

Picturing the Imaginative Geographies of the Great Western Railway: 1895 - 1939

Introduction

This research, a partnership between the University of York's Institute of Railway Studies and Transport History and the National Railway Museum, seeks to understand more about the visual vocabulary employed by the GWR when picturing landscape. It addresses the impact that such a 'picturing' had, both on the visitors and those who were visited.



The Great Western Railway (GWR) were among the first railway companies to produce their own illustrated guidebooks. From 1904 to 1947 they produced over 70 titles¹ the majority of which were profusely illustrated with photographs, not of the locomotives or infrastructure that provided the means of transportation but of the landscapes, and locations that they allowed the tourist access to.

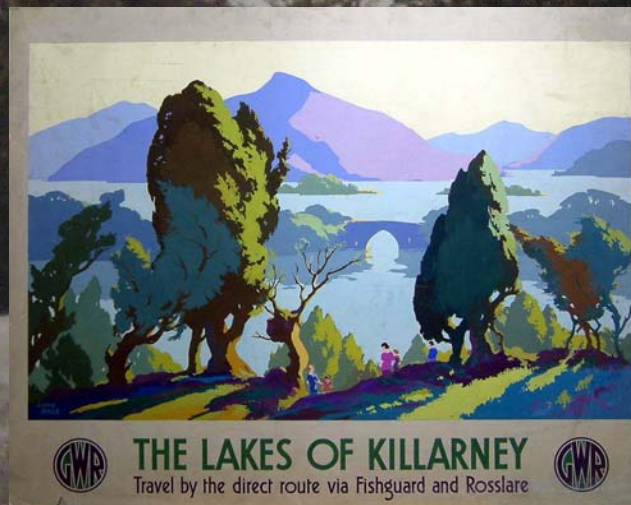
References

1. R. B. Wilson, *Go Great Western* (Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1987)
2. See, for example, E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London, Pion, 1976) and J. Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999)
3. T. Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 150.

Principal Investigator: Prof. Colin Divall: cd11@york.ac.uk
NRM Supervisor: Ed Bartholomew: ed.bartholomew@nrm.org.uk
Researcher: Matt Thompson: jemt500@york.ac.uk

Methodology

This research is based on the thesis that the landscape images employed by the GWR comprise an example of *corporate place-making*² where locations have been invested with meaning and significance. Over more than four decades the GWR sent their own photographers to take pictures of the landscapes of Cornwall, Devon, Southern Ireland and Wales. These images were used in guidebooks, carriage prints and even translated into the graphic art of posters. Through an examination of what was pictured and, just as importantly, what was not, it has been possible to reconstruct something of the visual vocabulary that the GWR made use of to create interleaving layers of very distinctive imaginative geographies designed to appeal, by turns, to independent tourists, families and even their own staff.



Early Findings

It has become clear that there was not simply a single homogenous imaginative geography that encompassed all of the qualities and attributes that the GWR wished to put across. The ways in which Southern Ireland was pictured differed considerably from the ways in which the mountains of Wales or the moorlands of Cornwall were represented which may reflect something of the colonial element present in the development of the Anglo-Irish tourist industry. Similarly, the sublime landscapes and places portrayed in the staff magazine were poles apart from the busy promenades and 'bathing beauties' pictured in the guidebooks bought by tourists outside of the company. What this suggests is that the GWR had a clear grasp of the importance of landscape in the ways people define themselves. They made use of the fact that "the meanings of places are historically constituted and vary through time" and that the associations and significances attached to certain locations and regions "were not natural but were socially and historically constructed."³



Outputs

In addition to the production of a doctoral thesis this research will be contributing directly to the exhibitions that will comprise the redisplay of the NRM's Great Hall to be completed 2012.

Pictures (left to right)
Chisleton Village, July 1928, Lakes of Killarney,
poster, c1930, Drake's Tower, c1924.