

WOMEN, TRAVEL AND IDENTITY

JOURNEYS BY RAIL AND SEA,
1870-1940



✦ Emma Robinson-Tomsett ✦

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The expansion of research into the history of women and gender since the 1970s has changed the face of history. Using the insights of feminist theory and of historians of women, gender historians have explored the configuration in the past of gender identities and relations between the sexes. They have also investigated the history of sexuality and family relations, and analysed ideas and ideals of masculinity and femininity. Yet gender history has not abandoned the original, inspirational project of women's history: to recover and reveal the lived experience of women in the past and the present.

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Women, travel and identity

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List of abbreviations

BA	Bromley Archives, London
BL India and Oriental Collection	British Library, India and Oriental Collection
BL Manuscripts Collection	British Library, Manuscripts Collection
CM	<i>Cunard Magazine</i>
CWAC	City of Westminster Archives Centre, London
HHC	Hull History Centre
ILN	<i>Illustrated London News</i>
JTH	<i>Journal of Transport History</i>
LA	London Borough of Lambeth Archives
MAL, MMM	Maritime Archives & Library, Merseyside Maritime Museum
NRM/SSPL	National Railway Museum/ Science and Society Picture Library
PMG	<i>Pall Mall Gazette</i>
RHUL Archives	Archives, Royal Holloway, University of London
RN	<i>Railway News</i>
SCA, ULL	Special Collections and Archives, University of Liverpool Library
SHC	Surrey History Centre
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
TSA	Teesside Archives
WSM	<i>White Star Magazine</i>

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Introduction

A foghorn sounds; a train whistle blows. Smoke billows from funnels and engines. An anxious mother thrusts sandwiches to her son through a carriage window. A woman searches for a free compartment, another finds her cabin. Porters struggle with trunks. Umbrellas are stowed in luggage racks; going-away gifts examined. Latecomers desperately search for their carriages. Doors slam and gangways are removed. People scurry on deck or lean out of windows to wave a last farewell to loved ones and friends. Finally, the train chugs out of the station; the ship leaves its moorings. 'Everything begins to recede: home, friends . . . How exhilarating it is, to be thus self-contained; to depend for happiness on no material comfort; to be rid of such sentimentality as attaches to the dear familiar; to be open, vulnerable, receptive!'; rhapsodized Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) at the beginning of her 1926 account of her journey to Persia, *Passenger to Teheran*.¹ Marion Ferguson Bridie was equally delighted to be on board the S.S. *Empress of Britain* for a round-the-world journey in 1931: 'here I am settled, unpacked, and feeling just as thrilled and excited as if I were still looking forward to coming'.²

Between 1870 and 1940, millions of Britons embarked on journeys abroad by train and ship, leaving their homes to participate in one of the great ages of journeying. They journeyed to multiple destinations in the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Australasia and Asia, including New York, Bombay (now Mumbai), Madras (now Chennai), Singapore, Hong Kong, Algiers, Rangoon (now Yangon), Yokohama and Cairo. Women were increasingly visible and important participants in this new era of mass mobility. Many were emigrating. Some journeyed as part of their work duties or to support spouses who were taking up work overseas. Others journeyed for their health or out of religious conviction. As shipping companies began to provide a greater level of hotel-style service for non-émigré passengers, ocean cruising became the shipping industry's main business³ and train companies provided new luxury services, women also increasingly journeyed for pleasure.

The decades between 1870 and 1940 were exhilarating ones in which to be passing beyond Britain's borders. In an age of journey transformation, technological and engineering developments such as the openings of the Suez and Panama Canals in 1869 and 1914 respectively and the building of ocean liners that accommodated hundreds or even thousands made journeys more accessible, faster and ever more varied in their

routes and destinations. Extensive international and transcontinental transport networks developed, enabling women to journey ever further abroad with ease. Novels and films such as *King Kong* (1933), *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) showcased these journeys as spaces of romance, excitement and danger while the Marx brothers explored their comic possibilities in *Monkey Business* (1931).⁴ Advertisements and magazines depicted the journey and journeyer as sites of glamour, elegance and sophistication. For those who could afford the most expensive tickets, journeys became extremely lavish experiences. Ship companies competed to launch ever more luxurious ships such as the *Oceanic* (1870), *Lucania* (1893), *Mauretania* and *Lusitania* (launched in 1906 and 1907), *Normandie* (1935) and the *Queen Mary* (1936). George Pullman and Georges Nagelmackers pioneered a new level of comfort in rail carriages and companies inaugurated the sumptuous *Train Bleu* from Calais to the French Riviera and the Orient Express between Paris and Istanbul, amongst others. Those who could not afford the opulence of first class shared the thrill of boarding some of the greatest transport ever built.

