

## World History Commons - Analyzing Travel Narratives Full Transcript

Tom Ewing

How to Cite This Source: Tom Ewing, "Analyzing Travel Narratives," in World History Commons, <https://worldhistorycommons.org/analyzing-travel-narratives>.

### **1. What can we learn from travel narratives? (2:03)**

You have the sense of learning about a different culture or a different people, a different environment. You have that sense of discovery, of going in and immersing yourself. A good travel account will try and decipher that and figure out what are the connections between people or where did they come from or why do things fit together the way they do.

I think what you would learn from a travel account is this sense of “seeing anew” that the traveler has that you couldn’t get from a source that’s generated within that community. A lot of Americans and others go to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and the 1930s because it’s such a striking contrast. And so there are a number of travel accounts where it starts with the traveler encountering this new society, this new socialist society. And you can get some of that from the Soviet side, but not in the same way.

A good account will say, “in this account I went in looking for these examples, but here’s what I also found.” And also have sufficient material in there that can be then interpreted even if that’s not the main thing that they’re talking about.

I would say the ones that are less satisfactory are the travel accounts where their experience is very narrow and they make much larger claims than what they’re actually seeing. So they make broad claims about society, and then when you actually read through it carefully and say, well, who did they talk to, they had an interpreter or they talked to a very narrow group and then they left or they were kicked out. And then they make these very broad claims. Somebody who comes into a society for a week, two weeks, three weeks and then leaves, well how much credibility does that have?

Often, you have this dynamic of a traveler from not only a literate culture but also a culture that prioritizes and rewards discovery and description—the West Europeans in the 17th, 18th century, you know. There’s a lot of interest in going into other countries and writing about them. And so there’s a real attention to that and discourse of that and there’s a very sophisticated level of description.

Many of the cultures they're encountering are not very literate and more importantly, they don't value that kind of discussion. And so there you have a very striking contrast between a traveler's account that will be very rich, lots of anecdotes, lots of descriptions of people, lots of reported conversation, versus an indigenous document that may be much more sparse.

## **2. How do you analyze a travel narrative? (1:48)**

By looking at the source and really paying attention to how that's constructed. Focus on particular passages. Why is this person looking at this particular issue and describing it in a certain way? What can we take from that? What may be missing? What may be distorted? What may be narrow in its depiction?

As you read the document and reread the document, you start to get the sense of why certain events or certain characters are where there are. They may not have happened exactly this way or they may have happened in a different sequence, but this is a sequence that tells a better story. I think that's where being very conscious of how the source is constructed is really important.

The second part is to use other sources. In the case of Russian history, there's been a real effort to combine what foreigners have said, for example, about the nature of autocracy with internal sources. And often, they're completely at odds, and you can either say one's right and one's wrong. Or more likely, you can say the travelers are focusing on certain things. The internal documents are focusing on other things. And what's actually happening is some combination of those.

What's there? And then, what's not there? What is this person seeing? Where are they going? Who are they talking to? What events, what activities are they describing? When do they start? When do they come back? Often there's a map. What are the important historical events that are happening in this period?

I would also focus on what's not there. How narrow is their experience? Where are they traveling? How much do they know about the language? How are their expectations and perceptions shaping what they're seeing and what they're remembering? I think that's the hardest one, but in some ways, that's the most illuminating. How is it that they go in looking for certain things and that's what they're finding?

Who's the audience for this? Who is the book being written for? Why were they interested in reading about other parts of the world? And a lot of that involves knowing about the society in which this is being done.

A more analytical approach is to take a particular passage and say “How is this directed at a particular audience? What are the assumptions that the author brings in?”

### **3. What are some limitations of travel narratives? (1:47)**

The first, and probably the most important, is that the travelers see a very narrow part of the society. Often they see what they’re looking for. Often they project onto the society what they want to find or what they are afraid of. They’re deceptive in lots of a different ways.

This sense of discovery may be imagined later on to make it more dramatic. Issues of time are played around with. A travel account may have the sense of a continuous narrative, and then when you actually go back, it says, “I did six or seven trips. But for the purposes of this narrative I went and I discovered it and then I went all the way through and then I left.”

Often travelers, if they don’t speak the language, they don’t make a big deal of that. They might say it at the beginning and it might come up a few times in between, but you can read an entire account and not realize that everything that is being said is in fact through a translator or simply not understood. It’s not that that may be wrong, but you just have to be very aware of that—that this is someone who may be not following all of these conversations.

Travelers pay most attention to the things they’re most interested in. [In] the accounts from Russia in the 16th century, they’re very interested in the church. Why? Because they’re coming out of western Europe where church conflicts and church identity are very, very important so that’s what they look for in Russia. They’re not so interested in the status of the lower class because in western Europe they’re not interested in the status of the lower class. You have to be very aware of that and look for other kinds of sources that fill that in.

