

William Blacker

***Along the Enchanted Way:
A Story of Love and Life in Romania***

John Murray 2010 / 320 pages / €23

The search for exotic and the unusual destinations attracts tens of thousands of people to some of the most remote places on the planet. They journey to deserts of Africa, the Amazon Basin, Himalayan valleys and Pacific atolls. But once there, many find the same trappings of Western consumerism they sought to leave behind, if only briefly.

That said, the question becomes are there really any untouched worlds left, and if so, where are they?

William Blacker, a British journalist of Irish descent, found just such a world: Europe. But his Europe was approached using infinite slowness, a journey back in time. In 1990, Blacker decided to travel to Romania, where Nicolae Ceausescu's regime had just

met its bitter end. But his attempt to reach Bucharest by car from Vienna went nowhere. Instead, he found himself in the Romanian countryside, which in terms of daily life, customs, and personal relationships seemed indistinguishable from the world of 1750, if not 1500. In essence, Blacker went back in time to a world removed from the modern but nonetheless content, self-contained, self-sufficient, and able to coexist with 20th century reality. The land he trekked through had endured two world wars and the ruthlessness of communism.

In diary form, Blacker recounts his original trek through the agricultural valleys of Transylvania. He fills in the narrative with descriptions of return trips later in the 1990s and again in 2008.

His time in Romania grew increasingly longer and more languorous. He spent months, then years in remote villages observing the life of Romanian farmers from Romania, the restless Saxon craftsmen, and the itinerant Rom. He shared homes, clothing, food and meals. He worked the fields with hands using ancient wooden tools, not a piece of modern agricultural machinery in sight. He became involved with local rites, the yin and yang of local gossip and love affairs.

In the end, he married a gypsy girl, Marishka, with whom he had a son. This total immersion taught him to speak to elders and listen to their narratives. It also made him into something a spokesman and defender of the region and its oppressed people.

Scenes from daily life in Romania's Maramures Region, near the Carpathians. Photos by Luisa Betti.



L. Betti



L. Betti



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Blacker's tale is an extraordinary journey, all the more so because these valleys endure to the present day. Parts of Romania are still crossed on horse-drawn carts, have wooden churches erected without using a nail, and host farmers working the land with wooden pitchforks.

But the world Blacker found is slowly facing extinction. Increasingly, modern ways are making inroads. Farmers are transforming what was once traditional hospitality reserved for visitors into the bed & breakfasts intended to attract tourists. Neon is beginning to make an appearance. An era is slowly but surely coming to an end.

Astrit Dakli

Antonio Tabucchi***Notturmo indiano*** (in Italian)

Sellerio, 1984 / 124 pages / €10

This slim volume captures India's extraordinary colors, moods, and habits. It follows Roux, who is trying to track down his friend Xavier. The long and arduous journey becomes a narrative means to breathe life into country's array of character. The "cast" includes a Mumbai prostitute, a hospital doctor, a staunch Jain waiting for a train that never comes, and deformed dwarf. Also making an appearance, in various forms, are the director of the Theosophical Society in Madras, the ghost of the Viceroy of India in Goa, a priest named Pimentel, a mailman named Tommy, hotel employees, and a photographer called Christine. These characters help Tabucchi reconstruct the story of the search for his missing friend. Tabucchi's prose and storytelling are both seductive and intriguing, allowing the reader close contact with India as seen by the inquisitive Roux. His search combines the adventurous with the mundane. He overlaps stories, dreams, and memories, weaving a kind of controlled confusion that helps make the narrative compelling. By pasting together an array of seemingly insignificant details it becomes apparent that Xavier has been "lost" for some time, and has no interest in being found, just as Roux in fact has no wish to find him. Tabucchi's story makes for good reading among India veterans seeking to compare their views with that of a probing writer. It is also homage to parts of the country as yet unexplored. With impeccable style, Tabucchi transport readers into a game of sorts, one that combines the fantasy and reality that are typical of India. *Claudia Astarita*

Colin Thurbon***Shadows of the Silk Road***

Vintage, 2007 / 384 pages / €18.00

First published in 2006, Thurbon's book has lost none of its charm. Thurbon traces the history of the world's first great trade route, which extended from the heart of China into the mountains of Central Asia, across northern Afghanistan, and the plains of Iran into Kurdish Turkey. It revels in mysticism, mystery and conflict.

It got its name from Lei-tzu, wife of the legendary Yellow Emperor who reigned for about a century 2600 BC. According to legend, Leizu discovered silkworms while having a midday tea. One account suggests a silkworm fell into her tea, and the heat unwrapped the silk until it stretched across her entire garden. Another that she found the silkworms eating mulberry leaves and spinning cocoons. Dropping a cocoon in her tea, she saw a thread started to separate itself and noticed she could unwind this soft and lovely thread around her finger.

Thought silk cultivation began long before, the Thurbon retraces myth and fact to move the narrative across millennia.

Thurbon, considered among the best English writers of his generation, is consummate observer who alternates factual details with visceral responses to what he sees. He also has an uncanny way of blurring time, so that the "then" and "now" seem to exist contemporaneously/ His mountain treks demonstrate shared human identity, whether in the countryside, towns and villages. Making his way by local bus, truck, car, donkey cart and camel, he travels from the Yellow Emperor's tomb to the ancient port of Antioch.

