



**Truth and Travel Writing: Staging Authenticity
in Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* (1984)
and *Congo Journey* (1996)**

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Abstract

Travel writing has always had a complex and contentious relationship with the truth. It cannot offer readers the reality of the journeys its authors (allegedly) undertook since, quite simply, the reader was not there. Rather, readers must content themselves with narrative accounts of journeys where markers of authenticity stand in for an inaccessible truth. This article focuses on the manifold and often contradictory layering of forms of authenticity in Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* (1984) and *Congo Journey* (1996). The exploration of this draws on MacCannell's concept of 'staged authenticity' (1973, 1976). Specifically, it makes use of the concept of 'object authenticity' as theorised by Lau (2010). Although having been developed in the context of tourism research, the use of this approach here facilitates the examination of the manifold layering of authenticity in O'Hanlon's work. It shows how different forms of authenticity come to the surface of his narratives cyclically through a process of being asserted and then undermined. It is also hoped that this might engender consideration of other applications for this approach in the study of travel writing.

Contributor Note

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Travel and Truth

Travel writing is inevitably at one remove from the realities of the journey it seeks to convey. The traveller's account is often produced months, sometimes years after the journey and thus its realities – the actuality of it as it was experienced – remains beyond the reader's grasp. Yet the issue of truth hangs over the genre, perhaps even providing the primary driver for the readers' engagement in it. As readers of travel writing we may be suspicious or questioning of its 'truth', and in this sense its 'truth' always has the potential to undermine the very narrative it helps construct. Nonetheless, we engage with it, arguably we *believe* the narrative, principally because it is the only means by which we can satisfy our desire to get close to the travellers' experience of 'out there'. Whilst the actuality of the traveller's journey is inaccessible to us (we were not there), what we have is the traveller's account with its markers of 'truth'. We must content ourselves with a narrative form where the rhetoric of authenticity stands in reassuringly for the truth.

As many have noted, the ways in which travel writing seeks to convey a sense of authenticity, the means by which apparent evidence of the journey is presented, is also problematic. As Lévi Strauss observed in *Tristes Tropiques*, it is 'impossible for the reader to assess the value of [this] evidence put in front of him' (1992: 17). In this sense, truth and authenticity are both constitutive aspects of travel writing but whereas the former is almost spectral – a presence over the text – the latter is very much a presence within the text; the genre's lingua franca. Consequently, then, 'Above all, travel accounts are involved in the production of imaginative knowledges' (Bishop 1989: 3). This production of imaginative

knowledge, the truth claim of travel narratives, 'arises from a number of elements, each of which contributes towards the coherence of a travel account' (4). What is of particular interest here are the ways in which such referents of authenticity are established in O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* (1984) and *Congo Journey* (1996). In examining the manifold and unstable ways in which forms of authenticity are presented in these texts the intention is to show how this occurs almost cyclically with assertion of one form of authenticity being predicated on the undermining of other, often contradictory, forms.

An account of a journey to the Sarawak region of Borneo in the company of poet and travel writer James Fenton, *Into the Heart of Borneo* contains some entertaining and farcical episodes in which the author and his travelling companion often feature as the cause. In addition to the title bearing similarity to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), 'O'Hanlon remains faithful to Conrad's idea that going up a tropical river is the same as going backward in evolutionary time' (Sugnet 1991: 79). This is perhaps not surprising as O'Hanlon wrote his doctoral thesis on Charles Darwin and Joseph Conrad (O'Hanlon and Rotthier 2011: 90). This background and a relatively short academic career can perhaps, in part at least, account for the ways in which the humour of the book is countered by detailed descriptions of flora and fauna, local peoples and customs. In this way, O'Hanlon 'presents himself as a knowledgeable natural scientist' with such descriptions gaining scholarly authority by meticulous references to naturalists, travellers and ethnographers predominantly from the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Sugnet 1991: 80).

By contrast, *Congo Journey* is a ‘more “serious” and introspective’ narrative (Holland and Huggan 2001: 78). Based on an expedition to the tropical forests of the northern Congo with Lary Shaffer – then a Professor of Psychology at the State University of New York – the book is more personal than *Into the Heart of Borneo*, revealing of the thoughts, fears and personal lives of O’Hanlon and his travelling companion. Nonetheless, like the earlier book, *Congo Journey*, also humorously casts the author and his travelling companion as inexperienced and amateurish. Similarly, it contains detailed references to the people, wildlife and jungle habitat of the Congo – these too are contextualised by references to nineteenth century travellers and naturalists. Both books are characterised by interplay between a humorous, parodic authorial persona and scholarly references to earlier travellers and naturalists. These references to the past create a lineage in which the past appears in the present. This forms an uneasy tension with O’Hanlon’s brand of slapstick humour, which both recalls the past but also threatens to undermine it.

In this sense, O’Hanlon’s writing seems to convey authenticity by drawing on the past principally in three ways: his authorial persona which reprises and satirises the Victorian amateur traveller, his borderline anthropological accounts of native peoples and their customs, and his descriptions of wildlife and flora. Whilst the former is generally implied and insinuated and rarely made overt, the latter two categories are predicated on references to nineteenth century and twentieth century travellers and naturalists. This is not, however, to suggest these characteristics are consistently present and fixed, but rather that the variation, instability and tension

between these modes of authenticity are worthy of further examination.

