Pioneira

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Through England on a Side Saddle **Celia Fiennes (1662-1741)**

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To Cláudia Coimbra
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Born in Newton Toney, Wiltshire, Celia Fiennes was the granddaughter of the 1st Viscount of Say and Seale, and the daughter of a Puritan colonel who had served in Cromwell's army; not surprisingly, her Nonconformist education shines through her frequent remarks on "Popery". Celia never married, and her spinsterhood, together with her social status, granted her an assertive sense of independence, not least of mind.

Our review will dwell on the narrative of her travels through England and Wales, especially those of 1697 and 1698, in the reign of William III and Mary II (1689-1702). These journeys were carried out, in her own words, "to regain my health by variety and change of aire and exercise" (Fiennes, 2016, p. 5), although she seems to have been a remarkably energetic lady. As to the text itself, it was published posthumously, in 1888, by Emily W. Griffiths, a distant relative of Celia's, to whom "The account [...] may prove interesting, as shewing the manners and customs of those times [...]. There being little literature of this kind and period [...], Celia Fiennes's diary almost takes the position and value of an historical document" (Fiennes, 2016, p. 3).

Let me start by suggesting the viewing of a short video (BBC, 2012): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f32pAm_7Aik.

Although written in late Stuart, not early Hannoverian, England, Celia Fiennes's book can be compared with Daniel Defoe's *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-1726), as suggested by Bohls and Duncan[1] and Pat Rogers[2]; they are also associated, and contrasted in Moir (2014, pp. 35-46)[3]. Defoe's journeys to Scotland, unvisited by Celia, may

1. "If Fiennes was the amateur traveler and writer *par excellence*, Defoe turned travel writing into a professional enterprise, a formal survey and accounting of the national stock" (Bohls & Duncan, 2008, p. 96).
2. "[...] nearer Defoe's own time, the best-known journeys [...] are those of Celia Fiennes, [...]. [...] Miss Fiennes compels admiration [...], as she uncomplainingly rides along the ill-made road, charting an erratic course between noxious inns and the comfortable homes of her endless relatives" (Defoe, 1986, p. 20).
3. "[...] they have a surprising amount in common, their greatest bond being a strong determination to see *contemporary* England. [...] Taken together the two are [...] a splendid foil and complement to each other, and between them they bring to life the England they found" (Moir, 2014, p. 36).

be due to the Anglo-Scottish Act of Union (1707), but the attention paid by both authors to trade, manufactures, and economic progress, wrapped up in patriotic feelings, is quite similar:

> [...] if all persons, both Ladies, much more Gentlemen, would spend some of their tyme in Journeys to visit their native Land, and be curious to Inform themselves and make observations of the pleasant prospects, good buildings, different produces and manufactures of each place, with the variety of sports and recreations they are adapt to [...], it would also fform such an Idea of England, add much to its Glory and Esteem in our minds and cure the evil Itch of overvalueing fforeign parts; [...]. (Fiennes, 2016, p. 5)

If *Through England on a Side Saddle* predates the dawn of British domestic tourism, it also reflects the antiquarian frame of mind 'resurrected' after the Restoration (1660) and revitalized by the emerging paradigm of "improvement"[4]. Celia's travel notes and impressions are not exclusively concerned with monuments, big estates, stately houses[5], gardens, grounds, and parks; attention is also paid to popular sports and pastimes, festivals, pageants, and processions, coronations and state funerals, government, law, and justice, local legends and traditions, social customs, food and drink, roads, bridges, spas, even to such 'unladylike' matters as natural resources, coal, quarries, early 'technology', etc.[6]. Richard Cavendish, who calls her "the pioneer of English travel writing"[7], adds that "She was particularly

4. "It must be remembered that a new discovery of England was in progress. Aristocratic house-parties would sometimes go to watch a river being made [...] navigable or a fen being drained. [...] A new edition of Camden's *Britannia* [1586] [...] seems to have lain on the parlour tables of most well-to-do people. Ogilby's wonderful road-book [*Britannia*] had appeared in 1675, and there were also surveys, comparable with modern directories and gazeteers" (Morris qtd in Ford, 1982, p. 27).

5. "Celia Fiennes was perhaps the first 'stately home' visitor in the modern sense. She not only automatically expected, and was as automatically offered, hospitality [...] but that observant, critical, sardonic eye of hers would not ignore the building itself." (Chamberlin, 1986, p. 137).

6. "Celia Fiennes [...] is untypical only in being a woman. Her curiosity was unbounded, her writing vivid and spontaneous, her interests ranged over all that she came upon in her travels, and she would describe with equal enthusiasm natural wonders or the most recent developments in mining" (Moir, 2014, p. 4).

7. This is endorsed in an anthology: "To read in sequence the published travel writings of those who undertook to explore the curiosities of their own country during the eighteenth century is to register [...] the steady spread of the landscaping taste throughout the British Isles: first, there

interested in the Cornish tin and copper mines. [...] She [...] took an especial interest in industry, mining and anything new [...]. The whole work [...] has been a mine of information for historians ever since" (Cavendish, 2012, n.p.).

