For centuries, depictions of the wider world have been important to the self-understanding of Europeans. During the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, in particular, the process of gathering information about peoples and places beyond the borders of Europe gained new importance to both the external geopolitical projects of European states and their internal philosophical and scientific cultures. From the era of the Cook voyages onwards, expeditionary travel acquired a new level of public prestige and scientific seriousness. Related to this, travel literature grew in popularity, becoming an important vehicle for philosophical reflection and, occasionally, political critique. Throughout this period, travel writing was entangled in fascinating ways with European domestic politics.

This paper explores the politics of travel literature in France during an era that stretches from the end of the ancien régime, through the turbulence of the Revolutionary decade, and into the first years of Napoleonic Empire. It tracks the rambles and writings of a single voyager, a renowned travelling philosopher named Constantin-François Volney, from Egypt in the 1780s to the United States in the 1790s and back to France during the Empire. In doing so, it offers reflections on continuities and transformations in travel writing as it passed from an ‘old world’ to ‘a new one’, in France as much as further afield.

Dr Alexander Cook is a Lecturer in the School of History, RSSS, at the ANU. He is also co-editor of the journal History Australia. He writes mostly on the intellectual history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe including, recently, the co-authored book Representing Humanity in the Age of Enlightenment (Pickering and Chatto, 2013). This paper is linked to the ARC project Revolutionary Voyages? (DP140100611).