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The visitors' book in historical context: introduction

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It is customary to begin introductions such as these with remarks underscoring the relative newness of research in the field.¹ That may be the case here, though the argument in favour of this collection is as much that it brings together scholars who have been working on discrete projects centred on a specific source set – one whose value has often primarily been understood in terms of the nominal information it yields about travel markets. Broadly speaking, the contributions in this issue explore the visitors' books' relationship to other texts, contemporaneous and historical, manuscript and print; their role in record-linkage; and their communicative functions amongst a range of users. All articles underscore that these sources have real research value; by asserting their value as forms of travel writing in particular, the authors argue in favour of materials that might otherwise be regarded with the same curiosity and dismissiveness that attended evaluations of the sources in the nineteenth century. Initial interest in the books for the systematic exploration of the geographic compass of the client market has given way, as this issue attests, to examinations of these sources as literary and cultural artefacts. The books tell us a great deal about technologies of transport, as several contributions to this issue underline, but also of the book itself as a technology – as an instrument for organising and communicating data, and not merely narrowly-defined nominal data.

Perhaps the most obvious comment to make on these sources is that their survival is largely serendipitous: the articles that follow explore visitors' books held in local museums, private establishments, libraries, county archives and other record repositories. Others were privately acquired and are held outside public archives and institutions. Perhaps more than anything this has nourished assessments of their ephemeral character – a stance which, until the embrace of ephemera as the basis for serious scholarly inquiry, left them to languish with the other “fragmentary documents of everyday life”, to borrow Maurice Rickard's terminology (2000). Adding to their ambiguous status as James and Northey note in this volume, and as all contributions here underline, is the diversity of material structures that the “visitors' book” encompassed, to say nothing of related nomenclature, from French “livres d'or”, “registres des arrivées” and “livres des étrangers” to German “Fremdenbücher” and many other similar variations. Serving in places as an album, elsewhere as a register, often as both at once, the artefact is difficult to define, and its genealogies remain largely apocryphal.

To understand the evolution of the visitors' book's value as an historical source, it is important to recognise how it was configured within meta-narratives that explicated

the album and its history in the nineteenth century (James 2020; Matthews 2020). To most commentators, the hotel visitors' book descended genealogically from ancient albums and metaphorically from practices of inspired inscription into "heterogeneous hotch potches of maudlin sentiment and racked rhyme" (Dick 1894, 263). They propounded a popular narrative of the book's origins that went back millennia, indicating the immemorial desire of travellers to register their presence in a place, and knitted the codex within a constellation of surfaces that constituted "albums" upon which people had sated *cacoethes scribendi*.² Early albums required no pages *per se* – merely an open surface upon which people would leave their mark for posterity. In this catholic formulation, the first albums included the walls of Herculaneum, Petrarch's tomb and other such surfaces, until they gravitated to a more materially contained form ("Visitors' Books" 1879, 349). The Alpinist Albert Smith and John Leech hailed this as a salutary development, but only because it preserved other surfaces from defilement: "The reprehensible mania for writing names on statues, ruins, and cathedral towers has died away, it is true, in a great degree, amongst us; but, at the same time, the folly of writing trash in the 'albums' kept at different show places has increased" (Smith and Leech 1851, 203).

By the nineteenth century, the codex was the familiar album form, and the visitors' book was as ubiquitous as it was versatile as a technology of communication and surveillance. A visitors' book could denote a prescriptive, formal record associated with official acts of visitation in workhouses, asylums, schools, prisons and other institutions subject to systematic inspection, when people who were accorded official status recorded observations in its pages following conventionalised practice.

In the wake of the journalist Victor-Joseph Etienne de Jouy, who saw in the visitor book a degeneration of the private albums of the eighteenth-century, it also designates volumes associated with acts of voluntary inscription at hotels, museums, clubs, stately homes, factories and historical sites, which lay open to be perused and to receive the responses of visitors ("A Guest Book" 1880, 642–643; Cook 1895, 334–340). The "visitors' book" appellation telegraphed that the volume notionally "belonged" to them, though in practice it was produced, superintended, often redacted, withdrawn from use, replaced, preserved or destroyed by the proprietors or managers of an establishment.

With storied antecedents in medieval monasteries, notably the Grand Chartreuse in Savoy ("Album" 1853; "Album [Vol. vii, 235]" 1853), hotel books had their own distinct histories and they too embraced other surfaces. William Shenstone occupied pride of place for his windowpane inscription at the Red Lion in Henley ("AT.Q.C." 1896, 146; Stone 1909), providing the eighteenth-century English-speaking world with its most famous ode to an inn (Cook 1895, 340; Harper 1906, 299–300). Visitors'-book historians also credited Jonathan Swift with a witty windowpane inscription at an inn at Willoughby that anticipated the widespread Victorian use of the books for subversive commentary:

There are three
 Crofses [*sic*] at your door:
 Hang up your Wife,
 And you'l [*sic*] count Four
 Swift, D., 1730 (Harper 1906, 303)

As the conventional surface of inscription transitioned to the page, writing in the visitors' book was associated pre-eminently with rituals of arrival and departure, and with

recording responses to people – other guests, the innkeeper and other staff – and to places – the inn or hotel, the landscapes, nearby sights, and even other hostelries. The spatial contexts of inscription and reading – from the micro-spaces of the hotel to the landscapes in which they were situated – shaped inscriptional practices, with one 1891 commentator opining that “[t]his hotel institution [the visitors’ book] is of more than ordinary interest in pleasure-resort houses, as people then have more leisure and inclination to scribble their opinions, and probably take a rosier view of men and things than when in ‘populous cities pent’” (“The Visitors’ Book” 1891, 311).

