

**Alan McNEE**

Research Fellow

Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study,

University of London

alan.mcnee@sas.ac.uk

## **Travelling Communities: Irreverence and Class Tension in the Late-Victorian Visitors' Book**

**Abstract.** — As access to leisure time and travel expanded in the late nineteenth century, a greater number of Victorians from a wider section of society were able to take holidays in their own country (and to a lesser extent on Continental Europe). The visitors' books of hotels and inns where these visitors stayed provide a rich source of material about their travel experiences, the attitudes and values they brought with them and the inter-class antagonisms which often surfaced as a result of the enforced proximity of very different visitors in these establishments. Visitors' books provided a rare unedited and unmediated opportunity for people of all backgrounds to record their impressions, and sometimes to poke fun at their fellow travellers. For the historian, they provide evidence of a virtual community of travellers and tourists, sharing information and impressions and sometimes expressing discontent, irreverence, and impatience with each other and with the whole experience of travel. This paper draws on extensive archival research in the visitors' books of British inns and hotels that were popular with visitors in the late nineteenth century, demonstrating how common irreverence and debunking are in this neglected sub-genre of travel writing.

**Keywords.** — Travel, tourism, irreverence, leisure, mountaineering, visitors' books.

## **About The Author**

Alan McNee has an M.A. in Victorian Studies and a PhD from Birkbeck, University of London. His first book, *The Cockney Who Sold the Alps* (Victorian Secrets, 2015), was a biography of the Victorian journalist, traveller and impresario Albert Smith. His second book, *The New Mountaineer in Late Victorian Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), explores the mountaineering literature of nineteenth century Britain and its connections to the wider cultural and medico-scientific context. He is presently a Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies in London, where he is working on the topic of irreverence in late-Victorian culture, with particular emphasis on non-canonical and unpublished travel narratives.

## **Travelling Communities: Irreverence and Class Tension in the Late-Victorian Visitors' Book**

The visitors' books of Victorian hotels and inns provide rich and varied evidence of a virtual community of travellers and tourists, sharing information and opinions. Particular groups, such as the practitioners of the new sport of mountaineering, used these books to create networks of like-minded individuals, who visited the same areas of Britain at the same time and left behind written records of their activities and impressions.

However, rather than a single, homogenous community or network of travellers, the entries in many books suggest the existence of a range of different, sometimes conflicting communities. Indeed, the evidence of some entries calls into question the very idea of a community as the term is normally understood, suggesting instead a diverse array of visitors with a fragmented and incompatible range of attitudes and sensibilities.

The source materials for this article are the surviving visitors' books of hotels, inns, pubs and other establishments. A number are lodged in archives, university libraries and local history centres throughout Britain, while a few are still kept on the original premises. These are not official hotel registers with formal lists of the names and places of origin of visitors – instead, they are the relatively informal books in which visitors would write comments about their stay, about their activities, and in some cases would contribute verses or sketches. Until 1914 there was

no legal requirement for British hotels to keep a formal register of guests, and even if they did there was no legal requirement for guests to provide this information (since hotel registers could and sometimes did play a part in divorce or breach of promise cases, some guests would have had good reason not to provide their true names). This was in contrast to most parts in continental Europe, where registers were legally mandated documents.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin James, “‘A British Social Institution’: The Visitors’ Book and Hotel Culture in Victorian Britain and Ireland”, *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* 13:1 (2012): 42-69.

The implications for scholars are two-fold. On the one hand, there are far more comprehensive and reliable records of late-Victorian British visitors to Chamonix or Zermatt than to Margate or Blackpool.<sup>2</sup> On the other, the British visitors' book was a relatively informal, unofficial document in which guests were generally free to write what they liked without any prior restraint by the hotel proprietors (although of course if they wrote something that displeased the owners, it was possible for it to be cut out or crossed through, and many surviving books show evidence of such excisions). Kevin James points out that writing in British visitors' books was regarded as 'a marker of particularly British emancipatory leisures, unencumbered by regimes of registration and surveillance – and equally free from codes of literary restraint'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, people felt relatively unconstrained when writing either original entries or marginalia in these books, which is precisely what makes them such valuable and fascinating documents.

The period in question – from about 1870 through to the very early twentieth century – saw a massive increase in the number of Britons travelling for leisure within their own country, and to a lesser extent to Continental Europe. An expanded railway network, improved infrastructure for visitors, the introduction of bank holidays, and an increase in real wages and disposable income combined to allow members of the lower middle classes the luxury of a vacation, usually to a seaside town but also to the Scottish Highlands, English Lake District, or the mountains of north Wales.

