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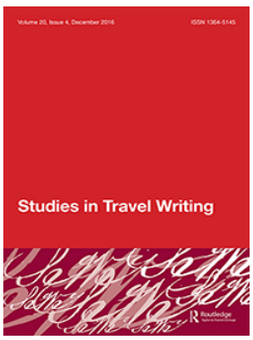

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Leisure, refuge and solidarity: messages in visitors' books as microforms of travel writing

Rita Singer *

Visitors' books not only trace developments in modern tourism, but they also reveal changes in the socio-cultural and language attitudes of travellers from all walks of life over prolonged periods of time. This article investigates messages in visitors' books from Wales from the mid-nineteenth century up to the present and argues for their recognition as microforms of travel writing. Despite their brevity, entries in visitors' books are a highly complex form of travel writing particularly in the inscribers' self-fashioning of identity for future readers. The article examines how writerly choices are not only directly rooted in the discourse of travel, but also in socio-political circumstances in the individual travellers' countries of origin and their travel destinations.

Keywords: travel writing; visitors' books; Wales; Europe; micro-texts; tourism

Despite its predominant classification as a fringe territory, for centuries Wales has lain at the historical centre of and is intrinsically tied to the rise of mass travel and commoditised exploration. Interest in Wales as a travel destination for visitors from England or Scotland first arose in the eighteenth century. Although Daniel Defoe strongly advised against a visit to Wales in his *Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1748), Samuel Johnson in his *Diary of a Journey into North Wales in the Year 1774* (1816) found Wales generally worthy of attention, while not being enthusiastic about the exertions of the act of travelling itself. Later accounts by Thomas Pennant (*A Tour in Wales*, 1778) or William Gilpin (*Observations on the River Wye*, 1782) not only gained the interest of domestic travellers, but also drew the curiosity of visitors from abroad. The increased number of travel accounts published by travellers from mainland Europe throughout the nineteenth century attests as much. A series of co-authored essays by three anonymous Dutch travellers, "Verhaal van een Reisje door een gedeelte van Engeland en Wales, in Mei 1835" ("Story of a Journey Through a Part of England and Wales, in May 1835") published in a popular periodical (1835), contains a number of by then well-established touristic activities, such as ascending Snowdon at night. The account *England und Schottland im Jahre 1844* (1845) by the German physician Carl Carus equally shows the early touristic commodification of Snowdon and, further, gives evidence of the great variety of hospitality services available to tourists throughout Wales. Travelling through Wales outside the busy summer season was also quite comfortable, as is shown in the collaborative work *Sketches of England* (1891) by the Austrian artist Felician Myrbach and the French journalist Paul Villars. These accounts reflect Wales's importance in the development of commercial tourism for both the international and domestic visitor. Indeed, by 1830 "there had been excursions by horse-drawn train on the Swansea to

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Mumbles line of the Oystermouth Railway" (Barton 2005, 29). A decade later, in 1845, Thomas Cook's agency took the paying customer on a day's round trip through north Wales: "The tourists travelled by rail to Liverpool, from where they took a steamer to Caernarvon – with an ascent of Snowdon as a grand climax" (Sharma 2004, 55).

In their study of twentieth-century travel writing, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan demonstrate that the genre "is hard to define, not least because it is a hybrid genre that straddles categories and disciplines" (2000, 7). One sub-category that so far has received little attention is the visitors' book. At first sight, messages in visitors' books fail to correspond with the prevalent view that travel writing chronicles linear movement through space while creating tourist sites through repeated acts of writing about them (Gregory 1999, 116–117). Furthermore, the brevity of the vast majority of entries in a visitors' book may equally disqualify this text type as travel writing, as it appears that these micro-texts lack "the quality of the narrative persona that raises the recounting of experience above the mundane and banal" (Youngs 2013, 181). However, this shortness poses a particular challenge as transcribers compact their messages via text-type-specific strategies. Travel writers are further credited with self-awareness, resulting in frequent recalibrations of identity, "[n]ow the pedagogue, now the clown; now the traveler, now (even) the tourist" (Holland and Huggan 2000, 7). Inscribers of visitors' books similarly undertake highly complex self-editing choices regarding their persona. Messages by international travellers regularly offer no more than snapshots of touristic engagement with sites of interest owing to language constraints or cultural barriers in foreign settings. However, as a collaborative work similar to co-authored travel accounts, the site-specific visitors' book moves beyond the snapshot impressions in individual inscriptions as it collects visitors' interactions with their successive travel destinations over a longer period, in some cases even spanning decades. Containing messages in multiple languages, the inscribed volume subsequently signifies the manifestation of a "contact zone" in an object, that is "the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (Pratt 1992, 4, 7).

As the messages by continental Europeans in visitors' books from Wales clearly attest, previous geographical separation and cultural difference do not necessarily imply incomprehension. This phenomenon is well recognised in more prototypical forms of travel writing from continental Europe.[1] As microforms of travel writing, foreign travellers' messages in visitors' books reveal encounters with the strangely familiar even in the most unexpected places. They highlight the increasingly blurred boundary between the local and the global, which is one of the characteristics that mark an age of increased mass mobility (Clifford 1997, 18–19). However, in the scholarly engagement with travel writing Charles Forsdick recognises a decided bias towards the study of Anglophone narratives (2009, 287). This bias is particularly noteworthy where descriptions of tours of the British Isles are concerned. Focusing on inscriptions by foreign travellers, an analysis of visitors' books from Wales would therefore complement the study of less conventional forms of travel writing in various languages while tracing historical developments of tourism in Britain. The corpus of visitors' books in this study display a multitude of attitudes by continental European travellers towards Wales as a travel destination that is also known for the rivalry between its two domestic language cultures, Welsh and English. As non-native travellers, their inscriptions further undercut dominant Western discourses about national identities as the inscribers position themselves in relation to Wales as a stateless nation. Examining examples of entries in visitors' books from the nineteenth century up to the present, it emerges that, European visitors to Wales have continuously used these books as a public platform for self-expression.

