In the 1840s, travel writing about Ireland proliferated. Its mostly English audience showed an increased interest in charismatic leaders like Fr Theobald Mathew and Daniel O'Connell, in Ireland’s social problems, its attractions as a tourist destination, and the effectiveness of British government there. Obviously, English travellers approached Ireland from the point of view of colonial power, and, predictably, Edward Said's definition of such writing as ‘that which disregards, essentialises, denudes the humanity of another culture’ does apply. But, since Said’s ground-breaking, discipline-forming work appeared, a number of writers have granted colonial discourse a complexity which he had appeared to disallow. Recently, Mary Louise Pratt and, particularly, Sara Mills, have written instructively of how women work with the traditionally colonial discourse of travel writing.

The problem, a fruitful one, as they see it, lies in the difficulty women had in assuming the position of their male peers as masterful judges of their subject, given that Victorian England expected altogether different ‘feminine’ characteristics of its women writers. How did women writers respond to the conflicting demands of their audience? Pratt and Mills argue that women often resisted the generalising, demeaning perspectives of their male counterparts, that they took the sting out of the colonial traveller’s tale. This essay will consider that argument in relation to three writers: two English, Lady Henrietta Chatterton and Mrs Frederic West, and one American, Asenath Nicholson. A New Yorker, Nicholson provides a useful contrast with the works of the English travel writers and she also consolidates the thesis that women’s travel writing can be marked off by certain distinguishing features.

The first published of the three writers under discussion, Henrietta Chatterton wrote novels as well as travel books, which are dominated by an intense and precious religiosity. It is interesting to note that Nicholson read Chatterton's

2 In *Orientalism*, the traveller’s production of the Orient is seen as the ally of official colonial power; it denies the native a voice in its own identity, keeps the Oriental in the object position, always available for evaluative description. For an outline of Said’s subsequent thoughts on travel writing, see the introduction to Dennis Porter’s *Haunted Journeys* (Princeton, 1991).  
4 Chatterton later followed her husband into Catholicism, which may have prompted the eminent praise of John Henry Cardinal Newman for one of her novels. See George Smith and Sir Sidney Lee, (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography*, iv (London, 1930).
book, *Rambles in the South of Ireland*, while on her own travels. Finding it on her bedside table one night she tells us that it is unusual in that 'it is prettily and candidly written, free from sarcasm on Irish character and Irish manners'. Nicholson then uses Chatterton as a springboard to attack travellers whose attempts to 'give a sentence a lively turn may fix a libel on a people which will be read and believed by many generations'. Chatterton's innocence of this charge, however, is rooted in her inattention to the people who are supposedly her subject. The focus for her religious musings is landscape rather than its inhabitants.

Although comparatively new to travel writing about Ireland this emphasis on landscape is typical of many of her contemporaries. Most critics now recognise this as the later of two forms of nineteenth-century travel writing. The first, which is often called the 'customs and manners' or scientific style, became less popular as the century progressed and is exemplified by travelogues which listed, and suggested improvements for, the country's institutions, use of mineral resources and agricultural methods. This project, tied up with colonial profit-making, was obviously underwritten by its subject's purported inferiority. As we will see, women travellers had difficulties adopting this perspective, but by the 1840s a different style of writing was in vogue. Scientific travel writing was replaced by, or mixed in with, what is generally called sentimental travel writing. This form of topographical writing was heavily influenced by ideas of the sublime and the picturesque, as popularised by the painters Salvatore Rosa and Claude Lorraine and by the Romantic poets.

At first, this kind of travel writing took Alpine scenery, especially, as its subject but the Napoleonic Wars quickly forced English tourists back from the Continent. Travel writers soon found some compensation in their newly accessible sister island; travel books of the time are packed with exhortations to the tourist to look for the sublime closer to home. Chatterton's *Rambles in the South of Ireland* takes this kind of writing to an extreme.

What is most striking on first reading the *Rambles* is its excessive attention to landscape (and not the impartiality that Nicholson noted). Chatterton frequently depicts set-piece landscapes in painterly terms so that they are often 'highly varnished' or look 'freshly finished'. Like many of her peers, she has no time for artificial refinements. She divines only the Divine in Ireland's wild sublimity. Parallel to her landscape writing is her enthusiasm for Ireland's equally empty

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ocean and cloud scenery. Such thinking transforms Ireland into an uninhabited landscape, nature without culture, and strips or denudes the landscape of local and historical associations. Chatterton’s ‘libel’ thus fixes her subject as an edenic magnet for the tourist and a land of undeveloped potential for the entrepreneur.

