

Book reviews

Gypsy identities 1500–2000: From Egipcians and Moon-men to the ethnic Romany. *David Mayall*. London: Routledge. 2004. ix + 313 pp. Photos, appendices, endnotes, index and ads. ISBN 1-857-28960-9 (hardback).

Reviewed by David J. Nemeth

Who are the Gypsies? Political and social historian David Mayall maps out a new strategy in search of an answer for this timeless conundrum. The book title reveals the outcome of his efforts—the Gypsy has multiple identities. Mayall is not the first Gypsy scholar to have reached this conclusion. Many Gypsylogists armed with what their modern detractors disparage as unsophisticated attitudes and unscientific approaches long ago pioneered different paths to the same discovery. John Sampson (1930), for example, disclosed ‘facets’ rather than ‘facts’ of Gypsy life. Discovering an ‘e’ in the facts of Gypsy identity is part of the maturation of Gypsy scholars, a humbling experience, and earned mainly through acquiring intimate knowledge of both Gypsies and Gypsy studies.

Dust jackets on books about Gypsies authored by the prodigious and popular author Konrad Bercovici often pronounced ‘There is not a gypsy in the world that cannot tell you who I am. I am a gypsy by choice and not by blood, by temperament and not by race.’ His colorful but casual claim draws attention to the possibility of Gypsy identity ‘by blood’ in contrast to Gypsy identity ‘by choice’. Mayall more rigorously explores the murky chasm between and beyond these two major facets of Gypsiness. He wields a theoretical flashlight that helps him negotiate even the more subtle shades of difference in Gypsy identity that stretch through time and across geographical space. He discovers that at all times and places ‘Outsiders fail to agree on every aspect of Gypsy identity: boundaries, labels, and characteristics’ (p. 278).

Mayall organizes his ideas and examples into ten chapters. Chapters One (Who are the Gypsies?), and Ten (So, who are the Gypsies?), serve nicely as pre-test and post-test for the reader. In between, Chapter Two introduces his theoretical bent, while Chapters Three through Eight provide his thorough

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chronology of the social construction of Gypsy identities by outsiders for the past five centuries.

Mayall's discoveries and interpretations undermine the stereotype that Gypsies are unknown. He argues that outsiders have always known the Gypsy. However, Gypsy identity has always been contested among outsiders. His historiography, his archeology of contested Gypsy identities, boldly surveys that inchoate knowledge field of uncertain boundaries. Fueled rather than confounded by these uncertainties he aggressively moves to explain them. He draws his survey lines for research and discussion purposes mainly around the case of English Gypsies, and over a time period of the last 500 years. Then, he applies the pickax and shovel of post-structural theory and practices.

His task consists of sifting down through archival mounds and layers of Non-Gypsy speculation and stereotype in search of the Gypsy. He sorts out whatever relevant identity labels assigned to Gypsies he happens upon: moon-men and land-pirates here, counterfeit Gypsies there, vagabonds, camp followers, warriors, ethnics . . . the list seems endless. It constitutes the myriad alternative constructions of Gypsy identity down through history. Mayall's shovel work is exhaustive. It ends with Mayall seemingly satisfied to be able to provide the reader with a long overdue and sensible accounting of a history of Gypsy identities. He has indeed written a monumental work of unprecedented depth, a landmark study, reader friendly, and one that informs and clarifies the persistent issue of contested Gypsy identities without promoting the legitimacy of any one Gypsy identity over another.

Mayall's chronology of the social constructions of Gypsies in England comprises most of the chapters in his book. He pauses wherever he encounters peoples in the past articulating a boundary between Gypsy and non-Gypsy, and he elaborates why they may have done so. He is concerned at these junctures with how the Gypsy people, their origins and behavior, culture, and ways of life have been contextually presented or socially 'constructed.' He investigates how knowledge, information—and especially misinformation—about Gypsies emerge as social constructions in historical context, and then gain credibility and acceptance. Under the microscope of Mayall's critical historical perspective 'scarcely any form of representation, public or private, cultural or political' escapes attention (p. 30). His relativist conclusion is that every socially constructed Gypsy identity has its own legitimacy.

Mayall writes that 'the clearest example of the social construction and reconstruction of Gypsy identities through time' is in the way that ethnic cri-

teria, broadly interpreted, 'have largely come to replace racial criteria as the primary distinguishing characteristic between groups' (p. 29). He glosses the distinction this way: the racial definition (which has both positive and negative aspects) is immutable, objective, biological, and fixed; the ethnic definition is mutable, subjective, cultural, and fluid.

