

WE ENGLISH, SIMON ROBERTS



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The English Outdoors

An essay featured in *We English*, written by Professor Stephen Daniels

Skirting the broad scars of erosion caused by hikers, he made a curving route to the ridge ahead of him and, as so often happened, thought about his life in fresh terms, gladdening himself with recollections of recent small successes ... These benign thoughts brought him at last to the ridge where he had a view of the long descent toward Sty Head, and what he saw made him cry out in irritation. Spread out over more than a mile, marked by brilliant points of fluorescent oranges, blues and greens, was a party of walkers. ... Instantly the landscape was transformed, tamed, reduced to a trampled beauty spot.

Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (2005)

The character whose Lake District walk is described in this passage, a London-based composer seeking inspiration in wild nature for a musical masterpiece for the Millennium, shoulders a long history of grumpy intolerance about English landscape and threats to its beauty by crowds of people. The enthusiasms of those crowds of people meanwhile have a long history of their own, and their depiction in Simon Roberts's engaging photographs records a different kind of connection with the landscape.

Since its early development in the 19th century, photography has accompanied tourism and recreation in the discovery and representation of England as a landscape for leisure. This includes professional photography of all kinds – artistic, journalistic, commercial, promotional – as well as the countless amateur Kodak snaps and digital images taken by leisure-seekers as souvenirs of the landscape and of themselves visiting it. Photography's 'envisioning' of England is part of a long-standing and wide-ranging culture of image making in a variety of media, both pictorial and written, expressing contrasting and sometimes conflicting notions of England and Englishness as forms of cultural character and identity. In a way, it is curious that despite its being one of the oldest, most densely settled and heavily portrayed countries in Europe, writers and artists still go in search of England as a nation. This perhaps reflects England's post-imperial predicament, the complications of New Commonwealth immigration, membership of the European Union, and UK devolution, particularly the resurgence of a confident, forward-looking, flag-waving Scottish and Welsh nationalism.

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There are several ways of characterizing the relationship between land and leisure in the depiction of England – fields of vision which are conditioned both by the kinds of country and activity observed and by the way they are framed by the ideas and tastes of the artist and spectator. None of these ways of seeing is uniquely English in origin or deployment, although they conventionally express typically English tastes and attitudes, and all predate photography as a form of image making. They include scenes of wild, untamed-looking country, largely empty of human figures (except the solitary observer): an approach informed by Romantic literature, especially poetry. Then there are the more homely, old-fashioned countryside scenes in which the human presence is largely historical, signified, say, by old hedges and cottages: an approach informed by the picturesque style. A third pictorial tradition is more documentary, encompassing scenes which include people as well as landscape, other excursionists as well as the picture maker: living landscapes of leisure.

When we look into the history of English art, the prevailing view of the country appears to be Romantic and picturesque, a countryside thinly populated with pleasure-seekers. Apart from harvest scenes, with dutiful labourers resting from their work with a flagon of drink, and the occasional cricket match on the village green, leisure is reserved for the few families who own the land – hunting, shooting and fishing, or promenading in their parks and gardens, perhaps with a few friends. But if we adopt a broader and less rustic interpretation of ‘landscape’, we discover a more inclusive art which engages with the city as well as the country, and which embraces the movement of people, to reveal a more sociable vision of England, as a people as well as a place.

When the tourist industry began in earnest in the 18th century, so did the great upsurge in English landscape art. Some artists blazed a trail to newly discovered beauty spots in the upland regions, along rivers and coasts, with tourists and other artists following in their footsteps. This art became part of a wider cultural programme to build or rebuild English identity, and to link local and regional places and pursuits as a national territory, within the new nation state of Great Britain. While the presence of other excursionists in these pictures is often only implied or at any rate discreet, some artists addressed the popular encounter with landscape, in crowded scenes, sometimes expressly theatrical ones, in which the landscape is an arena of performance and narrative.

Pleasure-seekers of various kinds, modern and traditional, rich and poor, inhabit J.M.W. Turner’s scenes: trippers, hunters, anglers, bathers, game players, sightseers, folk dancers, drinkers – the forerunners of today’s paragliders, bird-watchers and car-boot browsers (though there is a healthy overlap). Seen in themselves and as a series, Turner’s scenes offer a panorama of the nation, a freeborn people who have the liberty to play as well as work, and who enact their pleasures with both solemn ritual and gay abandon. We see poorer pleasure-seekers close to routeways and transportation, and in marginal places where there is some license from authority – riverside and seaside, city edge and common – but also in places where they mix with wealthier, more cultured visitors, in sometimes tense encounters. This England is set within Great Britain as an imperial power with a global reach, and Turner’s vision is an international one, drawing on continental models of landscape art (including populous Dutch scenes of village and city recreation by river and coast) as well as exploring the tourist scenes in France, Italy and Switzerland.

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When steam trains increased the geographical and social range of recreation, some Victorian painters stayed with the crowds rather than heading for the remoter hills and coasts. William Powell Frith exhibited brilliantly successful paintings of the crowds at Epsom on Derby Day, on Ramsgate Sands, and on the platform of Paddington Station, one of the railway terminals that took London into the country. Others painted the comic theatre of England's increasingly busy waterways, purposeful rowing boats and steam-driven pleasure craft mixing with those who were just messing about on the river. These pictures, which themselves drew crowds to the exhibition rooms, displayed more than just a metropolitan multitude; they showed episodes in a range of stories and encounters, personal, social and political. As narrative scenes, they were as graphic as the novels which seized the Victorian imagination. Again there was a patriotic vision, a liberal view of the free movement, mixing and congregation of many classes of people in the landscape. Victorian England witnessed both the growth of leisure and its control, the promotion of 'recreation'; that is, purposeful activities in regulated arenas such as sports grounds and public parks, devised in part to lure the masses from less energetic and less constructive pleasures in the pub and music hall.