Despite their significance for the material culture of travelling in Britain, contemporary "tourism history and travel-writing scholarship" continuously treats the visitors' book mostly "as a minor, auxiliary travel text" (James 2012, 44). Therefore, not many in-depth studies

about this text type have been undertaken and to this day Fitzwater Wray's monograph *The Visitor's Book* (1937) remains the most comprehensive, albeit non-scholarly work on visitors' books in the British hostelry sector. Wray esteems the visitors' book as a "British Social Institution" (1937, ix), but also concedes that by the 1930s the social practice of composing inn verse, i.e. occasional poems in visitors' books in the hospitality sector, was much diminished owing to changing habits and legislation. Building on Wray's appraisal of visitors' books as a cultural institution, Kevin James stresses that the practice of inscription once formed "an indispensable part of the culture of the nineteenth-century inn and small-scale hotel" because the visitors' book "constituted a record that was central to the performance of travel identities and spaces" (2012, 44). In other words, identities of travel essentially relate to visitors' behaviour in various travelled spaces conversely made manifest in the visitors' book as a material record of otherwise ephemeral performances. Beyond the field of the British hospitality sector, Andrew Gulliford (1992) and Mary Alexander (2000) investigate comments in visitors' books from temporary exhibitions in US-American museums. The works of sociolinguists Anastasia Stamou and Stephanos Paraskevopulos (2003, 2004) and Chaim Noy in the field of tourism studies (2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011) restrict themselves to educational sites, such as a Greek nature reserve or heritage museums in Israel. Antonio M. Bañón Hernández and Smantha R. Romero (2013) investigated messages in a visitors' book used during a sit-in in Spain. These studies, however, only represent a narrow aspect of the travelling experience, in which educational sites frequently intersect with spaces of hospitality.

Visitors' books create a "contact zone" between travellers and travelled places as their pages encourage inscribers to interact with their surroundings in a particular way. As Kai Mikkonen points out, "travel experience and travel writing presuppose the sense of a consecution of places"; they "give identity and narrativity to a series of events" (2007, 287). Owing to the form and function of visitors' books, entries that chronicle a series of events or itineraries, or that give comprehensive insights into the identity of the inscriber, are rare. Nevertheless, visitors' books provide contributors with an opportunity to inscribe their identities onto their travel destinations in the form of brief messages that remain *in situ* long after the travellers' departure. Entries in visitors' books qualify as micro-texts which, according to Kevin Dela Rosa and Jeffrey Ellen, show three main criteria: first, the text in question is brief; second, the language in micro-texts tends to be informal and unstructured, and, third, micro-texts are "semi-structured", meaning they contain more or less structured "meta-data […] in proportion to some free-text" (2009, 710). Applied to prototypical visitors' book inscriptions, most examples meet these criteria. Entries may range from one word, mostly a visitor's first or family name or a single-word exclamation, to a few pages and may even include sketches with various subjects. However, even such longer entries are sufficiently short and fulfil the criteria of informality and semi-structuredness that characterise micro-texts. The third criterion, finally, differentiates between inscriptions that are more invested in recording meta-data or "nominal data" (James 2012, 46), and those that privilege free-text content. A message commonly discloses an inscriber's name, date, country of origin, town of residence and address. Infrequently, visitors also provide their occupation, age or reason for travel. The example of two entries written by the same inscriber within a few days of each other demonstrates that the recording of meta-data does not follow a predictable pattern. During her visit to a tearoom in the Llyfnant Valley, a German tourist wrote (*Glanyrafon […] Visitor's Books* 1909–1929, 188): "2 July 1907 Frieda Keller, deutsche Lehrerin aus Frankfurt a. M., weilend in Wales zu dero Erholung und geistigen Vollendung!!!" ("Frieda Keller, German teacher from Frankfurt am Main, staying in Wales for her recreation and intellectual fulfilment"). Three days later, Keller left a second note in another tearoom nearby, this time, however, omitting the reason for her journey to Wales as well as identifying as a teacher *from* Germany instead of a "German teacher" (*Two Visitors' Books […] of the Caerhedyn Refreshment Rooms* 1897–1907,

366). In contrast to the relative structuredness of meta-data, free-text in visitors' messages may comprise notes of pleasure or displeasure, quotations from literary texts, the Bible, occasional verse or drawings (James 2012, 44, 45). For example, extant visitors' books from the summit of Snowdon between the 1840s and 1880s contain numerous caricatures of more or less hapless mountaineers, sketches of the summit huts and doodles of Snowdon shrouded in thick clouds of rain, most of which contain humorous captions (*Snowdon Visitor's Book* 1845–1847; *Museum of Welsh Antiquities: Visitors' Books* 1849–1850; *Snowdon Visitors' Books* 1863–1866, 1883–1885, 1886–1889). What unites this broad range of free-texts is their emotive purpose: independent of form and structure, inscribers express their pleasure or displeasure with their surroundings to varying degrees.

The textual corpus: historical developments and content

The corpus for this study contains 3287 entries by travellers from continental Europe collected from 89 visitors' books originally laid out in 30 different locations all over Wales, such as teashops, inns, museums, chapels, campsites or colleges, between 1834 and 2011. The chronological distribution of entries indicates a general development of continental European tourism in Wales since the early nineteenth century, but also reveals a bias in the corpus, because it contains a significantly greater number of more recent volumes. Foreign visitor numbers to Wales have increased substantially ever since holidays abroad became more available to average earners after the Second World War (Furlough 1998, 248). Even though the corpus matches the overall trend, it also has its limitations. For example, not every visitor participates in the inscription process. The surveys by Stamou and Paraskevopulos (2003, 37) and Noy (2008a, 518) show that generally only 10% of the total number of visitors inscribe a visitors' book. Finally, owing to the low survival rate of visitors' books, the corpus represents a fragment of the material culture of the travel experience (James 2012, 46). Keeping these principal barriers in mind, the corpus nevertheless returns clear results concerning the inscribers' gender distribution, countries of origin, language variety and identity construction.