These new visitors – in many cases the first generation of their family to enjoy paid holidays – soon found themselves rubbing shoulders with longer-established visitors from a quite different class background. In particular, the predominantly upper-middle class mountaineers of the Alpine Club, and later of the domestic clubs set up to promote climbing in Britain (such as the Cairngorm Club and the Scottish Mountaineering Club), were already using some hotels in mountainous areas of the country as informal bases. Most prominent among them were the

---

<sup>2</sup> Katarzyna Michalkiewicz and Patrick Vincent, 'Victorians in the Alps: A Case Study of Zermatt's Hotel Guest Books and Registers', in *Britain and the Narration of Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Kate Hill. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2016, pp. 75-90. See also Michael Heafford, 'Between Grand Tour and Tourism: British travellers to Switzerland in a period of transition, 1814-1860', *The Journal of Transport History* 27:1 (March 2006): 25-47.

<sup>3</sup> James, "A British Social Institution", p. 44.

Sligachan Hotel on the Isle of Skye, the Clachaig Inn in Glencoe, the Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel in north Wales, and the Wasdale Head Inn in the Lake District. All of these hotels are still popular with both tourists and mountaineers. The surviving books from these establishments form an important repository of knowledge about the practices of Victorian mountaineers, and about the way they thought and wrote about their hobby. People would record new climbing routes on particular mountains and would also engage in controversies and disputes.

The Pen-y-Gwryd in Snowdonia, for example, was a very important centre in the development of British climbing, and the Climbers' Club – one of several organisations started in the late Victorian period to promote climbing on domestic mountains – began life there in 1898. The hotel's visitors' book, which is still kept on the premises, is full of details about new routes on the mountains of Snowdonia, and also full of controversies and information about new developments. For example, an entry from 1892 about an ascent of the north gully of local mountain Tryfan and signed by four climbers – H.B. Dixon, A.S. Cornelius, H. Gamble, and A. Marshall – was amended the following year with an asterisk by Marshall's name, noting that he had been killed on a climb in the Lake District.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the visitors' book of a Welsh hotel was being used to relay information about a climbing accident in a completely different area of Britain, and these entries were being organized by the visitors themselves rather than by the hotel's landlord. Numerous other examples of this kind of entry can be found, suggesting that these books were an important part of the formation of a climbing community – a network of people who did not necessarily stay in the same place at the same time, and who in some cases never met each other, but who nonetheless shared a common interest and language. The visitors' books are part of a wider body of mountaineering literature, comprising guidebooks, climbing club journals, memoirs and so on, which created a coherent community of interest with broadly shared attitudes and assumptions.<sup>5</sup>

The typically well-educated, upper-middle class mountaineers were not, however, the only guests writing in these books. There are also plenty of entries and marginalia by ordinary tourists, many of whom visited these establishments in a quite different state of mind, and it is

---

<sup>4</sup> Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel, 'Not the Visitors' Book: Contributions on Mountain Rambles, Botany, Geology, and Other Subjects of Interest Connected with Pen-y-Gwryd', 1893, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> See Alan McNee, *The New Mountaineer in Late Victorian Britain: Materiality, Modernity, and the Haptic Sublime*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

these entries that complicate the notion of a coherent community, suggesting that rather than one ‘virtual community’ represented in these visitors’ books, there were actually a number of different communities, with very different and to some degree inimical interests.

The visitors’ book of the Sligachan Inn on Skye, for instance, is crammed with climbing-related entries, such as one from July, 1887 in which a Mr. and Mrs. Chichester-Hart from Dublin conclude a detailed account of their scrambles on the Cuillin mountains by noting that, ‘We used no ropes at any time.’<sup>6</sup> Underneath this comment, however, a different hand has added the comment: ‘A rope and a long drop would have suited this idiot!’<sup>7</sup>

This kind of textual amendment, in which the earnestness and enthusiasm of mountaineers is mocked and derided, suggests some real friction between the two different kinds of visitors – the largely upper-middle class mountaineers, and the ordinary tourists who stayed in the same place. It is a tension that is often expressed in the pages of mountaineering literature, where there are numerous disparaging references to ‘Cockney’ tourists, ‘Cookites’, and ‘trippers’. There is much less evidence of this same conflict from the point of view of the trippers themselves, however, since for the most part such visitors had neither the cultural capital nor the desire to publish accounts of their travels. Visitors’ books are among the few surviving texts where some evidence of what these ordinary tourists thought is available.

