Joseph Banks’ Grand Tour and the beginnings of modern tourism

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Abstract

When the young Joseph Banks – one of Britain’s richest men - was asked why he did not take the conventional Grand Tour, he famously replied ‘Every blockhead does that; my Grand Tour shall be one round the whole globe’. Instead of a year on the continent, he accompanied James Cook on his explorations in the Pacific and circumnavigation of the world. This was not simply a young man’s bravado. This paper argues that Banks’ supposed reply demonstrated that the Grand Tour was already being displaced by newly emerging modes of travel. Banks’ experiences, and the wide dissemination of various accounts of them in Britain in the 1770s and 1780s, contributed to more modern understandings of the relationship between travel, knowledge, work and pleasure, laying the groundwork for the emergence of mass tourism in the nineteenth century.

Specifically they contributed to a new notion of romantic individualism, in which doing the unconventional acquired more kudos than doing the conventional. They led to more modern understandings of the relationship between work and leisure, identifying leisure with geography and temporality rather than social status. They turned the observation of other cultures into entertainment, not just diplomatic intelligence, scientific classification or philosophical speculation. Most spectacularly, perhaps, they helped create a new geography of desire, in which exotic palm trees, beaches and dusky maidens came to represent a male fantasy of sexual freedom. And finally they promoted the commodification of escape, through which these fantasies became available for sale. In each of these ways, Banks’ voyage not only reflected these shifts taking place, but the widespread dissemination of his and others’ accounts of the voyage set some of the fundamentals that underpinned the emergence of mass tourism.