

Families on the Move: Tracking Romany Lineages, Travels, and Cultural Survival

Jeremy Harte. *Travellers Through Time: A Gypsy History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023, 320.

Jeremy Harte's *Travellers Through Time: A Gypsy History* provides a detailed examination of the history, culture, and challenges faced by the Romany people. Published by Reaktion Books in 2023, the book traces five centuries of Gypsy history, from their presence in Tudor England to contemporary times. Harte, an experienced British folklorist and the secretary of the Romany and Traveller Family History Society, reflecting his commitment to preserving Romany heritage, undertakes the task of documenting the lives of a historically marginalised group. While acknowledging the limitations of his position as an outsider, he seeks to foreground Romany voices rather than positioning them solely as subjects of academic inquiry. Through an analysis of archival records, oral histories, and personal testimonies, Harte constructs a complex portrait of Gypsy experiences, exploring both their adaptive strategies and the legal and social constraints they have faced.

Harte's engagement with Gypsy history is framed by a question posed to him in a conversation recounted in the prologue. A young Romany man directly asks, "So you're going to write a book about us, then?"(7). This exchange highlights broader concerns about historical representation and the complexities of an outsider documenting a community's past. Rather than overlooking this challenge, Harte explicitly acknowledges his positionality, emphasising that, despite extensive research and immersion, he remains external to Romany lived experience. Instead of attempting to speak for Gypsies, he facilitates their historical narration through careful documentation and an empathetic approach. His objective is to present a historical account in which Gypsies are recognised as active participants in their own history, rather than merely subjects of external interpretation.

The book incorporates an extensive range of primary sources, including legal records, parish registers, newspaper articles, and government documents that have shaped perceptions of Gypsy life. In addition to these institutional sources, Harte

integrates oral histories and personal narratives, offering a counterbalance to official accounts that frequently depict Gypsies through the lens of criminality or vagrancy. For example, sixteenth-century legislation classified Gypsies as felons subject to expulsion or execution. The Egyptians Act of 1554 made it illegal to self-identify as a Gypsy, reinforcing their status as outsiders within the English legal framework (29). Such policies illustrate how Gypsies were systematically denied legal recognition, compelling them to navigate precarious social and economic conditions.

One notable aspect of the book is its examination of Gypsy representation in literature, journalism, and public discourse. In Tudor England, Gypsies were often portrayed as deceptive wanderers, a trope that persisted into later centuries. By the nineteenth century, newspaper articles alternately depicted them as figures of mystery or as threats to social stability. Some writers of the time like John Clare characterised them as “deceitful generally & have a strong propensity to lying yet they are not such dangerous characters as some in civilized life” (82). Simultaneously, other publications romanticised Gypsy life, portraying them as free-spirited individuals living beyond the constraints of Victorian society.

Harte examines how such portrayals influenced broader societal attitudes. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers frequently depicted Gypsies as both exotic and criminal. The Derby race meetings serve as a case study of this duality. Journalists attending these events often highlighted Gypsy fortune-telling and distinctive attire while neglecting the economic conditions that necessitated their itinerant lifestyles. At the same time, local authorities sought to remove Gypsies from these gatherings, viewing them as disruptive. This contrast—between romanticised fascination and regulatory hostility—demonstrates the ambivalent position of Gypsies in British society.

In addition to analysing institutional and media representations, Harte incorporates personal narratives that illustrate the lived realities of Gypsies. One account describes Louie Taylor, a Romany woman who, after being subjected to derogatory comments, defiantly lifted her skirt to reveal pristine white petticoats, declaring, “I’m a Gypsy, and I’m not dirty” (209). This moment of resistance reflects the dignity and agency present throughout Gypsy history, challenging widespread prejudices. Another narrative recounts a family’s forced eviction from a traditional encampment, highlighting the broader historical pattern of displacement faced by Gypsy communities (211). These vignettes personalise the book’s broader historical analysis, illustrating the direct consequences of legal and social marginalization.

Harte also explores the interactions between Gypsy communities and local populations. These relationships were frequently marked by suspicion, as settled populations viewed itinerant lifestyles with apprehension. However, such interactions were not uniformly hostile. In many cases, Gypsies played a vital role in rural

economies, working as metalworkers, horse traders, and entertainers. Events such as fairs and market gatherings facilitated moments of cultural exchange, although these interactions were often shaped by underlying prejudices. Gypsy fortune-tellers, for instance, were a familiar presence at market fairs, attracting both curiosity and skepticism from their clientele.

The book further examines the representation of Gypsies in literature and the arts. In eighteenth-century art, Gypsies were often depicted as an exotic yet familiar part of rural life, with numerous paintings featuring romanticised portrayals of their camps and lifestyle. However, George Morland stood out by offering a more realistic depiction, as he travelled with Gypsies and was criticised for his unidealised portrayals of common life (52). It is also revealed, that most depictions often relied on stereotypes, alternating between admiration and condescension. Similarly, Charles Dickens included Gypsy characters in his novels, frequently casting them as symbols of otherness. While reflective of contemporary attitudes, such portrayals contributed to enduring perceptions of Gypsies as both alluring and marginal.

It is worth adding David Cressy's accurate analysis of *Travellers Through Time*, which offers a critical engagement with Harte's approach, highlighting the book's strengths in capturing Romany oral history and genealogy but also pointing out its romanticised depiction of Gypsy life. Cressy acknowledges Harte's deep commitment to preserving Gypsy history yet critiques the lack of engagement with contemporary academic scholarship and the book's reliance on older sources. He also raises questions about the portrayal of Gypsies as a distinct and unchanging group, rather than one shaped by broader historical and social transformations.¹

Throughout *Travellers Through Time*, Harte contends that Gypsy culture is not a static relic of the past but a continually evolving tradition that responds to contemporary challenges. The book explores the effects of urbanization, increasing legal restrictions on nomadism, and shifting public attitudes, illustrating how Gypsy communities have navigated these transformations while maintaining a distinct cultural identity. The final chapters examine present-day struggles, including recent legislation in Britain that imposes stricter regulations on Traveller communities, further constraining their mobility and rights. These discussions underscore the book's broader relevance, situating it within contemporary debates on ethnicity, citizenship, and minority rights.

GERGELY GUSZMANN

¹ Cressy, David 2023: Jeremy Harte. *Travellers through Time: A Gypsy History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. Pp. 320. \$30.00 (cloth). *Journal of British Studies* (62.) 4. 1096-1097.