In a sense, these documents could be regarded as one possible response to Peter K. Andersson’s dictum, set out in his much discussed 2015 *Journal of Victorian Culture* article ‘How Civilized Were the Victorians’, that, ‘Victorians as we see them in novels, government records, or portrait photographs are Victorians on their best behaviour’.<sup>8</sup> The Victorians who write comments in visitors’ books were certainly not always on their best behaviour, which makes these books a rich and engaging historical source. Many visitors’ books simply consist of lists of guest names and town or country of origin, and are thus of limited value. However, there are also a considerable number of books in which comments by visitors are challenged or even openly mocked by others.

---

<sup>6</sup> Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 11538/15, Sligachan Hotel Visitors’ Book, 1885-1905, 30 June-5 July, 1887.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Peter K. Andersson, ‘How Civilized Were the Victorians’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20:4 (December 2015): 439-452 (p. 452).

To begin with some relatively innocuous and light-hearted examples, many signatories seem to enjoy subverting the ostensible purpose of a guest book by signing with obviously fictitious names. These range from ‘Mr & Mrs. Bogie Man & Woman & Son’ (at the Athole Arms Hotel in Perthshire), through ‘Cockney Joe, King of the Barbers’ (at the Wasdale Head Inn), to ‘Cetawayo, King of the Zulus’, who crops up twice, in the Wasdale Head Inn and in the visitors’ book of Bayham Abbey in East Sussex.<sup>9</sup> Travellers also seemed to enjoy boasting about how much they had to drink, as in this 1891 entry in the Wasdale Head Inn guest book: ‘Here we arrived at half past four/Hungry and weary and very footsore/But we called for some beer and we called for some stout/And jolly well screwed we all toddled out’.<sup>10</sup>

Visitors were also fond of writing disparaging marginalia about other people’s entries – particularly against entries that were perceived as pious or priggish. Captain Thwaite and R.S. Lawrence wrote in the Wasdale Head Inn’s book in October 1894 that they had ‘left Walton at 5.30am and arrived at Windermere at 6.40, and immediately left for Wasdale Head in a hurry to attend Divine Service. But much to our dismay and inconvenience, there was no Pastor’. A different hand has written immediately below this entry, ‘So we drank a bottle of whisky as a consolation’.<sup>11</sup>

There is also evidence of some subtle inter-class rivalry. Some of this is straightforward snobbery. For example, the signatures of a group of visitors to the Athole Arms Hotel in Perthshire in 1877 have been added to by another hand with the words ‘Cooks Tours’.<sup>12</sup> It is of course possible that this group from Newcastle were on a Cook’s Tour of the Highlands. Thomas Cook was still organizing tours of Scotland at this stage. However it seems equally likely that one of their fellow guests had taken a dislike to the group and decided they were the kind of people who *should* be on a Cook’s tour, adding this comment as a dismissive epithet. Tourists who were perceived to be of humbler origins were routinely dismissed as ‘Cookites’ at this time, even if they were in fact travelling independently.

---

<sup>9</sup> Athole Arms Hotel Visitors’ Book, Blair Atholl, 14 May, 1891; Kendal, Cumbria County Archive, WDSO164, Fell and Rock Climbing Club, Wasdale Head Visitor’s Book, June, 1890; Maidstone, Kent History and Library Centre, U840/EB306, Acc. 2180, Bayham Abbey Visitors’ Book, 7 August, 1868.

<sup>10</sup> Wasdale Head Visitors’ Book, August, 1891.

<sup>11</sup> Wasdale Head Visitors’ Book, 26 October, 1884.

<sup>12</sup> Athole Arms Hotel Visitors’ Book, Dunkeld, 1868-1899, 22 August, 1876.

However, examples also exist of class rivalry directed the opposite way, towards those who were perceived to be showing off their superior education. In the Wasdale Head book in 1878 a guest wrote an entry in Hebrew, quoting the opening words of the Book of Genesis: ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth’, and noting that this quotation was suggested by ‘contemplating the greatness and grandeur of the mountains of Wasdale and the clouds’. A different hand has appended to this entry the words, ‘after a pot of shandy’.<sup>13</sup>

This kind of entry raises problems of interpretation. It is not possible to identify either of these writers, or to know how long after the original entry the marginalia was added. However the act of writing in Hebrew in a visitors’ book may have been seen as a deliberate provocation – a form of showing off one’s classical education and cultural capital – and that this marginalia is a hostile response to that. Entries in Greek or Latin often attracted similarly disrespectful comments from other visitors.