Staging Authenticity

Whilst initially conceived of in respect of tourist sights, Dean MacCannell’s concept of ‘staged authenticity’ (1973, 1976) and Raymond Lau’s (2010) work in this area help facilitate this analysis. Lau focuses on one of the implications of MacCannell’s seminal conception of authenticity in the tourist setting, which he has termed ‘object authenticity’. Whilst MacCannell does not specifically address this issue in his original work, it is worth briefly summarising his view of ‘staged authenticity’ in order to make clear Lau’s development of it. In this way, Lau’s conception of ‘object authenticity’, provides a means of categorising the varying interactions between the three tropes of authenticity identified in O’Hanlon’s work.

MacCannell deploys Goffman’s notion of front stage (or region) and back stage (or region) as means of demarcating the social spaces of the tourist sight. These stages provide the basis for conceiving of authenticity as a continuum, ranging from the ‘false’, constructed front stage, to the ‘realm of “truth”, “reality” and “intimacy”’ of the back stage (Lau 2010: 480). This is predicated on the view that authenticity – and anxiety about the meaningfulness of social interaction – is a feature of modern society. As Ivanovic notes, ‘since authenticity is absent from his or her own alienated world, the tourist hopes to find it in some other places’ (2008: 323). Consequently, then, MacCannell identifies primitive or peasant communities as social groups ‘who live their lives totally exposed to their “relevant others” [and] do not suffer from anxiety about the authenticity of

their lives' (1999: 93). Whilst this would seem to suggest that authenticity can only be fully realised in a primitive or peasant setting, it is conceivable that if in visiting modern societies, the tourist is able to access the back regions of local life, they will encounter a sense of authenticity (Lau 2010: 481). In this respect, MacCannell sees the social function of tourism in the modern world as akin to practicing religion: 'Pilgrims attempted to visit a place where an event of religious importance actually occurred. Tourists present themselves at places of social, historical, and cultural importance' (1973: 593). Consequently, if pilgrimage is about coming into contact with the actuality of a place of religious significance, so tourism is about the 'desire to share in the real life of the places visited' (594).

In positioning the tourist as being driven by a desire to encounter a slice of the locals' life, MacCannell 'unwittingly implies two concepts of authenticity' (Lau 2010: 478). The first is 'relationship authenticity', where individuals interact with locals 'on the basis of their real selves' (480). The second form of authenticity results as a consequence of the first form. That is, the interaction between tourists and locals raises the issue of whether or not in coming into contact with the latter group, the tourist really encounters 'real life' as lived by locals (480). The extent to which this may or may not be the case is dependent on the tourist's engagement with the practices of local life and this amounts to the second form of authenticity, object authenticity:

By object, we refer to everything ranging from life processes (e.g., cooking and washing), activities (e.g., recreational games, religious rituals, cultural performances),

artifacts, and so on. Thus, object authenticity is a property of a tourist object. In our view, this property is best conceptualized, not as either present or absent, but in terms of the degree to which a tourist object possesses it. (Lau 2010: 480)

In making use of object authenticity here, it is important to note two characteristics of the concept. Firstly, in contrast to MacCannell, Lau argues that the tourist's desire for object authentic experiences need not be driven by feelings of alienation and anxiety about interpersonal relationships in their home culture. This moves away from the implication in MacCannell's original paper that real authenticity – the true 'back' stage or region – can only be fully realised in primitive societies. As Lau notes, the tourists may well be experiencing life as it is lived by locals in a variety of settings but this alienation from one's home culture may or may not be a driver in the experience (2010: 480-481). Similarly, the settings for *Into the Heart of Borneo* and *Congo Journey* are 'primitive' societies, and clearly O'Hanlon certainly draws on past eras of travel and adventure. Whilst this may bear a passing similarity to MacCannell's concept of authenticity, it is not possible to know the extent to which O'Hanlon's motivations and travelling practices might equate with MacCannell's view that feelings of alienation about interpersonal relationships in modern society. Similarly, whilst our motivations for reading books such as O'Hanlon's may be borne out of a sense of alienation in modern society, any sense of object authenticity we may derive from it need not necessarily be predicated on this point.

Secondly, as the concept of object authenticity emerged from the sociological study of tourist behaviour and practices and the use of it in the cultural and literary study of travel writing requires some clarification, as does its application to ‘traveller’ rather than ‘touristic’ practices. Without wishing to engage in the complex and possibly irresolvable debate about the different cultural and signifying practices of ‘travellers’ and ‘tourists’ (Franklin and Crang 2001: 5-22), it would seem that ultimately the concept of object authenticity characterises cultural experiences that feel – or purport to feel – object authentic regardless of the context of this experience. For example, witnessing a druid ceremony first hand might well constitute an object authentic experience, but arguably watching a television documentary on the same subject, whilst not as heightened as being there in person, might also feel like an object authentic experience. Indeed, following Stuart Hall’s argument that televisual texts are ideologically ‘encoded’ by their producers and similarly ‘decoded’ by their viewers, it is conceivable that the signifying markers of an object authentic experience could be encoded into a television documentary (1996: 128). That is, its makers intend for the viewer to feel as though they are engaging in an object authentic experience. In this sense, it is also possible for a written text such as a travel narrative to convey a similar sense of object authenticity and for its readers to decode it as such. Clearly, the notion of object authenticity is not only applicable to the tourist setting but can also characterise our engagement with ‘texts’ regardless of format.

