

What the books say – the usefulness of visitor books as a research source.

An insight into ten years of visitor comment books at The National Museum of Ireland – Country Life.

The National Museum of Ireland – Country Life (NMI-CL)

The National Museum of Ireland - Country Life (NMI-CL) is located at Turlough Park in County Mayo on the West Coast of Ireland, it opened to the public in September 2001. The Museum is one of four branches of The National Museums in Ireland and the only one situated outside of the capital city, Dublin. It houses the Country's collection of Folklife material representing Irish traditional life during the period 1850-1950. The collection is made up of objects that signify traditional customs and festivals, religion, trades and crafts, farming and fishing and everyday life for ordinary people of the times. This material is supplemented with original video footage, images and oral recording that form part of the Folklife archive.

In addition to the purpose built galleries that house the main exhibits the Museum complex also has extensive mature gardens, a lake, walking trails and an impressive Victorian House. This was the ancestral home of the Fitzgearld Family who were the local landed gentry in the area. The original library and drawing room of the house have been recreated to reflect how they may have in the 1900's and are opened to the public. Entrance to the Museum and its grounds are free as they are publically funded.



The National Museum of Ireland – Country Life complex

Visitor books at The National Museum of Ireland - Country Life, 2001-2011

Since its opening a visitor comment book has sat quietly, and somewhat inconspicuously, by the reception desk where visitors enter and exit the Museum. The comment book provides visitors with an opportunity to fill in their name and address and leave a short comment about their visit to the exhibition galleries. There are no prompts or questions asked. Visitors are free to reflect their own thoughts and opinions of their Museum experience. In addition to the books visitors can also record comments on individual comment cards that are available in various locations throughout the Museum. The cards were not examined for the purpose of this particular analysis however.

When I began to explore the contents of a selection of the visitor books in more detail I was struck by the various themes that emerged from their pages. The depth and range of the experiences that some visitors encountered during their visits was equally unexpected. It became apparent that the books were not just a static medium for visitors to record their names and addresses. For some people they represented rather more, a space in which they felt they could express the deep impact that the Museum visit had on them personally.

With this in mind I began to look more carefully at some of the books that had accumulated since the Museum opened, with a view to further investigating the rich, unexplored treasure they might hold. Within the pages of the various volumes there was, time and time again, uncontested evidence of the effect the Museum and its exhibitions has on visitors who recorded comments. In a number of cases visitors felt able to freely, and indeed eloquently, express what the Museum visit meant to them personally. The result was a wealth of written evidence regarding the effectiveness of the Museum exhibitions.

There are a number of recurring themes that were identified throughout the books. These themes permit the NMI-CL to gain an insight into how it is already engaging audiences in a positive way. In this sense one of the more interesting themes to emerge was the ability of visitors to create links between their own prior life experience and what they see and experience within the Museum exhibitions. Such a connection has been recognised in the field of contemporary museum studies as a key way in which museum audiences can learn from their museum experience¹. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the ways in which the exhibitions and objects are presented at NMI-CL, and indeed the range and scope of objects on display, allow the audience to construct their own meaning from what they already have knowledge of. In turn this information could be used to provide a tangible reference point for the development of new exhibitions and museum programming in the future.

While the examination of the visitor comment books from NMI-CL yielded largely positive results, there were some occasional critical comments recorded too. These generally related

¹ Falk, John, H. And Dierking, Lynn, D., Learning from Museums: Visitor experiences and the making of meaning, Altamira, USA, 2000, p.87

to practical issues such as malfunctioning audio visuals, the inability to take flash photography and in particular, requests for written material in additional languages. Other comments within this genre focused on the perceived exclusion of particular interest topics; stone masonry and coffin making were two examples of these. Overall negative comments accounted for a very small proportion of the total comments recorded in the books I examined.

It must be pointed out that using visitor comment books for research in this way can be somewhat flawed. It could be surmised that visitors have a tendency to copy, or to be directly influenced by, comments or opinions written by other people in the book. I was aware of this as I examined the books and while there was a little evidence for this practice, it was the more detailed comments that provided the best sources of information for this study. In addition it must also be remembered that not all visitors did write in the books. Some may have filled in separate comment cards while others may have chosen not to write in either, or were even unaware of the books and cards.

Owing to the large amount of visitors that appear to fall through the net, by not writing comments in the books, they cannot be considered as a definitive source when analysing visitor opinion. Nonetheless, in the absence of a more systematic methodology of regularly gathering visitor reaction, they represent a good starting point on which to build from. Equally, the information gathered from the books can be used as a solid foundation for collecting further visitor information, through exhibition-specific questionnaires, focus groups or detailed visitor interviews.

