



A Sense of the World: How a Blind Man Became History's Greatest Traveler

Jason Roberts

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"He was known as the "blind" traveler, a solitary adventurer who fought the slave trade in Africa, survived a frozen captivity in Siberia, hunted elephants in Ceylon and helped chart the Australian outback. He was James Holman, who lived from 1786 to 1857.

A Sense of the World: How a Blind Man Became History's Greatest Traveler Details

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From Reader Review A Sense of the World: How a Blind Man Became History's Greatest Traveler for online ebook

Jenny says

An amazing biography on a little-known historical figure, John Holman. I think this blurb describes it best:

"He was known simply as the Blind Traveler, a solitary, sightless adventurer who fought the slave trade in Africa, survived a frozen captivity in Siberia, hunted rogue elephants in Ceylon and helped chart the Australian outback. Once a celebrity, a bestselling author and inspiration to Charles Darwin and Sir Richard Francis Burton, the charismatic, witty Holman outlived his fame, dying in an obscurity that has endured--until now."

Jason Roberts does a fantastic job of capturing the spirit of a man who loved to travel under the radar but who would not be ignored. Indeed, this is a rare biographical work that engages the reader thoroughly and makes one hopeful for more such books.

Author website: <http://www.jasonroberts.net/holman.html>

Delcie Bushman says

Wow! What am I so afraid of, that I don't follow my dreams? The whole idea of a blind man, with little monetary means, traveling such distances and with such enthusiasm and awe, is the best example of what people can do when they have the right attitude. (A little determination doesn't hurt, either!) I'm so thankful to Jason Roberts for not letting this story get lost! It's inspiring!

Erika says

This biography takes the reader into the life and times of James Holman (b. 1786), a British Naval officer who becomes blind after a mysterious illness at the age of 25. Well-written, engaging, and informative, this book not only chronicles the incredible adventures and accomplishments of Holman, but deftly escorts the reader into the world of sightlessness, describing such skills as "human echolocation," and such sensations as synesthesia (seeing sound, in Holman's case). Holman circumnavigated the globe, fought the slave trade in Africa, crossed Siberia, and hunted elephants on horseback, which are impressive feats by any standards. Add in the fact that Holman did these all by touch, sound, and smell, and they take on heroic proportions. Holman's journey is one worth reading, and author Jason Roberts makes it a pleasant trip.

Sarah says

Everyone should learn who James Holman is. This guy was extraordinary and totally forgotten by history.

He traveled more extensively throughout the world than anyone else had before him (1820s-1850s) and chose to get off the beaten path (if there even was one at that time) by hanging out in the bush and with natives any chance he got. A totally open-minded and sincere person who documented and experienced cultures we have all-but lost. Oh, did I mention he did this all as a blind man before Braille and almost completely on his own? Anyways, this was a well-written biography and its a shame he was forgotten so soon.

Jennifer says

I struggled through 75-100 pages before I figured out what was troubling me about this book.

It's the kind of book I fear I might write, given my penchant for pursuing scraps of tantalizing historical information, and falling down the rabbit hole in pursuit of the next detail, the next little piece of the picture.

John Holman should be a fascinating subject for a book. Born in 18th-century England, blinded at the age of 25, he rose above society's low expectations and considerable obstacles to become a well-educated traveler and writer. He circumnavigated the globe, had many adventures and published detailed accounts of his travels. He was famous in his day as "the Blind Traveler," but slipped into obscurity after his death in 1857.

I can't fault the author's choice of subject, nor his research, nor his writing skills per se (he's an accomplished journalist and graceful storyteller). His digressions as he explores various aspects of Holman's world can be fascinating in limited quantities: whether it's a discourse on the apothecary's trade, an exploration of the rather horrifying medical practices of the day, or examining the quirks of institutions from knights' orders to the university system, Roberts has unearthed many fascinating tidbits and gems.

