

Book Review: Growing Up Travelling by Jamie Johnson

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How wonderful!, I thought when glancing through the pages of this book and experienced what I do not recall to have ever experienced when spending time with a photo book showing people: I liked every single one of these photographs, without any reservation. That might have to do with the fact that the ones portrayed are children who are simply themselves and not conditioned to pose. The foreword of Mary M. Burke, professor at the University of Connecticut and author of 'Tinkers': Synge and the Cultural History of the Irish Traveller conveys useful historical background, highlights Jamie Johnson's modus operandi and states: "The subjects of Johnson's work challenge our easy assumptions as to what makes a child happy, culturally-assured and free." While I'm not sure that photographs – these two-dimensional reductions of a three-dimensional reality that neither sound nor smell – can do that, the infos that accompany these pics certainly help to see things in perspective.



The words contributed by the children of Galway, Limerick, Cork and Tipperary, Ireland, I thought immensely refreshing and very much to the point: “I much prefer living in a trailer than a house even though it’s more space in a house, because living in a trailer makes me feel more like a proper Traveller.” Or: “We don’t sit at computers and play games all day; we are always running about.” Or: “Traveller kids are lucky ’cause we live in nature and have ponies.”

For one reason or another Huckleberry Finn came to mind who, to me, basically stands for independence and his own reference system – and the children portrayed seem also to possess an independent spirit and a reference system of their own. Do I see this because I know that they spend a lot of time outdoors, because I imagine them to be somehow wilder than often overprotected children, because I assume them to be different from the regular ones?

“I see only what I know” Goethe said, which is, precisely, why photographs need to be explained. “In Johnson’s images, Traveller children present themselves in terms of what is important to their own aesthetic and cultural values,” Mary M. Burke explains. Also: “... it is striking that empathetic images of Travellers do not appear to be produced by any major Irish photographer: Johnson is based in Los Angeles.” That however does not surprise me; I think it to be fitting that an outsider photographs outsiders.



“Travellers are members of a historically nomadic and non-literate ethnic minority that has existed on Ireland’s margins for centuries. As a result of decades of pressure from the Irish authorities, Travellers today tend to live in houses in Irish towns and cities, though some still ‘halt’ (settle seasonally, either legally or illegally) in caravans or other mobile structures for some or most of the year in both serviced and unserved sites on the urban periphery. Nevertheless, and because of the distinct cultural practices the tradition of travelling accreted over many generations, the term ‘Traveller’ is applicable even when the nomadic way of life has effectively been abandoned.” This special spirit, it seems to me, can also be detected in the children portrayed in this tome.

The photographs are all black and white and radiate – I can of course only point out the sensations that I was experiencing – an emotional intensity that I instinctively associate with something raw, natural, and very much down to earth.

Jamie Johnson



Growing Up Travelling



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**Growing Up Travelling: The Inside World of Irish Traveller Children
by Jamie Johnson**

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