

## IMPRESSIONS OF A NINETEENTH CENTURY TRAVELLER OF AMAZONIA

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**Abstract:** The goal of this article is to comment on the translation of chapter XXII of *A Voyage up the River Amazon*, by William H. Edwards, as well as the translation strategies proposed. In the chapter, Edwards deals with the bureaucracy, tax, immigration, climate, and the white man needed for a civilizing mission of Amazonia. The prejudice against the Portuguese, the indigenous people and the blacks pervades the text in a more or less explicit way. The prejudice, the arrogance, and the civilizing raptures are not sparse in the travel literature of that period; and, in our translation, we highlight as much Edwards' intolerance as the impressionist trait of his narrative.

**Keywords:** Translation with Commentaries; Travel Literature; Amazonia; Impressionism

## IMPRESSÕES DA AMAZÔNIA DE UM VIAJANTE DO SÉCULO DEZENOVE

**Resumo:** O artigo abaixo tem como objetivo comentar a tradução do capítulo XXII de *A Voyage up the River Amazon*, de William H. Edwards, bem como as estratégias de tradução propostas. No capítulo, Edwards trata da burocracia, impostos, imigração, clima e da necessidade do branco para uma missão civilizatória do território amazônico. O preconceito contra portugueses, indígenas e negros permeia todo o texto de forma mais ou menos explícita. O preconceito, a arrogância e os arroubos civilizatórios não são incomuns na literatura de viagem da época; e, na nossa tradução, ressaltamos tanto a intolerância de Edwards quanto o caráter impressionista da sua narrativa.



**Palavras-chave:** Tradução Comentada; Literatura de Viagem; Amazônia; Impressionismo

A detail of Giuseppe Leone Righini's<sup>1</sup>*Belém do Pará*, painted in 1860: a boat with three flags, a Brazilian, an American and a Dutch, depicting the intense influx of foreigners in the region<sup>2</sup>.



Source: [Uruatapera.blogspot.com](http://Uruatapera.blogspot.com)

In the early morning of February 9, 1846, William H. Edwards sailed off the coast of New York in quest of adventures. His destination happened to be an imaginary world beyond the furthestmost point they could reach up the Amazon River. Although enthralled by such adventures, and further excited by fanciful tales of earlier chronicles, his intent was to lay bare whatever he would capture through sheer observation. Next, his narrative would be brought forth to his readers, as to be inspired by the imaginary of his travel, time and space.

In his *A Voyage up the River Amazon*, published in 1847, Edwards rendered account of his impressions of a distant place, far from his homeland. According to the writer, his narrative is to be considered a true record of what had happened along his trip. In

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<sup>1</sup> An Italian artist considered the best landscapist of the Amazon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> <https://uruatapera.blogspot.com/2015/01/tempo-em-recortes-no-museu-da-ufpa.html>.

a brief introduction, he signalled to his readers the benefits of the region and its positive effect on health. In Chapter I, he testified his departure from New York and the marvels of the boat trip. Chapter II focuses on his arrival and his first impression of the land. Chapter III narrates the chief characteristics of the city and its fauna. Chapter IV presents the institutions and their officials. Successive chapters discourse at great length on the land in general, the inhabitants, and its waterways. The last section of the book, Chapter XXII brings special attention on a bureaucratic Brazil, the drawbacks of heavy taxation, the difficulties encountered by immigrants and the voyage back home, all permeated by an air of superiority and all kinds of prejudice<sup>3</sup>.

This brief introduction serves as a preamble to our translation. Chiefly among its purposes are the challenges posed by translating the writer's personal impressions based on his own experience and interests. As it is made explicit by Joan-Pau Rubiés:

[B]ecause these numerous writings incarnated simultaneously the rhetoric of empire and evangelization, the projection of personal aims, desires and disappointments, and the formation of empirical discourses, historical, anthropological and geographical. That is to say, the traveller and his chronicler (who was not necessarily the same person) were working creatively at three simultaneous levels: a definition of the global ideology of imperial legitimation and imperial strategy according to a special bias, the expression of personal experiences geared towards a profitable social recognition, and the collective construction of an empirical body of information concerning the lands and peoples of the New World. (Rubiés, 1999, p. 76)

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth remembering that Edwards speaks of the Amazon region with the same fascination as the European colonizers as if he were European himself, and as if his birth country had not been a colony, with a decimated and acculturated indigenous population and a black population forcibly removed from their home and culture. Notice that he speaks of the indigenous and black people in Brazil without mentioning those from his own country.

