

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kelli Ann Costa. *Coach Fellas: Heritage and Tourism in Ireland*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009. 255 pp. \$79.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-59874-406-4; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59874-407-1.

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From the mid 1990s until the banking crisis of 2008, when the Republic of Ireland was still widely touted as a model of economic development, stock media narratives centered on Ireland's shift from Europe's backwater to a country that was entrepreneurial, wealthy, fast-paced, and young. Real estate was booming and new infrastructure was transforming the Irish countryside. Yet, even as the new Ireland was being talked up at home and abroad, Irish tourism advertising promised visitors a chance to escape the modern world. The paradox, as Kelli Ann Costa points out, is that the tourism industry itself is inseparable from the "modernization efforts" that transfigured the country (p. 11). Indeed, the invitation to a bucolic land with friendly natives and a relaxed approach to life—or, in Costa's words, "anachronistic, backward, rural [and] ancient" (p. 9)—was inseparable from the government's 1996 "Tourism Brand Ireland" campaign, which adopted "people, place and pace," to market Ireland as a holiday destination.[1]

Costa situates *Coach Fellas: Heritage and Tourism in Ireland* in the context of "modernization, tourism, the heritage market, and the people who work within the tourism industry" (p. 11). Costa does not provide a detailed account of her methodology. However, while the nature of her participation and the number and conditions of her interviews are rarely made explicit, she clearly did participate in coach tours and interviewed tourists and tourism professionals. Her focus on the construction of Ireland's "heritage," particularly its interpretation and marketing, is a familiar theme in the literature.[2] What sets her work apart is in her premise of approaching the topic through an examination of how "coach fellas"—the bus driver guides of organized heritage tours—mediate various Irelands, imagined and lived.

Coach tour drivers are an overlooked group in the tourism literature; one agency responded to a grant application with, "Bus drivers? What can you possibly learn from bus drivers?" (p. 212). But as Costa points out, for many international participants in organized tours, their "driver is often the only 'live' informant available. Tour guides and coach drivers, who are often one and the same, are responsible for imparting background information and insights on the heritage sites and other places visited by their groups" (p. 10). Said another way, the drivers "serve as 'primary interface,' escort and caregiver for organized tours" (p. 37). These men—Costa never met a female driver—play both onstage and backstage roles in the tourism industry, performing and presenting "Ireland" to tourists while doing the hidden organizational work that gets them there. They act as leaders and authority figures and are often highly trained even as they are seasonal workers in a service class, whose personal lives must be kept out of sight of the people whose needs they are catering to. As such, Costa's decision to focus on coach fellas promises privileged insight into the world of guided heritage tourism, including issues of class, gender, political economy, and the politics of culture.

Costa begins with a short survey of key themes in the tourism literature followed by a chapter addressing "Heritage Tourism and Discourse in Ireland." Here, she touches on definitions of tourism and heritage, aspects of the Irish tourism industry, and Irish nationalism and identity. Chapter 3 provides an overview of key components of "heritage in Ireland." Chapter 4, "Representing Ireland's Heritage," follows the purposeful construction of a sample of iconic tourist attractions: landscapes, sites, areas, time periods ("Georgian Dublin"), and "the Irish"

themselves. Taken together, chapters 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate that what gets included in “the heritage” is no simple measure of its (pre)historical significance. As Costa says, following Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (1998), heritage and tourism are “collaborative industries” that convert locations into destinations for commercial consumption (p. 102). These, in turn, are inseparable from the construction of national identity: the prehistoric monument Newgrange, for example, “represents not just a distant and mysterious past, but a past that is demonstrably of Ireland,” including the achievements of presumed “national ancestors” (pp. 106-107). At the same time, while the Irish government required archaeological impact assessments for all proposed developments, pressure for new infrastructure in Ireland’s boom years sometimes trumped arguments about heritage value.

A chapter on key participants in Irish tourism provides a useful historical survey of Ireland’s construction and promotion as a tourist destination by private enterprise as well as by state agencies. Costa follows this with a short chapter in which she offers a generalized sketch of “a Day in the Life of American Coach Tourists” and a profile of package tour visitors drawn from surveys and her own conversations with tour guides. The overall picture is of tourists “interested in ‘going to’ rather than ‘being in’ Ireland and in their collection of trinkets and souvenirs and the number of places they had been for the photo album. Tourism as consumption” (p. 142).

Costa finally focuses squarely the coach fellas themselves in chapter 7 (of 9), where she nicely conveys a feel for the coach driver life, offers a handful of “‘Real World’ Narratives on Coach Driving and Tourism,” and outlines the extensive training and skills required. In addition to technical issues related to driving and health and safety, and organizational matters relating to hotels and meals, drivers must communicate both affectively and effectively. They are expected to have extensive knowledge of Ireland’s history and current affairs, whether certified as guides or not. Additional challenges include seasonal employment and extended periods away from home with accompanying stresses on family life, and drivers’ frustrated sense that their skills are undervalued. Many complain of clients who tune them out—“I just talk to the windscreen”—and a feeling that “Ireland has become a massive theme park that no longer belongs to the Irish but to a world of visitors who come and go as they please” (p. 148). Irish-born coach drivers—apparently the only ones Costa got to know—also worried about the increasing presence of non-nationals. On one hand, they felt it

detracted from the tourist experience to have a non-Irish driver-guide. On the other, the willingness of the eastern Europeans “streaming into Ireland” (p. 170) to accept lower wages and working conditions undermined their bargaining power.

