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The Story behind My Uncle's Copy of Il Milione

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Cover Page Footnote

Works Cited 1. Alfred Webb, "William Marsden- Irish Biography", Library Ireland, 29 Sept. 2019, <https://libraryireland.com/biography/WilliamMarsden.php> 2. Joan Stahl, "Jon Corbino", 30 Sept. 2019, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/jon-corbino-991> 3. Ken Jeremiah, "Is Marco Polo a Fictional Character? Challenging the Historical tale of the Merchant Traveler", Ancient Origins, 29 Sept. 2019, <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history/marco-polo-fictional-character-challenging-historical-tale-merchant-traveler-006945> 4. Jalics, Kristi. Interview by Janos Jalics. Personal Interview. Akron, September 20, 2019 5. Robert Stewart. *Mysteries of History*, National Geographic Society: London, Eng., 2003 6. "The History of Doubleday", Random House, 30 September 2019, <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/history/>

The Story behind My Uncle's Copy of *Il Milione*

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Life craves adventure or rather something beyond the mundane. Adventure is often achieved abroad in places far beyond a comfort zone. Sometimes it is achieved by taking dangerous risks near home or by escaping into a story. About thirty-six years ago, my uncle Laci received a red hardcover book titled *Travels* by Marco Polo for his fourteenth birthday from my great-uncle Paul his wife Kristi. This book stayed in my grandparents' house after my uncle moved out and it became a gift from my grandfather to me. This may have been a seemingly mundane birthday gift, but the story behind the gift is just simply so much more, putting adventure at its center.

The story of Marco Polo's *Travels* is an old and familiar tale to anyone who has studied Medieval history. Marco Polo was a Venetian merchant born in 1254 to the merchant Niccolo Polo. His father and his uncle Maffeo spent most of Marco's childhood abroad in the vast Mongol Empire. They returned to Venice in 1269 with a letter to the pope from the empire's ruler Kublai Khan. They soon returned to the empire with Marco at their side and Marco recounted their adventures in *Travels*, also known as *Il Milione*¹. The book had awed the world since its 1296 publication thanks to a combination of accuracy, exoticism, and wild stories. These qualities led to many seeking out adventure and the most famous example is Columbus' journey to the Americas with a copy of the book in tow. This book inspired adventure and fascinated its audience with the ability to escape the mundane world.

It is nearly impossible to speak of Polo's *Il Milione* without speaking of the controversy around its authenticity. This debate was likely just as heated as it is today, and Polo supposedly spited his critics by telling a monk on his deathbed that he had not told half of what he saw. One example of this dubious authenticity is when Marco claims that he, his father, and his uncle designed siege engines during the Siege of XiangYang in 1273. However, the siege engines were known to have been of Islamic design and the city was captured before the Polos arrived

¹ Robert Stewart. *Mysteries of History*. London: National Geographic Society, 73.

in China². It is also possible that some of the book's inaccuracies may also come from the fact that Marco did not actually write *Il Milione*. The book was written by Rustichello da Pisa, a man who once shared a cell with Marco Polo. Rustichello's most famous work prior to Marco Polo's *Travels* was *Roman de Roi Arturus (King Arthur's Romance)*, another addition to the vast medieval library of Arthurian Romance³. Unsurprisingly, this made it likely that Rustichello was more interested in writing something fantastical rather than something accurate. However, there is enough evidence in the book's detail such as his description of Japan that many believe that he visited Kublai Khan. Overall, the exoticism and dubious authenticity of the book lends to how much adventure is inspired by it.

