



# Locke and Travel Literature

*edited by*  
*Giuliana Di Biase*

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# *Studi* Lockiani

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## Indice / Table of contents

Giuliana Di Biase, <i>Introduction. Locke and Travel Literature</i>	7
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### Articles

Daniel Carey, <i>John Locke's Use of Inquiries: Method, Natural History, and Religious Belief</i>	13
James Farr, <i>Locke Surveys New France</i>	41
Giuliana Di Biase, <i>Travel Books, Slavery and Colonial Ambitions in the Correspondence between John Locke and Nicolas Toinard (1678-1704)</i>	73
Saulo Henrique Souza Silva, <i>John Locke and the Atheists: Sociability in the Natural History of Peoples</i>	103
Luisa Simonutti, <i>John Locke and the Levant</i>	127
Ann Talbot, <i>All the World is not Mile End: Content and Context of Locke's Letters Concerning Toleration</i>	159

### Notes

Emily Thomas, <i>Travel, Philosophy, and Locke's Openness to the Unknown</i>	193
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# Introduction

## Locke and Travel Literature

Giuliana Di Biase

By the time of his death, Locke owned one of the largest collections of travel literature ever assembled in Britain. It comprised 195 books, including the massive collections of Ramusio, de Bry, Thévenot, Hakluyt, Purchas, and the accounts of the voyages of Hariot to Virginia, de Léry to Brazil, Sandys to the Ottoman Empire, Gage to the West Indies, and Choisy to Siam. His library also hosted accounts of minor voyages, many volumes of maps and a set of ethnographic illustrations “of the inhabitants of severall remote parts of the world espetically the East Indies”<sup>1</sup>. Locke’s works, journals and commonplace books bear witness to his great interest in travel accounts, and the enormous impact the reading of them had on the development of his views on human nature, social custom, religion, ritual, comparative government, coinage, medicine, and many other matters. Numerous scholars have investigated the reasons underlying Locke’s enthusiasm for travel accounts, which he seems to have regarded more as a locus of potentially useful information than as a source of entertainment. In 1996, Daniel Carey linked them to his participation in the Royal Society enterprise of constructing natural histories<sup>2</sup>, an opinion later endorsed by many commentators. In her book “*The Great Ocean of Knowledge*”, Ann Talbot has emphasised the close parallel between Locke’s approach to the anthropological data in travel literature and the method he employed to write Baconian-style

<sup>1</sup> Locke to William Charleton, 2 August 1687, in J. Locke, *Correspondence*, ed. by E.S. de Beer, vol. 3, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> D. Carey, “Locke, Travel Literature, and the Natural History, of Man”, in *The Seventeenth Century* 11 (1996), 2, pp. 259-280.

natural histories<sup>3</sup>, an aspect that Patrick Connolly has recently further explored suggesting that the genres of natural history and travel literature overlapped in the mind of early modern thinkers<sup>4</sup>.

Connolly has also demonstrated that Locke's interest in travel books deeply influenced the metaphysical and epistemological positions he developed in the *Essay*, where he used evidence gathered from the non-European world to support his anti-Aristotelian views on species and natural kinds<sup>5</sup>. Other scholars have investigated the influence of travel literature in Locke's political writings. Both Barbara Arneil and David Armitage have shown that travelogues were one of main sources of Locke's perception of the new world in the *Two treatises of Government*<sup>6</sup>, though their opinions diverge in some important respects. While Arneil suggests that Locke viewed American Indians as less rational than Europeans, Armitage points out that his knowledge of travel literature encouraged his scepticism about human capacities and about the alleged superiority of Europeans<sup>7</sup>. In keeping with Armitage's opinion, Ann Talbot has remarked that, through the reading of travel narratives, Locke developed a form of comparative social anthropology and had a sympathetic attitude towards native Americans, despite his role as a colonial administrator.

Many other commentators, such as Mark Goldie, Mariana Françoço and John Samuel Harpham, have emphasised the significant role that travel literature played in forming Locke's ideas. The aim of this special issue, the first of *Studi lockiani*, is to promote further investigation into this topic so essential for the understanding of Locke's works.

I would like to thank each of the authors for their remarkable essays, which are grouped thematically in this volume. The first essay, written by

<sup>3</sup> A. Talbot, "The Great Ocean of Knowledge". *The Influence of Travel Literature on the Work of John Locke*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2010, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> J. P. Connolly, "Locke, Pyrrard, and Coconuts: Travel Literature, Evidence, and Natural History", in J.T.A. Lancaster, R. Raiswell (eds.), *Evidence in the Age of the New Sciences*, Springer, Cham 2018.

<sup>5</sup> P. J. Connolly, "Travel Literature, The New World, and Locke on Species", in *Societate si Politica* 7 (2013), 1, pp. 103-16.

<sup>6</sup> B. Arneil, *John Locke and America: the Defence of English Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, pp. 21-44.

<sup>7</sup> D. Armitage, "John Locke: Theorist of empire?", in S. Muthy (ed.), *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 12.



Daniel Carey, focuses on Locke's practice of framing inquiries, highlighting the close link between the method he adopted in this activity and attempts by natural historians to capture insights from travellers. Moreover, Carey discusses a neglected manuscript in which Locke outlines a brief set of inquiries devoted to religion.

The second and third essays shift the focus onto Locke's French acquaintances. The rich milieu of travel literati with whom he came into contact in France comes to the forefront in James Farr's detailed analysis of Locke's surveys of New France (1678-1680), which sheds new light on the political motivations of his interest in travel literature and the geography of the new world. The travel books, voyages and explorations mentioned in Locke's correspondence with one of these French literati, the learned Nicolas Toinard, are the topic of my article, which underlines their link to French and English colonial ambitions and particularly to slavery.

The last three essays elucidate Locke's views on toleration. In his contribution, Saulo Silva brings Locke's conception of atheism to the fore, clarifying the reason for his interest in the history and reports of atheist peoples collected in travel books and the meaning of his denial of tolerance to atheists in his *Letter concerning Toleration*. This work also receives considerable attention in Luisa Simonutti's contribution. Through a rigorous examination of Locke's library and works, Simonutti shows how much the reading of travel books on the Levant influenced his views on the limits of human knowledge and on forms of social and religious coexistence. Last but not least, Ann Talbot points out that Locke's mature understanding of Natural Law Theory was derived from a body of Spanish travel literature based on neo-Thomist assumptions about the nature of the state and the universality of human rights, showing how important these sources were in his controversy with Proast.

A short note by Emily Thomas, the author of *The Meaning of Travel*, concludes this volume, and is helpful in keeping the reader abreast of recent publications on the topic of travel literature in early modern philosophy.



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