Given the fact that travelling and travel writing often touch on encounters with a foreign Other, visitors' books provide an alternative approach to the study of "contact zones" thanks to their comparative participatory quality for prospective inscribers. Given the prerequisites of freedom of travel, able-bodiedness and literacy, anyone can inscribe the displayed book and in a language of their choice without having to overcome the gatekeeping financial, legal and editorial practices that precede the publication of printed accounts. Throughout the nineteenth century, travel from continental Europe to Britain was largely related to trade, scientific research, the study of art history or even industrial espionage, while leisurely travel remained an indicator of social class and privilege until 1950 (Elsasser 1917, 4–5; Fischer and Fritzon 2009, 86, 91). The three countries from mainland Europe that dominate the pages of each of the Welsh visitors' books in the corpus are Germany, France and the Netherlands in descending order of frequency. Overall, entries by continental Europeans after the Second World War show a much greater *absolute* variety of languages than recorded at any time before (6.3 languages on average for the period 1950–1980; 14.9 languages on average 1980–2011). Even though journeys to Wales had become more affordable with the establishment of commercial travel agencies (Williams and Shaw 1991, 16–17), it took until the mid-1960s for a noticeable increase of visitors from countries other than Germany, France and the Netherlands. The second marked rise in the number of foreign travellers closely relates to the end of the Cold War, even though the *relative* language variety decreased (occurrence of continental European languages other than English: 64.9% for 1950–1980; 59.7% for 1980–2011). These numbers do not indicate actual language proficiency, but suggest the use of English as a friendly gesture, with frequent simple messages such as "Nice" or "Very beautiful", in order to decrease a perceived cultural distance between European visitors

and Welsh hosts (cf. King 1995, 228). In contrast to direct interactions between travellers and hosts, visitors' books thus constitute a delayed contact zone because tokens of friendliness are delivered in a manner that can transcend the boundaries of limited language proficiency. In that regard, it appears that, by their choice of language, native speakers of German are more eager to please their Welsh hosts than speakers of French or Dutch. However, given the particularity of the Welsh setting for each of the volumes in the corpus, the use of English by the visitors must also be viewed within a wider paradigm of Anglo-Welsh power dynamics which strongly disfavour the use of and engagement with the Welsh language and culture (Pitchford 2001, 54–55). Subsequently, only a handful of messages in the entire corpus are in Welsh, most notably by Breton, Polish and German visitors.

Over time, registers with narrow, line-ruled columns that privilege the provision of meta-data and discourage the composition of free-text increasingly replaced the blank page visitors' book of the Victorian era. In the hostelry sector, the introduction of registers is specifically linked to new legislation during the First World War, which largely resulted in the discontinuation of the British visitors' book in the form of albums whose pages were filled with a great variety of genres and in which inscription was voluntary (James 2012, 48–49, 64; Wray 1937, x). Independent of the page layout of visitors' books, negative comments hardly ever occur in the present corpus. Noy (2008a, 510) recognises visitors' books as carriers of social functions in which the books dictate social roles and performances of the people interacting with them. Especially in the hostelry sector, where host–guest relationships are markedly asymmetric (King 1995, 227), comments in visitors' books tend to reflect emotional extremes of agreement or disagreement. On the one hand, the dominance of positive messages in the corpus up until 1920 reflects the successful implementation of such a guest–host script. On the other hand, the multitude of visitors' strikingly positive responses may also be due to the common practice of removing offending content: not a single volume in the corpus has escaped censorship. Segments or entire pages have been removed or individual, apparently offending messages were made illegible. State surveillance may have been relatively low before 1914, but proprietors remained vigilant and, if necessary, took action accordingly. For example, in 1865, one of the managers of the refreshment huts on Snowdon felt obliged to remind his customers: "John Roberts / respectfully requests that / visitors will not write anything / objectionable in this book" (*Snowdon Visitors' Books* 1863–1866, 72).

Performing European identities in visitors' books: exemplary notes from the corpus

Early examples of leisurely travel to Wales: Mount Snowdon and the Swiss

During the late eighteenth century, explorations of Snowdonia became a quintessential ingredient for the appreciation of picturesque mountain landscapes and the complete Welsh experience. As a result, a commercial infrastructure related to the ascent of Snowdon developed early on. Two rival hotels in Llanberis employed local guides to conduct travellers safely around the mountain on foot or horseback and offered shelter and catering on the summit itself. This practice is well documented in the travel writing by continental Europeans, such as the aforementioned Carl Carus (1845, 103–104) who used these services during his journey in 1844.

