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A “Philosophic Traveller” in the Tatras and Galicia in the Year 1793: Robert Townson’s Account in *Travels in Hungary*

Anyone interested in the history of the exploration of the Tatras is bound to come across the name of an English traveller Robert Townson (1762–1827), who spent summer 1793 there, studying natural history and taking barometrical measurements of several peaks. Townson is generally acknowledged as the author of one of the first scientific studies of the Tatras, and as such has raised interest among mountain lovers. As a mineralogist, Townson took advantage of the proximity of Galicia and visited the salt mines both in Wieliczka and Bochnia. He travelled through the Raczkowa (or Kamienista) and Kościeliska Valleys (Szaflarski 221) across the Tatras to Kościelisko, and then through Dunavitz (Czarny Dunajec), Raaba (Raba) and Michlinitz (Myślenice) to Wieliczka and Kraków. As his account is only a part of a book *Travels in Hungary, with a Short Account of Vienna in the Year 1793*, he has also been studied by Hungarian and Slovak historians and scientists. I am particularly interested in the way in which an Englishman perceived this part of Europe in the late eighteenth century and in how he employed the contemporary discourse of travel writing in his narrative.

Travel literature was one of the most popular genres of the time, “second only to novels” (Batten 1). As Charles Batten points out, it followed

distinct literary conventions (3). The stance of the eighteenth-century travel writer was that of a researcher (7); however, his purpose was not only to instruct but also to entertain. Hence travel writing combined "Science" with "Events," some travel accounts were clearly divided into two parts: autobiographical narrative and information section. The aim of personal narrative was to provide the material for general observations. Towards the end of the century the focus more and more shifted to events and narrative details (Batten 46, 63–4, 118), and writers clearly described their own stance, "still avoiding their books to be 'egotistical'" (Batten 72). In 1793 a reviewer from *The British Critic* distinguished three types of travel writers: a "philosophic traveller," a "sentimental traveller," and a "picturesque traveller" (qtd. in Batten 72). A "philosophic traveller" was by far the most common type, propagated by the Royal Society. The word "philosophic" is used here in the wide meaning of the concept of "philosopher," still current in the 18th century, which, as OED says, encompassed "men learned in physical science (physicists, scientists, naturalists) as well as those versed in the metaphysical and moral sciences." In 1763 a *Monthly Review* writer observed:

In the travels of Philosopher . . . the discoveries of science, the improvements of art, the extension of knowledge – in a word, the general advantage of mankind, or the particular benefit of his own country, are the objects of his attention. (qtd. in Batten 72)

This might serve as a description of the stance Robert Townson assumes in his *Travels*. Not surprisingly so, as he was an extraordinarily versatile and erudite scientist, constantly concerned not only with scientific investigation but also with general improvement of human condition, especially with the issue of education. His account combines scientific observations on mineralogy, botany, zoology; a careful description of the current political and economic situation in the countries visited with numerous anecdotes, which allow him to make generalizing comments on human nature. His book has two chapters devoted solely to the analysis of the political, demographical and social situation in Hungary illustrated with statistical data (chapters IV and V), and the appendixes presenting the entomology and flora of the regions visited, so there is

clearly an attempt to make a division between the information section and autobiographical narrative.

The north of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not a common destination in those turbulent times: as *The Monthly Review* reviewer of Townson's book (1) pointed out: "Few countries possess either more forcible or more varied claims on curiosity, than that which is the principal subject of these travels." That might actually have been the reason for Townson's exploration of this part of Europe. There had been several accounts of journeys to Poland, Russia and Scandinavian countries, among them one by an Englishman – William Coxe's *Travels onto Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark* (1784), but there had been hardly any of Hungary, and Townson went on his journey after the failure of his application to become appointed government naturalist to the colony of Upper Canada. He might have hoped that the account of his exploration of Hungary would help him procure the patronage of the India Company to "undertake mineralogical surveys of India" (Torrens) and the dedication of the book to Henry Dundas tends to confirm this, but unfortunately he was not able to gather any support.

