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Brian Murphy

“Dark Tourism” and the Michelin World War I Battlefield Guides

Introduction

In 1900 André and Edouard Michelin, owners of the Michelin Tyre Company published a pamphlet to facilitate the drivers of the first motor cars that, at the time, populated the under-developed roads of France. It helped inform drivers where they might access a sparse selection of petrol stations, reasonable accommodation as well as the locations of the limited number of qualified motor mechanics that existed at the time. Over the next one hundred years this nascent Michelin guide would develop into the world-renowned series of publications that now offer the traveller an insight into the best restaurants, hotels and tourist attractions the world over. In the hospitality and tourism industry this little red book has become an obsession among culinary artists and gastronomes alike. Gastro-tourists seek out its recommendations. Such recommendations can be contentious. Documentaries have been made casting suspicion on the ethicality of how Michelin awards its stars¹ and arguments regarding such accolades frequently dominate kitchen life. In one tragic case a renowned, three star Michelin chef in France, Bernard Loiseau, took his own life as a result of the mere threat of losing a third star.

What is perhaps less widely known is that Michelin was also responsible for the publication of a series of comprehensive World War 1 Battlefield Guides. These guides were aimed at the early battlefield tourist. The first of these guides was published very soon after the end of the war in 1919.

Thano-tourism is a term derived from the Greek word *Thanatos* which refers to the personification of death. In 1996 Malcom Foley and John Lennon would first coin the more encompassing term “Dark Tourism”. According to The Institute for Dark Tourism Research based at The University of Central Lancashire:

Dark Tourism is the act of travel to sites *of* or sites associated *with* death [...]

There is a growing body of literature on the (re)presentation and tourist

¹ *Michelin stars: The madness of perfection*, broadcast on BBC 2, Thursday 11 March, 2010.

experience of ‘deathscapes’ within contemporary visitor economies. As such, dark tourism is now a recognisable field of academic study²

In this article I suggest that the Michelin WW1 Battlefield Guides were an early 20th Century example of a written aid to dark tourism.

Sensitivities around death exist in a myriad of different cultures. Lennon and Foley in their seminal book *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*³ suggest that it appears to be acceptable to visit death sites immediately following the events themselves to show respect and to mourn. When one looks at the Battlefield Guides and the speed with which some of them emerged for consumption, at first glance, it seems that their rapid publication goes beyond the bounds of good taste. However what seems like untimely haste through our contemporary lens may have been perceived differently almost 100 years ago. This article discusses two books from the series entitled *Michelin Illustrated Guides to the Battlefields (1914-1918)* both published in 1919. They are *Marne Battlefields 1914* and *Ypres and the Battle for Ypres*. For the purposes of the paper we will refer to the former as the Marne Guide and the latter as the Ypres Guide. We examine how, as an example of dark tourism aids, these guides relate to our perceptions of war and death. The article suggests that such perceptions can in part be sanitised through the use of tourism mediums like these.

Using tragedy to sell more tyres

Early on in their book Lennon and Foley pose the question

Is it possible that some death sites have become locations (or even, excuses) for service industries supplying conveniently-spaced watering holes, lavatories and retail outlets designed to intervene in the journeys made by visitors through heritages and landscapes?⁴

Both the Marne Guide and the Ypres Guide certainly support this hypothesis when one understands that part of Michelin’s original intention in publishing many of their guides was to encourage people to drive the relatively few cars that existed in the early 20th century. Their aim was to ultimately sell more tyres in a fledgling motorcar market. It doesn’t sit particularly well with us that the purposes of the Battlefield Guides and the later Hotel/

² Available at: <http://dark-tourism.org.uk/.%202014> (Accessed January 10 2014)

³ John Lennon and Malcom Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2000) p. 5.

⁴ Ibid.

Restaurant Guides that we are now so familiar with in an epicurean context might be so closely aligned. It appears to detract from the tragic losses of World War 1 and align the tourist exploration of the war with that of the more frivolous hedonistic purposes of the Michelin Restaurant Guides, which would appear some years later in 1926. The *Association des Collectionneurs de Guides et Cartes Michelin (ACGCM)* recognise this link:

Michelin des Champs de Bataille sont donc bien les précurseurs des Les Guides Illustrés guides touristiques qui apparaîtront en 1926 et qui, aujourd'hui, ont toujours autant de succès.

