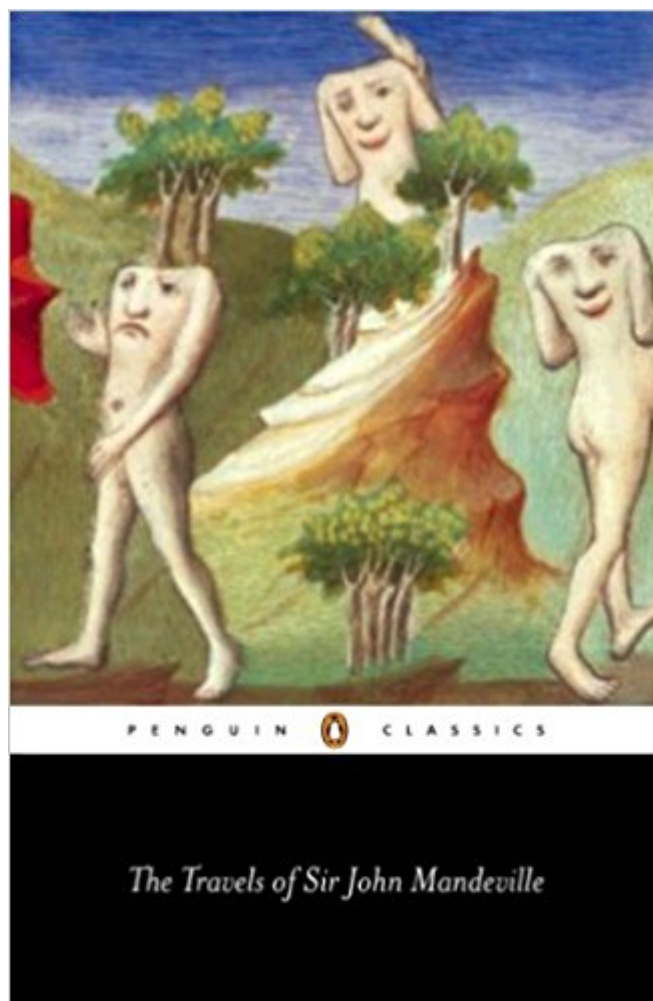


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The Travels Of Sir John Mandeville (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Ostensibly written by an English knight, the Travels purport to relate his experiences in the Holy Land, Egypt, India and China. Mandeville claims to have served in the Great Khan's army, and to have travelled in 'the lands beyond' - countries populated by dog-headed men, cannibals, and Pygmies. Although Marco Polo's slightly earlier narrative ultimately proved more factually accurate, Mandeville's was widely known, used by Columbus, Leonardo da Vinci and Martin Frobisher, and inspiring writers as diverse as Swift, Defoe and Coleridge. This intriguing blend of fact, exaggeration and absurdity offers both fascinating insight into and subtle criticism of fourteenth-century conceptions of the world. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

By the standards of the 14th century, the writing style of the man who called himself Sir John Mandeville is so informal as to be nearly chummy: "He who wants to pass over the sea to Jerusalem, may go by many ways, both by sea and by land depending on the countries he comes

from; many ways come to a single end. But do not think I shall tell of all the towns and cities and castles that men shall go by, for then I must make too long a tale of it." Historians remain skeptical as to whether the author really did journey to the Holy Land and Egypt, or hire himself out as a soldier to the Great Khan of China. Whatever the case, it is indisputable that he is one of the first modern travel writers, as we have come to know the genre, and that his book was considered authoritative in matters geographical throughout Europe--consulted by Leonardo da Vinci and Christopher Columbus alike. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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The question of whether Mandeville really did travel to these places or whether he even existed, is, from a literary perspective, inconsequential. As the wonderful introduction by C.W.R.D. Moseley put it, if Mandeville didn't actually do any traveling, that only increases his literary value. But really, *The Travels* needs little aid when it comes to value. As a piece of literature, it is easily the best travel book to come out of the Middle Ages, saving perhaps the history of Marco Polo's travels. I could probably go so far as to include the eras following the Middle Ages, but having read very few travelogues from anything beyond the Middle Ages, I'm reluctant to do so. As a historical document, its importance is again, far reaching and cannot be over-stressed. Even after much of the more fantastical elements were winked at, the more serious notions were considered of great value by explorers. Now, like all travelogues I've ever read--fictional and non--it is hit or miss. The parts in which he is essentially naming city after city, monument after monument, and people after people in rapid succession is "unentertaining" to say the least. To a modern reader, it's relatively useless outside of academia. But his stories and asides are what bring the book to life. I never recommend a reader skip any part of a book--at least upon the first read--but especially not in a piece like this. Just when you think he's giving you another list that's just like the ones that came before, he'll throw in a little story or an aside that captures your attention and imagination. There's whole literatures bound up in some of his sentence long comments and stories. I'm still fascinated by the story he gave of a man who traveled farther and farther, seeing wonders increasingly great, until, the greatest wonder of all, he found an island where they spoke his native language; but due to lack of supplies, he was forced to turn back. While this story of an explorer's circumnavigation of the globe is unlikely to be true, its poetical value far outweighs any value we could derive from the truth of it. A