Townson's life offers a remarkable example of the spirit of enquiry and enterprise. His father was a London merchant and insurer, and Townson was obviously expected to follow in his father's footsteps, but instead he embarked on a walking tour of France and Italy, and then started his scientific studies, first in Paris in 1787, next at Edinburgh in 1788. He originally intended to become a surgeon, but then discovered that natural history was his true vocation. In 1790 he was elected president of the student Edinburgh Natural History Society and in 1791 a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. It was in the same year that he unsuccessfully applied to be appointed government naturalist to the colony of Upper Canada. After leaving Edinburgh without graduating, he registered as a student of natural history at the University of Göttingen in late 1791. It was from Göttingen that he took a year off to travel to Vienna and around Austrian Habsburg lands, which included the present day Hungary, Slovakia and the south of Poland. Back in Göttingen he wrote and published works on reptilian physiology. He returned to Britain in 1795 and was awarded the degree of L.L.D (Doctor of Laws) in 1796 by Edinburgh University. He settled down in Shropshire, where he had spent part of his childhood, and there

he wrote his *Travels in Hungary*, which was published in 1797 (Torrens).

His next project was to undertake mineralogical explorations in India, but his application to the East India Company was rejected. And his application to the Sierra Leone Company met with the same fate. Forced to give up his great travel plans, he devoted the next ten years to the scientific studies at home. He wrote *Philosophy of Mineralogy* (1798), *A Poor Man's Moralists* (1798; five editions up to 1804), and *Tracts and Observations in Natural History* (1799) regarded as his most important work, which includes the conclusion of his experiments in reptilian physiology and a pioneering account of the geology of Shropshire. His plans to win enough subscribers for his History of Yorkshire fell through, and in 1806 he decided to set off to Australia, where he was eventually to become quite a prosperous colonist and wine producer, though very much disappointed in his plans to carry out scientific exploration in Australia (Torrens).

Travels in Hungary describes his five month-tour of the north areas of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Chapters XV to XVIII are devoted to his excursions in what he refers to as "the Carpathian Alps" and his short trip to Wieliczka and Kraków in August and early September 1793.

Townson made most of his ascents in what are now the Slovakian High and Bielskie Tatras. He climbed the Jagnięcy Szczyt ("the White Lake Peak"), the Lomnitzer Peak and the Kriwan, taking the barometrical measurements of the peaks. His role in the explorations of the Tatras is carefully described by Józef Szaflarski in *Poznanie Tatr*.

Townson in his narrative gives but little space to the descriptions of the scenery, and focuses on geology, flora, and fauna. The narrative is interspersed with scientific observations and anecdotes, which provide Townson with an opportunity to make general comments on human nature. Townson exhibits very little interest in the "picturesque," which as Barbara Stafford observes (3) was the contending mode alongside the "taste for discovery" in the late 18th century. Townson's nature descriptions focus on geological details and his account contains relatively few comments on scenery. The description of the landscape around the Green Lake is characteristic: "The first hills . . . were formed of great loose blocks and fragments of granit [*sic*]; but at the lake, the boldest craggy rocks of granit [*sic*] rise and form an amphitheatre, and shut up the val-

ley. The lake has obtained its name from the colour of its water, which has a greenish cast" (342). The descriptions of mist, fog, and thunderstorm are usually matter of fact and very sparse. The various types of the rocks, and the collection of specimens of plants and insects are his main concern and only the Kriwan in his account "having got in the night a cap of snow, looked sublime" (373). The descent into the Kościeliska Valley on his trip to Galicia offers a rare occasion in his narrative when he shows himself affected by the beauty of nature:

The rocks now before us were lime-stone cliffs, and these formed the most beautiful scenery; which, with but little of Imagination's kind assistance, who often heightens the beauty of our other prospects, represented amphitheatres, Gothic sanctuaries, lofty towers and ruined castles; which were intermixed with stupendous precipices and dreadful chasms; and as we descended and passed amongst them, they assumed new resemblances.