The Irish ruin, for Chatterton, is more likely to prompt thoughts of the author’s own mortality than the processes which caused it. An incident from Mrs West’s tour also exemplifies this outlook. When Mrs West’s Kerry guide mentions Cromwell’s campaign, she tells him that her own family’s estate had fallen under his power. A curious alliance ensues and they curse the ‘iron-hearted villain’ together. In the next sentence, our attention is drawn to ‘the sunbeams slanted down on Ross Castle, in one rich stream of golden light’. The guide recedes as West writes: ‘I could not take my eyes off the picture.’ Chatterton is even more effusive when she declares her love for Nature. At dinner one night, she amuses her hosts when she drops her knife and fork, rushing from table to window to exclaim at the moon’s brilliance. This sensibility which she displays is different to the simple colonial discriminations of ‘scientific’ travel writers but is equally removed from treating Ireland on its own terms.

Chatterton’s work is, moreover, as much a product of the discourse of femininity as the discourse of colonialism. Her book about France and Spain presents the same obsession with Nature and national characteristics. Throughout both books, she avoids political and public issues. This general avoidance is commented upon by Nicholson who, again more self-conscious about her position, observes as she criticises the lack of hospitality shown to her at Derrynane, O’Connell’s residence: ‘hush! a woman must walk softly on political pavements’. Returning to the dining room for a moment, we see Chatterton at her favourite vantage point. At every turn of the road, at each new destination, Chatterton observes and sketches Nature and people from a room with a view. This concrete example of the importance of feminine reticence keeps even the traveller within the sphere of the domestic. Women of Chatterton’s social class were rarely positively presented outside of certain narrowly ascribed roles, and women travellers faced corresponding typecasting. Mary Louise Pratt notes that in 1828, *Blackwood’s Magazine* listed ‘romantic female’ as a type of travel writer, ‘whose eyes are confined to a half-dozen drawing rooms and who sees everything through the medium of poetical fiction’. The line thus drawn between acceptable male and female behaviour sets definite limits for women travellers.

Certainly, survival literature and navigational narratives, forms in which travel writing has its roots, contained no precedent for women travellers. Involving arduous journeys over hills whose heads touched heaven, and escapes from kidnapping slavers whose heads grew below their shoulders, these forerunners of travel writing set a number of ideas in the mind of the reading public. One such preconception was that the traveller’s assertions must be subjected to

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incredulous and sceptical questioning. By the nineteenth century, this fantastic travel writing was less popular, but the woman traveller’s credibility was still an issue. What audience could take seriously, or approve, a woman’s claim to have made her way through O’Connell’s Ireland unscathed? In response to such questioning, women’s texts, as we shall see, developed distinct features. Mills and Pratt argue that one of the motivating forces behind the travel narrative’s structure is the desire to convince its reader of its veracity. Hence the first-person diary which all three writers use convinces the reader that the writing is rooted in the time and place it describes.

Women travellers also accord prominence to those who accompany them. Chatterton travels in a party, West with her husband. Significantly, West brings her husband to the fore when in difficulty: when they need food in Castleisland, when they go riding in south Kerry, and when they attend a Young Ireland meeting in Dublin. She also reports that she could not see Killary, or sketch a certain tower, because her husband insisted they make the most of their short trip and travel elsewhere. In stark contrast to this are the more famous tours of Thackeray and Henry Inglis. Thackeray does not once mention his Irish wife’s presence on the early stage of his journey, while Inglis’ declaration in the final chapter that his wife had been ill in the middle of their tour is the first indication that she accompanied him.

All three female writers determinedly assert their ill-health. Both of the English women suffered from neurasthenia and all three overexert themselves at some stage of their journey. It becomes almost a rite to restore the faith of contemporary audiences in their credibility. An incident from West’s tour illustrates this point. In Limerick, West and her husband are taken by a guide ‘through the filthiest alleys’ to climb the Cathedral’s bell-tower. On a windy day her descent proves awkward:

It is not always facilus descensis as of a surety I discovered, with a brain spinning round, encumbered with a weighty sketchbook. However, I reached terra firma at last, although the stiffness produced by this cramping of my whole person in my fright down those unusually steep stairs was such, I could not walk for three days without pain or flinching and suppressed ohs and ahs ...