The Illustrated Michelin Battlefield Guides are thus indeed the precursors of the tourist guides which later will appear in 1926 and which, today, always have so much success ⁵

The Michelin Battlefield Guides had a lot of publishing success. According to the ACGCM approximately 2 million were sold. There were 46 different titles in varying languages produced between 1919 and 1938.⁶ The two volumes discussed here offer both a detailed overview of the history of particular battles and also a comprehensive tourist itinerary. They also contain some commercial elements within certain volumes that advertise Michelin products such as tyres and maps along with reference in places to the Michelin war effort. Though it is beyond the scope of this article, these dedications and references pay tribute to the Michelin workers who died during the war, not to mention the hospital that the company founded and funded as part of its war effort.

Some of those titles published in the series include the following:

L'Yser et la Côte Belge (The Yser and the Belgian Coast)

Ypres et les Batailles d'Ypres (Ypres and the Ypres Battles)

Lille Avant et Après la Guerre (Lille Before and After the War)

Arras et les Batailles de l'Artois (Arras and the Artois Battles)

Les Batailles de Picardie (The Picardy Battles)

⁵ Jean-Louis Le Bail. Available at [:http://www.acgcm.com/](http://www.acgcm.com/) (Accessed 20 February 2014)

⁶ *Association des Collectionneurs de Guides et Cartes Michelin* Available at <http://www.acgcm.com/> (Accessed 20 February 2014)

Les Batailles de la Somme (The Somme Battles)

Les Batailles de la Marne 1914 (The Marne Battles 1914)

Le Chemins des Dames (The Ladies' Way)

Reims, et les Batailles pour Reims (Reims, and the Battles for Reims)

Les Batailles de Champagne (The Champagne Battles)

Les Batailles de Verdun (The Battles of Verdun)⁷

Dark tourism motivations

It is difficult to imagine now the mind-set of the first battlefield tourist who drove the villages, towns and cities of both the Marne and Ypres in the very early years after the war. According to James Power writing on First World War.com:

Almost as soon as the Great War came to an end in November 1918 visitors flocked to the battlefields; either out of curiosity or to visit the grave of a loved one, or even sadder, to visit the general area where a loved one fell and whose remains had not been found. Some had even made the journey whilst the war was still being fought. The Michelin Tyre Company was one of the first commercial companies offering guided tours to the battlefields of France (Somme) and Belgium (Ypres). They published a guide to the battlefields in 1919 (yes - 1919!) with fascinating pictures of the recently abandoned battlefields with all the material of warfare still littering the battered shell pocked landscapes⁸

These books acted as both guide and motivator for their trip. In general the reasons for tourism travel can be many and varied. Standard tourism texts offer numerous theories on motivations for travel from the innate desire to experience and learn about different cultures to more basic needs for achieving relaxation. Reasons for dark tourism are of course linked

⁷ Available at :(http://www.passioncompassion1418.com/bibliotheque/english_Guides.html) (Accessed 22 February 2014)

⁸ James Power is managing director of the non-profit [Somme Battlefield Tours Ltd](http://www.sommebattlefieldtours.com) based in the U.K. and has contributed extensively to First world war.com. Available at : <http://www.firstworldwar.com/tours/firsttours.htm> (Accessed 3 August 2014)

but many see additional motivations that can be somewhat more complex. Death sites associated with war probably constitute the largest single category of tourist attractions in the world.⁹ The Michelin Battlefield Guides certainly form part of this dark tourism narrative.

While dark tourism is usually associated with a defined period in history it is often the case that the tragedy was of such a scale that it continues to impact on modern society. Stone cites Tarlow who defines dark tourism as “visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact on our lives”.¹⁰ It is clear from the attention and coverage that World War 1 has received since its conclusion how its impact continues one hundred years on. There are other less dramatic examples of dark tourism closer to home. On a much smaller scale we have the example of the Belfast’s Black Taxi Tours which incorporate substantial elements of dark tourism into their varied itineraries. Though scale opposites of the dark tourism spectrum, an interesting comparison can be made between the almost irreverent attitudes displayed in the context of both our battlefield guides and the current review information around Belfast’s Black Taxi Tours.