Framework for using visitor books as a research source

Visitor comment books tend to be an underutilised resource in terms of museum visitor research, often overlooked in favour of other more targeted research methodologies. In the few cases where these types of books have been used they have proven to be fruitful in terms of enhancing our understanding of visitor experiences. One such case is the study carried out by Sharon McDonald and recorded in her article entitled “Accessing audiences: Visiting visitor books”. Although McDonald’s exhibition subject matter of Nazi Germany, is markedly different than that of rural life in Ireland, the principles she applies to the interpretation of her data can have a similar application for all types of museum visitor book analysis.

Interestingly, despite the very different subject matters of McDonald’s chosen exhibition compared to The Museum of Country Life, there were some fundamental corresponding starting points between both. First, McDonald observes that the visitor books were positioned in a fairly inconspicuous location, as with those at NMI-CL. Similarly, she noted

that, while a number of visitors leafed through the book on entry or exit to the exhibition, only as little as 20% of these actually wrote comments into the book².

While there are no precise statistics for how many people leafed through or actually wrote in the visitor comment books at NMI-CL, it can be surmised that it was substantially less than the overall numbers, estimated to be over one million visitors³, who have visited in the first ten years of its opening. Using a basic system I was able to make a rudimentary estimate of how many visitors on average signed the books over the period 2001 to 2011. The resultant figure of 1% was significantly lower than that for McDonald's books and is designed to be used only as a guide figure⁴.

McDonald was able to make a number of assumptions from examining not only the actual comments recorded in the German books, but also from the context and style in which these had been written. She explores the idea of self-positioning or "how commentators position themselves"⁵ when making their entry and how this influenced the tone of their comment. For example being from Nuremberg or the local area was significant, stating their age, especially if they were a child during the war was deemed important; some positioned themselves by stating their profession, being a history teacher implied a particular knowledge or insight into events in this regard. The idea of self-positioning was further influenced by whom the visitor believed he or she was addressing through the comment book, or what McDonald calls the "imagined receivers"⁶. This trend of self-positioning was detectable to an extent in some of the comments from the NMI-CL books.

McDonald suggests that comments can be evaluated further by dividing them in terms of their style or in terms of their content, as was done with the NMI-CL comments. Comment styles fall into two broad groupings as she sees it; the short evaluative comment, which ranged from one word to one line and was the most common entry, and the longer reflective comment which could be up to several lines long. The second type of analysis, by content, would appear to yield a greater wealth of information, as was apparent in my examination of visitor books comments from the NMI-CL.

With all this in mind and using McDonald's work as a comparative framework, I began to look at the possibilities within the NMI-CL books. I quickly recognised that the material was quite significant and warranted a more systematic analysis. Not only that, but it also became obvious that much of this data was linked to modern museum learning theory, such as that espoused in the writings of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, George Hein, John Falk and Lynn

² McDonald, S., *Accessing Audiences: Visiting visitor books*, *Museum and Society* 3:3, 2005, p.125

³ On 26th August 2010 The Museum of Country Life welcomed its 1,000,000th visitor

⁴ An estimated figure of approximately 10,000 visitors wrote in the comment books for the ten years 2001-2011 based on taking an average figure of 1,000 per year over 10 years (see end note).

⁵ McDonald, S., *Accessing Audiences: Visiting visitor books*, p.125

⁶ McDonald, S., *Accessing Audiences: Visiting visitor books*, p.126

Dierking⁷, and therefore should be evaluated within that contextual framework. The implications of using such a contextual structure as a reference point would prove central in determining the impact the Museum has had on some of its visitors. The work carried out here is designed to act as a starting point or basis for identifying positive reaction, recurring patterns of themes and overall levels of visitor engagement and interpretation at the Museum. The material available within the visitor books provides scope for an even further detailed evaluation in the future, particularly as the books continue to accumulate and be used by the public on an ongoing basis.