This emphasis on the person and the personal is typical, but when West continues, ‘It was thoroughly provoking to be baulked of my bird’s-eye view, and lamed at once’, a broader inference is possible. The bird’s-eye view or monarch-of-all-I-survey scene is a commonplace of colonial travel writing, where the ‘physical act of describing the landscape also masters it’. West pictures herself as unfit for

that task in Limerick. But, with some difficulty and a little help from others, she is able to muddle through, in her own way. Like Chatterton, she thereby conforms to an acceptable type without assuming the powerful, all-seeing role so common in the travel books of her male compatriots.

Illness served another purpose, and, in the forms of depression and neurasthenia, provided an original excuse for women to make their trips abroad. Male tourists, in contrast, felt no need to excuse their travels. Shaftesbury, Hume and Hutcheson had debated the value of travel in the early eighteenth century, but it was soon seen as part of a gentleman’s education. More importantly, such debates constructed another image of the travel writer, that of a scientist in pursuit of knowledge. This travel writer’s authority rests on his status as urbane, enlightened outsider seeing through the fog of local prejudice. He stays out of the frame in order to give the reader a clearer picture.

But, as we have seen above, women restore their credibility by introducing their physical presence into the text. Simultaneously, they undermine their own authority as commentators on Irish society. The pressure to present themselves in a favourably feminine light discouraged scientific generalisations and personal contact with their subject. A closer examination of Mrs West’s 1845 tour shows how this ‘catch-22’ contradicts audience expectations of colonial travel writing.

West, unlike Chatterton, is more interested in antiquarianism than sightseeing. She writes that her first reason for visiting Ireland was to see the round towers. Here again the prerogatives of femininity control how she writes about her subject. Antiquarianism, for most travel-writers, is the scientific equivalent of Chatterton’s depictions of the play of light and shade on a ruined castle. Examining Ireland’s ruins, antiquarian travellers generally speculated on the possible origins of the Irish race, often separating the ruin from its culture. On West’s arrival, the debate was centred on the purpose of the round towers. Other travellers conjectured wildly on their use. But West only quotes authorities, ‘abler heads than mine’, before adding her ‘humble belief in their eastern and pagan origin’ and referring the reader to the RIA’s proceedings. She also includes them in her engravings of picturesque landscapes, but her unease with the scientific discourse of her contemporaries is obvious. On the same theme, Nicholson writes, after overhearing two passengers on her stage coach discuss astronomy: ‘So sorry was I when the lecture ended that had it not been presuming for a woman to know that the moon is not a pot of curds and cream, I should have proposed a question or two.’

The narrow range of interests expected of them forces these writers to approach traditional subjects differently. The Irish economy is presented as more

20 West has less difficulty in conventionally picturesque spots like Killarney and Glendalough. 21 West, A Summer Visit, p. 19. 22 Nicholson, Ireland’s Welcome, p. 230. On the antiquarian perspective on Ireland, Nicholson is more cutting: ‘Had the object of my visit to Ireland been to have rummaged castles and abbeys, old graveyards and bridges, for antiquities to spread before the public, the public (to say the least) must have said: “We have caught nothing.”'
than the price of potatoes and a day’s work. Women travel writers, present in the text, discuss the prices they pay for travel, guides, accommodation and food. This transfer of emphasis is also evident in West’s sole encounter with Irish politics. She mentions in passing that she and her husband were turned away from the door of a Young Ireland meeting. West draws our attention to a fellow outcast. She writes: ‘He says, “well it won’t be on account of appearance they refused you”, looking at my own small individuality.’

This turn away from explicit political comment is echoed in Asenath Nicholson’s *Ireland’s Welcome to the Stranger*. On the evening of O’Connell’s release she abandons a rowdy Clonmel to tour the local area’s attractions. On her way she loses her spectacles and is forced to stumble back to her noisy inn’s lodgings. Nicholson, for all her independence, did not see fit to take an active interest in the political developments taking place around her. She regrets this early on her travels:

> When leaving New York, a friend said to me, ‘Give us all the information you can, but don’t touch politics. That is miserable work for a woman.’ But I soon found in Ireland that it was a great misfortune that I had not acquainted myself more with at least the technicals of the different parties; many egregious blunders might have been saved.

