

## Contemporary Photography



# Simon Roberts: Travelling with others

*Stephen Clarke*

The emphasis on place in the work of Simon Roberts can be seen to stem from his education as a student of geography.<sup>(1)</sup> Each of his three photobooks, *Motherland* (2007), *We English* (2009), and *Pierdom* (2013), has entailed a journey across country.<sup>(2)</sup> For the first, Roberts travelled the expanse of Russia; the two latter projects were contained within the shores of Britain. It is the later work at home that has positioned Simon Roberts within a lineage of photographers who have documented the British scene. Perhaps it is Roberts' continued education as a student of the history of photography that informs his projects. His photobooks may, more specifically, have their origins in works by Robert Frank, Tony Ray-Jones, and John Davies.

Mirroring Robert Frank's book *The Americans* (1959), *Motherland* is a road trip exploring an unfamiliar people and place.<sup>(3)</sup> Inevitably, we look back to Frank's book to set the pace and the context. Whereas Frank is the Swiss outsider in a post-war America at its zenith, Roberts is the Englishman abroad in its superpower rival after its fall. Throughout both books we are shown modes of transport as the two photographers move across the different countries. For Roberts the journey begins at an airport in Magadan in the far east of Russia

and ends on a park bench in Moscow. Frank also seems to travel east to west, starting his book in New Jersey and ending it in Texas. Along the way the two men become acquainted with each country's people: in Miami Beach, Frank photographs the elevator girl; and in Pyatigorsk,



*Meat market, Pyatigorsk, March 2005, from Motherland, 2007*

Roberts encounters a girl at the meat market.

The writer Raymond Mortimer observed that an Englishman, on returning home after a longish time abroad, sees his country through foreign eyes.<sup>(4)</sup> Arguably,

this was the case with Tony Ray-Jones who returned to England in 1966 after a long stay in the USA. Following the example of Robert Frank, Ray-Jones toured England observing its inhabitants at leisure for his book *A Day Off* (1974).<sup>(5)</sup> Similarly, after his road trip across Russia in search of the Russian identity, Roberts undertook a journey around his own country to find the English identity. The viewer revisits with Roberts the festivals, the races, and the seaside, once visited by Ray-Jones. In 1967, Ray-Jones photographed a picnicking couple at Glyndebourne; in 2008 Roberts would photograph a less grand couple



*Fountains Fell, Yorkshire Dales, 3 August 2008, from We English, 2009*

picnicking in the Yorkshire Dales. *We English* updates *A Day Off*, but whereas Ray-Jones immersed himself in the crowd, Roberts worked from the top of his camper van, consequently referencing the language of another British photographer, John Davies.

Tony Ray-Jones had wanted to record Englishness, its customs and festivals, before they disappeared. By the 1980s this vision of England was changing. In John Davies' book *A Green & Pleasant Land* (1987) we see a country undergoing the process of de-industrialisation.<sup>(6)</sup> Davies' approach is typified by a high vantage point and panoramic vista, a way of working adopted by Roberts for *We English* but one that has more resonance with *Pierdom*. In the wake of industrial decline we are left

not only with a post-industrial landscape but also a post-leisure landscape. The disappearing coalmines, the empty docks and the closed mills pictured in Davies' landscapes find their parallel in the decaying structures of seaside pleasure piers. *Pierdom* takes its cue not only from the seaside photography of Tony Ray-Jones and Martin Parr but the industrial photography of Davies. Industrial might is pictured in Roberts' photograph of the structure of Worthing Pier as it pits itself against the crashing waves of the English Channel. Instead of Runcorn's railway and road bridges photographed by Davies in 1986, Roberts gives us an elevated view of Birnbeck Pier in Weston-Super-Mare.

Worthing Pier, West Sussex, January 2013,  
from *Pierdom*, 2013

Undoubtedly, each of the three photobooks by Roberts functions as a guide in the manner of a geographic survey. They make reference to maps that correspond to the journeys taken by the photographer. To look at these books only in these terms reduces them to travelogues. It is their relationship to their predecessors that is important. Existing within the canon of photographic history, Roberts' books relate not only to previous practitioners but, significantly, to the photobooks that they made. It is this influence of fellow travellers that guides his practice.

1. Land, D. (2013) '*Cultural Geography*',  
The Royal Photographic Society Journal,  
(September 2013) pp. 396-402.

(Simon Roberts studied Human Geography  
at the University of Sheffield.)

2. *Motherland* and *We English* were  
published by Chris Boot. *Pierdom* is  
published by Dewi Lewis.

3. Frank, R. (1993) *The Americans*.  
Manchester: Cornerhouse. Originally  
published by Robert Delpire, Paris, 1958,  
and by Grove Press, New York, 1959.

4. From the introduction to Bill Brandt's  
*The English at Home*, 1936. Quoted  
in Roberts, R. (2004) Tony Ray-Jones.  
London: Chris Boot. p.13

5. Ray-Jones, T. (1974) *A Day Off*. London:  
Thames and Hudson

6. Davies, J. (1987) *A Green & Pleasant  
Land*. Manchester: Cornerhouse

Weston-Super-Mare, Birnbeck Pier, September  
2011, from *Pierdom*, 2013

