RGS)

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Ober, *In the Wake of Columbus* (Boston: Lothrop, 1893).

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Hulme, 'In the wake of Columbus: Frederick Ober's Ambulant Gloss' *Literature and History* 6/2 (1997), 18-36.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Levin, *Hannibal's Footsteps* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), 106.

<sup>17</sup> Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Travels with a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2002), 107.



acknowledged her harsh journey across Russia and Siberia, but Hapgood discounted her efforts in her review of Marsden's book *On Sledge and Horseback to the outcast Siberian lepers* (1893). Hapgood wrote: 'Her story is false' and 'Has no foundation in fact'.<sup>18</sup>

Breaking the Fourth Wall' by adding a 'time-travel illusion' narrative, ('going back in time'), allowed me to bridge this gulf and fictionally communicate with Kate. Brecht used this method frequently in his plays, allowing actors to step out of character and address the audience directly, while talking about how the character they are playing is feeling. It allowed me to take the reader with me in my efforts to, like Uusma, reach into the pockets of my subject.

It seemed a revelation to write a biography where I could break the fourth wall and talk directly with my subject. As Gabrielle Grady writes in *Collider*, the television character Fleabag breaks the fourth wall to let viewers know her: 'After experiencing so much grief and guilt, as well as being misunderstood by many people, her safe space is escaping to the audience. Looking at the camera.'<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, I put Kate Marsden into safe spaces, by sitting her in the sunshine on a park bench or buying her a tea that would normally stretch her financially. I wasn't alienating her, which this device is often perceived as doing. Munslow sums this up when considering how historians approach objectivity: 'it demands that the textual evidence

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<sup>18</sup> Jacki Hill-Murphy, *The Extraordinary Tale of Kate Marsden: and my journey across Siberia in her footsteps* (London: Adventuress Publishing, 2017), 498.

<sup>19</sup> Gabrielle Grady, 'This Part of 'Fleabag' Is What Makes It So Genius'. *Collider*. 16 May 2024, <https://collider.com/fleabag-breaking-fourth-wall-genius/> (accessed 27 May 2024).

can be deciphered so as to reveal all hidden intentionality, their likely mental state, and consequent motive and purpose'.<sup>20</sup>

The views of Irish mediaevalist Elizabeth Boyle chime with this: 'History is, in some respects an imaginative act, but it is one that has to be governed by evidence, by sources, by what has been remembered...sometimes the clouds can part...and we can be astonished.'<sup>21</sup> I could look into Kate's eyes and see if she looked back into mine. Describing myself looking sartorially out of place amongst *bona fide* Victorian inhabitants gave it jocular and filmic qualities. So, what if I had brought her forward to the twenty-first century in my writing. Could I also have written her reactions at observing another age, witnessing the outcome of the new agenda she and her generation of fellow feisty women had set for us?

It is all conjecture because as Bevir notes, 'In general terms, the argument is that we can not have objective historical knowledge because we do not have access to a given past against which to judge rival interpretations'.<sup>22</sup> I captured something of her character and spirit and filled in the silences of her own narrative by using clearly indicated conjecture. This seems justifiable for, as Liz Varon argues:

We are storytellers, and to make our stories compelling we have to sometimes pull in close to our subjects, to walk in their shoes, to use our powers of empathy and our skill as writers. Our

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<sup>20</sup> Alun Munslow, 'Objectivity and the writing of history' *History of European Ideas*, 28/1-2 (2002), 43-50.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Boyle, *Fierce Appetites* (London: Sandycove, 2022), 285.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Bevir, 'Objectivity in History' *History and Theory* 33/3 (1994), 328-344.

interpretations and stories are rooted in documentary evidence but they also require flights of imagination.<sup>23</sup>

## ii. Second Journeys

Discovering Isabela Godin's 1769 Amazonian story made an impact on me, so I went to Ecuador.

On that first journey I departed from the rising slopes of the Andean foothills, where the magnificent Chimborazo Mountain towers up to meet the clouds and travelled south from Quito. At Cajabamba I found the spot where Isabela's house had been, whence she had left with her party to be reunited with her husband Jean, who she hadn't seen for over 20 years. I travelled down the Chambo and then the Pastaza Rivers, which was the route Isabela's father had planned for his daughter. From my canoe I noted the likely area where she was rescued and lifted into a little covered dugout canoe by Quechuan Indians, who found her dying at the edge of the River Bobonaza. They gave her food, little by little: 'Poco, poco, poco'. Mrs Gualinga, the 90-year-old Kichwa shaman's wife in Sarayaku, told me, reflecting an oral transmission passed down from generation to generation.<sup>24</sup> She said that they covered her nakedness in crude cotton, tended the worst of her fetid bites, treated her paralysed hand and brought her back to life.

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<sup>23</sup> Cited in Lois Leveen in 'Best Guess or Worst Doubt: What's the Role of Conjecture in Writing Biography and History?' *H-CivWar* 17 August 2021: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/4113/blog/h-civwar-authors-blog/8089270/best-guess-or-worst-doubt-whats-role-conjecture> (accessed 27 May 2024).

<sup>24</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Adventuresses*, 35.

The story of Isabela Godin was first recorded by her husband, Jean Godin, in an epistolary account to M. De La Condamine at the Royal Academy of Science in Paris, dated 28th July 1773. However, the first published account of her story only appeared 62 years after her death, in *Magasin Pittoresque* in November 1854. This portrayal of her, styled as a lost, waif-like girl falling into the arms of head-dressed Indian rescuers, blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction.



Madame Godin emerging from the Jungle.

*Magasin Pittoresque*, November 1854

Two centuries later I wrote:

Macaws flew high, like screeching specks, the river flowed grey, the sandflies attacked us viciously and our boatmen wouldn't let us stray out of their sight. We prepared to eat and sleep on the lonely and inauspicious spot associated with death, possibly even, violent death.

Jean Godin's account had written that Isabela's companions had died of hunger and disease at the Ispinococha sandbar, but my meeting in Riobamba with the local Ecuadorian historian Carlos Ortiz Arellano produced a different view. He told me: 'Señor Godin was wrong, they were hacked to pieces by Jivaro Indians. Their bodies were left lying across the beach.'<sup>25</sup> My pilgrimage, unintentionally, felt like it had 'dark tourism' associations,<sup>26</sup> bringing me closer to Isabela through a place of violence and death. Edwards asks, 'What draws people to dark tourist sites?' He suggests diverse motivations, including 'viewing a specific history of human suffering'.<sup>27</sup> This spot certainly felt edgy and dangerous. I had taken two women in my team on this expedition which helped me to develop leadership skills for future ventures, particularly for entering even more dangerous terrain. We did not wander far at this point; the forest edge was the limit I set as Isabela's fate was on my mind.

It must have been pure luck that Isabela hadn't been bitten by a snake, staggering about deliriously in the tatters of a long dress and sandals

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<sup>25</sup> See Carlos Ortiz Arellano, *Una historia de amor: Isabela Gramesón 1728-1792* (Riobamba: Abya-Yala, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> See Duncan Light, 'Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism' *Tourism Management* 61 (2017), 275-301.

<sup>27</sup> Justin D. Edwards, 'Dark Tourism' in Carl Thompson, *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 308.

fashioned from her dead brother's shoes. As I stepped through the forest with my guides, I could see that without a hammock, Isabela would have found a place to sleep in the deeply creased roots of the Sumaumeira trees, so tall that they pierce the forest canopy. Each night, when she closed her eyes, it was the burning desire to see her husband again that kept her alive. I felt close to her there and when I awoke in my tent in the morning, amid the humidity and shrill sound of insects. I had travelled through a strange land and found on my return that the remoteness of my journey into the jungle and the close links that I had made with the Kichwa tribe fascinated people and pushed me to attempt further second journeys.

I embarked on my next trip, which was to climb Mount Cameroon in Mary Kingsley's footsteps. The Mountain of Greatness rises from the coast and there are hours of lowland rainforest to trek through before breaking out onto the steep gravelly slopes of the volcano. It was so easy to feel close to Mary as I also struggled through a continuous downpour. She wrote in *Travels in West Africa*:

"The whole Atlantic could not get more water on to me than I have already got. Ever and again I stop and wring out some of it from my skirts, for it is weighty."<sup>28</sup>

I began to think about recording these experiences. When I walked to Nubra, over the Lower Himalayas, at the exact same time of year and on the same route used by Isabella Bird in 1889,<sup>29</sup> I filmed the expedition and produced a 45-minute docudrama called *A Bird on a Yak in Ladakh*

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<sup>28</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 569.

