

Forgetting the Factory: Medievalism in the Late Nineteenth-Century Diaries of Female British

Travelers

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Standing beside the ruins of the Byzantine Palace of Blachernae in 1895, Frances Minto Elliott closes her eyes and imagines life as it would have been in the eleventh century. As a seasoned traveler and writer, the British author easily describes a scene to satisfy her readers and herself. Elliot chooses a hero, the Emperor Alexius, envisioning him at dinner “clad in silken robes of surpassing sheen, sown with pearls and gems, a crown upon his head; before him a table of encrusted silver.”¹ Elliot notes the quality and delicacy of the emperor’s medieval environment, highlighting the value of items “sown” and “encrusted” by hand. Yet, her daydreams are tinged with a certain bitterness that the beautiful terrace and golden throne room have become relevant to the city’s inhabitants only by the way their “shadows fall in little booths where coffee is served, which the ‘impossible Turk,’ in his lowest and dirtiest aspect, calmly consumes.”² Elliot’s dismay at discovering contemporary consumer activities in her travels outside Europe is not unique. This episode from Elliot’s 1895 *Diary of an Idle Woman in Constantinople* aligns with the writings of other late nineteenth-century British women who traveled primarily for the purpose of pleasure. Through their writings and travel journals, these women displayed a certain medievalist nostalgia, often paying special attention to handicraft and finely made consumer goods and reflecting on the damaging influence of industrialism.

It is not accidental that Elliott’s vision featured an eleventh-century emperor in beautiful handmade garments. Rather, Elliot juxtaposed contemporary British consumerism with medieval nostalgia. Some historians would connect this position to her British imperial lens. For instance, Lynn Festa argues that “sentimental depictions of colonial encounters refashioned conquest into commerce.”³ Festa investigates the connection between sentimentality and British

¹ Frances Minto Elliott, *Diary of an Idle Woman in Constantinople*, (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1893), 160.

² Elliott, 156.

³ Lynn Festa, “Sentimental Visions of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Studies” (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2.

representations of their colonies. Though female writers were certainly involved in this development of sentimentality as a cover for colonial exploitation, Festa's argument does not examine the implications of gender. Festa's exploration of over-sentimentalized British depictions of colonies contextualizes the nostalgia for pre-industrial society in British women's travel journals and informs their diaries' imperialist tendencies.

Like Festa, other scholars examine expressions of imperialism in travel diaries. Daniel Goh investigates the connection between medievalism and imperialism, particularly focusing on Malay. Goh argues that the manner in which nineteenth-century British and American travel diaries presented native people as medieval was an imperialist tactic. Goh approaches these medievalist representations as products of contemporary movements, such as Darwinism and Gothic Revivalism. Goh does not consider the way consumerism and industrialization may have contributed to the diarists presentation of Malay natives, even in his discussion of the native capacity for European-style industry.⁴ Though Goh does not use any women's writing, the conclusions he draws between medievalist portrayals of native peoples is relevant to understanding nineteenth-century British travelers' mentality.

In order to examine British women's travel diaries, it is important to acknowledge the already existing understandings of Britain's place in the world from the perspective of the female writer. Megan Norcia discusses the way women at home envisioned the world with Britain as an industrial and consumerist center. Norcia investigates the way in which these women writers use physical "consumption to display the English superiority over both European rivals and non-European subjects."⁵ Since the domestic perspective of women in Britain leaned towards British

⁴ Daniel P. S. Goh, "Imperialism and 'medieval' Natives," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (2007), 327.

⁵ Megan A. Norcia, *X Marks the Spot: Women Writers Map the Empire for British Children, 1790-1895*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 68.

superiority in production of goods, even goods which came from elsewhere would be improved and repurposed by Britain's industry. Norcia's argument offers a valid frame of reference for the women like Frances Elliot who left England and had the opportunity to experience and respond to modern consumerism in other countries.

British women carried this perspective with them in their travels outside of Europe. James Wolf contextualizes the importance of nineteenth-century British travelers who journeyed for pleasure alone, emphasizing women's rare presence in this situation. In particular, Wolf examines the travel patterns and writing of Helen Caddick, a British woman whose interest in solo travel later in life "not only got her money's worth... but her interest was whetted for more travel to the non-western, but western-dominated world."⁶ Wolf presents Caddick as not only an observer of British imperial domination, but also as an active participant in the process of its development and solidification.

