

America Life in the 19th Century: Unabridged Travel Accounts by Audubon, Olmsted, and Twain

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John James Audubon is best known as an artist, but he was also a major writer, and his accounts of American life in the Middle West from c. 1810-1835 are astonishingly vivid. **Frederick Law Olmsted** is best known as a landscape architect, but no one travelled more widely and wrote more incisively about the American South in the 1850s. **Mark Twain** is best known as a humorist, but his records of life along the Mississippi River and in the West are classic accounts of two eras of American history and two major areas of the United States.

Audubon, Olmsted, and Twain provided comparable accounts in that all three were similarly brilliant, well informed, and excellent writers. **Audubon** and **Olmsted** wrote like novelists, and **Twain** was as good at non-fiction as fiction. Taken together, their travel accounts provide what is probably the best possible panorama of American Life in the 19th Century. At least four volumes of their best works deserve to be read in chronological order by everyone interested in how Americans became a distinctive people.

Audubon

In search of birds, **Audubon** travelled throughout the eastern half of the United States during the early decades of the 19th Century. From 1827-1838 he published 435 plates in his *Birds of America*, and to accompany his depictions of birds, from 1831-1839 he wrote and published five volumes entitled *Ornithological Biographies of American Birds*. To add interest to his scientific descriptions, he included occasional "delineations of American scenery," and these episodes portray what the life of early settlers was like on the Ohio and other branches of the Mississippi River.

Audubon's accounts are all the more extraordinary considering that English was not his native language. He came to the United States from France to avoid conscription during the Napoleonic Wars, to make his way in life, and to learn English. While living on the Ohio, he became an American frontiersman and taught himself how to depict birds better than anyone ever had, and he learned to write extremely well. He kept detailed journals of his extensive travels, and they served as the basis for his accounts of birds and other types of animals and of his experiences travelling in the area of the Louisiana Purchase.

Audubon's *Delineations* were published together for the first time in 1897 along with selections from his surviving journals. A two-volume set edited by his granddaughter

Maria Rebecca Audubon contains valuable notes by the naturalist **Elliot Coues**. In 1926 the episodes were first published by themselves in a volume entitled *Delineations of American Scenery* that was edited by his biographer **Francis Hobart Herrick**. Recently published collections of **Audubon's** writings have enhanced his reputation as a writer, but he also deserves to be considered a historian for his important record of a way of life that disappeared during his lifetime. Altogether, **Audubon** published 59 essays (including "My Style of Drawing Birds," which was only in his granddaughter's reprint, and "Merchant of Savannah," which was only in **Herrick's** reprint, but excluding the "Moose Hunt," which as **Audubon** noted later was contributed by another writer). His essays were published in random order, but most are dated, and the ones which are not can, in many cases, be assigned approximate dates. In chronological order, they provide an excellent overview of how the Midwest developed and changed.

Olmsted

Before becoming America's first landscape architect, **Olmsted** was a writer, and before becoming a writer, he was a farmer. His first book was about a walking tour through southwest Britain in search of ways to improve American farming. During this trip, he was especially impressed by English landscape design, and he recorded much information about the lives of English and Welsh farmers. He and others spent four weeks travelling in 1850, and his book was published in 1852. His first book is primarily important for what it tells about him and for having led to his series on the South. His later books were much better, and they form a separate and coherent whole.

In 1852 **Olmsted** was hired by a New York newspaper to travel in the American South and record his impressions of a slave society. During a relatively short period of about three months, he travelled through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana. Afterwards, he spent additional months doing research on history and economy of the South and prepared a series of articles that appeared in the *New-York Daily Times* during 1853 and 1854. These articles were published in book form in 1856 as *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on Their Economy* (with the half title "Our Slave States"). It is widely regarded as the best single book that reflects all levels of society shortly before the end of the Ante-Bel-

lum period in the South. It consists largely of incidents he considered characteristic of the South as a whole. He recorded numerous conversations with the skill of a novelist. Although sometimes misleading, he attempted to be accurate and fair, and his book had immense impact.

