TRAVEL WRITING, 1610-1876

“And I’ll be sworn ’tis true, Travellers ne’er did lie, Though fools at home condemn ‘em.” So says Antonio in Shakespeare’s The Tempest when he is confronted with the wonders of Prospero’s enchanted island. Never before would he have believed in the tales of unicorns or phoenixes told by those who travelled to Arabia. But now, as Antonio plainly testifies, travel has expanded his concept of the possible. Writing about travel presses the very bounds of belief, testing the credulity of readers back home and engendering in some a certain scepticism. Yet travel writing also has the potential to expand the cultural imagination of its readers. Though they do not experience travel first hand, they can reap its rewards vicariously.

This course approaches the notion of travel writing in the broadest possible sense, examining works from the seventeenth century right through to the nineteenth that deal—in ways both explicit and implicit—with the expansion of the British empire.

Works of actual exploration and diplomacy are set against their fictionalized counterparts. For instance, we will read extracts from Dampier’s A New Voyage Round the World alongside Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels. In doing so, this course will locate travel writing within the wider contexts of scientific exploration, the developments in constitutional law that allowed for the incorporation of other nations and the political philosophy that justified empire’s violent expansions.

This class asks students to consider how literary culture anticipated and reflected the broadening of worlds that came with global navigation. We will not shy away from the negative implications of empire, either. Students will consider the trace left in the written record by the violent subdual of native populations. We will look at the complicity of literature in empire building as well as its power to challenge norms and to confront the problems that came with Britain’s emergence as a global power.

Class 1. Shakespeare’s The Tempest and the New World

Class 2. Dampier’s Voyages and the Discovery of Terra Australis

Class 3. Gulliver’s Travels and eighteenth-century science

Class 4. Writing Home: Montague’s Turkish Embassy Letters

Class 5. The Question of Naturalisation in George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda

No previous knowledge or “homework” is required, but students who sign up for this course will benefit from having some familiarity with the works under discussion and so may want to Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels or Eliot’s Daniel Deronda.
Dr. Marc Mierowsky studied English literature and linguistics at the Universities of Sydney and New England, Australia, before coming to Cambridge as a Gates Scholar to complete a PhD in English literature and intellectual history. He is currently the S. Ernest Sprott Fellow in Seventeenth-Century Literature at the Faculty of English, Cambridge. His interests range widely across early modern literature and intellectual history, though he is especially interested in questions of sovereignty, constitutionality, common sense philosophy. Other interests include the study of comedy from the seventeenth century to the present day (including stand-up), especially in relation to moral philosophy and social criticism; the use of literature in political and moral education; the literary criticism of the New York Intellectuals.