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Early Modern Descriptions of Poland as Fynes Moryson's and Peter Mundy's Cultural Autobiographies

Wczesnonowożytny opisy Polski jako kulturowe autobiografie Fynesa Morysona i Petera Mundy

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, wczesnonowożytna, Fynes Moryson, Peter Mundy

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Travel accounts and descriptions of foreign lands have always been used by historians as one of the richest, though often distorted by their authors' limited knowledge, sources of information about described places. Since the 1970s, however, travel accounts have also been increasingly analysed, as Barbara Korte put it, "for their projection of culture-specific mentalities, their representations of 'otherness' and imagining of foreign countries, or as phenomena of interculturality"¹. This article is an attempt to look from this point of view at two travel accounts written by the inhabitants of the British Isles, Fynes Moryson² and Peter Mundy³, who visited Poland in the late 16th and in the 17th centuries. The aim is to determine to what extent these texts are the projections of their authors' own cultural

¹ Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, Inc., 2000, p. 6.

² Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell: Through The Twelve Dominions of Gernamy, Bohemerland, Sweitzerland, Netherland, Denmarke, Poland, Turkey, France, England, Scotland and Ireland*, vols. I–IV, Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1907–1908; Fynes Moryson, "An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell: Through The Twelve Dominions of Gernamy, Bohemerland, Sweitzerland, Netherland, Denmarke, Poland, Turkey, France, England, Scotland and Ireland," in *Shakespeare's Europe. Unpublished Chapters of Fynes Moryson's Itinerary*, ed. Charles Hughes, London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1903 – hereafter *Shakespeare's Europe*.

³ Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608–1667*, ed. Lt.-Col. Sir Richard Carnac Temple, bart., Cambridge: Printed for the Hakluyt Society 1907–36.

identities and are, in this sense, autobiographical in character. Individual reactions and behaviours may vary within one culture and it is very easy to confuse culture with personality when we do not differentiate between social and individual levels of analysis. Therefore, I will first present the examples that I think illustrate the thesis of the importance of one's cultural background in the perception of foreignness and only then will I move on to briefly describe the traces of the authors' personal traits in their texts.

The problem of intercultural contacts between early modern Poland and England is an issue which is not new in literature, but it seems to have been looked upon mostly as an occasion to write about 'a culture in the eyes of ...,' which focuses on the world being observed rather than on observers⁴. In this article the perspective is reversed. The travelogues by Moryson and Mundy have been read for the traces of their authors' home culture. The texts are retrospective travel diaries, i.e. they are not records of events compiled as they occurred, but they were written up from notes after the journeys themselves had ended. None of them was supposed to be an intimate record of its author's travel experience, but both were written with an audience of strangers in mind. Fynes Moryson came to Poland out of pure curiosity. He was touring Europe and Poland was one of his destinations. Peter Mundy came to Poland as a merchant, but being an acute observer, he decided to record his memories in order to "keepe (his) owne remembraunce on occasion of Discourse concerning particularities off thes voyages," and "to pleasure such Friends (who mightt come to the reading thereof) Thatt are Desirous to understand somwhatt off Forraigne Countries"⁵. As far as their social standing is concerned, Moryson was a member of the gentry, a man of considerable prominence in royal service, whereas Mundy was a member of a well-off merchant family. Both were Anglican Protestants.

The authors of both texts share a unanimously negative attitude to the way Polish law allowed the gentry to mistreat and abuse their inferiors. Fynes Moryson writes that "... in Poland they care no more to kill a man than a dogg"⁶. A similar sense of outrage is visible in Peter Mundy's account of his visit to Poland in the 1640s. His choice of words implies that what he learnt about Poland was a shock to him. He writes, "Soe greatt a difference make they in Poland betweene the gentry and common sort, the one lording and tiranizing over the other, their very lives lyng in their hands, soe if they kill one of them, they pay butt a matter of ½ a crowne

⁴ Cf. T. Chynczewska-Hennel, *Rzeczpospolita XVII wieku w oczach cudzoziemców*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków 1993. J. Dąbrowski, *Polacy w Anglii i o Anglii*, Kraków 1962. J. Jasnowski, *England and Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries*, Oxford 1948. A.E. Mierzwa, *Anglia a Polska w pierwszej połowie XVII wieku*, Warszawa 1986. A. E. Mierzwa, *Anglia a Polska w epoce Jana III Sobieskiego*, Łódź 1988. U. Szumska, *Anglia a Polska w epoce humanizmu i reformacji*, Lwów 1938. H. Zins, *Polska w oczach Anglików XIV–XVI wiek*, Warszawa 1974.

