

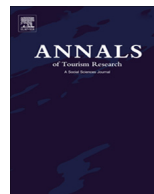


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The PTA: Promoting Swiss tours, 1888–1939



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ABSTRACT

This research examines the development from educational to commercial tourism in Britain between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century by questioning whether this reflected a transformed understanding of the role of travel within society. It focuses on the Polytechnic Touring Association (PTA), a London-based originally philanthropic travel organisation that became a commercial firm. During this period the PTA moved from the project of contributing to the education of citizens to the market-led imperative of 'harnessing' a consumer desire. In examining this transformation via the PTA's changing approach to the visual promotion of its Swiss tours, we suggest that the development of the tourism industry in Britain should also be explored in relation to changing ideas about travel's contribution to social formation.

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Introduction

While the literature on the emergence of modern British tourism has explored the negotiation between the original educational ambition of some of the early travel firms and the pressing demands of an increasingly competitive market, substantially less has been written about how this transformation might also have been influenced by changing perceptions of the benefits of travel. This is possibly

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due to the richness and complexity of the field (Ritchie, Carr, & Cooper, 2003), but perhaps also because Western cultures see education as mainly 'work' and travel as mainly 'pleasure' (Werry, 2008). Consequently, although studies do recognise how learning can take place beyond formal education (Broomhall, Pitman, Majocho, & McEwan, 2010; Shennan, 1991; Watson, 2003)—including through travel itself (Werry, 2008)—the relationship between travel and learning is still a largely neglected area (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012).

We contribute to this discussion by examining the changing expectations of travel developed within the Polytechnic Touring Association (PTA). The PTA originated at the end of the nineteenth century within the Regent Street Polytechnic, London (henceforth the Polytechnic), which became the University of Westminster in 1992. Its origins were as a philanthropic organisation but it became a commercial travel company. Exploring its development allows a magnified analysis of widespread social changes in the approach to travel. Emerging from an educational context, and maintaining a connection with its parent institution, the PTA provides a particularly rich and productive case to investigate how the education-based framework of the early tours was re-negotiated as the mass marketing of tourism developed. In order to discuss this transition the focus here is on the years between 1888 and 1939, after which the PTA links with the Polytechnic weakened considerably, and on the PTA's promotional representation of its tours to Switzerland, which changed profoundly during this period. By using a combination of historical and visual methods, this research interrogates how far changes in visual marketing reveal the reconceptualisation of the initial idea of tourism as personal development. In doing so, it contributes to understanding the changing (expected) social role of tourism in the early years of the twentieth century. The legacy of the PTA was long lasting: having changed its name to Poly Travel in 1958, it became part of the group later named Lunn Poly in 1962. This underlines the complex origins of British outbound tourism, generally discussed in relation to commercial firms such as Thomas Cook, drawing attention to the largely unexplored role that early educational ambitions had in its growth and development.

Sources and methodologies

The analysis of the PTA presented in this research draws on a thorough examination of the documents relating to the Polytechnic and to the PTA, held at the University of Westminster Archive in London. These include administrative and financial records; publications (i.e. tour brochures, guidebooks, leaflets, posters and postcards); programmes of tour reunions; memorabilia; photographs, glass slides and cinematographic films (see Dominici, 2014, 2015 for further exploration of the archive material). In order to investigate the changing discourse of 'education' and travel we focus on the visual and printed material produced by the travel company looking in particular at the promotion of Switzerland during the period 1888–1939. The Swiss tours were the flagship of the PTA offer, thus allowing for a fruitful longitudinal study of the changing promotional image of the country. The Swiss focus reflected the popularity of the destination at this time (Barton, 2008; Ring, 2011) and the company's invested interest in chalets and hotels it purchased in Lucerne in 1894, Grindelwald in 1923, and Interlaken in 1939 (*PM*, January, 1939, p. 6; Studd, 1950, pp. 119–121). Little information remains about exactly who commissioned and produced this promotional material. Archive documents suggest that in the period from 1888 to 1923 it was mainly the Polytechnic's senior management, whilst from 1924 external advertising companies were also involved. This indicates the progressive professionalisation of the task of promoting the tours as the organisation moved from education to commerce. The images produced by the PTA are thus discussed in the context of its changing approaches to travel, seeking to understand the visual articulation of the experience of travelling in relation to its expected contribution to social formation. Specifically, we question the development of the visual commodification of travel destinations not just as products of consumption, but also in relation to a transformed understanding of the relationship between travel and how this was seen to shape social identities. In order to interpret the PTA's printed material and thus advance our understanding of tourism, we draw from a combination of discourse analysis, routinely used within tourism studies to interrogate texts (Hannam & Knox, 2005), and photographic analysis, which examines images as historical processes (Barthes, 1977). As Barthes influentially demonstrated (1977), visual analysis of photographic images

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