

Lots of rum and no fuss

Reading classic travel books during lockdown

By Edward Platt



The travel writer Sara Wheeler, on the top of the Greenland ice cap. | Courtesy Vintage/Penguin Books

It wasn't lockdown alone that made me want to re-read *Terra Incognita* (1996), Sara Wheeler's brilliant account of her travels in Antarctica, but the fact that it coincided with the early summer heatwave.

As I struggled to sleep at night, made uncomfortable not only by the heat but the double anxiety generated by the pandemic and the sense that the weather wasn't behaving as it should, I kept reliving Wheeler's description of sleeping in "the coolest igloo on the West Antarctic ice sheet". I relished her account of the blue fluorescent light filtering through the spiralling bricks - which "threw everything inside into muted glory" and made her feel as if she had entered a temple - because it was almost unimaginably remote from London. Yet since I couldn't have gone myself, I also relished the descriptions of the "new torment" that her spartan home laid on every night: frozen clothes, a fresh hillock of snow on her sleeping bag, or ice cascading from the ceiling down the back of her neck. It was so cold that she couldn't sleep, and eventually she retreated to the heated tents of the nearby camp.

Perhaps Antarctica was better read about than experienced - though Wheeler had spent years trying to get there, and whenever she left, she couldn't wait to get back. Yet she also accepts that there may have been no need to go at all, for Antarctica represented an inner journey, a pilgrimage of the soul. She quotes a character in Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V*, who thinks he might find peace at the South Pole, and one in Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak* who thinks it might offer "a foretaste of eternity"; but when she gets there, she imagines those two novelists laughing at her: "If they had been able to see me at that moment, supine in a tent at ninety degrees south, I imagine they would both have said, 'God, I didn't mean it literally'".

Wheeler travels to get away from what she calls the "Nomadic Thoughts" that periodically overwhelm her, while also acknowledging the old conundrum that "you can run away as far as you like but you'll never get away from yourself". What's more, you will meet others who have escaped but brought themselves along: McMurdo, the largest of the three American bases on Antarctica, welcomes her, but the Rothera Station base of the British Antarctic Survey on the Antarctic Peninsula, the most northerly point of the continent, is populated by "British men doing what they do best - reverting to childhood and behaving like gits". An earlier woman visitor had said it was like "living in a male locker room".

Wheeler is rightly scornful of the "frozen beards" who still see polar exploration as a test of endurance. The British explorer Ranulph Fiennes dismisses Barry Lopez's idea that the continent "reflects the mystery that we call God" and questions his right to talk about the subject, because "he's hardly been there at all". Wheeler points out that Lopez is a "highly respected author who has visited Antarctica five times" and that "his trips were not exercises in seeing how dead he could get - he went to see, and to learn". But she also recognizes the heroism of the early explorers, particularly Apsley Cherry-Garrard (the author of *The Worst Journey in the World*, 1922, and the subject of her biography *Cherry*, 2001), whose delight in going South matched hers. Cherry-Garrard was one of the people who discovered the tent where Captain Scott and his companions were entombed with the cache of letters that formed the foundation of their legend. "As he lay dying, Scott somehow found the rhetorical language to invest the whole ghastly business with the currency of nobility", Wheeler writes in *Terra Incognita*. "This is his greatest achievement."

To *The Times*, Scott's expedition was "proof that we are still capable of maintaining an Empire", and to soldiers on the Western Front, it was an inspiring story of endurance and self-sacrifice. Wheeler quotes a chaplain tending to frontline troops who says that the story of Captain Oates disappearing into the night to improve his companions' chance of survival is a "legacy and heritage of inestimable value in seeing through our present work". Wheeler writes that Scott's widow, Kathleen, received "scores" of letters from frontline soldiers "telling her they could never have faced the dangers and hardships of the war had they not learned to do so from her dead husband's teaching".

After the war, however, the expedition was cited by those who set their sights on the last remaining *terra incognita* - the summit of Everest - as a failure that mustn't be repeated. "We missed both Poles after having control of the sea for 300 years, and we certainly ought not to miss the exploration of the Mt. Everest group after being the premier power in India for 160", said a Scottish scientist and explorer called Alexander Kellas, who would die during a reconnaissance of Everest. Kellas is quoted in Wade Davis's book *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the conquest of Everest* (2011), which travels through the trenches of the Western Front, detailing the unimaginable horrors that drove the men of the Everest expeditions of 1921, 1922 and 1924, and ascends nearly to the summit of the highest mountain in the world. Yet it begins far from the Himalayas - at the summit of the Lake District peak of Great Gable. "At 2,949 feet, Great Gable was not a serious or difficult climb, but it was said to be the most completely beautiful of English mountains", Davis writes. Great Gable was the first mountain I climbed as a child. My mountaineering ambitions never exceeded its modest challenge, and coming across this fitting tribute to it in Davis's book made me want to climb it again.

