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Reading Identities in Landscapes and Stereotypes

Historians and literary critics certainly recognize the close connection between tourism and identity. Leisure travel is often about finding the “other,” about locating the exotic. As Michel Peillon pointed out some years ago, prestige is accrued by venturing as far from home, culturally if not also geographically, as possible.[1] It follows that tourists have a vested interest in discovering difference, while hosts are compelled to present themselves as distinct. As a result, both sides of the tourism equation are thrust into a direct confrontation with the question: “Who am I and what culture do I come from?”

The challenge for students of tourism and identity is to explore how such questions are actually worked out. William H. A. Williams’s *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character* is the second book in the past three years to examine the question of national identity and tourism in the North Atlantic archipelago through the pen of travel writers. The first was Katherine Haldane Grenier’s *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770-1914* (2005). Williams’s results are compelling, the book well written and engaging.

Through extensive use of a range of pre-famine travel narratives, Williams develops an argument whereby early English tourists to Ireland initially arrived seeking sublime and beautiful landscapes, gradually turned their attention to the Irish people, and then later turned their focus back to the landscape after the potato famine depopulated the countryside. Fueled by a much wider late eighteenth-century desire to feel hearts flutter at natural sites/sites, English visitors rushed to such places as Killarney, Co. Kerry to gaze upon rocky hillsides and across wild lakes. Irish landscapes struck English visitors as shockingly different, even horrifyingly exotic. Initially, while gaping at the hills and rocks, tourists made every effort to ignore the poverty that stood out against the barren hillsides as a blight on the scenery. Yet, given the extraordinary overpopulation of western Ireland, the people were not be blotted out.

Over time, the rural poor emerged as a tourist sight/site. The Irish peasant was quite different, or so English travelers imagined, from their English counterparts. Cottages lacked chimneys, farmers inhabited the same living space as pigs, and dung heaps were piled directly in front of decidedly unpicturesque cottages that were strewn willy-nilly beside the roadways. The people were often nearly naked, wearing clothes that seemed more holes than cloth. These creatures dined on half-cooked potatoes, always leaving “the bone” in because, in the words of one Irish peasant, “we always have our praties hard, they stick to our ribs, then we can fast longer that way” (p. 98). Ignoring the reality of extreme English scarcity, Anglo-Irish travel writers assumed that Irish poverty must be indicative of some considerable moral failing.

The determination that the Irish must be lazy and morally lax generated a renewed interest in the landscape. The beauty of Irish scenery reinforced for many visitors the notion that there must be something wrong with the Irish people. If the land was aesthetically pleasing, English visitors assumed, then it must also be agriculturally productive. It followed that if the Irish people would simply show a little old-fashioned English initiative they could grow more than potatoes. If the Irish would just throw their backs into it, they could create the same ordered countryside that the English enclosure movement had generated in England: the ratty Irish hedges might be replaced by primly cropped English shrubs, and the ramshackle Irish rock walls (which were actually
built to resist fierce gales) might be replaced by neatly stacked English-style walls. Indeed, if the Irish would only be more English, then Ireland might become a positively wealthy country.

On the eve of the Great Famine, many travel writers remarked on the extraordinary vulnerability of Ireland to disaster. The average diet consisted of twelve to fourteen pounds of potatoes daily, usually with a small amount of buttermilk and possibly a tiny portion of animal fat. As monotonous as the food was, it was also rich in nutrients. Thus, Irish peasants were both more strapping and numerous than were English ones. Ireland was woefully overpopulated on the eve of the famine, raising the risks associated with crop failure to catastrophic levels. When Phytophthora infestans, a fungal potato blight, struck Ireland starting in 1845 and recurred repeatedly through 1852, the death rate was dizzying. Nearly one million died and millions more ultimately emigrated. Where once the western seaboard was overpopulated, with houses stretching far up on rock-strewn hillsides, now it was marked by rapidly decaying ruins. Many writers wrote of the potential for redevelopment and suggested that, while terrible, perhaps the famine might ultimately result in positive change.

English settlers were urged to move to such areas as Connemara, and travel writers enthused about how an English example might finally result in the Anglicized improvement for which the country virtually cried out. Bogs would be drained. Crops would be planted. Canals would be built and Galway town transformed into a busy seaport—just like places in England. Of course, it was not to be. The west of Ireland is not a suitable place to farm, at least not in a cost-effective manner. Instead, the west evolved into a tourist utopia. As in the past, and in increasing numbers, English tourists flocked to see what their relentless thirst for difference created as the “real Ireland.”

Williams concludes with a paradox. English tourists, he suggests, helped make the west truly Irish. These “strangers” had “long regarded the West as the essential Ireland.” Now, after the famine, the Irish repackaged this personification for nationalist purposes. For those anxious to break free of British rule, the west became “the cultural heartland’ of Irish Ireland, an ‘idealized landscape, populated by an idealized people’” (pp. 193-194). Just as English tourists imagined connections between landscape and character, so too did Irish nationalists, only now the negative comparisons that English tourists made between themselves and the Irish were transformed into positives. The “true” Ireland reemerged as a symbol for separatists anxious for independence. Whereas English travelers long dreamed of making Ireland English, now the Irish themselves sought to take back the country.

