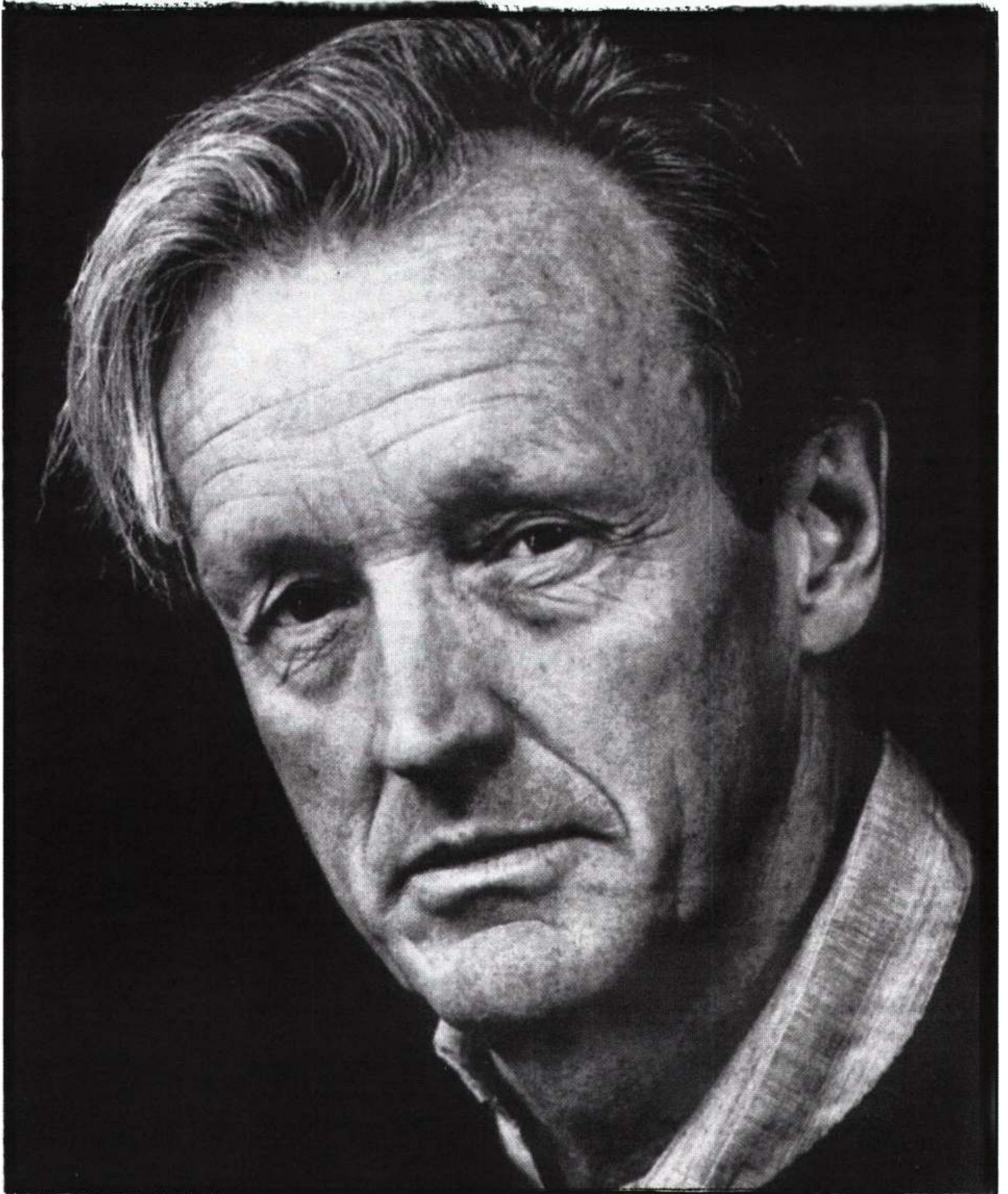




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Thubron's silk read

Colin Thubron is the traveller who goes where many won't, a true adventurer. **Bron Sibree** reports Thubron's latest journey into the unknown is to the Perth Writers Festival with his new book.

