Travels Through 18th-Century Britain

by Matthew Wardour (July 2021)

Humphry Clinker, Milton Glaser for Signet, 1960

It seems unlikely that the remaining second-hand bookshops will survive their owners. These extraordinarily strange creatures (I suspect they are unemployable in most other spheres of life) develop cramped, unlovely, and usually disordered shops which no-one of a sensible mind would want as an inheritance. Every death of these remarkable owners and their dens diminishes society. When they are finally gone from all but a few pockets in these islands, it will be one of the clearest signs that we have become a much less civilised country.

Such a fate has befallen the bookshop in which I discovered Tobias Smollet's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker,* a comic travel novel which this year celebrates its 250th anniversary. It is, with the possible exception of *Three Men in a Boat*, the best of its kind. An epistolary novel, *Humphry Clinker* follows the travels of a household of several "originals" who are travelling round Britain with the chief aim of relieving the various ailments of the curmudgeonly patriarch, Matthew Bramble. The long journey is farcical, satirical, scatalogical, and ultimately very endearing.

In many ways the older I get and the more I read, the more stereotypically childish I become. There is something about the supposedly youthful and rather romantic view of the world which makes a lot more sense to me than the grim, serious realism that seems commonplace in modern art—where misery, dullness and amorality are usually unrelenting and, worst of all, unamusing. In older books one finds a much richer and more colourful world. There is greater diversity—real diversity—a large indigestible platter of madnesses and strange beliefs (whereas madnesseses today seem to have become both homogeneous and pandemic). In *Humphry Clinker*, one town believes in this quack cure; another town in that quack cure. Each place tends to have its own variation of fanatical customs and diabolical habits. Moreover there are eccentric individuals everywhere who seem to be laws unto

themselves. Indeed, one cannot help but notice an eccentricity that seems, in modern times, to have died out as individual virtues have been replaced by collective passions. I wonder if Don Quixote could be created today, had Cervantes not got there first; I suspect a modern author might invent quixoticism, but not a Don Quixote.

Most of Smollett's novels are quixotic. (Smollett even made an excellent translation of *Don Quixote.*) In *Humphry Clinker* there is a Sancho in the form of the eponymous Humphry Clinker, a sort of holy fool who becomes a faithful servant of the Bramble family. And then there is Matthew Bramble, who is almost an anti-Don Quixote. His miserablism and pessimism conceal a quixotic romanticism, a feeling that so much is fragile and needs to be vigorously protected, and that so much else must be put right. If Bramble were not an ill, aging man, and greatly embittered because of it, I suspect he would be a sort of knight. But now he feels utterly defeated and has given up even idle hope. "In a little time," Bramble writes, "I am fully persuaded [that] nothing will be infamous but virtue and public-spirit."

Naturally, Bramble is not like the species of modern tourist who smiles in photographs and insists on sight-seeing in some kind of tour. I suspect that Bramble would rather never see the sights. He finds the experience of travelling an almost constant displeasure, only occasionally interrupted by joys such as old friends, spirited complaining, and, finally and most of all, returning home. He understands what most of us are curiously reluctant to admit, that traveling is seldom as enjoyable as we imagine it to be, and certainly more trying, in the places we must go, the company we must keep, and the vehicles we must use.

His experience of visiting London, for example, inspires some marvelous invective:

In short, there is no distinction or subordination

left. The different departments of life are jumbled together. The hod-carrier, the low mechanic, the tapster, the publican, the shopkeeper, the pettifogger, the citizen, and courtier, all tread upon the kibes of one another: actuated by the demons of profligacy and licentiousness, they are seen every where rambling, riding, rolling, rushing, justling, mixing, bouncing, cracking, and crashing in one vile ferment of stupidity and corruption. All is tumult and hurry; one would imagine they were impelled by some disorder of the brain, that will not suffer them to be at rest. The foot-passengers run along as if they were pursued by bailiffs. The porters and chairmen trot with their burthens. People, who keep their own equipages, drive through the streets at full speed. Even citizens, physicians, and apothecaries, glide in their chariots like lightning. The hackney-coachmen make their horses smoke, and the pavement shakes under them; and I have actually seen a waggon pass through Piccadilly at the hand-gallop. In a word, the whole nation seems to be running out of their wits.

The diversions of the times are not ill suited to the genius of this incongruous monster, called the public. Give it noise, confusion, glare, and glitter; it has no idea of elegance and propriety … One half of the company are following at the other's tails, in an eternal circle; like so many blind asses in an olive-mill, where they can neither discourse, distinguish, nor be distinguished; while the other half are drinking hot water, under the denomination of tea, till nine or ten o'clock at night, to keep them awake for the rest of the evening. … The walks, which nature seems to have intended for solitude, shade, and silence, are filled with crowds of noisy people, sucking up the nocturnal rheums of an aguish climate.