For capturing such instances in the last chapter of *A Voyage up the River Amazon*, successive readings were done before starting its translation into Portuguese. First and foremost, Edwards cannot be considered immune to the exertion brought about by the system of ‘othering’ as presented by Rubiés (1999).

Such tension creates a blurred space for the appreciation of the travel, which is further reproduced in Edwards’ writings. In that sense, the final reader, much distant from that particular space and time, is subject to an obscure representation of that reality for natives are unable to shed light on such narrative. Another important remark is that the reader’s view is also influenced with regard to their standing within a geographical and economical context. To make it clear, it is understandable that a reader belonging to the Western Hemisphere would avidly welcome Edwards’ narrative whereas a native of the Amazon might be lured into a legendary representation of their own reality. For one thing, the primary intent of Edwards was to give a true account of his travel into the Amazon, but facts might also have been further inflated by his own judgement or personal impressions.

In an attempt to shed light on the matter presented above and to allow us to understand the different points of view between the foreign traveller writing on a society and those who inhabit that society, we are then obliged to admit that the views of the latter are also influenced by their perceptions, intellects, and sympathies. According to Geertz (2008), our perceptions are limited by the overlearned and overvalued acceptances of our own society. That is meant to demonstrate that a point of view is always influenced one way or another, and interpretation can be drifting in a rather utopian domain.

The importance of the travelers’ record from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, not only of the Amazon but of peripheral regions in general, is that this description is far from the objectivity of an observer. In fact, these travelers are possibly laying the groundwork for how such regions, their peoples, languages, customs, and cultures will be perceived and assimilated by the non-

periphery and the periphery itself. Furthermore, it is also clear that translating one place, without a sense of belonging, leads to cultural losses, and as such the cultural idiom of the latter place cannot keep track of all the cultural variances, which were further turned into symbolic values.

For the purposes presented above, we try then to pin down such instances in Chapter XXII since it clearly delineates the political incapacity of Brazil, the implication of the mixture of races, above the fact that the country needs whites to take full potential of its natural resources. Those may be considered obvious signs of want of European colonialism and its capital accumulation that the author related through the description of the landscape, the fertility of the soil, and its forthcoming potential if conditions were otherwise, according to the author, under better management.

At the very beginning of Chapter XXII, the author makes it clear that “the want of emigrants from other countries, and of efficient laboring class among its population, are the great obstacles to the permanent welfare of Northern Brazil” (Edwards, 1847, p. 246). Such utterance is indicative of the prejudice that lurked beneath the apparent benevolence of the West in quest of a common welfare. This is more than true when the author states that “with the nobler qualities of the old Portuguese, to which popular history has never done justice, was mingled a narrowness of mind, that was natural enough in the subject of an old and priest-ridden monarchy” (Edwards, 1847, p. 246).

According to the author, Brazil could not reach its full potential because it failed to operate correctly in the hands of the Portuguese. This might be a common misconception that the Portuguese did not know how to use their capacity towards the economic expansion of their colonies; and such view was not a novelty. The West had always laid suspicious eyes on the Portuguese long before European colonialism. As pointed out by Niall Fergusson in *Civilization: The West and the Rest*.

This eagerness to trade was far from being the only difference between the Portuguese and the Chinese. There was a streak of ruthlessness – indeed of downright brutality – about the men from Lisbon that Zheng He only rarely evinced. When the king of Calicut looked askance at the goods the Portuguese had brought with them from Lisbon, da Gama seized 15 fishermen as hostages. On his second voyage to India, at the head of fifteen ships, he bombarded Calicut and horribly mutilated the crews of captured vessels. On another occasion, he is said to have locked up the passengers aboard a ship for Mecca and set it ablaze. (Fergusson, 2011, p.34)

Similar prejudice against the Portuguese and the Negroes is found in the reflections of Edward Long's on the judgment of a Negro cause at court. Long did not spare prejudice against the Negroes, the Mulattos and the Portuguese. For Long, the presence of anyone who does not belong to the Western hemisphere constitutes a threat to society, a drag for its economic expansion. In that regard, he states:

The lower class of women in England, are remarkably fond of the blacks, for reasons too brutal to mention; they would connect themselves with horses and asses, if the laws permitted them. By these ladies they generally have a numerous brood. Thus, in the course of a few generations more, the English blood will become so contaminated with this mixture, and from the chances, the ups and downs of life, this alloy may spread so extensively, as even to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of the people, till the whole nation resembles the Portuguese and Moriscos in complexion of skin and baseness of mind. This is a venomous and dangerous ulcer, that threatens to disperse its malignancy far and wide, until every family catches infection from it. (Long, s.d., Section V)

