

SOURCE

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BOOK REVIEWS

Away from the Shopping Centre

We English
Simon Roberts

Think of England, think of Sir Benjamin Stone; or Humphrey Spender or Tony Ray-Jones or Martin Parr. They and many others have turned their cameras on the English (or British), exploiting a strong documentary tradition to record social identity or explode cultural myths. Reminiscent of Stone in his wagon caravan and, 70 years later, Daniel Meadows in his double-decker bus, Simon Roberts toured the country, mapping it photographically; a motor-home road trip lasting over a year. He took with him his pregnant wife, their two-year old daughter and a 5 x 4 camera. The result is published by Chris Boot in *We English* and, according to Roberts' website comprises a 'portfolio of large format tableaux photographs of the English at leisure'. These are Boot's words, and he boldly

adds: 'This is the most significant contribution to the photography of England in recent years'.

The origins of the project are more tentative. In the 'commentary' at the back of the book, Roberts explains:

'Initially, I was simply thinking about Englishness and how my upbringing had been quintessentially English. How much of this was an intrinsic part of my identity? In what ways did my idea of what constitutes an "English life" or English pastimes (if there are such things) differ from that of others?'

His 'fascination with ideas of belonging, memory, identity and place' was further engaged by a trip to Russia, where Roberts photographed its people and its landscape, and the relationship of the former to the latter (resulting in the book *Motherland*). The 'comparative lack of [recent] contemporary studies' of England, apparently made evident in the 2007 Tate Britain Exhibition *How We Are: Photographing Britain* curated by

Val Williams and Susan Bright, encouraged him on. *We English* was funded by the National Media Museum, Arts Council of England and the John Kobal Foundation. The Photographers' Gallery represents him. Thus Boot's is not a lone voice. Roberts has big backers.

Roberts' photographs are indeed beautiful. The light is often luminous, the colours rich and intense. The landscapes he depicts are viewed from an elevated position (he cites John Davies as an important influence), and populated by people at a distance, engaged in a variety of leisure activities that seem to typify the English at play. *Blackpool Promenade, Lancashire, 24th July 2008* is curiously reminiscent of an old postcard; its composition and colour strangely similar to another body of work published by Chris Boot in 2002: *Our True Intent Is All for Your Delight: The John Hinde Butlin's Photographs*. Roberts' beachscapes, such as *Camel Estuary, Padstow, Cornwall, 27th September 2007*, owe something to Richard Misrach's ocean



scenes, though he doesn't exclude the horizon. The hunters in *Heberdens Farm, Finchdean, Hampshire, 20th December* mirror the gun-wielding positions of the men in Søndergaard and Howalt's digital composites, *How to Hunt*. In fact, given his interest in Englishness, Roberts deploys a now-international language of large-format colour photography. The pictures are sumptuous, but their familiarity does not derive solely from knowledge of English pastimes, be it amateur football, rambling or paragliding. In addition to the obvious photographic references that resonate through the book, Roberts cites 16th century Dutch and Flemish landscape painters as a source of inspiration.

His repertoire isn't limited to rolling hills and yellow sands, to countryside or seascape, either. Though people paddle in streams, camp in fields and feed the ducks, the commodification of leisure is made explicit in the car parks and car boot sales, the cafes and the caravan sites. Much of what looks at first glance like 'nature' is often offset by a power station or a roller coaster in the background. Though the natural world has historically been landscaped by the aristocracy and subsequently reclaimed by trusts and councils, symbols of the industrial past and contemporary post-industrial Britain interrupt the rural idyll that pictorial photography traditionally aimed to preserve, in the form of pylons and canals.

Though the people pictured are predominantly white and casually dressed, ethnic and religious diversity is visible. The potentially complex tensions around race and the English landscape (one only has to think of Ingrid Pollard's *Pastoral Interlude*), are not, however, made evident. While Roberts deems his survey 'timely', it generally fails to address current and pressing issues around Englishness, immigration and nationalism. His images suggest integration rather than separation or displacement, a romanticized and apolitical take on the nation. His vision is gentle, not cynical nor judgmental; even the vulgarity of *Ladies' Day, Aintree Racecourse, Merseyside, 4th April 2008* seems to be captured without

comment. Where Parr fed our prejudices and Ray-Jones made us smile, Roberts is at ease with his subject matter, benign and comfortably 'at home'.

The photographs are accompanied by a text from Stephen Daniels, Professor of Cultural Geography at the University of Nottingham. Though his essay does not refer directly to Roberts' photographs, he provides an interesting historical and cultural context for the photographs. He explains how 'photography has accompanied tourism and recreation in the discovery and representation of England as a landscape for leisure' since the 19th century, discusses the Romantic and the picturesque, J M W Turner and William Powell Frith. He describes the significance of the steam train in extending the range of leisure destinations for the Victorians, and reveals how the 20th century notion of 'The English Outdoors' aimed to regulate the potential rowdiness of mass leisure, making recreation an extension of the 'domestic, family-friendly environment': little England.

As someone who learnt young that you don't have to walk far to get away from the crowds unless you're in a shopping centre, I suspect that more of England's leisure time is spent in malls and retail parks than in national parks and on access land, a point perhaps overlooked in Roberts' book. Nevertheless, the photographs in *We English* reflect a personal odyssey, a revisiting of childhood memories and the evocation of an essential aspect of Englishness, however partial the view.

Jane Fletcher

Rereading Barthes

Reflections on 'Camera Lucida'
MIT Press

Geoffrey Batchen's introduction to this critically exuberant collection very usefully fills out the immediate Barthesian context of *Camera Lucida*, and gives some sense of the way in which it rode the Gallo-Anglo-American photo-cultural tide of the late 70s. It also touches fascinatingly on the translational history of the text, particularly on the omissions of the critical apparatus of the original – bibliography, marginal notes, list of illustrations, Tibetan quotation – and more particularly still on the removal of David Boudinet's *Polaroid*, a frontispiece photograph which can be seen as a substitute for, or sister of, the absent Winter Garden photograph of Barthes's mother. But there is still work to be done on the English 'Barthes': Batchen does not address the linguistic detail of Richard Howard's translation, an enquiry whose potential significance is underlined by Victor Burgin and Jane Gallop in their contributions. Gallop uses her own translations of Barthes in preference to those of Howard and Richard Miller, but unfortunately does not say why; Margaret Olin cites the English translation, but 'sometimes amended'; Michael Fried is dissatisfied with the translations of '*gomme*' and '*gracieux*', as is Rosalind Krauss with the translation of '*Ta, Da, Ça!*'.

Thirteen essays follow Batchen's introduction, ten of which are reprints or revisions of previous articles. Burgin's 'Re-reading *Camera Lucida*' (1982) creates a readerly envelope for *Camera Lucida* by tracing Barthes's journey from semiology to phenomenology, from work to text/intertext, from teacher to private citizen, a journey which was bound to make the ontology of the photograph something of a chimera. Gallop's laboured 'The Pleasure of the Phototext' (1985) explores the sexuality, the eroticism, of (rather than in) *Camera Lucida*. This