Engaging in object authentic experiences requires a degree of knowledge, minimally knowledge that one is

experiencing something significant, and therefore, authentic. And as Lau notes, the greater the knowledge, the more enhanced this experience is likely to be (2010: 483). However, object authentic experiences and the forms of knowledge associated with them are varied. In an attempt to illustrate some of their main characteristics, Lau makes reference to the eight senses of authenticity given in the Oxford and Webster dictionaries (484). He argues that senses ‘(d) to (h) pertain to object authenticity’ (484).

Whilst these characteristics were derived for the purpose of cataloguing different aspects of touristic practices of authenticity, they help to provide a framework for differentiating the various means by which O’Hanlon evokes senses of authenticity in his writing. Specifically, they demonstrate how authenticity in O’Hanlon’s writing is premised on the presentation of what in the context of tourism have been referred to by Wang as ‘toured objects’, which in this context might be referred to as ‘travelled objects’ (1999: 351). Consequently, just as the tourist finds object authenticity to be a property of a tourist object (for example, Tibetan artwork), so the reader is exhorted to identify these ‘travelled objects’ as possessing object authenticity (for example, O’Hanlon sighting a particular bird or, indeed, descriptions of the equipment taken on his journey).

Of the five senses of authenticity which Lau argues pertain to object authenticity, three are particularly relevant here. Sense (d) – that which is real or genuine – may apply to travel writing, in that most purport to be ‘genuine’ accounts of travels undertaken by their authors. However this is, as the discussion at the beginning of this paper noted, at some remove from the ‘true’ ‘reality’ of being ‘out there’ and as such are not directly

relevant to the examination of the way in which markers of authenticity stand in for the truth in travel writing. Similarly, sense (e) – that which is original, such as a hand written manuscript – is not applicable here in that a published text has clearly been through many hands and many iterations.

Sense (f) – that which is ‘marked by close conformity to an original: accurately and satisfyingly reproducing essential features’, for example a portrait (Lau 2010: 484) – is applicable to O’Hanlon’s work (and the generic features of travel writing more broadly), in that tropes of authenticity ‘satisfy’ the reader that the narrative closely conforms to the original (the journey) by ‘reproducing its essential features’. Sense (g) – that which is ‘marked by conformity to widespread or long-continued tradition’, for example, a custom – can also be seen as pertaining to this characteristic of the genre whereby the travel narrative is built on markers of authenticity: ‘travel objects, standing in for the reality of the journey.’¹

Sense (h) refers to that which is authoritative, authorized, or legally valid. Clearly, a travel narrative is not in general required to be legally valid. Nonetheless, it is authorized and it usually purports to be authoritative to some degree or other, even if this takes an ironic or inverted form. In terms of *Into the Heart of Borneo* and *Congo Journey*, the issue of authority is particularly relevant in that O’Hanlon mobilises a sense of object authenticity identified above (i.e., his Victorian amateur traveller persona, his

¹ See, for example, Blanton who notes that; ‘To question authenticity, meaning, and authority, after all, is the hallmark of the postmodern era. Travel writing has no special claim on these issues. Yet these concerns have always been up front in travel writing as they rarely are in fiction’ (2002: xvi).

scholarly accounts of local peoples and customs and his descriptions of wildlife and flora) by asserting a high level of knowledge about these subjects. In displaying a mastery of them, this authoritativeness lends weight and credibility to these referents of object authenticity.

The Amateur Traveller

The authorial persona of the bumbling Victorian gentleman traveller lumbering from one farcical episode to another is not a *constant* presence in *Into the Heart of Borneo* and *Congo Journey*. Nonetheless, it is a strong and significant presence in each book, serving to establish continuity with the past and thereby acting as marker of authenticity; and yet simultaneously the humour and satire of this persona unsettles this lineage with the past and undermines the authoritativeness of each text to speak about its journey. As Holland and Huggan note, in adopting this persona, O’Hanlon is evolving a significant representational strand of post-war British travel writing (2001: 32). Quint-essentially English, public school educated, the gentleman abroad is amateurish and blundering. This authorial persona was perhaps first fully realised in Eric Newby’s *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958), representing an amalgam of ‘two cherished strands of the national character overseas – the gifted, if eccentric, amateur willing to try anything, and the bewildered Briton amused by the strangeness of foreign parts and people’ (Cocker 1992: 140). The description could equally apply to O’Hanlon.