Nicholson is silent on her allegiance to political parties, yet she never fails to speak out strongly for the Irish poor. Her relation to them is far more intimate than West’s and Chatterton’s. The English writers do not look farther than their guides and although West, in particular, presents these men as more than types, they are still removed from the context of the Irish poor, who are mostly pictured as parts of the quaint scenery, a fate worse than the awful brogues which most writers inflicted on their guides. The anthropologist, Johannes Fabien has coined the phrase ‘denial of coevalness’ to describe such a perspective. Nicholson is exceptional in avoiding it.

She uses her American background to enter Irish society at a level untested by English travellers. Her American accent makes her welcome where her Douay Testaments do not. Accordingly, her subject is the people, not the landscape. On this rare occasion, the Irish are shown as a working people, compatible members of society, contemporaries of the author. In Kilkenny, she visits the families of her New York servant girls. In a Cork convent, she talks American politics. She meets a child whose parents tell her he has been baptised Yankee Doodle. Most of the cabins she stays in have people in America. Some of the labourers she meets ‘know and abhor American slavery’. Another man tells her: ‘I passed three pleasant years in New York and left it with great reluctance. I am quite attached to its customs and people in many respects especially their hospitality to strangers and their politeness to females.’

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kind of writing. The contrast between Nicholson's and any other English travel writer's depiction of the Irish is stark.

All three writers possess a self-awareness which is most clearly present in Nicholson's text. Parts of her account are dominated by her acute awareness of the undue attention accorded her by the local people. This unaccompanied woman, with her spectacles, exotic clothes, strange luggage paraphernalia and vegetarian diet, was plagued by inquisitive locals. To a lesser degree, Chatterton and West note the same problem. Chatterton writes of the country people staring at her party's zealous sketching. West writes: 'the men watch the unwonted passing of our carriage till we were out of sight'.

Nicholson, on the other hand, is outspoken about the supposed novelty of women travel writers. In a curious role reversal, the unaccompanied Nicholson becomes the object of the locals' gaze. In the same way as representations of the Irish as types place them in a powerless position, Nicholson is cast in one of two marginal roles. The poor cast her as a penitent and saint. She writes: 'The notices made of me in their papers brought me before the public so prominently that I begged them to desist. I had wished to go through Ireland as unobservedly as possible, asking no honorary attentions.'

The other role in which she was cast is less favourable and more persistent. The Achill Herald reported that 'the singular course which she pursues is utterly at variance with the modesty and retiredness to which the Bible gives a prominent place in its delineation of a virtuous female ... (she must be) the emissary of some democratic and revolutionary society'. Nicholson closes her brilliant book with another lament for the travesties of religion which wield so much power over the Irish before forecasting that before their heart-rending misery ends, 'there must be an explosion of some kind or other'. She attempted to speak outside, or against, the discourses of colonialism and femininity which dominated the works of her contemporaries. Subsequent notice of her work concentrated on casting her in the role of an eccentric whose views are more amusing than worthwhile. Thus the editor of the 1927 abridgement remarks, 'it is not difficult to smile at the vagaries of this early Victorian woman.'

Again, these notices were coloured by preconceptions about women's abilities or lack of them: what has been referred to as the discourse of femininity. West and Chatterton, faced with a different set of preconceptions, produced deviations from typically colonial travel writing about Ireland, but did not even aspire to the plain talking of Nicholson. Constrained by gender and nationality, their approach...

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to traditional subjects is hesitant and unreliable; drawing back from a generalising, essentialising tone, they wrote books which still retain a degree of individual flavour. The three writers asserted that they were trying to change their audiences’ minds about Ireland, but Nicholson alone does not conjure up an Ireland of waterfalls and charming simply-dressed guides as an alternative to savage wildness. She is most conscious of the positions a travel writer may take, and of the consequence of her own writing. As a result, Nicholson successfully shows her subject at a level which was beyond the ken of Chatterton, West and their compatriots.