The full development of the English Outdoors – the countryside and seaside as an amenity for mass leisure – can be dated to the mid 20th century, the period when rural England witnessed the start of its steep demographic decline as a working landscape and urban England spread out, in terms of both residential development and recreational pursuits. Although custodians of rural England stirred up fears of invasion by day-trippers as much as by suburban sprawl, recreation proved a largely orderly movement. As the phrase suggests, the English Outdoors is a domestic, family-friendly environment, more an extension of house and garden than a genuine engagement with nature, any rowdiness contained by the vision of a well-regulated crowd and campaigns to keep the countryside tidy. These new patterns of leisure fitted with the private and domestic sense of England as a homeland. 'Little England', in the phrase of the time, became a refuge from – or alternative to – Great Britain, with all its associations of military imperialism; a nation that seemed both more ancient and more modern than the political state.

A bright new world of weekends and annual holidays with pay, of new motorized modes of transport, by car, charabanc and caravan, as well as a frequent and far-reaching rail network, brought thousands to the country. Trippers flocked to the beaches, hikers to the hills, sunbathers to lidos, cyclists along country lanes, and picnickers to woods and fields. Then as now, most people happily cleaved to each other's company, not too far from designated places. It was and remains a collective, sociable pleasure on the whole, not a solitary one: an encounter with nature, or at least fresh air, green space and water, conditioned by comfort in numbers.

But the English countryside proved complicated cultural terrain in which to define contrasting and conflicting versions of national identity, elegiac and progressive, insular and expansionist. Campaigns promoting physical fitness and social access through hiking and camping were part of a larger European and North American outdoors movement with a range of ideological affiliations, left and right, liberal and imperial. Moreover, guidebooks for those in search of picturesque old England and its half-timbered tea rooms took respectable family motorists well away from working-class coach parties heading for buzzing beauty spots, crates of brown ale on the back seat; and away from young, modern-minded, fruit juice-drinking sunbathers revealing more human flesh than had hitherto been seen in public.

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A public-spirited art of this period, of postcards and posters as well as paintings and prints, captures this popular movement, in weather that seemed always sunny. Some of those travelling in search of England, like J.B. Priestley in *English Journey* (1934) found scenes of urban England at play a sign of a robust democracy; the new lido at Blackpool, for example, which held ‘thousands of people, the population of a small town’. If L.S. Lowry’s scenes of crowded Lancashire beaches and public parks were mordant visions of Northern workers’ playtime, paintings of middle-class picnickers shown at the Royal Academy summer exhibitions portrayed the anxious pleasures of displaced suburban garden parties in the Home Counties. Less public spirited meanwhile were the observers who blamed pleasure-seekers for spoiling the country (at least when the wrong sort ventured beyond designated leisure spaces into rural England), saying they would ruin its rustic charm. ‘The only way to save the countryside for democracy’, declared a conservative newspaper in 1933, ‘is to keep democracy out of the countryside.’

The post-war period witnessed a surge in the popularity of countryside and seaside for annual holidays and day trips, and with it a surge of concern among authorities, academics, conservationists, planners and policy makers. There was nothing very new in this, of course; leisure in the English landscape had always been regarded as a problem as well as a pleasure, occasionally a moral panic, at least by those who speak as custodians of the country and its character. Writing from Old Cottage, Appleton, Berkshire, in his preface to *Land and Leisure* (1970) Oxford professor E.W. Gilbert railed against the spreading of commercial recreation in the countryside and along the coast – signs, he claimed, of worrying population growth in an overcrowded country, and of a decline in sensitive appreciation of natural beauty.

Philip Larkin’s poetry of the sixties and seventies is not usually thought to entertain a generously inclusive vision of England; and while he could offer a sour view of modern youth and a sentimental view of old lanes and fields, more than most contemporary writers and artists he appreciated the pleasure-seeking community rituals of the ‘cut price crowd’, the ‘gaiety of seashores ... half an annual pleasure, half a rite’ and the Whitsun wedding party aboard the train ‘watched the landscape, sitting side by side / – An Odeon went past, a cooling tower, / And someone running up to bowl ...’.

With the rise in affordable foreign annual holidays and weekend breaks, and of leisure centres and even shopping centres as day-trip destinations, the concern shifted focus to a fall in visitor numbers to the English countryside and seaside (especially those without their own transportation), and to the apparent absence of ethnic minorities. Surveys suggest moreover that most of the seven million who do visit the countryside each summer weekend do not venture far from designated places, from picnic tables and parking spaces for cars, caravans and burger vans, and spend their time wandering around or sitting down, admiring the view, eating and drinking.

The precise places and pursuits of the English Outdoors – racegoing, seaside promenading, picnicking, angling, hiking and heritage visiting – may have changed over the past century, but much appears to remain the same. Some older traditional pastimes such as street football and cheese rolling have either survived or been renovated, even reinvented. How far these places and pursuits are regarded as forms of national or even patriotic identity by the participants themselves, rather than by those who merely observe the English Outdoors, remains an intriguing question.