metaphor for this book, perhaps? There is one last thing I'd like to address in this review. I've read in a couple of places that this book is full of racism and misogyny. I can't fully criticize a casual reader for not fully grasping a Medieval work, especially if they've not removed their own modern mindset--or, at least, learned somewhat about the Medieval mindset--but these claims are simply not true. *The Travels* is easily one of the most accepting and broad-thinking books I've read from the Middle Ages. For example, when he talks of the Brahmin, he discusses the notion that just because they don't hold to the Christian faith does not mean they're evil or doomed to hell, but rather takes what most would agree is a modern view, namely that "we know not whom God loves nor whom He hates." And for many of his first readers, his book may have been the first time where Muslims were not described as essentially devils in human form. In fact, the only time a "Christian" prejudice seeps into his writing is when talking about cannibalism, and I think we can all agree that it's not just Christians that have a prejudice against cannibals, even if it is unlikely that there were as many cannibals as he described. I think another reason why this has been misunderstood is that, to the casual reader, his subtle use of what we would call "sarcasm" is lost. A case in point, when he describes the burning of a man's wife at his funeral. He then briefly says that if a man does not want to, he does not have to be burned with his dead wife. There is a bite in his statement, and it was meant to have one. Of course, don't go in expecting a 21st century thinker. He was a 14th century man and you'll be hard pressed to forget that; however, even keeping that in mind, this book does show that a 14th century man was not as "unenlightened" as many would have you believe.

A glimpse into the 14th century mind-set is an adventure in time-travel - see the basis of all subsequent literature involving utopian fantasy and social satire. The introduction is masterly!

Unfortunately one is directed from the Penguin edition of the book to the kindle digital edition without a clear notice that it is not the same book. The work may be the same, but it lacks the 40 page introduction, and appendix. Also, it is not the same translation. It's a bit frustrating that the book is advertised as the penguin edition when it is not. I find it particularly odd for to do this since when one is looking at a book's preview (Look inside!) one is always told when the book shown is not the same as the one advertised if that is the case.

Sir John Mandeville was an Early-Renaissance writer of travel tales similar in content and style to his famous near-contemporary, Marco Polo. But history has judged these two men quite differently: whereas Marco Polo has become a household word, synonymous with bold explorations,

Mandeville has been largely forgotten. But it was not always so. During his lifetime, and for a couple of centuries afterwards, Mandeville was by far the more famous of the two. A copy of Mandeville - but not Polo - was in the possession of Leonardo da Vinci. More telling, about 300 manuscripts (hand-written copies) of Mandeville survive, compared to only about 70 of Polo. What accounts for Mandeville's reversals of fortune? Mandeville (or someone calling himself that) wrote his book about 1356, or shortly thereafter. Its original title was "The Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville, Knight," but is now generally known as "Travels of Sir John Mandeville." Polo's book, originally titled, "Descriptions of the World," came out about 1300. Whereas Mandeville wrote his book himself, Polo used the services of a professional writer, Rusticello, who in turn based the book on Polo's notebooks. (Mandeville is the better written.) Standards of what constitutes a historical/geographic work have greatly changed. Both books -- but especially Mandeville -- contain a fascinating pastiche of facts (often distorted), impressions, opinions, and utterly fantastic claims. Reading Mandeville today, one is left with a bewildering farrago of National Geographic and supermarket tabloids. As the Age of Exploration progressed, reliable geographic, historic, and economic data came to be more highly valued than fantastic tales. Since Polo's book was found to be the more reliable its reputation increased. Mandeville, on the other hand, came to be seen as a "teller of tall tales," a kind of Baron Munchausen. Indeed, today many historians question whether the man "Mandeville" really existed. Most believe that the person who wrote "Mandeville" never actually traveled to the places he describes, and obtained his material from other sources. He took the identity of "Sir John Mandeville" to bolster his credibility. (Recently there have been attempts to "rehabilitate" Mandeville.) What is their relevance today? Except in a narrow historical context, I would say that Mandeville is definitely the more interesting. What Mandeville lacks in historic and geographic accuracy, he more than makes up by his insight into what continually fascinates mankind - both then and now. A considerable portion of Mandeville can be fairly equated to today's Elvis sightings, or to the woman from Ohio who has the spaceman's baby. We are too immersed in our contemporary world to clearly see what is behind such phenomena; but looking back at Mandeville's world our vision greatly improves. Consider: Mandeville tells of a society in which women often have snakes in their ...uhm...private parts. In order to protect themselves their men hire the services of professional "testers." As absurd as this all sounds, could Mandeville actually be describing some venereal disease? Another example: could the various human monstrosities described by Mandeville (people with dog's heads, etc.) have modern counterparts in television's Star Trek? The Penguin book would be improved by additional maps and illustrations -- unfortunately this would increase the cost.

I have to be honest and say that I had never heard of this work, at least so far as I can recall, until I found a used copy of it in the bookshelves of my local Goodwill. But I'm very happy that I found it! The text is fascinating in its own right as it presents us with the perspective of an Englishman of the 14th century looking at, examining, and perhaps actually exploring the wider world around him, including a great diversity of cultures and geographic locations. This makes it interesting as both a historical work -- a real firsthand perspective that touches on these interesting topics -- and also a study in psychology and sociology, as we view his views of these various cultures. The work is, as I learned through the introduction and notes which accompany this addition, also important for the effect it had on European thought in the years leading up to and somewhat after the discovery of the Americas by Europeans. I recommend this book to those with a love for history and culture.

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