"Horrors and Magnificence Without End"

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Abstract

But Calabria! No sooner is the word uttered than a new world arises before the mind's eye, - torrents, fastnesses, all the prodigality of mountain scenery, - caves, brigands, and pointed hats, - Mrs. Radcliffe and Salvator Rosa, - costumes and character, - horrors and magnificence without end.¹

One modern-day travel writer asserts that We read travel books in order to be given a better sense of what is strange in the world.² Peter Quennell, in his introduction to Lear's Journals of a landscape painter in Southern Calabria and the Kingdom of Naples, declares that Calabria was then, - indeed it is still, - one of Europe's strangest corners. And what is strange, too, is almost always Other. This paper briefly examines the notions of Calabria constructed by British people travelling to Calabria from the end of the period of the Grand Tour to the early 1900s. This list of travellers includes people like Edward Lear and George Gissing. There were few travellers to the Italies south of Naples until well into the twentieth century, and not many of these produced accounts of their journeys. An examination of the accounts of British travellers reveals a construction of true-to-life notations of what is observably there and a non-unawareness of or unwillingness to admit to subjectivity. But what can be recovered from these accounts that gives some clue as to how the space the British adventurer travelled through was experienced by those who lived and worked there? This paper will attempt to unravel the discursive practices at play - the construction of the "Calabrian" as opposed to ideas of both "Italian-ness" and "British-ness" and the consequences for Calabrians of these kinds of cultural imaginings and representations.