(380)

The philosophic traveller allows himself for a moment to be affected by the picturesque and the sublime, but not forgetting the need for a moral lesson, stresses that the impression is produced by the vagaries of imagination.

The same type of imagery occurs when for the first time he mentions his desire to travel to the salt mine in Wieliczka "where, according to some accounts, there are subterranean republics, and where the infernal regions and their inhabitants are intimately represented, and likewise the regions of the blessed" (378). The trope of "subterranean republics" instead of "subterranean kingdoms" offers an insight into Townson's radical political inclinations. But Townson is primarily a scientist and in describing his visit to the salt mine he complains:

The scientific traveller is often incommoded by common travellers through their numbers setting the taste, and deciding what are the things most worthy of notice; he is by this means hurried about by his guides, from one trifling thing to another, and is perhaps never shown objects of real curiosity.

(388)

Thus he was led to admire the chapel and the other tourist attractions, which he briefly sketches, but his real interest lay in the mine's geological resources, and he provides a detailed description of various types

of salt. He also criticises the policy of the Austrian Emperor Joseph II, according to which the purest salt is only for export to foreign countries and the Galicians are only entitled to the consumption of the inferior type of salt: "This is politic, but hardly just: it is hard that the Galicians should not be allowed to enjoy what Nature has given them in such abundance" (389).

The account of the visit to Wieliczka is a good example of how Townson perceives his role as a scientific traveller: he is not only a researcher in natural philosophy, but also in politics, economics and ethics. In economic terms the Austrian Emperor is right; but morally he is wrong.

The numerous "events" Townson relates provide him with the basis for generalizing comments both on the characteristics of the local inhabitants and on human nature. On one hand, human nature is the same all over the world; on the other hand, the visited countries, particularly Galicia, are at a lower stage of civilizational development. So, for example, while walking to the Green Lake he meets a group of peasants armed with guns and hatchets in pursuit of "the robbers from the other side of the Alps." In reply to his reservations about their chances of success, "John Bull like" they stress their determination, on which Townson comments: "So then it is the same in Hungary as it is with *us*? – Yes, just the same, whether thou art a Chinese or a Briton – Hence patriotism" (342).

Though for Townson human nature is the same all over the world, the local inhabitants of the Tatras are particularly prone to superstitions. The way in which he presents local legends offers a good example of his scientific scepticism. It is noteworthy that the tales were related not to him directly but to his servant while they were staying overnight at the Green Lake:

"Here, Mr. Frank," said they, "at the top of yon rock which is called the Car-buncle Rock, was a precious stone of this name, of an immense value, and which shone like a star in the firmament, many ascended the rock in vain; just where it was placed the rock was quite inaccessible; at last it was shot down. – Indeed! – There in that direction lies a treasure; but a spell is laid upon it, so that nobody can find it. – Surprising! – And in that there is a remarkable hole, from which if a stone is thrown in, a vapour arises which is soon followed by a dreadful storm, which makes the very mountains tremble. – Good God!! – Upon that mountain grows a plant, which now nobody can find, which turns copper into gold. – Impossible!! – And there on yon

craggy rock I was once caught in a fog, and obliged to remain shivering with cold for many hours, till the wind dispelled it." (346–7)

The brief accounts of local tales are not directly commented on, but the tone of the narrative is clear: they exemplify the superstitious nature of both his guides and his servant. Nonetheless, these superstitions appeal to "curiosity" and would be entertaining for the reader.

In another anecdote Townson shows himself for a moment possessed by a sense of the miraculous. While warming himself by a fire near the Slovakian Five Lakes, he is addressed in German as "HIGH, WELL and NOBLY BORN":

. . . though no fairy tale was floating in my brain, yet I could not conceive the blessed sound to come but from some aërial messenger send to hail me KING OF PERSIA. On looking up, I saw not one but three – not ambassadors from heaven, but three poor devils with haggard looks and tattered clothes. – Ah! How often do the outward senses, careful guardians over the wanderings of the mind, correct its errors and repress its wanton freaks! They were not botanists nor chamois-hunters, but gold-hunters, and by trade shoe or *chism* makers, from Kesmark, and all more or less tinctured with Alchymy, who were begging for permission to take shelter under my rock . . . (361)

