

Women's Travel in the Time of Jane Austen  
by Barbara Hodgson

a talk for the Jane Austen Society,  
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The following is an unedited summary of my talk, for the benefit of the members of the Jane Austen Society, Vancouver Branch.

Of Jane Austen, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, ninth edition, wrote: "Her life was singularly tranquil and void of incident." Contributing to her relatively uneventful life, was the fact that her travels were limited to a very small area, principally Hampshire and Somerset.

Many of her contemporaries, however, chose to leave the British Isles altogether and travel to the Continent or even to the Middle East. They travelled for many reasons. Some were making pilgrimages, one of the few acceptable reasons for travel. Others, such as Eliza Fay and Mary Elgin, accompanied their husbands to distant lands. Some, such as Lady Hester Stanhope, sought escape. Still others, Mme. de Staël and Princess Caroline, for example, travelled as exiles. Very few admitted they were just travelling for travel's sake. Mary Shelley and Lady Craven were two exceptions who admitted to wanderlust.

Travel at this time was relatively difficult. There were no trains; the first rail service was not in place until 1825, nine years after Austen's death. Land transportation was limited to diligences (stage-coaches), cabriolets, post-chaise, or horse and mule. The diligence was most commonly used for long-distance travel on the Continent. This carriage commonly held up to six people and travelled between posts, where horses could be changed and the traveller could take refreshments or grab a nap.

Roads were fairly rudimentary, and there were few bridges. Crossing rivers meant fording them or finding a ferry boat. Crossing the Alps presented a challenge to those going from France, Switzerland or Austria to Italy. Mount Cenis, a 6800-foot-high pass between France and Italy, was mostly used by travellers coming from Britain. At this pass, locals could be hired to carry goods and passengers. Some carriages were taken apart and transported in pieces.

Ship transport on long-distant travel, was by sail. The time required to cross the Atlantic by sail was about six weeks. (Steamers later cut the time to ten days). For such long voyages, livestock were brought on board to ensure fresh meat and milk. Entertainment was not provided. Harriet Martineau, who travelled to the United States in the 1830s, commented that passengers had a good time reading the mail carried by her packet ship.

Travellers through the Continent usually brought their own linens and cutlery, as those supplied at post houses were unsanitary or inadequate. Customs charges were levied against such personal property, so travel through several territories could be quite expensive.

Up until the early 1800s, passports were issued by the country being travelled to, rather than the country of citizenship. As Europe was then broken into many separate territories, principalities, duchies, city-states, etc., this created untold complications.

Money was another difficulty. Paper currency, or bank notes, had little use outside of the issuing country. Coin, especially gold and silver, was preferable, as it could be valued by weight and purity. A less hefty and risky alternative was the letter of credit, issued by established bankers and negotiable at banks or with consuls.

Intermittent conflicts between France, Holland, Spain and Britain rendered travel dangerous during the 1780s through to the second decade of the 1800s. And the French Revolution essentially cut France off to travellers. After Napoleon's abdication in 1814, travel to France opened up, but travellers had to beware of roving bands of restless soldiers, looking to plunder defenseless wayfarers now that they had no other means of survival.

Tourism included shopping and sightseeing, activities we are familiar with today. Sightseeing, however, took on a different aspect when the traveller visited the Paris morgue, as in the case of Eliza Fay and Fanny Trollope, or watched a French king dine at Versailles, as did Princess Dashkov. Women in Jane Austen's time were especially interested in French fashions, so shopping for clothing in Paris was *de rigueur* for any woman who could afford it. Men, too, availed themselves of the latest in French hats, gloves, canes and wigs.

The travellers discussed included Mrs. Eliza Fay (1756-1816), the author of *Original Letters from India: 1779-1815*. Fay travelled from England to India with her husband, Anthony, in

1779. The couple went overland through the Continent, caught a boat from Leghorn (now Livorno) to Alexandria, then went up the Nile to Cairo and overland to Suez. From Suez, they sailed to Calicut, where they were imprisoned by the Indian governor. When they were finally released, after paying a ransom, they made their way to Calcutta. They separated some ten years later, and Fay tried to earn a living by investing in cloth and in ships. She died penniless in England, after travelling between India and England several times and to America. Her book was published posthumously. The latest edition (1925) was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, with a foreword by E.M. Forester.

Also discussed was Lady Hester Stanhope (1776-1839). Stanhope, the niece of British Prime Minister William Pitt, left England several years after her uncle's death in 1806. She and her half-brother James hitched a ride on a frigate ship to Gibraltar. From there, she went to Malta, where she began an affair with Michael Bruce, also of England. The couple, along with Hester's maid and her personal physician, Charles Meryon, then travelled to Athens and Constantinople. They were shipwrecked at Rhodes, en route to Egypt, and lost everything. At this point Stanhope began to dress in Turkish men's clothing.

They reached Syria in 1811. Stanhope daringly entered Damascus openly, then even more daringly travelled to Palmyra, the Roman ruins in the Syrian desert, where no Western woman had been since Roman times. She was greeted with great celebration, and after this triumph, styled herself the Queen of the Desert. She settled into an abandoned monastery near Sidon, in today's Lebanon. She lived there until her death,

entertaining local dignitaries and such luminaries as Alphonse de Lamartine and Alexander Kinglake.

Also mentioned were

Lady Charlotte Bury (1775-1861). Author of *The Diary of a Lady-in-Waiting: Being the Diary Illustrative of the Times of George the Fourth*. Bury travelled on the continent to Italy in 1814-19. She had been lady-in-waiting to Princess Caroline.