Methodology

The starting point for this study was to make a comprehensive examination of all the visitor comment books available to me from the opening date of the Museum⁸. Each of the books tended to bridge a period of two chronological years for example 2002-2003 or 2006-2007. The first step I took was to categorise the comments in terms of those that seemed to be of significance and those that fell into the more generic type of comment. Generic comments were ones that basically recorded the visitors name and address and gave a relatively simplistic one-word comment such as “*good*”, “*excellent*” or “*interesting*”. In some cases the visitor recorded no more than their name and address in the space provided; as a result no information was provided apart from the ability to identify the provenance of the visitor. There were occasional spoiled comments to discount; these appeared to be mainly the work of children judging from the handwriting. However such incidents rare enough, probably due to the proximity of the comment books to the Museum reception desk deterring visitors from engaging in this practice.

When these generic type and spoiled comments had been eliminated, I was able to begin in earnest identifying those which contained the information of value. I took note of the page and the comment content and began to list those I found to be of significance. Once I had completed this process for a number of books I was able to detect patterns of comments emerging. From there I developed broad thematical categories into which each comment could be grouped. Using this process I formulated a number of these categories that groups of comments could be matched to. The categories that developed to classify the comments included reminiscence, emotional response, ownership and identity. These were not generated in isolation, but were deeply rooted in contemporary museum and learning theory, allowing for an appraisal of how the NMI-CL performs in relation to these principles. Once the primary categories had been established, the easier it was to allocate comments to a group. In other words, while individual comments did differ in ways to an extent, generally the underlying context could still be classified under one of the headings.

⁷ Hooper-Greenhill, E., (ed) *The Educational Role of the Museum*, Routledge, England, 1996; Hein, G. *Learning in the Museum*, Routledge, England, 1998; Falk, John & Deirking, L., *Learning from Museums; Visitor experiences and the making for meaning*, Altamira, USA, 2000.

⁸ Visitor books were not available for every year since 2001

While identifying the theme and underlying context of a comment was of primary importance in evaluating the impact that a visit to the Museum had on the commentator, there were other factors that were equally pertinent to the study. Taking note of the provenance of the visitor was significant in terms of assessing their particular comment, and in some cases this seemed to influence their point of view. A broad range of visitors wrote in the books, from the local, to national and international. In a number of cases the international visitors were of Irish decent or were born in this country but now lived in another country, most notably England, the USA or Canada. These types of commentator tended to write perceptive, insightful, and poignant comments that were very useful to dissect for the purposes of the study.

Many of the comments recorded by our local and national visitors were equally insightful because of their ability to relate personally to exhibition topics and objects. There were also examples of written evidence of the strong sense of pride in, and ownership of, Irish heritage and of the physical Museum itself. The ability to link these underlying themes into contemporary museum theory helped provided an analytical structure for evaluating the performance of the exhibitions. This was particularly true with reference to their learning and interpretation values for its visitors.

Themes that emerged

There were a number of strong themes that emerged during the examination of the visitor books. Many of these had common threads running through them, and there were elements of crossover evident between all at some level. Collectively they can be defined as falling into one of two key fields; the first being that of reminiscence and emotion, and the second that of identity and ownership. Here I will look more at each individual theme with reference to some of the specific types of comments that were recorded in each.

Reminiscence and Emotion

The two categories of comment outlined here are concerned in some way with remembrance and its subsequent ability to elicit a level of emotional interpretation on the part of the visitor. The first category is defined by the ability of the visitor to have had experience on a direct personal level, with themes and objects in the exhibitions, or indirectly through related memories often of, or from, family members particularly parents and grandparents. In both of these cases, it can be inferred that the visitors possessed the ability to make meaning from their own individual life experiences. This is often described as a cornerstone for harnessing museum learning potential by the likes of Hein, Hooper-Greenhill and Falk. Some of the comments were recorded in a factual manner, but in others there was a level of emotional input involved, and this was reflected in the comments written.

- **Direct and indirect connection to the past**

Some of the visitors who commented on the exhibitions in the books had a personal resonance with many of the physical objects on display. This was reflected in comments like *“so many familiar things from my childhood”*, *“I remember (too) many of the items on display”*, and *“we have seen a lot of the objects in use”*. These visitors seem to have had direct knowledge of using the objects on display within their own lifetime. Such familiarity has enabled them to make deep connections between what they seen in the exhibitions and their own personal life experience. Interestingly, these personal associations with the exhibits and their objects were not only limited to Irish visitors, one Canadian visitor reflects that they were able to make comparisons with rural life in Canada, while a French visitor who was born in Normandy in 1946 wrote that many things reminded him of his own childhood.