His prose elicits the bustle that defined

the Silk Road for centuries. It brought together merchants from the whole of the known world, including Saudis, Japanese, Persians, Turks, Indians, Bactrian, Jews, and Syrians. It was a melting pot of ancient splendor. *Marina Gersony*

Bruce Chatwin***The Songlines***

Vintage Classics, 2008

304 pages / €12.00

Australia's so-called "songlines" are unmarked pathways that extend throughout the continent like ancient tracks that connect communities and respect ancient boundaries, some of them never set down on maps. It is believed that Aboriginal people used them to pass along songs that revealed how the world was created and the history of history itself.

Chatwin remarkable book is part travelogue, memoir, and history. It narrates his travels across Australia in an effort to discover the origins of the songs and unravel their mysteries. I picked up this book again after 24 years and rediscovered all the charm I found on first reading. The Songlines is above all an ode to literature and to the discovery of nature based on how it's described. Nature remains intact even when awareness of it declines in humans.

Chatwin's reflections on aboriginal patience are an excellent antidote to times that emphasize velocity and the instant, often without taking time out to watch, see, and hear. The book sees the desert as the home of all human language, which was created through imitating birdcalls. "Song" reasserts the original harmony that once tied man to his natural universe.

Written in 1986, "The Songlines" was among Chatwin's final books (he died in

1989). For Chatwin, it was vital to insist that aboriginal culture and the land were one and the same, one the expression of the other. Only by "singing the land" did the land itself exist. You see tree rock, path, and sing it into existence. What are we if not defined by our environment?

*Carlo Pizzati***Ryszard Kapuscinski*****Travels with Herodotus***

Penguin, 2008 / 288 pages / €8

The likes of Kapuscinski have vanished from the planet. The late Polish journalist who spent half-a-century traveling through most of the world was uniquely capable of long-form insights that 21st century editors and publishers seem reluctant to commission, let alone publish.

The book, Kapuscinski's final original published work (he died in 2007), mixes his own experiences with excerpts from The Histories by the 400 BC Greek historian Herodotus, considered the first scholar to ever work in a systematic manner, chronicling both the past and how it tied to what was known about the present, developing a kind of early ethnography. "I was quite consciously trying to learn the art of reportage, and Herodotus struck me as a valuable teacher," he writes.

Memories of the Herodotus and his observations also permit Kapuscinski to recall how he rose, almost by accident, to his position of global correspondent for a Polish newspaper, a job that would see him dispatched mostly to the Middle East and Africa. "The Histories," he writes, was given to him by an editor before he left for his first foreign assignment in India.

Kapuscinski describes but doesn't preach. He seems to do so in the name of

the world's freelancers, who are forever asking the question, "Where can I find information?" His answer is to snoop, listen and glean news. He suggests reporters listen carefully to opinions and anecdotes. A great deal of what's important to know about the workings of the planet, he writes, can't be found in its newspapers, on the radio, or on television.

"Each culture requires acceptance and understanding," he concludes, "and that to understand it one must first come to know it."

*Simone Pieranni***José Saramago*****The Elephant's Journey***

Vintage 2011 / 208 pages / €12.50

What better way to take a trip that read a book that tells of one? This slender book by the late Jose Saramago, the Portuguese novelist who won the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature, weaves history and fantasy to beautiful effect.

It takes the reader back to the strife-torn 16th-century, when Europe was riddled with religious conflict, the Lutheran Reformation and the Counter-Reformation butting heads. At the time, religion disagreement meant war. Thus we enter the year 1551, when King Dom Joao III comes up with a novel idea for a present. For two years he's been in possession of an elephant named Solomon, which arrived in Lisbon from India. In an effort to make a good impression, he decides to gift Solomon to the regent of Spain, Austrian Archduke Maximilian, his Lutheran cousin.

Gift accepted, the next question is how to get an elephant from Lisbon to Vienna. Accompanied by his Indian handler Subhro, a military escort, and with bag-

gage in tow, the elephant party sets out on its journey. After a few border skirmishes between Portuguese and Austrians officials, Solomon heads to Rosas, on the border between Spain and France. Next is a boat trip to Genoa. After than a northern journey through Piacenza, Mantua, Verona, Padua, where we're made privy to an effort by the local bishop convince Solomon's handler to get the beast to kneel in front of the Basilica of St. Anthony so he can hail an anti-Lutheran "miracle."

Then comes the crossing of the Alps at the Brenner Pass in conditions similar to those faced by Hannibal's troops. Later, Solomon rides along the Inn River to Linz, which spills into the Danube, before finally disembarking outside Vienna to make a triumphal entry into the city.

The trip sees local people amazed and bewildered at the sight of a creature many didn't know existed. We learn that the elephant is unique, and not only because there's no comparable creature in nature, but because the animal has a specific character. One part of an elephant hears and responds to a handler's demands, while another is more determined, stubborn, and willful.

Saramago's prose makes for a journey of its own. Waves of prose, often unpunctuated and lasting whole pages, flow like river water from point to point.

Saramago plays the role of period-piece reporter, telling what he knows of the facts and admitting what he doesn't know. He listens bewildered to the language of the handler (later named Fritz by Maximilian) as he gives order to Solomon. The book, which sublimely mixes fact and fantasy, is based on a similar trip made by an Indian elephant in 1551.

Giuliana Sgrena