10-1995

The Blessings of a Good Thick Skirt: Issues of Dress in Women's Travel Narratives

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I argue here that as illustration became expected in travel accounts between 1870-1900, the visual image produced a constraint on how women presented their dress and general appearance in their narratives. My particular focus is on women who presented themselves as traveling on their own, whether in fact they were alone or not, and as directing their own journeys, a position that I believe was used when women were attempting to establish a name for themselves in a developing profession. Prior to access to photographic images, women could present themselves in any manner they wanted for their reading public. Once illustration or photography became expected, however, women were forced to take into account the gaze of the reader and presented themselves accordingly. The decision to use self-representation or not, to use the camera or stay with drawings often depended on how much control the woman traveler had over the illustrative process. In the case of Somerville and Ross’ 1893 In the Vine Country, for example, the “eye of the Kodak” was rejected in favor of Sommerville’s illustrations [Fig.1].
Fig. 1. Somerville and Ross examine a camera.

Today, consumers are asked to engage in imaginative travels as a means to sell clothing as evidenced by a 2000 catalog illustration of the “Isabella Bird collection”; however, in
the 1790s, when travel works did not contain illustrations, women resisted describing their appearance in much detail if they wanted to be taken seriously. Mary Wollstonecraft in *Vindication* characterizes the differences between men and women’s perception while traveling and how their respective dress colors their perception:

A man, when he undertakes a journey, has, in general, the end in view; a woman things more of the incidental occurrences, the strange things that may possibly occur on the road; the impression that she may make on her fellow-travellers; and, above all, she is anxiously intent on the care of the finery that she carries with her, which is ore than ever a part of herself, when going to figure on a new scene; when to use an apt French turn of expression, she is going to produce a sensation. Can dignity of mind exist with such trivial cares? (151)

In her own 1795 travel account, *Letters from a Short Residence in Sweden*, Wollstonecraft maintained her own “dignity of mind” by carefully avoiding the description of her own dress and she was critical of the Scandinavian women she encountered for paying so much attention to the style of her French gowns. Awareness of dress among women and its effect on the observer thus served as an indication of a lack of intellectual development.

Later, Harriet Martineau, in order to distance herself from the radicalism of Wollstonecraft, made use of dress references to emphasize the domestic character of her narrative persona. When writing about her travel to America in 1834, she presented herself as sitting in cozy family circles engaged in needlecraft. While traveling in the
Middle East in 1847, she joined the other European women making bonnets for desert travel. Always practical, she recommended her account *Eastern Life* that women travelers in the area wear sturdy, washable clothing, round straw hats, and ribbons that can be turned when they faded. But she felt no need to discuss the actual dress she wore while traveling nor to provide an illustration of herself while traveling.

In contrast, in the 1880s-1890s, as women traveled further afield and there was growing uneasiness over women’s behavior while traveling, issues of dress were raised in women’s travel accounts. Isabella Bird was preoccupied with how the British reading public would view unconventional riding position (she rode astride) and accompanying dress, which featured a split skirt in her early works. Through her Hawaiian and Rocky Mountain travels she promoted a split skirt, which allowed her to ride astride.

Whereas Wollstonecraft and Martineau purposefully avoided bringing up the issue of how they dressed while traveling, Bird, and later Mary Kingsley, did raise the issue of dress because they wished to separate themselves from the various developing women’s movements (which were later lumped under the term the “New Woman” movement), which were being mocked in the popular press. A comic illustration in *Punch* in 1894, labeled “Donna Quixote,” serves as an illustration of the women’s issues that were regarded as impractical and unrealistic—appropriate targets for satire. (See fig.2)

Because of such imagery, women travelers during the later half of the nineteenth century experienced anxiety over how to present to the British public their appearance in the field. Bird wrote that, “Travellers are privileged to do the most improper things with perfect propriety, that is one charm of traveling” (qtd. in Barr 54). This belief, however, did not remove anxiety over the “improprieties” present in her writings. In her Six
Months in the Sandwich Islands, Bird was careful to include an engraving of a woman on a horse in full gallop. (Fig. 3) labeled “The Pau or Hawaiian Ladies’ Holiday Riding

Fig. 2. Donna Quixote from *Punch* 1894.
Fig. 3. Isabella Bird’s Hawaiian riding dress.
Dress,” the full folds of the divided skirts are shown as almost covering the horse as well as the rider (22). This was obviously an impractical costume if the rider ever had to dismount or was thrown.

Bird continued to modify her riding dress for the Rocky Mountains and she expressed concern that reviewers of *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* might scent “out any imagined impropriety” (Barr 184). When the review in *The Times*, however, played up the Wild West elements of her travel and claimed she wore pants, while noting she was unchaperoned for weeks in a mountain cabin with two young men, Bird protested to her publisher and, rather than complaining about misrepresentation of her behavior though, she focused on the representation of her dress. Bird claimed her costume was “a dress worn by ladies at Mountain Resorts in America and by English and American ladies on Hawaii. The full-frilled trousers being invaluable in mountaineering or riding.” Very much enraged, and having emphasized the word “ladies,” she continued, “My indignation and disgust have not cooled down yet. I can imagine a lady who ‘dons masculine habiliments’ quite capable of thrashing an editor on less provocation” (Barr 184). Her publisher, Murray, suggested adding a note and a sketch that emphasizing the femininity of her riding dress to derail such comments. (Fig. 4) A sketch was then produced to add to the frontispiece of further editions of *A Lady’s Life*. This sketch shows a woman with a mid-calf length skirt over bloomers that are carefully secured at the ankles to maintain modesty. Bird’s response to the drawing was that it was “rather Amazonian,” but at least not masculine (Barr 184-185).

