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### Researching a *Time Traveller's Guide*

How does one set about doing the research for a *Time Traveller's Guide*? That's not a straightforward question. The key thing is that these books are not just *researched*: they have to be lived. It's a sort of method acting, I suppose. Unlike most historical books that either start with a narrative and build on it, or take a bundle of documents and consider what they tell us about the past that we didn't know before, a *Time Traveller's Guide* starts with the audience. It turns the historical research process upside down in that it does not proceed from something that survives from the now-vanished past but with the concerns of the modern reader. It considers what the man or woman in the street knows about the century in question, and what he or she might want to know, and what people would definitely need to know if they were to find themselves thrust back into a distant century, and then it tries to provide that information in an accessible form – fully referenced, in case you have any doubts about its accuracy – and in the hope of inspiring people to think about what it means to be alive now as well as then.

There are those who think of these books as 'history-lite', which is fine because that's the way they're meant to come across. But writing them is anything but a 'light' or easy task. For example, you might think that your readers need to know how to greet people, and how to wash appropriately, and how strangers will treat them in a town or village. These things can be difficult to research. Just finding *an* answer can be tricky – history books tend not to index 'greetings, methods of...' because such subjects tend not to have interested scholars in the past, who were more interested in battles, parliaments and taxes. There are no government-created parchment rolls of ways people washed in the Middle Ages; such things need to be teased out from between the lines of accounts and legal records. But even supposing your reading does cover enough contemporary source material, just a single answer to the question 'how did medieval people greet each other?' is not good enough. Did peasants greet each other in the same way as lords? And how did a man approach the king? You need to know whether your evidence is representative of the whole of society – rich and poor, north and south, male and female – and, if not, in which ways is it unrepresentative. This, incidentally, marks a key difference between the amateur researcher and the professional: the amateur finds a juicy detail and uses it without worrying how the evidence was created and thus whether the detail is unrepresentative. The professional is more discerning, establishing the process whereby the source was created and making a judgement as to whether it is reliable and representative or a misleading oddity.

As a result, you have to read an awful lot of sources to write a *Time Traveller's Guide*. You have to scour a lot of accounts and narratives from the period about which you are writing, obviously; and you have to understand how they were made and what they actually might say about the past as well as the pitfalls in quoting them out of context. However, your reading does not stop there, for you also have to read secondary works. You need to know what modern readers *already* know in order to engage them in a conversation that will interest and amuse them. There is no point in labouring details with which they are familiar. And this calls for more than just reading: you need to get out there and rub shoulders with people visiting historical houses and castles. You need to speak to them and listen when they ask guides and wardens: you need to hear the answers as well as the questions. Often at a National Trust property I ask the kind person watching the room 'when was the glass first installed?' or 'how was the room originally decorated?' only to find they haven't the foggiest idea. People normally know when the walls were built or how old a bed is or

who's in the portrait above the mantelpiece but they can rarely answer questions about glazing or interior decoration.

With these books you can't really divide the research process from the writing. The two are closely interlinked. My early years reading and writing poetry come into play here. One of the most influential things I have ever read is T. S. Eliot's distinction between 'spurious originality' and 'true originality' in his introduction to Ezra Pound's *Selected Poems* (1928). In Eliot's view, 'spurious originality' is that in which the writer writes a new poem but derives the form and perhaps even the substance from other writers. It is essentially derivative – the writer develops what has gone before for the sake of continuing a tradition. 'True originality', according to Eliot, comes from the writer who goes direct to life and tries to describe what he finds *outside* literature and then brings it within a literary form. I have always used this in my attempts to recreate historical descriptions. When writing *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* I would stop on a street and look at it hard and try to recreate its fourteenth century appearance in my mind. If there was building work going on, with scaffolding poles and boards, I would think to myself: 'what wood did they use for scaffolding poles in the Middle Ages?' In that case, the answer was to be found in Salzman's extremely detailed study of medieval building. Similarly, when writing the Elizabethan guide, I tried to work out why people started eating breakfast – and soon found that if you are shifting to long hours of employment, as they did in the sixteenth century, you need a three-meal cycle to your day; the old two-meal routine does not give you enough energy.

I could add many other aspects of this engagement of modern life in the course of conducting historical research. When starting a new study, I normally buy a small selection of coins from the period, and I handle them regularly. They aren't just works of art; they are silent witnesses. They have threaded their ways in and out of pockets and bought everything from bread and butter to sex and wine. They are like little pieces of life in themselves – I think of them as leaves afloat on a very deep ocean. I also listen to music from the period, for even a tune can give you a feel for the period. I walk around galleries and notice things in Dutch genre paintings or Italian landscapes that I need to consider, such as maids cleaning utensils, the furnishings of a Dutch inn, or peasants doffing their caps as an aristocrat drives past in a carriage. Although the art might come from another country or another place, it is still inspirational in that it points out a difference that I need to investigate for the time and place I am describing. Likewise in a museum, you might notice a strigil in a Roman display and find yourself considering why we obsessively connect cleanliness with water. There are other ways of cleaning yourself, as the process of cleaning oil off the body with the strigil shows, and that little realisation makes you reconsider what a linen-based method of cleaning the body says about the values of those who employ it, and their attitudes to water.

I don't live in a university town. I live in a rural part of Devon, overlooking Dartmoor. This isn't just because it is very beautiful; it is also because it is historically inspirational. Most people in the past lived in a rural setting, and so coming to understand country life is essential to imagining and recreating past scenes. I know all the routes and many of the farms around here, and I think of how and why people travelled locally as well as further afield. How often was the manorial court held and which path led to it? And the market, the church, the reeve's house? If a new gate needed nails, where did the farmer obtain them in the twelfth century? And in the fourteenth – had things changed by then? Those evergreen trees: when did they start to grace the English landscape? What evergreens were here before 1600? When did grey squirrels replace the red here? And this enquiry goes far beyond facts and processes. There were at least three houses up at Butterdon in the fourteenth century. Today there is just one. Ruins of the others are to be

found under the bracken. What drove their inhabitants away? Harvest failures? The Black Death? Did they die of the disease or move to take advantage of better farmland at lower levels? What did the people here think when they heard of the plague killing people by the thousand? This is why I regard rambling across the countryside just as valid a form of research as reading a manorial court roll. Sometimes in order to understand life in past ages what you need most of all is not another line of Latin but to remember that life is short, and the way home is a steep a path that only grows steeper as you grow older.

As you can imagine, all this leads to a vast compendium of data, insights and thoughts. So a lot of the work that goes into a *Time Traveller's Guide* does not appear in the book. Everything I have mentioned above provides a solid bedrock for imagining the past, and describing its inhabitants, but if all the questions and details were to appear in the text, it would be a vast and unorganised mess. As one perceptive reviewer said of the *Time Traveller's Guide to Restoration Britain*, the book is 'a great work of synthesis' – making everything manageable and readable. This is to certain extent true of all history books; it might seem ironic but what you pay for when you buy a good historical text is as much what *doesn't* appear between the covers as what does. But without all that extra knowledge, the printed words would be far shallower.

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