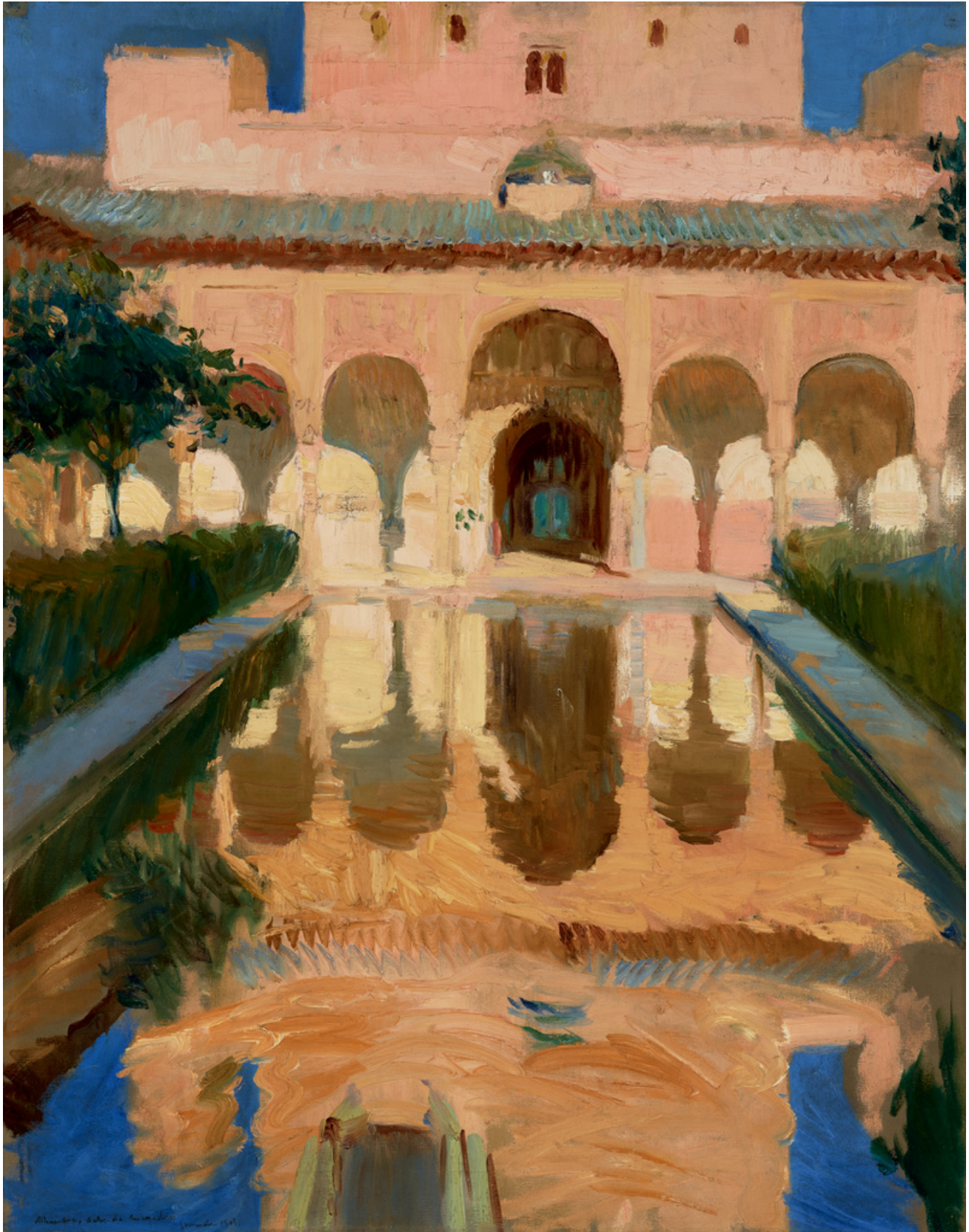


Faraway Places

by [James Como](#) (April 2020)



Hall of the Ambassadors, Alhambra, Granada, Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, 1909

Some went off to sea in ships, plied their trade on the deep waters. They saw the works of the Lord, the wonders of God in the deep.

—Ps 107.23-24

Many readers know the rest of the story, that even though it ends well— “the waves of the sea were stilled” —it was rough-going until then. And these were no tourists. One of my oldest and dearest friends is also among the most intelligent people I’ve ever known, and widely read. Yet, though he has taught me much, he also baffles me. “I have no interest in travel—don’t see the point of it,” he once declared. I’m certain he knows Psalm 107, but risk would not faze this man. And he is *not* complaining about not getting bang for the buck. It’s simply that, for him, there is no bang ‘there’.

On the other hand, I have always felt the allure of strange places. Even before discovering Narnia (dispositive) I was at home in Burroughs’ Pellucidar and Pal-ul-Don. I couldn’t wait to dive into Alice’s rabbit hole, cross the mountain pass into Shangri-la, meet Jansson’s Moomins, and eventually travel (many times) with Odysseus. No, I did not want to visit Kafka’s castle or Abbott’s Flatland or even Oz (though that remains borderline), but I wouldn’t mind touring the great heap that is Gormenghast, or pricking upon the plain with the Red Cross Knight, or spending a century or so in Helprin’s Kingdom Far and Clear.

