

The Life and Works of Robert Wood

Classicist and Traveller (1717-1771)

Rachel Finnegan and Lynda Mulvin

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Foreword

To have been invited to place a few thoughts at the beginning of this book is an honour. Dr Finnegan's scholarly life has been watched by me with admiration for almost four decades. Her firm grounding in Greek and Roman studies in Trinity College Dublin and at Maynooth was supplemented with a sojourn in Greece.

Over the years she has acquired a diverse knowledge of members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy of the 18th century and in consequence has written about those of them who travelled to Greece, the Levant, and Egypt. The Mulvin family has also been devoted to antiquarian and architectural scholarship: Dr Lynda Mulvin is well known in Ireland and beyond for her studies in Graeco-Roman archaeology and she has exercised exemplary skill in cataloguing objects, large and small. The present book has thus become a happy combination of their special abilities.

The greatest merit of the book is to be seen in the presentation and discussion of hitherto unpublished primary testimonies. The manuscripts of Wood and his friends have not been neglected by architectural historians concerned with Baalbek and Palmyra, but Hellenists may have been less diligent in contemplating the significance of Wood in the chronicles of Homeric studies. His determination to link parts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to landscapes (notably in the Troad and Ionia) and to the coastland of Egypt deserve respectful attention. Furthermore, his reflections upon the powers of memory in illiterate reciters of poems indicate that some epics may well have been fixed – for social or other reasons – in speech for some time before they were fixed in writing. It remains true, as Wood perceived, that ‘... in a rude and unlettered state of society the memory is loaded with nothing that is useless or unintelligible’ Let us bear in mind that the Muses are daughters of Mnemosyne.

I hope that this enlightening work will prompt the making of an annotated facsimile reprint of *The Original Genius of Homer*.

G.L. Huxley

17. x. 2021.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to:

Terence (Terry) Edward Beechey, architect
(1939-2016), father of Rachel Finnegan

Niall McCullough (1958-2021), architect and author,
brother-in-law of Lynda Mulvin

Introduction

On the 250th anniversary of his death in 1771, this volume reviews the life and writings of an extraordinary Irishman Robert Wood (1716/17-1771), occasionally mistaken for an Englishman,¹ whose travels in the Middle East and subsequent pioneering books on the classical sites of Palmyra and Baalbek, together with his inspirational study on the poetry and geography of Homer, were celebrated during his lifetime and recorded on his sumptuous epitaph, and whose influence has continued to survive into the 21st century. There are numerous minor biographical accounts that appear either in dictionaries or encyclopaedias, or as introductory elements to various aspects of Wood's extensive achievements. However, he shares the fate of many eighteenth-century travellers and scholars of this type, in that he has never been the primary subject of a book, thus leaving him a somewhat obscure figure in literary history. In particular, the sources for his travels and writings have been given relatively little attention. The present volume attempts to address this lacuna and to provide the general reader with a study that can be regarded as a source book for the fascinating life and career of a much-neglected figure in the realm of Irish eighteenth-century travels and antiquarianism.

Chapter 1 briefly sets the context of eighteenth-century travels to the east. It outlines some of the motives for British travellers undertaking the eastern voyage and considers the interest in the east, in terms of the popularity of eastern travel literature, the role of learned societies and academies, and the western view of the east.

Chapter 2 considers the sources. Part 1 examines the primary (manuscript) sources emanating from Wood's own eastern voyages (1742-1743 and 1750-1751), in the form of the surviving diaries, notebooks and journals kept by him and the other members of his travelling party. These were James Dawkins (1722-1757), John Bouverie (1722-1750), and Giovanni Battista Borra (1713-1770). They are further discussed in Chapter 3, in relation to the particular part they played in the production of Wood's three books. Part 2 examines the relevant literary sources that may have been available to Robert Wood before he undertook his first eastern voyage, as well those with which he was definitely familiar, as they are mentioned in his memoirs and published accounts; and Part 3 considers additional sources that he consulted for his second voyage.