<sup>29</sup> Isabella Bird, *Among the Tibetans* (London: John Murray, 1894).

which was selected for the 2013 *Ladakh International Film Festival*. In this I used editorial devices to discuss our similar journeys, and this format allowed me to share contemporary photographs and objects with her.

A key scene in the film is our audience with the Namgyal dynasty Gyalpo (King) of Ladakh at the historic Stok Castle that sits picturesquely amid the rocky outcrops outside Leh. The King I met was an accomplished figurehead, wearing a leather hat and silk shirt. As apple juice and apricots were served, we discussed Isabella's and my route through

Nubra. Isabella's words in my film come from her book *Among the Tibetans*: 'The Gyalpo was seated on a carpet... He placed us on a carpet beside him, and coffee, honey, and apricots were brought in.'<sup>30</sup> Our worlds had well and truly intersected. But I hadn't found the process of filmmaking satisfying and realised I was better suited to writing.

I still loved the idea of two eras, two women and one journey, and adopting the same style in travel writing came as a revelation. Why shouldn't my heroines be there too, like in a film? I could reveal so much more about them and their story. I could do flashbacks, time-travel and I could use their manners of speaking from their books. This style would shape the representation of the experiences of these female explorers so that their accomplishments could not be undermined or ignored. It would also sit well in the limited corpus of work in this register. That is how I came to write *Adventuresses* using an 'In the Footsteps' style.

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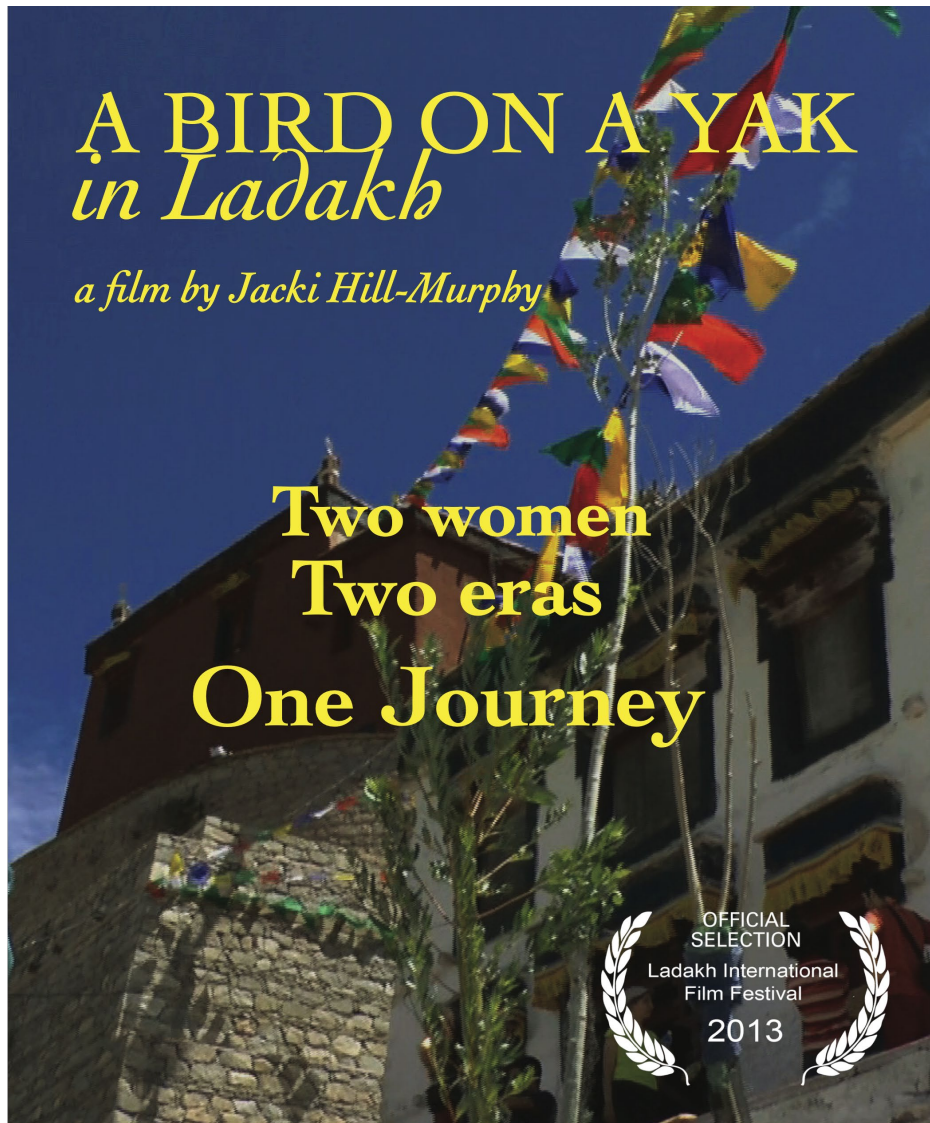
<sup>30</sup> Bird, *Among the Tibetans*, 96.





*Stills from A Bird on a Yak in Ladakh 2013*

'I was filmed sitting at a dimly lit table, and then again, dressed as Isabella.'



Film

*Pink Ginger Films*

**Gryphon MEDIA**

Dave Punshon and  
the Babe Ruth Band

The Digital Film Company

Poster for A Bird on a Yak in Ladakh 2013

Poster by Morgan Hill-Murphy

I also found myself explaining these journeys to audiences who, through me, experienced them vicariously. To enable them to engage emotionally and imaginatively with Isabella, I recreated her presentations as well as her journeys. I restaged her magic lantern lecture of 1897 and toured the south of England and Scotland performing:

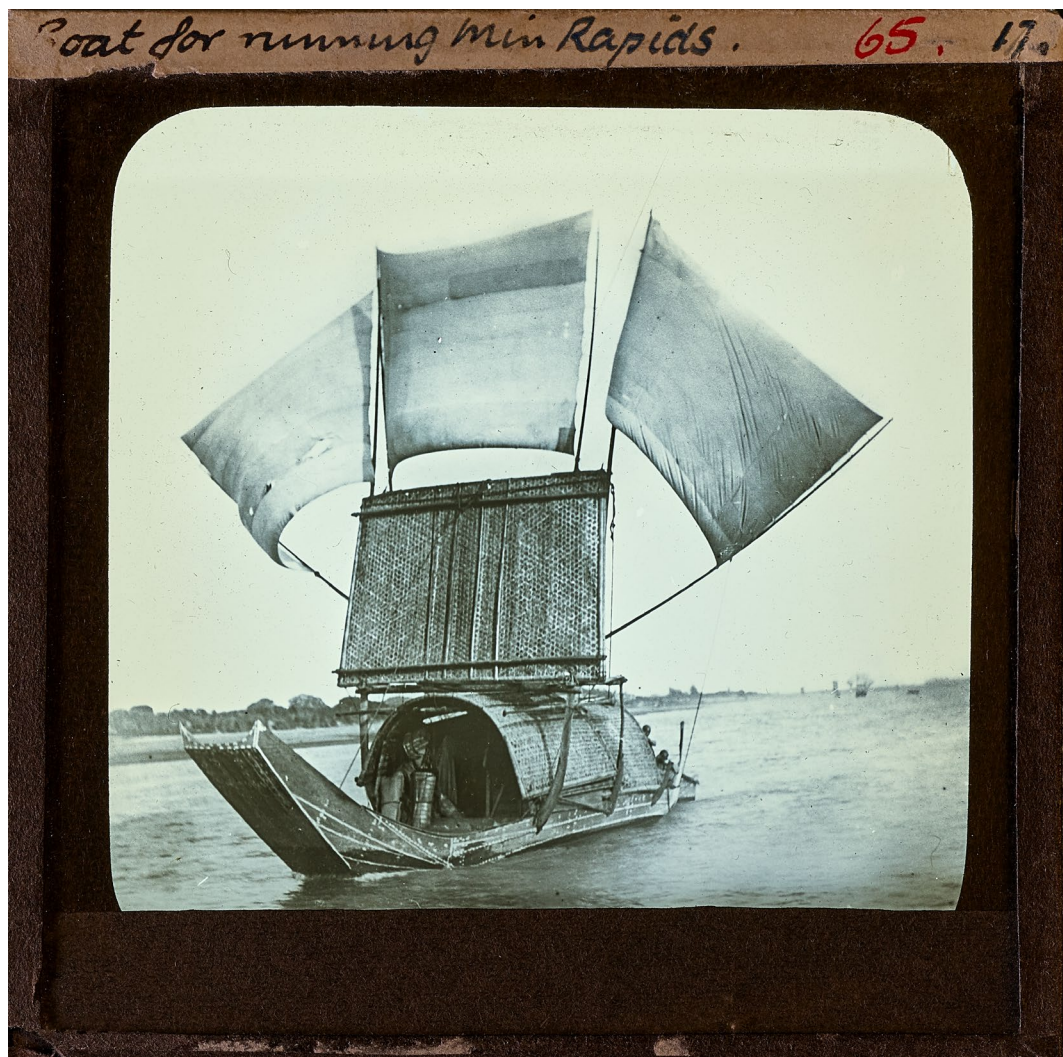
*Isabella Bird, Britain's Fearless Victorian Adventurer and her Magic Lantern Slides from China: On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1897, Isabella Bird was engaged to lecture on Western China at the RGS in London.*