The Arabian Nights framing of the episode is used to show the pitfalls of imagination, and a sentence of empiricist reflection follows. Thus the first lesson to be drawn is for the writer; the further moral follows:

These poor fellows, like these gloomy moralists who conceive virtue to exist in suffering, and in the performance of some galling task which nature unwillingly performs, and are regardless of the little offices of kindness dictated by our own hearts, have had the misfortune to believe that mines and treasures are only to be found in the most inaccessible parts of the rocks. (361)

The simile combines Holbach's criticism of religion as "gloomy superstition" in *The System of Nature* with the sentimental belief in the innate goodness of the human heart, and brings to mind Wordsworth's "little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love" ("Tintern Abbey" 34–5). The whole account of his expedition to the Lomnitzer Peak presents the triumph of science over superstition and at the same time science is equated with right moral thinking: the treasure-seekers

guided by illusion search the top region of the mountains for non-existent gold. The misguided wanderings of the gold-seekers are contrasted with Townson's "philosophic" pursuits: he measures the height of the mountain, carefully describes the rocks and botanical specimens; they return with hungry stomachs and empty bags.

A similar strategy of showing himself briefly deluded appears in the description of the encounter with customs officers in Raaba. Two of the smartest of the crowd addressed him with compliments; he thought them to be local squires offering assistance, but they turned out to be corrupt customs officers, who "ransacked his luggage," suggesting that "a trifling *bono mano* would be very acceptable to them." The judge would not let him have horses, but as he did not know Latin, Townson managed to persuade him pretending that the great Imperial pass was an order to procure him horses (382). So eventually Townson's knowledge triumphs over the corruption and ignorance of the locals.

His journey through Galicia to Wieliczka and Kraków and back to Priblini did not provide Townson with many favourable impressions, apart from the praise for the taste of the potato, which in this part of the world was already a staple food of the peasants. As the other travellers to Galicia in those times, he found the quality of accommodation deplorable. In Raaba the public house could only offer straw, coarse bread and brandy; in Michlinitz there was not a single inn: the only place where the traveller could get food and accommodation was a combination of a "coffee room" and a "laboratory for taylors [*sic*]" He also complains of the absence of proper inns in Galicia and their relative scarcity in Kraków. This leads Townson to comment on the lack of "division of labour" in Galicia, which points to the backwardness of the civilization of the country (384).

Likewise, on numerous occasions Townson laments the condition of Galician peasants. Several incidents on his journey reveal peasants' ignorance and Townson ascribes it to the lack of education and "the inconveniences of compelled labour" (398. See also 384–5). He has a progressive vision of history and sees Galicia as being several centuries behind Britain in its historical development:

It appears, however mortifying the thought, that the same hard state has been the lot of peasantry almost throughout Europe, but at different times; and that it differs not so much in regard to the country, as the time in which

it has prevailed. A Polish and an English peasant, how different now in the eighteenth century! Yet the peasants in our happy island were once much in the condition they are now in Poland. (106-7)

Polish science, and in particular medicine, at least what Townson saw of it in Kraków, seemed to him to be in a similar condition. In the library of the medical faculty he found out that "there are no books so modern as Boerhaave, and that the writings of this great man are not yet here!" (396). To a former medical student, the lack of the works of the great early eighteenth-century Dutch medical reformer provided clear evidence of backwardness. However, this sounds surprising in view of the fact that Kraków University had been undergoing numerous reforms at the time, and the medical school had introduced modern demonstration techniques and clinical observations (Bieniarzówna 578).