He continues within this initial distinction to discern between two sides of an older historical argument over Gypsy identity. One side classifies Gypsy identity with race/ethnicity combined. The other side classifies Gypsy identity with neither of these, but instead with criminal nomads and their vagrant/vagabond lifestyles. Elaborating further, the race/ethnicity classification has itself two versions. The first version accepts both common origin *and* diversity of Gypsies. The second version gives prominence to the historical and contemporary oppression of Gypsies. In the second version, for example, 'the notion of Gypsies as a diaspora people has become an essential component of the ethnicity argument' (p. 221).

Mayall succeeds to clarify his categories by introducing a 'building' analogy (p. 35), where he contrasts (1) the uniform structure of an old 'racial Gypsy house' built by Victorian Gypsylorists to the (2) decentralized structure of a newer 'ethnic Gypsy house' built by a broad range of stakeholders in more contemporary Gypsy identity issues. These parties include, for example, government officials, social scientists, police detectives, Gypsy activists, free market entrepreneurs, and others.

Mayall describes a chronological sequence for social constructions: the 'primordial' view of ethnic Gypsy identity precedes an 'instrumentalist' view, followed by a 'constructionist' view (pp. 193–4). The pre-1960's primordial or ethnographic view (identity by blood, speech and custom) 'fails to allow for the social and historical contexts in which groups are formed' (p. 193). The instrumentalist view (circa 1960–1980) argues that ethnic groups are 'interest groups produced through social interactions,' with group boundaries shifting according to self-interest and practical needs. The post-1980 view is that all cultures and collective identities are 'dynamic constructions' and works in progress. Mayall dates the first conscious and explicit use of the idea of social construction in the formation of Gypsy identities to research papers presented at a scholarly conference held in Leiden in 1990.

Mayall's historical survey of contested Gypsy identities in England culminates with his discussion of the 1968 Caravan Sites Act. When here again the old question rises – 'Who are the Gypsies?' – subsequent intense and protracted public scrutiny of the question ultimately fails to provide an answer.

The outcome, as always before, is an ambiguous Gypsy identity. This case study illustrates how and why the state propagates the myth of the 'criminality of the nomad' against arguments for Gypsy ethnic identity

Although Mayall's study is deliberately focused in time and place, it creates a strong foundation in support of more weighty and extensive conversations. Gypsy scholars in the United States especially will find conspicuous voids to fill in Mayall's text, notes and bibliography. One omission, for example, concerns the rise and fall of that interesting movement among a coalition of European and American scholars to socially construct Gypsies as 'peripatetic peoples' (Berland and Salo, 1986). Also, *Gypsy Identities* provides an opportunity for more theoretically informed American Gypsy scholars to revisit and respond critically to the merits of that old charge of 'Kalderasho-centrism' made by some prominent English Gypsy scholars.

Every good book leaves small windows of opportunity open for constructive criticism. Mayall might have included mention of some additional vernacular, even if derogatory, Gypsy identities such as Hedgecrawlers, Pavs, Pikies and so on. He might also reconsider his uncritical use of the slippery terms 'concept' and 'notion'; for example, is the racial Gypsy [p. 152] a 'notion' or a 'concept'? Also, Mayall's emphasis on 'outsider' constructions of Gypsy identity detracts attention from significant manifestations of 'insider' constructions of Gypsy identity involving boundaries, labels and characteristics. For example, Rom Gypsies in North America identify some outsiders as 'Road Refs.' Are these the same as those self-ascribed 'Roaders' identified by Matt T. Salo? (2003). Finally, on account of its small print I hesitate to recommend the book as 'reader friendly' in spite of its straightforward style. Readers will find the illustrations appropriate to the text materials as well as interesting.

In conclusion, *Gypsy Identities* is informative, thought provoking and innovative, and should find a home in every university research library, and on bookshelves in the homes of many Gypsies, Gypsy scholars, politicians and public servants. It will provide a great stimulus for seminar discussions about Gypsies, and not just in Gypsy studies courses. *Gypsy Identities* also has merit as a potential standard work in multicultural studies, and should be considered for adoption for either teaching or reference purposes across the social sciences and humanities.

References

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