

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

These extracts are from personal letters the art critic and social commentator John Ruskin wrote to friends and family. Here he is concerned about how new modes of travel have disconnected us from the landscape and from our own bodies.

Extracts from John Ruskin's Letters about Modern Travel

To Dr John Brown

PISA, June 27th, 1846.

[...] I wish you would let me know why, of all things in the world, you should differ with me
5 upon railroads; I am quite at a loss to conjecture what can be said in their defence; granting
that their effect on natural scenery is trivial, that their interference with the rest and character
of rural life is of no moment, and that sometimes the power of rapid locomotion may be of
much service to us or save us from some bitter pain or accident which our absence at the
moment must have involved, yet the general effect of them is to render all the time that we
10 pass in locomotion the same, except in feverishness, as that passed at home, and to enable
us to get over ground which formerly conveyed to us a thousand various ideas, and the
examination of which was fertile in lessons of the most interesting kind, while we read a
page of the morning paper. One traveller is now the same as another: it matters not whether
you have eyes or are asleep or blind, intelligent or dull, all that you can know, at best, of the
15 country you pass is its geological structure and general clothing; your study of humanity is
limited to stokers* and policemen at the stations, and of animal life to the various
arrangements of black and brown dots on chessboard-looking fields. I can safely say that my
only profitable travelling has been on foot, and that I think it admits of much doubt whether
not only railroads but even carriages and horses, except for rich people or conveyance of
20 letters and merchandise, be not inventions of the Evil one. How much of the indolence*, ill-
health, discomfort, thoughtlessness, selfishness, sin, and misery of this life do you suppose
may be ultimately referable altogether to the invention of those two articles alone, the
carriage and the *bridle*? I am not jesting. Think of it and tell me, believing me always very
gratefully yours,

25 THE AUTHOR OF "MODERN PAINTERS."

To his MOTHER

KESWICK, 1st August, 1867.

It was fine yesterday, and I took a light carriage, and drove with Downs up Borrowdale, and
30 round under Honistar Crag to Buttermere—and played a little while at the edge of the same
stream which I got scolded for dabbling in till I was too late for dinner, when I was a boy. [...] We
came home through the Vale of Newlands. Both passes were higher and grander than I
expected; but driving a long way through moors is duller than walking, for at least in walking
one has to look where one is going, and that is amusing.

35 To his FATHER

HARRISTOWN, Thursday Morning [August 29 1861].

I hope you received the telegram rightly; it was sent from Dublin a little after seven, with some difficulty, Crawley having to return two miles to another station across the town. I had what people would call a beautiful passage—that is to say, an entirely dull one—in huge
40 steamer. I had no idea of the disagreeableness of these large boats. Their enormous fires vomiting volcanofuls of smoke continually through two funnels nearly as big as railway tunnels; the colossal power of the engines making everything else subordinate to it, so that the feeling is not of being in a boat at all, but on a timber framework surrounding a fearful engine which is crushing the sea—roaring and storming its way along; the want of all healthy
45 wave motion, and the substitution for it merely of a continual sense of giddiness, which makes one fancy one's legs or head are failing somehow; the whole bow of the boat planked over, not a deck, but a roof, so, the top of which is forbidden to passengers, so that one can't go near the head of the boat; the huge saloons, and perpetual draught through all of them, caused by boat's railway speed—make the whole thing the most disagreeable floating
50 contrivance imaginable. It went over in four hours.

Glossary

* stoker – man who shovelled coal into the steam engine's firebox to keep it running. Sometimes called 'fireman' or 'boilerman'.

* indolence – laziness

These extracts are from Volumes 36 and 37 of *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. The full text of Ruskin's letters can be found online at <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/depts/ruskinlib/Letters> on pages 61-62, 532 and 382-3 respectively.

This resource is brought to you by the Diseases of Modern Life project at the University of Oxford, which is supported by the [European Research Council](#) under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 340121.