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Correspondence should be addressed to the

Administrator

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Public History Research Unit (PHRU)

History Programme,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences *Te Tari Tumu Korero*,

The University of Waikato, *Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*.

Private Bag 3105

New Zealand

Or by electronic mail to: phruadmin@waikato.ac.nz

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Being There and Being Then: Ideal Presence and Historical Tourism

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins”

– T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* (1922)

“In my utopia, human solidarity...is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.”

– Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989)



Figure 1: Quarr Abbey ruins. Isle of Wight, U.K.

Photograph by the author (January 2011).

In January 2009 I delivered a conference paper to the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies 38th Annual Conference in Oxford. In this paper I discussed, among other things, the dissolution of the English monasteries under Henry VIII. Immediately after the conference I travelled to the Isle of Wight to visit family. On walking the five kilometres or so from one cousin to the next I passed the ruins of Quarr Abbey, tangible evidence of the Tudor antipathy to the Roman Catholic Church I had so recently discussed in my conference paper. Curiously, I scarcely noticed this significant and topical historical site, a site which annually attracts numerous British and foreign tourists. Like many members of the public, professional historians often take the opportunity to visit historically significant places. As a professional historian I have always been a little troubled by my ambivalence in regard to this activity. This paper tentatively explores that ambivalence.

How does 'being there' affect a person's attitude to the past/history? I first encountered this question in a theoretical mode when working on the eighteenth century philosopher, novelist and historian William Godwin. Godwin put great stress on the extent to which we are irremediably somatic beings for whom emotion rather than detached rationality is the essence of our consciousness and behaviour. In his *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809) Godwin argued that we can never properly perceive the past until we are physically present with its remains. Many lay people feel the same way today. A recent study of North Americans has shown that they find museums among the most affective and trustworthy of historical experiences, precisely because of the unmediated proximity to artefacts they afford.¹ It is thus advantageous to inhabit what Godwin termed an Old Country rather than a New Country.² He claimed that when with certainty we know ourselves to be on the actual spot or in the presence of material remnants to which an historical narrative or memory appertains, our historical perceptions are intensified, even to the point of corporeal/sensual experience.³

What Godwin is alluding to here is the notion of ‘ideal presence’ formulated by the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher Henry Home, Lord Kames. Herein, we experience the past as if it were happening in front of us now. Kames argued that painting or theatrical performance or a good narrative are most affecting and can operate in this way. And I have to admit that I am most profoundly affected by a rich, dense, colourful narrative or by the twenty first century’s equivalent of eighteenth century theatre, a film. It is thus that I am most forgetful and unreflective of my *distance* from the past and its actors and relive and re-experience, as it were, the events of the past as if personally, corporeally present.⁴

Yet should history be affecting? Should we engage with it emotionally? These concerns were central to eighteenth and nineteenth century historiography and remain relevant to historians, especially public historians.⁵ Eighteenth century historians like Godwin were highly exercised by the effect of history on the reader, particularly the moral effect.⁶ Relatedly, eighteenth and nineteenth historians speculated constantly on the extent to which the reader ought to be proximate to and engaged with their subject(s) and the extent to which they should be detached and maintain a distance from them.⁷ There is a tension here – some say a choice – between history as a primarily affective and aesthetic discipline and history as a cognitive, objective, scientific discipline. That history thus has a “curious doubleness” is a perennial observation, going back to Herodotus and Thucydides.⁸

But assuming the ongoing, central place of affect in History, I have to account for the general *lack* of affect on me of the historical place. This seems to put me at odds with most people though not, I suspect, all historians. In what follows I would like to reflect on a recent personal experience of historical tourism in Mexico. I am not an historian of Mexico: I have never formally studied Mexican history nor written about it. Yet I have been fascinated with it since being exposed to parts of William Prescott’s classic *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) as a young boy. Nearly forty years later I managed to travel to Mexico and visit some of the places

about which I had enjoyed such a profound literary-historical experience. In terms of Mexican history I was an amateur historian; above all, I was a tourist.

Mexico is dripping with sites of historical and archaeological significance. Yet interesting and occasionally astonishing though these are, none produced the effect of much of my earlier reading. None, certainly, imparted the sense of historical presence that had my childhood reading in Prescott. One passage in particular continued to haunt me. It recounts, in Prescott's florid and emotive prose, the Aztec sacrifice of captured Spanish prisoners of war in Tenochtitlán (today's Mexico City) in 1521.⁹ On my visit to Mexico City I had occasion to observe a traditional Aztec site of human sacrifice which could easily have been the identical site at which the events described by Prescott transpired. Yet the horror which Prescott's narrative still evokes in this reader far outweighed any imaginative response created by proximity to place and artefact.



Figure 2: Sacrificial stone, Templo Mayor, Mexico City.

