

# Literary Review

## Blazing Sidesaddles

By Amanda Foreman

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O My America! Second Acts in a New World  
By Sara Wheeler (Jonathan Cape, 267pp, £18.99)

Sara Wheeler is a travel writer best known for her writings on the two coldest places on earth: the North and South Poles. For this book she chose an altogether different route, taking a leisurely stroll through the 19th century in the more temperate clime of the United States. *O My America!* is a collection of essays about six remarkable women who explored the country when it was still a half-tamed wilderness.

It is difficult to imagine, now, quite how much grit and courage it took for a woman to defy Victorian convention and travel on her own, let alone to places where there were none of the protections or comforts of 'modern' life. If some of



An American caricature of Fanny Trollope, 1832

the women profiled by Wheeler come across as a little odd, they probably were. Only one of her choices enjoyed a conventional marriage; the rest were widowed, separated or spinsters. They were socially unmoored and often financially insecure, and foreign travel beckoned to them as both an escape from Britain and a bold attempt at self-realisation.

The book begins in the late 1820s with Fanny Trollope (mother of Anthony), who made an abortive attempt to start a commercial bazaar in Cincinnati, selling expensive knick-knacks to pork merchants' wives. Undeterred, she turned her failure into a best-selling diatribe about the crass commercialism of the New World called *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Wheeler rounds off *O My America!* a half-century later with the American adventure of another literary relative, Jane Austen's niece Catherine Hubback, who produced a finished version of Austen's outline for *The Watsons*. The four women who fill in the intervening years are an intriguing mix of types. There is the famous actress Fanny Kemble; the darlings of academia the reformer and social commentator Harriet Martineau and the professional

travel writer Isabella Bird; and a more obscure witness, Rebecca Burlend, a British emigrant whose letters home bear eloquent testimony to the fortitude of those early pioneers.

Wheeler links the six narratives with accounts of her own travels to some of the places that the women visited. Disappointingly, at a mere 250-odd pages, there is not enough room for her to do more than throw in a casual aside or personal anecdote at odd intervals. Readers seeking the same rich, soaring prose found in her *Evia* or *The Magnetic North* may wonder why she has kept it under wraps here. Wheeler's travel writing sings with her poetic affinity for nature. Surely America deserved more than a few lines here and there. On the other hand, historians and devotees of biography may well be mystified by some of Wheeler's interjections. *Punch* magazine's mock-horrified response to Isabella Bird's surprise election as a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society earns the rebuke: 'Tongue in cheek? More head up arse.' Since *Punch* was being contumelious in order to poke fun at the various heads-up-arses in society (a not uncommon practice of the magazine), it seems a shame to take such umbrage. The tension between stream-of-consciousness and narrative history is never fully resolved in the book.

All the women in *O My America!* deserve their place in Wheeler's pantheon of intrepid travellers, but Fanny Trollope stands out as the most important, if only because her reputation has suffered so unfairly at the hands of her detractors. They happen to be legion, not least because *Domestic Manners* skewered the Americans in a way that was both witty and, at times, insightful. Her book caused such affront in the United States that she single-handedly set back Anglo-American relations for almost a generation. When Anthony Trollope published his own travelogue *North America* in 1862, he wrote in the preface that he was trying to undo his mother's damage and 'mitigate the soreness ... between two nations which ought to love each other'. He dismissed her work as 'essentially a woman's book', meaning it was politically idiosyncratic and socially inconsequential.

Today, it is precisely for this reason that Fanny's book is worth reading. She provides us with an unencumbered window into Victorian life as she found it. She was a mother who buried three of her seven children, a wife whose life was immiserated by marriage, an entrepreneur whose dreams were crushed by market forces, and a writer who wrote not for art's sake but because no other income-generating avenue was open to a woman of her class and background. America both appalled and thrilled her. Fanny grasped that a great social experiment was under way, but she longed for old-fashioned English deference and harboured severe doubts over the hypocrisy that infected the project: 'You will see them with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty, and with the other flogging their slaves.'

*Domestic Manners* marked the beginning of Fanny's writing career and the partial redemption of the family's ever-precarious finances. The author of 41 books, her greatest contribution still waits to be properly acknowledged: a novel on slavery, *The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw*, that strongly influenced Harriet Beecher Stowe's more famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Yet if Fanny Trollope holds centre stage of the book, it is Rebecca Burlend's story that brings out the best in Wheeler's writing. Burlend's memoir is freely available in digital form on the Internet, but it takes a special skill to bring her experiences alive for the modern reader. Rebecca emigrated with her husband and children from Leeds to Illinois in 1831. During Christmas that year they took possession of an eighty-acre farm that included a spring, four hundred maple trees and a simple log cabin. The next two years were a desperate fight for

survival. In Wheeler's evocative description: 'When the Illinois torrents died to a soft, dripping rain, sky and land turned a dark smoke colour and came together like two waves.' The Burlends did eventually succeed in making peace with the land and went on to prosper. Touchingly, Wheeler includes a photograph of one of their descendants, who lives not far from the original homestead. There is a popular saying about Ginger Rogers that she 'did everything that Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels.' Something similar could be said about the women in *O My America!*: they explored it all while walking on tiptoes and wearing a crinoline barrel.