

maturely bald at the age of 30. There was that indefinable mineral quality of a dissenting clergyman.” Note the factual details, the evocative diction, the gradual coming into focus of a seemingly unappealing figure. “And yet,” adds Holmes, “there were nightingales in his story.” That romantic image segues into a brief account of the utilitarian thinker’s impassioned, life-altering love for a married woman.

Sidetracks collects a dozen superb “portraits in miniature” (of poet Thomas Chatterton, ghost-story master M. R. James, and photographer Nadar, among others), essays on the nature of biography and the pleasures of living in France, a couple of radio plays, and even a short story about Dr. Johnson’s first cat. Holmes interleaves this admittedly occasional material with headnotes that touch on freelance journalism, life with novelist Rose Tremain, and the nature of his art: “The great thing was simply to summon up for one moment a living breathing shape, to make the dead walk again, to make the reader see a figure and hear a voice.”

Though clearly a miscellany despite his efforts to link the various sections, *Sidetracks* is as enjoyable as any of Holmes’s more sustained works. It’s also a good introduction to his appealing personality. Opening a piece on James Boswell, for example, Holmes provides just the right flourish: “Biography, like love, begins in passionate curiosity.”

—MICHAEL DIRDA

THE ROYAL ROAD TO ROMANCE.

By Richard Halliburton.

Travelers’ Tales, Inc.

305 pp. \$14.95

FRESH AIR FIEND.

By Paul Theroux. Houghton Mifflin.

466 pp. \$27

Between his birth in 1900 and his disappearance at sea in 1939, Halliburton inspired a generation of travelers, armchair and otherwise. Originally published in 1925 and now back in print, his delightful first book chronicles the 600-day romp around the world that launched his career. Describing himself as a “horizon chaser,”

the young Princetonian rejects his parents’ offer of a grand tour graduation gift and descends instead into what he calls “hobohemia.” Often equipped with only camera and toothbrush, the ever exuberant Halliburton charms his way into and out of adventures ranging from tiger hunting to a pirate attack to arrest as a suspected spy.

But even in the 1920s, the exotic could be elusive. The Spain of reality “brutally” supplants the Spain of his dreams when Halliburton spots a Barcelonan in a dowdy Sears Roebuck dress. And he has to work to dodge organized tour groups. En route to Singapore, he slogs for days through cobra-infested jungles just to avoid the route favored by tourists. A travel agent arranges his most adventurous jaunt, a mule trip to Ladakh in the Himalayas. He gives the agency a tongue-in-cheek plug in the book.

A century after Halliburton’s birth, travel has become the world’s number-one industry. Avoiding the beaten track is even more difficult—a predicament that suffuses Theroux’s second collection of essays. “I hated sightseeing,” he writes. “In an age of mass tourism, everyone sets off to see the same things.” Instead of describing destinations, he focuses on journeys: how he got there and whom he met along the way. Although the essays jump from the Africa of Malawi to the South Pacific of the Trobriands, this method allows Theroux to transform even close-to-home destinations into worthy subjects. By getting to Nantucket under his own power, for instance, the avid kayaker manages to make the overvisited island feel exotic.

Halliburton and Theroux, paramount travel writers of their respective eras, don’t have much in common beyond a shared distaste for tourists. While Halliburton discloses almost nothing of his inner life, Theroux reveals everything from his first sexual fantasy to his hurt at constantly being called grumpy. And while Halliburton coasts on the privileges afforded by white skin, Theroux often rides with the natives and takes pride that his writing predicted the events in Tiananmen Square. Like much else, travel writing has grown more personal and more political. But the underlying drive—a love of trespassing—remains unchanged.

—REBECCA A. CLAY