In 1853, while **Olmsted's** first book on the South was being serialized, he travelled throughout the newly created State of Texas with his brother, **Dr. J. H. Olmsted**. His account includes an especially memorable description of the state's leaders and capitol. His second series of articles appeared in the renamed *New York Times* in 1854 and in book form in 1857 with the title *A Journey Through Texas; or, a Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier: with a Statistical Appendix*. By this time, **Olmsted** was preoccupied by the design and execution of Central Park in New York, and his brother edited the book.

In his first book about the South, **Olmsted** had travelled through areas that consisted mainly of plantations. In the third book in the series, he travelled through the piedmont and recorded life mainly on farms. After leaving Texas in 1854, he went by horseback from Mississippi to Virginia, a trip that took more than three months. A series of ten articles was published in the *New York Tribune* in 1857, and they were issued in book form in 1860 as *A Journey in the Back Country*.

Olmsted's trilogy covered every part of the South and every level of its society, and it recorded direct testimony by slaves, farmers, planters, merchants, and politicians. It provides unparalleled insight into ways of life that soon afterwards ceased to exist.

In 1861 about half of the text of **Olmsted's** three volumes on the South was published as *The Cotton Kingdom: a Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*. Since so much was omitted and since **Olmsted** did not make the selection, a better idea of the South can be gained by reading all of *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* than by reading the *Cotton Kingdom*. Since the three volumes were written as a set and contain much that the others lack, all three deserve to be read in their entirety.

Olmsted wrote relatively little about urban life in the South, but his account of Richmond is memorable, and the contrasts he makes with life in Northern cities are telling. When he got to Charleston, for example, he noted only that it had been written about too often to need further discussion. He provided some good information about cities of the East Coast, as **Twain** did about the West Coast, but numerous European travellers such as **Charles Lyell** left better accounts of American cities. However,

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life in American cities was less distinctively American than in the rest of the country.

Twain

Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) recorded the main events of his life from the 1850s through the 1870s in two of his greatest books: *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *Roughing It* (1872). In *Life on the Mississippi*, he provides an autobiographical account that is highly selective and much embellished, but it vividly records what it was like to learn to be a riverboat pilot in the Antebellum South and travel along the river that unified the country. On his first voyage up the river, he had to roll more than a thousand miles of scenery up in his head, and when he was ready to return, he learned that the river looked entirely different travelling in the opposite direction. When the War Between the States interrupted commercial traffic on the Mississippi, **Twain** went west.

Roughing It records **Twain's** seven-year "pleasure trip" in Nevada, California, and Hawaii. He almost became rich through silver mining, lost everything, and turned to journalism to make a living. His travels to Hawaii were written for serialized publication in the *Sacramento Union* in 1866. All of the articles did not appear in book form until 1947.

Twain wrote five volumes of travel and description, two of which were about European travel from the American point of view written with an American sense of humor that he single-handedly created. *His Tramp Abroad* (1880) is as good as *Roughing It*, but his *Innocents Abroad* (1869) and *Following the Equator* (1879) were acknowledged pot-boilers. More can be learned about American life in the 19th Century by reading *Huckle-*

berry Finn than by reading most of his travel accounts, but his books on the Mississippi and West are among the best books he ever wrote (including *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*).

Conclusion

Travellers were more likely to record what residents took for granted. The finest American travel accounts reflect what life was like in the 19th Century better than any other type of writing. Most travel accounts were biased, and few bring the past to life, but the writing of **Audubon**, **Olmsted**, and **Twain** are exceptional for their accuracy, insight, and vividness.

Every library needs complete editions of the six titles that best represent the United States in the 19th Century: **Audubon's** *Delineations*, **Olmsted's** trilogy, and **Twain's** *Mississippi* and *Roughing It*. A publishing opportunity exists to make available a set of facsimiles of all six volumes (similar to those that **Oxford, New York**, has provided of first editions of **Twain's** works).

Ideally, **Olmsted's** original articles should be printed with notes limited to any new material that he added to his books. **Audubon's** episodes should be rearranged as nearly as possible in chronological order. No introductions or explanatory notes are needed, and none should be included. History should be allowed to speak for itself, and selections invariably distort an author's intentions. Readers should have the chance to come to their own conclusions on the basis of what authors actually wrote.

Every college student should read all six volumes to understand how Americans came to be as they are. Unabridged primary sources such as these should be the basis for a college education rather than textbooks. 🌻