

## INTRODUCTION

I, Sir John Mandeville, have travelled to here and here,  
seen this wonder and that, and returned home. Believe me.  
What I have said is true, or as good as, or was once.

...

We have travelled across the world and received only  
sores, blisters, fever, wounds, chills, sunburn, hunger and thirst.  
We are tired. And this may be some spell or delusion.

(Matthew Francis, *Mandeville*)

*The Book of Marvels and Travels*, supposedly written by a free-wheeling independent traveller, describes a perilous journey from Europe to Jerusalem and into Asia. It describes *jihadi* suicide-warriors in central Asia who believe in sacrificing themselves for the promise of heavenly virgins. It describes the dizzyingly rapid rise to power and wealth of the Chinese ruling class and free love, wife-swapping, and incest in south-east Asia. It describes the distinctive religious life of the people of Tibet, subject to the great ruler in Beijing. It describes the Jews' lack of a homeland, their national ambitions, their invention of a national language, and their difficult relations with their neighbours. The reader might be forgiven for thinking this book is a contemporary tabloid, a pulp chronicle of the early twenty-first century, but it is in fact a fourteenth-century text, and one of the 'bestsellers' of its day. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?*

Sir John Mandeville's *Book of Marvels and Travels* appeared in England and northern France in the second half of the fourteenth century and quickly became a key medieval European book, a widely read narrative of an Englishman's voyage to Constantinople, Jerusalem, and beyond. Mandeville's *Book* combines reports of foreign politics and non-Christian religions with stories, culled from geographies, natural histories, and romances, of extraordinary peoples and beasts. Mandeville includes accounts of the Sultan in Cairo, the Great Khan of Cathay and his vassals in Asia and Tartary, and the mythical Christian prince of the Far East, Prester John. These

sit alongside descriptions of fantastical semi-human ‘monstrous races’ of Ethiopia, Armenia, India, and elsewhere.

The author-narrator, one John Mandeville, claims to be a knight from the southern English town of St Albans, Hertfordshire, travelling in the 1320s or 1330s, but it is clear that this persona is as fictional as some of the peoples he depicts. Meanwhile, his book, which became very popular in England and northern France from the 1360s, is a mixture of many kinds of learning: part travelogue, part fantasy, part scholarly treatise, part pilgrimage of both body and soul, part record of ethnographic desire, wit, and whimsy. Mandeville’s *Book* was, quite simply, one of the most important books of later medieval and early modern Europe: it first circulated in French, Anglo-French, and English, but was translated into many languages, from Danish to Gaelic to Latin. A ‘bestseller’ in manuscript and print, Mandeville’s *Book* reflects far more than medieval ideas of what lay beyond Europe on the eve of the Age of Discovery. Mandeville playfully but brilliantly explores and interrogates ideas of fantasy, good society, the human body, sexuality, magic, language, and belief.

### *In Search of John Mandeville*

Our author says he is ‘John Mandeville, knight . . . [who] was born in England in the town of St Albans’ (p. 6). In later medieval St Albans, Canterbury, and Liège, if not elsewhere, John Mandeville was clearly believed to be a real person. The first fresco one sees upon entering the magnificent cathedral at St Albans is, in fact, an early modern epitaph to Mandeville, apparently copying a medieval tomb commemorating the writer. Thomas Walsingham (d. c. 1422), a learned monk and historian who was master of the scriptorium and archives at St Albans, himself claimed Mandeville for St Albans,<sup>1</sup> and the abbey owned a copy of Mandeville’s *Book*, in English, in the fifteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Around the year 1500 an imaginative monk from the Benedictine abbey in Canterbury wrote a Latin letter purporting to be from Mandeville.<sup>3</sup> Mandeville had at least two tombs (the one at St Albans

<sup>1</sup> London, British Library Cotton MS Claudius E.IV. f. 333f.

<sup>2</sup> Now London, British Library Egerton MS 1982. The abbey also owned an early Latin version, now London, British Library Royal MS 13.E.IX.