Costa’s final substantive chapter surveys “The Components of Irish Coach Tourism.” This chapter contains some interesting observations on tourist perspectives on their own identities. It also considers how tourist experiences are mediated by pre-trip expectations, preparatory devices such as Tourist Board publications, and the structure of tours. The last includes an “‘orthodoxy of musts’: sites that must be seen, visited, and recorded to demonstrate visitors’ presence in a highly popular area that others may only dream of” (p. 194). These “must see” sites are themselves inseparable from the marketing of tourism “routes” in relation to anchor sites: the Boyne Valley Drive, the Ring of Kerry, and so forth. Costa’s main concern is with the complexities of drivers’ roles. However, she also touches on contradictory aspects of tourists’ position. At least in the tour context, they are privileged clients with staff at their service (at home, things may be very different). But they are dependent on the same people for their material needs and understanding of the sites and sights being delivered up to them.

Costa’s book is accessibly written and points up many critical issues in Irish cultural/ heritage tourism, including “the difficulties, challenges and triumphs of working with audiences who connect with Ireland mostly through hopes and dreams” (p. 215). Her idea of addressing these through the figure of the coach driver guide is original and intriguing. However, I wished she had developed a more sustained analysis of certain problems her material points to. For example, she notes but does not explore in much depth the intimacy between the marketing of Ireland for foreign tourists and Irish cultural and economic nationalism. Likewise, the antipathy toward eastern Europeans working in the Irish tourism industry raises interpenetrating questions about class, national citizenship, and the politics of culture that are never explored.

The rendering of Ireland as a “theme park” is another recurring and fascinating topic in this book. Quotes from coach drivers indicate that they themselves are often reduced to living exhibits, “putting on the Irish” (p. 45) for tourists who assess their professional competence on the basis of how well they embody “expected Irish traits” (p. 186). Similarly, Costa introduces some insightful reflections on the implications of image-based identi-

ties for the tourist experience, including the resistance of many tourists to anything foreign to their received ideas about the “real” Ireland (pp. 46-48). However, I wished she had developed these in a more extended discussion of the politics of authenticity and connected them to other developments in industrial heritage. For example, she notes that, in response to the declining importance of agriculture on foot of European Union and World Trade Organization policies, government tourism agencies in Ireland are encouraging rural tourism as an economic alternative. Costa reports without further comment: “Clever initiatives by local farmers include such activities as watching sheep dogs work, learning to play traditional Irish musical instruments, and having a traditional lunch with a farm family.... Longer stays are also gaining in popularity ... for families who want to experience life on an authentic working farm” (pp. 131-132). Costa does not take the opportunity to tease out the complexities of political economy and cultural identity producing what is an example of an increasingly widespread phenomenon in which productive activities are reworked as performances for tourist consumption.[3] This gap is particularly disappointing given the iconic role of agriculture in Irish cultural nationalism. The recent transformation of Waterford Crystal into a tourism exhibit—mentioned but not discussed by Costa—is another example.

Finally, Costa’s point that anthropologists have rarely examined the “felt experience of the tourist” (p. 187) is well taken—which makes the dearth of ethnographic detail on tourism in her own book especially disappoint-

ing. When tourists do appear, they often look like whiny philistines. This may reflect her greater concern with coach drivers, whose perspectives she tends to treat as authoritative. And Costa offers real insight into the challenges and contradictions of their profession. Ultimately, I wished she had delivered on the promise of her title and written a sustained ethnography of the coach fellas, making their lives speak to the wider questions they so clearly suggest in a more systematic and critical way.

Notes

[1]. The term “pace” was later replaced with “culture,” with a dual emphasis on “living” and “historic” culture. See: <http://www.tourismireland.com/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?~guid=b368d940-82bc-4a54-a40d-a2f420eddb13>, accessed July 24, 2011. Tourism Ireland conducted a “Brand Review” in 2007 and adopted “Go where Ireland takes you” as its new campaign theme. <http://www.tourismirelandbrand.com/our-brand/background-to-brand-ireland>, accessed July 19, 2011. For an extended academic analysis, see Michael Clancy, *Brand New Ireland? Tourism, Development and National Identity in the Irish Republic* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[2]. In addition to Clancy see, for example, Michael Cronin and Barbara O’Connor, eds., *Irish Tourism: Image, Culture and Identity* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2003).

[3]. See Moya Kneafsey, “Tourism and Place Identity: A Case-Study in Rural Ireland,” *Irish Geography* 31, no. 2 (1998): 111-123.

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