PETER O. STUMMER

An-Other Travelogue: Ferdinand Dennis’s Journey into Afro-Britain

"If crab nuh walk, him don't grow claws."
(Jamaican Proverb)

It is not only the fact that the idea of progress has recently come under fire which seems to lead us straight back into the 18th century, but other vectors are also pointing to a shift of paradigm where the vertical model of linear chronology is being substituted by the horizontal concept of experience in geographically adjacent lands.

Perhaps this is not the most plausible way of accounting for the new vogue of travelogues which we have been witnessing in recent years, and I do not want to labour the eighteenth-century parallel too much. But we should bear it in mind alongside the more fashionable “blurring-of-boundaries”-syndrome and the “deconstruction-of-everything”-project, which together go quite nicely hand in hand with a growing solipsistic concern and a search for the self in the form of the journey – especially when one sees such developments against the backdrop of mounting tension between the global and the regional all over the world.

To prove my point about the omnipresence of accounts of travel, suffice it to cite but a few recent titles. Granta 10 and Granta 20 were both devoted to travel writing. 1985 saw the publication of A Book of Traveller’s Tales by Eric Newby; The Armchair Traveler by Thorn and Reuther followed in 1989.¹

There is also, of course, the important tradition of turning the tables on the former colonial master and of making his home the object of “peripheral” scrutiny which existed long before the phrase “post-colonial discourse” had been coined. Let me remind you briefly of the likes of Frank Clune and Nirad

Chaudhuri, George Mikes and Prafulla Mohanti, Paul Theroux and Margaret Atwood. Although it should be noted in passing, that their renown appears to be in inverse proportion to their places of origin, regardless of whether they come from the Northern or the Southern Hemisphere.

Yet the Eighties also saw the production of more patriotic publications steeped in every tinge of British nostalgia, from Chamberlin’s *The Idea of England* to Ousby’s *The Englishman’s England*. Small wonder, then, that a travel writer like Jan Morris is not merely being facetious when she refers to her fellow-writer Chistopher Hope’s anguished formulation that he comes from a country which does not exist quite simply and unashamedly as “colonial.”

So we have a great number of books which rather wistfully retrace the imperial steps abroad and, at the same time, we encounter some frenzied activity along the lines of the Heritage Business at home. Heritage Business in capital letters that is, since – through increased privatisation – it has indeed become big business. John Urry in his book *The Tourist Gaze* calls this the representation of history as commodified past.

Stock-taking and inquiry into the national character are no doubt on the agenda. In this vein Idries Shah’s *Darkest England* and Nigel Barley’s *Native Land* are, in their attempts to produce prose full of barbed humour, more the exception than the rule, not least since they apply the Afghan’s learning as a historian in the one case and the ethnographer’s method of participatory observation in the other to the inhabitants of the British Isles as modern natives.

To approach the work of Ferdinand Dennis, which is the subject of this essay gradually and in greater detail, we must first bring in a category which might be called “the English Journey Pattern Reactivated.” Alas, what Barley’s *Native Land* and Beryl Bainbridge’s *English Journey or the Road to Milton Keynes* have in common is their multimedia aspect, for both books were published in conjunction with the productions of corresponding television programmes. To

---


