

The Blind Traveler

One might ask "Why should we care about a blind British traveler? I suppose he went on Trips. But, did he have anything to do with Dartmouth?" OK, these are good questions.

On the other hand, maybe we should observe that this gentleman might have actually been something on the order of The Second Coming of John Ledyard!

James Holman (1786 – 1857), known as the "Blind Traveler," was a British adventurer, author and social observer, best known for his writings on his extensive travels. Completely blind and suffering from debilitating pain and limited mobility, he undertook a series of solo journeys that were unprecedented both in their extent of geography and method of "human echolocation." In 1866, the journalist William Jerdan wrote that "From Marco Polo to Mungo Park, no three of the most famous travelers, grouped together, would exceed the extent and variety of countries traversed by our blind countryman." In 1832, Holman became the first blind person to circumnavigate the globe. He continued traveling, and by October 1846 had visited every inhabited continent. John Ledyard, of course, had traveled extensively by sea or by foot, alone or with others, and was thought to have seen more of the world than any other person ever had by the end of the 18th Century.

Holman was born in Exeter, the son of an apothecary. Like John Ledyard, he entered the British Royal Navy, as a first-class volunteer in 1798, and was appointed lieutenant in 1807. In 1810, while on the *Guerriere* off the coast of the Americas, he suffered an illness that first afflicted his joints, then finally his vision. At the age of 25, he was rendered totally and permanently blind.

In recognition of the fact that his affliction was duty-related, he was in 1812 appointed to the Naval Knights of Windsor, with a lifetime grant of care in Windsor Castle. This position demanded he attend church service twice daily as his only duty in return for room and board, but the quietness of such a life harmonized so poorly with his active habits and keen interests, physically making him ill, that he requested multiple leaves of absence on health grounds, first to study medicine and literature at the University of Edinburgh, then to go abroad on a Grand Tour from 1819 to 1821 when he journeyed through France, Italy, Switzerland, the parts of Germany bordering on the Rhine, Belgium, and the Netherlands. On his return he published *The Narrative of a Journey through France, etc.* (London, 1822).

He again set out in 1822 with the incredible design of making the circuit of the world from west to east, exactly as Ledyard had some 35 years before. He traveled through Russia as far east as the Mongolian frontier of Irkutsk (Ledyard was also turned back at Irkutsk). There, like Ledyard, he was suspected by the Czar (or in Ledyard's case, Catherine the Great) of being a spy who might publicize the extensive activities of the Russian American Company should he travel further east, and was conducted back forcibly to the frontiers of Poland. He returned home by Austria, Saxony, Prussia, and Hanover, when he then published *Travels through Russia, Siberia, etc.* (London, 1825). Interestingly, John Ledyard actually did know something about two topics which were threatening to the Russians: the fur trade and the

territory of Alaska. John Ledyard and James Holman were observant travelers. In a case of being far ahead of the consensus, Ledyard had impressions that the Siberian and Asian natives bore a striking resemblance to our Native American Indians.

Shortly afterwards he again set out to accomplish by a somewhat different method the design which had been frustrated by the Russian authorities; and an account of his remarkable achievement was published in four volumes in 1834-1835, under the title of *A Voyage Round the World, including Travels in Africa, Asia, Australasia, America, etc., from 1827 to 1832*. Ledyard had written *Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage*. He may have been the only non-Hawaiian eyewitness to the death of Captain Cook in 1779.

Holman was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society (UK), and of the Linnaean Society (UK). Charles Darwin, in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, cited Holman's writings as a source on the flora of the Indian Ocean. On Fernando Po Island, now part of Equatorial Guinea, the British Government named the Holman River in his honor, commemorating his contributions to fighting the slave trade in the region during the 1820s.

His last journeys were through Spain, Portugal, Moldavia, Montenegro, Syria, and Turkey. Within a week after finishing an autobiography, *Holman's Narratives of His Travels*, he died in London on 29 July 1857. This last work was never published, and likely has not survived.

While his early works were generally well received, only partially as a novelty, over time competitors and skeptics introduced doubt into the public consciousness about the reliability of Holman's "observations". In a time when blind people were thought to be almost totally helpless, and usually given a bowl to beg with, Holman's ability to sense his surroundings by the reverberations of a tapped cane or horse's hoof-beats was unfathomable.