The Marne Guide is interesting in the way it positions the text. It starts in an appropriately sombre tone indicating that some of the information in the guide was gathered “even before the smoke of battle had cleared away”.¹¹ The author is keen to emphasise the seriousness of such an itinerary when he suggests that “the contemplated visit should be a pilgrimage; not merely a journey across a ravished land. Seeing is not enough, the visitor must understand”.¹²

However there is also evidence of what some might describe as near irreverence in the tone of the latter part of the forward:

[...] ruins are more impressive when coupled with a knowledge of their origin and destruction. A stretch of country which might seem dull and uninteresting to the unenlightened eye becomes transformed at the thought of the battles that have raged there. The wealth of illustrations and authentic map [...] offer the

⁹ Philip Stone and Richard Sharpely “CONSUMING DARK TOURISM: A Thanatological Perspective”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 35, No. 2, p. 574, 2008.

¹⁰ Philip Stone “DARK TOURISM AND SIGNIFICANT OTHER DEATH: Towards a Model of Mortality Mediation” in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3, p. 1568, 2012.

¹¹ Foreword of *Battle-Fields of The Marne 1914* (New jersey: Michelin et Cie, 1919) p.7. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/michelinguidetob00mill>. (Accessed 5 June 2014)

¹² Ibid.

prospective tourist a most interesting study, preliminary to a very instructive and delightful journey beneath the sunny skies of France¹³

A comparison might be made here with the Belfast black taxi tours, where one tour company itinerary suggests:

As well as the murals and peace wall, we cover the Crumlin Road jail and court house. Witness to killings, bombings and escape attempts, These Victorian buildings have been a major part of Irish history for over 160 years. Convictions, imprisonment and even executions are in evidence within the buildings¹⁴

Another black taxi company lists some customer reviews on their main website which suggest a comparable irreverence of sorts considering the nature of the tour:

The best way to see Belfast, especially the wall murals and Shankill Rd and Falls Rd.

The best tour I have ever taken.

An unbelievable experience. Lonely Planet was spot on! Excellent.

A great tour. The guide made is so personal. Better than a cold bus.

A fun tour and lots of information. Exactly what we wanted.

Brilliant - the whole family was in the taxi. It rained though!

The best tour you will ever take.

The murals were so amazing - great city¹⁵

These examples suggest a tension between the more frivolous tourism element of dark tourism and the tragic reality of the subject matter. It might be suggested that the very publication of the battlefield guides as a tourism aid helps to sanitise the tragedy of war to a sometimes already removed observer. The Belfast political tours do the same thing for some of their clients.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ NI Black Taxi Tours. Available at : <http://www.niblacktaxitours.com/belfast-political-tours/> (Accessed 24 May 2014)

¹⁵ World Famous Black Taxi Tours of Belfast. Available at : <http://www.belfasttours.com/reviews.htm> (Accessed 24 May 2014)

Modern media and the sanitisation of violence

In a chapter entitled “Instances of Dark Tourism” Lennon and Foley devote a section to the concept of global communication technologies. They discuss how global technology in the form of film footage of the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy provided a blueprint for later coverage of death and the aftermath. The authors argue that coverage of Kennedy’s assassination was an example of “shrinking time and space” brought about through the use of communications technology of the time. They propose that the sinking of the Titanic “equally illustrated the technological possibilities of global communications in its time in that it was one of the first real global events due to its impact upon news media worldwide”.¹⁶ The later influence of movies, music and books has led to these events becoming major dark tourism attractions in their own right. Their representation through the media technologies of the time did, it could be argued, help distance and, in a sense, sanitise death in the eyes of the dark tourism consumer.

Both Michelin Battlefield Guides also offer us their own version of such death sanitisation through print and photography. Much of the imagery used is stark in both books. The *Marne Guide* in particular has additional impact in that it also includes many personal accounts of local people’s war experiences. For example it includes an account given by one Mr. Chartry, *Procureur de la République*, who was held prisoner by the Germans. He recounts over the next two pages how he was taunted and beaten by his captors in their belief that he was lying to them regarding the riches of his town Coullumiers.¹⁷ Another example in the Marne Guide details the rough treatment endured by the villagers of Sompuis located between Chalons and Vitry Le François.¹⁸ However, because they are communicated through a touristic medium, such events and imagery are often tempered by the benign language of tourism, e.g. itinerary, directions, history of particular locations and artifacts. The photographs in the Ypres Guide offer a number of extremely stark, before and after shots showing the reality of the ravages of war. And yet a number of these photos feature the tourist guide’s car which, it could be argued, helps act as a “sanitising buffer” between the tragedy of war and the tourist’s gaze.