In a similar vein, there were comments generated by visitors who appeared to be recalling memories indirectly through the themes and objects they encountered in the exhibitions. Often there was particular reference to parents and grandparents with these types of comment. In such cases, it would appear that the visitors engaged in a process of reminiscence through recalling memories of these people, rather than their own direct experience. The word *“evoke”* was used by some to indicate a strong sense of memories being brought back to life once again. Comments such as *“memories of stories told to me by my father”*, *“brought to life all the things my grandmother talked about”* or *“brought me back to my Grannies in the 1970s”* were evidence of the commentators’ experience of personal reminiscence. A number of these type comments were also accompanied by sentiments such as *“wonderful”*, *“interesting”* and *“excellent”*. It seemed that these visitors experienced a sense of nostalgia from the exhibitions and this was usually described as having a positive effect on them.

- **Emotional reaction**

A number of comments were surprising in that despite their brevity, they managed to convey a depth and spectrum of emotion, from happy to sad. Comments ranging from *“I could cry over the hard life of my ancestors”*, to *“made me feel sad”*, and *“so many tears in my eyes”*, were all phrases inscribed by visitors to record their strong emotional responses to the exhibitions. By contrast, one visitor describes his experience at the Museum as *“a very happy day”*, another writes that the exhibitions as *“bringing back so many happy memories”* while a visitor from Co. Down wrote that the exhibitions *“lifts the heart and restores confidence”*.

These differing emotional responses recorded in the books would seem to imply that some visitors do engage deeply with the exhibitions, and demonstrates how this can provoke a raw emotional reaction on their behalf. In some cases the visitor simply just used the word *“emotional”* or *“moving”* to describe their visit, again indicating the impact that the

exhibitions had. Research has identified that there is a symbiotic relationship between emotion and cognition in free-choice learning environments such as museums, which subsequently can have a positive influence on visitor learning experience⁹. Taken within this context, the information from the visitor books regarding emotion would seem to suggest that the Museum is well positioned to initiate learning for the visiting public.

Identity and Ownership

This category of comment was bound up in the visitors own sense of personal history and the notion of self-identity. Commentators in the books have taken aspects of their own identity or history and linked those to what they see and experience in the exhibitions, subsequently encouraging a sense of self-validation. This helps to cement the visitor's interpretation of who they are and where they have come from, which in effect allows them to create a more personal narrative around their experience of the exhibitions. John Falk has described this type of behaviour as the fulfilment of self-identity and self-interpretation related needs within a museum context. Such actions allow "people to achieve an understanding of themselves...which in turn influences their subsequent perceptions and behaviour"¹⁰ and this trend was reflected to a degree through these particular comments.

- **Identity and personal history**

A certain amount of people who wrote in the visitor books did so to record their own specific links to Ireland. This pattern was particularly true for many of the international visitors who signed the books. In these comments, references to an ancestor or ancestry were made regularly. Comments like "*my ancestors were from Co. Waterford*", "*my parents are from Ireland*", "*helped put me in touch with my Irish family*", signify the need to express the visitors own sense of identity or belonging within an Irish context. They have used the books as a means of recording these links with their Irish heritage and there is a sense that the exhibitions enhance their understanding of where they have come from, even if it was in the distant past.

One visitor from Canada describes the exhibitions as "*a great tribute to our ancestors*", while another one comments that his visit is "*like coming home because (my) parents were from Ireland*". There is a feeling that these visitors, who may have no direct knowledge of Irish rural life, feel genuinely connected to what they see in the exhibitions. This has facilitated them in creating links to their own personal history. Others use the books in this

⁹ Falk, John, H. and Gillespie, Katie, L., "Investigation the Role of Emotion in Science Centre Visitor Learning", *Visitor Studies*, 12:2, 2009, p.112

¹⁰ Falk, John, H., *Reconceptualising the Museum Visitor Experience. Who visits, why and to what affect?*, 2011, ICOFOM Conference paper, p.9

context to record specific familial connections to Irish history. An American visitor writes that his Dad grew up in Parke, Co. Mayo and that his family are buried locally at Turlough cemetery. Elsewhere an Australian visitor records having copies of letters written by family in Cork and Sligo to family in Australia from the period represented. Identity-related comments like these are very significant in terms of the information they provide about the actual visitor themselves primarily, but also for the insight they provide regarding the deeper psychological interactions that occur with the exhibitions space.