Descriptions of the huts and landscape are not limited to published accounts, but also appear in the comments provided by continental Europeans who inscribed the visitors' books of the "Roberts Hotel", the hut managed by the Victoria Hotel. Only four volumes from this particular site are still extant in which 85 continental Europeans left 21 messages in English, French, German, Spanish and even Latin between 1845 and 1889. Three of these messages were composed by Swiss travellers. Two years after Carus's visit, on 5 June 1846, one E. Zellweger from St. Gallen complains:

> Daß es für einen Schweizer die Mühe nicht lohn [sic] diese drei tausend Fuß zu erklimmen statt in den hübschen Gasthöfen oder am Ufer des Oceans sich zu erholen findet der Unterzeichnete & hofft seine Mitschweizer werden ihm beistimmen. (*Snowdon Visitor's Book* 1845–1847, 104)
>
> (The undersigned finds that it is hardly worth the effort for a Swiss to ascend these three thousand feet instead of resting in the lovely inns or along the banks of the ocean, and hopes his fellow Swiss will agree with him.)[2]

Zellweger filters the Welsh landscape through his Swiss point of view in such a way that he does not acknowledge his surroundings by name anywhere in the message. The only geographical references divide the inscriber's present location on Snowdon from the location of his desire, an unspecified guesthouse on the sea front that, above all, denotes a geographical feature not native to his home country. In fact, Zellweger is so disappointed with his Welsh travel destination that it is more important for him to underline his Swiss identity three times by referring to the country of his origin, his fellow compatriots and his town of residence. In contrast, Wales shrinks to a second-rate mountain terrain that does not deserve any recognition of its culture, language or name.

In contrast to this first Swiss messenger, Karl Johan [van?] der Guht's inscription, dating from 16 July 1849, sets an entirely different tone:

> Stock in der Hand
> Löcher im Gewand
> Wandeln wir gar müßig
> Durch das wundervolle Land
> Aber hätten wir mehr Geld in dem Sack
> rauchten wir Tabak
> Machten wir ein [illeg.] wären sonst ein
> solches Lumpenpack
> Karl Johann [van?] der Guht, Zögling
> aus Herrn Fallenbergs Erziehungsanstalt
> Hofwyl im Canton Bern in
> der Schweiz, erstieg den Snowdon
> am Sechzehnten Juli 1849, und
> obgleich er die schönsten Gegenden
> der Schweiz besucht hat, war sehr erfreut
> mit der Ansicht. (*Museum of Welsh Antiquities: Visitors' Books* 1849–1850, 154)
>
> (Cane in hand / Holes in our clothes / We are walking idly / Across the wonderful country / But had we more money in the bag / we would smoke tobacco / If we did [illeg.] we were / such a ragged lot / Karl Johan [van?] der Guht, ward / from Mr Fallenberg's educational institute / Hofwyl in the Canton of Bern in / Switzerland, climbed Snowdon / on the sixteenth of July 1849, and / even though he has visited the most beautiful areas / in Switzerland, he was very delighted / by the view.)

The entry divides into three sections in which an incidental poem and a positive message frame the meta-data. [Van?] der Guht switches from humorous self-deprecation in the occasional poem to a more formal tone in the meta-data and the second free-text. He appreciates the Welsh landscape, but maps it firmly on his Swiss origins. [Van?] der Guht echoes Zellweger's signifying chain in which the foreign territory is filtered by the visitors' domestic, Swiss landscapes. Only once does [van?] der Guht establish his immediate location by name, i.e. "Snowdon", and once covertly as "das wunderbare Land". In contrast, he refers to three specific Swiss locations (Mr Fallenberg's institution; Hofwyl; Canton of Bern) and Switzerland as a whole.

Even though he is highly complementary of his surroundings, Wales does not feature as a distinct geographical or cultural entity.

Finally, the shortest of the Swiss messages from Snowdon dates from more than 30 years later:

> Hélène Gschwind [illeg.]at Sep. 22nd /85
> Edith J Gee
> Emile Gschwind Zürich (Switzerland) Sept 22nd 1885
> Nach getaner Arbeit ist gut ruhen. (*Snowdon Visitors' Books* 1883–1885, 170)
> (After finished work, it is good to rest.)

This entry documents the frequent practice of leisurely travel as a group activity. It cannot be ascertained whether Edith J. Gee is related to the Gschwinds nor where she is from; neither does the entry relate any information on the exact relationship between the two Swiss travellers (who may be a married couple, siblings, parent and child, cousins or simply share the same last name by coincidence). However, the tight clustering of their names on the page of the visitors' book and Emile's subsequent brief message clearly marks them as one group (cf. Noy 2008a, 520). Again the entry incorporates the Welsh setting into a Swiss frame of mind from which it is impossible to derive any conclusion about the travellers' wider opinion about or knowledge of Wales. Nevertheless, Emile's brief, if formulaic response in the shape of a common German proverb indicates the group's appreciation for the services offered by the "Roberts Hotel" after a leisurely, if taxing ascent.

Visitors' books and non-leisurely travel: European dignitaries and refugees in twentieth-century Wales

Previous studies (Wray 1937; Stamou and Paraskevopoulos 2003, 2004; James 2012) commonly associate visitors' books with either leisure activities or tourist destinations, such as inns, hotels or nature reserves, which preclude the voluntary presence of the individual traveller. However, taking wider historical contexts into consideration, it emerges that the delineation between leisurely and non-leisurely travel is less clear-cut. In a survey of recent Francophone travel writing, Kathryn N. Jones demonstrates that travel writers frequently utilise their accounts as means of *distancing* themselves from leisurely travel, thus drawing attention to "the ethical value of travel writing" and their engagement in social criticism (Jones 2013, 25). In conjunction with Clifford's criticism of prototypical conceptualisations of travel which do not account for periods of dwelling (1997, 31, 39), a re-evaluation of travel writing as (socio-)critical commentary should include entries in visitors' books. Such a re-definition would subsequently recognise the experiences shared, for example, by refugees, diplomats or convalescent travellers, as their presence in a foreign location is only temporary or, at least originally, intended as such (251). In the context of travel from the European mainland to Wales, the two World Wars significantly influenced the content of the Welsh visitors' books.