It wasn't only Great Gable's centrality in "the rounded hills and rocky crags of the Lake District, where so many English climbers had first discovered the freedom of open space and the feel of wind and rain and sleet on cold hands jammed into cracks of granite and slate" that made it the starting point for Davis's history, but also a curious coincidence that ties it to the mountaineers of the Everest expedition in another sense. On June 6, 1924, the day that George Mallory and Sandy Irvine were last seen as they disappeared into the mist on the Northeast Ridge of Everest, in their final attempt on the summit, eighty-odd members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club climbed Great Gable to gather by a plaque inscribed with the names of the members of the club who had died in the war, and pay their respects. Seventy-five years later, Mallory's body was discovered in the snow beneath the Northeast Ridge. His right leg was broken and there was a frayed cotton rope, 10 feet long, tied around his waist. It still wasn't clear how he and Irvine had died, or whether they had succeeded in reaching the summit.

No matter how many times Everest has been climbed since Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the summit, in 1953, it remains an intimidating physical challenge, far more inaccessible than the South Pole, which Wheeler reached by plane, to be greeted by "a twelve-foot posterboard of Elvis and a signpost marked 'Graceland'". Yet the great mountains of the Himalayas are comparable to the South Pole in the sense that they are a catalyst for spiritual journeys as well as physical ones. When Peter Matthiessen set out for the Crystal Mountain on the Tibetan Plateau in September 1973, he was ostensibly helping his friend, the field biologist George Schaller, study the wild blue sheep, and hoping to catch a glimpse of the exotic creature his book *The Snow Leopard* (1978) is named after. But his real purpose was "a journey of the heart", conceived in emotional and spiritual terms: he was trying to come to terms with the death of his wife the year before, and attempting to discover the enlightenment promised by the Zen Buddhism to which she had introduced him.

The aspect of Matthiessen's journey that I found most moving, however - and most resonant now, perhaps, given the agonizing stories of family separation we have heard during lockdown - was his recognition of the sadness of leaving. He is preoccupied by the promise he made to his youngest son, Alex, that he would be home in time for Thanksgiving. Matthiessen's discomfort was deepened by the knowledge that his journey wasn't necessary: he could find enlightenment anywhere, if he only knew how. "I feel great gratitude for being here, for being rather, for there is no need to tie oneself to the snow mountains in order to feel free. I am not here to seek the 'crazy wisdom'; if I am, I shall never find it. I am here to be here, like these rocks and sky and snow."

I wondered if I could renounce the need to go anywhere as well - that would have been helpful in lockdown - yet I was also interested in Matthiessen's account of his physical journey through the Himalayas. I was particularly struck by the sombre conversation he has with Schaller during which they acknowledge that no one would come and help them if they were ill or injured, for they have gone too deep into the mountains to be rescued in time. I remembered how claustrophobic I felt when I trekked in the Himalayas, in the far north of India - the clutch of fear I felt whenever I thought of the time it would take to retrace our steps, on foot, and then by Jeep or truck along the looping, switchback roads that overlooked the painstakingly cultivated slopes of the valleys below - and was reminded that I am not a natural traveller. "The realm of abandoned dreams and narrowing choices that loomed outside the rain-spattered windows of home", as Sara Wheeler called it, has always been my natural domain.

Still, I like travelling vicariously; and I marvel at the courage and endurance displayed by travellers such as Dervla Murphy, who decided on her tenth birthday, when she was given a bike and an Atlas, to cycle to India, and finally set off twenty-one years later. The "admirable Armstrong Cadet man's bicycle" was purchased by this time was named Rozinante after Don Quixote's horse. Unfortunately, 1963 was the worst winter in Europe since the war: packed snow and black ice were standard hazards. "More than once the agony of frozen fingers made me weep rather uncharacteristically", she writes in *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a bicycle* (1965).

When the thaw began, there were gales and floods to contend with. And the weather was only the start of Murphy's difficulties. She had taken a gun with her, and she needed it: once when she was attacked by wolves, and had to shoot one dead, and again to scare off a "scantly-clad" Kurdish man who had tried to climb into bed with her. She suffered three cracked ribs on a bus in Afghanistan and when they were healing she was bitten by a scorpion and stung by a hornet. None of it concerns her in the least: her antidote to living "in a state of permanent saturation from the waist down" was "lots of rum and no fuss", and when she finds herself halfway across an icy river in Pakistan, with one hand around the neck of an obliging cow, and the other gripping Roz's crossbar, she will only admit that it might be developing into "an Awkward Situation". This is travel writing of the old school: forthright and uncomplaining.