The problem is it just doesn't flow. Apart from Holman's four-volume travelogue, primary sources for his life are almost nonexistent today. Roberts tries to fill out his life with various historical investigations; but, being a conscientious journalist, he is careful not to attribute too much to his actual subject. Thus, a long discourse on blindness and its treatments in Georgian England ends with this caveat, "There is no record of the specific treatments endured by Holman." Similarly, Roberts goes into exhaustive detail about the British Navy, setting it in historical and social context, apparently to explain that Holman's brief and unremarkable career MAY have influenced his admission to the Naval Knights of Windsor, against steep odds--but it's a slim thread to cling to, a lot of exposition for a somewhat minor point.

And on it goes. There are fascinating passages, but getting through the whole was a slog. I gave up and skimmed the rest of the book, looking for episodes that caught my eye. I found myself frustrated by the author's explanations, in the afterword, of what he left out: "Holman rather daringly took part in some public protests in China. But to fully explain what he was protesting... would have required a lengthy discussion..." He also dispatches in a single paragraph the fact that Holman's will pointedly excluded his brothers, though the cause for the rift is unknown.

The book is clearly a labor of love. I'll probably keep it around for reference; as I say, lots of interesting digressions (though the source citations are quirky and there is no index). But I think it would have been more successful either greatly compressed, as a feature-length magazine article; or if the writer had gone ahead and taken the leap into fiction.

Obviously, a lot of readers disagree with me; the book was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle

Award, and I've read plenty of enthusiastic reviews. It just doesn't work for me - to my surprise and disappointment.

Karen says

A fascinating, very well-written book about someone you've probably never heard of - James Holman, the "Blind Traveler," who lived from 1786 to 1857.

In this age of Google (Glass, Earth, Maps) it's very hard to remember that there was a time when travelers could still journey to places that were absolutely unmapped and unexplored. Holman did make these journeys, and he did it as a blind man who had very limited means, only the most basic transportation (he mainly walked), and, usually, no companionship (he preferred it that way.) Losing his sight in his 20s, suffering also from serious rheumatic illness, he rejected the inactive, coddled life expected for someone in his position at that time. Instead, he began his travels, writing about them and becoming a well-known and admired figure.

Sadly, though, he became almost forgotten after his death - until Roberts read a short description of him in a book and became obsessed with wanting to know more.

The book follows Holman's life from his birth, to his Navy career, through his many journeys, and into his old age. Reading about Holman's determination to live his life on his own terms, despite the prejudices at the time against blind people in general and blind travel writers in particular, is inspiring.

(Note: the Kindle edition of this book does not include most of the illustrations, including many portraits of Holman. I strongly suggest getting the paperback version instead.)

Austin Outhavong says

this book seems to give a good picture about the following things i have never experienced:

1. being blind
 2. living in the 19th century
 3. being in the british navy
 4. the nature of world travel before there was a world tourism industry
 5. the nature of the medical profession in england in the 19th century
-

Sue says

James Holman joined the Royal Navy in the mid-1700s to see the world. When he gradually became blind, he decided that travel was the only way to stay healthy and sane. He ended up traveling thousands of miles around the world.

Holman's accomplishments are astonishing not just for their time, but for the fact he often traveled to foreign countries alone, not knowing the language or anyone there. The book also contains the best description I have ever read about how a blind person uses the textures of the world to move about in it.

Tracey says

A chance encounter in a library led the author to discover James Holman (1786–1857). Son of a shopkeeper, James rises to lieutenant in the British Navy right around the War of 1812. He is forced out of the Navy due to medical issues (blindness as well as rheumatic arthritis) and although nearly penniless, finds he is in the best of health when travelling in exotic countries and climes. ... alone.

Holman's charm and cunning nets him excursions to the Americas, Africa and the Orient - hunting slavers or exploring the depths of a continent. He climbs Mt. Vesuvius during its active phase and even travels nearly the width of Mother Russia before being turned back due to the Tsar's politics.