⁵ P. Mundy, *The Travels...*, p. 3.

⁶ *Shakespeare's Europe*, p. 390. In all the quotations from primary sources original spelling, punctuation and grammar have been retained.

to the king for this subjectt, and are freed”⁷. What these observations have in common is that they consistently present the relationship between the Polish gentry and peasants in a very bad light. The choice of words and comparisons also seems to suggest that our authors disapproved of the belief that power is not subject to moral judgment and that power places one above the law. That view was consistent with the practice of the English legal system in the early modern period. It is true that in the middle of the 1640s radical revolutionaries in the English parliament demanded changes in the law which they believed to be the instrument of oppression used by the ruling class against the rest of the society⁸. However, there were at the same time numerous occasions when “the great and the famous suffered the law’s full rigours as completely as the meanest felon in the land”⁹. Moreover, it was a characteristic feature of the English legal system that participation in legal institutions reached far down the social scale and, as Brewer and Styles claim, the common people who clashed with their superiors “knew that they were never merely the passive victims of the process that they were powerless to affect”¹⁰.

Another example of how the writers’ culture might have influenced their perception of Poland concerns the issue of status and its symbols. When Mundy writes about the gravest vices of the Polish gentry, he notices that Poles are “costly and proud in Apparell”¹¹. The way he describes the ostentatious display of Polish nobles’ splendour ought to incline us to assume that such an exaggerated manifestation of status by those who were in the positions of power was considered somewhat out of place in his native land. And indeed, when we remember the emergence of strong Puritan opposition to the refined ostentation of the Stuart court and the pomp of the Church of England in the first half of the 17th century, it seems that our author’s tendency to view ostentation as something inappropriate was not just a matter of his individual preference, but was well rooted in his native culture. Lavish hospitality and display without respect to expense might have been fashionable in the 16th century, but in the 17th century, with its permeating Puritan ideology, both were viewed as inappropriate and were largely abandoned even by great gentlemen¹².

Keith Wrighson points out, writing about the characteristic features of English society between 1580 and 1680, that “... there already flourished a cultural emphasis on the interests of the individual nuclear family”. He also emphasizes that already at that time “beneath the rhetoric of contemporary ideals of commonwealth

⁷ Mundy, *The Travels...*, p. 183.

⁸ Allan G.R. Smith, *The Emergence of a Nation State. The Commonwealth of England 1529–1660*, 2nd edition, London – New York: Longman, 1997, pp. 358–359.

⁹ James A. Sharpe., *Crime in Early Modern England 1550–1750*. 2nd edition, London – New York: Longman, 1999, p. 207.

¹⁰ John Brewer and John Styles., *An Ungovernable People: the English and Their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, London: Hutchinson 1980, pp. 19–20.

¹¹ Mundy, *The Travels...*, p. 168.

¹² Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500–1700*. London: Macmillan, 1994, p. 140.

was concealed the cold reality of a harsh, competitive, contract society”¹³. It appears, therefore, that even though it is commonly thought that modern individualistic societies were founded as a result of the triumph of the Enlightenment and capitalism in the 18th century, certain tendencies had prevailed in England long before that¹⁴. Careful analysis of our 16th- and 17th-century texts seems to prove that individualism was indeed an important criterion our authors applied to their assessment of Polish ‘otherness.’

An interesting issue to be discussed in the context of individualism is how the visitors perceived family life in Poland. Fynes Moryson reveals his own cultural background when he writes about Polish inheritance rights and finds it surprising and interesting to learn that the father’s estate was divided equally among his children and that siblings were responsible for each other’s welfare, which was untypical of English individualistic culture¹⁵. Such an attitude could be adopted only by someone in whose own culture “everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family”¹⁶.

Our visitors’ reflections on the problem of relationships between parents and children also reveal much about their culture-specific understanding of it. Though the issue of child-rearing is not of particular importance to our visitors, they do make a few comments on this matter, and the influence of cultural patterns that were familiar to them is evident. For Fynes Moryson a feature of Polish upbringing which is worth mentioning in his *Itinerary* is that “... the mothers not being able to nurse their Children, take Nurses into their houses, but neuer send them out of dores to be nursed”¹⁷. He does not add any comment to this statement, so it is impossible to say whether he approves or disapproves of such a practice. Nevertheless, we may venture to guess that what attracted his attention was how the practice contrasted with the English system of child-rearing in which it was customary to ‘put forth’ the children very soon into the outside world, first by sending them to be nursed and then by placing them as servants or apprentices in other people’s homes at a very young age¹⁸.