In the centenary year of the outbreak of the First World War, public attention in Britain turned to the largely forgotten history of an unprecedented number of refugees: within a year of the German invasion of Belgium, Britain had taken in approximately 225,000 to 230,000 Belgians (de Jastrzebski 1916, 136). The Belgian refugees received a warm welcome in a political climate that simultaneously "bred a hatred of the enemy" (Purseigle 2007, 434). The presence of the Belgians and their attitudes towards the host nation and the common German enemy is well documented in the present corpus of visitors' books from tearooms across Wales. Noy argues that the semiotic function of visitors' books "has more to do with emotive and aesthetic expressions of involvement than with reflexive comments" (2008a, 515). Although tearooms

are associated with leisurely travel, within the context of war and displacement they offer space for emotional release. In a discussion of travel literature in mid-twentieth-century Wales, Carol Tully challenges "the prevailing notion that the exile and the traveller can or should be considered separately in relation to the travel accounts they produce" (2014, 175) as it divests displaced people of their genuine voice. The emotional trauma of exile and asylum is evident in a message by a Belgian mother and daughter:

> Aug 16th Mrs G.E. Spicer
> 1917 Rotton Park
> Birmingham
> also Mr H.E.S. the lesser half.
> Marie De Keuster
> & Hilde (daughter)
> Diamant Steeg
> Antwerp
> Belgium
> Here till (Williams/Wilhelms) [sic] whiskers are cut.
> That that is x is that that is not is not
> is not that so.
> (If you know it, dont [sic] show your swank by
> putting the wrong slops in.) (*Glanyrafon […] Visitor's Books* 1909–1929, 75)

The example illustrates the merging of tourist and refugee identity. The clustering of the entire entry indicates that the de Keusters represent a case of exile as travel, not only in their capacity as displaced persons, but also in their actual participation in tourism as they shared their outing in Wales with a married couple from Birmingham. The formal structures that underlie the entry and the topic of the message push the inscription beyond its primary function as a visitor's record abroad. They also turn the note into a public performance of a carefully crafted identity "in response to existing negative images" which "is best understood in relation to the stimulus that provoked it" (Pitchford 1995, 48). Owing to Britain's pet-like appreciation of the "brave little Belgians" (Baynham 1914, 8), there is no need for the de Keusters to identify themselves unambiguously as refugees because already the provision of their hometown and country places them outside the tourist discourse. Their demonstrative antipathy towards Kaiser Wilhelm II in conjunction with a flippant ditty equally signifies their construction of a public self-image as defiant, non-leisurely travellers. Their irreverence towards the German head of state exemplifies a "discursive involvement" with their British surroundings played out on a safe stage, i.e. not just the visitors' book itself but also the Welsh tearoom and its guests (Hernández and Romero 2013, 10). The de Keusters' performance of this particular social script guarantees them instant support in a by then war-weary country in which traumatic experiences were channelled into conventionalised, public demonstrations of Germanophobia. Thus, the public refugee identity suspends the categorisation of the de Keusters as private leisurely travellers from Birmingham, which could trigger hostile reactions because tourism denotes conspicuous consumption during times of hardship and austerity (Urry and Larsen 2011, 40).

In contrast, the inscriptions dating from around the Second World War show a greater variety in their countries of origin and the number of foreign inscribers. Whereas examples from the First World War are limited to entries by refugees, for the duration of the Second World War in Europe, members of the Allied forces feature prominently among the inscriptions. In terms of the corpus, the Museum of Welsh Antiquities in Bangor shows the largest, most varied and consistent stream of wartime visitors from continental Europe, with 44 visitors from 14 countries (*Visitors'*

Book, Victoria Hotel, Llanberis 1939–1967). In contrast, Gregynog Hall near Newtown saw a much smaller and more selective contingent of foreign travellers. However, the following examples demonstrate how visitors' books not only constitute a stage for the visitors, but also for the visited places themselves which then impacts on the inscribers' performance of identity in their written messages. Consequently, place, visitors' book and inscriber function as extensions of one another (Noy 2009, 437).

Within popular Welsh imagination, Gregynog Hall once was a central hub of the fine arts in Wales after its purchase in 1914 by the sisters Gwendoline and Margaret Davies and their brother, the philanthropist David Davies of Llandinam (Cannon-Brookes 1979, 225). However, a more globally oriented and politically interested Gregynog Hall emerges from the visitors' books that establish the estate as a travel destination outside tourism discourse while it provides its guests with all the comforts of a gentrified life style. David Davies's involvement in international relations and especially the League of Nations culminated in a number of international conferences at Gregynog Hall during the 1920s (Steeds 2002, 127–129). One of these conferences included a three-day meeting of the Welsh National Council branch in October 1926 with the "important purpose […] to hear from distinguished fellow workers from abroad their accounts of the educational work done in the Schools of their own countries" (*Gregynog Visitors' Book* 1921–1931, 104–106). The Burge Memorial Trust Conference in September 1930 attempted to provide a framework for the normalisation of the political relationship between Germany and the Allied forces of the First World War as well as the promotion of academic exchange between Germany, France and Britain (160–191). Both events receive detailed and cordial coverage in the visitors' book by an anonymous inscriber, who appears to have been personally involved in the organisation of the conferences and, more likely than not, a resident of Britain, and may even have been David Davies himself. In both cases, the summaries identify the estate as a work-related travel destination for foreign guests and dignitaries and establish the ideological framework into which they embed their signatures.