The act of travel consists of several stages: departing from home; the journey to the destination; arrival; the time spent in that destination; the moment of departure; the return journey; and, finally, arriving back home. The journey stage had certain distinctive characteristics in this period. Trains and ships enclosed journeyers within self-contained environments. Journeying was usually confined to a fixed period of time, from a seven-day ocean journey from Liverpool to New York to the 118-day world cruise made by Marion Bridie.⁵ The journey route was usually determined before departure. For those travelling to or from another city or country in which they stayed, or intended to stay, for weeks, months or years, the journey was an incidental stage in getting to and returning from these places. For those whose travel experience was the journey – those taking rail journeys or cruises around a country or countries, continent(s) or ocean(s), visiting multiple places with no intention of staying anywhere for long – it was the only, and most important, stage; in these cases, the journey became the entire act of travel.

The journey also had several substages. First was the moment of leaving home. Next was embarkation on the ship or train in which the journey was being undertaken; then came departure from the home port or station. The central part of the journey followed: days or weeks spent in almost continual motion within the selected mode of transport, with occasional stoppages at various stations or ports *en route*. These stoppages sometimes offered a brief opportunity to leave the train or ship to explore the place reached. For those who made multiple, sequential

journeys on several trains and/or ships, this central stage was repeated many times. The final parts of the journey were arrival at the journeyer's destination and disembarkation. With the exception of the stoppages, the central stage is the focus of this work.

The revolution in women's journeying ran parallel with dramatic changes in their status in Britain, as they fought to achieve equal political, educational, professional and material status with men. Leading figures such as Virginia Woolf, Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby argued that women needed financial independence, improved employment and domestic parity with men.⁶ Women slowly entered universities' hallowed halls. The Women's Social and Political Union and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies campaigned fiercely for the vote. Gaining the franchise after 1918 increasingly allowed women to assert their status as citizens rather than the second, invisible sex. Women also entered new 'white-blouse' professions: teaching, nursing, retailing and office work.⁷ By 1940 women's lives had been transformed in numerous ways: their expectations and belief in what they could achieve and experience would have been unrecognizable to many women in 1870.⁸

Millions of women unhesitatingly seized their opportunity to journey abroad; yet these journeys have remained largely invisible. Although they usefully highlight the diversity of women's professional roles in the maritime trade as stewardesses, laundresses, matrons, nurses, shop attendants, beauticians, hairdressers and pool attendants, previous histories of female ocean journeying have privileged the experiences of journey staff over that of paying consumers.⁹ Others focus on the women left behind when men went to sea, or the most unusual of female ocean journeyers: pirates and cross-dressing sailors.¹⁰ Within railway history, a minute number of studies highlight women's work as matrons in railway lodging hostels, waiting room attendants, sewing machinists, upholsterers, telegraphists, company secretaries, ticket sales personnel, telephonists and clerks as well as their wartime work as track-workers, ticket collectors, guards and 'signalmen'.¹¹ But the paying woman journeyer remains a hidden figure.

This book aims to redress this imbalance through a close examination of forty women's journeys abroad. Thirty of these were undertaken for leisure and pleasure to and around Europe, the Middle East and Asia. One was undertaken to improve the woman's health, but was also a journey of leisure. Two were emigration voyages by women who sought new lives in New Zealand. One was what can be termed a family-and-duty journey on a troopship by a woman accompanying her husband to an army posting in India. 'Duty' is not intended to suggest that she

did not want to make this journey but to reflect that many women journeyed abroad because they had no choice but to accompany their husbands and families. Five women journeyed as a requirement of their work as nurses, teachers and domestic servants. Finally, one journey was undertaken both out of religious conviction and to support a family member: one woman accompanied her husband to a missionary station in Zululand, South Africa. This book has, however, purposely excluded First World War journeys such as those made by Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses, the most famous of whom is probably Vera Brittain, to military field hospitals overseas. Leaving Britain for purposes other than war work was difficult and these journeys offer a distorted impression of the female journey in what were exceptional years for the period.

Three of the women studied here made their journeys by train; twenty-four made them by ship; and thirteen used a combination of ships and trains. There were notable differences between journeying by rail and sea. Ocean journeys were often longer: it took days to cross the Atlantic, while a train journey from, for example, Paris to Marseilles could take only hours. The spaces of the train and ship were dramatically different in size and variety: ships could contain ballrooms, libraries and leisure facilities such as swimming pools that could not be replicated within the narrower dimensions of the train. Rail journeyers were largely confined to the carriage in which their seat was located, and had little opportunity to explore other spaces such as the engine. By contrast, some ocean journeyers were able to visit ships' engine-rooms and stores. This lack of mobility within trains meant that the diversity of women's encounters with other journeyers could be more limited as they could socialize easily only with the others in their compartment, of whom there were a limited number. There was also a far greater variety of organized leisure activities available on ocean journeys than on rail.