He stayed in Kraków only for a day and a half, visited the churches, the castle, the newly opened botanic garden, the observatory, the collection of natural history and the university library. The time of his visit, early September 1793, was a time of violent political turmoil, just after the second partition of Poland, earlier that year. He could see the "marks from the musquets" on the walls of the castle and neighbouring houses. The Russian troops which had kept guard "with the Polish, or rather opposite them" had left the day before his arrival and "some trifling fortifications" were being constructed against the Prussians (396). This report is surprising as I have not found any confirmation of it in other historical sources. Townson was actually in Kraków a few days before Kościuszko's visit to Galicia (10 Sept.) when the preparations for the insurrection were being carried out. From the perspective of 1797, Townson writes with admiration of the few Polish troops he saw and laments on the final fall of Poland. The reasons for that fall are clear to him: "a disorganized state with internal feuds, and surrounded by the most powerful sovereigns coalesced to destroy it . . ." (396). However, he explicitly refuses to discuss the tragic Polish history in any detail (unlike William Coxe writing of his visit in July 1778), and instead quotes Cowper from *The Task* (1785): "My ear is pain'd; / My soul is sick with ev'ry day's report / Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill'd" (2. 5-7).

This is a significant omission and the most likely explanation for it is that in 1797 Townson had no means of checking the accuracy of his

memories and his sources and could be wary of factual errors. The quotation from Cowper shows Townson's emotional and moral judgment of the events. In view of the popularity of *The Task* it would have been easily recognizable as coming from the passage where Cowper criticizes all forms of oppression and injustice, and in particular slavery. It comes from the beginning of Book II "The Time-Piece" and continues: "There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart – / It does not feel for man; the natural bond / of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax / That falls asunder at the touch of fire."

On the basis of his observations in the Tatra region and Galicia Townson feels himself entitled to draw a universally applicable moral lesson:

But education, on which every thing in society depends, how it is neglected every where! What are our principles for conduct but heterogeneous mass of false religion, false philosophy, and erroneous knowledge of the world, supported by absurd dogmas, and silly maxims and proverbs? MAN, it grieves me to see thee thus neglected, whilst premiums are given for an exuberant growth in goose-berries. (426)

Townson presents himself as a fervent advocate of radical reforms in education, but he is cautious not to reveal his radical sympathies, which, however, are apparent in his comments and occasionally even in the imagery. After all, his book was published in 1797 when such sympathies would not be well received. Yet these sympathies were easily picked up by the reviewers, though not explicitly referred to. Thus it is no surprise that Townson's book was highly praised by *The Critical Review* and rather easily dismissed by *The British Critic* (137–47).

Townson in his account speaks of himself as a "scientific traveller"; and in this choice of the term he is truly modern in the Lockean distinction between philosophy and science. However, the condition of a scientist can also appeal to the imagination and in his narrative Townson constructs a persona who not only is a scientist, an intrepid explorer, and a moralist, but also occasionally a man of feeling.

The very night of the encounter with the gold-hunters, while listening to the violent wind, and watching the moon and fleeting clouds in a rare description of picturesque scenery, Townson ponders with his companions on the ordeal of the chamois hunter "lost among the rocks," "the poor deluded gold seeker," and "a botanist . . . who might be lost,

and now wandering amidst this world of ruins; or who is reaching at the supposed nondescript, and falling from these towering battlements of heaven, might now be groaning out his last breath amidst these unpitying rocks, without a single breath to condole him in his distress" (362). Thus the fate of a botanist may be as pathetic as that of the more traditional outcasts. Townson, of course, shows how these fantasies make him realise the comfort of his position "at the side of a cheerful fire" (362). However, the desire to make himself into a proper hero remains and he states that he "led the life of the hunting state" (362). Earlier on in his description of the expedition to the Keszmark Peak (Jatki Zadnie), he complains of the cowardice of one of his guides who abandoned him during a storm, and states that "a cockney" has turned out "to be a better climber of Alps than those born just at their feet" (350). And as a proper eighteenth-century man of feeling he tries to engrave his name on the granite rock under which he stayed at the Green Lake, which both offered protection and was a place of imprisonment (355-6).

But in the end, the old fashioned eighteenth-century term "philosophic traveller" seems to be appropriate to describe Townson's stance, for throughout his narrative his concern is not only with scientific studies but also with human nature, and the need to improve it; thus in the truly eighteenth-century manner he seeks to combine instruction with entertainment.

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