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Jan Morris: Around the World in 80 Years

Paul Clements

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Extract

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James / Jan Morris Timeline

1926:	Born October 2, Somerset, England
1935-39:	Christ Church Cathedral Choir School, Oxford
1939-41:	Lancing College
1941:	Journalist, *Western Daily Press*, Bristol
1942-47:	British Army: 9th Queen's Royal Lancers in Italy and Palestine
1947-48:	Journalist, Arab News Agency, Cairo
1949:	Married Elizabeth Tuckniss
1949-51:	Undergraduate, Christ Church, Oxford
1951:	Birth of first son, Mark
	Joined editorial staff, *The Times*
1953:	*Times* Correspondent on the first ascent of Everest
	Birth of second son, Henry
1954:	Harkness Trust Commonwealth Fund Fellow, United States
1955:	*Times* Middle East Correspondent
1955-56:	Journey across south-east Arabia with the Sultan of Oman
1956:	First book, *Coast to Coast*, published; won Café Royal Literature prize
	Reported on the Suez Crisis for *Manchester Guardian*
1957- 62:	Foreign Correspondent, *Manchester Guardian*
1959:	Television films for BBC's *Panorama*
1960:	*Venice* published
1961:	U.S. George Polk Memorial Award for Journalism
	Birth of third son, Twm
	Royal Society of Literature Award for *Venice*

	Covered Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem for *Guardian*
1964:	Acquired Plas Trefan, Caernarfonshire, Wales
	Birth of daughter, Suki
1968:	*Pax Britannica: The Climax of Empire* (Vol. 1) published
1972:	Sex-change operation, Casablanca
1973:	*Heaven's Command: An Imperial Progress* (Vol. 2) published
1974:	Publication of *Conundrum*
1974-6:	Contributor to *Rolling Stone*
1978:	*Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat* (Vol. 3) published
1984:	*The Matter of Wales: Epic Views of a Small Country* published
1985:	*Last Letters from Hav* shortlisted for the Booker Prize
1992:	Honorary D. Litt. University of Wales
1993:	Elected to the Gorsedd of Bards
1996:	Honorary D. Litt. University of Glamorgan
1998:	Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects
1999:	Appointed CBE for services to literature
2001:	*Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* published
2003:	*A Writer's World* anthology published
2004:	Thomas Cook Travel Book special award for outstanding contribution to travel writing
2005:	Golden Pen Award for a lifetime's distinguished service to literature
	Painting commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery, London
2006:	Publication of *Hav*

The Complete Traveller

Paul Theroux

It is a great thing, at eighty, to look at a life's work filling many shelves. Jan Morris has that satisfaction. But it also a great thing to be happy and fulfilled and to be at home, among family - Jan has all that, too, and something else many of us lack – a homeland, a feeling and fondness for it which amounts to a cause. Friendship is important, as well, and the people who have contributed the pieces gathered here – some of the ablest travellers in the world – count themselves as her friends. Many are felicitous writers too, yet if the essays have one quality in common, it is not their felicity but the sincerity of unreserved praise for the woman and her work.

These are endearments and memories we have always wanted to write to Jan - the sort of grateful sentiments that are too often belated, elegiac or else obituaristic. So, in one sense this is an assortment of besotted valentines and rave reviews; in a deeper sense it is a demonstration of the life of energy and passion Jan has led, and how strongly she has influenced us through her example. The variety of response is astonishing. There are no false notes here, but many telling anecdotes. We are glad she is alive to read this, because she has meant everything to us.

Not just the work, but the life. Which of us would invite an examination of our privacies, our moods, our manners, our humour, our sexuality? Yet Jan is here as a writer and a person, a young man shod in climbing boots in one piece, and a woman in "smart court pumps" in another, and in both she is wholly alive. It is one thing to be a traveller – some of the most resourceful travellers I've known have never written a word, just kept moving alone

across the world. Jan is proud, alert and portable, a travelling genius. She is also one of the greatest descriptive writers in English. Add to this a life that is so rare as to be almost unique, something like a martyrdom – for the word martyr means witness – and you have a person worthy of the loving and admiring sentiments adumbrated in this big birthday card.

It often seems to me that we travel because we feel incomplete and want to lose ourselves in distant episodes of romantic voyeurism. We write books because we have a sense of inadequacy, half-greedy for attention, half-baffled by the irrational urge to set it all down. If we were normal, balanced souls we would not feel the need to leave home and risk our arses, or to hide ourselves and scribble out our fantasies.