<sup>3</sup> Now Canterbury Cathedral Archives Add. MS 6. See M. C. Seymour, ‘A Letter from Sir John Mandeville’, *Notes and Queries*, 21 (1974), 326–8.

and one at Liège).<sup>4</sup> There were relics associated with him: a set of jewel-encrusted rings in St Albans, possibly an orb at Canterbury, and some pieces of reed (the *lignum aloes* described at p. 98) which were being peddled to the pious (or gullible) in the early fifteenth century and are mentioned in the Canterbury letter.<sup>5</sup> Other texts, including lapidaries and a herbal, were attributed to Mandeville.<sup>6</sup> The earliest surviving European globe, made in Nuremberg in 1492, mentions many of the real and mythical places ‘visited’ by Mandeville, and cites Mandeville as an authority, describing him as both ‘knight’ and ‘physician’.<sup>7</sup>

There are three separate questions to consider here: first, did our author ‘John Mandeville’—whoever he was—see what he claims to have seen? Secondly, who was ‘John Mandeville’? And thirdly, where did the text come from?

The first issue is easily resolved: the *Book* comprises a wide range of material borrowed from elsewhere: Mandeville’s *Book* is certainly not Mandeville’s eyewitness account. This is not to say that its narrator did not undertake a journey to, say, the Mediterranean or the Holy Land, as medieval pilgrims, traders, soldiers, and mercenaries often did.<sup>8</sup> It is important to state, however, that Mandeville’s *Book* was not a ‘factual’ account like a modern guidebook, but a more hybrid thing, mixing fact, error, and fantasy, mostly drawn from the reports of others (see below, ‘Mandeville’s Sources’) and recounted by a narrator best described as playfully unreliable.

The second question, which Josephine Waters Bennett regarded as ‘the problem of who wrote *Mandeville’s Travels*’, remains impossible to resolve conclusively but need not be regarded as a problem.<sup>9</sup> In what follows I shall offer only the briefest of summaries of the

<sup>4</sup> See M. C. Seymour’s life of Mandeville in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); Rosemary Tzanaki, *Mandeville’s Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the Book of Sir John Mandeville (1371–1550)* (Aldershot, 2003), 66, 274.

<sup>5</sup> See Tzanaki, *Mandeville’s Medieval Audiences*, 272–4; Seymour, ‘A Letter’.

<sup>6</sup> See Tzanaki, *Mandeville’s Medieval Audiences*, 273.

<sup>7</sup> See C. W. R. D. Moseley, ‘Behaim’s Globe and “Mandeville’s Travels”’, *Imago Mundi*, 33 (1981), 89–91.

<sup>8</sup> On medieval travel to the Holy Land see Nicole Chareyron, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2000); Annabel Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks* (Chicago, 2006), 49–97.

<sup>9</sup> Josephine Waters Bennett, *The Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville* (New York, 1954), p. i.

suggested identities of 'John Mandeville'; the notion that Mandeville was not the real name of our author is almost as old as his *Book*.

Since the Middle Ages the true identity of Mandeville has been associated with two men who lived in the city of Liège, the physician Jean de Bourgogne (a.k.a. Joannes ad Barbam, d. 1372) and Jean d'Outremeuse (1338–1400). Jean de Bourgogne, who wrote medical treatises and was named as patron, but not author, of Mandeville's *Book* by Outremeuse, cannot be convincingly identified as the *Book*'s author.<sup>10</sup> A story, which circulated widely from the fifteenth century, held that on his deathbed Bourgogne revealed himself to Outremeuse to be the real John Mandeville, an English knight who had been forced to flee England after killing a nobleman. This has led some scholars to suggest that Outremeuse was in fact the author. Outremeuse, a writer and historian of Liège, himself possibly wrote a later version of Mandeville's *Book* (the 'Liège' or 'interpolated' version), but certainly was not the original author.<sup>11</sup> Christiane Deluz, in her important recent work on Mandeville, agrees that the *Book* is connected to the city of Liège, arguing that the author was an Englishman living there in the 1350s.<sup>12</sup> Deluz posits that this Englishman took his book to both England and France, hence the ensuing complicated textual history in which various versions of Mandeville's *Book* developed in English, French, Anglo-French, and many other languages.