Eventually, in her later travels, Bird taught herself photography so as to take her own photographs for her travel accounts and she partly resolved the problem of dress by
adopting native costume when possible. In her *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, Bird included a photograph of herself in a formal pose in a “Manchu dress” (347) (Fig. 5) the loose robes were dignified, yet exotic, and they indicated that she had achieved her status as an explorer. In including this photograph, she is following the well-established tradition of male explorers’ presentations. However, male travelers, such as Edward Granville Browne in his *A Year Amongst the Persians* (1893) used their photograph as the frontispiece illustration for their books (Fig. 6). Bird placed hers well within the center section of *Yangtze Valley*. (See Fig. 5).

Such concerns with image and conventional appearance were effective in that Bird became one of the first women to be nominated to full fellowship in the Royal Geographic Society. In 1893, however, the decision to admit women to the RGS was rescinded as part of a growing anti-“New Woman” movement. When Mary Kingsley
Fig. 5 Isabella Bird in later life in Manchu dress.
Fig. 6 Typical male traveler pose. Edward Brown in this case.
started to write her *Travels in West Africa*, she had to take this regression in women’s professional access into account.

As a way of distancing herself from charges of being a “New Woman,” by 1897, Kingsley insisted publicly that she wore a traditional full-length skirt through the swamps of West Africa; however, her works do not include photographs of herself. Having performed so many unladylike actions and having challenged expectations of how women should behave by traveling with groups of native men, Kingsley needed to defuse a possible backlash and accusations of unfemininity and lax morals by carefully emphasizing her maintenance of feminine clothing during her travel. This campaign was skillfully handled by Sarah Tooley of the *Young Woman*, a magazine that promoted marriage as the primary role for women, after the *Daily Telegraph* attempted to link Kingsley with the New Woman movement.

While Bird did everything she could to make pants appear skirt-like so she could ride astride, Kingsley did not feel sufficiently secure in her femininity nor gentility to attempt any variety of bloomers or heavily lace-draped divided skirts. In her best-known sketch, and one that has been used as a sort of defining moment for all nineteenth-century women travelers, Kingsley describes falling into a jaguar pit trap onto the points of spears. She survives, she claims, because her voluminous heavy skirt protected her from any harm.

It is at these times you realize the blessing of a good thick skirt. Had I paid heed to the advice of many people in England, who ought to have known better, and did not do it themselves, and adopted masculine garments, I should have been spiked to the bone, and done for. Whereas, save for a good many bruises, here I was with the
fullness of my skirt tucked under me, sitting on nine ebony spikes some twelve inches long, in comparative comfort, howling lustily to be hauled out. *(Travels 270)*

It is a little difficult to determine just how seriously Kingsley intended such a claim to be taken. But then she later reaffirmed the importance of feminine dress, declaring,

> I hasten to assure you I never even wear a masculine collar and tie, and as for encasing the more earthward extremities—well, I would rather perish on a public scaffold. *(Travels 502)*

She also mentioned using stays (at least when visiting Europeans), lacing them up with a shoestring when they broke.

The message of the “blessing of a good thick skirt” was reemphasized when she was contradicted by Lady MacDonald, a friend who had sailed with her on one trip. MacDonald claimed (probably truthfully) that Kingsley wore pants under her skirt, removing the skirt when having to wade through rivers and swamps, then securing the pants’ legs around her ankles to keep leeches off *(Frank 64)*. In response, Kingsley carefully dressed in outdated conservative fashions whenever she gave lectures in Britain. *(Fig. 7)* the startling effect can be seen in this cartoon drawn at one of her lectures.

Labeled “Anticipation” and “Realisation,” they express the audience’s expectation of what a woman explorer would look like and then the actual impression she gave.

Whereas Kingsley does not show herself in her first book *Travels in West Africa*, her second book, *West African Studies*, uses as a frontispiece a head shot from this studio photograph showing her in full black mutton-sleeved dress with umbrella and gloves. *(Fig. 8)* Her biographer, Katherine Frank, comments that these photographs suggest that
Fig. 7. Cartoons of Kingsley titled “Anticipation” and “Realisation” drawn during her Cambridge lecture in 1899. (Birkett 196)
Kingsley “is doing her utmost . . . to seem like the last person one would accuse of having traveled in West Africa” (222). While photographs of West African natives
illustrate her books, Kingsley’s photographs do not feature her in Africa, and since she only traveled alone with uninterviewable natives, no one could dispute her accounts, although at least one surviving photograph from 1895 provides us with a comparison (Fig. 9). Apparently, Kingsley’s original photographs had suffered from the humidity of Africa and Kingsley replaced them photographs taken by others, but I also believe she realized that she needed control over her image in the field for her readers.

Indeed, through judicious use of lectures and newspaper accounts, Kingsley translated a relatively short stay in Africa into a position of authority and some political power in her promotion of indirect colonial governance. And in her early death, she became a martyr for the British Empire.

After consideration of the rhetorical challenges posed by the demand for print and photo illustration, we might consider how similarly, women in the field have had to consider the use of the film documentary. We can see that those who film well, such as primatologist Jane Goodall, gain a greater presence than those who hold to Wollstonecraft’s position, such as primatologist Dian Fossey, who, according to her National Geographic photographer, would not “keep up” her appearance in the field and, thus, “looked terrible” (Hayes 217). Indeed, the challenges posed by the image is greater now than ever before.
Fig. 9. Kingsley’s normal dress in 1895. (Blunt 51)
Works Cited


“Donna Quixote.” *Punch* 28 April 1894, 194-95.