Taking a different position on Caddick's travel diaries, Tim Youngs presents Caddick's preference for natives without European education, clothing, or style as "poised to criticize the very basis of the spread of capitalism, seeing it as not a good thing that there is created in the natives a desire for new wants—of money, finery, and clothing."⁷ Not only does Youngs praise Caddick for criticizing the influence of mass-consumerism and capitalism outside Europe, he defends her, arguing that while her "preference might hint at a taste for the exotic... her dismay at the threatened loss of native crafts and industries seems sincere."⁸ Unlike Wolf, who criticizes Caddick as an active participant in colonial oppression, Youngs represents Caddick's preference

⁶ James Wolf, "A Woman Passing through: Helen Caddick and the Maturation of the Empire in British Central Africa." *Journal of Popular Culture* 30, no. 3 (Winter, 1996), 37.

⁷ *Nineteenth Century Travels, Explorations and Empires: Writings from the Era of Imperial Consolidation, 1835-1910, vol. 7-Africa*. ed. Tim Youngs (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), 379.

⁸ *Nineteenth Century Travels*, 379.

for native handcrafted goods in place of mass-produced British industrialism as sincere concern for the preservation of native culture. Despite the imperial context of Caddick's travel, Young fails to analyze the reasons behind her interest in native handicraft.

Nineteenth-century British female travelers' expressions of nostalgia coexisted with a sense of pride in Britain's own materialistic advancement, casting a new light on their expressions of discomfort on finding industrialization outside of Europe. This discomfort is an expression of their nostalgia, and even anxiety, about what Europeans have lost by way of industrialization. Several women writers offer an important opportunity to explore the medieval nostalgia evident in British travelers. Frances Minto Elliott, whose "literary works met with considerable popular approval" writes a travel diary valuing Constantinople for its medieval features and rejecting evidence of modern life.⁹ Another woman, Elizabeth Ellis, an author known for her historical fiction, feels it was her duty as a "casual visitor" to write about leaving "security and civilization" as she "travelled to Burmah in search of adventure."¹⁰ Along with Helen Caddick, who traveled alone through Africa and published her opinions on consumer culture alongside detailed descriptions of what she saw, Elliot and Ellis's works contain an underlying anxiety about what Europeans lost through industrialization and modern consumerism and often address mass-production and industrialization in a negative fashion.

Their nostalgia for a way of life before mass consumer culture existed in Britain represents these underlying anxieties. They long for a lifestyle no longer possible in Britain's industrial cities, but reminiscent of the medieval village, where individual relationships and skilled craftsmanship were a fundamental part of consumerism. On her return to England, Ellis

⁹ "The Athenaeum," *HathiTrust Digital Library*, (July-Dec. 1898).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Ellis, *An English Girl's First Impressions of Burmah*, 3rd ed. (R. Platt; Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., Ltd., 1899), 45.

remembers Burma fondly despite “the slowness of locomotion, the lack of many so-called benefits of civilization” and even directly compares it to the way of life in Britain saying, “after the warmth, the quiet, and the absence of hurry to which I had become accustomed in the East, I found the bustle and noise... almost overpowering.”¹¹ Ellis questions the value of the ‘so-called benefits of civilization,’ shocked by the bustle of modern industrialism after the calm she associated with her lifestyle in Burma. While traveling outside of Europe, Ellis and the other women seem to be searching to escape the less appealing aspects of industrialism. As with the ruins of Blacharnae where she imagines the “Emperor deigned to repose on festal days,” Elliott often uses her diary as a space to record her reflections on medieval lifestyle.¹² She consistently characterizes the quality of life through her observation of the richness of the Turkish people’s attire. For instance, she describes Constantine Dragases, one of the last rulers of Byzantine empire, “clad in...the miraculous garment... placed in a special *cella* of gold, set with precious stones” and the “Varangian guards, in shining casques and with loose gold *plaques* affixed to their armour.”¹³ Her nostalgia for their lifestyle is linked to the unique individual quality of consumer items.