A third contender for the real Mandeville has been proposed by M. C. Seymour and John Lerner as Jan de Langhe (Jean le Longue or Long John, d. 1388) of Ypres, a Franco-Flemish writer and monk. In the 1350s Langhe translated various writings (Marco Polo's account of the East, Odoric of Pordenone's account of missionizing in Asia, William of Boldensele's account of his pilgrimage to Palestine in the mid-1330s) into French, texts that were also used extensively by Mandeville.<sup>13</sup> But Langhe seems to have been a confident Latinist

<sup>10</sup> See Malcolm Letts, *Mandeville's Travels: Texts and Translations* (London, 1953), pp. xviii–xxiv; Bennett, *Rediscovery*, 147–58; Christiane Deluz, *Le Livre de Jehan de Mandeville: une géographie au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Leuven, 1998), 15–20; Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia, 1997), 260–4.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *Rediscovery*, 158–69.

<sup>12</sup> Deluz, *Jehan de Mandeville*, 273–5.

<sup>13</sup> Seymour, 'Mandeville' in *ODNB*; John Lerner, 'Plucking Hairs from the Great Cham's Beard', in Suzanne Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci (eds.), *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West* (Toronto, 2008), 133–55.

where Mandeville is tentative, and Langhe, based at the Benedictine monastery of St-Bertin near St-Omer in northern France, seems never to have travelled to England or anywhere far from his cloister. Nonetheless, Langhe certainly demonstrates that a mid-fourteenth-century monk could have extensive interests in those topics which preoccupied Mandeville: natural history, geography, marvels, and pilgrimage.

Whilst there were various Norman families living in medieval England with the name Mandeville—literally, *magna ville* ('large town')—Michael Bennett has recently identified one such aristocrat who fits the 'Anglo-French' royal moment from which Mandeville's *Book* emerged. Bennett has described a Hertfordshire man named John Mandeville who visited Isabelle of France, Edward II's widow, at Hertford Castle, near St Albans, with a brace of deer at Christmas 1357.<sup>14</sup> Bennett's evidence is intriguing, showing that this John Mandeville—apparently recently returned from France in 1356(ish), and attested to elsewhere as park-keeper of Enfield Chase, not far from St Albans—fits in terms of time, place, and social class (although this Mandeville was not a knight, he was of gentle birth). Whilst many have argued that the author of the *Book* must have been a monk in order to have access to such a diverse library, a well-educated and well-travelled reader (like Geoffrey Chaucer some twenty years later) could easily have developed the wide range of intellectual interests we see in the *Book*. Yet, as Bennett acknowledges, his identification of Mandeville is far from watertight and is at odds with earlier traditions of authorial attribution.

Mandeville's *Book* must have been composed, in the forms we now have it, after 1351 (the date of some of the translations by Jan de Langhe used by Mandeville) and probably after 1356 (the earliest date given in manuscript for the return of the narrator from his travels). Mandeville's description of the Jews' plans to harm Christendom (p. 105) might show some familiarity with accusations against the Jews as poisoners that developed with the European Black Death in 1348–50.<sup>15</sup> The earliest dated manuscript of the *Book* is from 1371, and was

<sup>14</sup> M. J. Bennett, 'Mandeville's Travels and the Anglo-French moment', *Medium Aevum*, 75 (2006), 273–92, at 273.

<sup>15</sup> See Séraphine Guerschberg, 'The Controversy over the Alleged Sowers of the Black Death in the Contemporary Treatises on Plague', in Sylvia Thrupp (ed.), *Change in Medieval Society: Europe North of the Alps 1050–1500* (New York, 1965), 208–24.