

***Through Another Europe – An Anthology of Travel Writing on the Balkans.* Ed. Andrew Hammond. Oxford: Signal Books Limited, 2009. xxiv, 265 pp. Notes. Index. Paper.**

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The Balkans, with their dynamic history, geographical position, and diverse mixture of ethnic and religious groups, have been—and still are—represented as a liminal space which is neither European nor Oriental. This specific ‘otherness’ of the Balkans has been, to a great extent, established and perpetuated through the representations of the peninsula in the books and articles of Western European and American intellectuals, diplomats, journalists, travel writers etc. who are both captivated and appalled by the Balkans.

Andrew Hammond has taken upon himself the difficult and ambitious task of compiling a representative sample of such writings in his book *Through Another Europe—An Anthology of Travel Writing on the Balkans*. The book begins with an introductory study in which the editor addresses the history of the British and American fascination with the Balkans, its causes (the attraction of the reputed combination of savagery and mystery), its implications (the opening of the peninsula for imperial penetration), and its consequences (the transformation and persistence of specific representations of the inhabitants).

This introductory study is followed by more than 50 passages from travelogues chronologically organised into three parts. Each of the three parts is introduced by a short passage addressing the general historical context and the prevailing representations of the Balkans and its peoples during the specific period. The editor also provides a short introduction to each extract, drawing attention to specific representations and themes present in the passage. Furthermore, the table of contents indicates the national and regional focus of each extract.

The first part covers the period between the 17th and early-20th century, when much of the peninsula was under the administration of the Habsburgs and the Ottoman Empire. The selected extracts demonstrate that British travellers, as well as long-term British residents of the region, found little to admire in the native populations. The predominant representations of the peoples and lands of the Balkans establish them as backward, violent, barbaric, bloodthirsty, and savage. Although some writers did express sympathy for the Balkan peoples and for their national liberation struggles, they also portrayed them as child-like and bucolic noble savages from a long-forgotten age.

The representations change quite substantially in the second part, which covers the period between 1914 and 1939. According to the editor, the main cause for this change is that “the vilification that dominated travel writing for centuries now seemed inappropriate for a region that the allied forces sought to conscript against the central powers” (p. 77). The denigration prevalent in the 19th century was exchanged for a complimentary style of representation, which

endured after the First World War. After the war, the Balkans became a sort of romantic, pastoral alternative to Western modernity, a region full of music and dances.

This romantic vision of the Balkans begins to wane in the extracts from the third part of the anthology, which covers the period between 1939 and 2005. The majority of the passages from the Cold War period paint a quite sympathetic and respectful picture of the peninsula. As Hammond observes, “The Balkans were perceived more as a source of humour than a source of fear” (p. 194). After 1989, and especially since the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the representations of the Balkans in travelogues return to the same kind of denigration common in the 19th century. The Balkans are once again portrayed as an insecure region of barbaric, bloodthirsty people, devoured by ancient hatreds which endanger not only themselves but also the presumably peaceful peoples of Western Europe.

Considering the wealth of the material available, the particular strength of this anthology lies in the painstaking selection and well-considered organisation of extracts that are representative of travel writing from the specific period in history. Furthermore, the introductory study and the short introductions accompanying the passages address important questions regarding the epistemological status of travelogues, their embeddedness in the ideological structure of their home countries, and geopolitical implications of these writings. By addressing these issues, the editor avoids perceiving travelogues as factual documents that offer actual truths about the Balkans. Despite this perception, the main shortfall of the anthology is actually its lack of a well-developed systematic approach which would be necessary for comprehensively addressing the above issues. The consequence of the editor’s approach is an unclear understanding of the complex concepts of truth and reality. On the one hand he is talking about how our perceptions about the region are mediated by the “cultural baggage” present in the travelogues, and on the other he is talking about the possibility of writing about other cultures in an unimpeded way in the sense of perceiving them as not so different from our own. But the question remains if this perception of sameness can be considered as non-ideological.

Moreover, the editor’s implicit understanding of the West as homogenous and reducing it to Great Britain and the United States (although simultaneously warning against the pitfalls of homogenising representations of the Balkans) can also be attributed to the lack of a comprehensive approach. Additionally, the relationship between the representations and the historical context is sometimes given too little space, and some of the historical context provided is rather unsettling. I find it very disturbing, for instance, to reduce the complex causes of the Yugoslav wars to years of underinvestment.

Despite its shortcomings, *Through Another Europe—An Anthology of Travel Writing on the Balkans* can be seen as required reading for anyone interested in the British and American representations of the peninsula, and especially how these representations persist and transform through the ages. Due to its wealth of material, the book also offers many possibilities for further research and could be of particular interest to scholars interested in the subject of the historical development of representations of non-Western regions and peoples, as well as the historical development of travelogues.