Likewise, a biographical note argues that "A keen social observer with up-to-date tastes, her [Celia's] *Journeys* provide the best description of the late seventeenth-century English scene." (Ure, 1956, p. 276), whereas *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* claims that "[...] her journey provided the first comprehensive survey of the country since Harrison [William Harrison, author of *Description of England*] and Camden. She recorded throughout what interested her: enclosures, mining, cloth manufacture, gardens, and domestic architecture" (Harvey, 1983, p. 299). In spite of these evaluations and appraisals, her name is not mentioned in Robin Gard's (1989) *The Observant Traveller*, whereas Russell Chamberlin dedicates ten pages to this unusual lady of quality, "[...] a woman who would be as outstanding in our own time as she was in the 1680s [...]" (Chamberlin, 1986, p. 45). And he adds:

> It was [...] in her description of industrial processes that Celia Fiennes excelled, and to record them she penetrated [...] into the most insalubrious places, despite her delicate upbringing and supposedly frailer sex. [...] Her preoccupation with these processses makes her [...] an anomaly and an exemplar at the same time. An anomaly, for where others of her sex would be spending their time enthusing over ribbons and gossiping over beaux and queening it at balls, she was enthusiastically poking around smelly fulling-mills, scrambling through the frightening peaks of Derbyshire to visit a lead mine, ignoring the social life of Canterbury in favour of seeing how the paper-makers went about their trade. But she was an exemplar, too, in that she was unconsciously responding to the deep subtle changes [...] in society which [...] would burst into the Industrial Revolution. (Chamberlin, 1986, pp. 53-54)

All in all, *Through England on a Side Saddle* offers abundant and straightforward descriptions of places, roads, and buildings, as well as factual data, like names, placenames, distances, and figures. The 'subalternization'

was Celia Fiennes, who travelled between 1686 and 1705; then Defoe in the 1720s [...]" (Hunt & Willis, 1988, p. 25).

of Celia's travelogue *viz-à-viz* Defoe's may therefore suggest the existence of a male hegemonic outlook. Considering the words of Defoe (who, like Celia, was a Dissenter)[8], the ideological views of Nonconformism on the condition of women in the later Stuart period should be further investigated.

As to Celia's style, riddled with misspellings, abbreviations, grammar mistakes, and rather careless when it comes to punctuation, it is not very elaborate, as acknowledged by Moir[9], Chamberlin[10], Rogers[11] and the author herself[12]. However, the documentary relevance of *Through England on a Side Saddle* calls for a specific analysis through the lens of Women Studies, paying attention to the way the text may reflect and/or appeal to female audiences and interests. Such a study might help trace and reconstruct models and patterns of education, as well as the writing and reading practices of gentlewomen at the turn of the 17th-18th centuries[13].

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8. "Daniel Defoe, [...] educated at a dissenting academy in Stoke Newington, defended the right of women to education in his *Essay upon Projects* in 1698: 'I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us a civilized and a Christian Country, that we deny advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with folly and impertinence; while I am confident, had they the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves'. He took up the argument of equality of souls. God had surely not made women only to be 'stewards of our houses, cooks and slaves'. [...] I would have men take women for companions, and educate them to be fit for it'. These ideas of course only applied to the women of his own class" (Rowbotham, 1992, p. 14).

9. "The cascades of words pouring forth breatlessly with little regard for punctuation constitute at once the charm and the difficulty of her style, and contribute in no small measure to the impression [...] of a naive, childlike enthusiasm and enjoyment" (Moir, 2014, pp. 35-36).

10. "[...] is a headlong, tumbling, breathless style. But, for that very reason, it is a living style and, once the reader has caught the rhythm, her personal voice comes through loud and clear" (Chamberlin, 1986, p. 49).

11. "This straggling style, with its elliptical syntax and chatty miscellany of information, is precisely fitted to Celia Fiennes's mode of tourism" (Defoe, 1986, p. 28).

12. "As this was never designed: soe not likely to fall into the hands of any but my near relations, there needs not much to be said to Excuse or recommend it. [...] as most I converse with knows both the ffreedom and Easyness I speak and write as well as my deffect in all, so they will not expect exactness or politeness in this book, tho' such Embellishments might. have adorned the descriptions and suited the nicer taste." (Fiennes, 2016, p. 5) The entry in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* states that "Her style is breathless and her spelling erratic, but she communicates a lively enthusiasm" (Harvey, 1983, p. 299).

13. "[...] as female literacy increased dramatically in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so a growing number of women travellers became also travel *writers*. Often, however, their accounts of travel occur in forms of writing intended for private rather than public consumption, such as letters and diaries" (Thompson, 2011, pp. 170-171).

Celia's preface, entitled "To the Reader", provides us with a final and significant message:

> [...] the Ladies might have matter not unworthy their observation, soe subject for conversation, within their own compass in each county to which they relate, and thence studdy now to be serviceable to their neighbours especially the poor among whome they dwell, which would spare them the uneasye thoughts how to pass away tedious dayes, and tyme would not be a burthen when not at a card or dice table, and the ffashions and manners of fforeign parts less minded or desired. [...] [I] shall conclude with a hearty wish and recommendation to all, but Especially my own Sex, the studdy of those things which tends to Improve the mind and makes our Lives pleasant and comfortable as well as proffitable in all the Stages and Stations of our Lives, and render suffering and age supportable and Death less fformidable and a future State more happy. (Fiennes, 2016, pp. 5-6)

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