



THE FAR ISLANDS AND OTHER COLD PLACES: WOMEN TRAVELERS IN THE ARCTIC, 1850–1935

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This article uses historical travel writing by Anglo-European Women to investigate the construction of gendered geographies in the Far North. Applying an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, literary analysis and gender studies, the paper examines the gendered aspects of travel, and the intersectionality of gender, class and race. Using examples from two published travel accounts and personal archives, the paper will demonstrate the historical processes of gender differences and representations, as well as capture the intersectionality of literature and the construction of place in real, imaginary and symbolic terms.

Keywords: History, Travel literature, Gender.

Introduction

I must go North again! My heart
Is where the white mist lies
About the roots of starlit crags
Beneath the Arctic skies,
Where through the dusk the Dancers play
Across the northern pole;
I must go North again, for they
Have stolen away my soul¹

There is no doubt that “Women have been considered either absent from or powerless in the landscape of Arctic adventure” (Ericson, 2009: 104). Their absence from the history of the Arctic in general is largely due to a continuing emphasis on male historical actors in the North, and a dominant narrative that frames the Arctic frontier as a hypermasculine region with a scientific and colonial history that “produced solid patterns of homosocial environments” (Lewander, 2009: 91). Here “exaggerated models of masculinity prevalent in Anglo-American societies” are found, with Arctic landscapes described as “proving ground to demonstrate manliness” (Lyle, 2001:125). The historical peak period for this “culture of polar masculinity” and “patriarchal character” (Lyle, 2001: 125-126) runs parallel to the heroic age of Arctic exploration from 1818 onwards. This means that while (male) heroes of Arctic exploration and an extensive list of ‘Men of Letters’ of the Romantic and Far North are celebrated and commemorated, women, and their differently gendered perspectives on the North, have tended to be treated as an exotic

¹ HUTCHISON WYLIE, I. 1935. *Lyrics from Greenland*, London and Glasgow, Blackie & Son Limited.

sideshow to male expeditions and travel, or disappear from sight altogether. There is thus a need to continuously “excavate” and recover the voices and stories of women, in order to be able to put them alongside their male narratives and understand the significance of their participation.

Closer attention to women (...) — will reveal how their participation significantly influenced the political, economic, and cultural processes, as well as the public’s perception, of Arctic exploration (Erikson, 2009: 104)

The literature of ‘Lady Travelers’ thus takes on a very important role. Women Travelers had been a feature of travel literature for some time, with European women traveling to the edges of the British Empire to explore the exotic new places and people being added to the imperial maps of Britain and America (Byrne, 2013, Mills, 1993). Our view of the restricted role of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century does thus not adequately reflect the different historical and geographical realities women travelers encountered. Balducci and Balnap Jensen (2014) suggest that it makes much more sense to explore the wider historical contexts of female participation in public spaces and see their travel activities much more than a mere escape from the social and political restrictions at home.

While there is no question that women did not participate in institutions such as the government and the academy in the same way or to the same extent as their male counterparts in the nineteenth century, they were, nevertheless, important actors in other public spaces that included museums, parks, cafes, theatres, salons, shops and the streets, to name but a few locales where women’s presence and participation was common (Balducci and Balnap Jensen, 2014: 3).

Isobel Wylie Hutchison’s writing, as the introductory poem shows, conveys her deep fascination with the Arctic as an inspiring and magical place, motivating feelings of affinity with both the landscape and the people. Born and brought up on a Scottish country estate, her publications and private papers demonstrate her scientific interests as a botanist and geographer, her experiences as a female traveler, but also aspects of the colonial histories of the early twentieth century societies in the Arctic, be it as part of the British and Danish Empires. Much as her male counterparts, Wylie Hutchison engaged in both adventure and science, traveling by train, plane, ship and river steamer, as well as overland on foot or by dog-sledge, while collecting plant specimens for the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and the British Museum (Hoyle, 2005: xiv). As a tribute to her explorations in Iceland, Greenland and Arctic Alaska, she was awarded a Fellowship Diploma (1932), and the Mungo Park Medal by the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in 1934, having published several travel books including ‘On Greenland’s Closed Shore: The Fairyland of the Arctic’ (1930) and ‘North to the Rime-Ringed Sun’ (1934), but also four volumes of poetry.