It's often called the most romantic journey in the world. But Colin Thubron is quick to remind you that the fabled Silk Road "is a very tough tough area to go through". When Thubron decided to set out three years ago on his 11,270km journey along this age-old trade route at the age of 65, "it was because I always do things out of a kind of gut instinct. I don't take a pen to a map and think where shall I go?" he explains.

"It's just something that makes me feel I've got to write about this area, something that gives me a charge... the Silk Road used to be the most populous trade route that existed. Now its pretty desolate and goes through some of the toughest countries in Asia, and some of the most disturbed."

Not that Thubron, now 68, has ever shrunk from hardship in his four-decade-long career as an award-winning travel writer. The author of such celebrated tomes as *Among the Russians*, *Behind the Wall*, *In Siberia* and *The Lost Heart of Asia* habitually eschews a camera, all personal comforts and devotes himself to learning local languages and history before he travels. As is his habit, too, he travelled from China into Central Asia across the Taklamakan desert, and on through Afghanistan and Iran into Turkey, by whatever local means he could find — crowded public buses, camel, donkey trap, horse or by foot.

"All my life I've been writing about Central Asia, Islam, Russia, and China and I just wanted to go back, really, in a book that would connect them all, and the one thing that connects them all, of course, is the Silk Road."

But as he reveals in his account of this journey, *The Shadow of The Silk Road*, "to follow The Silk Road is to follow a ghost", because the road has "officially vanished, leaving behind it only the pattern of its restlessness; counterfeit borders, unmapped peoples".

Shadows and ghosts populate this extraordinary book, his ninth travel book so far (he has also written seven novels), as it evokes silken commerce, unspeakable hardships, long forgotten tragedies, awe, mystery, romance and not a little comedy in such transcendent measure that it reminds you just why writer Jan Morris, described Thubron as "one of the two or three best living travel writers, in some ways probably the best".

And as Thubron speaks down the ailing telephone line of a rundown hotel in Florida's Everglades where

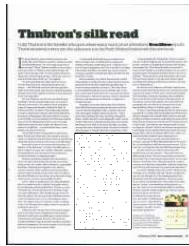
he is holidaying with his girlfriend of 14 years, you are reminded, too, that his penchant for travelling rough is no mere affectation. After abandoning his room for the lobby phone, the only one in the establishment that works, he laments sotto voce so the manager cannot hear: "It's typical of my sort of hotel, in that it's falling to bits. But I thought there might at least be one phone working in one room."

Thubron is the real deal. Few travel writers inspire such trust as this veteran Englishman who acquired Mandarin and Russian in middle age in order to better communicate with people he meets. He's both the intrepid hitchhiker's pin-up and the armchair traveller's preferred companion. He travels rougher in his 60s than most Gen Y-ers, yet never misses a beat.

It's often said of him that he goes to places most other travellers can't, so deftly does he conjure the shadows of the past inside the present. "I think I have a sort of visual imagination and I like to be able to envisage what a place was like in an earlier age, not just what its economy or policies were like but what it looked like and smelt like," he says.

But he concedes, too, that he has accrued a wealth of knowledge over the years that colours his lyrical prose and lends his books their celebrated scholarly edge. "I do an enormous amount of research. That takes about a year and half usually for my travel books and, in this case, at least that. By the time I start a journey my head is full of the past as well as the present, which is sometimes relevant, and sometimes you discard it completely. A strange business."

He admits he has also taken a big risk in *Shadow of the Silk Road* by punctuating his narrative with the voice of a fictional Sogdian trader, a ghostly alter-ego who interrogates Thubron about his motives. "I have never done anything like that, anything a bit playful, before. I didn't intend it. It just happened, really. I wrote it rather like poetry without knowing what was coming but always in the back of my mind I thought, I'm going to scrap this when I finish the book. But when I looked at these passages, I thought they had an importance and I kept them."