Photograph by the author (November 2009)

In fact, it was exposure to the mundane present which provided the more affecting (and instructive) historical experiences. As I continued to observe the literally overwhelming reality of twenty-first century Mexico I have to say that some historical generalisations became more vivid. That is, my historical imagination was more provoked by twenty-first century Mexico than by any physical remnants of Mexico's past. For example, if I wanted evidence of the calamity that colonisation was for the majority of indigenous people I saw it daily in the poverty and homelessness of the myriad Mayan, Nahuatl and Zapotec people I felt it generally inappropriate to photograph. Colonial Latin American society is re-enacted, so to speak, everyday on the streets of Mexico where the lighter your skin, the more Hispanic your culture, the better your life. Passages of the textbook with which I instruct undergraduate students of the Atlantic World came immediately to mind:

In the cities, Indian women became servants, cooks, nursemaids, midwives, sold food in the streets and bought produce from the country and sold it in the market. They were poor then and, remarkably, we see them still today in the modern cities of Latin America doing very much the same things.¹⁰



Figure 3: Souvenir seller, Oaxaca.

Photograph by the author with permission of the subject (November 2009).

So, while physical proximity to the human consequences of the past provides a ready connection to, and illustration of, previously-acquired historiographical information, proximity to non-human remnants of the past does little to affect my historical sensibility. There is one immediately discernable reason why my responses to historic place in Mexico were so underwhelming, and this has to do with the fact that my original historical experience of the place was literary. I approached sites in Mexico like Templo Mayor and Chichen Itza very much in the manner of the literary tourist described by Nicola Watson. My original literary experience had occasioned my seeking an external or foundational reality which, by virtue of its signifiatory dependence on that original text, could only ever itself prove a further, supplementary text.¹¹ Indeed, the original experience remained ontologically prior, so to speak. The *ordo cognoscendi* was the *ordo essendi*, if I remember my undergraduate philosophy correctly. This process would seem to render so many tourist experiences unsatisfactory or disappointing. The secondary, somatic experience seems less 'real', is less affecting than the primary mental experience.

There exists a substantial amount of scholarship dealing with literary tourism and literary pilgrimage, seemingly inventions of the Romantic Age.¹² Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres*, with which I began, is in this vein. As Paul Westover remarks of that work: "Godwin elaborates his theory of community by contending that the dead are pilgrimage centres, repositories of the best collective values...".¹³ The affinities between some tourist activities and religious pilgrimage have long been acknowledged. The anthropologist Victor Turner said of pilgrimage generally that it seeks "the center out there",¹⁴ a site productive of social or cultural cohesion and authentication *spatially* removed from that society's or culture's geographic centre. Certainly travel to specific places can function so as to confirm our membership in particular communities: "It is through the recognition of the authenticity of objects, places or experiences that the subject is interpellated as citizen, national, or member of the faithful."¹⁵ Given this quasi-religious quality, then, historical tourism seems

rather more a “heritage” than a strictly “historical” activity, as David Lowenthal unpacks those terms.¹⁶ One thinks automatically of the pilgrimages of New Zealanders and Australians to Gallipoli in recent years.¹⁷ Pearl Harbor and Ground Zero in New York probably function similarly for citizens of the USA.¹⁸ The recent plan to build a mosque close to Ground Zero was problematic for many Americans precisely because they regard it as a sacred site. Said Elliott Maynard, Republican Congressional candidate: “Ground zero is hallowed ground to Americans”.¹⁹

What, however, of that underanalysed species of historical tourism which does not indulge or promote *communitas*? John B. Allcock notes that the two main tourist motivations are existential and self-actualising on the one hand and the solidification of community membership on the other. These constitute religiosity of the “implicit” and “civil” types, respectively. On the basis of survey data, then, Allcock tentatively suggests that the “privatised” touristic experience of the implicit religious type is most usually directed at experiences of natural beauty, while sites of historical and cultural significance are, for the most part, sought out by those tourists seeking validation of their community membership or of a set of shared, traditional group values.²⁰ I posit my Mexican experience an exception to this schema; for therein sites of historical and cultural significance were rendered meaningful for purely personal and private reasons. My experience was one of a privatised religiosity, so to speak, seeking historical sites as a means of existential affirmation or self-actualisation which is not dependant on affirming communal values or membership. I am not, after all, Spanish or Mexican, Mayan, Nahua or Zapotec.