The collaborative provision of prominent signatures under the formal introduction may generate a message of ethically committed *travel as work* instead of *travel as leisure*, a reading that gathers strength when taking the biographical and professional background of the participants into account. Particularly the columns of names in the entry for the Burge Memorial Trust support such an argument. Among the list of guests, the following attendees stand out as they correspond to a similar list of signatures entered in the twin visitors' book of the Gregynog Press located on the same estate:

> Tony Sender M. S. R. Berlin
> Dr. Magdalene Schoch Hamburg
> [A v] Nostitz Wallwitz
> Frhr. v Grünau Berlin
> A[lbrecht] Mendelssohn Bartholdy
> […]
> Dr. Felix Wach Dresden
> […]
> Prof. André Philip Lyon. (*Gregynog Visitors' Book* 1923–1944, 31)

It has been possible to identify these dignitaries. Tony Sender was born Sidonie Zippora Sender (1888–1964). She worked as a lawyer and journalist and in 1933 escaped from Germany to Czechoslovakia after she had received death threats; Sender emigrated to the USA in 1937 (1939). Magdalene Schoch (1897–1987) was Germany's first female professor of law and personal assistant to Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy; like Sender, she emigrated to the USA

in the 1930s due to political persecution (Oeter 2008, 25, 29). Werner Ernst Otto Freiherr von Grünau (1874–1956) lawyer, civil servant, diplomat, is the most likely candidate for the signature "Frhr. v Grünau" (Akten der Reichskanzlei 2014). Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1874–1936) and Felix Gustav Wach (1871–1943) are both grandsons of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Whereas Mendelsson Bartholdy is known for his work as lawyer, artist and his pacifist undertakings, Wach worked as a civil servant for the state of Saxony before receiving a commission as *Amtshauptman* (Gantzel-Kress 1994; Graul 2006, 288). Finally, André Philip was a noted French socialist and later became a member of the *Résistance* before serving as Finance Minister of France after the war (Nord 2010, 131, 148). The signature "A v Nostitz Wallwitz" most likely belongs to Alfred von Nostitz Wallwitz (1870–1953). As a National Socialist German politician and diplomat (Bock 2010, 157–158), he stands out from his socialist and liberal conference peers. The prominent public and diplomatic profiles of the conference participants configure their signatures as a demonstration of ethical commitment to their travel as work, regardless of their support for or disagreement with the ideology of the Burge Memorial Trust.

Attempts to separate leisurely and non-leisurely travel create a false dichotomy, especially where foreign visitors are concerned. This is apparent in the entries from the Gregynog Hall visitors' books during and immediately after the end of the Second World War in Europe, when the estate briefly took on the function of a medical residence. During the war, the Davies sisters shared their home with the Red Cross, which used the main house as a hospital and convalescent home for the British and Allied armed forces (White 1984, 2011, 41). For this purpose, Gregynog Hall was rededicated as "Gregynog Convalescent Home" and given a non-civilian visitors' book (*Gregynog Convalescent Home Visitors Book* 1941–1945). On at least four occasions after the war, the Davies sisters invited groups of Dutch girls to relieve their suffering from malnutrition and treat them to a holiday away from their destroyed hometowns. Whereas the injured soldiers foreground their medical condition, the same cannot be said about the Dutch girls. Firstly, the children signed the civilian visitors' book that had already been in use in 1932. Secondly, none of the headlines above the four entries recognises their presence at Gregynog due to war or illness. They simply read "Dutch Children" or "Thanks to England and to all people of Gregynog Hall", the latter of which is adorned with a pencil drawing of the Dutch flag crossed with the Union Flag (*Gregynog Visitors' Book* 1932–1961, 175, 179, 181, 183), thus excising any potential Welsh dimension from the travel destination. The Dutch girls' attitude after the Second World War closely echoes the attitudes of Basque refugee children from the Spanish Civil War who stayed in various charitable institutions across Wales in 1937 (Tully 2014, 177). The conflation of Wales, England and Britain further hints at the concealed medical objective of the Dutch girls' visit: after all, they did not travel to Gregynog in search of Welsh history and culture. The free-text in the earliest entry contains the lyrics of an occasional song composed by the Dutch guests, most likely by the adult minders. The third stanza of the song declares, "Gregynog Hall it is you who made us / Strong and healthy like we were before" (*Gregynog Visitors' Book* 1932–1961, 175), acknowledging the restorative properties of the place, but omitting the source or form of the children's lack of health. The "before" in the second verse creates a meaningful gap, which only becomes clear in conjunction with the dating of the entry as a month and a half after the end of the Second World War in Europe.

A similar tactic of obfuscation emerges in the children's drawings in two later entries. In October 1945, three "before and after" drawings illustrate the girls' change within a month from emaciated and pale to well-nourished children with plump, red cheeks (178). The girl artist acknowledges to a limited degree the ill health of her friends, but does not identify the cause. Instead, the additional message foregrounds the transformative powers of Gregynog, "Thank you very much for the lovely time, you gave us" (179), which suggests a leisurely

instead of a medical reason behind the children's presence in Wales. A year later, another Dutch girl produced two drawings with the same effect. The first image, entitled "On the Daffodil Hill", shows a group of girls and one of the Davies sisters in a pastoral scene; in the second drawing, "The Dutch children sing a song for you", the girls perform in front of two sitting women (180). Unlike the first two entries in the visitors' book, these drawings entirely gloss over any medical condition, which may be attributed to a sense of shame, if not taboo.

The wilful self-editing that has gone into the creation of the entries in the visitors' books of the Glanyrafon tearoom and Gregynog Hall, supports the argument for the reading of supposedly spontaneous messages as a highly complex form of travel writing, despite or because of their extreme brevity. The inscribers' editing choices concerning the creation of publicly accepted identities show that leisurely and non-leisurely travel may not be easily distinguished from each other. Whereas the Belgian visitors during the First World War obscure the fact of their leisurely venture into Wales in order to highlight their more heroic refugee identities, the Dutch children wilfully present themselves as holidaymakers in order to divert attention from a medical condition. In other words: both groups of visitors "[conform] to certain norms of embodiment, articulation and aestheticization" (Noy 2008a, 510) as they perform a specifically chosen identity to later interactors with the visitors' books.