¹³ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 223.

¹⁴ Some scholars claim that the origins of English individualism date back even to the Middle Ages, see: Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism. The Family, Property and Social Transition*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.

¹⁵ In the early modern period people of higher rank divided their property according to the rules of primogeniture. The eldest sons were provided with the lion’s share of the estate, while the younger sons were provided either with a small property in land or an annuity. Although primogeniture was criticized by many as an “unnatural custom,” partible inheritance was not often used by the English nobility and gentry (For more details see: Joan Thirsk., “Younger Sons in the Seventeenth Century,” *History* 54 (1969): 358–377).

¹⁶ Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, p. 51.

¹⁷ *Shakespeare’s Europe*, p. 395.

¹⁸ Keith Wrightson, *English Society...*, p. 118. The practice of wet-nursing was so well-established and popular among women in the middle and upper ranks of society that in the 17th century the fact that ladies suckled their own children was mentioned with special pride on their tombstones (Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450–1700*, London-New York: Longman, 1990, p. 133). In general, however, breastfeeding one’s own baby was interpreted as a mark of poverty or out-of-the-ordinary commitment to the child (Mary Abbott, *Family Ties. English Families 1540–1920*, London-New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 48).

Reflections of a specific cultural background can be seen in the level of importance which our visitors attached to privacy, diversity of opinions and freedom of choice. Their culture-specific mentality reveals itself clearly when we analyse their comments concerning religion in Poland. The fundamental fact no Englishman visiting Poland in the late 16th and 17th centuries could ignore was its predominantly Catholic character. Protestantism, which was the religion of our visitors, argued for the private nature of religion, thus it was believed to support and reinforce individualization¹⁹. It echoes in the words written by Fynes Moryson in his *Itinerary* when he describes Catholic practices in Melvin (Elbląg):

The nation is reputed very superstitious in their devotions, and I haue seene the Papists among them adore the Crucifix with their bodyes prostrate on the earth, and when they rose vp not only to signe their faces and brests but their very hinder partes with the signe of the Crosse²⁰.

Clearly, Moryson, as well as other Protestants from the British Isles travelling to Catholic Poland, tended to find in that country what their culture taught them to find. That emotional description of a religious show-off is the best illustration thereof.

When we read Moryson's comments on religious diversity in Poland, it is hard not to have an impression that his opinions reflect the transitional stage between individualism and collectivism England was going through at the turn of the 16th century. How else can we interpret this, far from being neutral, remark: "No people in the world are so much infected with variety of opinions in Religion. Insomuch as it is proverbially sayd that if any man haue lost his religion, he may fynde it in Poland, if it be not vanished out of the world"²¹. Diversity, as it seems, is not perceived as particularly desirable. On the other hand, however, the same author praises Polish tolerance and observes that, in spite of Poland's predominantly Catholic character, other religions are practiced freely²². It appears, therefore, that while looking at the problem of religion in Poland, Moryson is, on the one hand, driven by traditional hostility towards Catholicism, but, on the other, he lets himself be influenced by the ideas of autonomy and tolerance of dissent,

¹⁹ Although it has recently been questioned whether Protestant churches allowed religious freedom to their members (because they did not demand religious toleration in principle, but only as a means to an end – finding the proper religious path, preferably to these churches themselves), it cannot be denied that Protestantism deepened individual responsibility for one's salvation, intensified individual piety and made people more focused on their individual contact with God, experienced in much greater privacy than it was the case in the Catholic Church (Wolfgang Weber, 1996. "Rulers and Subjects: The Absolutist Making of the Individual," in *The Individual in Political Theory and Practice*, ed. Janet Coleman, vol. 6 of *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe*, ed. Wim Blockmans and Jean-Philippe Genet, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 197–8.

²⁰ *Shakespeare's Europe*, p. 282.

²¹ *Shakespeare's Europe*, p. 282.

²² Moryson, *An Itinerary...*, p. 129; Bruce, *A Relation...*, p. 117.

which were becoming popular in England, especially at the end of the 16th and in the first half of the 17th centuries²³.

When we read the texts of our 16th- and 17th-century authors, we learn that one feature which they find particularly positive about Poland is its inhabitants' imagination and resourcefulness. Peter Mundy, for instance, writes about various inventions that help to move on the icy surface in winter:

... the Ice was as sleeke as glasse, hardly now to bee gon upon on Foote, butt For that purpose Men have certaine straps with Nailes in them tied to the soles of their shooes. About Dantzic I have seene them slide with a wooden Invention, having as it were an iron keele, wherewith they will, with little labour, slide away five or six miles in an hower²⁴.