In evolving this persona O’Hanlon down-plays the significance, the difficulty, and the danger of his travels and revels in

humorously recounting instances of his own inexperience and ineptitude. Here, in contrast to the Victorian era of exploration, amateurism is no longer equated with noble triumph in the face of immense adversity, rather it provides the basis for humour, drama and, to an extent, a celebration of failure. Indeed, as Holland and Huggan note of O'Hanlon, his work tends to be premised on "momentous" happenings that taper off into sheepish anticlimax' (2001: 13). Certainly, the hopes of sighting the rare Borneo two-horned Rhinoceros in *Into the Heart of Borneo* are, ultimately, not realised, nor is the book's principal aim of making contact with the remote Ukit tribe. Similarly, whilst one of the aims of *Congo Journey* – to reach Lake Tele – is realised, the hopes of sighting Mokélé-mbèmbé, the legendary Congo dinosaur, unsurprisingly, is not.

In this way, whilst the opening pages of *Into the Heart of Borneo* impress upon the reader a sense of the scale and danger of the journey O'Hanlon is due to undertake, the comedic aspect of his authorial self surfaces almost immediately to lampoon and undermine this. Thus, the difficulties of 'barring 1,700 different species of parasitic worm from your bloodstream and Wagler's pit viper from just about anywhere' (1984: 1) quickly gives way to an account of some pre-journey training with the 22 SAS near Hereford. Here the notion of training with the SAS further underlines the seriousness of the journey O'Hanlon is planning, but it also undermined with slapstick comedy:

The hammock was about five feet off the ground. So this was it, the first piece of action, day one... Darwin, I remembered, had had excoriating problems trying to get into his hammock, but I just could

not quite recall how he solved them. I took in a great deal of air, which is how the grouper fish breaks surface, and got airborne backwards. Nets, ropes, parachute cords, canvas sheets and metal stiffener rods strung me up from throat to ankles. (O'Hanlon 1984: 4)

Although *Congo Journey* differs considerably in narrative structure, O'Hanlon's authorial persona is similarly deployed as a means of counterbalancing this and making light of difficulty of his journey. Whilst staying in Brazzaville, O'Hanlon contracts malaria following a meal in a North Vietnamese restaurant with travelling companion, Larry Shaffer. The severity of the illness and the fact that it occurs prior to the start of their expedition into the forests of northern Congo, dramatically illustrates the danger and difficulty of what they are attempting. As with *Into the Heart of Borneo*, a reference to SAS training points to the difficulty of their journey but also provides the opportunity for O'Hanlon to 'indulge his propensity for self-deprecation and self-parody', sending up his English gentleman persona (Holland and Huggan 2001: 31). On looking through O'Hanlon's rucksack for malaria tablets, Shaffer comments:

'Your pack's a mess,'... 'Why don't you have a system? It's all just shoved in any old how. Crammed into plastic bags. It's truly horrible. First off, you should differentiate between the main load-bearing sack and the side-pockets. Second off, you should put the maps flat in the map-pocket, properly folded. They're precious. We're going to need them. And why's the whole thing stuffed with socks?'



'The SAS major in Hereford said that's what you do. [shivering with fever] You s-stuff the c-crannies with s-socks'. (O'Hanlon 1996: 52)

However, as others such as Holland and Huggan have noted, the comedy of O'Hanlon's writing is very much borne out of the anachronistic aspect of the persona he adopts. Here, slapstick and farce do not run counter to the gentlemanly traveller harking back to the nineteenth century, rather they occur precisely because of it. His persona is a figure out of place and out of time with humour and satire being indicative of a form of belatedness. In contrast, though, to the belatedness of late Victorian travellers, who Behdad argues wrote with a sense of anxiety that there was nowhere left to go, in O'Hanlon's work anxiety is supplanted by amusement (1999: 14).

In 'hiding behind the mask of escapist explorer-adventurers', O'Hanlon remains largely unaccountable for his 'gauche but "inoffensive" actions' (Holland and Huggan 2001: 7). In this sense, the humorous episodes of farce and self-irony which populate both books are shot through with the anachronistic characteristics of the English gentleman traveller. Nonetheless, this point is also impressed upon the reader in overt and explicit terms in each book. As they travel up the Baleh river by boat, O'Hanlon's travelling companion in *Into the Heart of Borneo*, James Fenton is attributed with saying 'Really Redmond... you're absurd. You live in the nineteenth century. Everything's changed, although you don't appear to notice' (O'Hanlon 1984: 34). Similarly, in *Congo Journey*, O'Hanlon's persona is explicitly referred to with characteristic self-irony when Shaffer jokes:

'But we're in the nineteenth century, aren't we? You love all that, don't you? You should have been born 150 years ago. Bearers and paddlers and those white Brit hats like a bra-cup stuck on your head. I know. And a sedan-chair or whatever you call them with punkah-wallahs and tiffin-boys and under-pig-stickers and things.' (O'Hanlon 1996: 32)

O'Hanlon's authorial persona, then, can be seen as constituting a complex and contradictory form of object authenticity. The English gentleman traveller is familiar, believable and traditional and in this sense falls within the remit of sense (g) – that which conforms to a widespread or long-continued tradition. Yet, the parodial aspect of this persona would seem to unsettle the authenticity it affords in respect of sense (g). Clearly, the slapstick and farcical vignettes that populate each book are built around the anachronistic nature of O'Hanlon's persona and in this way draw on the past.