The title for this paper is taken from a collection of travel essays and unpublished papers by Elizabeth Taylor, a woman traveler who specialized in traveling to and writing about the Far North. Elizabeth Taylor traveled during the 1880s by steamboat, canoe, Red River ox cart and on horseback. As a self-taught botanist and zoologist, she wrote about the local flora, fauna and wildlife she observed in her journeys, collecting plant and fish specimens for the American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Institute. Her itineraries included both mainland Scandinavia and the Canadian North (Taylor Dunn, 1997). Her published travel accounts included descriptions of the culture, family life, folklore and natural history of Alaska and Arctic Canada, but also covered other places she traveled to such as Iceland, Norway, Scotland and the Faeroe Islands. She traveled alone, and repeatedly declined the services of a servant or companion, managing to remain ‘a Lady’ at all times. This aspect was very important to women travelers, who all perform, in different ways, specific, gendered aspects of travel and womanhood within their narratives (Kassis, 2015, Johnston, 2013). When discussing ‘Women Travelers’ in the Far North, it is important to keep this aspect in mind. Although these women thus perform and curate European civilization and colonization ideologies, the texts these women produce – for the readers at home – also “need to be read in the context of the gender anxieties at the end of the nineteenth century” (Hansson, 2009: 107). The popularity of women’s travel literature during the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century, for example, seems to stand in sharp contrast to their longevity as emancipators, and creators of a female Arctic history, as women travelers return home to their more acceptable roles in society. Heidi Hansson discusses the different layers of gender that women negotiated in order to create a 'Feminised North' (Hansson, 2007).

The titles of nineteenth-century women's travel books, if not always the texts, seem to uphold the gender ideology of separate spheres, at times, to counteract the perceptions that traveling abroad was an unfeminine activity, but at times also to signal a sincere espousal of this gender contract (Hansson, 2007:77).

So, even though they seem to escape the constraints of gender norms at home, both Elizabeth Taylor and Isobel Wylie Hutchison are careful *not* to defy the gender norms and "conventional understanding of femininity" (Hansson, 2007: 75). Ostensibly, this is done in both published travel descriptions and private diaries, by being very specific about hygiene and dress, as well as commenting on domestic arrangements encountered, dresses and behavior of both indigenous and non-indigenous women and children, and describing social encounters with other women (carefully noting family connections and names). Elizabeth Taylor provides a whole essay on "Articles Found Useful on my Mackenzie River Trip", in itself a manual for dressing the colonial lady in this region:

My camp dress (leaf brown checked skirt, mantle with detachable hood, blouse, full knickerbockers, gaiters and cuffs) has been just the thing, light comfortable, and has passed through great circumstances, and still looks respectable. (...) My hat is still good as regards form and color, this English felt though expensive, paid. (...) As to gloves, my stout Paris dog skin ones though good, rather pretty, and serviceable, are not thick enough for mosquitos (Taylor Dunn, 1997: 59).

Not only does Taylor manage to convey a 'ladylike' dress sense here, she also refers to 'English felt' and 'Paris dog skin', showing her sophistication and ability to afford European materials. So, on the one hand, nineteenth and early twentieth century women travelers use their femininity to redefine the North from a dangerous and men-only region to somewhere "quite woman-friendly" (Hansson, 2007: 71), on the other hand their role as a 'Lady Traveller' is to frame and domesticate the Arctic, by imposing and maintaining colonial norms and boundaries.