His travel memoirs made him wildly popular at first, then his blindness became a drawback - if a blind man could do all these things, how difficult could they be? Interest in his exploits flagged and James Holman faded into obscurity.

Roberts presents a thrilling tale of success against adversity - keeping Holman human, while celebrating his achievements. Recommended to anyone interested in historical travel.

Carrie says

This book is a biography and travel account of Englishman: James Holman (1786- 1857). During his life, he became "the most accomplished traveler of all time", covering no less than a quarter of a million miles in his circumnavigation of the world.

It is exceptional that a person ventured of his own initiative (with an impulse towards the exotic)- but perhaps even more epic, because this solo traveler was blind.

The Blind Traveler wrote more than 5 books, regarded himself of equal to any seeing task, and rarely commented on his loss of sight. Only in his final book, and autobiography did he write about the world that blindness had closed up to him, and the one it had opened up.

Fascinating ~ what moves people to action and how perspective and attitude can help change the world.

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Notes:

p.67

"Contrary to popular conception, the remaining senses of the blinded person do not become more acute. They become more eloquent. A blind hears no better than he did when sighted; the change is wrought in his ability to extract new meanings from familiar sounds. Touch is not increased, but its role is heightened. It is called upon for more than the blunt confirmation of contact. The shift from raw sensation to refined perception arises from a cultivation of attention."

p.135

"Holman was ready to continue his own transformation. He'd started this journey as a frail invalid, a bit of human baggage. He'd bloomed into an expatriate, a tourist, then an active, questing, and questioning traveler. Now he was ready to become an adventurer."

Cassandra Kay Silva says

So inspiring! Holman really blew me away! What industry and what a sense of adventure, and a strong sense of self you must possess to confidently travel in this way. I am so upset at the author though! Bah on you for writing such an important and legendary hero in such a transparently boring fashion! A hundred stars for the main character and negative a hundred for the writer. Fie! What an opportunity to explore allusion and description in a novel focusing on someone who must use all these other senses. How could you stuff this up? I have to give it a good rating though because this man's life must be known, it's an impossibly beautiful tale despite the author's botching of it.

Heather says

This was a timely read. I've been thinking a lot lately about eyesight and world travel and this is an interesting book about the life and travels of James Holman - a man born in England in the late 1700s. After several years in the navy and other illnesses he suddenly finds himself blind. Even though this leaves him with little support and opportunities, it doesn't stop him from living his life fully. He finds a way to take care of himself and even to travel the world and write about his adventures. He is still little known, but it's quite remarkable to think about the courage he had to explore and experience the world.

Here are a few quotes that I liked:

"He insisted on walking over places where we could hear the crackling effects of the fire on the lava beneath our feet, and on a level with the brim of the new crater, which was then pouring forth showers of fire and smoke, and lava, and occasionally masses of rock of amazing dimensions, to an enormous height in the air (p. 2)."

"Geographic knowledge was discontinuous and often sketchy, shaped more by the need to navigate trade routes than to gain a comprehensive understanding of the world. Coastlines of trade-rich regions like India

or Sumatra were well mapped, but with an accuracy that degraded rapidly away from the principal ports. Outside of Europe and pockets of the New World, interiors were still largely uncharted, with rivers running vaguely through guessed-at regions (p. 13)."

"I felt an irresistible impulse to become acquainted with as many parts of the world as my professional avocations would permit...and I was determined not to rest satisfied until I had completed the circumnavigation of the globe (p. 20)."

"Clear eyesight is a requirement for every Royal Navy lieutenant. Holman had experienced no prior problems with his vision--had never even required spectacles--yet on an otherwise ordinary day he found himself cupping his face in his hands, struggling to maintain his composure. Something was wrong with his eyes (p. 55)."

"In 1811, even the most enlightened medical professional knew no more about the eye than might a curious butcher (p. 61)."

"Uncertainty is itself an affliction. His eyes had failed at the height of summer. By the beginning of spring Holman was desperate, not for a cure so much as a means to rationally comprehend what was happening to him. 'The suspense which I suffered, during the period when my medical friends were uncertain of the issue...appeared to me a greater misery than the final knowledge of the calamity itself (p. 66).'"

