

The Scenic Route to ‘Humphry Clinker’: Smollett’s Travels Through France and Italy

By Ronnie Young



In 1763, Tobias Smollett embarked on a two-year trip round France and Italy. The great eighteenth-century novelist, historian, journalist and man of letters had good reason for quitting Britain. His support for the deeply unpopular prime ministership of the 3rd Earl of Bute (from 1762-1763) had left him the target of what he saw as political ‘persecution’ at home, and the recent death of his youngest daughter, combined with his poor state of health, had prompted Smollett to take a restorative trip to the continent.¹ As well as taking up a prolonged residence in Nice, Smollett

visited Boulogne, Paris, Dijon, Lyons, Montpellier, Nîmes, Genoa, Pisa, Florence and Rome. His account of this time abroad was recorded in a series of letters published in 1766 under the title *Travels Through France and Italy*, a work which in many respects lays the groundwork for Smollett’s final novel and finest work, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771).

Unlike *Humphry Clinker*, however, Smollett’s *Travels* have not been the most enduring or well-received of the author’s works. This is partly because of a peevishness which pervades the text, whereby Smollett appears as what one commentator called ‘the most embittered and cantankerous Englishman [sic] that ever travelled abroad’.² At every stage of his journey, Smollett meets with discomfort and dissatisfaction, ‘idleness and dissipation’,³ and – what has to be one of the most frequently used terms in the book – ‘imposition’, as the various individuals he meets en route attempt to swindle unwitting travellers.

Contemporary travel writers were quick to criticise Smollett’s manifest meanness

of spirit. To Philip Thicknesse, Smollett's experience had been clouded by his 'his own state of ill health and want of appetite' which had 'been the means of warping his judgement, and corrupting his own imagination'.⁴ Likewise, Laurence Sterne, who bumped into Smollett in Montpellier, offered the reader of his highly successful *Sentimental Journey* (1768) a satirical characterisation of his fellow traveller and countryman:

The learned SMELFUNGUS travelled from Boulogne to Paris - from Paris to Rome - and so on - but he set out with the spleen and jaundice, and every object he passed by was discoloured or distorted - He wrote an account of them, but 'twas nothing but the account of his miserable feelings.⁵

In turn, these reactions coloured responses to the *Travels*, leading to a pervasive view of them as (to use the words of one biographer) 'melancholy proof of the influence of bodily distemper over the best disposition'.⁶

If Smollett's work thus appears a curious and somewhat uncharacteristic journal of gripes, snipes and stereotypes, it nevertheless merits attention for providing a shaping context for *Humphry Clinker*. In this novel, Smollett reflects upon the vogue for travel writing and places his own *Travels* in a list of precursors which includes the work of detractors such as Thicknesse and Sterne: 'There have been so many travels lately published', writes the novel's patriarch Matthew Bramble, 'What between Smollett's, Sharp's, Derrick's, Thickness's, Baltimore's and Barretti's, together with Shandy's Sentimental Travels, the public seems to be cloyed with that kind of entertainment'.⁷ The astute eighteenth-century reader would no doubt have noticed a direct response to Sterne in particular. Sterne had reacted to *Travels Through France and Italy* with a lampoon of Smollett as the typical splenetic traveller in direct contrast to his own idealised type of 'sentimental' traveller, as embodied in the literary persona of Mr. Yorick. In turn, Smollett offers a riposte to Sterne through the character of Matthew Bramble, *Humphry Clinker's* misanthropic Welsh Tory squire, who shows that even the most splenetic traveller has a sentimental side. Bramble, by his own admission, is 'rankled by the spleen'⁸ and views the situations he encounters accordingly. The pleasures of Bath and London, for instance, appear to the bluff old Tory invalid little more than a hotbed of folly and presumption. However, his nephew Jery Melford discovers another side to the squire: Bramble merely

'affects misanthropy, in order to conceal the sensibility of a heart, which is tender, even to a degree of weakness'.⁹ By the time Bramble arrives in Scotland, his sensibility is on full display, allowing him to openly wax rapturous about the landscape around Cameron House (a Smollett family property) in a manner which might even make his overly romantic niece Lydia blush. This revelation of Bramble's hidden sensibility is part of a series of self-conscious gestures within a self-reflexive work which flaunts its awareness of the charges laid against *Travels Through France and Italy*. When Bramble admits 'I have perceived that my opinion of mankind, like mercury in the thermometer, rises and falls according to the variations of the weather',¹⁰ this itself is an admission that somehow relates back to the traveller who had so riled the critics with his account of France.