Chapter 3 offers an extensive and much-needed biographical account of Robert Wood, the sources for whose early years, especially in Ireland, are particularly scarce, but for whom they become more plentiful for the period after he had completed his formal education and begun to make a career in public life. The chapter ends with an account of certain posthumous matters, including Wood's will, the Chancery court

¹ Sir J.L. Myres, for example, twice refers to him as English in his book on Homer. See *Homer and His Critics*, edited by Dorothea Gray (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958), pp. 59 and 66.

case taken against his widow, and the arrangements she made to have a suitable tomb and epitaph made for her late husband, and to publish his third book.

Where appropriate, the text refers to the Irish contribution to eastern travel history, with particular reference to prominent members of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, including William Ponsonby, 2nd Earl of Bessborough (1704-1793) and James Caulfeild, 1st Earl Charlemont (1728-1799), both of whose travels in the east were roughly contemporaneous with Wood's first eastern voyage. Joseph Leeson (1711-1783), later 1st Earl of Milltown, of Russborough House, County Wicklow, is especially important to this story, as he employed Wood as his private secretary for several years in Italy. Equally important is the English aristocrat Francis Egerton, 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, later 6th Earl of Bridgewater (1736-1803), with whom Wood was to have a lifelong relationship of patronage and friendship.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the main results of the second tour, namely, the two publications: *The Ruins of Palmyra, Otherwise Tedmor, in the Desart* (London, 1753)² and *The Ruins of Balbec, Otherwise Helipolis in Coelosyria* (London, 1757).³ These two impressive folio-sized volumes, which describe and depict the remains of the ancient archaeological sites of Palmyra, in Syria, and Baalbek, in modern-day Lebanon, were written by Wood, illustrated by Borra, and financed by Dawkins.

Chapter 6 considers the author's famous and influential study entitled *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer: with a Comparative View of the Ancient and Present State of the Troade* (London, 1775).⁴ Although this work was possibly closest to his heart, Wood failed to publish it (at least officially) in his lifetime. However, he circulated several privately printed copies to his friends and literary associates in later life and the positive responses he received from his peers must have assured him (and his wife Ann Wood, who published it posthumously) of its great literary merit.

Finally, Chapter 7 considers the enormous legacy of Robert Wood, in terms of the popularity of his books, as can be judged by the number of translations and editions through which they went; the variety and quality of portraits commissioned by his friends and associates; his contribution to the study of classical literature; his influence on architectural drawing in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe; and the cultural significance of his work on building design. The chapter ends with a reflection on the somewhat questionable nature of his works, in terms of the fact that his second voyage of the east, and the entire production of the first two books, were financed by his friend Dawkins, whose wealth derived from a slave plantation in Jamaica.

² Henceforth abbreviated to *Ruins of Palmyra*. Interestingly, 'desart' is the Irish spelling of 'desert'.

³ Henceforth abbreviated to *Ruins of Balbec*. This was Wood's spelling of Baalbek. Other contemporary writers used different spellings, such as Richard Pococke's 'Baalbeck'.

⁴ Henceforth abbreviated to *The Original Genius of Homer*. However, in Chapter 6, where the book is discussed in detail, the two distinct parts are referred to as the *Essay* and the *Comparative View*.

Note on the Spelling, Terminology and Authorship

We have retained Wood's eighteenth-century spelling of place names and given the modern name or spelling in brackets on first mention. For distances we have used miles (rather than kilometres) but for the dimensions of buildings and illustrations we have used metres and centimetres. Also, we have given a brief explanation, in brackets, after what may be regarded as uncommon architectural terminology (especially in relation to the architectural engravings); and we have given a brief identification of Homeric characters mentioned in Chapter 6.

The idea for this book originated with Rachel Finnegan, who has written the majority of the text. Lynda Mulvin has contributed material on the artistic, archaeological, and architectural aspects of Robert Wood's work in Chapters 4, 5 and 7. For reference purposes, we have included the name of the author at the end of each chapter or, in the case of co-authored chapters, at the end of major sections.

(Rachel Finnegan)