These passages not only underscore Thubron's uncanny ability to connect with the past but his continuing compulsion, evident in almost all his travel books, to sift through the detritus of centuries and civilisations for clues to understanding not just certain societies but to the how and why of us now. "I'm always interested in what makes a civilisation tick, what makes us tick, where the heart of us is, where people put their trust, whether it's an individual or a civilisation. What seems to be its real kernel, its crux, and I guess that goes with the persons in the past in my case. I'm interested in abstract values, really, as well as the material."

But it's the humanity and perception he brings to his encounters with the living that render Thubron such a favourite. Whether it's getting drunk with local truck drivers, sharing his meal with an elderly Russian beggar in Uzbekistan or having emergency dental work in Iran, he never fails to transform the experience into a cultural excavation.

"All those things that go wrong are, in a way, meat and drink to the traveller," he says. "If I was just travelling for ordinary vacation, that experience at the dentist would have been just pure misery. As it was, it gave insight into the Iranian way of life. I couldn't have had an easier time than I did in Iran, the so-called axis of evil."

"Their outward courtesy to me, and rather more, was absolutely immaculate."

Thubron came to travel writing in 1967, writing *Mirror to Damascus* at the age of 28, after stints in publishing and as a freelance filmmaker in Turkey, Japan and Morocco. He continued to write about the Middle East in *The Hills of Adonis: A Quest in Lebanon* (1968) and *Jerusalem* (1969).

"I was fascinated by writing first. I just love words. I was one of those children that wrote horrible poetry." His mother, a relative of English poet laureate John Dryden, encouraged this. Then when his father was posted to America and Canada as a military attache, he was sent to boarding school in England and flown back to the US on holidays. "That gave me an early fascination with travel. The two came together in my late teens when I began travelling and nothing seemed more natural to me than to be writing about it."

He cites the early influence of Patrick Leigh Fermor and Freya Stark but feels he hit his own writing style with *Journey into Cyprus* (1975), but it was his much lauded 1983 bestseller, *Among the Russians*, that established him as one of finest travel writers of his generation. To this day, he cannot fully explain even to himself what prompted him to set off into the Soviet Union in his battered Morris Minor in 1980 in order to write it.

"It was not anything anybody did. But for some reason I just dared to. I'd had a bad road accident in 1978 and was laid up in hospital with a broken back, and it set my mind swirling. I decided I wanted to walk along the great wall of China but permission was refused, however many avenues I tried to take. And then the next thing seemed to be just to charge into Russia. I think it was because my generation was brought up to be afraid of the Soviet Union, the Great Russian Bear, and of the Chinese Yellow Peril, and it was these lands that I wanted to put a human face to."

From that time on, he has also flourished as a novelist, winning the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award for *A Cruel Madness*, while his most recent novel, *To the Last City*, was long-listed for the 2002 Man Booker Prize.

In some senses his novels are concerned with shadow lands, too, he concedes. "They come from very different parts of me. They are often rather personal and introverted. They're not typical travel writers' novels at all. When a travel book's over, I feel that the force I need for writing a novel has been lying fallow. And after doing that, I get sick of myself and want to go and travel somewhere."

Currently "fiddling with a new novel", Thubron says: "Writing can be absolute hell. But I do get a satisfaction out of it, hard though it is." He remains powered by a fascination with the world and says: "It always seems to me curious that people don't travel rather more than they do. I mean, I travel whether writing about it or not. But I can't travel with anybody while I'm working. Nobody would be stupid enough to go with me and you need to be alone. You have to be isolated in a sense and not have the comfort of falling back into, as it were, some Western cultural norms. I find it's harder, it's tougher," he adds, "but it's much more productive."

Shadow of the Silk Road, published by Vintage (Random house), \$24.95. Colin Thubron will be a guest of the Perth Writers Festival and will speak at the Octagon Theatre next Saturday.