- **Ownership and pride**

While the need to record a sense of identity and personal history was prevalent across the range of visitor books examined, so too was a related pattern of comments portraying a sense of ownership and pride. These expressions of pride and ownership were principally towards Irish heritage itself, reflected in comments like *"proud the state has invested....kept our history accessible"* and *"it makes me feel proud of our heritage"*. This also extended to an expression of national pride with one commentator simply writing the words *"so proud to be Irish"*. Another variation of this theme was visitors who wrote comments regarding their pride specifically in the Museum itself, or of being proud to bring family and visitors to the Museum. These comments were often quite short and precise like *"very proud of the museum"* and *"proud to bring visitors here"*. Others took the opportunity to describe the Museum as *"a gem"* and *"a national treasure"*.

When categorising these types of comments, it was the recurring use of language like *"our history"*, *"our heritage"* and *"our past"* that signified to me the visitors sense of ownership. Some comments of this type were accompanied by an expression of thanks for representing or preserving this particular history, or indeed for the Museum galleries and buildings themselves. *"Thank you for showing us how our ancestors lived"* and *"Thank you for keeping and presenting the objects of our beloved Irish life"* were just two comments characteristic of this trend. These comments embody the visitor's appreciation of what they have seen, combined with their sense of ownership of Irish history and heritage as discussed earlier. Interestingly, both of these comments were recorded by visitors from The United States; it is apparent by their reactions that they engaged deeply with what they experienced at The Museum of Country Life.

What does it all mean?

The ability to detect distinct patterns of comment across the visitor book and to divide them into the two key thematic fields of reminiscence and emotion, and identity and ownership, has had significant implications for analysis and interpretation of the written material. Firstly, it permitted visitors to be recognised as active, rather than passive, participants within the exhibition experience itself. Seeing the visitor in this way ties in with the view put forward by Sharon McDonald in her study of the German visitor books. She advocates that

museum audiences must be seen as active participants and this “perspective seeks to access visitors’ own active meaning-making, and the assumptions, motives, emotions and experiences that this may involve”¹¹. Once we understand the visitor as an *active* participant within the exhibition process, particularly in terms of their ability to make their own meaning, we can go about enriching their museum experience further.

In keeping with the notion of the visitor as an active participant, the visitor books also revealed that some visitors do have the capacity to create meaning in their own specific ways. They would seem to be using their own inherent systems, to build association between what they already know or have experience of, and that which they encounter within the exhibitions. In some cases, it is associations with the physical objects on display, while in others it is with familiar ideas or concepts such as farming, fishing etc. These are not necessarily always concepts or objects which the visitor had a direct association with, but they can also be recalled indirectly through a series of reminiscence and remembrance for example from parents and grandparents. This trend was reflected by written comments such as “*saw things that my father used for farming and blacksmithing*”.

The outcome is that some of the visitor book commentators can be seen as active meaning makers within the exhibition space. Museum learning theorists John Falk and Lynn Deirking believe this ability is a fundamental part of museum learning. They understand it to be “a long-term process of making meaning and finding relationships”¹². Such a concept is also supported by Hooper-Greenhill who says people make their own meaning rather than receiving, accepting or encountering meaning. Hooper-Greenhill also believes in the concept that visitors will *write* their own meaning using prior knowledge and experience as a starting point¹³. George Hein described the idea of links between objects and concepts which are familiar to the museum visitor as being crucial in encouraging them to *write* their own meaning, thereby enhancing their inherent learning potential¹⁴. Comments that fell into the reminiscence category of this visitor book study characterised the tendency of some museum visitors to use these particular systems during their visit. Devising ways to manipulate the capacity some visitors possess to make their own meaning in this way could work to supplement learning within the exhibition context.

In common with McDonald’s notion of self-positioning, the visitor books revealed the ability of some visitors to position themselves within the narrative constructs of what they encounter within the exhibitions. Doing so enables them to establish links between the exhibitions and their own personal narrative, similar to Falks notion of the realisation of self-identity and self-interpretation needs. Discussing narratives and memory in the context of

¹¹ McDonald, S., “Accessing audiences: visiting visitor books” p.120

¹² Falk, John, H. And Dierking, Lynn, D., Learning from Museums: Visitor experiences and the making of meaning, Altamira, USA, 2000 p. 12

¹³ Hooper-Greenhill, E., (ed.), The Educational Role of the Museum, Routledge, England, 1996, p.22

¹⁴ Hein, G., Learning in the Museum, Routledge, England, 1998, p.77

history museums Rowe et al. has described them as “potentially ideal public spaces where personal, private or autobiographical narratives come into contact with a larger scale, collective or national-narratives”¹⁵. These differing narratives reflected through the prism of the museum gallery are also referred to as *little* (personal) narratives and *large* (national or collective) narratives by Rowe et al. Public engagement within the museum space is an important factor in order to create these visitor narratives. One comment like “*I was born in this village 1932*” and another “*spent 6 months in Knockranny, Bohola (with grandparents) attended school and church functions*” were indicative of two visitors stitching their own personal narrative into the larger collective one that is represented in the exhibitions.