Speaking strictly, I don't much like traveling *to* other places (that metaphorical, and sometimes literal, buck). But that has little to do with a strong desire to be *in* other places (the bang); I even like traveling *within* those places, especially by rail. Thereafter I like remembering those places and comparing notes with others who have been there. I even enjoy hearing and reading about places I've already visited, or haven't. So I will pay the price of *traveling to*. One motive for this is the "getting away" syndrome (as well as that of the "coming home"). But the greater motive is the attraction of foreignness in all its manifestations, as well as the palpable history of that foreignness—an identity not mine—then pondering and comparing. Generally, I would *connaitre*, rather than merely *savoir*.

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I have my blind spots, big ones. The Third World is mostly in, as is the Near East, but the Far East is not. I would visit the ragged Balkans; the whole of the sweet rim of the Mediterranean; Europe wide, deep, and thick; the summoning lakes and veldts of East Africa; and the mystifying sites of ancient South American cultures. But the Stans, India, China, Japan, and further on and south I have no desire to *travel to*. Perhaps my friend sees the whole world as I see the Far East. Neither taste is defensible but, then again, neither needs a defense: *de gustibus* . . . I'll see movies showing those places, and recommend some, like the little known, *Mongol*, about the early life of Genghis Khan: thrilling, expansive; and they sure could ride horses. But why visit metropolitan

Ulaanbaatar, no longer remote and so European in its high-rises and traffic?

And we have our books, for example *The Book of the Marvels of the World*, better known as *The Travels of Marco Polo* (1298-1299), actually a collaboration between the explorer and the writer, and cellmate in Genoa, Rustichello da Pisa. The book soon existed in six versions, corresponding to different languages and dialects (e.g. Franco-Venetian, Old French, Latin). But what matters, I think, is that it was at first mocked as “the book of a million lies,” a play on Marco’s nickname ‘Emilione’, but subsequently substantiated—largely, that is. Marco was relentlessly attentive and curious. “The [great ladies of Badashan] all wear drawers made of cotton cloth,, and into the making of these some will put . . . even 100 ells of stuff . . . to make themselves look large in the hips, for the men . . . think that to be a great beauty in a woman.” He would live and serve as a foreign emissary for nearly two decades in the court of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis.

At some point I came upon Hakluyt’s *Voyages (The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, 1598-1600)*. Apparently useful to Shakespeare, this book was also indispensable to English commerce and colonization, for Hakluyt was no Mandeville; rather he was an intellectually serious anthologist whose work was so meticulous that mariners were able to navigate the more safely and efficiently for having read it. He documents voyages by Cabot to the Caribbean (under Henry VII, whom Columbus approached before Isabella), John Eversham to Egypt (“there is a castle wherein is the house that Pharaoh’s wives were kept . . .”), John Davis (searching for a Northwest Passage, the account written by a merchant), and very much more. No mariner

himself, Hakluyt inspired others to go down to the sea in ships and in so doing had a hand in changing the world.

These days the great Jan Morris (now in her nineties) has taken us around—and into—the world all by herself. (See her exemplary *The Matter of Wales: Epic Views of a Small Country*, 1985, as close to an actual visit as any book I know). And our enormous travel bibliography is the more expansive for its letters, more often than not engaging—sometimes portentous.

Somewhere near Fiji

November 15 (?), 1913

Dear Eddie . . . you think of me in a loin cloth, brown and wild in the fair chocolate arms of a Tahitian beauty . . . reclining beneath a breadfruit tree, on white sand . . . and strange beautiful fish darting . . . Oh, Eddie, it's all true about the South Seas . . . heaven on earth, the ideal life, little work, dancing and singing and eating, naked people of incredible loveliness, perfect manners, and immense kindness . . . and intoxicating beauty of scenery. . . . The Samoan girls have incredibly beautiful bodies and walk like goddesses. . .

Thy, Rupert

(Brooke, d.1915, Gallipoli)

. . . at once evocative and sad, and informative; it tells us

something more about a man we know *of* in a different light.

Very different is this, which I find almost useless. Phillips Brooks, "Late Bishop of Massachusetts," wrote *Letters of Travel*. Reporting on two year-long trips (1865-66, 1882-83), they were published in 1893. Included are letters from dozens of places, (e.g. Nazareth, Berlin, Florence), and this, from the Alhambra:

The Alhambra joins on remarkably to the remembrances of India [!]. Here is the farthest west, as there is the farthest east, of the Mohammedan conquests, and Granada and Delhi have very much; in common. . . . Granada is the more beautiful, for here is the Sierra Nevada . . . in view all the time, and the best parts of the Alhambra beat anything in the old city of the Moguls. Still, I like to stand by India.

Well, I know the Alhambra, the Alhambra is my friend, and, believe me, Delhi, you are no Alhambra, which I confidently assert even though I have never been to India.

Granada. "I've fallen under your spell. If you could speak, what a fascinating tale you could tell." No. no, not that. This:

Granada, tierra soñada por mí,

Mi cantar se vuelve gitano

Cuando es para ti.