They’re aimed at a certain audience or they are recreating a particular journey. The fictionalized ones become more complicated because you can essentially tell the story of a journey, but more or less explicitly make things up.

A journal that is actually kept during the time of the trip is different from the ones written afterwards. The person goes and then comes back and then writes about it. And I think you have to be very cautious about how much of it may be fictionalized. There may have been multiple encounters that are brought together into one, or there may be major stretches that are left out.

### **4. How do you analyze John Ledyard’s *Journal*? (3:44)**

This account is very useful for a world history context. It was by an American named John

Ledyard, who was born in 1751, and so lived through the era of American War of Independence. He travels with Captain Cook on his Pacific voyages and travels along the North American coast and then up into Alaska and actually over to Siberia. So he encounters several different cultures—the Pacific Islands cultures, the Native Americans of the Northwest, and then indigenous people as well as Russians along the Pacific Coast. So you have an American, although he's born a British subject but becomes an American citizen after Independence, who is encountering these multiple different cultures.

Historians have discovered that much of it is not very reliable. He actually borrowed heavily from an earlier account of Captain Cook's voyage and added much of those anecdotes and incidents to his own account. But it has this sense of discovery, that he really is going out and encountering these cultures for the first time.

He dates this so it looks like a journal:

*On the 7th of March we fell with in with the coast of America in lat. 49 degrees North long. 233 East. A little below Cape Blanco, and tracing it northerly until the 28th we entered an inlet in 45 [49] degrees North. From the 7th to the 28th we had the ruggedest weather we had yet experienced. The weather was cold, the gales of winds were successive and strong, and sometimes very violent. Our ships complained. We were short of water and had an unknown coast to explore. And the very day we purposed to reconnoiter for a harbour, the wind veered to the Northeast and forced us off the coast a full week. . . .*

*It was a matter of doubt with many of us whether we should find any inhabitants here, but we had scarcely entered the inlet before we saw that hardy, that intrepid, that glorious creature man approaching us from shore. As we advanced into the inlet we found it still more favorable, and perceived several small islands between the two shores. Night approaching we came to an anchor between one of those islands and the eastern shore about one quarter of a mile from each.*

*In the evening we were visited by several canoes full of the natives; they came abreast our ship within two rods of us and there staid the whole night, without offering to approach nearer or to withdraw farther from us, neither would they converse with us. At the approach of day they departed in the same reserve and silence.*

This is a classic account. It starts out very specific, down to the latitude and the longitude, although a footnote on this edition says “an obvious error,” which is characteristic. And talking in detail about the environment—what was going on with the weather and then the geography of

this harbor And you get the sense in this account of the actual experience of coming into this harbor and not really knowing what was going to happen. Not knowing what they were going to see, and then this mentality of the sailors, “We weren’t sure if we were going to see anybody. We really wanted to see people. We were a little afraid of them.”

And then this very mysterious sentence that he has at the end about being visited by several canoes full of the natives who come close to the ship but then don’t say anything. They don’t know if they’re friendly or not, and then they depart in the same reserve and silence. This is a frequent model in travel accounts—what our first encounter with the “other” is. Here’s the crucial moment when they first see what they’ve been looking for all this time which is the people of North America.

It’s somewhat exaggerated when he talks about “that hardy, that intrepid, that glorious creature man approaching us from shore.” Here is where you have to think: “is this really what they were thinking at the time?” May have been; may not have been. But certainly it’s something that in this narrative is powerful. Whoever annotated this said that this is not really the right place. As he was re-creating the story once he got back, he was putting in details to make it seem like it was very accurate, but not always getting them correct.

The issue here is whether there’s any account from the other side. What was their response to the coming of Europeans? For this purpose, all we have is this account and so we get some sense of what the European sailors were thinking. We don’t have any sense of what the “other” is [thinking] except in this behavior of coming out to see who they are and then going away. I think it’s very illustrative of that dynamic.

### **5. How does Ledyard describe the “natives” he encounters? (3:25)**

He says:

*On the 1st of April we were visited by a number of natives in their boats, which resemble our bateaux. . . .*

*I had no sooner beheld these Americans then I set them down for the same kind of people that inhabit the opposite side of the continent. They are rather above the middle stature, copper-coloured, and of an athletic make. They have long black hair, which they generally wear in a club on the top of the head, they fill it when dressed with oil, paint, and the downe of birds. They also paint their faces with red, blue, and white colours, but from whence they had them or how they were prepared they would not inform us, nor could we tell. Their cloathing generally*