Demonstrations of cultural solidarity: tourism in Wales after the fall of the Iron Curtain

With the end of the Cold War, Wales experienced an influx of tourists from Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. For many of these visitors, this was also the first chance to travel freely outside the former Bloc states and, as a result, some of the notes in the visitors' books clearly attest to the changes in the political climate across Europe. Nancy L. Green stresses that:

> [t]ravel is about seeking otherness. At the same time, it is intimately connected to self-knowledge. The analysis of difference can be made only in function of prior information that can indeed establish that difference. (2002, 433)

A significant number of entries in the visitors' books express political and cultural solidarity with the holiday destination Wales by highlighting similarities with the inscribers' home countries. In such instances, the visitors' books function as a retained contact zone between the travellers and their foreign destination because the entries last beyond the holiday.

The following example is taken from a visitors' book in the most remote chapel in Wales, Soar-y-Mynydd, located in a largely de-populated valley in Ceredigion. The entry dates from October 1991 (*Soar-y-mynydd Visitors' Books* 1991–1993, 12): "A group of Lithuanian Rugby players wish the people of Wales to be free too, just like the people of independent Lithuania."[3] This note comes at a particularly crucial point in Lithuania's history as it had been less than a year since the country had seceded from the Soviet Union and suffered subsequent occupation until March 1991. Visitors' responses are gradable by their "levels of discursive involvement" from "weak" to "strong" in direct relation to their identification with the surroundings where the visitors' books are laid out (Hernández and Romero 2013, 10). In this respect, the visitors' book of the isolated Calvinist chapel provides the Lithuanian tourists with an opportunity to demonstrate their strong discursive involvement in the public performance of their own national identities and profess their strong political solidarity with Wales. The latter is achieved by way of analogy and implication: constructing Welsh independence analogous to Lithuanian independence implies an uncomfortable likeness between the United Kingdom and the USSR, or, more specifically, England and Russia. In addition to declaring political kinship between the two small nations, the inscribers further identify themselves as rugby players and so establish a closer proximity

to the popular culture of Wales. Finally, however, the message also creates a clear hierarchy between Lithuanian inscribers and Welsh addressees: whereas the Baltic nation has succeeded in gaining its independence despite Soviet military occupation, pre-devolution Wales is identified as hitherto lacking that very agency and determination.

In contrast to the visitors' books of Soar-y-Mynydd, only a few years later, in 1994, a French tourist from Strasbourg during a visit to the Ceredigion Museum in Aberystwyth recognises an international reach in Wales's cultural prowess:

> Où l'on se rend compte, une fois de plus, que les besoins élémentaires des peuples, ont et seront toujours les mêmes. Les Gallois ont sauvé leur langue, c'est formidable. Qu'ils contribuent à sauver les langues minoritaires d'Europe et du monde entier [illeg.] que la dignìté, le respect social et économique de chaque individu! (*Amgueddfa Ceredigion Llyfr Ymwelwyr* 1996–1998, 94)
>
> (This [museum] makes us realise, once again that the basic needs of the people will always be the same. The Welsh have saved their language, which is great. That they should help save the minority languages of Europe and the world [illeg.] that dignity, social and economic respect for each individual person!)

Similar to the Lithuanians, the French inscriber separates Wales from political self-determination. However, the location of the visitors' book in a museum has a noticeable impact on the tourists' interpretation of Welsh cultural agency (Macdonald 2005, 119 cf). The didactic intent of Ceredigion Museum lies predominantly in the presentation of local history in its permanent displays. Temporary, topical exhibitions highlight specific events or historical periods and their significance for the nation. Owing to the institutional status of the museum as part of the public sector, all interpretation panels are required to be bilingual since the passing of the Welsh Language Act 1993 (UK Parliament 1993). In the environment of Ceredigion Museum, the permanent visibility of the Welsh language is therefore guaranteed. It is in this context that Welsh is a living language instead of a museum artefact. The French visitor therefore perceives the persistent use of Welsh as an authentic practice that preserves the language from extinction (Taylor 2001, 9). Although the inscriber conflates a single, unified Welsh national identity with Welsh language proficiency, and so disowns the English-speaking Welsh, he equally maintains the image of Wales as a small, yet resilient nation. It is a particularly heroic version of the national community that is crafted in the message. The French visitor thus credits Wales with an active, central part in language revival movements to which other minoritised language communities in Europe and beyond can aspire. Ultimately, the inscriber's strong discursive involvement is owed to the assessment of language diversity as a shared, transnational need.

Owing perhaps to the limited international visibility of post-devolution Wales, Welsh political agency matters little for European visitors in their demonstrations of solidarity with their travel destination. As a result, foreign visitors show strong discursive involvement with Wales based on objects, cultural practices or landscapes in their home countries. Strong involvement, however, does not automatically imply agreement – with the surroundings or with each other, as two Italian messages from 1999 show in the visitors' book of Ceredigion Museum, which is located in a disused Edwardian theatre:

> Ma con tut[t]i, i bei musei che ci sono in Italia la visita non
> ci ha colpito particolarmente. [E]ra meglio lasciare il
> teatro. A tutti gli Italiani nel mondo Saluti[.]
> [Italian tourist A]
> Ho trovato il Museo molto interessante.
> [Italian tourist B]. (*Amgueddfa Ceredigion Llyfr Ymwelwyr* 1998–2001, 177)

(A: With all the beautiful museums we have in Italy this visit did not impress us much, it was better to leave it as a theatre. Greetings to all Italians in the world.
B: I found the museum very interesting.)[4]

