I can't honestly remember how I began collecting guidebooks. It had something to do, maybe, with an enormous novel, forever in progress, which I wrote as an undergraduate. Set in France, Germany and Italy in the years immediately before 1914, this interminable work, to which I subjected my long-suffering friends, was provisionally entitled *The Marquis, or They Are Not to be Had on the Spot*. The subtitle – chosen out of sheer cussedness, I now have to confess – came from the opening pages of Murray's *Knapsack Guide To Norway* (1869).

In quest of local colour for my narrative I had found myself ransacking Murray, Baedeker and other travel books of the pre-First World War period. My novel may have gone the way of all fictional flesh, but an addiction was born. I soon learned that the name Baedeker should be pronounced not 'Bydeker' or 'Beadeker', but 'Baydeker', the 'ae' being merely a phonetic rendering of the original German 'ä'. Over the years my collection of such volumes grew organically. They now seem to me battered survivors

from the days when second-hand bookshops were run by grubby old curmudgeons in carpet slippers, who did not, unlike their modern avatars, hide the antiquarian stock in locked cases, and who priced their books with a thought or two for the interests of dedicated readers.

In those days, no one had much time for an out-of-date guidebook, especially intellectuals, for whom proper history did not take place on the margins or in ephemeral genres. The prejudices of the day were those of George Steiner, who once complained of Jane Austen that 'at the height of political and industrial revolution, in a decade of formidable philosophical activity, Miss Austen composes novels almost extra-territorial to history'. Yet I have always believed that, for all the fact that she does not discuss the causes of the Napoleonic Wars head-on, Austen gives us the texture of life as it was lived during the first two decades of the nineteenth century in a way that is entirely central to history.

Guidebooks may seem at first glance unreliable witnesses to the past. They date so quickly and their information as to the tourist infrastructure of cities and resorts is rendered worse than useless by the rapidity of socio-economic change. For similar reasons their illustrations, after a very short while, offer embarrassing reminders of the truth enunciated in one of his short stories by Somerset Maugham that 'No day is so dead as the day before yesterday.' Nothing

ever looks quite as sad, in both the traditional and modern senses of that word, as an old guidebook dragged out into the sunlight by a modern traveller.

The truth is, nevertheless, that in the same degree as their usefulness and relevance diminishes, so the significance of guidebooks from an entirely different perspective grows more substantial. Through being gradually rendered 'extra-territorial' in the purely physical sense, they become indispensable companions to another territory entirely, that immense, enduringly resonant space created by the culture and aspirations of an evolving society at a crucial stage in its development. After due seasons of practical use and ensuing neglect, a guidebook renews its existence as a conspectus of what its original purchasers (perhaps more important, in this respect, than its author or publisher) dreamed of, hankered after and eventually succeeded in discovering. Whether as professional historians or as everyday readers anxious for a closer walk with the past, we do wrong in ignoring these books as valid witnesses of their own era.

These books speak as physical artifacts. None of the guides in my collection is in mint condition, and I should be extremely suspicious if that were the case. Admittedly my Baedeker's *Greece* (fourth edition, 1909) has a slight air of never having wandered much further than the bookshop in the Strand where it was originally sold at 3/6d, but the others

are battered and dog-eared with the experience of frequent use and hard travel. Their covers have faded from the original scarlet to interesting shades of rose madder, salmon pink and terra cotta. The various volumes in the Murray's *Handbook* series have been still more roughly handled. Successive ramblers through Anatolia have placed the 1905 *Asia Minor* almost beyond redemption via the loving attentions of a bookbinder, while the *Portugal* evidently spent so many years under a torrid Lusitanian sun, with accompanying splashes of seawater, that its cockled covers have bleached to an earthy beige. Comparatively few of the Murrays preserve the folding maps originally held in a specially-designed wallet inside the book's back board. Here and there, what is more, the traveller has jotted down a little list of expenses, noted the names of hotels not listed in the guide, or added marginal question and exclamation marks beside the author's comments. My copy of the 1913 Baedeker's *Spain and Portugal* belonged to the poet John Masefield, who whiled away an idle Iberian hour by playing a game of telegrams on the fly leaves with his companions. The state of the handwriting suggests that they were on a fast train or a violently rocking ship at the time, and they kept their messages topical – 'Jemima Sailing Aquitania For Los Angeles Or Indies As Last Resort, Alfred,' reads one; 'Maria Has Burned Every Fig Tree, Help! Letitia At Cadiz,' says another.

The archaeology of the guidebook, the sense of it as a place of occupational layers where miscellaneous objects lie scattered in suitably enigmatic confusion, has its own unique poignancy and – to use the word in a continental rather than an English sense – suggestiveness. Which of those trains from Saumur to Angers, whose times he hastily scribbled on the back of a hotel bill tucked into Black's guide to Touraine and Brittany, did R. Hustler of Newton Road, Torquay, finally catch? Who gathered the harebells, meadowsweet and sheepsbit scabius pressed between the pages of Baedeker's *Paris and its Environs*, each marking places so resoundingly urban that the last time a wild flower can have grown there was in the days when Julius Caesar was attacking the Gaulish tribes? As a bookmark for my copy of Appleton's *United States and Canada* someone has used an envelope from one of the state rooms of a transatlantic steamer of the Allen Line out of Liverpool. The envelope was sealed, and I have so far left it unopened.

It's easy to grow sentimental over things like these. Often I like to smell books, and the gamiest of scents float off the pages of an old *Guide Bleu*, a wormy Ward Lock or a damp-speckled exemplar of the Conti series, which covered the various French departments in obsessive detail during the nineteenth century's final decades. A guidebook, by such tokens, becomes a spur to the overactive