

The Ethnographic Imagination and the Unspeakable World of the Tehuelches

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The embryonic ethnographic practices of nineteenth century evolutionism which were enacted in travel writing anticipated the problematic relation between anthropology and colonialism. Travel writing and ethnography seem to intersect in the illusion of encountering the other in an unaltered state of savagery. Although unnamed, the conception of culture as a legible object of knowledge was operant of travel writing and contributed to the rhetorical modes in which travellers authorise themselves. Through a reading of *At Home with the Patagonians* I propose to analyse how the paradigmatic shift in the construction of an exotic other -- produced in the formulation of ethnography as a technique of observation -- enters the travel writing tradition of Patagonia. Published in London in 1871 and written by George Chaworth Musters, this travel narrative is about a 28-year-old former officer of the English Royal Navy who, inspired by Darwin's *Journal of the Beagle*, decided to join a tribe of Tehuelches. Known as the Patagonians as early as 1520, the Tehuelches made their entry into Western cultural imagination as giants. By the time Musters met the Tehuelches, thousands of pages had been written confirming or challenging Antonio Pigafetta's account of Magellan's circumnavigation. In spite of Musters' non-scientific ambitions the Royal Geographic Society thought his work deserved attention. Indeed, the sympathy towards the Tehuelches in Musters' narrative, including the need for eleven months' submersion in their culture in order to record their way of life, and his determination to learn their language, is indicative of Musters' ethnographic experience.

Biographic information

I graduated from the Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina with a degree in Social Communication Sciences in 1997 and completed an MA in Criticism and Theory at the University of Exeter in 2000. I am undertaking my second year of doctoral research, a study of how aesthetics affect cultural contact, at Exeter under the supervision of Professor Regenia Gagnier. The scope of my study ranges from a comparative reading of the diaries of the Welsh who settled in the Argentine Patagonia through the literature by English travellers and explorers who visited the region in the nineteenth century. My aim is to problematise the articulation of imagined and real possession of the Patagonian landscape and to identify how these imaginative responses are mediated by 'race', gender, class, sexuality and ideals of nationhood. I am currently teaching Spanish language and translation in the Department of Hispanic Studies as well as undertaking a Teaching Assistants programme in the School of English. I have given papers on Patagonian Travel Writing in Argentina and Britain, the most recent in September 2002 at the Travelling Texts conference held at Stirling University.