This raises the issue of whether the humorous element undermines the ways in which O'Hanlon's persona can be seen as an object authentic marker of each narrative. Or does it in itself add a further layer of object authenticity? It does not lend the narratives authoritative weight and consequently seems to be at odds with sense (h) – that which is authoritative, authorized or legally valid. Perhaps, though, the humorous aspect of O'Hanlon's persona could be seen as being closest to sense (f) – that which is 'marked by close conformity to an original: accurately and satisfyingly reproducing essential features', for example a portrait (Lau 2010: 484).

Into the Heart of Borneo and *Congo Journey* are not exemplars of nineteenth



century travel writing produced a hundred and fifty years later. O'Hanlon's persona is not a 'portrait' of the English gentleman traveller, it does not closely conform to some notion of originality, nonetheless, its exaggerated and overblown signifiers enable us to recognise that to which it refers. It can be seen as a playful, yet also wistful, reprise of the English gentleman traveller. In this way, the humour of O'Hanlon's persona is both very much characteristic of the way in which it can be perceived as object authentic and also the driver behind undermining and suppressing this marker of authenticity in the face of other object authentic elements in each narrative. That is, the parodic and slapstick aspects of O'Hanlon's authorial persona butt up uncomfortably against the ethnographic and naturalist markers of authenticity, though these in themselves are extensions of the late Victorian Englishman traveller.

Naturalist modes of authenticity

The naturalist focus of *Into the Heart of Borneo*, along with O'Hanlon's mix of humour and scholarly endeavour, is established at the very beginning of the narrative. Indeed, on the first page O'Hanlon gives an indication of the breadth of his knowledge of Borneo's natural environment, providing the reader with an entertaining insight into the dangers that this environment presents:

As a former academic and a natural history book reviewer I was astonished to discover, on being threatened with a two-month exile to the primary jungles of Borneo, just how fast a man can read.

Powerful as your scholarly instincts may be, there is no matching the strength of that irrational desire to find a means of keeping your head upon your shoulders; of retaining your frontal appendage in its accustomed place... (O'Hanlon 1984: 1)

The reference here to his previous career in academia as well as the naming of species and diseases follows the scholarly tradition of substantiating such information with references to other sources. In this case, the dangers of the region outlined above are presented in the context of references to Charles Hose and William McDougall's *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo* (1912), Alfred Russel Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago: the Land of the Orang-Utan and the Bird of Paradise* (2 vols, 1869), Hose's *The Field-book of a Jungle-Wallah* (1929), and Robert Shelford's *A Naturalist in Borneo* (1916) (O'Hanlon 1984:1).

Arguably, the principal aim of *Congo Journey* – to reach Lake Tele and search for the possibly mythical Mokele-mbembe or Congo dinosaur – is in itself redolent of the nineteenth century era of 'discovery'. Similarly, in common with *Into the Heart of Borneo*, the narrative is frequently underpinned by extensive references to the explorers and naturalists of this earlier period. For example, O'Hanlon, rather grandiosely, admits to 'feeling like Stanley' as he discusses some of the finer points of their journey with Shaffer and Congolese expedition leader and biologist, Marcellin Agnagna. This is followed by a much more detailed reference to Stanley who provides authority and context to an account of the river Congo and its dangers:

We stood on a big grey boulder, hypnotized by the start of the



cataracts which Stanley described in *Through the Dark Continent* (1879). After making his way for 1235 miles down the Congo, surviving thirty-three pitched and running battles with the peoples on its banks, Stanley looked out on 'the wildest stretch of river that I have ever seen. Take a strip of sea blown over by a hurricane, four miles in length and half a mile in breadth, and a pretty accurate conception of its leaping waves may be obtained'. (O'Hanlon 1997: 36)

Though it is more of a constant presence in *Into the Heart of Borneo*, this format features in both narratives, with O'Hanlon's numerous accounts of animals and the environment being contextualised by references to earlier naturalist texts. For example, *Into the Heart of Borneo* makes extensive use of Odoardo Becarri's *Wanderings in the Great Forests of Borneo, Travels and Researches of a Naturalist in Sarawak* (1866) or Bertram E. Smythies *The Birds of Borneo* (1960), the latter being a constant source of reference in all bird sightings. Similarly, in addition to references to Stanley, Livingstone and Mary Kinsley, *Congo Journey* draws on sources such as Captain Guy Burrow's *The Land of the Pigmies* (1898), Major Denham, Captain Clafferton, and the late Doctor Oudney's *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries: in Northern and Central Africa, in the Years 1822, 1823 and 1824, extending across the Great Desert to the Tenth Degree of Northern Latitude, and from Kouka in Bournou, to Sacktoo, the Capital of the Felatah Empire* (1826) and Paul B. Du Chaillu's *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa: With Accounts of the Manners and Customs of the People, and the Chace of the Gorilla,*

Crocodile, Leopard, Elephant, Hippopotamus, and Other Animals (1861).

