International PhD symposium organised by Arman Martirosyan and Suheyla-Hacer Sahin at the University of Strasbourg, with the support of SEARCH UR 2325

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Seeing the Other **Empire**

British Travel Writing and Imperial Rivalry in Europe and the Near East, 1783–1914

24 April 2026

At the MISHA – Salle de conférence
5 allée du Général Rouvillois, Strasbourg

Call for papers – International PhD and early-career symposium

SEEING THE OTHER EMPIRE: British Travel Writing and Imperial Rivalry in Europe and the Near East, 1783–1914

University of Strasbourg, 24 April 2026

Organisers: Arman Martirosyan and Suheyla-Hacer Sahin
Research group SEARCH (UR 2325)

Travel literature is a form of narration that has existed for millennia across various societies. Regardless of the period or society, people never travel without a purpose – whether it be spiritual, material, military, exploratory, or for personal growth.

The nineteenth century is a key moment in British imperial history. The loss of the thirteen American colonies in 1783 marked the beginning of the Second British Empire. Following the defeat of Napoleon, Britain, economically fuelled by the Industrial Revolution, consolidated its position as the world's leading power. Thus began an era of opportunities: foreign careers proved to be quite seductive to Britons. Simultaneously, the aristocratic Grand Tour gave way to a more democratic, recreational form of travel in which middle-class Britons could actively participate. Yet not all journeys were sought: apart from tourists and explorers, some, such as soldiers in troops, travelled out of constraint. Some even became captives in the hands of foreign governments. These diverse backgrounds all produced narrations of their own. Thus, imperial expansion, which founded the basis of modern globalisation, allowed different peoples of different backgrounds, cultures, governments and economies to interact under different circumstances, each special to their own.

Back in Britain, the rise in literacy and the growth of an urban public increasingly interested in the outside world turned travel writing into an economic opportunity.

Travellers thus left us a multitude of accounts on the vast and diverse regions of the globe, generated by the rise in colonial and imperial activity.

Though nineteenth-century British travellers could confidently claim their nation's perceived superiority while in foreign lands, it was becoming obvious that other European nations were catching up. In particular, Russia and France, and, after 1870, Germany, started raising anxieties both for British politicians and travellers. On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran were believed to be declining and potentially destined for collapse. The Tsar's empire fought two consecutive wars against Iran and Turkey between 1828–29, deepening the international interest in the Eastern Question. The Crimean War of 1853–56 saw Britain ally with its historic enemy, France, to support the Sublime Porte against Russia. Austria–Hungary, on the other hand, occupied an ambiguous position: while it never truly challenged Britain, its political alignments provoked British anxieties. All of these empires were multiethnic in nature, and as the century progressed, the ethnic minorities, long suppressed by central authorities, demanded political autonomy. The nineteenth century gave rise to the nationalist movements of the Greeks, Poles, Ukrainians, Armenians, Hungarians, the Balkan peoples and other ethnic groups. Anti-Jewish discrimination and restrictions were widespread across Europe, later giving rise to the British-backed Zionist movement. Beyond continental Europe, Russia's expansion into Central Asia – perceived as a direct threat to India – deeply alarmed the British, and the two empires engaged in the tense Great Game. The Congress of Berlin in 1878 aimed to restore the balance of power in Europe and allowed for several Western empires to partition Africa among themselves. In the meantime, British Protestant missionaries were establishing centres and settlements across the globe, often clashing with the interests of the Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim governments. On the other hand, if political rivalries were rather pronounced, there were underlying potential ties for economic cooperation. These long years of imperial and colonial activity peaked with the consolidation of the capitalist system, leading socialist and communist thinkers to write critiques of capitalism and imperialism, culminating most notably in J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study* (1909) and Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917).

In her seminal study, *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt holds that travel writing was one of the key instruments in European imperial expansion. It allowed armchair travellers to create a space for themselves in the world as citizens of their nations. The subjects of an empire came to 'possess' unknown lands through the sense of national ownership and belonging created in the narration. Thus, travel literature constitutes a corpus rich in national representations, be it of themselves or of the rival nation, which the writer views through his own national prejudices. These representations, built on an 'us' that is opposed, associated or compared to an 'other,' reveal the tensions, rivalries, but also the similarities between different societies and states.

This conference aims to interrogate some of these British visions of rival empires in narrations published between 1783 and 1914. It would be interesting to analyse the practice of imagined colonialism, that is, how the British travellers cast a domineering gaze upon their imperial rivals when travelling in lands that were not colonies of the British crown. Travellers could project superiority while simultaneously revealing deep anxieties. At the same time, military, economic, industrial, cultural and religious rivalry could coexist with forms of cooperation.

We are looking for PhD students and early-career researchers interested in an interdisciplinary approach to history. We ask that contributions engage with travel writings as primary sources. While we encourage non-fiction travel books, discussions on fictional travel literature are also welcome, so long as the main angle of approach is historical and not purely literary. Relevant academic domains include world history, transimperial history, area studies, cultural studies and geopolitics. All papers must be presented in English.

Possible themes include (but are not limited to):

- Imagined colonialism: projecting imperial attitudes onto rival powers.
- Travel writing and the Eastern Question.
- British perspectives on 'decaying' powers and their modernisation efforts.
- British anxieties towards the rapid expansion of Russia.

- Franco-British competition and cooperation.
- Orientalism, Balkanism and other forms of knowledge and power dynamics.
- Christian missionaries and cultural encounters in multiethnic empires.
- Travelers and the rise of ethnic nationalisms.
- War and memory: travel writing as a reflection of conquests and losses.
- Political and economic competition and cooperation.
- Travelers as social(ist) critics: responding to the age of capitalism and imperialism.
- 'Marginal' figures: women, subaltern and Irish writers on imperial rivalries.

Please send an abstract of no more than 350 words, along with a short biographical note, to the organisers, a.martirosyan@unistra.fr and suheyla.sahin@etu.unistra.fr, by 10 February 2026 at the latest. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by early March.

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