



A sea view: perceptions of maritime space and landscape in accounts of nineteenth-century colonial steamship travel



Jonathan Stafford

Nottingham Trent University, School of Arts and Humanities, Nottingham NG11 8NS, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the introduction of steam propulsion into the sea route to India in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The entry of steam into shipping marked a radical development in the nature of sea travel, not least, I argue, in the imaginative geographies of the voyage. There were significant alterations in the way that maritime space came to be expressed and represented, changes which were articulated at the level of the visual, in responses to the maritime landscape. These historical geographies of colonial shipping are considered through the examination of voyage narratives by passengers who travelled aboard the steamships of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, on the distinct geography of transit that became known as the 'overland route'. Through an analysis of historical change as it was articulated at the level of experience, I argue that technological means of propulsion played a key role in shaping colonial responses to space and landscape.

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A series of articles published under the title 'The Overland Route to India' appeared in the *Leisure Hour* in 1857, narrating the voyage from England to India on one of the steamships of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company. Written in the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion of the previous year – an event which sealed the fate of the East India Company and simultaneously raised the profile of the rapid steam route in the public estimation – the first in this series of articles employs a vocabulary more often reserved to describe the revolutionary changes associated with a firmly terrestrial modernity than the vicissitudes of travel at sea.¹ 'We live in stirring times', it enthuses, 'all is now bustle, motion, progress, change'. Locating the steamship at the centre of this relentless process of flux and renewal, the article comprehends technological change specifically within the framework of a historical break, as a preindustrial past is invoked in order to emphasise the revolutionary nature of this transition:

In days of yore our worthy sires, in this sea-girt isle, seldom travelled far from home. ... Not so now. Steam has changed all that. These are the days of rapid, easy, economical transit.

Oceans are now bridged, and distance is well nigh destroyed, by the wonder-working achievements of human intellect and skill.²

The technology of steam is characterised as the vehicle of historical transition, with the overcoming of the natural space of the ocean emphasising the role played by the steamship in a radical reappraisal of spatial distance, ushering in a new relationship between people and the sea. This enthusiasm for the transformative power of steam shipping highlights that the industrial revolution took place not just on land. Interrogating the nineteenth-century introduction of steam power from the heterodox perspective of the ship offers the opportunity to consider the multiple geographies of steam, its production of space on a global scale. The consequent change in the perception of maritime space was, I intend to show, one which was mediated as much by the imagination as by the practicalities of steam-propelled shipping.

The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company – commonly known today as P&O – was officially incorporated by royal charter in 1840 to provide steamship communication with the East. The company relied largely on a state subsidy for the transportation of mail, and on the high fares passengers were willing to

E-mail address: jonathan.a.stafford@gmail.com.

¹ O. Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt*, Berkeley, 2013, 31. As Barak observes, the use of the slow sailing route to send troop reinforcements to India caused a national scandal, resulting in the governing of India from the metropole and bringing public attention to the usefulness of P&O's steamship line.

² The overland route to India, *Leisure Hour*, 5 November 1857, 711.

pay for the relative rapidity and reliability of the passage it provided to Egypt, India and beyond. This service revolutionised the British Empire's means of communication, constituting a radical departure from the maritime tradition of sail. The introduction of steam power as a form of propulsion in colonial shipping meant that an unpredictable sailing voyage around the Cape of Good Hope of between three and six months or more could be supplemented by one of under a month and a half which was able to follow regular, standardised timetables. While the velocity of the steamship was in actuality often little more than that of a sailing vessel, its means of propulsion meant that it was no longer restricted by the contingency of the elements which constrained sailing ships, enabling it to leave port without having to wait for favourable conditions, propelling itself at sea against the prevailing wind and forcing its way through storms which would render sailing ships incapacitated, indeed often dangerously so. No longer reliant on the seasonal trade winds and currents which restricted sailing voyages to specific times of the year, the steamer was also able to maintain a year-round service.

The image of the 'maelstrom of modern life' mobilised by the *Leisure Hour* article's energetic, excessive tribute to P&O's steam service evokes a typical image of modernity, a transformative, visceral mode of being in the world which is characterised by cataclysmic shifts in experience rooted in technological change.³ However, any claims to such radical change in the context of sea travel must be tempered by the fact that the steamship was anything but a stable, complete technology. In reality the modernity represented by the steamship was at best only partial. In the mid nineteenth century the technology of maritime steam propulsion was rudimentary; engines were inefficient and prone to mechanical failure, and until almost the end of the century steamships still possessed a full complement of sails as an auxiliary means of propulsion. Steam power was at this early stage not yet a practical choice for the majority of ocean-going traffic. It was expensive, relatively unreliable, and it limited a ship's cargo capacity. Thus steam in the maritime context did not present the same break with tradition as its land-based counterparts: with steam-driven ships at the nascent stage in their development and thus relatively uncommon, sail was itself not a thing of the past, but continued to dominate British shipping for some years.⁴ Attempting to document the experiential changes associated with steam shipping must therefore take into account the unstable, often contradictory nature of this technological innovation.

