

THE VOYAGES AND MANIFESTO OF WILLIAM FERGUSSON, A SURGEON OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY, 1731–1739. Edited with an introduction and notes by DEREK L. ELLIOTT. pp. 185. Published by Routledge for the Hakluyt Society, London, 2021.

doi:[10.1017/S1356186321000432](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186321000432)

This volume will join more than forty travel accounts focused wholly or in part on South Asia which the Hakluyt Society has published over the years. Almost all were written before formal western control, though edited in the age of high imperialism. By contrast, this work is consciously set by its author in the world of the European Enlightenment. Derek Elliott has edited it with notes and a critical introduction which explore the training and career of apothecary surgeons and contextualise the Indian Ocean trading world into which they sailed. There are eight maps, four colour plates and copious other illustrations. The reader is taken on four voyages, three in English East India Company ships, the author's engaging observations and reflections growing in length with each journey. Researchers interested in the history of ideas, medicine, early modern colonialism and maritime merchant empires will find much new information to explore in these pages.

The timing of these voyages makes them particularly interesting. They are set in a world on the cusp of a great transformation. This note is struck in the first journey from Ayr to London. Fergusson took advantage of a stop at Portaferry in Ireland to visit Struell Wells. It was Midsummer's Eve and vast numbers inflamed by the eloquence of a preacher were performing the difficult and painful rituals of ancient custom. This was Catholic Ireland under the Penal Laws of a Protestant government, and where the Roman Church was already trying to bring most of these open-air Irish language gatherings to an end. In India the European presence that Fergusson reports is confined to coastal trading bases. But in more than one reference he shows awareness of the potential for momentous change implied in what modern historians have called the Military Revolution. From information that he received at the East India Company factory at Tellichery/Thalassery in October 1736, he explained the recent defeat of a huge Indian army by a small European force in terms of the discipline and standardised equipment that were the fruits of a standing army. Elsewhere, he implies that the strength of the country powers was not what it seemed. When he reaches Canton, he expresses his almost unqualified admiration for China under the Qianlong emperor. But here, too, he mentions on more than one occasion areas of growing European superiority: medicine; ship design; mathematics and science.

The *Voyages* have remained in manuscript, and copies are held at the Cambridge Centre of South Asian Studies. Almost nothing is known of Fergusson's early life, but perhaps when he wrote them thirty years after his return, he intended them to be published. His inclusion of 'Manifesto' in the title draws attention to them as a form of 'philosophical travel writing', comparable to the Enlightenment tradition of 'philosophical history writing'. There must be an element of later reflection but the immediacy and consistency of his observations seem to justify the date of the title. His encounter at the Cape with the people then known as Hottentots brings out his dispassionate humanity. Their vilification by the Boers as a brutish, degraded community, he thought was designed to justify their inhumane treatment. He was even prepared to consider that "their Capacity or Understanding was rather superior to that of Europeans". In India he writes of the custom of vegetarianism that there "is none I admire or approve more". He recounts with similar approval the ease of divorce to be found in the Maldive Islands.

On the subject of religion, he voices most clearly his Enlightened viewpoint, deistical and anti-clerical, with, perhaps, an undercurrent from his Scottish Calvinist forebears. At Struell Wells he reflects: "How much better it is to have no Notions of God at all than Such as are unworthy of him". The thought of Roman Catholic missionaries targeting the Hottentots makes him fear "the

monstrous consequences of the hellish Religion”. Muslim intolerance in Mocha repels him, but he is comforted by the religious freedom of Bombay under the Company, and by what he hears of Hindu openness and kindness to animals. But reports of hook-swinging, sati and other customs show that Indian enlightenment has been corrupted by ‘Enthusiasm’. In the form of Buddhism this has also polluted China, but otherwise that country is an exemplar of civilised values. Its government represents an Enlightened Despotism that European philosophers could only dream of, and Confucianism represents the highest form of Natural Religion.

However, we learn that Canton was more or less closed to foreigners and, of course, that the author did not know Chinese. He has interesting observations from his restricted opportunities, but he makes no secret of his dependence on the work of Jean-Baptiste du Halde. Du Halde himself had not been to China but had collated reports from fellow Jesuits in a great compilation which had strongly influenced Voltaire. The editor thinks that Fergusson may have had access to *The General History of China*, the English translation which appeared just before he left on his fourth voyage. On the other hand, he may have read it during the three decades after his return before he wrote up his memories. So, it either guided or confirmed the inference he drew of a well-governed and prosperous country from sailing up the populous Pearl River delta or from visiting mandarins. Either way, he is interestingly explicit about the system of values that filters his experience, hearsay and reading about China.

For India, he cites no prior authority, but some of the same limitations, though to a lesser extent, apply to his visits where he spent more time but wrote less than in his account of China. Fergusson was a ship-bound surgeon calling at the Company enclaves in Bombay, Malabar, Madras and Calcutta. The reader will not find the detailed information about Indian society offered, for example, two centuries earlier by Ludovico de Varthema or Duarte Barbosa. But as with China, he declares his own values, which he brings in a spirit that is observant, open-minded and humane. There is also much incidental information of interest: some reported, as concerning the ‘humane Tempers’ of the Andaman Islanders; some gathered first hand about the Banians of Mocha, or the port of Malacca, or St Helena society, or the treatment of scurvy. The *Voyages* begin and end with a brutal reality of eighteenth-century seafaring. In the first voyage they escape the press gang. In the last, after months at sea and with the English coast in sight, the ship is boarded and the despairing crew are taken for service in warships.

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