THOMAS PENSON:
PRECURSOR OF THE SENTIMENTAL TRAVELLER

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INTRODUCTION

In the seventeenth century, travelling and writing about it was very much an occupation associated with the upper classes. One of the few surviving travel accounts of this period written by a working-class person is Penson's Short Progress into Holland, Flanders and France. Between 1691 and 1698 a calligraphed copy of the journal was lent out to more than 80 different people.\(^1\) If we want to know what made it so popular with Penson's friends and acquaintances, it may be helpful to study the journal not only against the background of contemporary travel accounts, but also against that of later eighteenth-century travelogues. But first a little more about Penson himself.

The author of the manuscript was born in 1652 and educated at Christ's Church Hospital (1655–66) before he was apprenticed for eight years to a writing master. In 1676 a son, Jonathan, was born to him and his wife Mary. At the time of his journey he was a member of the Society of Arms Painters, a group of craftsmen operating with the consent of the College of Arms. A business card dating from the 1680s details his professional activities: "Thomas Penson, Arms Painter at the sign of the King's Arms on Ludgate Hill, where you may have pedigrees, curiously written, and painted Arms, Funeral Escutcheons, Ensigns, Cornets, Drums, Trumpet Banners, or anything drawn according to Heraldry, also palls of velvet. Honni Soit Qui Mal y Pense.\(^2\)

From the journal's preface it would appear that at the time he set out for Holland he was 'full freight with trouble', presumably because his wife had died or had left him, for there is also an outburst against the 'pernicious ... Doctors Commons', the society of ecclesiastical lawyers who also had jurisdiction over the affairs of laymen relating to marriage, legitimacy and wills. In 1694 he remarried and the next year he is mentioned as living in the parish of St Martin Ludgate, with his wife Deborah (King) and a son John.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Rough copy with names of people who borrowed the book, BL, MS Harl. 3516; fair copies (1690), Edinburgh, Nat. Lib. of Scotland, MS 3003; Leeds University Brotherton Lib., MS Trv d2 (1697). An edition is in preparation by the author.

\(^2\) Guildhall Library MS 12,818/3 (Christ's Hospital Children's Registers, 1635-1657), fo. 216. Baptism son, MS 6540/2, Parish Register, St Bride's. Arms painters, BL, MS Harl. 1454; card, BL MS Add. 38,140, fo. 165.

\(^3\) Cf. George D. Squibb, *Doctors' Commons: A History of the College of Advocates and Doctors of Law* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 1–3. For his marriage, see *A True Register of all the Christenings,
Penson may have undertaken the tour to recover from the strain he must have suffered at the breaking up of his family, possibly combining therapy and pleasure with business; in any case he very carefully noted down matters to do with his profession. On 30 June 1687 Old Style, he embarked on a ship bound for Rotterdam. His itinerary was that taken by the majority of tourists in Holland: after a brief stay in Rotterdam he moved on to Amsterdam, passing through Delft, The Hague and Leyden. He remained in Amsterdam for two months, longer than most others, and then travelled to Antwerp by way of Utrecht, Gouda and Rotterdam. Via Gent, Lille and Péronne he reached Paris, and after having made a trip to Versailles and run out of money, he arrived back in London on 22 November. He had spent roughly three months in Holland, a week in Flanders and seven weeks in France.

**SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY TRAVEL JOURNALS**

Before going into a more detailed analysis of Penson’s journal, one or two remarks about seventeenth-century tourism and the practice of keeping a travel journal may be in order. The travelogues of this period very strongly reflect the educational background of travel. Young members of the upper classes wrote them to show their parents and patrons they had travelled with profit. Those which got published were mostly written by scholars, many of whom as ‘governors’ accompanied the young noblemen on their journeys. Their accounts, just as those kept by people who toured mainly for pleasure, were written according to a set pattern derived from geographical descriptions found in atlases and guidebooks. The emphasis is on the descriptions of the various towns, their history, the sights and the customs of the people, elements which were linked together by a succinct narrative of the journey. After the description of the last city of a particular country, we usually find general observations. This approach already occurs in accounts of travels dating from the beginning of the century such as Thomas Coryat’s *Crudities* (1611; second edition, 1776), William Lithgow’s *Rare Adventures* (1614; tenth edition in 1692) and George Sandys’ *A Relation* (1615; seventh edition in 1673). Thus the travelogue offered authors a loose framework into which they

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5 Titles of these works: Th. Coryat, *Crudities Hastily Gobled up in Five Moneths Travells in France, Savoy, Italy, Rhetica …* (London, 1611); W. Lithgow, *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures and Paineful Peregrinations of the Long Nineteen Yeares Travayles from Scotland to the Most Famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia, and Africa* (London 1614); G. Sandys, *A Relation of a Journey Begun An. Dom. 1610. Foure Bookes. Containing a Description of the Turkish Empire,*