One of the main reasons for travelling is to explore potential palliatives and even cures for Bramble's various

illnesses. It is on such occasions that we get to see Smollett's mastery of scatalogical description:

> *As for the [Harrigate] water, which is said to have effected so many surprising cures, I have drank it once, and the first draught has cured me of all desire to repeat the medicine. Some people say it smells of rotten eggs, and others compare it to the scourings of a foul gun.… As for the smell, if I may be allowed to judge from my own organs, it is exactly that of bilge-water; and the saline taste of it seems to declare that it is nothing else than salt water putrified in the bowels of the earth. I was obliged to hold my nose with one hand, while I advanced the glass to my mouth with the other; and after I had made shift to swallow it, my stomach could hardly retain what it had received. The only effects it produced were sickness, griping, and insurmountable disgust. I can hardly mention it without puking. The world is strangely misled by the affectation of singularity. I cannot help suspecting that this water owes its reputation in a great measure to its being so strikingly offensive.*

Bramble is sceptical of most of the treatments he encounters; in the end he is at best mildly disappointed and at worst appalled. We could have done with a Matthew Bramble during the recent pandemic, for two chief characteristics of Bramble's temperament are pessimism and a sense of proportion, both of which are essential to good governance in a time of crisis. In addition to the various daft cures suggested to him by a credulous public that widely believes they are effective, Bramble has to endure doctors who, because of their studies, are confident that they intimately understand his many ailments and who proceed to explain how they will cure him. Seldom are they better than useless. "From such doctors," writes Bramble, "good Lord deliver us!"

Bramble possesses, like nearly all genuine curmudgeons, a most generous heart underneath his saurian,

well-worn exterior. When he first meets Humphry Clinker, a good and pious (though simple) young man who was dismissed from his stable job because he was taken ill, Bramble defends him in the strong, effective way that only an indignant miserabilist can:

> *"So that the fellow being sick and destitute," addressing the landlord who dismissed Clinker, "… you turned him out to die in the streets … You perceive our landlord is a Christian of bowels. Who shall presume to censure the morals of the age, when the very publicans exhibit such examples of humanity? Heark ye, Clinker, you are a most notorious offender. You stand convicted of sickness, hunger, wretchedness, and want."*

George Orwell preferred Smollett's earlier novels *Roderick Random* and *Peregrine Pickle*, writing approvingly that neither hero "is ever shown acting from an unselfish motive, nor is it admitted that such things as religious belief, political conviction or even ordinary honesty are serious factors in human affairs." He believed that "many of [Smollett's] best passages would be ruined by an intrusion of the moral sense." Well, it is for the same reason that I find myself seldom returning to those novels. There is never relief from comedy and cruelty. There is never the surprising and touching diffidence of Matthew Bramble, a man seemingly so misanthropic, yet who, for example, quietly takes pity on a widowed mother with a poor emaciated child whom he happened to notice at the Bristol hot wells. Still, this is a Smollett novel, and so Bramble is soon discovered by his sister, Tabitha, who bursts into Bramble's bedroom to find that he is gifting this pitiable woman twenty pounds. Tabitha immediately assumes the woman is a prostitute, snatches the money out of her hands, and exclaims "Brother, brother, I know not which most to admire; your concupissins, or your extravagance!" Farce ensues.

Poor Tabitha is the butt of many of Smollett's jokes.

She is terribly obsessed with money and status, and her frequent anxieties and pretensions are often amusing. No more so than when Smollett plays with her poor grasp of language and spelling. Tabitha is so furious with her brother's doctor that she "shall never favour him with another [letter], though he beshits me on his bended knees." She complains about an employee of the estate, Roger Williams, writing that "Roger gets this, and Roger gets that; but I'd have you to know, I won't be rogered at this rate by any ragmatical fellow in the kingdom." Her good-natured and bumbling servant, Winifred Jenkins (who naively reveres and in many ways tries to emulate her mistress), has her share of unintentionally creative language too. "Combustion" becomes "gumbustion". "Baume de vie" becomes "bumtaffy". "An object" becomes "nubjack". At one point she innocently exclaims, "O Mary! the whole family have been in such a constipation!" (I have wondered whether Richard Brinsley Sheridan had both Win Jenkins and Tabitha Bramble in mind when he created Mrs Malaprop four years later.)

I can only give a taste of Smollett's magnum opus. It is impossible to give an overview of such a diverse and unwieldy novel, one free from the constraints of plot and brevity. ("What the devil does a plot signify," wrote Sir Walter Scott, "except to bring in fine things?") I will simply end with an incident that should particularly appeal to readers of a literary magazine. At one point Bramble says to his nephew, Jeremy Melford, that, "There is very seldom any thing extraordinary in the appearance and address of a good writer; whereas a dull author generally distinguishes himself by some oddity or extravagance. For this reason, I fancy that an assembly of Grubs [Grub Street writers] must be very diverting." Melford is intrigued and therefore arranges to meet a group of such writers at the house of none other than Tobias Smollett (Smollett sometimes inserted himself and indeed his past fictional creations into *Humphry Clinker*). A wonderful satire follows; I offer the first paragraph:

> *I question if the whole kingdom could produce such another assemblage of originals. Among their peculiarities, I do not mention those of dress, which may be purely accidental. What struck me were oddities originally produced by affectation, and afterwards confirmed by habit. One of them wore spectacles at dinner, and another his hat flapped; though (as Ivy told me) the first was noted for having a seaman's eye, when a bailiff was in the wind; and the other was never known to labour under any weakness or defect of vision, except about five years ago, when he was complimented with a couple of black eyes by a player, with whom he had quarrelled in his drink. A third wore a laced stocking, and made use of crutches, because, once in his life, he had been laid up with a broken leg, though no man could leap over a stick with more agility. A fourth had contracted such an antipathy to the country, that he insisted upon sitting with his back towards the window that looked into the garden, and when a dish of cauliflower was set upon the table, he snuffed up volatile salts to keep him from fainting; yet this delicate person was the son of a cottager, born under a hedge, and had many years run wild among asses on a common. A fifth affected distraction. When spoken to, he always answered from the purpose. sometimes he suddenly started up, and rapped out a dreadful oath; sometimes he burst out a-laughing; then he folded his arms and sighed, and then he hissed like fifty serpents.*

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