

Conquering the Unknown

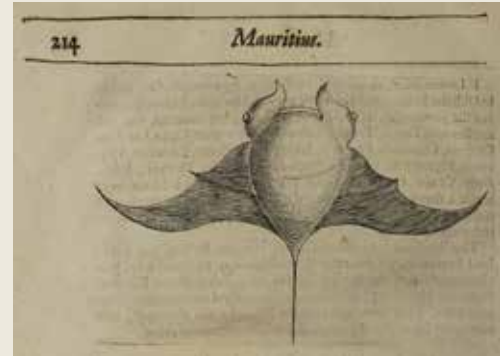
A journey through the history of scientific exploration in the travel narratives of the Old Library

The urge to travel to distant lands and learn about the world cannot be confined to a single period of time or a single civilization, but exploration is perceived differently across societies and historical periods, and its cultural importance varies. In Europe, the end of the Middle Ages saw an ever growing number of attempts to improve geographical knowledge. Local in their scale at first, these attempts led to the unexpected discovery of the New World, which provided further proof that the geographical certainties inherited from the past were mere illusions, and that Creation was filled with unsuspected marvels. The emergence of printed books ensured that new information travelled fast and wide, regardless of its reliability. In many ways, the history of the early modern period is characterised by competing appetites to discover and describe the world. Travellers' accounts enable us to grasp the scope and stakes of these rivalries.



Eugène Roger, *La Terre Sainte, ou Description topographique tres-particuliere des Saints lieux...* (1664)
© Bibliothèque nationale de France

Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of some yeares travailles begunne anno 1626 into Afrique and the greater Asia...* (1634)
© Wellcome Library



These travellers, despite their various social identities and motives, all decided to collect and spread information that seemed worthy of interest. Therefore, their writings are precious stepping-stones to understand what reasons and criteria were behind their curiosity and how both evolved. The act of documenting a far-away region implies that the traveller is, to a certain extent, conscious of what he does not know, and it demonstrates a willingness to turn the unknown into the known. Therefore, every travel that can be termed an exploration is informed by the ways in which the traveller's society constructs knowledge, and by the boundaries of this knowledge. Here, the scholarship of the authors is less important than the spaces their writings will fill on the shelves of libraries, their information on the largely incomplete maps of the world, and their descriptions in the knowledge, taste and imagination of sedentary readers. Thanks to a historical collection of remarkable and very rare books, the Old Library of the Centre Culturel Irlandais offers the opportunity of a journey through space, from the Holy Land to the Coral Sea via the Canadian North, but also through time, as it evokes the various motives and identities of the many travellers, who have, one after the other, played their part in conquering the unknown.



Centre
Culturel
Irlandais

In this timeline, each colour corresponds to a type of traveller identity among those represented in each of the display cases of the exhibition. The travels mentioned in the exhibited books are paralleled with important landmarks in the history and legacy of European scientific travels.

- I. Scholarly pilgrims
- II. Missionaries
- III. Ambassadors
- IV. Explorers of the Northeast Passage
- V. Commanders of great scientific expeditions

<u>Bernhard von Breydenbach – pilgrimage to Jerusalem</u>	1482	
	1487	<u>Bartolomeu Dias – rounding of the Cape of Good Hope</u>
	1492	<u>Cristoforo Colombo – chance “discovery” of the Caribbean</u>
	1534	<u>Jacques Cartier – first voyage to the Saint-Laurent</u>
<u>Jean Alfonse – exploration of the Saint-Laurent</u>	1544	
	1549	<u>François-Xavier – arrival in Japan</u>
<u>Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq – ambassador to Constantinople</u>	1555	
	1603	<u>Samuel de Champlain – first voyage and start of the exploration of Canada</u>
<u>Álvaro de Semedo – mission to China</u>	1613	
	1616	<u>Willem Schouten and Jacob Le Maire – rounding of Cape Horn</u>
<u>Alexandre de Rhodes – mission to Vietnam</u>	1624	
<u>Thomas Herbert – travel to Persia and in the Indian Ocean</u>	1626	
<u>Eugène Roger – arrival on Holy Land</u>	1629	
<u>Luke Foxe – exploration of the Hudson Bay</u>	1631	
<u>Adam Olearius and Johan Albrecht de Mandelslo – diplomatic mission to Muscovy</u>	1633	
	1638	<u>Jean-Baptiste Tavernier – first voyage to India</u>
<u>Jean Doubdan – pilgrimage to Palestine</u>	1651-1652	
	1681-1682	<u>René-Robert Cavelier de La Salle – exploration of the Mississippi</u>
	1735-1736	<u>Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis and Charles Marie de La Condamine – geodetic expeditions to Lapland and Peru</u>
	1776-1779	<u>James Cook – third and last voyage</u>
<u>Jean-François de La Pérouse – expedition around the world</u>	1785-1788	
<u>John Meares – exploration of the North Pacific</u>	1788-1789	
<u>Joseph Billings – return of the Arctic expedition</u>	1794	
	1795	<u>Mungo Park – exploration of West Africa</u>
	1798-1801	<u>Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign, accompanied by a large scientific expedition</u>
<u>Peter Dillon – voyage in the Melanesian archipelago</u>	1826	

This exhibition is presented in partnership with the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève as part of the 2022 thematic year on scientific travels

Scientific direction:

Ladislav Latoch,
PhD student in Early Modern History,
Sorbonne Université
Research Fellow, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève

Exhibition open from Monday
to Friday from 2-6pm
Admission free

Centre Culturel Irlandais
5 rue des Irlandais,
75005 Paris

www.centreculturelirlandais.com



Centre
Culturel
Irlandais