In framing his accounts of the natural environment with references to earlier works such as these, an impression is built of the wildlife, forests and peoples of both the Sarawak region and the Congo as being unchanged and continuously linked to the past. In *Into the Heart of Borneo*, having pulled ashore to make camp, O'Hanlon notices a cluster of insects. Upon fetching his camera, he recognises them immediately, confessing:

I began to feel, as I crawled on my stomach towards the pullulating insects, more than a passing pride in the quality of my offering. After all, some thirteen inches from my own nose and closing, was the very butterfly which Wallace described in 1855. (O'Hanlon 1984: 35)

O'Hanlon finds the Ornithoptera Brookeana (named after Charles Brooke, nephew of James Brooke, the first white Rajah of Sarawak), as Wallace had been able to, some hundred and thirty years earlier, experiencing the 'excitement that Wallace himself describes' (1984: 35). In *Congo Journey*, references to earlier naturalists are less explicit, nonetheless, O'Hanlon frequently asserts that the Congo forests are also unchanging and that the past is alive in the present:

As I fell asleep I wondered if we'd see ... any of the animals that Bahuchet lists, the taboo animals that no pygmy mother or father – from the first signs of pregnancy to the child's first steps – must eat. Way out in the forest we'd meet, maybe, one of those animals that you pull from their womb-like retreats with your hands: the Small-scaled tree pangolin (a long-

tailed and long-snouted anteater covered in scales like a fir-cone) or the Tree hyrax (very like the common ancestor of the horses, tapirs, rhinoceroses, hippopotamuses and elephants, which is the size of a rabbit, lives in trees, and, on moonlit nights, screams like a baby). (O'Hanlon 1996: 155)

Thus, O'Hanlon's breadth of knowledge presented with scholarly authority reminds us that whilst references to Wallace or Stanley may be romantic idealism, the sightings of flora and fauna on which they are built are in fact indicative of some apparently real points of continuity. The vivid descriptions of wildlife placed in the context of much earlier accounts brings the past into the present.

The overriding impression is that the forests of Sarawak and the northern Congo are unchanged; that O'Hanlon's moments of discovery are therefore comparable to Wallace and Stanley *et al* simply because nothing has changed in the interim. Here the accounts of birds, animals, plants and flowers are object authentic signifiers enabling the reader to accept as true O'Hanlon's vision of an unchanged world. In so doing, forms of object authenticity (f) and (g) are applicable here in that this trope 'satisfyingly reproduces' the 'essential features' of earlier naturalist accounts (f) and in so doing can be seen as conforming to a 'widespread or long-continued tradition' (g).

In contrast to the humour of the authorial persona which seems to undermine its authority, sense (h) is applicable here. O'Hanlon's immense knowledge of tropical wildlife is very much premised on the assertion of authority. A scholarly form of authority whereby O'Hanlon's expertise is

substantiated by adherence to the academic convention of placing his accounts of wildlife in the context of other established experts. Thus, whilst all three forms of object authenticity apply here, arguably it is sense (h) ['authority'] which most fully defines the way in which this naturalist trope functions as a form of object authenticity.

Anthropological Trope

The sense of continuity with the past is furthered in O'Hanlon's descriptions of the tribes of Sarawak and northern Congo. In both cases such descriptions are also presented in the context of earlier accounts. In *Into the Heart of Borneo*, the primary focus is on the Iban people (the tribe to whom his guides belong) and the Ukit people, the remote tribe O'Hanlon is keen to reach. O'Hanlon draws on a range of sources, the majority of which, such as Odoardo Becarri's *Wanderings in the Great Forests of Borneo, Travels and Researches of a Naturalist in Sarawak* (1866) being over a century old. Indeed, even the lone reference to a contemporary traveller, John Hatt, author of *The Tropical Traveller* (1982) - whose advice of taking 'lots of postcards of the Queen, preferably on horseback, and showing all four legs, because they think she's all of a piece' (1984: 7) O'Hanlon follows - are framed in the context of comparison to earlier accounts. In this case, Hatt is described as the modern equivalent of Francis Galton's *The Art of Travel; or Shifts and Contrivances Available in Wild Countries* (1984: 7). Whilst his Iban guides are the source of a good deal of camaraderie and humorous banter, their cultural practices and their ancestry are given detailed consideration by O'Hanlon.

Here, again, these themes serve as a means of constructing continuity with the past, substantiating the sense that O'Hanlon's Sarawak is much the same as that which was experienced by earlier travellers. For example, in giving a sense of the cultural heritage of the Iban people, O'Hanlon describes how in 1843 a party of 6000 Iban inflicted severe casualties on Brooke's expeditionary force; Brooke agreed a peace accord with Orang Kaya Pamancha Dana, one of the principal Iban chiefs two years later.

These historical details form part of O'Hanlon's account of the first evening he and Fenton spend with their guides, at the long house of their principal guide, Dana. As well as having fought against the Japanese in the Second World War, it becomes apparent that Dana has been 'named after his famous ancestor, the great Pirate and headhunter Orang Kaya Pamancha Dana' (1984: 25), who fought against Brooke some hundred and forty years earlier. The presentation of this connection adds to the impression that, humorous banter with Fenton aside, they have embarked on a dangerous and difficult journey, one that could not be undertaken without the leadership of a man of such prestigious ancestry. However, in actual fact, it is not made clear whether O'Hanlon's guide Dana is a direct descendent of Orang Kaya Pamancha Dana or whether he was simply named after him. Nonetheless, it is a further indication of the importance for O'Hanlon of establishing a lineage with the past, however tenuous.

