

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lines of Travel: Route Language and Situated Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing

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Abstract

Travel writing often turns movement into description so smoothly that the conditions of observation disappear. This article restores the route to the centre of interpretation by comparing Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian letters, Dorothy Wordsworth's record of a Scottish tour, Isabella Bird's Rocky Mountain correspondence, and Robert Louis Stevenson's journey with Modestine in the Cévennes. It follows directional verbs, temporal markers, place names, transport, lodging, weather, guides, and delay to ask how a traveller's position regulates what can be claimed as knowledge. The four works produce sharply different mobile standpoints: Wollstonecraft converts passage into political and affective comparison; Wordsworth builds landscape knowledge through pedestrian sequence and retrospective notation; Bird negotiates independence through equestrian mobility and local assistance; Stevenson allows an animal companion and repeated obstruction to unsettle the fiction of solitary authorship. Across the corpus, place names shift among orientation, memory, encounter, and possession. Interruptions are especially revealing because they expose the workers, animals, technologies, and permissions that continuous itinerary tends to hide. Route language does more than connect destinations: it records the changing conditions under which a landscape becomes narratable.

Keywords: travel writing; itinerary; mobility; place names; situated knowledge

1 Introduction

The destination has long enjoyed a privileged place in travel writing. Cities, ruins, mountains, and borders provide recognizable subjects, while the movement between them is easily reduced to connective prose. Yet travel knowledge is made on the road. Pace, direction, season, transport, fatigue, weather, language, money, and access determine what can be seen and how long it remains available. A description detached from these conditions risks presenting a situated encounter as an unqualified truth about place.

This article treats the route as a rhetorical and epistemic form. A route is not simply a line joining two locations. It is a narrated sequence in which perception changes with position. Verbs such as arrive, descend, cross, return, and wait make that sequence legible; deictic terms place the reader in relation to a moving observer; names fix some locations while leaving others generalized; interruptions reveal the material support of passage. By reading these features together, the analysis asks not only what the traveller reports, but how motion authorizes, narrows, or revises the report.

Travel scholarship has established that

apparently personal journeys participate in imperial systems [1], cultural representation [2], organized tourism [3], and practices of travel and translation [4]. The field's generic range provides the wider context for comparing these different itineraries [5]. A synthetic account of travel writing further supports treating observation as a rhetorically organized claim rather than transparent report [6]. Mobility studies distinguishes movement as displacement from mobility as socially organized capacity [7], while relational accounts of space clarify why position changes what can be known [8]. The present comparison brings those distinctions to the sentence level.

The corpus comprises works by Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, Isabella Bird, and Robert Louis Stevenson. The article first defines a route-centred method, then reads the four itineraries, and finally discusses moving deixis, place naming, infrastructure, and the limits of the Anglophone comparison. Its thesis is that route language records the changing conditions under which a landscape becomes narratable. Recent work on travel and mobility further specifies the relation between route language and situated knowledge. Youngs surveys the genre's

changing forms and the interpretive problems created by its mixed documentary and literary claims [9]. Sheller and Urry place movement within interconnected social systems rather than treating it as simple displacement [10].

2 Four Narrated Itineraries

The comparison brings together Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* [11], Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* [12], Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* [13], and Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* [14]. Their publication histories, implied readers, and modes of transport differ. That difference prevents a single traveller from becoming the unacknowledged norm.

Each journey is read in segments defined by departure, reported movement, obstacle or pause, and arrival. Within a segment, the analysis records directional verbs, changes in tense, named and unnamed places, means of travel, assistance, and the point at which the narrator generalizes from an encounter. This attention to spatial practice treats the route as enacted rather than merely plotted [15]. A second reading follows later corrections

and returns. If a place is redescribed after delay, or if a route is reconstructed from memory, the difference is treated as evidence of narrative mediation rather than inconsistency to be removed.

This approach does not reconstruct exact historical itineraries from maps, nor does it measure distance where the texts provide no reliable scale. Cartographic verification would be valuable for another study, but the present question is rhetorical: how does each narrator make location knowable through the order of movement? The method remains close to wording while acknowledging that every published itinerary has already been selected and shaped.