In like manner, Edwards made explicit the position of Brazil's diverse racial constituents on an economic and social scale. For Edwards, the Negro's body was fit for working in the country's climate. A parallel can be drawn here between the heat effects on the whites expressed by Duncan and Gregory in *Writes of Passage* and the one presented by Edwards in the referred chapter. For the first mentioned writers, the excessive heat of Africa enervated "the mind, morals and the body" (Duncan & Gregory, 2002, p. 20). And that, according to some critics would explain about the "torrid zone being the home of indolence, lasciviousness and tyranny" (Duncan & Gregory, 2002, p. 20), with an organization of village life and labor alien to the British.

Edwards also emphasized that the constant heat of the Amazon region was enervating and that "natives of colder regions, after a few years' residence, have not that bodily strength requisite to daily and protracted toil" (Edwards, 1847, p.250). With regard to the heat, he further exclaimed "where a white would inevitably receive a sun-stroke, a negro labors with uncovered head, without injury or exhaustion" (Edwards, 1847, p.250).

Long took a similar approach to race, weather and manual labor. Long affirmed that Whites are not fit for manual labor or working in intense heat. The author noted that the West India climate required the hard labor of the Negroes. He believed that such natural necessity was not "to be cured by any alternative". Long stated:

This utter inaptitude of Europeans to such occupations in hot climates, and the impossibility of supplying them with white labourers from any other source than Europe, leave no room for questioning, but that we must either abandon all these settlements, ruin many thousands of our fellow subjects, and resign our fortune into the hands of foreign powers, differing from us in sentiments; or we must conduct them, as hitherto we have successfully done, by the labour of Negroes; whose constitutions being by nature and the Divine Will appropriated to these climates, they

are evidently the fittest for such employments there. (Long, s.d., Section II)

When it comes to immigrants, Edwards briefly signaled the liminal position occupied by foreigners, despite governmental efforts to welcome them. This means that most immigrants remained stateless, as if confined in a place between home and the new land, a society into which they were never fully integrated. The author claimed “although the government professes every desire for the accession of foreigners, it denies them the rights of citizenship, excepting under peculiar circumstances, which, of course, obliges them to labor under legal disabilities” (Edwards, 1847, p.247).

Edwards also highlighted the hindrance that the Brazilian tax burden placed on the productive resources of the country. Besides the high import duties that left no room for innovation and technological advances, exorbitant export taxes were “a greater drawback”. For the writer, the export duty was “the most stupid, indefensible measure that could be conceived; a withering curse to all enterprise, and a more effectual hindrance to the prosperity of Brazil, than a weak government, dishonest officials, a debased currency, and all other influences together”. (Edwards, 1847, p.247)

He further added that:

The truth is that the Brazilian government is a weak government. It is too republican to be a monarchy, and too monarchical to be a republic. If it were decidedly one or the other, there would be greater strength and greater freedom; but now, it has neither the bulwark of an aristocracy, nor the affection of the people. It is forced to depend entirely upon a regular army for its existence and is kept in a state of constant alarm by disturbances in its provinces, or invasions of its frontiers; it is bowed beneath a heavy foreign debt, and obliged to use all kinds of expedients, not to make advance, but to retain its position. (Edwards, 1847, p. 249)



Overall, the translation of Chapter XXII of the book *A Voyage up the River Amazon* was motivated by the noticeable cultural arrogance and the excessive prejudice of the writer. As pointed out by Laura Brown, travel literature is impelled by the attraction of the land. According to the author, “it is directly related to its abundance and its use to Europeans” (Brown, 1993, p.43). She laid particular stress on the natural resources common to early eighteenth-century narratives. For Brown, it was a tendency of imperialist literature which she identifies as “the rhetoric of acquisition” (Brown, 1993, 43). Likewise, such rhetoric proliferates the narrative of William Edwards, which was largely distasteful in respect of the country’s governance and people.

All along the translation task, the challenge of bringing to the surface what was lurking beneath the writer’s prejudiced views was further aggravated by his verbosity, the long-run sentences, and the never-ending paragraphs. An inattentive reader can lose track of the narrative, which makes it necessary to evince its meaning through restructuring, rephrasing and punctuating.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by CNPq (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico) and CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior).

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Recebido em: 10/08/2022

Aceito em: 24/09/2022

Publicado em novembro de 2022

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