Fynes Moryson, visiting Gdańsk, is impressed by “a faire water conduit, vulgarly called Wasserkunst, where by a mill the waters are drawne up into a cesterne, from whence they are carried by pipes into all streetes and private houses”²⁵. These do not seem to be only the notes on some peculiarities of life in Poland. The very fact that Moryson and Mundy praise Poles for their ingenuity may be indicative of the importance attached to this feature in their native land.

It is also interesting to see how one of our English travellers perceives Polish people's temperament. In the manner typical of cultures in which displaying private emotions is thought of as inappropriate, Fynes Moryson finds it particularly unpleasant about Poles that they are “furious and quarrellsome”²⁶ and that “they are naturally valyent [and] ... subiect to sudden passions, and out of pride apte to take small thinges in worde or deede for scornes and iniuries, and so prone to quarrels, wherein they will assaile with any disparity or advantage of number”²⁷. This inability of Poles to control their emotions is perceived as even more reprehensible when it leads to impulsive behaviour in public. Fynes Moryson makes it quite clear when he praises his fellow citizens for the fact that “... they despise them, who quarrel and fight in the streets publiquely, and doe not rather make private triall of their difference...,” which according to him is exactly the opposite to what Poles are used to doing²⁸.

Another point which is worth considering is how the culture of our authors shaped their ideal of femininity. In the 16th and 17th centuries, an Englishwoman was supposed to be primarily a good wife – patient, loving, sweet, modest, quiet and obedient²⁹. Unfortunately, our visitors do not write much about Polish women

²³ Thomas Munck, *Europa XVII wieku. 1598–1700. Państwo, konflikty i porządek społeczny* Transl. R. Sodół, Warszawa 1998, p. 303.

²⁴ Mundy, *The Travels...*, p. 103.

²⁵ Moryson, *An Itinerary...*, vol. I, p. 131.

²⁶ Bruce, *A Relation...*, p. 3.

²⁷ *Shakespeare's Europe*, p. 407.

²⁸ Moryson, *An Itinerary...* vol. III, p. 407.

²⁹ Abbot, *Family Ties...*, pp. 191–192.

and their relationships with men, so it is very hard to conclude on the basis of their texts to what extent their perception of Polish women was influenced by their own native culture.

Fynes Moryson, who is not particularly interested in this matter, mentions Polish women on two occasions only. The first one is when he writes about hostesses in the inns. They make positive impression on him because they do not, as he writes, expect any money for preparing food (which he has brought with him to the inn) and serving it hot to their guest:

... the Hostesse will give her labour for nothing, except in curtesie you desire her to eate with you, and if you freely give her a small reward, as three pence for the whole Company, she will thinke you deale bountifully with her, but she will aske you nothing³⁰.

He finds this situation quite unusual, considering that in a place like that customers are normally expected to pay for services. Yet from his words we may conclude that at the same time he is pleased to see that in Poland women do what is natural for them to do, i.e. take care of others and do not demand any reward for it. On another occasion, he remarks briefly that “The Polonians are Courteous and kinde hearted, and vse their wiues with much loue and respect, and also these Gentlemen seruants with mildness and affability”³¹. Though this statement is, apparently, to compliment Polish husbands on their fair treatment of their wives, we cannot ignore the fact of putting together in one sentence a wife and a servant, and we may only speculate whether this kind of combination is completely accidental.

Another mention of Polish women is in Peter Mundy’s brief comment on one of the “peculiarities of Dantzic,” namely, a house of correction. What he finds particularly worth mentioning is the fact that one of the inmates is a man who was sent there by his wife’s complaint. He writes that the man had a child by his wife every year, but, as he adds wittily, that was not the reason why he was sent to that place. The actual reason was “misspending his tyme and meanes in Idle company, drinke, etc., which hee should imploy to the Maynetenance off his said wiffe and Children”³². It may be argued that the sheer fact that Mundy treats this story as a rather amusing example of Polish eccentricity proves that he is only reflecting his culture’s masculine conviction that it is improper for a woman to act against her husband. Even if we agree that this is too far-fetched an interpretation and admit that Mundy’s words suggest that he actually sympathizes with the brave woman, it is not improbable that the main reason why he feels sorry for her is that she was married to a man who failed to fulfill his, overtly masculine, role of a responsible breadwinner.