Accounts of the pygmy tribes of the northern Congo follow a similar structure. Here too, in *Congo Journey*, they are framed by descriptions from early travelers. Again, impressed upon us is the notion that these are a people whose culture and mode of living has

remained largely unchanging for millennia. In so doing, O'Hanlon's interaction with pygmy tribes is contextualised not only by the customary nineteenth century accounts but a reference to an inscription from around 2500 BC on the 'walls of the tomb of Herkhuf, nomarch of Elephantine, at Aswan' (1996: 107). This has the effect of heightening the sense that the past and present form an unchanging lineage. Paul du Chaillu describes the pygmy tribesmen in 1865 as being 'very expert and nimble in trapping wild animals and fish in the streams' (109) and the lineage from the past to an unchanged present is arguably completed by O'Hanlon's account of his first encounter with them which makes reference to very similar themes:

A young man appeared from the wispy smoke, the moving shadows, the hubbub of voices – the pygmy I had followed in the forest, but transformed, masterful, wearing a red loincloth, his village tee-shirt and shorts discarded. He was carrying two leaf-bundles tied with liana-strips, and, sitting on the end of Nze's kit-bag, next to the old man, he laid them on the ground, unwrapped one – it contained small black pieces of meat – and passed the other to Nze. (O'Hanlon 1996: 140)

Throughout both narratives there are numerous references to the traditional cultural practices of the Iban and pygmy tribes people, respectively. Here, too, traditional practices are presented as unchanged. This is apparent in the numerous descriptions of O'Hanlon's Iban guides in *Into the Heart of Borneo* diving for fish, hunting pigs or guiding him and Fenton through the rapids and forests of Sarawak.

One incident that is indicative of O'Hanlon's respect for, if not privileging of, the traditional over the modern occurs as his party approach the upper reaches of the Baleh river. They find their outboard motor unable to power them up the increasingly turbulent and fast flowing rapids. On one such occasion O'Hanlon's party manoeuvre the dugout canoe into a side channel away from the main thrust of the rapid. As they wade upstream, pushing and pulling the canoe up the rapid, Fenton loses his footing and despite O'Hanlon's attempts to hold on to him, is swept into the main flow of the rapid:

Leon jumped into the boat, clambered on to the raised outboard-motor frame, squatted, and then, with a long, yodelling cry, launched himself in a great curving leap into the centre of the maelstrom. He disappeared, surfaced, shook his head, spotted James, dived again, and caught him. (O'Hanlon 1984: 48)

Once Fenton has been safely pulled ashore, O'Hanlon asks Leon, their boatman, why he let out a cry before diving into the river to rescue Fenton. Leon explains 'Well... we Christians like you, of course, but, all the same, we respect the river. The river like Jams. The river take Jams away. So we say sorries to the river, because we take him back again' (1984: 51). Undoubtedly, the essential, indeed only, response to this incident was to dive in after Fenton. Yet, it is clear from O'Hanlon's presentation of this event that whilst he would have willingly committed himself to this impulse, in reality, he lacked the skills and knowledge to save Fenton. In this way, the traditional skills of the locals are privileged but such passages seem to have also been written with humour in

mind. Whilst we have laughed at O'Hanlon many times through the narrative, here we are asked to laugh at the Iban and this makes the acquisition of knowledge about their spiritual beliefs uncomfortable for the tone borders on patronising.

By contrast, accounts of the spiritual beliefs and practices of the pygmy tribes people, and indeed O'Hanlon's expedition party, are presented in a more considered and serious way in *Congo Journey*. In comparison with *Into the Heart of Borneo*, local people are given much fuller voices; we learn much more directly from them rather than via the authorial voice. For example, the expedition leader introduces Bobe, a village elder in the region of Boha, to O'Hanlon. Through Bobe, the history of the tribes people living in this area is recounted in some detail. In the form of a vision, Bobe also warns O'Hanlon of some of the dangers of the forest:

'We have come to know that a sacred animal, Yombe, lives in the forest of Boha... I affirm, now, as I sit here, that I too have seen this animal... So I, Bobe, I am still alive. And now I have warned you in my own house, Mr Redmond, because you are said to respect our traditions, and also because you are well known to my friend Dr Marcellin. I warn you, on pain of death, do not meet the eye of this animal when you come across it in the forest'. (O'Hanlon 1996: 334)

In contrast to *Into the Heart of Borneo* – where discussions of spiritual practices, such as letting out a yodelling cry before diving into the river, leave them seeming unsophisticated and outmoded – in *Congo Journey* the notion that local beliefs might appear far-fetched or simplistic in comparison with Western

practices is openly discussed. Indeed, through conversation with his expedition leader, Marcellin Agnagna, such views are forcefully countered. For example, in discussing Bobe's warning about the Yombe, Agnagna asks 'Anyway what about your other god who became a man and let himself be stuck on a piece of wood and speared so that he could save you all – what could it possibly mean?' (1996: 335).