EunJung Chang argues that "[p]ersonal and cultural history is an important variable" (2006, 174) in a visitor's interaction with and evaluation of museum displays. Similar to the Swiss mountaineers on Snowdon circa 150 years earlier, the Italian inscriber A clearly interprets the exhibited objects based on an imagined hierarchy between the cultural frameworks of Italy and Wales, the latter of which is found sorely lacking. The depreciation of the Welsh museum indicates a personal history of previous museum visits in Italy that shape the traveller's opinion of what constitutes high-quality collections. Therefore, inscriber A cannot identify with the displayed Welsh objects as they seem to lack cultural value and can only express solidarity with other, future Italian travellers as the more worthy recipients of notice (recalling Zellweger's message in the Snowdon visitors' book). This deprecating comment is immediately confronted by a message underneath from another Italian visitor, inscriber B, who curtly undercuts her compatriot's opinion. Such practices of contradiction or even ridicule run through the entire corpus. The same phenomenon was also observed by Andrew Gulliford who found that "visitors contradicted each other's opinions on concurrent pages of the comment books or even on the same page" (1992, 77) in visitors' books used in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art. Owing to the accumulative and collaborative nature of the messages in the visitors' books, visitors equally respond to the exhibits or the building's immediate surroundings as well as previous inscriptions that have, at this stage, fused with the travel destination. Consequently, inscriber B expresses her solidarity with the Welsh folk museum in rejecting her Italian compatriot.

Later comments in the visitors' books of Ceredigion Museum demonstrate that solidarity with travel destinations originates from the recognition of the familiar in the culturally Other. In 2001 a visitor from Estonia (*Visitors' Book Amgueddfa Ceredigion Museum* 2001–2002, 93) remarks about Aberystwyth: "Love the town – extremely beautiful[.] And it's so nice to find your own flag here." The inscriber refers to the row of over 50 flags of small nations and stateless nations from Europe on the Aberystwyth promenade, a popular site with British and international tourists. The message diverts attention entirely away from the museum, most likely because the visitor could not find an object with which to identify as an Estonian traveller in Wales. In contrast, three Finnish visitors in 2011 sent their "Greetings from Finland – interesting to see the same kinds of (and even the same brands) of old household items & machinery that my parents recognise from their childhood & history in Finland" (*Visitors' Comments Book* 2008–2011, 168). Estonia's and Finland's former location on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain becomes apparent in the Finnish message and retroactively explains the Estonian entry. Whereas the Finnish population would have had free access to western European goods and brands, Estonian goods were restricted to what was commonly available under Soviet Rule. It is therefore likely that the Finnish visitors are in a position where they can identify with everyday objects from recent Welsh history, owing to their access to a shared international market. In contrast, the Estonian inscriber was forced to relocate their attention beyond the museum in order to find an object that links the Welsh foreign location with the Estonian home country.

Conclusion

Visitors' books may at first glance not allow the reconstruction of itineraries as is the case with more traditional forms of travel writing nor do they, in their form as micro-texts, provide great detail in the description of travelled sites. However, as pieces of collaborative writing over an extended period of time, these short messages offer glimpses of visitors' attitudes towards the

same travel destinations, which otherwise would have to be artificially compiled from disjointed traditional travel accounts. Unlike prototypical forms of travel literature which are subject to translation before their delayed publication in the foreign book market, foreign inscribers of visitors' book suffer no such delay as their performed travel identities become immediately available with the composition of the entry. Unlike often conservative, highly edited and revised commercial texts, these semi-formal micro-texts act outside the conventions and restrictions of the traditional travel account. Visitors' books give inscribers a chance to perform their identity (collectively as visitors and individually as inscriber) in the public domain while retaining control over the stage by way of offering or obscuring personal details that allow or prevent their identification (Noy 2008a, 509).

Particularly in light of the restrictions imposed by a selective publishing process behind traditional travel literature, visitors' books support the study of commonly underrepresented voices, such as women travellers in the nineteenth century, refugees or visitors from the former Eastern Bloc countries. The study of comments by these groups in opposition to conventionally published travel literature, which particularly in the nineteenth century favoured the white, cis-male voice, may challenge the understanding not just of the historical development of European tourism in Wales, but also about the travellers themselves.

Finally, owing to a certain degree of Anglophone bias in the study of travel literature, critical engagement with continental European travel to and writing about Wales is sorely lacking despite its long history of commercialised travel. The recently created database *Accounts of Travel* (2015) with over 400 examples of under-researched continental European travel writing about Wales attests to this bias. As the social practice of inscribing visitors' books coincided with the emergence of commercial tourism, the rescued archival material allows long-term studies not just in the field of traditional tourist sites in Wales, such as the summit of Snowdon, or Welsh hospitality culture. Instead, the sufficiently large corpus in this present study of alternative forms of travel writing reflects the larger political dimensions that relate particularly to non-leisurely travel. The messages left behind by continental Europeans show a complexity of Wales beyond its function as holiday destination that is often missing in more conventional accounts. In their sum, the inscriptions contradict representations of Wales as a fringe territory depending on the good will of paying holidaymakers. The foreign inscribers afford Wales a more central and active position, particularly in light of peace-keeping activism and a place of refuge throughout the twentieth century.

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Notes

1. The Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project "European Travellers to Wales, 1750–2010", undertaken jointly by Bangor University, the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies (Aberystwyth) and Swansea University, have developed the database *Accounts of Travel* (2015) that identifies no less than 162 accounts of travel to Wales from continental Europe for the nineteenth century alone.

2. Unless explicitly stated, all translations of entries in the visitors' books into English are mine.
3. Sharon Macdonald highlights the ethical dilemma for researchers of visitors' books and points to a duty of discretion on the hands of the researcher regarding personal data of individual commenters (Macdonald 2005, 124). Accordingly, in this article any cited visitors' book entry dating after 1990 has been anonymised and may only retain information about towns and countries of origin.
4. Translation by Irene Cuogo.

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