There were, of course, two other modes of transport in which women could journey after 1900: the motorcar and the aeroplane. Women were involved with these two new technologies from their earliest stages: American upper-class and middle-class women began to drive cars themselves in the early 1900s rather than using chauffeurs.¹² Amy Johnson and Amelia Earhart became renowned pilots. However, aeroplanes and automobiles became mass forms of transport only after the Second World War.¹³ This book therefore focuses upon rail and marine journeys as the most significant and representative female journey experience prior to 1940.

Leisured and working women of all ages could journey abroad. Of the fifteen journeyers featured here for whom definite biographical information

exists, the ages of fourteen are known: one was aged sixteen, five were in their mid-to-late twenties, three were in their thirties, two in their forties, one was fifty-six and two journeyed throughout their fifties, sixties, seventies and early eighties. Five of the forty women were in paid employment; two sought work upon arrival in their new homelands as immigrants. Eleven were students at the women-only Bedford College, University of London.¹⁴ Two were too young to work. Two supported their husbands' work while the remaining eighteen were apparently leisured women, as they made no mention of jobs in their journey accounts.

Social status was no barrier to women's journeying, although it could entail significantly different qualities of experience. Four of the women studied here were upper-class and wealthy; they could afford and enjoyed extremely comfortable journeys. The wife of the founder of London's Liberty department store, Lady Emma Lasenby Liberty (born *circa* 1845) journeyed first class with her husband Sir Arthur Lasenby Liberty (1843–1917) around Europe, Turkey and Greece on the Orient Express and various ships in 1884. Three of the women were working-class, including lady's maid Janet Smith, who journeyed with her employer to and from New York in September and October 1896. Journeys were far more arduous for women who journeyed with their employers, as they had to continue their work duties. Lower-class journeyers were usually poorer and so usually endured far less comfortable and private accommodation, as this was all they could afford. The remaining thirty-three women were of middle- to upper-middle middle-class status, such as sisters Emily (1819–1901) and Ellen Hall (1822–1911) from West Wickham, Kent, daughters of an army captain, who made multiple journeys to and from Algeria between December 1873 and 1900 and 1901 respectively.

The journey abroad was also accessible regardless of women's marital status. Eleven of the women featured here were married at the time of their journeys, and their husbands accompanied ten of them. These women sometimes had additional companions: Annie Brassey (1839–87), author and wife of the Liberal politician and future peer Thomas Brassey, travelled with her children as well as her husband on her sea and rail journeys to and from, and within, Canada in 1872. The remaining twenty-nine women were apparently unmarried and their companions varied. Londoner Emily May Jones was accompanied by a friend or companion, Pauline, during her cruise along the Rhine in the summer of 1889. Teacher and missionary Margaret Hunt (born 1907) made several journeys with various colleagues to and from India in order to teach at a women's Christian college in Madras between June 1932 and June 1938. The very youngest women journeyers were usually accompanied by family members

rather than journeying alone. Eleven women mentioned no companions in their accounts so apparently journeyed alone, although it is possible that they simply, or deliberately, did not mention them, as Vita Sackville-West did not in *Passenger to Teheran*.¹⁵

Journeying abroad was a private, personal and public act that blurred the boundaries between the private and the public. Most women personally determined which routes they took, selected the ships or trains in which they journeyed as well as the type of accommodation they booked within them, decided the degree to which they socialised with their fellow journeyers and chose whether or not to leave their trains or ships to visit stoppage places. Yet trains and ships were communal public spaces designed to carry hundreds or thousands of people; inevitably, women encountered them in virtually all journey spaces. Many other journeyers used the carriages and cabins in which women journeyed before, during and after the latter's journeys; these were not necessarily wholly private.

The journey by rail and sea was also a period of leisure for many women, removing them as it did from some of the daily commitments that prevented them from participating in leisure activities at home. By framing the journey abroad as a leisure opportunity, this book adds a new dimension to the history of women's leisure. It moves beyond previous studies' focus on women's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century local and home-based activities, such as visits to music and dance halls, the cinema and women's clubs, and music making, knitting and gossiping with friends at home. The ship in particular was a leisure space filled with organized and spontaneous, communal and individual activities, including fancy-dress dances, quoits and skittles. The determining and limiting impact of women's life cycles on their leisure experiences during this period has been a key argument in previous analyses. Youth has customarily been regarded as the pre-eminent female leisure period because unmarried working women had surplus income and time outside their fixed hours of work that enabled them to pursue their own interests; after marriage it is argued that women's leisure activities were determined almost exclusively by their duties towards their families and households.¹⁶ What made the journey unique as a leisure experience was that women's age and life cycles did not always so powerfully determine what activities were accessible to them: journey sports, competitions, dances and fancy-dress competitions were accessible to young, old, married, unmarried and widowed women.

Gender history has dominated much recent scholarly activity. This book is not a work of pure gender analysis, as it does not compare male and