Jan is the proof that you don't have to be manic to be a traveller, and that the tradition of travelling the world and recording one's impressions is a highly civilized activity. Her qualities are illustrated in this book. They are the hallmarks of an exemplary personality.

First of all is her strong sense of place. She has always had the same home. It is an advantage for a traveller to have a home – it makes you bold, gives you confidence, makes you less of a bludger, and importantly gives you a place to return to. That knowledge can lighten the burden of travel. Jan has never been in search of the great good place – Wales is that for her, and Wales seems to me to lie at the heart of Jan's travelling. Welshness has informed Jan's sense of history, for Wales is a whole culture, just as Botswana and Japan are, with a literature and a language, and folk, and the deepest roots. Wales also has a history of siege and has been a battlefield.

A superb memory is another trait that has contributed to making Jan the traveller she is, and recorder of her travels. This quality of remembering we take for granted, but in Jan it is combined with her powers of observation. Among travellers she is the great noticer; nothing escapes her glance, and this sets her writing apart. By seeing so clearly herself, she shows us how to see the world.

She wears her learning lightly, but I know of no one who travels so widely and who is so well-read. Like the most eminent travellers of the past, she is historian, diarist, journalist, and at her best combines these attributes into an intense and lasting impressionism. She is the most painterly of travellers and can be the most precise.

She is the proof that travellers are essentially optimists, for why would any traveller rise in the morning in a foreign place and set off for an unknown destination unless he or she felt there was something worth looking at, someone worth meeting, something to discover?

Humour enters her writing at the most unexpected times, sometimes with poignancy, sometimes with a sharp crack. And the same is true of her conversation, which is at its best when it is defiant, for she can be a persuasive contrarian. I have gone on being guided by her chance remarks – one about the snobbery among certain English travellers being pompous in rugged places continues to reverberate.

I admire her ego, the strength of it, the decisiveness in her convictions, her confidence. Where does this come from? Is it Welshness, a great education, knowing herself to the core, a fulfilled life? I wish I knew, but it is clear that it has made her honest. Ask Jan a question, send her to a new city, show her a book and you will get the truth. Yet there is evidence of her generosity through these pieces, and as they testify, she is that unusual creature among writers, the best of friends. All of us are lucky to know her.



Sir Peregrine Worsthorne

My personal knowledge of Jan – James as he then was – goes back to the time when we were both apprentice journalists on *The Times* in the early 1950s. As I remember it, he was a bit junior to me, and I was given the job of showing him the ropes; indeed of training him up to be my successor as assistant to the elderly Foreign News Editor, Ralph Deakin, who had a chip on his shoulder about not having been at Oxford or Cambridge, unlike most of the other senior members of the staff, who in some cases were even Fellows of All Souls. Nor was status Deakin's only problem. He was also tormented by an unrequited passion for his secretary, which I had not noticed until James brought it to my attention almost as soon as he had got his feet under the desk, so quick were his perceptions. In short order James's exceptionally discerning and illuminating eye revealed much else – most of it endearingly sympathetic – about that marvellously eccentric cast of characters who day after day produced a paper of record from which – as James was also fond of pointing out – all signs of eccentricity had been scrupulously excluded.

Our workload was very light. The main duty was to sub-edit 'the turnover article'; so called because it had originally extended over two pages. By then, however, it was at the top of the leader page and our job was to make sure that there were no breaches of house style, no spelling or grammatical mistakes, no repetitions, no historical howlers, no contradictions, no libels, and above all, no infelicities or vulgarities. Usually these 2,000 word articles were written by distinguished academic specialists –

mostly professors, each of whom had his – no women in those days – own den plus coal fire on the floor above. With proof in hand, we had to invade their privacy to get their approval for any changes – a high-risk activity, requiring great gifts of diplomacy, charm and sensitivity, with all of which James was preternaturally endowed. Not that he was in the least smarmy. His sure-fire technique, which came to him quite naturally, was to enter the den with so radiant a smile on his face that any idea of an answering scowl was peremptorily pre-empted. Individually these encounters unearthed not only rich seams of human vanity and academic pedantry, but also of arcane knowledge and rare scholarship – much to marvel at and learn from in the long lunches which were also very much part of the job.