Besides this well-known literary spat, there are other ways in which *Travels Through France and Italy* feeds into *Humphry Clinker*. Both works employ a particular *epistolary* form of travel writing, where the traveller writes a series of letters to correspondents back home. One of the commonly recognised sources for *Humphry Clinker* is Richard Anstey's *New Bath Guide* (published the same year as Smollett's *Travels*), which, much like Smollett's last novel, follows a dysfunctional family of eccentrics during their visit to the fashionable resort. However, Anstey's work is written in *verse* epistles, which, although they allow for multiple perspectives and the kind of social satire evident in *Humphry Clinker*, do not allow for the range of subject matter of prose description. Smollett's achievement in *Humphry Clinker* was to take the epistolary novel - the dominant form of eighteenth-century prose fiction - to new heights with his deployment of multiple narrative perspectives. Bramble's letters have to vie for space with the often contradictory dispatches of his nephew Jerry, his romantically minded niece Lydia, his sex-starved sister Tabitha, and her maid Winifred Jenkins. In this, he was aided greatly by the fact that he was parodying epistolary travel writing and had already had a dry run with his *Travels Through France and Italy*. There one can see him rehearsing changes of subject matter depending on the person one writes to (his correspondents are unknown but would most likely be friends from the medical profession). For example, Smollett pens two letters from Paris on 12 October 1763, one to a male friend, the other to a woman. Alongside observations about the diet of the populace, their level of industry, street planning and so forth, the first letter makes points about the French fashion and national character as seen from a male perspective. The second letter focuses on women's fashion and

the character of French men in particular. Travel writing allows for a range of observations; epistolary form adds a potential range of relative perspectives.

The range of subject matter covered in Smollett's travel writing also sets a pattern for *Humphry Clinker*. Anecdotes about individual characters and the 'originals' encountered - for example, the charming but roguish mule driver Joseph who carries the Smollett family to Montpellier - sit alongside observations on such Enlightenment ideals as improvement and progress, and, it must be said, converse views of apparent social and moral decline. In *Humphry Clinker*, the staunch Tory Bramble is thrown into the society of Bath and London and there famously rallies against the socially levelling effects of 'luxury', which, he fears, brings greater class mobility at the expense of established distinctions of rank and standards of taste. *Humphry Clinker's* treatment of the luxury found in British cities has a model in the Paris encountered earlier in Smollett's *Travels*. While complaining about Parisian fashion, Smollett asserts that 'France is the general reservoir from which all the absurdities of false taste, luxury, and extravagance have overflowed the different kingdoms and states of Europe'.¹¹ It is not simply that travel to urban centres allows observation of social change - or in this case social contagion - in a condensed and more apparent form; *Travels Through France and Italy* also establishes a lexicon with which Smollett can deal with the spread of luxury. In the *Travels*, France is a reservoir of luxury which spills over into Britain; in *Humphry Clinker*, this spillage has become a 'tide of luxury, which hath overspread the nation, and swept away all, even the very dregs of the people'.¹²

Travel allows observations of culture in transition; it can likewise provide data on the differences between cultures. Indeed, one of the frequently stated aims of Enlightenment travel writing is to distinguish between 'national characters'. The longer title given to the 1766 edition of Smollett's work is *Travels Through France and Italy: Containing Observations on Character, Customs, Religion, Government, Police, Commerce, Arts, and Antiquities*, showing not only the range of Enlightenment travel writing but also the importance of national character to that mode of enquiry. Such reflections also appear, for instance, in the work of the seasoned traveller Dr. John Moore, whose *View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland and Germany* (1779) finds him under obligation to defend 'the French national character' against the imputations of writers such as his old friend

Smollett.¹³ It would be considerably more difficult to defend Smollett's views of the French national character: the French are variously accused of being rakish, foppish, fickle, superstitious, and indolent. At times the outline of national character becomes little more than the passing off of stereotypes as shrewd observation. 'If a Frenchman is admitted into your family', Smollett asserts, '[...] the first return he makes for your civilities is to make love to your wife, if she is handsome; if not, to your sister, or daughter, or niece.' If these attempts at debauchery fail, we are told that the Frenchman will then set his sights on one's grandmother.¹⁴ In Paris Smollett likewise observes a 'strange incongruity in the French genius':

With all their volatility, prattle, and fondness for *bons mots*, they delight in a species of drawling, melancholy, church music. Their most favourite dramatic pieces are almost without incident; and the dialogue of their comedies consists of moral, insipid apothegms, intirely destitute of wit, or repartee.¹⁵

There is a certain irony here as Smollett would have already seen his own countrymen fall victim to cruel stereotyping, particularly in the context of recently worsened Anglo-Scots relations and through such channels as John Wilkes' notorious *North Briton*, the magazine set up in political opposition to George III's Scottish favourite Bute, and to rival Smollett's equally ill-fated pro-Bute publication *The Briton*. Indeed, it is largely in response to negative views about Scots and Scotland circulating in England in the 1760s that Smollett presents such contrastingly favourable views of the nation and its people in *Humphry Clinker*. As Jerry himself points out, 'the South Britons in general are woefully ignorant in this particular. What, between want of curiosity, and traditional sarcasms, the effect of ancient animosity, the people at the other end of the island know as little of Scotland as of Japan'.¹⁶ Japan was of course closed to travellers during the eighteenth century; Scotland was anything but, yet misunderstanding persisted south of the border. Part of the charge frequently laid against Scots at the time was that they are insidiously pro-French, as evidenced by everything from the auld alliance to Bute's recent peace treaty with France, which was popularly believed to have set terms that favoured the vanquished nation at the expense of victorious Britain; but Smollett's view of the French is anything but Francophile.