As far as reading the visitors’ book, a “dip” into it was authorised a subsidiary, compensatory act of leisure – a recourse for guests who were penned into their hostelry by night-fall or, more commonly, inclement conditions which precluded other entertainments (“Visitors Book at Our Swiss Inn” 1867). Commentators girded the prospective reader for the contents they would discover. J. Harris Stone, for example, dismissed their fripperies:

For I suppose no one has occupied a few leisure moments in poring over the Visitors’ Book without being appalled, even stupefied, by the chaotic mass of drivel and rubbish there set out in black and white. The prose is bad enough, then how much worse must be the verse! Poetry only in name! Usually it is in fact merely bad prose cut up into sausage lengths and most of it as mysterious. (Stone 1909, 269)

Stone’s appraisal was, as we shall see, a common evaluation of the books in printed texts. Excerpts of egregious doggerel and stilted prose were cited as critics denigrated visitors’ books as compendia of fripperies – an unstable, chaotic mess (Dick 1894; *Mammon in London* 1823, 12). In printed commentaries, the quality of visitors’-book’s putatively impulsively authored, disjointed banalities came under withering criticism. On close inspection, however, the apparently inchoate, miscellaneous character of inscriptions which Stone decried adhered to established communicative practices produced and reproduced by inscribers. Enactments within and outside the books stabilised conventions of the genre in hostelry parlours and lobbies across Britain.

In one of only a few monographs on the subject, *The Visitor’s Book* (1937), Fitzwater Wray claims that these practices were particular to British culture, that they are a “British social institution” (quoted in James 2012, 46). They were associated in particular with common law culture and the liberating character of travel in Britain, where registration under one’s own name was not required until the twentieth century. In that sense, visitor books seemed to belong to an elective culture of travel, in contrast to registers which were more prescriptive. But if a majority of research so far has focused on British books and travellers, we find similar practices on the European continent and beyond, where English rubs shoulders with many other languages in albums.

That point is evident in several contributions here, from Vincent’s to Heafford’s to Brewer’s, all of which explore how conventions associated with the book were produced and reproduced by travellers in foreign realms. One of the biggest cultural differences stems from the fact that inns and hotels on the Continent were obliged to register their guests from the beginning of the nineteenth century, while in Great Britain this obligation was not imposed until a century later. The institutional function of the guestbook most often determining its format and content, continental hotel registers contain less free commentary than their British counterparts. In other tourist sites, on the other

hand, one mostly finds blank-paged albums, inviting the visitor to be more creative. Yet even these inscriptions continued to be governed by conventions and codes, and could be controlled by the owner of the book, who sometimes tore out pages deemed too critical, or by other users, who often stole valuable autographs.

This special issue of *Studies in Travel Writing* explores scribal and reading conventions centred on these sources, and the wider constellation of practices and texts of which they were a part. In so doing, it illuminates the variety of approaches to visitors' books which place them at the heart of histories of mobility, technology, the book, tourism, aesthetic codes, and political and legal cultures. As the provincial press in Britain expanded, and as travel writing of all forms became more widely available to a reading public, the visitors' book figured prominently, albeit in seemingly contradictory ways which highlighted its visibility and depreciated its uses and users. This depreciation has led to an under-theorising of visitors' books, a lacuna which many contributions to this issue seek to address. Chaim Noy's contribution, which opens this issue, examines the visitors' books of several history museums in the United States and Israel. It offers a valuable delineation of these books' diverse functions, using six key concepts and approaches with which to systematically interrogate these sources as media. Noy addresses the importance of relating text to context and of identifying the performative aspect of reading and writing, with close attention to how situational such acts are.

In historical case studies, several other contributors adopt and adapt various theoretical models and conceptual tools. Rita Singer, in her article on nineteenth-century visitors' books from Mount Snowdon in Wales, assesses their instrumentality in negotiating complex responses of "disappointment" to the natural landscape (an inversion of the customary treatment of them as sites upon which canonical ideas of the sublime were iterated and reiterated). Looking at early twentieth-century cycling inns, Alan McNee adopts the perspective of the "imagined community" in his exploration of the book as a tableau for the production and reproduction of social ties among cyclists. Exploring the same touristic phenomenon, Kevin James and Andrew Northey share with McNee an interest in how the visitors' book served as a tool for diverse sub-sets of travellers and users to engage in specific shapes of dialogue, often grounded in technologies and cultures of mobility. Patrick Vincent uses Actor-Network Theory to understand how the books played a key role in "ordering" and mediating the encounter with nature, and also reminds us that while we, like nineteenth-century critics of the books, are often drawn to their most flamboyant features, illustrations, verses and other inscriptions were very much the exception, rather than the rule. His perspective, like all others in this issue, embraces the visitors' book as an instrument, and also as an agent constructing and disrupting dynamics of sociability and conventions of use.