Caddick reflects more directly on the production process which was lost with industrial mass-consumerism. In one instance, she observes natives handpicking each coffee bean and notes that it “certainly it appeared to me to be the finest coffee I had ever seen.”¹⁴ At another time, she watches natives carrying packages on their heads and remarks that they are “wonderfully quiet and patient in going off with these awkward loads... it seemed quite easy for

¹¹ Ellis, 244, 247.

¹² Elliott, 156.

¹³ Elliot, 168, 150.

¹⁴ Helen Caddick, *A White Woman in Central Africa* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), 395.

them to manage it, and they always walked off with it quite cheerfully.”¹⁵ Caddick seems pleased with their process and represents their manual labor as joyful. She does perceive the difficulty of the labor when certain “loads consisted of the iron plates for the new gunboat... The angles of the plates were sharp and rough, and must have been exceedingly irksome when borne on bare shoulders.”¹⁶ Notably, the loads she identifies as irksome are European items intended for constructing a ship, not native-made products. While Caddick admires the natives as they go about their manual labor, she finds their connection to industrialism disagreeable.

Ellis’s nostalgia for the medievalist production process favors the use of animal labor rather than industrial machinery. Ellis recounts the screeching sound made by an old bull cart with “wheels... formed of solid circles of wood, not even rounded, and carefully unoiled.”¹⁷ Her description does not seem to be of a comfortable or efficient vehicle, yet she goes on to reflect on how “eminently peaceful must be the life of the bullock-cart driver! He knows no hurry, no anxiety, no responsibility. Hour after hour, day after day he jogs along... wrapped in a deep sleep or meditation, trusting for guidance to the meek solemn-faced bullocks which he drives.”¹⁸ Drawn to the calmness of animal labor, Ellis is unconcerned with the driver’s occupation. Instead, she is interested in his unhurried attitude as he works, likely comparing it to the bustling, machine-run production process she is familiar with in Britain, where mass-production and money-making are the goals. Ellis is interested in another animal’s labor: the elephant. She describes the way the elephants stack logs to ensure high quality of the work, claiming they deserve praise for going “about their duties in a stately, leisurely manner,” particularly noting how as they are “marching to the end of the pile and contemplating the result with their heads on

¹⁵ Caddick, 384.

¹⁶ Caddick, 384.

¹⁷ Ellis, 83.

¹⁸ Ellis, 84.

one side, to see if all are straight and firm... they give an air of dignity to the menial work.”¹⁹

Ellis credits the ‘dignity’ of the work to the care and time the elephants put into it and their stately manner. Like Elliot and Caddick, Ellis is also drawn to a slower, more individualized process of production as part of a nostalgia for a lifestyle that would have been associated with British medieval lifestyles.

In the context of consumerism, anti-industrial sentiment is one example of the romanticized perspective present in these women’s travel journals. Elliott is particularly disturbed by evidence of industrialism in Constantinople, especially where she believes it has interfered with medieval sites. She describes the area around one of these palaces as “perhaps the most squalid and ignored portion of all that vast city. Steamers and caiques every day touch at the little peer.”²⁰ Elliott is concerned with the presence of steam ships nearby, associating them with the decline of the city and blaming the fact that “the palace died an ignominious death” on “the repeated assaults of a mean and needy population, who... burn lime and charcoal among the grandest monuments a man has ever raised,” another industrial development she perceives as harmful.²¹ When she passes a Turkish guard-house she notices “the ceaseless clatter of wheels and engines being a modern desecration of this historic spot.”²² She also observes that “the Seven Towers, now transformed into a station, where we stop to gaze on coke and general railway refuse” are impressive but complains “it must be noted, as a melancholy fact, that the making of this railway has destroyed much.”²³ Caddick is concerned that the combination of industrial development and the apparent disregard people around her appear to have for the

¹⁹ Ellis, 32.

²⁰ Elliott, 187.

²¹ Elliott, 186.

²² Elliott, 149.

²³ Elliott, 14.

guard-house and towers as mementos of another time obstructs her ability to enjoy the magnificence of these buildings. Caddick also objects to the European-influenced development around her, describing the native huts in contrast to her claim that “architecturally, we are not improving the look of the country. Red brick houses are certainly not pretty.”²⁴ Elliot and Caddick’s vexation at finding industrial construction where they expected to find medievalist culture preserved points toward their desire to escape industrialization in their own country.