As a Scottish/British traveler, Isobel Wyle Hutchison, who spent time both in Greenland and the Canadian North, also has the unique opportunity to compare the Danish approach to colonialism to that of Britain. Elisabeth Taylor, on the other hand, follows a much earlier commercial geography, with her journey up the Mackenzie River charting the newly developed trading networks by the Hudson's Bay Company. Both women are actively engaged in colonial and imperial activities by using the transport networks of their time. But whereas Elizabeth Taylor traveled along the Mackenzie River, a central part of the British Fur Trade Empire and the Hudson's Bay Company from the 1840s onwards, Isobel Wylie Hutchison's arrival in the 1930's encounters a very different Arctic of government-led, professional colonization (Stuhl, 2016: 16-87). Significantly, however, for the reception of publications by women travelers at the turn of the century, both form and content relate to wider historical and political gendering processes that were specifically aimed at "rearticulating 'the female'" (Boydston, 2008: 568-569). Being observed as an exotic creature is part of this experience, with Elizabeth Taylor noting that "Few of the Eskimos had ever seen a white woman, and they evidently found me very strange and amusing (Taylor Dunn, 1997: 57)". However, within the existing regional colonial social structures, the role of the exotic single woman traveler can also cause animosity - as Gwyneth Hoyle, Isobel Wylie Hutchison's biographer observes:

In such a tight little community, where the social structure was clearly defined, Isobel, a single white woman, was an outsider who did not belong. And, while her stay in Greenland had been as an accepted visitor authorized by the Danish government, "in northern Canada

single women, unless they were nurses or nuns, were viewed with suspicion by the male population (Hoyle, 2005: 147).

Wylie Hutchison began her travels in the Far North by walking from Reykjavik to Akureyri in August 1925, continuing a year later with a boat journey to the Lofoten Islands in Northern Norway. It is already clear then that she was planning to travel further, with her 1926 diary beginning with a list of ‘Things I’d like to have done before end of 1926” that includes “Have visited Greenland and Labrador” (Hutchison Wylie, 1926). She applied for a “Greenland Passport” in April 1927, traveling to Angmassalik (Tasiilaq) in East Greenland on the ship Gertrud Rask from Copenhagen on the 31 July 1927. She arrived on the 5 August 1927, spending several months in Julianehaab, a small settlement “full of gossip and a little family of Danes who all seem pretty friendly fortunately, with each other” (Hutchison Wylie, 1927). The result of this and another trip to Northern Greenland in 1928 (via Godthab (Nuuk) to spend 7 months in Umanaq (Uummannaq)) were two books “On Greenland’s Closed Shore: The Fairytale of the Arctic” and “Lyrics from Greenland” (Hutchison Wylie, 1930, Hutchison Wylie, 1935). As well as her publications, Wylie Hutchison also returned with sketches, photographs and film, unique in their depiction of the everyday lives of the communities she encountered.

As a single woman traveler, she clearly found it easy to engage with both the settler communities and indigenous people, mainly via other women, such as her indigenous ‘maids’ or the local teachers, nurses and doctors. So, while she follows her interests as a botanist, she also takes part and documents many social occasions. She also accepts and disseminates many colonial practices and ideologies, commenting positively view of colonial education practices:

In her travels she had a chance to observe Eskimo life under three different jurisdictions – Danish, American, and Canadian. Shingle Point, a good example of such an institution, was her first connection with a Canadian residential school and impressed her favorably (Hoyle, 2005: 142).

And then there is sketching. Along with the ‘feminine’ science of botany, sketching is probably one of the most common female travel activities encountered in travel literature. Repeatedly, women travelers draw and sketch the people and places they encounter, forming personal relationships with their subjects and personalizing the landscape around them by capturing it in a drawing or painting. Both women were keen botanist, but painted, sketched, and took photographs to illustrate their texts, publishing widely both in newspapers, magazines and book-form. Elizabeth Taylor sketches, and takes photographs of the people she meets along the river, commenting that,

Two days we spent at Peel’s River post. No one thought of going to bed. Trading and letter writing, Eskimo dances given in our honour, the loading of furs, kept everyone busy, and I wished to collect plants and sketch (Taylor Dunn, 1997: 57).