Mi cantar hecho de fantasía,
Mi cantar flor de melancolía
Que yo te vengo a dar.

– ‘dreamt’ ‘gypsy’, ‘fantasy’, ‘melancholy’: the place weaves the spell promised by the song. I’ve visited twice. Virtually alone, nearly fifty years ago, as Alexandra and I stood in the Alhambra, I was undone. I said, “I want to live here. Right here.” If you’ve read C. S. Lewis’s *Magician’s Nephew* you will have some idea of the effect. Recall the chapter entitled “The Wood Between the Worlds,” where visitors, forgetting even that there is another world, will want to remain, unless they leave immediately.

Such a spell was unknown to most of the Muslim empires (the plural matters) stretching from Kabul to the Pyrenees. Aesthetic allure did not seem to matter to the greatest conqueror, utterly indiscriminate in his slaughter of Muslim and infidel alike: the late-fourteenth century Tumor, who loved Samarkand “as an old man loves a young mistress.” His prowess was unmatched. With his lameness he would become Tamburlaine the Great. But he cast no spell. That special allure is from Al Andalus. There the glorious caliphate of Cordoba ended in 1031, but the regional aesthetic would flourish in Granada and Sevilla, where that caliphate gave us the Alhambra, the magnificent palace that gave us Washington Irving’s enchanting *Tales of the Alhambra* 1832).

Irving (1783-1859) had learned Spanish so he could read Cervantes in the original; later he would be our ambassador to Spain. His love for the country was deep and wide, especially

for Andalucía. Before his *Tales* he gave us *The Conquest of Granada* (1829). There he describes Granada as a city of seventy thousand, with fruit trees, fountains, and houses with gardens and interior courts ranging above each other on the sides of the hills, framed against the Sierra Nevada. The Alhambra was on a very high hill,

a royal palace and warrior castle, capable of containing . . . forty thousand men, but possessing also its harem, the voluptuous abode of the Moorish monarch, laid out with courts and gardens, fountains and baths, and stately halls decorated in the most costly style of Oriental luxury . . . Such was its splendor that even at the present day the stranger, wandering through its silent courts and deserted halls, gazes with astonishment at gilded ceilings and fretted domes, the brilliancy and beauty of which have survived the vicissitudes of war and the silent dilapidation of ages.

My own memories are of coolness and the purity of the long shallow pool stretching the length of the patio of the *arrayanes* (myrtle), the delicate complexity of the arches and architraves, and the vista below—a quite beautiful, but *lower*, domain.

While there, nearly fifty years ago, I read many of the *Tales*. The first six chapters—all chapters are leisurely—are historical and descriptive. The seventh introduces us to “The Inhabitants of the Alhambra,” which begins,

I have often observed that the more proudly a mansion

has been tenanted in the day of its prosperity, the humbler are its inhabitants in the day of its decline, and that the palace of a king commonly ends in it being the nestling-place of the beggar.

For example the old lady Maria Antonia Sabonea, the Cockle-Queen, who sits in an open closet under an outer staircase. She sings, sews, tells jokes and weaves a spell with her story-telling. No one knows her origin; she may be a fairy. "That there may be some fairy gift . . . would appear from her extraordinary luck, since, notwithstanding her being very little, very ugly, and very poor, she has had, according to her own account, five husbands and half, reckoning as a half one a young dragoon, who died during courtship."

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Other chapters deal with "The Mysterious Chambers," "The Truant," "The Legend of Prince Ahmed," "Poets and Poetry of Andalus," "The Legend of the Enchanted Soldier," and "Spanish Romance"— forty-eight chapters in all. I re-visited many of them in anticipation of our trip to Granada and Seville. I began writing this even before our anticipated departure. But the prospect of being quarantined in a hotel stirred as much imaginary misery as being struck by the virus. Alas: I caved; we cancelled. "We've visited twice; we will again. Adults know to delay gratification." Which is all fine . . .

. . . if you're an adult. In graduate school I accompanied Sir John Mandeville on his *Travels* (c.1356 and a sensation). I read the prologue, in which the author listed the places he had visited (from Chaldea to Amazonia), adding "where dwell many divers folks of divers manners and laws and of divers shapes of men." That was enough for me: I dove in directly, *in medias res*. I had not read the scholarly introduction or any of the notes, so did not know—though I very soon learned—that the whole of it is a hoax, from "Hippocrates' Daughter," to "Polombe" (the well of which restores both health and youth), on to the "Anthropophagi and Men Whose Heads Do Grow Beneath Their Shoulders." But close before that was "The Earth Is Round" (intended as another hoax?), telling how "a worthy man departed once from our countries . . . He had gone so long by land and by sea that he had encircled all the earth, so that . . . going around, he had come again unto his own frontiers."

Of all the travel writers, always with the exception of Irving, I prefer the fantasist Mandeville, who first gave momentum to modern travel literature. So I will sit with Sir John, even as I continue to wander through the *Tales*, for, as it happens, there will be, for us, no Parador de Granada, right there *inside* the Alhambra, at least not for the duration.

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