I used digitised images of Bird's strikingly sharp magic lantern slides of the Yangtze Valley.<sup>31</sup> Bird was an accomplished and important photographer who used her images not only to record, but also to convey her own viewpoint and explore her subjects. In recreating her lecture, I sought the same engagement. There was no archived transcript, so I wrote one using her detailed account *The Yangtse Valley and Beyond* (1899) as a guide.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> On Bird's photography see Floriane Reviron-Piégay, 'Isabella Bird Bishop's 1897 Journey up the Yangtze Valley and Beyond: Beyond the Writing/Photographing Divide' in Valérie Baisnée-Keay et al (eds), *Text and Image in Women's Life Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 179-197 and Debbie Ireland, *Isabella Bird: A Photographic Journal of Travels through China 1894-1896* (London: Ammonite Press, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Isabella Bird, *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (London: John Murray, 1899).



### Boat for Running the Min Rapids

Magic lantern slide taken by Isabella Bird and used in her lecture at the RGS London on May 10th, 1897. Courtesy of the RGS picture library.

I dressed in costume for the lectures. The long skirt restricted my movement, the lacy blouse had many small buttons which I struggled to fasten, and the belt pulled me in and restricted my breathing. Isabella delivered her lecture in the masculine domain of the RGS in 1897,<sup>33</sup> an activity seen as more suitable to a man rather than a woman, based on the remote part of the world that she had explored, unchaperoned except for the occasional local guide. She had refused a previous invitation on the grounds that she would not address a Society that would not admit her as a fellow. It was only in 1892 that Bird became the RGS's first female fellow.<sup>34</sup>

### iii. *An Ethnographical Perspective*

Hulme tells us that narrations of second journeys are 'hybrid texts, part homage, part self-examination, part scholarly investigation',<sup>35</sup> but I like Wade Shepherd's view that such journeys are: 'de facto, a first person account of the world in a certain place...using personal experience to essentially provide a still life moment of a time on planet earth.'<sup>36</sup>

Essentially, by gathering the richness of the moment to add to my texts I

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<sup>33</sup> It was then at 1 Savile Row, now the home of the gentleman outfitters Gieves and Hawkes.

<sup>34</sup> Morag Bell and Cheryl McEwan, 'The Admission of Women Fellows to the Royal Geographical Society, 1892-1914: the controversy and the outcome' *Geographical Journal* 162/3 (1996), 297-300.

<sup>35</sup> Hulme, 'In the wake of Columbus', 18.

<sup>36</sup> Wade Shepherd, 'Ethnography, Journalism and Travel Writing' *Vagabond Journey* 7 November 2008: <https://www.vagabondjourney.com/ethnography-journalism-and-travel-writing/> (Accessed 27 May 2024)

could bridge two eras of time. I needed to record the events carefully and create a methodology that would be thorough, sensitive and accurate and so my notebooks are a paradigm of this. Roni Berger commends the robustness of a methodology in which 'Researchers carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs and experiences through the practice of reflexivity.'<sup>37</sup> Jayne Pitard comments that she did this as a 'process rather than a single action'.<sup>38</sup> For me this happened on my return when I studied my handwritten notes.

I knew my subjects very well before I embarked on each journey, and I also purposefully took original source material with me. Reading this again in the field helped me to re-evaluate my feelings in relation to those records. It was, as Andrea Stöckl suggests, that 'any description of a social phenomenon turns into an auto-ethnography "at the moment when the writer starts to understand his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes"'.<sup>39</sup> I hoped that my auto-ethnographic reflections would both validly engage with the worlds of my subjects and my own journeys and would interest my readers through my role as narrator. Cromby and Nightingale (1998) suggest that it is this personal reflexivity which considers how our values, life experiences and assumptions influence our research.<sup>40</sup>

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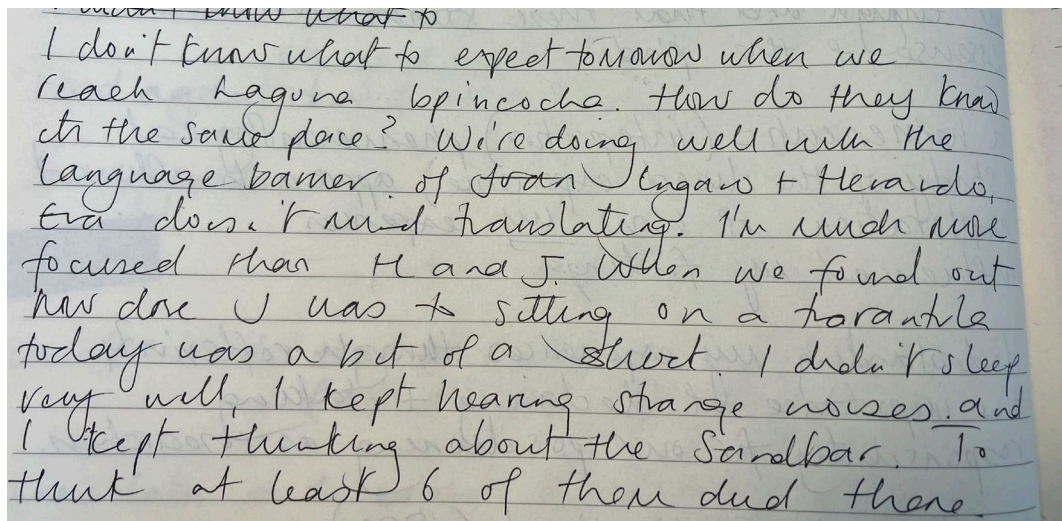
<sup>37</sup> Roni Berger, 'Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research' *Qualitative Research* 15/2 (2015), 219-234.

<sup>38</sup> Jayne Pitard, 'A Journey to the Centre of Self: Positioning the Researcher in Autoethnography' *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 18/3 (2017), Art.10

<sup>39</sup> Andrea Stöckl, 'Ethnography, Travel Writing and the Self: Reflections on Socially Robust Knowledge and the Authorial Ego. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 7/2 (2006), Art. 11. She cites: Russel, Catherine (1999). *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>40</sup> John Cromby and David J. Nightingale, 'What's wrong with social constructivism?' in John Cromby and David J. Nightingale (eds.) *Social constructivist psychology: A critical analysis of theory and practice* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), 1-19.

Pitard notes that auto-ethnography is a method of 'journeying to the centre' of oneself to explore our own anxieties when facing the 'cultural challenges of recreating these journeys.'<sup>41</sup> I wanted to show that I hadn't made such extensive undertakings, with all the inherent difficulties - a year's planning, inevitable costs and struggles with bureaucracy - just to be there. I wanted to 'get behind the words' as Uusma puts it,<sup>42</sup> that my subjects had left behind in their own narratives. To do so, I was willing to act as the 'passionate participant',<sup>43</sup> going along with them to investigate why they wanted to explore remote places and how they did



it.