Despite its drawbacks, steam proved irresistible for facilitating transportation to Britain's colonial periphery. In addition to its more general advantages, steam offered not just a more reliable, predictable means of transport than sail, but enabled an entirely novel pattern of geographical movement. Travelling through the Mediterranean to Alexandria, transporting the cargo, mail and passengers across the Egyptian landmass to Suez, and continuing on a separate steamship down the Red Sea and across the Indian Ocean, the P&O steamer made possible a channel of movement which became known as the overland route.⁵ As the Red Sea posed difficulties to navigation by sail, this route represented a geography of transit to the East which was a total historical departure, facilitated specifically by the technology of steam.

³ See for example the classic account of modernity in M. Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, London, 1993, 15.

⁴ G. Jackson, The shipping industry, in: D. Aldcroft and M.J. Freeman (Eds), *Transport in Victorian Britain*, Manchester, 1988, 253–284. It was in fact not until 1883 that the tonnage of British steam vessels surpassed that of sail.

⁵ The overland route, so named for the short section of the journey performed across Egypt, played a key role in creating the pressure of traffic which prompted the building of the Suez Canal, opened in 1869.

Thinking about the historical geographies of early steamship voyages foregrounds historical change as it was played out at sea. Much work has been done to address the lack of attention paid to the sea as an important site for coming to terms with spatial histories in the decade since the publication of the special issue of the *Journal of Historical Geography* dedicated to the subject. Recent scholarship has seen a turn toward ships and the sea as significant areas for renewed attention, opening up new areas of historical enquiry and adding fresh layers of discourse to the state of play documented by Miles Ogborn, Luciana Martins and David Lambert in their introduction. 'Historical geographies of the sea', they observe, 'have the potential to reorient our perspectives in significant ways'.⁶ The movement they describe, from the land to a sea-based perspective, still holds the potential to generate innovative ways of engaging with space. Historical geography can gain new insights from what could be called historical oceanography, a term which in its most literal interpretation means to write the sea.

The writing of the sea is a useful way of thinking about some of the changed cultural meanings undergone by sea travel in the age of steam-driven ships. This article draws principally on travel accounts written by mid nineteenth-century passengers on the overland route, passengers who came to terms with the new experiences of steamship travel through the texts they wrote describing their voyages. Paying attention to representations of the maritime landscape within texts which write the sea from the vantage point of the steamship offers the opportunity to engage with historical change from the perspective of identities of mobility.⁷ These vernacular writings at times feature nuanced attempts to relate the experiences of the sea voyage, descriptions which elucidate the way in which such journeys were thought and related to in the early era of steam travel. Descriptions in nineteenth-century travel narratives can be seen to reflect their textual constitution through the discursive processes of global movement: the means of propulsion made possible new geographical imaginaries, new ways of thinking of and writing about the maritime landscape.⁸ These accounts are taken from the first three decades of steamship travel to the East, and these early, tentative years of steam navigation are uniquely revealing. While it has been acknowledged that the steamship was at this time by no means a stable technology, the similarly unstable character of the diverse responses to and interpretations of maritime landscape which these accounts exhibit reveal novel attempts to come to terms with the new experiences of steamship travel.

Among recent work which has widened the critical vocabulary of maritime research is the special issue of the journal *Mobilities* dedicated to the subject of ships, a topic which, if not neglected, has suffered from a perhaps overly narrow disciplinary framework.⁹

⁶ D. Lambert, L. Martins and M. Ogborn, Currents, visions and voyages: historical geographies of the sea, *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006) 488.

⁷ The mobilities paradigm in the social sciences has been characterised by an insistence on the centrality of processes of movement to the formation of subjectivity and the production of meaning. See T. Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, London, 2012, 2–3. For a range of discussions of the place of the ship itself as a significant space for the production of nineteenth-century history and experience, see the various articles in the special issue on the subject of ships of the *Journal of Global History* 11 (2016) 155–294.

⁸ James Duncan and Derek Gregory have emphasised the extent to which the impact of travel upon subjectivities both finds expression in and is in turn affected by the writings which record the journey, see J. Duncan and D. Gregory, Introduction, in: J. Duncan and D. Gregory (Eds), *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, London, 1999, 1–13.

⁹ The problematic of the too-prescribed disciplinary limitations of Maritime History has been polemically set out in M. Rediker, Towards a people's history of the sea, in: D. Killingray, M. Lincoln and N. Rigby (Eds), *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, Woodbridge, 2004, 195–206.

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