This is later extended to the moving image, with Isobel Wylie Hutchison documenting domestic scenes, as well as the landscape by filming it. These activities introduce various aspects of visual control, with both landscapes and people being actively ‘framed’ and, in some cases, directed to provide examples of ‘typical’ activities. So, for example, Isobel Wylie Hutchison’s film “Flowers and coffee party at Umanak” from 1927 acts as a reference back to homeliness and femininity, but also curates the event as colonial event. The Danish coffee party is preceded by sketches of flowers and short sections showing two Greenlandic children and dogs entitled “Other growing products in Greenland” and “The crowberry is gathered by women and children, and stacked for winter fuel” (with a woman and two children ‘demonstrating’), followed by a section entitled “The governor of Greenland gives a coffee-party at Umanak”. It introduces all the characters attending this party as a playful performance of the Danish colonial social structure, including “The Danish Lady Doctor”, an indigenous woman “Judita” (no surname), “Professor William Thalbitzer”, “Herr Daugaard Jensen and “North Greenland’s Judge (Herr Rosendahl)”, later joined by “Kruuse, the Schoolmaster and Organist”.

As many of her contemporaries, Isobel Wylie Hutchison saw the Arctic as a fairyland, a place to escape to from the noise of industrialization and modernity, but also as an escape from her gender role at home. She never married, but instead chose to travel extensively, keenly interested in the landscapes and people she encountered, producing photographs and paintings of many of her acquaintances. Although her biographer Gwyneth Hoyle insist that “she would never have called herself a feminist – merely an independent *person*” (Hoyle, 2005: 213) Wylie Hutchison appears on a 1939 photograph of a commemorative *Dinner with the Glasgow Suffragettes* (republished by the Glasgow Evening Times (2014)). This puts her into the category of women that are politically active, and who travel with a sense of emancipation and self-determination available to women of their social class. Women travelers like Taylor and Wylie Hutchison thus adopt shared responsibility for transferring colonial cultural values to the Arctic frontier, while sending back images of exotic locations and peoples. While traveling through the colony, class and race actually often override gender (as the women act as colonial agents), whereas gender is often an important consideration for readers at home, where representations of the strong, Arctic female traveller are in danger of clashing with the heightened emphasis on propriety and family values. This is why the ‘lady traveller’ is an explorer that generally follows existing trading routes. This is why she demonstrates an interest in the feminine science of botany, but does not ‘discover’ new land.

Conclusion

Scholars such as Heidi Hansson have argued that women travelers produce what she calls a ‘Feminized Arctic’ and, through their publications, curate their own gendered ‘space’ in the Arctic, the Feminized North (Hansson et al., 2009). Patricia Erikson (Pierce Erikson, 2013) notes how this type of biographical writing is a process that

- Channels and implements historically specific ideas about race and class, but also
- situates women as a historical actor alongside the current migration and colonization narratives.

It follows that we should study these texts not as travel literature, but as complex examples of biographical writing, which is historically located and feed into a collective memory and an extension of the national histories (Boydston, 2008, Halldorsdottir et al., 2016). Women travelers thus capture the intersectionality of literature and the construction of place in real, imaginary and symbolic terms. So, for example, the women’s travel narratives are largely complicit with the colonization narratives and colonial heritages of the Arctic, where women writers combine their public persona as historical actors with those of the domestic/feminine/maternal symbols of the time. Gender here becomes a rather dynamic and changing historical process, rather than a static, sectional concept, that ‘intersects’ with other, fixed concepts, such as class and race (Boydston, 2008: 559). Instead, we can observe gender as part of a series of historical and cultural processes “that have produced ‘women’ have also produced ‘men’ (Boydston, 2008: 558)”;

the growth of popular culture at the turn of the century – exactly at the moment when the woman suffrage movement was reaching its broadest appeal – provided labouring young women with both material and social forms for rearticulating ‘the female’. The representation of ‘the lady’ that so inspired labouring women, for example, was not a mere pale and envy-riven reflection of ‘the lady’ of elite discourse: it was its own gender marker, signally a distinct gendering process (Boydston, 2008: 568-569).

The significance of the Women traveller as a historical actor lies perhaps not so much in her immediate transformation into a feminist activist, but in their very public position as actively negotiating contemporary gendering processes both as a woman and a *person*.

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