*Extract 1:* I had time to think, while I stared into the vegetation at the water's edge, about Denzin and Lincoln's ideas on methodology: 'What kind of being is the human being and what is the nature of reality?'<sup>44</sup> This section of my notebook reflects on the darkest part of Godin's journey and our responses. We are about to arrive at the sandbar where

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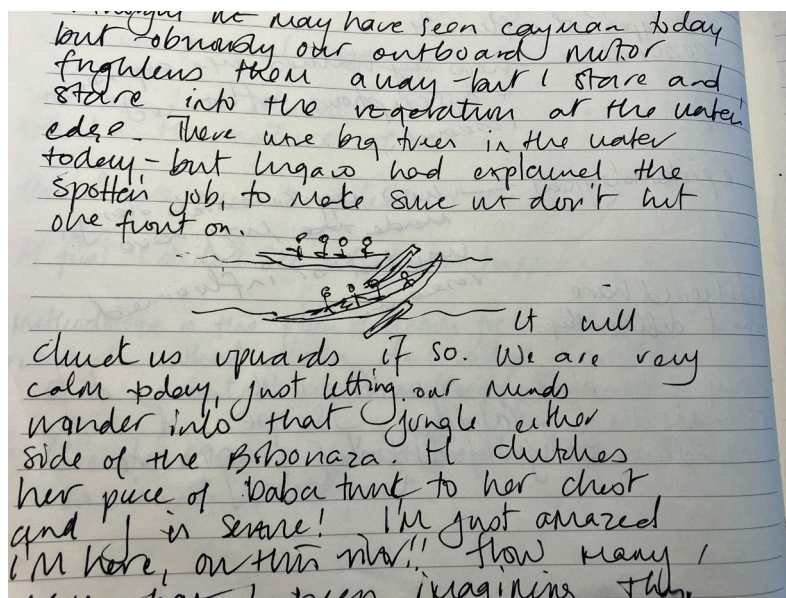
<sup>41</sup> Pitard, 'A Journey to the Centre'.

<sup>42</sup> Uusma, *The Expedition*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 'Competing paradigms in qualitative research' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 1994), 115.

<sup>44</sup> Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln 'Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (London: Sage, 2011), 1-19.

many of her party died and I refer to my reliable boatmen, although I am doubting their knowledge that this is the right place. This reveals my anticipation at arriving at this chilling spot. Isabela's boatmen were dying from smallpox or had run away in Sarayaku, and I knew this from my extensive knowledge of the pre-texts. The language could have been an issue for her, but she spoke Quechuan and Spanish and could communicate with the boatmen who rescued her. I almost sat on a tarantula, a danger that Isabella surely faced, along with the strange noises at night. I am placing myself firmly within the research and showing that I am willing to go through similar dangers to replicate journeys that were done by women who had different backgrounds to

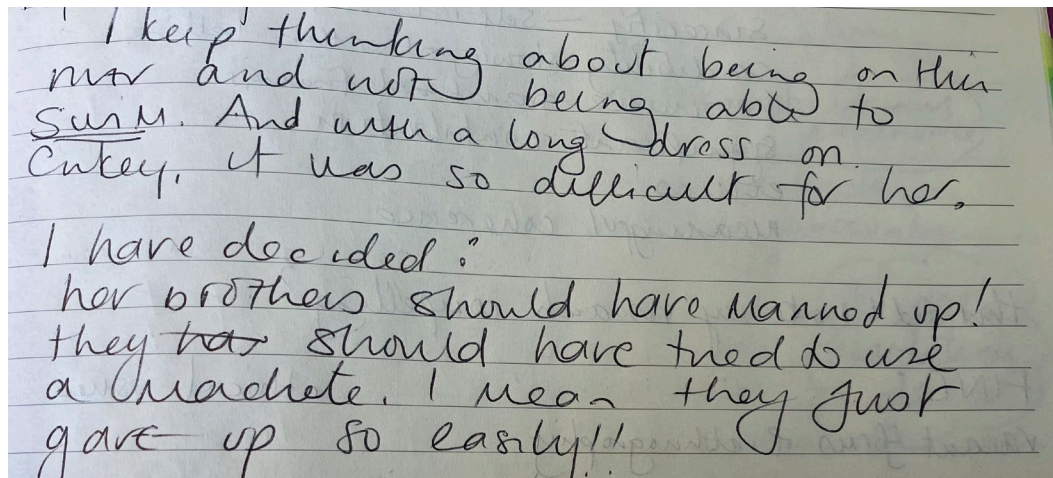


myself.

*Extract 2:* In this extract I discuss the dangers that Isabela and I faced: the cayman, which vanished for us at the sound of our canoe motor and the fallen trees that floated just beneath the surface of the river that needed an expert 'spotter'. There are lots of these as they fall from the banks causing great danger. The teammate is clutching a piece of cut



balsa wood that acts as a flotation aid which could have saved some of their lives; but of course, they couldn't use a machete. There is a credibility created by this meaningful and honest personal discourse.



*Extract 3:* In this extract of my reflexivity, I am angry at Isabela's party's lack of survival skills and lethargy in the face of death. Not being able to swim, forage for food, find water or build a shelter suggests from our perspective that they lacked the most basic survival skills. But I knew about the Amazon, I watch survival programmes, and of course they couldn't. This highlights a chasm of difference in our education and opportunities. The knowledge I had influenced my daily decision-making on safety and helped me to feel comfortable in such extreme terrain.

When I started writing up the accounts of these journeys these auto-ethnographical notes helped me to create authenticity with empathy, allowing readers to connect with my feelings and experiences.

It made me sad that my subjects were all solo travellers (or ended up that way) as pathos and emptiness emerged in their stories. As Behar writes 'It is a type of ethnography that breaks your heart'.<sup>45</sup> I had unraveled their journeys and exposed more than was already known and found a deep loneliness and a melancholy which I experienced myself. I could also compare my 'fast' travel to their 'slow' means of travel and witness the dangers they encountered. After that expedition I flew out on a Cessna over the area where Isabela wandered lost for six weeks and I looked down at the desolate jungle with its meandering river and I could quite understand why she shut the experience out for the rest of her life.

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<sup>45</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart* (New York: Beacon Press, 1997), 161.



**Aerial view of Bobonaza and forest**

Photograph by Jacki Hill-Murphy

It is important to put into context what 'returning to England' meant for Bird and Kingsley after lengthy stays abroad. Mary was obliged to keep house for her brother, Charles, when he was in the country. It was an obligation that bound her to stifling domesticity. Isabella Bird expressed similar concerns prompting me to reflect:

She wrote of her 'return to bondage', did she consider that even enduring the dreadful hardships was worth it; because while she was a lone traveller in China, she was free? Maybe that's the lengths that a woman in her time would go to escape the constricted daily routine.<sup>66</sup>

I switched genres to write Bird's biography and in doing so I created a useful educational text. Isabella Bird left an abundance of personal material to assist me, much accessible in the Murray archive at the National Library of Scotland. I was able to draw on her vividly recounted experiences, such as her travels as a young woman in America: 'She ordered a glass of wine... but she was sorely disappointed to be told, 'You can't have it, it's contrary to law'.<sup>67</sup>

Here was a sickly, four foot eleven inches powerhouse of curiosity and human aspiration, travelling courageously into the unknown. As Isabella herself wrote: 'Beyond the tracks were the plains and she could see a solitary wagon with a white cover, drawn by eight oxen. It was most likely an emigrant and his family and their possessions moving to Colorado'.

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<sup>66</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 42.

<sup>67</sup> Jacki Hill-Murphy, *The Life and Travels of Isabella Bird, The Fearless Victorian Adventurer* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2021), 8.

That region of the Ecuadorian forest today is still largely primary rainforest, but Isabela would not recognise the onward part of her journey from Andoas today. I frequently observed the impact of the world undergoing change and Peru and Brazil were a painfully emotional example. 'Since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas.'<sup>46</sup> Sadly, this includes logging and oil extraction and subsequent pollution on the Pastaza and Marañón Rivers. I longed to see these regions through the early explorers' eyes. Kate Marsden's route took minor roads in Siberia which have now been largely wiped out by the Soviet Union and roads and electricity pylons are now slowly encroaching upon Digar in northern Ladakh damaging the barley fields. How long would the 'small houses, clustered tightly together allowing me to picture hundreds of years of an evolving culture', still be there?<sup>47</sup> I wrote in my notebook:

'It's the same time of year but it's scary because it doesn't look the same as IB describes it. There are no glaciers and no snow on the mountains, the Digar-Pass is just grey gravel (no primulas either!!).'

I tell my audiences at lectures that Ladakh is a land-locked country and ask them where the future water supply will come from. Isabella came close to drowning as she attempted to cross the raging torrent of the Shyok River at Satti caused by the summer melting snow. Now it is a trickling stream, although still referred to as 'the river of death' due to its past ferocity.

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<sup>46</sup> 'What is Climate Change'?' United Nations: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change> (accessed 27 May 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Adventuresses*, 204.