Williams’s account is loaded with fascinating anecdotes. His relentless desire to offer readers not only English perceptions of Irish life but also a more fact-based reality provides those not already versed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Irish social history a worthy introduction. For tourism scholars there is even more of interest. Through both careful analysis of primary sources and an able use of existing theory, Williams demonstrates how tourism-inspired discourse shaped both English and Irish identities. On the one hand, and as noted above, the Irish developed a sense of what was truly Irish: the western landscape that so captivated visitors. On the other hand, the English solidified a sense of what was truly English, a reading that was based little more on reality than was their interpretation of the Irish and Ireland. Travel writers “read” places through the lens of what they knew, but also of what they repressed.

One might criticize the book for failing to cite more travel writers or for failing to fully offer a rationale for choosing these travel writers, but to do so is to fail to engage with the far more interesting questions raised by this work—questions that will hopefully spark much more study of tourism in the North Atlantic archipelago. First, Williams claims that British travel narratives played a vital role in the ongoing history of Anglo-Irish relations and that those narratives were “shaped by the nature of tourism” (p. 195). He concludes by adding: “The tourist may like his or her hosts—may even love them. But unless he or she can step outside the role of tourist and go beyond the endless game of using ‘them’ to define ‘us,’ of seeking ‘our’ superiority in ‘their’ shortcomings, genuine understanding between host and guest will be elusive” (p. 200). Williams certainly cites a large theoretical literature that supports the idea that tourism defines behavior, that tourists mindlessly follow a “beaten track.” But is this a fair characterization? Does tourism limit our ability to “read” others or are we limited by factors extending far beyond tourism? Translation is fraught with difficulties. Intralingual translation, just like any other form of translation, is entirely dependent on the possession of adequate
cultural capital for the job. Thus, if Rudy Koshar is correct and “the search for knowledge and an ‘authentic’ identity beyond the marketplace characterizes even some of the most mindless and commodified forms of touristic behavior,” then Williams does British travel writers a disservice. Perhaps their words and behavior were the result not of the dynamics of tourism but of far deeper biases within British society. If this is the case then travel writing did not so much shape Anglo-Irish relations as it reflected and added to those relations. Tourists actively tried to find authenticity, but their ability to read the spaces, places, and people that they gazed upon was clouded by the hazy lens of discourse about English national character.

Williams notes that English tourists thought nothing of staring at Irish peasants or even of bursting uninvited and without knocking into their cabins, and Grenier recounts similar behavior by English tourists to Scotland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Can this behavior truly be defined in terms of “tourism” or is something greater at work? Williams notes that this type of behavior was very much a product of English class politics, not purely of a gaze defined in terms of “home” and “away” (p. 52). Perhaps tourist behavior has little to do with being a tourist per se and a great deal to do with the cultural capital acquired at home. That English tourists felt it completely acceptable to throw open the doors of Scottish or Irish cottages suggests a definite sense that their Celtic counterparts were socially inferior, but class may be only part of the story. During much of the nineteenth century, English character was defined according to a racial pseudoscience that placed Celts below their Anglo-Saxon neighbors on the evolutionary ladder, as argued by Peter Mandler, in The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair (2006). Given this, it is unsurprising that English visitors would express what they learned at home by treating the Scots and the Irish as objects in a vast island zoo. While it is reasonable to assume that travelers feel a sense of distance from their everyday lives when abroad, it is another question altogether whether they ever really break free.

Second, Williams engages, although not explicitly, with a debate originally launched by the publication of Linda Colley’s Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837 (1992) over whether national identity is defined largely in terms of what it is not. For Colley, England was defined by not being France. For his part, Williams accepts Michael de Nie’s argument in The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882 (2004) that the relationship with Ireland played an equally (if not more) important role in defining English identity. By identifying all that was wrong with Ireland, largely English travel writers helped define what it meant to be English. Williams places considerable significance on this dynamic, noting that “nations choose what they reject” (p. 198). The question is whether this characterization is accurate. Do “nations” make choices, and, more important, should scholars accept the nationalist conception that nations are monolithic actors, governed by a collective consciousness and unified interests? The self-presentation of nations is clearly one of unity, but scholars need to be careful of accepting nations on their own terms. Indeed, Williams notes a fair degree of variation among the travel writers he cites. For example, and perhaps most significantly, travel writers had fundamental disagreements about Irish character. While many imagined laziness to be the Irishman’s greatest problem, other authors pointed out that simply surviving in Ireland disproved such a thesis. Indeed, “the travel writers were just as likely to question the charge of Irish laziness as to confirm it” (p. 119). One imagines that a larger sampling of authors would yield still more division. Scholars would do well to complicate notions of nationalism and national identity, acknowledging that the imagined notion of unity frequently obscures extraordinary division.

Once again, the above points are not intended as a critique of Williams’s superb book. Students of tourism and national identity, as well as of British and Irish history will all find a great deal of interest in this text. Not only does the book provide a wealth of interesting material, but it also raises questions that should generate future study.

Notes


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