Dark Tourism on Fields of Battle

The volume *Battlefield Tourism*, edited by Chris Ryan, offers an original collection of case studies from a sub-genre of tourism, “death tourism” (also known as “dark tourism” or “thanatourism”). A. V. Seaton defines thanatourism as “traveling to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death.” The juxtaposition of sites of death with an industry usually dedicated to pleasure and recreation creates all kinds of fruitful tensions and ambiguities. It is precisely these frictions that beg observation, contextualization, and analysis from interdisciplinary perspectives. Until now, scholarship on death tourism has, for the most part, remained descriptive and limited to hospitality management experts.

*Battlefield Tourism* focuses on sites of battles from five different perspectives: tourism management, history and myth, new developments in the tourism industry, re-embodied performances, and national identity building. Every section attempts to expose the tensions, conflicting agendas, and controversies that lie at the core of thanatourism, and the exploitation of battle sites for recreational and educational purposes. Unfortunately, the brevity of the essays and the methods of analysis do not fulfill the promises that Ryan announces in his (too) numerous introductions to the volume and to the individual sections, as well as in the preface and conclusion. “References to silences, and to discourse, and the nature of that discourse, and the relationship between agreement, disagreement, presence and absence,” he declares, “reflects an underlying philosophical paradigm that helped shape this book” (p. 2). Many of the subsequent essays likewise spend too much time listing issues of great relevance, but too little time on deeper analysis of those issues. Nevertheless, the volume has the merit of addressing key topics in the study of thanatourism, such as authenticity and specificity of a site, state intervention, economics of battlefields, historical interpretations, and mythology; and of examining regions of the world that deserve more academic attention in relation to tourism, like Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, and the Solomon Islands.

In his essay, “It’s Just a Bloody Field! Approaches, Opportunities and Dilemmas of Interpreting English Battlefields,” Mark Piekacz gives a good overview of the development of battlefields as tourism resources in England in the 1990s. His typology lists practical methods of interpretation of historical sites, including plaques, trails, maps, and panels. He raises some difficulties faced by the transformation of battlefields into tourism sites, for example, the risk of ignoring conflicts because they happened too long ago, on too small a scale, or too locally. However, he does not tackle the controversial aspects of the development of thanatourism, such as tensions between the state and local communities over historical interpretation, funding, and management of the site; the conflict over a piece of land deemed “sacred ground” by those who have a connection to it, but used as a leisure destination by other visitors; or the sensitivity and ethical thinking required to market sites as battlefields.
Malcolm Cooper’s essay, "Post-Colonial Representations of Japanese Military Heritage: Political and Social Aspects of Battlefield Tourism in the Pacific and East Asia," attempts "to understand the attitude of the Japanese towards the rising popularity of Asia-Pacific battlefield tourism in the early part of the 21st century" (p. 74). It turns out to be a survey of sites with very succinct descriptions that ultimately frustrate the reader. Only fourteen lines are devoted to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for example, while important controversies are mentioned only in passing. This reviewer would have liked to learn more, for example, about official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine—a war memorial that also enshrines Japanese soldiers convicted of war crimes—and rulings of the Supreme Court on such visits; or about the marketing approaches used to attract tourists from China or the United States who have a very different reading of World War II battlefields in the Pacific.

Teresa Leopold provides a much-needed discussion in "A Proposed Code of Conduct for War Heritage Sites." She examines the ethical principles that govern the management of historical sites, and the difficulty in implementing rules of conduct to address such concerns as: the impact of visitors on the local community and respect for other cultures; the accuracy and truth of the displayed information; the role of the state; and the health and safety of employees and visitors. Her theoretical and general proposal could have been enriched—and maybe questioned—with case studies that could illuminate some complex relationships. These might include the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, in which very few rules of conduct are actually enforced; or the Cambodian prison of Tuol Sleng, outsourced to a Japanese management company. Ground Zero in New York City has likewise produced tension between a memorial and the public space that surrounds it.

Overall, most essays open doors to new sites, mention controversies, and whet the appetite of the reader. Unfortunately, they do not offer a deep analysis of the sites or the controversies, but rather descriptions or lists of issues that should have been pushed forward. For example, Craig Wight’s “The Legerdemain in the Rhetoric of Battlefield Museums: Historical Pluralism and Cryptic Parti Pris” announces a fascinating comparison between the museum rhetoric of the Lithuanian Genocide Museum and that of the United Kingdom Imperial War Museum. Out of the seven-page essay, however, no more than a page and a half is devoted to the two museums, and the important issues Wright lists are detached from the case studies. For example, the questions of sanitized interpretations of history and commemorative language would have benefited from citations of primary sources (museum panels, guided tours, or publications) and rigorous textual analysis and comparison.

Two essays—“Jinggangshan Mountain: A Paradigm of China’s Red Tourism” and “Refighting the Eureka Stockade: Managing a Dissonant Battlefield”—stand out in the volume, because they attempt to embrace theory and case studies, and scratch beyond the surface of the tensions they identify. The first essay, by Gu Hui min, Ryan, and Zhang Wei, focuses on Red Tourism, “a revolutionary narrative weaved around memorials and places of history associated with the period from the birth of the Chinese Communist Party to the founding of New China” (p. 59). The Jinggangshan Mountain accommodates multiple readings as a natural setting for eco-tourism, a site of patriotic identification, a generator of income, and a landmark to promote a region. The authors look not only at interwoven discourses but also at silences—the untold stories of the Chinese Revolution, and the contemporary struggles over economic and social change. The second essay, by Warwick Frost, examines conflicting narratives of an Australian battlefield, and especially issues of tourism marketing, branding, and programming. Frost does not shy away from contentions; on the contrary, he uncovers the apparent simplicity of the site’s presentation, and analyzes the battlefield’s dissonance with nationalist, conservative, liberal, or socialist interpretations, and with the development of the war site as a means of promoting a city. Both essays rely on historical facts and theory, as well as practices associated with commemorations, tourism, marketing, and education. This is what is lacking in many of the other contributions in this otherwise very promising volume.

Several essays in Battleground Tourism would have benefited from adoption of an interdisciplinary perspective using case studies to illuminate transnational controversies. The authors might also have done more to consider issues that are faced by battlefield and other death sites all over the world. There is far more to be known about which population segments visit battlefields and for what purpose (are they victims, survivors, relatives, students, scholars, tourists?), and more debate to be had over the appropriateness of marketing tools and rules of conduct in relation to sites of memory (for example, what do we make of “Schindler’s List tours” in Poland?). It is vital as well to understand fully the multiple functions assigned to sites of memory, from memorial and public artwork to political statement and educational institution.
Ryan had the merit to gather contributors who opened new horizons to the field of thanatourism. It is time to go beyond evocation and description and offer rigorous, interdisciplinary analysis of the rich and often conflicting issues that sites of death have to offer.

Note

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