3 Wollstonecraft: passage as comparative judgment

Wollstonecraft's letters join geographical movement to restless evaluation. Sea crossings, coastal approaches, roads, lodgings, and commercial settlements are not inert settings for philosophical reflection. They prompt comparisons among political economy, manners, gender, and feeling. Because the letters preserve changes of mood and circumstance, judgment appears as something made in transit rather than delivered from an abstract vantage point.

Directional language is crucial to this effect. Arrival does not conclude inquiry; it replaces one horizon with another. A harbour first approached through difficult passage may be assessed differently after social contact. A road that promises access can turn attention toward labour, isolation, or the practical limits placed on a woman travelling with a child and attendants. The first-person voice is forceful, but its authority is repeatedly shown to depend on conveyance, hospitality, interpreters, local information, and correspondence.

Place names in the letters carry uneven weight. Some orient the reader within a recognizable northern itinerary; others gather commercial or historical associations; still others become charged by personal memory. The same name can therefore function as coordinates and as an emotional threshold. This instability complicates any reading of the journey as a steady accumulation of facts. Wollstonecraft's knowledge remains mobile because the route brings political observation and private recollection into contact without fully reconciling them.

4 Wordsworth: sequence, walking, and retrospective form

Dorothy Wordsworth's Scottish tour produces knowledge through close attention to succession. Roads, lochs, weather, inns, ruins, vegetation, and encounters are registered as parts of a day's movement. Walking and carriage travel create different rhythms of notice. Pedestrian pace permits extended attention to surfaces and changing prospects, while faster passage compresses intermediate space and gives arrival greater emphasis.

The record's later editorial and publication history reminds us that immediacy is constructed. Daily sequence may preserve the feel of encounter, but the surviving narrative also orders recollection. Temporal markers do more than date the journey; they decide which impressions belong together. A scene becomes meaningful through what precedes it—fatigue, expectation, unfavourable weather—and through the correction supplied by a later view.

Wordsworth's route language often refuses the sovereign prospect associated with picturesque tourism. A landscape may not yield a commanding composition at once. Curving roads, partial visibility, and changes of elevation make perception incremental. Local residents, ferries, accommodation, and route advice enter precisely where an idealized landscape description might omit them. The itinerary thereby places aesthetic response alongside the practical negotiations that allow the response to occur.

5 Bird: mobility, competence, and assisted independence

In *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, Bird presents movement as an achievement of endurance and adaptation. Horse travel opens spaces that conventional expectations of women's mobility might restrict, and the epistolary voice turns practical competence into a source of authority. The gendered conventions of travel writing provide an important context for this self-presentation [16]. Yet this authority is never simply individual. Animals, equipment, trails, guides, settlers, lodging, and local knowledge determine the possible route.

Bird's directional verbs often emphasize decisive motion: climbing, crossing, descending, and pressing onward. Read alone, such verbs support a narrative of autonomous adventure. Read with their agents and circumstances, they tell a more distributed story. A path is found, a horse manages terrain, information is received, shelter becomes avail-

able, or weather imposes delay. Independence is not disproved by these relations; it is made concrete. The traveller's agency consists in coordinating dependencies rather than escaping them.

Toponyms also mediate between experience and a geography already culturally claimed. Naming can offer precise orientation, but it can make Indigenous presence, contested ownership, or local labour less visible than scenery. A route-centred reading asks what appears between names and who enables that passage. This question checks the expansion of individual experience into general judgment without denying the descriptive force of Bird's writing.

6 Stevenson and the obstructed itinerary

Stevenson's journey with Modestine gives interruption unusual narrative prominence. The donkey does not behave as a transparent vehicle. Pace, resistance, care, and misunderstanding continually reshape the route, producing comedy while also exposing the material relation on which the traveller depends. The itinerary becomes a negotiation between bodies rather than the expression of a single will.

This resistance alters narration. A delay that would disappear from a destination-centred account becomes an event with its own ethical pressure. The traveller must interpret an animal whose motives remain partly inaccessible, and the limits of that interpretation parallel his uncertain readings of people and places. Modestine is neither a simple symbol nor merely transport; her presence makes authorship of the journey visibly shared and unequal.

