

Selling the Sights: The Invention of the Tourist in American Culture

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Review

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For most of human history, long-distance trips were, at best, a hassle and, at worst, life-threatening. Descriptions of travel during the early years of American independence, for example, abound with muddy roads, wretched food, dismal sleeping arrangements, and a general unhealthiness. Abigail Adams dreaded the trip back to Massachusetts from the new capital at Washington in 1801 as “a mountain before me,” as a result of the “many horrid Rivers to cross and such Roads to traverse.” Even elite travelers like Adams needed a few days of rest just to recover from the journey itself. What impact, then, would a rash of new roads, canals, or even railroads have upon travel in the United States? Could this mundane task ever become pleasurable? How might the hassles of getting from one place to another be transformed into a desirable experience?

Will B. Mackintosh tackles this question in his excellent new book, *Selling the Sights: The Invention of the Tourist in American Culture*. More specifically, Mackintosh examines how once domestic travel became feasible after the Early Republic’s improvements in infrastructure, Americans took advantage of those opportunities. The birth of American “tourism,” a relatively new concept, was the result. But just as the notion of traveling for pleasure came into being in the United States, the image of the tourist as a banal consumer of an experience created by shrewd marketing ploys also appeared in the literature of the day. In the end, American travelers who wrote about their experience, Mackintosh argues, sorted themselves out into categories based upon their reasons for seeing the sights, as well as the way in which they reacted to those experiences.

Mackintosh describes his book as “an analysis of the commodification of experience and the creation of modern industries of leisure.” (14) In the end, though, this analysis really covers

the reading public more than the traveling one. He begins *Selling the Sights* with a discussion of how geographical literacy came to the United States during the Early Republic, with authors such as Jedidiah Morse leading the way with a didactic style of prose in which readers were introduced to the American landscape with lofty ideals and intellectual rigor. However, as the market for printed guidebooks became larger and as new sites in upstate New York or western Virginia sought to lure tourists to see their own particular sights, the guidebook evolved into much more a marketing tool and much less an uplifting one. By the 1850s, Mackintosh argues, the American guidebook “most clearly reflected the consolidation of the industry and the power of the national publishing market to shape the content of geographical knowledge.” (52)

After establishing the foundation for American tourism as laid out in print, Macintosh gives a riveting account of several early travelers in order to recreate the lived experience of antebellum tourism. Traveling was still hardly a weekend affair—William Richardson took two months in 1815 to travel from Boston to New Orleans—but it had become more possible as a result of the internal improvement boom of the 1830s and 1840s. Here we see the emergence of new destination travel to places like Mackinac in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and Trenton Falls in upstate New York. These new locations describe a new kind of commodification of travel for Mackintosh, in which travelers exchange their dollars for a leisure experience. This kind of travel seems obvious today, but *Selling the Sights* does a fantastic job of unraveling exactly how this process occurred, albeit mainly from the guidebooks and travel narratives.

As travel changed, so did the popular conception of travelers. The second half of *Selling the Sights* contains a fascinating discussion of how “tourists” came to be the objects of mockery and satire as the “absurd and laughable consumer of trite experiences.” (149) In contrast to the materialistic strivers who saw the sights because they were fashionable, trendy, and popular, Mackintosh introduces the “useful traveler,” who provided a more intellectual perspective on visits to see interesting or unique scenery in the United States. In promoting a literature dedicated to traveling “for good purpose,” these writers “offered a complex and ambiguously gendered cultural script for transcending the status of the mere tourist.” (172) The notion here is that by the 1830s and 1840s, well-prepared travelers could transcend the status of mere tourists and provide meaningful experiences beyond the simple pleasures of seeing something new and pleasurable. Instead, active observation, education, and an uplifting experience served as the benchmarks of “useful travel.”

Mackintosh's focus on the literature of travel during this relatively narrow period of time offers both advantages and disadvantages to the reader. On the one hand, the deep dive into the travel literature at the time gives us a thorough inspection of its emergence and the divergent interests of tourists and useful travelers. On the other hand, this is not a wide-ranging exploration of tourism in antebellum America. As *Selling the Sights* provides a thorough interrogation of the first element, those hoping for an analysis beyond a literary one will be disappointed. However, that should not detract from what is an entertaining and enlightening examination of this pivotal period in American culture.

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