Isabela Godin was in extreme danger the whole time and when Carlos, our guide, suggested he could talk his way into visiting the Kandozi Tribe on the Pastaza in the Peruvian Amazon, I was delighted but surprised. Surely these were the descendants of the aforementioned Jivaro tribe who were hostile towards Madame Godin's party.<sup>48</sup> Carlos, however, was highly experienced and the only man with sufficient knowledge of the individual tribes to lead a party down the Pastaza as the area is so hostile. He negotiated for two days with the Chief in Musacarusha (the Guardians of the Lake) on Laguna Rimachi, the largest body of water in the Peruvian forest, while we waited in a small boat. 'Why did it take so long?' I whispered to him. 'Because I had to find a way to please him', he replied, 'and it was only when I agreed that it was a pity that they only shot one Achuar Indian fishing on their lake last month and not two, that he finally agreed'.

It was a palpable moment for me. Madame Godin's party had been the recipient of such hostility. Having arrows fired from the shoreline was a constant threat; 200 years had not changed much. But did my white skin pose a threat to them or that I was a female expedition leader? I was told that oil prospectors were hated on this river and those villages that fell for their juicy bribes (outboard motors and even schools) were chased from the district or even killed. On entering Musacarusha and then Porto Belem on the opposite side of the Laguna Rimachi, chugging past a floating island and pink Amazon dolphins to get there, I was met by stares and the children ran away from me. It was an outstanding experience as we wandered around their villages, but I sensed it was time to leave when the chief spoke to me personally:

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<sup>48</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Adventuresses*, 106.

We don't need strangers in our villages; please take this message with you, we are hunter-gatherers, we have water, and we have food from the forest, we have our community, and we don't need your people.<sup>49</sup>

I appreciated this, mindful of a history of colonial exploitation and that now the colour of my skin represented that past and the current representatives of oil and logging exploitation. I was also aware that he had insisted that the older male in my party dance to a disco tune for acceptance into the village, but he had delivered his speech to me, a woman leader, and I was grateful that he treated me as his equal. I wondered what our reception would have been like if I had not forced a member of the team to remove the ugly knife strapped to his thigh that morning.

#### iv. Development

As Thompson points out, in contrast to their male counterparts, women travel writers 'did not present themselves to the reading public as heroic figures engaged in some sort of epic quest'.<sup>50</sup> They also avoided the salacious essentialising often centred in male narratives.<sup>51</sup> Books written by women instead necessarily provide a gentler, female gaze on the worlds and cultures encountered, if only because of the gendered

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<sup>49</sup> Personal recollection of a speech given in Spanish by Chief Noningo at Porto Belem . He told us not to try and influence the villagers with our outside culture and customs.

<sup>50</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 189.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Bassnett, 'Travel writing and gender' in Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 229-230.

nature of their imperial context.<sup>52</sup> The pervasiveness of that context nonetheless ensures that my subjects also reflected a complex range of conscious and unconscious responses to coloniality. Mary Kingsley's 'support for the traders was fanatical and unbalanced', but her views of missionaries were often hostile.<sup>53</sup> Isabella Bird's views on Western superiority came out in her writings on native Americans: 'They are perfect savages, without any aptitude for even aboriginal civilisation, and are altogether the most degraded of the ill-fated tribes which are dying out before the white races.'<sup>54</sup> In *Korea and its Neighbours* she compared the impact locally of Western civilization to that of 'a man awaking from a profound sleep'.<sup>55</sup> She did nonetheless temper such judgements with more nuanced observations such as:

It maybe added that the Koreans, like their neighbours the Japanese, love our music as little as we love theirs, and for the same reason, that the ideas we express by it are unfamiliar to them.<sup>56</sup>

Her writings, and those of other women travel writers of the time, were very different to the ones based on the 'new worldness' of the lands encountered across the Ocean Sea',<sup>57</sup> which constitute the works in the Hakluyt collection. The accounts published by the Hakluyt Society since its foundation in 1846 turn historic ships' records into texts recording the

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<sup>52</sup> Cheryl McEwan, 'Encounters with West African women: Textual representations of difference by white women abroad' in Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (eds), *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (New York: Guildford Press, 1994), 73-100.

<sup>53</sup> J. E. Flint, 'Mary Kingsley: A Reassessment' *Journal of African History* 4/1 (1963), 95-104.

<sup>54</sup> Isabella Bird, *A Lady's life in the Rocky Mountains* (London: John Murray, 1879), 13.

<sup>55</sup> Isabella Bird, *Korea and its neighbours: A narrative of travel, with an account of the recent vicissitudes and present position of the country* (London: John Murray, 1898), 59-60.

<sup>56</sup> Bird, *Korea*, 164.

<sup>57</sup> Francisco J. Borge, 'Hakluyt, promoter of the New World: the navigational origins of the English nation' *Sederi* 13 (2003), 1.



adventurous voyages of (so far exclusively) male European explorers. They, as well as the narratives penned by male contemporaries of my subjects, depict imperial masculinities taming the wild inhabitants and lands they encountered.<sup>58</sup>

I crossed Russia to gauge with more accuracy how honestly Kate Marsden's book had been written. We both travelled by public transport, and I intended to stay as close to her 1891 itinerary as possible, but it proved impossible. Kate had done this same journey through all the seasons, by sledge, tarantass,<sup>59</sup> boat, carriage and horseback and she endured unbelievable hardship in completing this part of the journey.

My beaten-up minibus rolled into Yakutsk at midnight having joined the unpaved 'road of bones' or Kolyma Highway near Yakutsk for the last lap.<sup>60</sup> This seemed appropriate, as Kate had noted of the times she spent on her journey 'visiting prisoners, distributing tea and sugar' as they shuffled towards exile and death in the gulags.<sup>61</sup> Tickets were handed to me, unexpectedly honouring me with access to all VIP privileges at the first Yakutsk International Film Festival. I was carrying a gown-less pack and worried that I would be a sartorial disappointment to them. Kate had been more prepared:

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<sup>58</sup> See Andrew Hammond, 'Imagined Colonialism: Victorian Travellers in South-East Europe', *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 28/2 (2006), 94-95.

<sup>59</sup> A four-wheeled, horse-drawn, Russian carriage without springs, mounted on a long flexible wooden chassis, used as an ice-breaker.

<sup>60</sup> The Kolyma Highway, or p-504 has a dark past. It runs from Magadan to Yakutsk and was built on permafrost by prisoners from the gulags. Between 250,000 to 1,000,000 are said to have died building it and their bodies were built into the foundations of the road.

<sup>61</sup> Kate Marsden, *On Sledge and Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), 158.

My first step was to go the Governor, Prince Dolgoroukow, who represents His Imperial Majesty the Czar.... I had my nurse's uniform with me, which suits all occasions.<sup>62</sup>

At Vilyuisk, I was whisked off in the local mayor's special car to the site of the Leper Colony in Sosnovka. If Kate had come for the ride, she would have seen the fruits of her fundraising.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Marsden, *On Sledge and Horseback*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Kate Marsden established the St Francis Leprosy Guild, still operating today in London. Her leper colony, the first in Siberia, was built in Sosnovka and by 1902 had 76 patients.



The remains of the leper colony in Sosnovka, Sakha Province, Siberia.

Picture by Jacki Hill-Murphy



The Russian Magazine 'Journiflix' 2013

I was quite shocked at the spectacle of over 200 members of the Sosnovka Hospital Community in full costume, singing and dancing to the traditional mouth harp in my honour. I was merely Kate's latter-day interpreter. but it was her they loved. I had brought her back, because I could sense she had been the victim of injustices in the 1890s and her name was forgotten. Although the leper colony she'd established was in its last throes of collapse, it was there to be seen and more recently I have helped to identify and honour her long-lost Hillingdon grave.

My short time in Siberia created a ripple which manifested itself in a new Anglo-Siberian relationship. It was covered on all-Russia TV and widespread media, outcomes denied Kate in the 1890s. In a Lyons Corner House in London Kate told me about her sledge journey:

At the end of a terrible day, in that horrid conveyance, my face was barnacled with ice and my lips and eyes were frozen and I couldn't speak.<sup>64</sup>

Pain and discomfort were a significant element for us both. In this extract I am talking to Kate about being bitten by Siberian midges and mosquitoes in the forest around Vilyuisk and Sosnovka:

My poor dear Miss Marsden, your description, of your face becoming swollen to alarming dimensions - that's exactly what happened to my face in Sosnovka.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Kate Marsden*, 121.