I began with T. S. Eliot’s classic response to Modernity’s putative spiritual, moral and cultural crisis, *The Wasteland*. The sentiments therein provide a useful entry into the phenomenon of modern tourism fruitfully understood as an escape from the “dark side of modernity” which is nonetheless enabled by modernity’s technological achievements.²¹ Sociological analysis rightly reminds us of the varying motivations of the tourist. Here I limit myself to the “experiential”, “experimental”

and “existential” modes as outlined by Erik Cohen, wherein the tourist seeks not simply recreation or diversion but, in different ways and degrees, solutions to philosophical or existential issues unassuaged, or even created, by mundane (modern) life.²² One suspects that Eliot’s nostalgic adhesion to definitive, constitutive literary fragments is a response to a sense of dislocation and disorientation having to do with more than the specific malaise of post-World War One Western culture. It is also, I would argue, a reflex gesture and genuflection towards personally formative, constitutive and definitive literary experiences rendered increasingly meaningful or sacred as one advances in age. I expect that readers can easily think of a number of such aesthetic and literary personal experiences. One of my core literary experiences was historiographical. Travelling to Mexico was then a form of pilgrimage which I now understand less as a quest for historic presence or enlightenment than as a celebration of, or homage to, a core intellectual/aesthetic constituent of my being.

I have to admit, then, that I continue to find literary narrative more affecting, more evocative of a past reality than any artefact or historical site. And my musings on the issue thus far do much to cement my conviction of the obvious point that History is something which goes on in our heads. It has its primary existence in our minds and in our mind’s commerce with other minds. Thus my lack of interest in the ruins of Quarr Abbey and the general emotional paucity of my response to the Aztec ruins of Mexico City.

At the same time, I have to explain why it is that I felt it appropriate, even necessary, to acknowledge this intellectual experience somatically. After all, I physically went to Mexico in order to engage with certain environmental realities and material artefacts. And I am still prompted to engage in historical travel. While in Mexico I read *The Broken Spears*, an extremely moving and haunting indigenous account of the conquest of Mexico, a specimen of which is worth reproducing here:

While the Spanish were in Tlaxcala, a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan. It began to spread during the thirteenth month and lasted for seventy days, striking

everywhere in the city and killing a vast number of our people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot.

The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads. They could not lie face down or roll from one side to the other. If they did move their bodies, they screamed with pain.

A great many died from this plague, and many others died of hunger. They could not get up to search for food, and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved to death in their beds.²³

This economical and evocative narrative somehow urged me to put on my shoes and engage the physical reality of Mexico. Did I expect a better understanding of the details I had recently perused? Was I looking for particular sites or terrain mentioned in the narrative? No. Yet there occurred a strong urge to tread Mexican earth and breathe Mexican air. Despite the objections raised by some of the more jejune, anti-materialist and easily-ridiculed strains of historiographical poststructuralism, we clearly retain an unshakeable conviction as historians (and as human beings) that the past we imagine was, fundamentally, a material realm experienced by embodied individuals like ourselves. I would suggest that where our affective historiographical responses are at their most acute it is as we empathise with the fears, the longings and the sufferings of our fellow human beings, whether the sacrificed conquistadors in Prescott, the wretched, dispossessed and diseased Nahua of *The Broken Spears* or the impoverished, twenty-first century Mexican indigenes readily observed by any tourist to that country.

It was noted above that such historiographically-inspired tourism as my recent visit to Mexico can be categorised as religiosity of the “implicit” type, as a purely personal pilgrimage in search of the psychologically formative and existentially sacred. Yet there is also a mode in which such activity constitutes religiosity of the “civil” type, if we are to envisage the solidification of communal belonging thereby produced in terms of the community of humanity. Humanist literary criticism once contended that literature was of value to the extent that it

acquainted us with, and enabled us to appreciate the complexity of, universal human nature. The shortcomings of this approach have been roundly and exhaustively elaborated by a variety of more recent scholarly positions.²⁴ Yet it seems to me that the mistake made by humanist scholarship was not in its attempt to seek and celebrate a universal human nature but to suppose that this universal human nature was that automatically and normatively exhibited by the middle-class, heterosexual, Western male. As theorists – most famously and sophisticatedly, Michel Foucault²⁵ – have pointed out, such a tactic was always doomed to produce new forms of marginalization, exclusion and oppression, even if its aim was enlightenment and liberalization. Yet, in rejecting the very possibility of a shared human nature, the baby has gone out with the bathwater: we are invited to enter a posthuman episteme wherein mutual understanding and empathy are impossible and peaceful coexistence, ultimately, highly improbable.

Given the almost identical genetic material shared by *homo sapiens sapiens* and our unavoidable, mutual embeddedness in the material reality of our planet, it is surely absurd to deny the existence of a universal human nature. The cultural variations produced by the interaction between human nature and physical reality is, of course, another matter; and our experience of cultural variety in our reading and our travelling should always be interpreted as legitimate products of such interaction and never as instances of normative, universal human nature itself. In a qualified return to literary humanism, the postmodern American philosopher Richard Rorty has argued that great literature – or, even more importantly, *useful* literature – is, that “which sensitiz[e]s one to the pain of those who do not speak our language”.²⁶ The genres of fiction, ethnography and history are especially apt in this regard;²⁷ and it is this empathizing experience, which, I would argue, constitutes the profound and lasting affect of such literature. If pilgrimage is personal gesture to significant constitutive literary experience, then, the latter experiences assume such profound resonance precisely because of their communitarian aspect, because in

engaging us with the particularity of human existence we are reminded of the universality of human nature, specifically, says Rorty,²⁸ our capacity to feel pain. Historical tourism ultimately reminds us both of the powerful ideality of History and the fundamental material reality of the Past. It also emphasises our kinship with all those separated from us by time, place and culture, or by the rudimentary fact of their not being us.