In my memory again, these lunches took place either at my club Boodles or at his, The Naval and Military. In those days James had a marked military aura – not, of course, in the least Blimpish or anything of that kind, heaven forbid, but more what one imagines the First World War poets looked like when on leave in mufti – well-polished brown brogues, soft and finely woven tweeds, in such striking contrast to my other two brilliant friends and colleagues on *The Times* at that time – Henry Fairlie and John Raymond – both of whom were scruffy bohemians busily engaged in drinking themselves into an early grave. Not surprisingly it was only James whom I introduced to my mother, then married to Montagu Norman, Governor of the Bank of England. She was deeply impressed and, to my amazement, declared he had something about him which reminded her of T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia), whom after the First World War, Norman tried to recruit into the Bank. Much later, too, my mother, on her own initiative, went to visit James and his family on their houseboat on the Nile.

These few months together on *The Times* were enormously enjoyable. But I don't remember us ever discussing our personal lives. While I knew everything about the private lives of Henry and John – their loves, hopes, fears and so on – I knew nothing about James's. This may have been due to James's relative sobriety – no question with him of *in vino veritas*. While I never saw James the least drunk, I seldom saw Henry or John sober. At no point was James ever 'one of the boys'. Yet of the three, if I had ever got into trouble, it would certainly have been to James that I would have turned, sure of support and understanding. Ours was an odd relationship. Jan now tells me

that during those Printing House Square days he remembers my saying to him "I can't quite make you out". With the benefit of hindsight now, I think I can. Not ever having had a sister, it could be that in James's-Jan's company I began to realize what I had missed.

In any case, we soon went our different ways. I was posted to Washington and he was sent up Mount Everest to report the Hunt-Hillary conquering ascent in time for the Coronation – an assignment that launched him into orbit. In those days, however, dispatches in *The Times* were anonymous – "from our special correspondent". So out in Washington I initially had no idea that James was their author. He had seemed too slight, too gentle, too cerebral, not at all the man of action and explorer type. But in a flash my mother's reference to T.E. Lawrence sprang to mind and I realized that travel writing of this highest – in every sense – quality was where my friend's true destiny must lie.

It was some years before we met in London again – at a party given by the Anglo-American monthly journal *Encounter*, to which we had both become regular contributors. Catching sight of each other across the room and hurrying to meet up, I noticed something strange about his gait – a kind of teetering and tottering, as if he was struggling to walk on high heel shoes. (I later learnt that he was gradually building the heels). His face was also powdered; this also seemed strange, but again, not so strange as to make me suspect the truth. Nothing was mentioned and I put it out of my mind. Some months later, however, we ran into each other again and I had the same impression, even more so. This time I did at last begin to ask questions and a mutual friend put me in the picture.

Since then I have seen little of Jan. I admire her books, but at meetings feel rather out of my depth. This is entirely my fault. Jan's serenity puts me to shame. Moreover how can I possibly have failed to notice during the months that we saw each other daily that he was struggling with this profound gender conundrum. Such insensitivity on my part was inexcusable. What a failure of imagination and of human solidarity. And, on the other hand, what courage on Jan's part to carry on with such carefree high spirits while preparing for the ordeal that lay ahead. The more I think of her strength of character, the more I become aware of my own blind crassness. So, although in recent years my veneration has kept on growing, it has always

been, sadly, from a respectful distance.

Finally, a footnote. Sometime in the late 1960s Mel Lasky, the American editor of *Encounter*, rang me on a personal matter. Years earlier, he explained, *Encounter* had published a brilliant article by James Morris in praise of the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth, and on the basis of this article the First Lord of the Admiralty had telephoned to enquire whether James would agree to be the speaker at the College's two hundredth anniversary banquet which was to take place in the Painted Hall at Greenwich. What's the problem?, I asked. The problem, Mel replied, was that the First Lord of the Admiralty had no idea that James in the meantime had become Jan. What is more, Mel was convinced that Jan would not think this mattered. In other words, if the invitation was passed on, Jan would undoubtedly accept it and even quite relish the thought of surprising their Lordships, their distinguished guests and, best or worst of all, the assembled cadets, by proudly walking up the aisle carrying a handbag.

Tempting as it was to let this happen, we both decided that to do so would be of no service to either party.