Lady Elizabeth Craven (1750-1828). The author of *Memoirs of the Margravine of Anspach*. 1826 (Eastern Europe) and *A Journey Through the Crimea to Constantinople*. 1789 . Lady Craven lived a scandalous life. She was divorced in scandal and, in 1785, went travelling for a year with a male companion. She went to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Amsterdam, Vienna and Constantinople. She then became the lover of the Margrave of Anspach and travelled frequently with him. When their respective spouses died, they married. She lived her final years in Naples and is buried there.

Mary Elgin (née Nisbet) (1777-1855). Born in Scotland, she married Lord Thomas Bruce Elgin, 1799. Together, they travelled to Constantinople, where Elgin had been appointed Ambassador extraordinary, 1799-1802. Her travels were recorded in letters home to her mother.

Lady Sydney Morgan (1777?-1859). Lady Morgan would not admit her birth date, though she proudly declared she was born in a boat somewhere between Ireland and England. She was the wife of Sir Charles Morgan, with whom she negotiated a contract which allowed her to keep her earnings from her books. She

travelled extensively on the Continent and was the author of *France*, 1817, and *Italy*, 1821. She also wrote *Woman and her Master: A History of the Female Sex from the Earliest Period*, 1840.

Mme. de Staël (Anne Louise Germaine Staël-Holstein (née Necker) (1766-1817). de Staël was a famous exile, during both the revolution and post-revolution (Napoleon). She travelled through Switzerland, Germany, England, Italy, Russia and Sweden. Her book *Corinne, ou Italie* (*Corinne, or Italy*) is a novel, but it is most interesting as a guidebook to Italy.

Other English travellers of Jane Austen's time:

Barkley, Francis (1769-1845) Travelled around the world to the BC Coast with her seafaring husband. She did not publish.

Barnard, Anne Lindsay, Lady. (1750-1825) *Letters Written From the Cape of Good Hope, 1797-1801*.

Belzoni, Sarah. (1783-1870) In Egypt from 1815-19. Author of *Mrs. Belzoni's Short/Trifling Account*, appended to G. Belzoni's *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries . . . in Egypt and Nubia*. 1820

Bradley, Eliza. (b. 1783) wife of Captain James Bradley, of Liverpool. She was a passenger on the *Sally* a sailing ship that was wrecked off the coast of Barbary in June 1818. She wrote an *Authentic Narrative of the Shipwreck and Sufferings*, 1821

[Amelia Elizabeth] Caroline of Brunswick (1768-1821). The wife of the future George IV, forced upon him by his father, George III. The Prince Regent formally separated from her upon the birth of their child, Charlotte Augusta, in 1796. She was censured for careless speech and, as a virtual exile, travelled on the Continent and as far as Palestine until George III's death in 1820, when she returned to England. She was barred from the coronation of George IV, though she was officially the queen and remained so until her death a year later.

Marguerite Countess of Blessington (1789-1849). Lady Blessington travelled for several years with her husband and sister through the Continent, in the 1820s. The result were her books *Idler in Italy*, *The Idler in France* and *Conversations with Lord Byron*. She was also a novelist.

Anna Maria Falconbridge, (née Horwood) (b. 1769). The author of *Narrative of Two Voyages to Sierra Leone During the Years 1791-1792-1793*. Travelled with her husband to Sierra Leone, where a colony had been established for former slaves.

Maria Dundas Graham, (Lady Callcott) (1785-1842). The author of *Journal of a Residence in India*. 1812, as well as several books on South America. She travelled to Brazil and Chile with her husband and was widowed partway through the voyage.

Lady Florentina Wynch Sale, (1787-1853) Lady Sale was taken captive during the first Afghan War. She and some two dozen other women and children lived through the massacre that saw the deaths of all the British soldiers but one. She wrote *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan*. 1843

Janet Schaw (c. 1737- c. 1801). The author of *Journal of a Lady of Quality* (not published until 1921). She travelled to Jamaica and the Carolinas in 1774-75.

Mary Shelley (1797-1851). The author of *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, 1817 and *Rambles Through Germany and Italy*, 1840, 1842, 1843. The author, as well, of *Frankenstein*, and the wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Their tour of the Continent in 1814, after peace was temporarily established in France, was done on a shoestring.

Mrs. Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe (1766-1850). Author of *The Diary of Mrs. John Graves Simcoe: Wife of the First Lieutenant-Governor of the Province of Upper Canada, 1792-6*.

Somerville, Mary, née Fairfax (Scottish, 1780-1872). A mathematical genius, Somerville trained in astronomy and geography by her father, Sir William George Fairfax, an officer in the Royal Marines. Her studies were encouraged by her first husband, Samuel Greig., When she was widowed, she married Dr William Somerville. She is known for her respected astronomical experiments, and her books *On the Connection of the Physical Sciences*, 1834, and *Physical Geography*, 1835. She was made an honorary member of the Royal Astronomical Society, 1835. She also travelled frequently to the Continent, where she met various scientists, and died in Florence, her last home.

Mariana Starke (1762-1838). The author of the very popular and early guidebook: *Travellers on the Continent*. 1820

Frances (Fanny) Milton Trollope (1780-1863). A prolific author of novels, Trollope's other focus, travel books, include *Belgium and Western Germany in 1833*, *Paris and the Parisians*, and *Domestic Manners of Americans*, 1832, all based on her many travels.

Barbara Hodgson is the author of two books on the history of women's travels: *No Place for a Lady: Tales of Adventurous Women Travellers*, 2002, and *Dreaming of East: Western Women and the Exotic Allure of the Orient*, 2006, Greystone Books. *No Place for a Lady* is an overview of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century women's travel around the world. *Dreaming of East* concentrates on women's travel to the Middle East, from 1717 until 1930. Both books are copiously illustrated with archival engraving and photographs and are available at local bookstores.