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Genie Babb

'Preserv[ing] the Freshness of the System': Itineraries of the Body in Alexander Bain's Rhetoric of Travel

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Genie Babb

‘Preserv[ing] the Freshness of the System’: Itineraries of the Body in Alexander Bain’s Rhetoric of Travel

‘While the face of the civilized world is receiving its network of railroads, and the broad sea is becoming narrower by steam power, it may not be unprofitable to take up as a theme of study and discourse, “How to travel.”’ Thus begins a little-known essay by nineteenth-century Scottish polymath Alexander Bain. Since travel is pertinent to an understanding of Anglo-American literary relations, it is instructive to think not just about the travel itself, but also about the theories of travel that informed attitudes and practices. Bain’s advice in this essay draws on the revolutionary (for the time) assumption that the mind/body is a unified system, that physiological processes are intimately bound up with intellectual and aesthetic comprehension and experience. Bain’s essay exemplifies his revolutionary notions, as well as offering a pertinent meditation on the subject of travel. Most importantly for understanding the connections between Scottish intellectual history and the Americas, Bain’s essay exhibits in embryonic form the ideas that were to be deeply influential across the Atlantic, particularly in the teaching of English composition and literature. In Bain’s subsequent works, ‘travel’ was to operate as a central metaphor for how the mind functions, and ‘travel writing’ as the paradigm for effective communication.

Famous in his day for his contributions in the newly emerging field of psychology, Scottish-born Alexander Bain (1818–1903) was also known for his work in rhetoric and educational theory. Of working-class origins and largely self-educated, though with a degree from Marischal College, Bain developed early and lasting professional friendships with such leading figures of the