<sup>65</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Kate Marsden*, 323.



Picture of my swollen face.

On another day she saw six of them. 'Everything suggests a beyond', she wrote to her sister.<sup>68</sup>

I had seen for myself the distances she covered in her extensive travels, how fear and stepping into the unknown both fascinated her and held her mental and physical ills at bay, I felt her spiritual energy. After her first near shipwreck en route from Newfoundland to Portland, Maine she 'felt a new era of her existence had begun'.<sup>69</sup> Seeking danger; it made her feel alive and free. Similarly, she wrote to her sister of riding into the heart of the Mauna Loa volcano as 'the most unutterable of wonderful things'.<sup>70</sup> Perilous escapes like fleeing a Japanese invasion at Chemulpo in Korea with only the tweed suit she stood up in seem not to have bothered her. Nor did sitting in a chair in the snow at Tok Chhon in Korea because frightened villagers would not allow her to stay anywhere, considering her a 'foreign dog'.<sup>71</sup>

Her life is gaining academic significance as she is increasingly seen as a revered female icon and covered in areas of the National Curriculum such as geography. She also now features on both British and American educational resource websites. My text is used in these, and I promote it with school visits and appear in the 'In the Footsteps of History' video about Isabella Bird.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Bird, *A Lady's Life*, Letter III, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 141.

<sup>72</sup> 'World Explorer Isabella Bird' <https://www.mylarning.org/stories/leeds-explores-the-world/1169> and 'In the Footsteps of Isabella Bird' <https://inthe footsteps.org/isabella-bird/> (both accessed 27 May 2024).

## v. Parallel experiences

These journeys are not all danger, loneliness and deprivation. There are many strong elements that give aesthetic and uplifting merit to my narrative, in particular socio-cultural interactions. There are ancient ceremonies and untouched landscapes to relish and social communities that are poignant, as globalisation hasn't yet eradicated the past through progress. As Mark Bevir writes: 'But surely the study of culture is always parasitic on history?'<sup>73</sup> It was heuristic for me as some of the most inaccessible places I visited are undergoing rapid change. There are roads being built at a prodigious rate, predominantly by the Chinese, making experiences the reverse of expectations. On my first visit to the Amazon I found 'That drive from Puyo to Canelos was the most exciting of my life with slithery ruts that pitched us up against dense, jungly vegetation.'<sup>74</sup> On my return I felt I had been robbed, the forest had been irreversibly scarred by tarmac and the jungle had become homogenised. I could have been in the Lake District rather than Ecuador.

Nevertheless, it is heartening that traditional ceremonies are still being practised in Siberia, the Amazon Basin, Cameroon and Ladakh and these enriched my travel experience exponentially. I knew that some of my female explorers and I had been the recipients of precisely the same experiences. For instance, Bird talks about how to make butter tea: 'Put the infusion into the churn with one pound of butter and a small tablespoonful of salt. Churn until as thick as cream'.<sup>75</sup> We had butter tea

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<sup>73</sup> Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>74</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Adventuresses*, 38.

<sup>75</sup> Bird, *Among the Tibetans*. 71.



made for us by an elderly recluse who lived in a subterranean house. After initially throwing rocks at our ponies, she ventured into our camp bringing butter tea before washing-up in a mountain stream.<sup>76</sup>

In the Amazon Basin they brew chicha, an alcoholic, fermented drink that dates from the Inca Empire. I noted: 'Porto Belem seemed to be having a chicha party when we arrived...'<sup>77</sup> As team leader I need to be prudent on these expeditions. Drinking chicha or experiencing ayahuasca, which many of my team wanted to do,<sup>78</sup> may be part of an authentic socio-cultural exchange, but there has to be a last person standing in case it all goes wrong.

Siberia surprised me with its love of ceremony and rituals. As a revered guest I was often offered a loaf of bread by a lady in national costume who then; 'Stepped towards me with a ceramic bowl on three-legs. I remembered from Tomsk that it was fermented mare's milk or kymys . . . I took a sip, it was fizzy and warm.'<sup>79</sup>

Kate's lack of detail in her book on her cultural encounters left her open to criticism, particularly from the eagle-eyed Mrs Hapgood who was not convinced from Kate's text that she had even been to Siberia. On her uncomfortable ride on a cargo boat down the Lena River she would have drifted straight past the Lena Pillars, towering 1,000 feet high, surely one of the natural wonders of the world. How could she not have marvelled at their beauty and presence? Or did she have more important issues on her mind, like lepers and survival: 'For two hours we

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<sup>76</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 263.

<sup>77</sup> Hill-Murphy *Adventuresses*, 107.

<sup>78</sup> A tropical vine of the Amazon region, noted for its hallucinogenic properties.

<sup>79</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Kate Marsden*, 407.

baled and baled, and really that rapid, dangerous Lena seemed eager to draw us into her embrace.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Marsden, *On Sledge and Horseback*, 86.



## The Lena Pillars

Photograph by Jacki Hill-Murphy

Mary's porters, were difficult and when she pushed on past the tree line to climb the great wall of Mount Cameroon, she wrote that:

The men are sulky, and Sasu, Peter, Kefalla, and Headman say they will wait... We get on to the intervening hillocks and commence to ascend the face of the wall.<sup>81</sup>

My porters collected palm fronds and, on breaking through the tree line to the 'wall' of the mountain, they waved them while singing their tribute to the mountain gods, appealing for clement weather and an easy ascent. Both Mary's and my expeditions were bound to be as much about the weather and our experiences when hiring guides and porters, who were essential to our success in ascending *Mongo ma Nдеми* as it is a tough undertaking. Mary Kingsley was assigned men by Eduard von Liebert, the German Governor, but his attitude was not encouraging, and he even assigned her some labourers whom she sent back. The Cameroonians did not believe that a white woman could succeed and they had many excuses not to cooperate, telling her that they couldn't climb on a Sunday: 'You no sabe this be Sunday, Ma?,' argued Kefalla who then 'scratches his head for other argument', on the morning she decides to reach the peak.<sup>82</sup> Cook went off and announced her 'horrible intentions' to the others.<sup>83</sup> The men dropped out, one by one, and her final ascent to the summit was solo. As she looked down from the top, she saw her men 'looking like so many little dolls'.<sup>84</sup> But she cared for them: 'I go and see that my men are safely quartered.'<sup>85</sup> My porters needed no coercion as it was valuable paid work, but my heart sank to

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<sup>81</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 592.

<sup>82</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 585.

<sup>83</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 584.

<sup>84</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 596.

<sup>85</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 582.

see these strong and intelligent men being fitted with 32 kilo packs wearing plastic sandals and inadequate clothing to climb the second highest mountain in Africa (4,095m).

If Mary was exploiting her men by getting them to reluctantly climb a mountain, I was the one being exploited in my trek. The Mount Cameroon Trekking Centre in Buea boasted that its profits went to create sustainable farming projects along the foothills of the mountain to end the age-old custom of hunting bush meat. Josephine, the large, suited lady in the office worked efficiently to smooth our departure, delegating the weighed packs, briefing Fernando our guide, removing pots and tents from the store and carefully itemising our hired equipment onto two invoices.

On the first wet night in hut one, Primrose, who portered in a woman's pink coat, lay on the bare concrete floor and read aloud from my copy of Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa*. '...nobody wanted to stop him. Black or white, we were bewitched by his voice. I smarted at the words nigger and negro as he read them, - no more offensive to Mary than to her contemporary Joseph Conrad, but Primrose and the other men didn't flinch at them...' <sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, I examined the damp chits. 'Why two?' I wondered. Of course, Josephine had creamed off a fair chunk for herself and hoped I wouldn't notice. On our return to Buea I reported her to the Director of Mount Cameroon Trekking and, I am told, she was subsequently sacked.

Mary struggled to find anywhere to change out of her wet clothes, even when she found 'the habitation of a Basel Mission black Bible-reader' to

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<sup>86</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Adventuresses*, 156

dry out in. There, like Bird in Japan, she found herself an object of local fascination: 'You look at a corner one minute and it is empty, and the next time you look that way it is full of rows of white teeth and watching eyes'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 570.



**'My porters, on breaking through the tree line to the 'wall' of the mountain, sang their  
tribute to the mountain gods....'**

Photograph by Jacki Hill-Murphy.



**'The Ladakhi lady, who I had thought unhinged, had ventured into our camp  
the evening before, bringing butter tea.'**

Photograph by Guide Tsering in her underground house.