The methodological challenges of working with this kind of material are considerable. Apart from the obvious problems of deciphering often illegible handwriting, there are also questions of how much significance to assign to entries, and of knowing whether comments are written in earnest or in jest. For example, an 1893 entry in the Athole Arms Hotel book is ostensibly by a woman called Mary Ann McGinnis from Dublin. She describes herself as ‘On tour, lookin’ for a ‘usband’.<sup>14</sup> This immediately raises the question of whether Mary Ann McGinnis was a real visitor, writing with a degree of self-parody, or whether (as seems more likely) this was written by someone parodying the accent and pronunciation of someone perceived to be lower down the social scale. The fact that the writer has taken the trouble to simulate the omission of the voiceless glottal fricative (more commonly known as ‘H-dropping’) suggests that this entry is not the authentic voice of a young working-class or lower middle-class woman but rather an educated person parodying what they believe to be the speech patterns of the urban poor.

Similarly, when two men from Leeds signed themselves in the Wasdale Head Inn in 1892 as ‘Amateur Casuals’, they were presumably alluding to James Greenwood’s 1866 book *A Night in the Workhouse* (1866), considered to be one of the earliest examples of incognito social

---

<sup>13</sup> Wasdale Head Visitors’ Book, 2 July, 1879.

<sup>14</sup> Athole Arms Visitors’ Book, Blair Atholl, 2 October, 1893.



investigation.<sup>15</sup> Greenwood, who visited workhouses in disguise, styled himself the ‘Amateur Casual’.<sup>16</sup> But did these visitors to the Lake District genuinely consider themselves to be amateur casuals – respectable members of society slumming undercover for a short period as tramps – or was this simply a joke?

These kinds of questions are raised time and again when examining the material in late-Victorian visitors’ books, raising troubling issues of methodology, interpretation, and theoretical framework. Nonetheless, these texts provide an unusually rich resource for understanding the experiences and responses of people who were in many cases the first members of their own social class to participate in tourism and leisure travel, and for demonstrating that a considerable degree of mockery, irreverence and class antagonism was at work in the social interactions of the hotel space – and that when we talk about community in the context of travel and tourism, we need to think in terms of a multiplicity of communities with very different experiences and values.

## References

### Bibliography

Andersson, Peter K., ‘How Civilized Were the Victorians’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20:4 (December 2015): 439-452.

Greenwood, James, *A Night in the Workhouse: Reprinted from the Pall Mall Gazette*. London: Pall Mall Gazette, 1866.

Heafford, Michael, ‘Between Grand Tour and Tourism: British Travellers to Switzerland in a period of transition, 1814-1860’, *The Journal of Transport History* 27:1 (March 2006): 25-47.

James, Kevin, ‘A British Social Institution: The Visitors’ Book and Hotel Culture in Victorian Britain and Ireland’, *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* 13:1 (2012): 42-69.

---

<sup>15</sup> James Greenwood, *A Night in the Workhouse: Reprinted from the Pall Mall Gazette*. London: Pall Mall Gazette, 1866; Wasdale Head Visitors’ Book, 14 June, 1892.

<sup>16</sup> Luke Seaber, *Incognito Social Investigation in British Literature: Certainties in Degradation*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 1.

Luke Seaber, *Incognito Social Investigation in British Literature: Certainties in Degradation*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Michalkiewicz, Katarzyna and Vincent, Patrick, 'Victorians in the Alps: A Case Study of Zermatt's Hotel Guest Books and Registers', in *Britain and the Narration of Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Kate Hill. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2016, pp. 75-90.

McNee, Alan, *The New Mountaineer in Late Victorian Britain: Materiality, Modernity, and the Haptic Sublime*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

### ***Guest books***

Blair Atholl, Perthshire, Athole Arms Visitors' Book, 1866-n.d. Held at the original premises.

Dunkeld, Perthshire, Athole Arms Visitors' Book, 1868-1899. Held at the original premises.

Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 11538/15, Sligachan Hotel Visitors' Book, 1885-1905

Kendal, Cumbria County Archive, WDSO164, Fell and Rock Climbing Club, Wasdale Head Visitor's Book, 1879-1885

Maidstone, Kent History and Library Centre, U840/EB306, Acc. 2180, Bayham Abbey Visitors' Book, 1868-n.d.

Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel, 'Not the Visitors' Book: Contributions on Mountain Rambles, Botany, Geology, and Other Subjects of Interest Connected with Pen-y-Gwryd', 1884-n.d. Held at the original premises.