³⁰ Moryson, *An Itinerary...*, vol. IV, p. 72.

³¹ *Shakespeare’s Europe*, p. 90.

³² Mundy, *The Travels...*, p. 185.

So far I have been searching for the traces of the authors' native culture in its 'global' sense. What we have seen are the instances of the modes of perception which were common to our travellers because they were members of the same culture. But the accounts of their experiences in Poland abound also in pieces that give us a chance to learn about who they were in more personal terms.

What we learn about Fynnes Moryson is, for example, that he was a zealous Protestant. With astonishing frequency he uses the word "superstitions" to describe Polish religious practices. And if we remember that he was to become a church minister, it becomes evident that in his *Itinerary* he not only gives vent to typically Anglican attitude towards Catholicism, but his opinions also reflect his own theological experience. Moreover, in his description of Poland we may find many traces of his exceptionally practical nature. His book is addressed to potential travellers, so its main assumption is to provide them with information that would make their journeys as safe and pleasant as possible. But sometimes his love of details seems to reveal something more than a usual, in such cases, wish to be accurate. For instance, he does not limit himself to maintaining that Poland is a cheap country. To this general information he adds extremely detailed lists of prices in the local currency: "I remember wee paid three grosh for a goose, two for a partridge, two for a loyne of mutton, and three for a pigge"³³. This seemingly unimportant thing shows not only his aforementioned practical nature, but also his great experience as a traveller and awareness of what kind of knowledge is useful and important during a journey to a foreign land.

Peter Mundy's text contains very few allusions to its author's personal experiences, but from the observations recorded in his diary, we may conclude that he was a man of remarkably broad views, for whom it was impossible to be bored with the world around him. His text is, in many respects, different from Moryson's. First of all, Mundy exhibits much more passion and excitement in his writing about the people and the places he visits. Moreover, he pays attention to tiny details Moryson tends to ignore. While in both texts we find descriptions of Polish houses, built mostly of wood, and the landscape dominated by thick forests and vast fields of wheat, it was only Mundy who writes about the manner of fishing in frozen waters³⁴, amber in the Baltic Sea³⁵, a hangman, beheading and breaking on the wheel³⁶, or about gardens in Warsaw³⁷. Poland, as it is presented in his diary, appears to be a country very rich in all kinds of attractions, a country almost as fascinating as the main destinations of the Grand Tour. It is possible that it was Mundy's unusual curiosity and open-mindedness that made him see wonders in ordinary things. Another feature that differentiates Mundy's account from the other text is that he uses 'visual aids' and often adds pictures to his descriptions.

³³ Moryson, *An Itinerary...*, vol. I, p. 135.

³⁴ Mundy P., *The Travels...*, pp. 106–107.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 173–177.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 202, 204.

This practice reveals not only his individual sensitivity to visual stimuli, but also his empathy. It seems that any time he finds it difficult to convey to his readers the bewildering customs of the Poles, or is not sure of the comprehensibility of his message, he draws pictures which accompany the text to make it more understandable.

The two texts I have discussed in this article were written by two very different men whose personal histories imprinted themselves on their memories from Poland in very different ways. There is no doubt that for each of them their encounter with Polish culture meant something else and that it was a unique and incomparable experience. The ways they wrote about that experience were also very different. What neither of them, however, managed to escape was translating their personal experience into the only language available to all who write about foreign lands – into the language of their own culture. What I wanted to show is that anybody writing about a foreign culture uses their own cultural identity as a filter. Early modern descriptions of Poland are no exception to this rule and as such they may be used as a rich source of knowledge not only about the world they are supposed to describe, but also about their authors' native culture.

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Streszczenie

Podróżowanie jest jednym z tych najbardziej oczywistych momentów, kiedy człowiek styka się z innością. Intensywność tego przeżycia zależy od wielu wzajemnie się uzupełniających elementów, poczynając od powodów podróży, poprzez związane z nią oczekiwania, aż po jej mniej lub bardziej pozytywne rezultaty. Czynnikiem, który zdaje się jednak najbardziej wpływać na to, jak interpretujemy odmiennosc napotykaną w czasie podróży, jest nasza własna kultura. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przyjrzenia się, w jaki sposób wartości istotne z punktu widzenia mieszkańców Wysp Brytyjskich przybywających do Polski w XVI i XVII wieku kształtowały ich odbiór postrzeganej rzeczywistości. Podstawą analizy są teksty autorstwa Fynesa Morysona i Petera Mundy.