During her visit to Remyo, Ellis disapproves of the construction of a railroad, which she sees as out of place. She believes the road built to the railway station is “infinitely pathetic... wandering aimlessly in the jungle, leading nowhere and used by no one.”²⁵ While she is primarily upset by the railroad’s presence in a space she does not want to find modern development, Ellis links the railway’s inadequacy to its specific location. In the context of her later comment that “the future is traveling faster than the station” and “the railway, like the great future of Remyo, is late in arriving,” Ellis’s anti-industrial sentiment is tinged with a belief in the superiority of European industry.²⁶ While Ellis’s view contains imperialist sentiment and Caddick and Elliott are primarily offended by the aesthetic of European industrial influences, the evidence of industrial development in their travel outside England irritates all three of them.

Along with the anti-industrial sentiment in these women’s journals comes an admiration for finely made, hand-crafted items. Elliot admires “two golden lions of such curious workmanship that they seem alive. Golden trees, shooting up around, simulate the overarching of a forest in which mechanical birds, exquisitely enamelled to the life, disport themselves on mimic branches.”²⁷ Her appreciation for the life-like detail and quality of the lions is explicitly

²⁴ Caddick, 399.

²⁵ Ellis, 88.

²⁶ Ellis, 88.

²⁷ Elliott, 162.

linked to their workmanship. When she mourns the destruction of a church, her regret stems from the lack of opportunity to rebuild it as no one was “at hand to plate again the golden roofs, illustrate the walls with mosaics, or raise the lines of glittering cupolas.”²⁸ Again, Elliot’s interest in consuming, unique workmanship of the mosaic and gold plate, which she feels have disappeared with contemporary construction processes, displays her medievalist nostalgia and uneasiness about what has been lost in the process of industrialism.

Although she critiques much of her surroundings in Constantinople, Elliot is still pleased with the well-crafted and beautifully made, at one point commenting “the whole space outside our windows is full of soldiers and attendants, all in dark uniforms and fez ... horsemen in green and silver, Albanians in embroidered jackets and snow-white fustanella.”²⁹ Elliot chooses to comment on the embroidered details of their clothing, rather than their identity or reason for being outside her window. Ellis also focuses on clothing, even taking the time to note a “wee baby, clad in gorgeous silk attire” when she watches a local family eat their dinner.³⁰ She also admires Burmese girls “as they performed their toilet by the stream, decking their hair with flowers and ribbons, and donning their delicately coloured pink and green ‘tamehns.’”³¹ Ellis notices the quality of even the baby’s clothing and is intrigued by the slow, delicate, and individual process of dressing with flowers and ‘delicately coloured’ traditional Burmese clothing, which would not have been produced in a factory.

Ellis not only admires the quality of native clothing, but is upset by the intrusion of European styles in the country. After observing that the British have turned a throne room in Mandalay into a club, Ellis despairs that the palace had been “desecrated by the feet of an alien,

²⁸ Elliott, 152.

²⁹ Elliott, 216.

³⁰ Ellis, 67.

³¹ Ellis, 54.

and... its bazaar has become a warehouse for the sale of Birmingham and Manchester imitations.”³² Ellis is upset both by the alterations made to a historical space and the sale of items likely produced in British factories. During her visit to Africa, Caddick worries that if Europeans “are teaching them many of our own industries, they are forgetting their own,” expressing a similar concern that industrial production processes will replace local traditions as they did in England.³³ She also claims that native people appear “far better and are healthier with only their nsaru, or loin cloth, made of native cloth... than when wearing old soldiers’ coats, and the shabby things they are tempted to buy at the stores—clumsy,” further displaying her anxiety that British mass-produced goods are replacing handmade and also revealing her desire to keep native people out of European products.³⁴

This concern does not just relate to clothing, but also to other hand-made goods. For example, she remarks on certain drinking vessels, which are “adorned with all kinds of quaint designs” and storage baskets, stating that they are “much prettier than the ugly boxes in which we keep ours,” noting their unique design and contrasting them with what she is used to at home.³⁵ Additionally, Caddick reflects on the general quality of workmanship she finds in native wares, observing that “the native iron and copper work was excellent, and their axes, hoes, spears and knives were all beautifully made and ornamented. All the things they use were carved, or had brass, copper or iron wire tastefully twisted round them.”³⁶ Impressed by the beauty of these items, Caddick remarks that they are “tasteful as well as useful” and attributes this to their makers having “had plenty of time to spend on decoration,” directly linking their

³² Ellis, 57.