'Porto Belem seemed to be having a chicha party when we arrived....'

Photograph by Jacki Hill-Murphy.



'They stepped towards me with a ceramic bowl on three-legs. . . I took  
a sip, it was fizzy and warm.

Photograph by Linda McLachlan

During the Ladakh journey I identified the forgotten home of Gergan the monk where Isabella stayed. She wrote that 'The rooms were large, ceiled with peeled poplar rods, and floored with split white pebbles set in clay'.<sup>88</sup>

The house now stood like a crumbling old lady in an abandoned campsite. In any other country the building would have been condemned, but not in India. 'I wandered around it in awe. Staring out from its wooden-shuttered balconies to the far distant hills I realised this was where her hosts wondered: 'Why is the Englishwoman always writing or sewing? Is she very poor, or has she made a vow?''<sup>89</sup>

Kate Marsden assisted the local community with an environmental cause on her journey across Siberia. The red cross on her sledge attracted attention and she wrote that, 'An old man suddenly appeared...he said the river was polluted by the refuse of a paper-mill ten miles away, and that the whole village was thereby ruined'.<sup>90</sup> I found myself involved in altruism when requested to speak to the Governor of the province to try to persuade him to rebuild the old wooden psychiatric hospital on the footprint of the leper colony.<sup>91</sup> I met him with a translator. He resembled Putin, with eyes dulled with vodka. Had I become Kate? I lacked the well-filled nurse's apron, kept starched and shiny to repel the ticks, but shared her downcast demeanour in dealing with authorities who didn't care.

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<sup>88</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Adventuresses*, 249.

<sup>89</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 116.

<sup>90</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Kate Marsden*, 31.

<sup>91</sup> The Governor had to choose whether to rebuild the wooden hospital or demolish it. This psychiatric hospital sits on the footprint of Marsden's leper colony and is/was the last wooden hospital in Russia.

I had embarked on a journey into a strange land, and it had become so much more. Two years later, I returned to give a speech in Yakutsk to 500 social workers. My topic was 'Kate Marsden: a pioneer for social change'.

### *vi. Struggles*

Kate Marsden received the most unfair criticism. She was never born to be the ideal woman, who was pure, chaste and modest. Elizabeth Baigent is very condemnatory of her, writing that 'Celebrity rapidly turned to ostracism, as she, her writings and her work were declared a sham or worse'.<sup>92</sup>

Kate Marsden might have disarmed some of her critics had she adopted better tactics. Her failure to conform to the feminine stereotypes of the time seemingly contributed to the malicious personal attacks on her character. Her own approach to narrative, redolent of contemporary male writers, conspired against her. As Baigent notes,

Travelling in a land where truth is stranger than fiction and describing it for readers very largely unable to make authoritative, independent judgements as to the text's truth Marsden is open to charges of lying even when she tells the truth.<sup>93</sup>

Addressing this issue was a challenging task that has been complicated by the passage of time. Most traces of Kate were lost apart from in

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<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Baigent, 'Travelling bodies, texts and reputations: the gendered life and afterlife of Kate Marsden and her mission to Siberian lepers in the 1890s' *Studies in Travel Writing* 18/1 (2014), 34.

<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Baigent, "'One Could Never Reckon Up All Her Misstatements!'" Lies and Deception in the Life and Texts of Kate Marsden, Traveller to Siberia in the 1890s', in Clare Broome Saunders (ed), *Women, Travel Writing, and Truth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 18-19.

Vilyuisk in Siberia where her name has lived on. There is also no doubt that *On Sledge and Horseback* smacks of a gothic horror piece of fiction. Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, although published 100 years earlier, was still popular reading in Great Britain at the time, with its gothic landscapes and terror-laced physical and psychological narrative. There are definite echoes in some of the incidents Kate recounted. For instance, one night she saw a dead horse in the road and wrote that 'the moon had risen' and, in consequence, 'in the blood-stained snow', she saw 'the animal's flesh torn off'.<sup>94</sup> Such episodes, alongside accurate but at the time incredible accounts of subterranean fires in Siberia, undermined public trust in her narrative which her defiant prefatory comment: 'this is but a faint description of what I saw; I have exaggerated nothing' did not succeed in allaying.<sup>95</sup>

Patriarchal social arrangements in Victorian England posed many obstacles to women's travel. It took feisty and independent woman like Kate Marsden or Isabella Bird to even embark upon a journey.<sup>96</sup> As Jane Robinson points out, women 'have rarely been commissioned to travel'.<sup>97</sup> Publishers, public institutions and educational establishments all froze out women who entertained activities deemed fitter for a man. Getting into print was challenging for women writers.<sup>98</sup> Various tactics were accordingly adopted by these authors. For instance, knowing that their accounts were less likely to be seen as credible, female writers sought to emphasise the veracity of their narratives by liberal use of

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<sup>94</sup> Marsden, *On Sledge and Horseback*, 56.

<sup>95</sup> Baigent, 'Lies and Deception', 18; Marsden, *On Sledge and Horseback*, 123.

<sup>96</sup> Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 31.

<sup>97</sup> Jane Robinson, *Unsuitable for Ladies. An Anthology of Women Travellers* (Oxford University Press, 1994), xii.

<sup>98</sup> May Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 171.

critical apparatus such as maps and other supporting evidence. In Bird's case these notably included photographs. These female authors also minimised their knowledge and achievements.<sup>99</sup> In the field of exploration this reflects: 'the sexist nature of much of the women's systematic under-recognition' akin to 'the Matilda effect' identified by Margaret Rossiter.<sup>100</sup>

To avoid sounding too authoritative many women published texts as letters or journals. Such approaches contrived to palliate public expectations of femininity. For instance, Isabella Bird prefaced her *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* with the statement that her text originated as letters to her sister Henrietta which, 'as their style sufficiently indicates, were written without the remotest idea of publication'.<sup>101</sup> As Thompson points out, presenting their text as originating in a diary or letter format was a common tactic for these female travel writers.<sup>102</sup>

Societal expectations of women and their limiting impact on women's ability to explore in remote locales were also referenced in Bird's letters published as *The Hawaiian Archipelago*: 'Everyone says that if we had a white man or an experienced native with us, we should never have been allowed to attempt the perilous ride.'<sup>103</sup> Indeed, much of her writing reflects her ambition to escape such expectations. This included a clear desire to spend time with indigenous people on her travels, often putting herself in great danger to do so. Her extensive account of living

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<sup>99</sup> Mills, *Discourses of Difference*, 121.

<sup>100</sup> Margaret W. Rossiter, 'The Matilda Effect in Science' *Social Studies of Science* 23/2 (1993), 337.

<sup>101</sup> Bird, *A Lady's Life*, i.

<sup>102</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 181.

<sup>103</sup> Cited in Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 34.

among the Ainu settlements at Biratori in Hokkaido, a major Ainu centre, details their daily life including family life and religious beliefs: 'Again taking my hand, Shinondi led me to the place of honour at the head of the fire'.<sup>104</sup> She had infiltrated the inner circle and was able to comment on the cultural practices that she thus was able to observe.

A letter in 1875 to her publisher, John Murray III, exemplifies the challenges Bird faced as she raises the issue of patriarchal ideology and her nervousness about possible public responses. She wrote that her 'book on the Sandwich Islands is a lottery' and worried that it would not conform to contemporary expectations of female propriety.<sup>105</sup> The content includes her descent into a semi-active volcano, which would have been seen as unsuitable activity for a woman.<sup>106</sup> She was flouting, as Thompson points out, 'highly restrictive norms of femininity'.<sup>107</sup>

Her publisher was aware of the need for sensitivity to avoid scandalising contemporary sensibilities which could scotch these women's reputations

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<sup>104</sup> Isabella Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: An Account of Travels in the Interior including visits to the Aborigines of Yezo and the Shrine of Nikko* (London: John Murray, 1881), 347.

<sup>105</sup> National Library of Scotland Archives and Manuscripts Division: Acc.11007, Isabella Bird to John Murray, 1857.

<sup>106</sup> Hill-Murphy, *Isabella Bird*, 25.

<sup>107</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 180.