The translator for this copy, William Marsden, had an adventurous life that was all its own. He lived from 1754 to 1836, making him a witness to the effects of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. The man spent much of his life studying the Far East, specifically modern-day Indonesia. He even authored a book titled *History of Sumatra* as part of his study of the area shortly after a visit to the island. This interest in the Far East likely led him to translate Marco Polo's *Travels* in 1817⁴. While Polo likely never visited Indonesia, he likely traded for the area's spices during his travels in the Mongol Empire. Marsden also worked as Secretary of the Admiralty from 1795 to 1807, making him one of the first Englishmen to hear of the death of Horatio Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar⁵. Nelson enjoyed heroic status throughout the British Empire and hearing the news must have been hard on Marsden. Even through the translator, the book continues to excite with adventure.

This copy of Marco Polo's *Travels* was illustrated by Jon Corbino, an Italian artist born in 1905 and died in 1964. His style, as documented by many pieces in the Smithsonian, evoked Baroque with heroic animals and people in

² Robert Stewart. *Mysteries of History*. London: National Geographic Society, 75.

³ Ken Jeremiah, "Is Marco Polo a Fictional Character? Challenging the Historical tale of the Merchant Traveler", 29 Sept. 2019, <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history/marco-polo-fictional-character-challenging-historical-tale-merchant-traveler-006945>

⁴ Alfred Webb, "William Marsden- Irish Biography", 29 Sept. 2019, <https://libraryireland.com/biography/WilliamMarsden.php>

⁵ Alfred Webb, "William Marsden- Irish Biography", 29 Sept. 2019, <https://libraryireland.com/biography/WilliamMarsden.php>

violent scenes⁶. While his style is miniaturized and done in black and white for the book, it is still more than adequate for the book's depiction of the Mongol Empire's violent history. He worked primarily in New York City and Rockport Massachusetts. Corbino certainly knew how to capture adventure in this book and throughout his work.

This book was published by Doubleday and Company in 1948 in Garden City, New York. This company was founded by Frank Nelson Doubleday who had the aid of the magazine publisher Samuel McClure as Doubleday and McClure Company. A famous book published by them was *A Day's Work* by Rudyard Kipling. The company is still around today under the ownership of Random House⁷. As shown by their willingness to publish a translation of Polo's *Travels* and their willingness to work with the author of *The Jungle Book*, they are just another adventurous company in the story of this book.

The story of how this book got to my uncle Laci seems comparatively mundane. My grandparents, my great-aunt, and my great-uncle all loved giving books as birthday or Christmas gifts. My library is lined with their books and many have a little inscription wishing me a happy day. Those inscriptions are sometimes the best part of the gift but even years later, they are the hardest to read sometimes. These notes are hard to read because of the heartfelt happiness written inside. I imagine that my uncle had a similar experience with this copy of Marco Polo's *Travels*. Birthday parties are big with my family with just about every relative nearby making plans to attend and buying gifts. I managed to interview my great-aunt about the book recently and she recalled purchasing it at a bookstore but not much else. This party occurred in March 1983, about two years after my great-aunt and great-uncle bought a cottage in Chataqua. The cottage had insecure foundations in its early years and my father and my uncles came to fix them. Laci came the most often and through their efforts, the cottage stands to this day. This likely went through Paul and Kristi's minds as they purchased the book and they thought that Laci might like it⁸. The book stayed in my grandfather's library until

⁶ Joan Stahl, "Jon Corbino", 30 Sept. 2019, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/jon-corbino-991>

⁷ "The History of Doubleday", 30 September 2019, <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/history/>

⁸ Jalics, Kristi. Interview by Janos Jalics. Personal Interview. Akron, September 20, 2019

it came into my hands many years later. This book was part of a family trend, hoping for my uncle to have as many adventures as Marco Polo.

Adventure is a consistent theme throughout the story of this copy of Marco Polo's *Travels*. First, Marco Polo and Rustichello Da Pisa wrote about the former's adventures in the Mongol Empire. Then, the translator William Marsden had his own adventures in Indonesia. The publisher ventured through owners and even worked with Rudyard Kipling. My great-aunt Kristi and my great-uncle Paul gave this book to Laci with adventure in mind. My uncle certainly had his adventures not unlike Marco Polo and so did I.