ROWLAND WESTON

NOTES

¹ Roy Rosenzweig & David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), pp.89-114.

² "I love to dwell in a country, where, on whichever side I turn, I find some object connected with a heart-moving tale, or some scene where the deepest interests of a nation for ages to succeed, have been strenuously agitated, and emphatically decided." William Godwin, *Essay on Sepulchres*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, Mark Philp ed., (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993), 6: pp.1-30.

³ I never understood the annals of chivalry so well, as when I walked among the ruins of Kenilworth Castle. I no longer trusted to the tale of the historian, the cold and uncertain record of words formed upon paper, I beheld the queen, 'of lion-port,

Girt with many a baron bold,

And gorgeous dames,

Uprear her starry front'. The subtle, the audacious and murder-dealing Leicester stood before me. I heard the trampling of horses, and the clangour of trumpets. The aspiring and lofty minded men of former times were seen by me as I passed along, and stood in review before me. Godwin, *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp.20-21 (my emphasis).

⁴ "The force of language consists in raising complete images; which have the effect to transport the reader as by magic into the very place and time of the important action, and to convert him as it were into a spectator, beholding every thing that passes." (Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, Edited and with an Introduction by Peter Jones (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), 2: p.329.

⁵ As the current interest in historical re-enactment indicates. See, for example, Iain McCalman and Paul A. Pickering (eds) *Historical Reenactment. From Realism to the Affective Turn* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁶ Rowland Weston, "Politics, Passion and the 'Puritan Temper': Godwin's Critique of Enlightened Modernity", *Studies in Romanticism*, 41 (2002): 463-70. Rowland Weston, "History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge: William Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809)", *The European Legacy* 14 (2009): pp.651-65.

⁷ See, for example, John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.335.

⁸ Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is history fiction?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p.13.

⁹ William H. Prescott, *The Conquest of Mexico and the Conquest of Peru* (New York: Random House), pp.580-82.

¹⁰ Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians and Their Shared History, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.443.

¹¹ Nicola J. Watson, *The Literary Tourist* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp.6-7.

¹² See Paul Westover, "William Godwin, Literary Tourism, and the Work of Necromanticism", *Studies in Romanticism* 48 (2009): pp.299-319.

¹³ Westover, "William Godwin, Literary Tourism, and the Work of Necromanticism": p.312.

¹⁴ Victor Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal", *History of Religions* 12 (1973): pp.191-230.

¹⁵ John B. Allcock, "Tourism as a Sacred Journey", *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure* 11, 1 (1988): p.39.

¹⁶ David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ See Bruce C. Scates, "Manufacturing Memory at Gallipoli" in Michael Keren & Holger H. Herwig (eds) *War Memory and Popular Culture: Essays on Modes of Remembrance and Commemoration* (Jefferson (N.C.): McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), pp.57-75.

¹⁸ The author visited the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor in November, 2010. Visitors are encouraged to adopt a solemn, reverential, contemplative attitude. 'Appropriate dress' is required

and prior to embarking on the short boat trip out to the Memorial, visitors are asked to assemble at the 'Remembrance Circle'.

¹⁹ *The Guardian*, 19/08/10.

²⁰ See Allcock, "Tourism as a Sacred Journey": p.42-44.

²¹ Ning Wang, *Tourism and Modernity: A Sociological Analysis* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2000), p.169.

²² Erik Cohen, *Contemporary Tourism: Diversity and Change* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2004), pp.65-85.

²³ Miguel León- Portilla (ed.), *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), pp.92-93.

²⁴ In an essay mainly designed to underline the defects of recent challenges to humanist literary scholarship, Graham Good usefully defines the traditional "liberal-humanist outlook": " 'The study of great art and literature advances civilisation by opening the individual to universal human values' ". See "The Carceral Vision: Theory, Ideology, Cultural Studies", *The Critical Review*, 38 (1998): pp.83-102. See p.101.

²⁵ See Mark Philp, "Michel Foucault" in Quentin Skinner (ed.) *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.65-81.

²⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.93-94.

²⁷ For Rorty's subsequent inclusion of History see Inga Clendinnen's "Fellow Sufferers: History and Imagination" and Rorty's response in *Australian Humanities Review* 4 (December 1996 - February 1997).

²⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p.192.