Hotel du Lion d'Or  
Hospenthal  
Canton Uri  
Schweiz (Switzerland)  
August 4<sup>th</sup>  
67  
Dear Mr Murray  
I forget to say  
that I accept your terms as  
I think with you that a book  
on the Sandwich Islands is  
a lottery. I am not sure that  
my recollections of 18 years  
ago are right but I think the  
terms for the Englishman  
were that you took all the  
risque and gave me half  
profits and 12 copies.  
I should however like to  
know the steps in which

Letter to John Murray from Isabella Bird, 1875.



and jeopardise future book sales. Fortunately for Bird, Murray was a great champion of female authors and literati and willing to take risks. She and her fellow female authors used a range of additional strategies alongside an epistolary style as means of accommodating contemporary attitudes towards femininity. Particularly common was a tendency to self-deprecation. Mary Kingsley, for example, wrote an apology in her preface for her failings as a writer, using self-effacing words and phrases like 'imperfect', 'humbly', and 'my mind was full of errors'.<sup>108</sup>

As the nineteenth century wore on, Isabella Bird and other female travel writers' books slowly pushed the boundaries, adopting the gaze that had traditionally and stereotypically been associated with men until, as Susan Bassnett suggests, 'the sheer diversity of women's travel writing resists simple categorisation'.<sup>109</sup> Yet in the process their exploits on horseback, in jungles, upon stormy seas, deserts, dangerous railcars and so on were undermining the dominant cultural presumptions of masculinity and pushing the boundaries of what was deemed possible and acceptable for women to achieve, as Bird's admittance to the RGS indicated.

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<sup>108</sup> Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 11, 23, 26.

<sup>109</sup> Bassnett. cited in Thompson, *'Travel writing'*, (2011), 172

## *Envoi*

Paul Fussell writes, 'Before tourism there was travel, and before travel there was exploration.'<sup>110</sup> In a world habituated to tourism we need to revisit the explorer's gaze and that is why the early travel writing of Isabella Bird, Kate Marsden and Mary Kingsley is so important; their sources are raw and unique, but they have become obscure and forgotten.

In revisiting their journeys, I have used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, with studies of four women, highlighting them as unique and individual people shaped by a significant life story that has added to our knowledge of the world. My peregrinations match theirs: I felt their spiritual energy and just as nothing was ever the same for them again, it wasn't for me either. My overall career changed as I led other people into remote areas, I published books that drew on these double journeys and I began to reflect deeply on the ethical dilemmas in the world that I had witnessed. Finally, bolstered by the knowledge and experiences that I have gained, my life is now enriched by altruism and educational pursuits.

The auto-ethnographical approach of parallel explorations has helped me to capture minds and hearts. It has also enabled me more effectively to convey the nature and hardships of my subjects' journeys in ways that connect meaningfully to modern audiences. In recreating their journeys,

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<sup>110</sup> Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 37.

## Appendices

Three remarkable women. Three dramatic tales of adventure and survival.

Isabela Godin, abandoned in thousands of miles of jungle, became the first woman to successfully travel the length of the Amazon.

Mary Kingsley, conquering Mount Cameroon in atrocious weather with the 'madman in the mist'.

Isabella Bird an indomitable 60 year old travelling hundreds of miles accross the Himalayas on the back of a yak.

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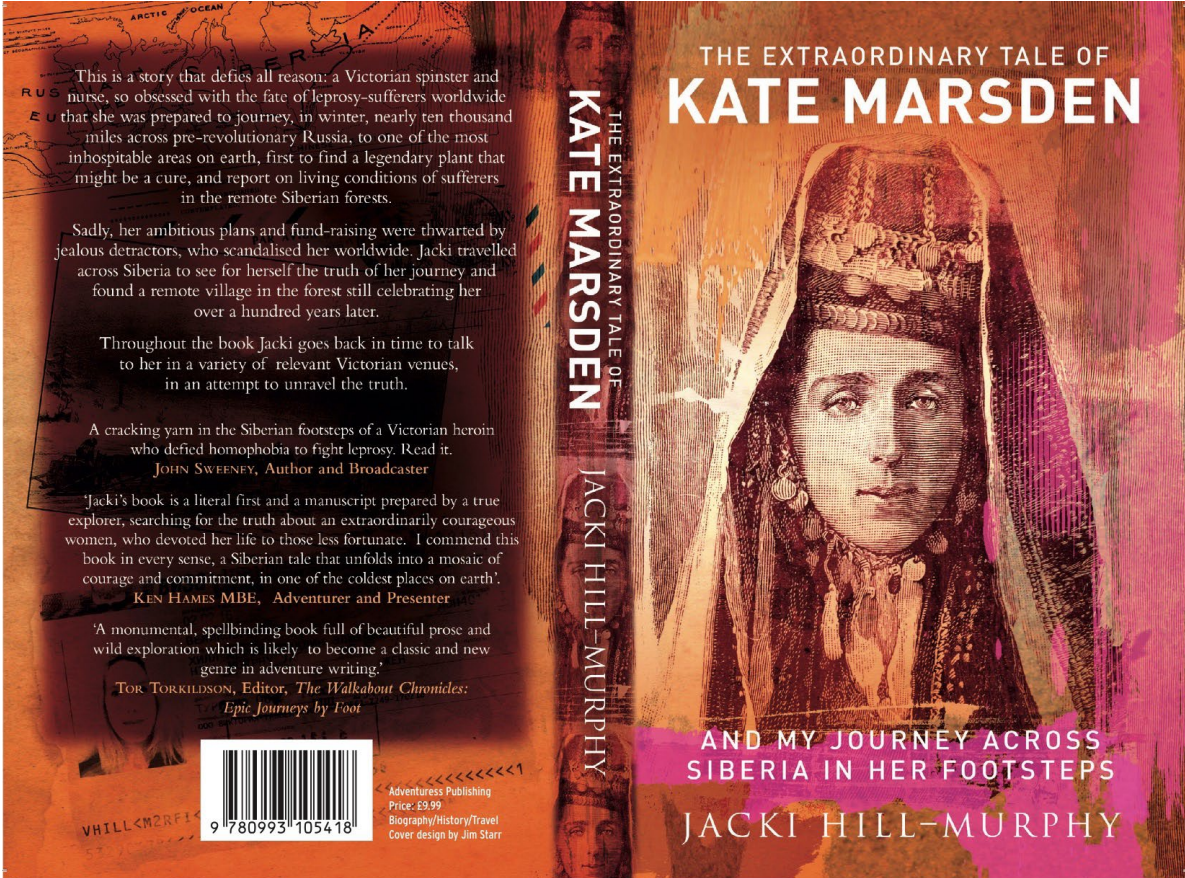
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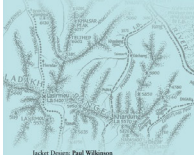
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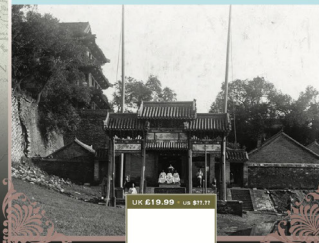
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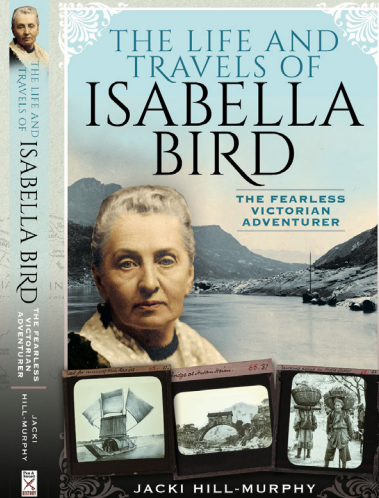
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## Transcript of notebooks

### Extract 1.

I don't know what to expect tomorrow when we reach Laguna Ispincocha. How do they know it's the same place? We're doing well with the language barrier of Ingaro + Herado. Eva doesn't mind translating. I'm much more focused than H and J. When we found out how close J was to sitting on a tarantula today was a bit of a shock. I didn't sleep very well last night, I kept hearing strange noises and I kept thinking about the sandbar. To think at least 6 of them died there.

### Extract 2.

We may have seen a cayman today but obviously our outboard motor frightens them away - but I stare and stare into the vegetation at the water's edge. There were big trees in the water today - but Ingaro had explained the spotter's job to make sure we don't hit one front on.

It will chuck us upwards if so. We are very calm today, just letting our minds wander into that jungle either side of the Bobonaza. H clutches her piece of balsa trunk to her chest and J is serene. I'm just amazed I'm here, on this river! How many times have I been imagining this.

### Extract 3.

I keep thinking about being on this river and not being able to swim. And with a long dress on. Crikey, it was so difficult for her.

I have decided:

Her bothers should have manned up! They should have tried to use a machete. I mean they just gave up so easily!!

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