Still, the notion that different nations each have their own distinctive 'character'

was creatively enabling, even if it ultimately tended to invite stereotyping. Such a notion is a fundamental feature of Enlightenment travel writing and is further crucial for *Humphry Clinker*. The Scots encountered by Jery

[...] are far from being servile imitators of our modes and fashionable vices. All their customs and regulations of public and private oeconomy, of business and diversion, are in their own stile. This remarkably predominates in their looks, their dress and manner, their music, and even their cookery. Our 'squire declares, that he knows not another people upon earth, so strongly marked with a national character.¹⁷

The novel of national character is something we perhaps more closely associate with a later generation of Scottish writers from Sir Walter Scott to Susan Ferrier, but Smollett prefigures many of its devices, dwelling on the difference between cultural modes in different nations, often in a way which highlights the moral opposition between Scottish life and life in the metropolis. Bath and London are corrupted by luxury; Scotland provides an antidote in the shape of progressive improvement and useful productivity, from the Edinburgh Enlightenment to the burgeoning manufactures of Glasgow.

This exploration of 'national character' is not so much about a flagrant partiality to Scotland, as contemporary reviewers complained, as it is about defining Britishness in such a way that favours greater co-operation between England and its northern neighbour. Even travel writing has a part to play in the consolidation of a sense of Britishness. Such a sense does not just come through positively identifying national characteristics; it also comes in contra-distinction to other nations, through the realisation that whatever Britain is, it is not the same as elsewhere. Smollett's views on France are relational in this respect: he reads as a British subject aware of key differences between Britain and France. In Boulogne, Smollett offers 'reason why the reformation did not succeed in France', contrasting 'a volatile, giddy, unthinking people, shocked at the mortified appearance of the Calvinists' with nations of 'a more melancholy turn of character and complexion'.¹⁸ He also shows how the arbitrary nature of government in France shapes the character of the people:

The interruption which is given, in arbitrary governments, to the administration of justice, by the interposition of the great, has always a bad effect upon the morals of the common people. The peasants too are often rendered desperate and savage, by the misery they suffer from the oppression and tyranny of their landlords.¹⁹

Such notices of French Catholicism and French Tyranny throw Britain into sharp relief as a land defined by Protestant liberty.

This process of definition hints towards the complimentary effects of foreign and domestic travel writing during the period. Domestic travel literature imaginatively maps out the new British state, staking out its ideological territory as well as its geographical boundaries. Foreign travel sets that state within a world of other states and a comparative framework in which such factors as moral improvement, social progress and economic growth become an index of national greatness. *Humphry Clinker*, for its part, imaginatively attempts to consolidate the components of a still relatively new Britain; *Travels through France and Italy* had already distinguished that nation from its nearest rival.

References & Further Information

¹ Tobias Smollett, *Travels Through France and Italy* (London: R. Baldwin, 1766), pp.1-2. Smollett outlines his reasons for travelling in the first letter.

² Edward Cox, *A Reference Guide to the Literature of Travel: including voyages, geographical descriptions, adventures, shipwrecks and expeditions*, 3 vols (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1935-1949), I, p.137.

³ Smollett, *Travels*, p.88.

⁴ Philip Thicknesse, *Observations on the Customs and Manners of the French Nation. In a Series of Letters in Which That Nation is Vindicated from the Misrepresentations of Some Late Writers* (London: Robert Davis, 1766), pp.89-90.

⁵ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005), p.28.

⁶ Robert Anderson, *Life of Tobias Smollett, M.D. With Critical Observations on His Works* (London: J. Mundell & Co., 1796), p.29.

⁷ Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (Oxford & New York: OUP, 2009), pp.2-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.77.

¹¹ Smollett, *Travels*, p.102.

¹² Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*, p.36.

¹³ John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland and Germany with Anecdotes relating to some Eminent Characters*. 2 vols (London: W. Strahan and T.Cadell, 1779), I, p.28.

¹⁴ Smollett, *Travels*, pp.116-17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.89.

¹⁶ Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*, pp.213-14.

¹⁷ Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*, p.222.

¹⁸ Smollett, *Travels*, pp.54-55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.47.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*