¹⁶ John Lennon and Malcom Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2000) p.17.

¹⁷ *Battle-Fields of The Marne 1914* (New jersey: Michelin et Cie, 1919) p.139.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.235.

The car appears incongruous in many photos as it helps illustrate directions for the tourist to take in an otherwise war-ravished land. The inclusion of the car along with the usual touristic language of a guide help distance the tourist and allows them to feel very much apart from the war-scape. Though we now fully understand the utter devastation of the Great War, one could argue that the guides helped translate the tragedy of war into a more sanitised version for those who may have visited soon after the devastation occurred.

Conclusion

Dark tourism, as a concept, has been around for many years and the “touristic packaging of death has long been a theme of the morbid gaze”.¹⁹ However, it is only in more recent years that an academic field has built up around the area. By publishing these early battlefield guides The Michelin Company presents us with an early 20th century example of how the realities of war were communicated to a particular audience. They show us how perceptions of that reality have the potential to be altered by the medium used, in this case a tourist guide. The availability of the motor car and the subsequent publishing of these books provided a vehicle for the dark tourist’s gaze that hadn’t really existed before. Those wealthy enough to drive a motor car were presented with the opportunity to view at close quarters the devastation of war in a pre-television age. As we have seen, an argument can be made that the existence of tourism guides such as these can help the tourist interpret that devastation in a more acceptable manner. We have seen more contemporary instances of dark tourism close to home in the form of the Belfast black taxi tours, where again we have proposed that death has to some degree been sanitised allowing the tourist to observe at first hand very dark periods of recent history while still remaining aloof and at a considerable distance from the events themselves. The two guides discussed here provide us with unique examples of the portrayal of war in the early 20th century. There are many other types of portrayal through media of the time such as newspaper commentary, early cinema reels, poetry and historical writing. Many of these portrayals have been accused of providing a particular slant on the war and, though not immediately obvious, it appears that the Michelin guides discussed here are no different. They present the dark tourist with an accurate depiction of what went on in the war, and yet I would argue that that this depiction is sanitised by its portrayal through the medium of the tourism guide. Timing is also important and the fact that the guide emerged so

¹⁹ Philip Stone “DARK TOURISM AND SIGNIFICANT OTHER DEATH: Towards a Model of Mortality Mediation” in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3, p. 1565, 2012.

soon after the war allows it to be very realistic in its portrayal of events while at the same time appearing almost indecent in its haste to provide fodder for the dark tourist's gaze. By writing the tragedy of war into a tourist guide it presents the war in a way that was acceptable to the wealthy tourist of the time. A lot has changed since 1919 and even in the 18 years since Lennon and Foley wrote their seminal book on dark tourism, technology has moved on. We now have the advantage of real-time communications such as social media, websites, live television feeds from embedded journalists and the fact that even war participants themselves are now uploading immediate video from smartphones and tablets. We are now presented with the live war atrocities and, rather than read about them in a printed tourist guide, we voyeuristically view them from the relative safety and comfort of our own homes. The recent TV feeds from wars in the Middle East provide a case in point as does the tragic real-time footage of horrific executions transmitted over the internet that the world has recently witnessed. Such exposure has led to accusations of a society that has managed to build up a certain immunity to the horrors of war. It was the relatively quick subsequent coverage of events such as the JFK assassination that made it a global event and, as time passed, allowed it to become acceptable to view such a terrible act as a site of dark tourism. The Titanic has met a similar fate with now a substantial dark tourism industry built around that particular disaster. The Great War though, was unique. The levels of devastation and death caused were unprecedented in human history and the Michelin Guides discussed here were an early literary intervention into the exploitation of that war as another dark tourism entity. One might suggest that, even today, society still cannot turn away from this "morbid gaze". A voyeuristic thirst for war and its associated violence pervades many aspects of our lives today, from movies to the modern phenomenon of ultra-violent war-themed computer games. As with the early Michelin battlefield guides, certain depictions of war have the potential to skew our perceptions. One would like to assume that we are now more realistic in our understanding of such mass violence and its implications but our apparent growing immunity to contemporary war atrocities would question such an assumption.