In common with the naturalist trope, in functioning as a form of object authenticity this ethnographic mode of representation appears to be predicated on 'authority' and in this way, most closely conforms to sense (h) [that which is authoritative, authorized or legally valid]. In common with the naturalist trope, this is a form of authority that asserts itself via scholarly endeavour. O'Hanlon's interactions with locals and observations of their cultural practices are invariably contextualised by earlier accounts. In this way, the lineage of the past and present is reinforced and the notion that O'Hanlon finds the tribes people of Sarawak and the northern Congo exactly as they were a century earlier is continually impressed upon the reader throughout each narrative.

Nonetheless, the humour and patronising tone of some of the descriptions in *Into the Heart of Borneo* is unsettling and seems to run counter to this form of object authenticity. Certainly, this tone contrasts with the more participatory anthropological mode of *Congo Journey*. Despite this, the breadth of knowledge and references to early accounts ensure that the authority of this object authenticity in *Into the Heart of Borneo* is not entirely undermined by its patronising accounts of locals: as Holland and Huggan note, O'Hanlon's travel writing 'makes use of

the tropical zone to recollect exotic (mis)adventure, but also to reinstate authority in Western science's name' (2001: 81). Though less prevalent, aspects of the other two forms of object authenticity can also be found in O'Hanlon's ethnographic trope. Sense (f) [that which is marked by conformity to an original: accurately and satisfyingly reproducing essential features] and sense (g) [that which conforms to a long-continued tradition] is more applicable to the more overtly anthropological style of *Congo Journey*. Nonetheless, his knowledge of local customs in *Into the Heart of Borneo* also alludes to a more considered, scientific approach, more so than the patronising humour it is packaged in might, at first, seem to indicate.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is clear that markers of authenticity, which have been termed here 'travel objects' are deployed in both *Into the Heart of Borneo* and *Congo Journey*. Though the latter's studied and more personal perspective contrasts with the former's slapstick comedy and farce, across both texts the past is continually brought into the present in order to convey authenticity, to reassure the reader that O'Hanlon has, indeed, been 'out there'. Principally, this is manifest in three 'travel objects' which serve to engender a sense of object authenticity. His satirical reprising of the English gentleman traveller of the Victorian era is more prominent in *Into the Heart of Borneo*. Nonetheless, its presence can be felt across both texts. Similarly, the naturalist and anthropological strands are characteristic of each book, although they are more extensively deployed in *Congo Journey*, where they take on a more

serious and learned form. The interplay between the representation of these 'travel objects' is complex: all three draw on versions of the past but, as this paper has sought to show, they are conflicting with the assertion of one either running counter to the presence of another or undermining it.

O'Hanlon's authorial persona, his parodying of the Victorian traveller, is clearly played for laughs. Nonetheless, although its parodic aspect always threatens to completely undermine, on balance this is kept in sufficient abeyance to direct us back to an earlier and well-established point of reference.

Ultimately then, the humorous aspect of O'Hanlon's persona serves to underscore its function as a 'travel object' through which the reader should derive a sense of object authenticity. This, though, raises the question of whether this persona represents such a stark contrast with the naturalist and ethnographic aspects as to effectively nullify their potential to be seen as object authentic elements of the narrative. Perhaps not to the extent of nullifying but certainly at times there is a disrupting or devaluing effect. For example, when Fenton falls out of the boat and is swept down the river in *Into the Heart of Borneo*, the drive to cast this humorously certainly undermines the ethnographic value of the description of the Iban's spiritual beliefs. Returning to Hall's notion of encoding and decoding, it would seem that the narratives have not been encoded in such a way as to draw attention to these tensions and contradictions. Ultimately, they are encoded in order that we believe in them, requiring us to make the leap when one form of 'travel object' is rotated for another and gloss of the inconsistencies that are revealed mid-cycle.

Whilst this analysis is revealing of the dynamic interchange between these different representational strands, Lau's work enables us to consider how these strands constitute markers of authenticity in each text. On a representational level O'Hanlon's description, for example, of meeting Bobe, a village elder, in *Congo Journey* indicates something about the ways in which he has chosen to portray his engagement with [an]other. Over and above the power relations of such an account, it is clear that – to use MacCannell's terminology – O'Hanlon is taking us 'back stage'. Of course, as readers of travel writing the real 'back stage' alludes us, in its place we encounter representations of 'travel objects' which we must place trust in in order to accept such narratives as 'truthful'. Though borne out of a different discipline and applied to tourist behavior, Lau's development of the concept of object authenticity is particularly relevant here. This paper has sought to show that Lau's work provides a framework for classifying different forms of authenticity that can be applied to travel writing. Whereas the tourist must have a degree of knowledge in order to know when they are having an object authentic experience, in seeking to establish markers of authenticity, O'Hanlon has to show his expertise (knowledge) in order for the reader to believe in them. In doing so, the reader is then able to engage with a textual object-authentic experience – O'Hanlon has supplied the knowledge and in effect taken us 'there' so we feel we have had an object-authentic experience and we, ultimately, know his account is true.

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