³³ Caddick, 398.

³⁴ Caddick, 398.

³⁵ Caddick, 399.

³⁶ Caddick, 399.

beauty to the time and care put into their creation.³⁷ All three women display an interest in the beauty of finely made goods as they travel, which suggests their dissatisfaction with mass-produced items available at home.

While these women are uncomfortable with the evidence of British industrialism and nostalgic for medievalist production processes, they maintain a sense of superiority associated with the success of British consumer culture. Though they prefer the native handcrafted goods, the shops and bazaars in which these items are sold do not impress them. Elliot states that she “shall never forget the approach to the great Bazaar—the flaunting little shops, like boxes on end, protruding on either side, the filthy loose pavement, and the steep sides” and is shocked to find this is in the “most frequented part of Stamboul.”³⁸ Her criticism of a supposedly ‘great’ shop in the busiest shop in the city as ‘little’ and ‘flaunting’ implies that she expected a grander space for the sale of goods, even though she prefers them to be handcrafted. Ellis finds the shops in Burmah similarly disappointing. She describes one as a “fair sized native bazaar, consisting of rows of unpleasant looking mat huts, each raised a few feet from the ground, with sloping overhanging roofs, and open sides...always very dusty, crowded with bullock carts, goats, and dogs, and usually alive with naked Burmese babies.”³⁹ Unlike the department stores she would have been used to at home, Ellis finds the bazaar unpleasant, dusty, and crowded.

Caddick also complains that Katunga only has “one large store with the buildings belonging to it, and all around...there was a confused mass of goods of every description, piled up just as they were left when unloaded from the river steamers—huge iron plates, parts of steamers, boilers, railway and telegraph stuff, and cases of every shape and size were all waiting

³⁷ Caddick, 399.

³⁸ Elliott, 231.

³⁹ Ellis, 89.

to be carried off by the natives.”⁴⁰ Like Elliott and Ellis, Caddick is unamused by the store’s disorganization, but notably her greatest objection is the “confused mass” of industrial items. While all three women are unimpressed by the stores they visit in comparison to what they might find at home, the source of their dissatisfaction is still an anxiety about mass consumerism.

Though these women are chiefly concerned with escaping European consumer culture while they travel, they do begrudgingly accept its presence in some moments. At one point Caddick comes across a building, which she originally says looks like a prison, but is relieved to find that “this place belonged to the African Lakes Company. Their stores and offices were built round this large square in order to afford protection and defence against the natives in case of a rising, and also to serve as a laager for the Europeans of the neighborhood.”⁴¹ She describes the industrial buildings as a prison at first, but no longer seems bothered by its presence when she realizes that it has been created to ‘serve’ the British company. Caddick claims “our own fads and customs...have certainly not proved entirely satisfactory at home” but blames the presence of modern European consumer culture in Africa on “the great hold we have over the natives...on account of the respect, and almost awe, they have for the white man, and their belief in his superiority.”⁴² To Goh’s point that medievalism allowed non-European cultures to be perceived as “similar to metropolitan society but belonging to an anterior stage of socioeconomic development because of perceived...inferiority” these women do not outwardly condemn their nation’s unparalleled development when they find it comfortably in European possession, maintaining an imperialist lens in coexistence with their anxieties about industrialism.⁴³ Even in

⁴⁰ Caddick, 382.

⁴¹ Caddick, 390.

⁴² Caddick, 400.

⁴³ Goh, 324.

the face of their anxieties about industrialism, these women express the same Anglo-centric worldview that Norcia argues existed in women writers at home.

Elliott, Ellis, and Caddick appear to be searching for an escape from industrialism and development of mass consumer culture in England, expressed the form of a medievalist nostalgia. This view primarily manifests itself in anti-industrial sentiment and admiration for handcrafted goods. As Elliott's wistful vision of the Emperor Alexius lounging in beautiful, handcrafted clothing is shattered by the Turkish shops outside, all three women are often vexed to find evidence of the same mass consumer culture outside Europe. Even with the imperialist lens, which encourages pride in British industry, these women's diaries consistently link their anxieties about consumer culture to industrialization at home.

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