"He did not wear a rag around his eyes. Nor did he shirk from the gaze of others....'Others hear, but not as do the blind. He concentrates his very soul while he listens, and can detect the slightest variations, the finest fractional point of tone...they tell minutely all the alteration of welcome, of regard, of coldness, pleasure, pain, joy, reproof, and all that fill the measure of his misery or his mirth.' Holman began to use his ears not only to read people, but to read the landscape (p. 75)."

"Holman was an unusual blind man in another respect. He learned how to write. In the era of featherquill pens, the act of writing required a number of skills (p. 77)."

"The reliance on the verbal, not the visual, made for an educational experience that would hardly be recognizable as such by today's university standards. But it also made the dreams of a blind student not entirely possible. To learn was to listen (p. 102)."

"Blindness, compounded by silence, had made Holman all too easy for everyone to ignore....Henceforth he cultivated the skill of subtly reaffirming his status as a human being, observing every wordless courtesy and taking pains to speak with a geniality that needed no translation. Decades later, fellow travelers encountering him for the first time would be struck by how easily and quickly his voice assumed 'the earnest tone of an ancient friendship.' It was a genuine sociability, but also a measure against slipping into invisibility (p. 115)."

"His journey had reacquainted him with...the invigorating embrace of risk, the engrossing immersion in the unknown (p. 122)."

"When he felt his own powers of description were inadequate to evoke a strongly visual scene, he unabashedly borrowed from published accounts by sighted travelers (p. 149)."

"Go...and wander with the illiterate and almost brutal savage!--go and be the companion of the ferocious beast!--go and contemplate the human being in every element and climate...It is only by patience,

perseverance, and humility, by reducing thyself to the lowest level of mankind, that thou canst expect to pass through the ordeal with either safety or satisfaction (p. 181)."

"Notwithstanding his blindness...his readers will not fail to derive gratification from accompanying him (p. 215)."

"A Naval Knight was, by definition, 'aged or infirm,' but a young man mustering the strength to gallivant across a third of the globe seemed to meet neither criteria (p. 226)."

"While other travelers were content to cling to increasingly Europeanized population centers (with occasional day trips to take in local color), Holman had experienced in both Siberia and Fernando Po the exhilaration that came only from venturing off the maps. Hearing a foreign language spoken and eating exotic foods were no longer sufficient distraction from his afflictions. Henceforth his travels would usually comprise a cursory survey of cities, then a beeline for the wilderness (p. 260)."

"By the summer of 1836, after five consecutive leave rejections, he was genuinely suffering from the effects of idleness....'We find him much out of health, being greatly emaciated, and in a state of nervousness, approaching to melancholy. All these complaints we attribute to the sedentary habits and confinement of his College residence...and for which we have no hesitation in recommending him immediate change of air and scene (p. 297)."

"The only chance remaining to the said James Holman of ultimate restoration to health would be afforded by a continual change of scene and of climate, together with the unrestrained exercise of his mental and physical powers prolonged for a period of at least three years (p. 307)."

"By October of 1846...his travels totaled no less than a quarter of a million miles. While other contemporary, professional travelers, such as Cochrane, had racked up impressive mileages, none could even approach the achievements of the Blind Traveler. He could claim a thorough acquaintance with every inhabited continent, and direct contact with at least two hundred distinctly separate cultures....Alone, sightless, with no prior command of native languages and with only a wisp of funds, he had forged a path equivalent to wandering to the moon (p. 320)."

"Some difficulties meet, full many. I find them not, nor seek for any (p. 347)."

"Holman's obscurity has become almost total. But the blind remember the Blind Traveler....'To be sure, many blind persons have been cowed by the myth of helplessness into remaining in their sheltered corners...Holman's story is important for its demonstration that blind people could wear seven-league boots almost two centuries ago--before Braille or the long cane, before residential schools or vocational rehabilitation.' There will never be another James Holman, a sightless person dedicating a lifetime to ranging the entire world 'alone, without counsel, and without attendance,' as he put it (p. 351)."

