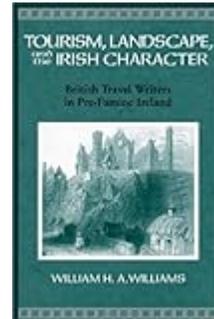


William H. A. Williams. *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. xi + 267 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-22520-9.



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Home Thoughts from Abroad

This book is a valuable and lucid study of the ways in which British travelers to pre-Famine Ireland understood and wrote about the country. William H. A. Williams focuses usefully on the ways in which their descriptions of, and judgments about, Irish landscape and society were at least as much a negotiation of British identity as they were an analysis of Ireland. The central argument of *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character* is one grounded in both theories of travel and the specific historical context of British travel writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Williams convincingly insists that the vast social, economic, and cultural changes to British society provided the ideological backdrop to travelers' perceptions of Ireland—that, in effect, Ireland became the mirror that they held up to the troubling questions of what it meant to be British in the decades before the Famine.

Williams uses well over one hundred primary sources, mostly dating from 1800 to 1850, and provides fascinating close readings of many of them. The book is structured in a largely thematic way, with chapters and subchapters discussing travelers' accounts of agriculture,

housing, Irish people, religion, poverty, and other recurring topics that provided a dominant framework for British perceptions of Ireland. In one chapter, devoted to the “exceptional” case of Ulster (as British visitors saw it), Williams discusses both the forms of its supposed exceptionalism to the Irish norm and the motivations for its different representation in English writing. In the final chapter, the author analyzes the particular focus, by the 1840s, on Connemara as an “exotic,” but often especially troubling, destination for travelers. In the book's conclusion, he points to the ways in which the tone and content of travel writing about Ireland in the decades preceding the Famine provided a template for British public opinion on judging the catastrophic events of the 1840s as being a result of Irish mismanagement of their land, natural resources, and society, which, of course, justified the imperial project to a British audience. Williams argues, “The seeds of this imperial solution had been sown before the Famine by travel writers, who helped to fix the source of Irish poverty in the Irish character, thereby establishing the need for British intervention and control” (p. 200).

Williams's focus on the British identity of the travel writers yields particularly impressive results when he discusses landscape descriptions, perhaps the dominant theme of all the travelers' commentaries on Ireland. Early in the book's introduction, he provides a fascinating analysis of the ways in which, by the late eighteenth century, the Irish landscape most admired by visitors was itself being remade by the landlords of the great estates to facilitate the developing tourist industry. He explains that such landlords, by creating roads, laying out vistas, and installing conveniently placed benches in their parklands, "literally organized the ground for tourists" (p. 9). This was especially prevalent in the much-admired Lakes of Killarney, where "virtually the whole area ... was opened for visitors by the two major families there, the Kenmares and the Herberts. The Kenmares even developed a system whereby visitors could rent barges for exploring the lakes" (p. 9).

In later parts of the book, using a wealth of examples, Williams identifies some of the common themes of visitors' landscape descriptions, the most important of which was an insistence on a "lack" in Irish agricultural organization. What was specifically lacking, writer after writer insisted, were picturesque trees, hedgerows enclosing fields, and "proper" villages consisting of rose-covered cottages clustered around a steeple church. What this often vehement condemnation of the Irish agricultural landscape reflected, Williams argues, is a specifically British set of aesthetic concerns, themselves in fact a result of the political economy of a changing British agricultural landscape. He points to an English "fetishization" of trees—especially oak trees—by the end of the eighteenth century, due to the massive deforestation caused by modern agricultural practices. Similarly, the panegyrics to English hedgerows that travelers regretted not finding in Ireland reveal not only a lack of understanding of the differences in soil and agricultural technique in the sometimes harsh environment of Irish farming land, but also an aesthetic taste born of the political economy of enclosures in England. Williams points out that this period of travel writing coincided with the height of the enclosures movement in England, and that, in effect, the class interests of middle- and upper-class English travelers to Ireland had already shaped their aesthetic tastes and ideals of landscape "beauty." Williams argues that "without trees, cultivated fields, and hedgerows—the signifiers of the English-style enclosed systems—British

travelers found it difficult to visually organize, to literally see, much less comprehend and appreciate, much of the Irish landscape they encountered" (pp. 137-138). Once more, therefore, Ireland was being described, judged, and found wanting according to an English set of norms, which were themselves a result of radical changes that had called into question what it meant to be British.

In many ways, this book builds on the arguments of Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the New Nation 1707-1837* (1992), but it shifts its focus to the ways in which Ireland acted as a crucible for definitions of Britishness, and, in this instance, further filtered through the act of travel. As Williams points out, many travel writers wanted to "explain" Ireland to a British audience as a way of cementing the Act of Union. Following the formation of the union in 1800, Ireland was officially a part of the United Kingdom, rather than a "foreign" colony. In reality, however, what the Act of Union did was to make Ireland's intense difference from the rest of the United Kingdom—a difference of economy, culture, religion, and even, as we have seen, landscape—more problematic to British travelers who were negotiating changes to their own national identity. The book's dual focus, on the cultural influences and anxieties at home acting on British travelers, as well as the added influence of being away from that home and confronted with cultural difference, works particularly well as a framework for analyzing the representation of Ireland in visitors' writing.

Given the strength of Williams's analysis of the political economy of tourists' gaze, it would have been illuminating if he had extended his study to include a discussion of their response to Irish cityscapes as well as landscapes. Urban history and culture in Ireland remains a relatively neglected field as compared with studies of rural life, and there is a clear need for scholarly examinations on the representation of Irish cities, especially during the period covered by this book, given that it was an age largely defined by the growth of urban life.

This book will be instructive and enjoyable reading for all scholars with an interest in both British and Irish studies of the early nineteenth century, as well as those looking for insightful discussions of early tourism as a cultural practice. It is a well-written and clearly argued contribution to its field, and is deserving of a wide audience.

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