The Cévennes route also crosses religious and historical memory. Place names can summon inherited conflict before present encounter complicates it. Stevenson's light tone does not eliminate these layers. Instead, misdirection and pause prevent historical associations from becoming a smooth explanatory map. The journey's knowledge is produced by failed mastery: the road is narratable because it repeatedly refuses to behave as an abstract line.

7 Discussion

Across the four texts, directional verbs organize a moving centre of perception. Words such as here, beyond, below, behind, and again possess meaning only in relation to the traveller's current position. When that position changes, a previous description can become partial without

becoming false. The route thus builds correction into its grammar. Knowledge is provisional because its coordinates move.

Tense contributes to the same effect. Present-tense vividness may compress the interval between journey and narration, while retrospective qualification reopens it. Letters can claim immediacy yet still select experience for an absent recipient; journals can retain daily sequence yet acquire coherence through later arrangement. A route-centred analysis therefore treats the narrated present as a literary achievement, not an unmediated transcript.

This insight changes the evaluation of inconsistency. Differing descriptions of a place may register a changed angle, social encounter, weather condition, or purpose. The critical task is to identify the condition of revision. When the text marks that condition, variation becomes evidence of situated inquiry rather than a defect in observation.

8 What place names do

Place names perform at least four distinct operations in the corpus. They orient by locating movement within a public geography. They commemorate by attaching a present route to historical memory. They personalize when repetition allows a location to gather emotional significance. They also claim, because naming can make territory appear available to the traveller's linguistic and cultural order.

These functions frequently overlap. A named pass may be a practical way-point and a scene of self-fashioning; a town may organize commercial observation and private unease. By contrast, unnamed stretches can disappear into generalized scenery even when they require the greatest labour to cross. The alternation between named points and compressed intervals therefore distributes value. What earns a name becomes recoverable to the reader; what remains between names risks becoming pure transit.

A critical reading should not assume that more precise naming is always more responsible. Colonial and touristic naming can overwrite existing geographies. The important question is whose knowledge a name carries and what relations it leaves unrecorded. The four works answer unevenly, which is one reason their itineraries should not be collapsed into a universal traveller's perspective.

9 Interruption reveals infrastructure

Continuous movement makes support easy to overlook. Delay reverses that effect. A missed connection, difficult road, tired animal, unsuitable lodging, uncertain direction, or weather-bound pause reveals the chain of persons and materials on which travel depends. Interruption is therefore not incidental background; it is an analytical opening onto infrastructure.

The texts distribute this visibility differently. Wollstonecraft's delays connect political reflection to commerce and domestic circumstance. Wordsworth's pauses alter aesthetic expectation and admit local guidance. Bird's obstacles display skill while exposing the assistance that makes adventurous mobility possible. Stevenson's repeated difficulty with Modestine turns dependency into the journey's governing form. In each case, the route becomes most socially legible when forward motion fails.

This pattern also cautions against celebrating mobility in the abstract. The capacity to convert delay into literature is itself unevenly distributed. Money, passport regimes, social status, gender, health, and imperial privilege shape who may travel, wait, or return. The selected texts register some of these conditions and obscure others. Their silences should be treated as limits on the knowledge their routes can support.

10 Conclusion

These travel narratives do not acquire authority by reaching destinations alone. Wollstonecraft makes movement a condition of political and affective comparison; Wordsworth composes landscape through sequence and retrospective order; Bird turns assisted mobility into a record of practical agency; and Stevenson lets animal resistance unsettle the fiction of solitary command. Their routes produce knowledge through change of position.

Directional verbs, place names, and interruptions are the principal instruments of that production. Deixis keeps judgment tied to a moving observer, names distribute cultural and emotional value, and delay exposes the infrastructure hidden by fluent passage. Reading the line of travel rather than only its endpoints reveals a more exact relation between mobility and authority: the traveller knows from somewhere, by particular means, and with assistance that the narrative may either acknowledge or conceal. The Anglophone corpus and selected editions limit generalization; future comparison with other languages, media, and routes

should test how narrated movement redistributes authority elsewhere.

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