*consists of skins, but they have two other sorts of garments, the one is made of the inner rind of some sort of bark twisted and united together like the woof of our coarse cloaths, the other very strongly resembles the New Zealand Togo, and is also principally made with the hair of their dogs, which are mostly white and of the domestic kind. . . .*

*In their manners they resemble the other aborigines of North America, they are bold and ferocious, sly and reserved, not easily provoked but revengeful; we saw no signs of religion or worship among them, and if they sacrifice it is to the God of liberty.*

What's most striking in this is how he is using familiar categories to try and understand this "other" population. He actually had many encounters with Native Americans in Connecticut and New Hampshire where he grew up and was interested in these settlements. So when he goes to sea and goes to the Pacific, he's looking for things that are familiar. Why is it that he keeps comparing them to Indians? Is that because they're like Indians of New England? Or because that's what he knows and so that's a useful category to put them in? In this case, you see it again and again: "I had no sooner beheld these Americans and I set them down for the same kind of people." He's making an argument about essential identity that's true on opposite sides, in this case, of the North American continent, but also among peoples that had no way of interacting with each other. It's the Europeans who are making this connection.

The descriptions of clothing and appearance are very common in travel narratives. They often have very good descriptions of what people are wearing, what they eat, how they look. What kind of decorations are on their clothes? In their hair? That, again, is often done because travelers often feel an obligation to re-create what they're seeing for their audience, and it sells. It sells books. But it's also something that's obvious. The travelers can see this and so they can write about it.

This one is unusual because he admits things that he doesn't know. And he admits he doesn't know them because they won't tell him. Often that is not obvious to an outsider. Or an outsider is deliberately kept away: "we saw no signs of religion or worship among them." Does that mean they have no religion, or does that mean that they don't want an outsider observing? The fact that he puts it in this way—"we saw no signs"—rather than saying, "they don't have a religion." In some ways it's more common for travelers to think if they don't see a sign of religion, that there is no religion.

Clearly here he's projecting onto this population: "they're bold and ferocious, sly and reserved, not easily provoked but revengeful." I think that is in some ways the worst part of travel

accounts, is to make extraordinarily broad, sweeping generalizations about a population based on an extremely limited encounter.

How does he know they're not easily provoked, but revengeful? What might have happened that would make him think that? Is this accurate? Is this a useful way to think about this particular culture? Or does it tell us more about his expectations and the expectations that he's bringing in to this kind of encounter?

In terms of interpreting journals written by westerners about other cultures, there's a homogenization. "Our" culture is like this; "their" culture is like that. And all of "their" cultures are kind of the same. There's sort of this implicit "us" and "them" dichotomy. And in this case, the "them" is the Pacific Island culture, the Native American culture.

## **6. How do you teach students to analyze travel narratives? (2:18)**

Maurice Hindus, who was born in Russia, emigrated to the United States and spent much of the 1920s traveling around the Chautauqua lecture circuit talking about Russia. And so his whole frame was "I have to explain Russia to the world." He wrote this book called *Red Bread* which is about collectivization which is a wonderful teaching resource because it is about him going back to his village. Each chapter has a main character, representative character from different aspects of collectivization. There's all this excitement and all this change and he contrasts that to the U.S. That's very useful and it's very easy for students to imagine what it would be like to come into this culture and to see these different characters. It's so descriptive because he was really trying to show to the outside world what Russia is like.

If you contrast that to the documents that are indigenous to this process, they're not nearly as descriptive. Often they're more slogans. You have to look very, very hard to find an interesting character or to get that same sense of a narrative and a conflict and so on. And so it's much easier to use the travel account for teaching than to use these other sources, but what you're missing in the travel account is that larger picture.

You can use the travel account that's very accessible for the students but bring in other materials. When you're looking at the character of the young woman revolutionary, compare that to petitions from older women. The young woman revolutionary who's "gung ho" in favor of collectivization; petitions from older women who are much more critical or unhappy. In terms of understanding the source, you can say, well, "why is it that he focuses on these characters and depicts them in a certain way?" And really look internally to the document. Why is he, in this case literally, so attracted to the young woman and dismissive of these others? Well that's his

narrative, the story he's interested in.

You could ask a more imaginative question. How would you feel after being at sea for many months and now you're coming close to land? What kinds of things would you be thinking? What's their purpose in going into this harbor? Are they looking for people? Are they looking for shelter? Are they looking for land?

Ask if they've had a similar experience or imagined one of going into a very different culture or community for the first time. What would they look for? Or if an outsider came into their community, how much would they understand what was going on?

If somebody came into a student dorm and didn't speak English, how much would they understand? If this is something you're encountering for the first time, what are you looking for and how much are you missing? If go to Vienna [Austria] and you hit six bars, that's your travel account. Is that going to be an effective source for Europe in the year 2003? Ask students to imagine the process of creating these accounts.