Murphy had her share of luck as well, for she made her journey when the route was hazardous, especially for a woman, though not impossible. She felt so at home in Afghanistan that she seriously considered settling there permanently. By the time Colin Thubron entered its northern provinces in 2003, it had been shattered by two decades of fighting, which had not been resolved by the US invasion of 2001.

He entered from the north, across the long bridge that Soviet tanks had rolled over in 1979, in the full knowledge that "foreigners did not cross here", as he writes in *Shadow of the Silk Road* (2006). His first stop was the town of Mazar-el-Sharif, which "became the last liberal outpost in Afghanistan" under the rule of the "brutal Uzbek warlord" Abdul Rashid Dostum. Yet in 1997, Dostum fled, and the Taliban entered the town. They were massacred by the locals, "mown down in streets they did not know", and later returned to take revenge. A year before Thubron arrived in Mazar, its streets were "quartered by the militia of rival warlords" and the road westward was still closed. "Danger was cumulative, of course", he writes of a town called Maimana, which he was forced to leave by plane, for no one would take him any further: "it crept up step by step half-noticed as your journey took you deeper, farther. Until you woke up at night in a place beyond help". I have never been anywhere that made me feel as vulnerable as Thubron felt in Maimana, though I understood his motive for undertaking his journey in the first place: a similar feeling took me to the West Bank city of Hebron, on the one occasion when I have gone abroad to write a book: "You go to touch on human identities, to people an empty map. You have a notion that this is the world's heart. You go to encounter the protean shapes of faith".

Thubron had been to many of the places on the Silk Road - an old trading route - on earlier trips, and he is preoccupied by how they have changed. Yet *Shadow of the Silk Road* doesn't only look backwards: since Thubron made his journey in 2003, during the SARS epidemic, it has resonances for the world of today as well. His journey begins in Xi'an, in western China, at the beginning - or the end - of the Silk Road, and as he travels west through Xinjian, home to the Muslim Uighur minority, he hears rumours of the "labour reform camps" that will grow into a system of mass oppression, and encounters Beijing's fledgling attempts to deal with the threat of a pandemic. "Even in this hinterland the mass machinery for social action is in place, and this disinfection crusade, however belated, is moving along the nerve-system of countless bureaucracies to stir the farthest extremities of the nation."

In a town called Chertchen he is detained in a "quarantine compound" and told he will be held for a fortnight. He is lucky: for reasons that are not explained to him, he is released the next day, and allowed to resume his journey. The virus that the Chinese authorities had been striving to contain would not prove as contagious as the one that would emerge seventeen years later, and confine people all over the world to their homes.

In the early 1990s, my sister also travelled from China to Europe, overland through Central Asia, as the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up the Silk Road for the first time in twenty years. I could have gone with her, and now wish I had. But I was drawn, as ever, to the faraway nearby, as Rebecca Solnit called it (after Georgia O'Keeffe), and stayed at home in London and wrote about the A40 instead. For similar reasons, I doubt that any of the books I have read in lockdown, invigorating though they are, will impel me to set off for distant places when it ends. Yet there is one country that I want to go back to - and that has inspired me to re-read Patrick Leigh Fermor's *Mani* (1958).

Like Thubron, Leigh Fermor is preoccupied by the complex genealogies of the people who inhabit his chosen territory - in his case, the Mani Peninsula (the middle of the three peninsulas of the southern Peloponnese). *Mani* contains speculative digressions on history and folklore, including entertaining stories of the Maniot feuds conducted from the high towers that stud the hills. But the real pleasure of the book lies in its evocation of the landscape: the "miraculous spring" Leigh Fermor discovers on a sweltering midday hike that takes him over the ridge of the Taygetus mountains, or the underwater cave he swims through one morning that is said to be the entrance to the Underworld. Lockdown lends extra poignancy to his stories of Greek hospitality, and the nights of "talk, wine, moonlight and the warm air". Yet, above all, there is the light, with its "many odd foibles and conjuring tricks", the "limitless Greek sky" and "the blue-green paradise of the sea". It is no surprise that Leigh Fermor settled in the Mani, for he is evidently enraptured by it - and he makes the reader share his pleasure. For me, his book is the best substitute for a trip to Greece, and the best preparation for the one I hope will come.

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