"To discover the unknown is not a prerogative of Sinbad, of Eric the Red, or of Copernicus. Each and every man is a discoverer. He begins by discovering bitterness, saltiness, concavity, smoothness, harshness, the seven colors of the rainbow and the twenty-some letters of the alphabet; he goes on to visages, maps, animals and stars. He ends with doubt, or with faith, and the almost certainty of his own ignorance...I have shared the joy and surprise of finding sounds, languages, twilights, cities, gardens and people, all of them distinctly different and unique (p. 354)."

"Conscious, sensory-rich travel--a process of awareness, not a means of conquering distance--is beginning

to make a comeback. In the last century, the race was to provide speed and comfort in ever increasing quantities, to make journeying a sort of blank spot between destinations...Each summer, the Italian countryside now plays host to people exploring it as Holman had...at a companionable walking pace...There will never be another James Holman. But there will always be people who must summon the courage to plunge, wholeheartedly, into a world complex beyond our illusions of comprehension (p. 354)."

"On the summit of the precipice, and in the heart of the green woods...there was an intelligence in the winds of the hills, and in the solemn stillness of the buried foliage, that could not be mistaken. It entered into my heart, and I could have wept, not that I not see, but that I could not portray all that I felt (p. 355)."

"Time, if not space, renders all of us travelers. Cling as we might, we are ultimately compelled to let go of the familiar, to forge affinities with the new, and to sense the approach of the more unfamiliar still. We feel our way. If we are as fortunate as the Blind Traveler, we are given the grace to listen, with equal attention, to the intelligence of winds and the solemnity of silence. To remain, joyfully, awake to the path itself (p. 355)."

Mukikamu says

I have read an amazing book about a blind traveler in the XIXth Century. Jason Roberts has done a priceless job in bringing this role-setting man to life again. The book is truly breathtaking. Holman's adventures sound like very far-fetched fiction. It's insane how he could travel the world alone at those times. To top it all, it turns out his only pal was deaf. Here are some of the many incredible things he managed to achieve alone with very limited funds and no sight at all:

explore the Brazilian jungle

travel through Siberia

go elephant hunting on horseback in the jungles of Sri Lanka and actually shoot a gun in action

travel on horseback across uncivilized parts of South Africa

climb the mast of a sailing ship

negotiate for the English with nomad tribes without understanding a word of their language

climb the Vesuv before eruption

It's so unbelievable your jaw drops!

Remember the name of James Holman. It has been forgotten long enough.

<http://mukikamu.wordpress.com>

Jeff says

This is one of the more interesting biographies I've read. It's in a similar vein to *The Professor and the Madman* in that it explores a period in time as well as an idea as much as it does the life of a single individual. In this one, James Holman, the Blind Traveler, certainly is the central focus of the story, but it is wrapped in the early 19th century world in regards to its ideas about travel and Roberts exploration of blindness. Overall he has written a gripping, fascinating tale.

Sheila says

An interesting man who went from being a naval lieutenant who suffered from joint pain then became blind and traveled the world alone. Fascinating! And this all takes place from 1787-1857. James Holman was an apothecary/shop owner's son who was destined to follow in his father's footsteps when family fortunes changed. He goes to the Navy at 12 and expects to be there for the rest of his life but his health turns bad and he must retire on half-salary. He becomes a Naval Knight of Windsor to retain his half-salary. He absents himself a lot from his duties as he travels the world. What he does and how he learns his way around with short funds and limited language skills is remarkable.

I loved that the history of the time is explained and that what is happening in the countries he explores is also given. That he often is on naval vessels and helps is remarkable. I also enjoyed seeing the societal downsides of his times. He is a remarkable man. I am glad the bookseller recommended it as I was checking out. Excellent read!