Broadly speaking, these contributions: show the generic constellations of which the books were a part; seek to cautiously, but still, in a circumscribed way, assert their value as indices for tourist flows and travel patterns; explore their communicative functions amongst specific users; and investigate their agentive function in producing and reproducing ideas about nature and the social dimensions of travel. As many of the contributors make clear, visitors' books were part of a broad textual network. Samantha Matthews shows that the generic conventions associated with the visitors' book embraced other album forms, and argues that poetic materials drawn from published country-house inscriptions can illuminate the versifying practices associated with the Victorian

hotel volumes. In a similar vein, Isla Macfarlane shows that the library visitors' book can elucidate the emergence of a tourist attraction in nineteenth-century Scotland. Focusing on the the earliest visitors' book belonging to the Innerpefferay Library, which covers the years 1859–1897, and which contains more than 8,000 names showing the blossoming of tourism in that country, she also remarks on the incompleteness of these sources as “registers of visitors” – a qualification which, though by no means lessening their utility as historical sources, has nonetheless necessitated thoughtful consideration on how they may best be used.

Macfarlane's use of inscriptions as proxies for visitors, and for the broad geographic scope of visitors' origins, evinces methodological sympathies with John Brewer's approach, which uses the books from the Vesuvius hermitage (1826–1828), mysteriously kept at the Houghton Library at Harvard, to develop a profile of the occupations and nationalities of travellers. Inspired by *Corinne* by Germaine de Staël, visitors came to the hermitage in pairs or in groups, undermining the Romantic cliché of the solitary walker. Studying the albums of Flégère (1832–1855) and Montanvers (1854–1869) in order better to understand how these helped order the experience of the sublime, Vincent also sees the books as indices for measuring the broad numbers of travellers to Chamonix as it was developing as a tourist region. Michael Heafford, for his part, uses meticulous record-linkage techniques to interrogate the representativeness of the nominal data found in the passport registers in Geneva, the books of the Rigi Kulm, and those of the Rütli, trying to estimate the number of English on the continent and to reconstruct the itinerary of several travellers – an approach for which Vincent evinces some sympathy in his use of the *Registre des courses* alongside the books. Jérémie Magnin also looks at the Rigi Kulm albums, underscoring the complex legal and political status of such texts, and underlines, as Heafford does, the necessity of understanding and exploring the wider political-legal culture of which they were a part (or, from which they were removed). Magnin, Vincent and Brewer draw clear linkages between these books and dominant aesthetic codes – most notably the sublime – which inscribers employed within their pages. Magnin, like Matthews and James and Northey, also points to the curious relationship between the manuscript book and the printed text – both Matthews and Magnin working with examples of texts that are attributed to visitors' books that are either no longer extant, or apparently missing the alleged entry.

The richness and variety of perspectives brought to bear on these sources testify to the “rehabilitation” of the visitors' book as an historical source, but especially to the ways in which new approaches nourished by cultural history and theory have resulted in a reappraisal of their value. Now no longer seen as incomplete, or as compendia of miscellanies, often imitated ad nauseum, the books are explored in these contributions from critical perspectives that see their incompleteness as telling, their often miscellaneous character as concealing well-established codes and conventions of use, and their textual and material qualities as central to understanding patterns of travel, histories of reading and writing, and how the visitors' book as a technology was integral to ordering, and disrupting, dynamics and sociability and assessments of nature. While these contributions are focussed on Britain and Switzerland in particular – two countries whose experiences of nineteenth-century tourism were deeply entwined – it is hoped that this issue will nurture interest in these books across a broader geographic compass, including comparative studies. The visitors' book never languished in obscurity – but it laboured under the

stigma carried forward from the nineteenth century, which, as these contributions demonstrate, is now being decisively lifted.

Note

1. The editors thank Professor Caroline McCracken-Flesher for her valuable insights and feedback on this issue.
2. An early issue of *The Album* (no. 1. April 1822), for instance, expounded on its title and form, proclaiming that the periodical's textual genealogy was long, embracing the famous (lost) album at la Grande Chartreuse, and charting the genre's origins: "In the infancy of the art of Albuming," it asserted, "'the virgin page,' destined to receive the contributions of all comers, instead of being bound in morocco, edged with gold, and secured with an ornamental lock, was no more than the surface of the wall of a frequented place, on which those who thought they had wit, and were fond of shewing it, gave vent to their cacoethes scribendi" (1).

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