This trend was particularly reflected by comments classified in the self-identity category, where the commentator tended to place him or herself within the contextual framework of the exhibition narrative. The description of particular personal or familial connections both locally and nationally was a common factor in these comments, as was the use of language such as “*ancestors*” or “*family*”. This language could be construed as visitors engaging in a level of “identity-building” within the confines of the exhibition, which Falk has highlighted as being a specific motivating factor for some museum visitors. He also refers to this sense of self as being “strengthened, modified and or extended” by a tourism experience¹⁶.

Establishing that some visitors to the Museum are partaking in visits that are either primarily identity motivated, or have identity related secondary consequences, could be vital. Falk has suggested that “the quest for identity enacted through leisure will continue to be a dominant theme”¹⁷ for the future in centres like museums. Recognising the identity related agendas of many visitors, puts the NMI-CL in a strong position to influence learning and interpretation potential for such audiences.

The visitor books also revealed the part that emotion played in the various comments recorded, indeed the strength of some of these comments was, in parts, surprising. Research carried out by Falk and Gillespie into the field of emotion and its role in cognition, particularly in free-choice learning environments like museums, has revealed that memory of facts improves when it becomes emotionally arousing information, as compared to when it involves neutral information. Not only that, but emotion may even be responsible for sustaining the necessary interest for learning to take place and “even the laying down of memories subsequent to the experience”¹⁸. Acknowledging that powerful emotional reactions are generated as a by-product of some visits could be a significant factor in

¹⁵ Rowe, Shawn, M., Wertsch, James, V., and Kosyaeva, Tatyana, “Linking little narratives to big ones: Narrative and public memory in History Museums”, *Culture and Psychology* 8, 2002, p.98

¹⁶ Falk, John, H., “The Learning Tourist: The role of identity-related visit motivations”, *Proceedings of the 6th International Congress on Coastal and Marine Tourism*, 2009, p. 41

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 42

¹⁸ Falk, John, H. and Gillespie, Katie, L., “Investigating the role of emotion in Science Centre visitor learning”, *Visitor Studies*, 12:2, 2009, p. 113

enhancing the overall visitor experience. It could also be an interesting starting point for carrying out more detailed visitor studies into the topic of emotion and cognition.

Similarly, written evidence of visitors expressing a sense of ownership and pride in Irish history, heritage and the Museum itself, may be indicative of a degree of emotional interaction as well as an expression of identity-related needs on their behalf. Looking at this in conjunction with the possible link between emotion and cognition, it could be surmised that such reactions would have positive consequences for the visitor's museum learning experience.

Conclusions

John Falk says: "Today's museum has no choice but to think seriously about who their visitors are and why they come...Visitors are at the heart of the twenty-first century museum's existence. Understanding something about museum visitors is not a nicety, it is a necessity"¹⁹. Often the humble visitor book is overlooked as a valid way of gauging visitor opinion. McDonald says that these books serve as "inscriptions of visitor interpretation and thus provide access to aspects of visitor meaning construction"²⁰. She also notes that, because they are not shaped by a researcher agenda, they are more likely to elicit unanticipated visitor responses. The data gathered from this ten year sample of visitor books from The Museum of Country Life was reflective of this process. It confirms that Museum visitors cannot be seen as a blank canvas, but that they are already preconditioned by their own set of life experiences, beliefs and prior knowledge when they come to visit a museum. Awareness of this fact can enable the Museum to facilitate, not just existing visitor interest, but also to promote learning and interpretation values for new audiences.

Analysis of the comments from the books would suggest that the Museum has, to an extent, already integrated certain systems recommended by leading museum theorists. Primarily these systems engage visitors by acting as hooks to attract their attention in the first instance. Subsequently it appears they can also work by supplementing learning and interpretative values as a secondary outcome. The material gathered here can provide a solid foundation for developing a more advanced research agenda with regard to investigating these outcomes. Systematic strategies like detailed pre- and post-entry interviews and questionnaires based particularly on the themes of reminiscence, identity, emotion and visitor motivation could be used for this purpose. Establishing visitor motivation, whether it be leisure, learning, identity related or part of an altogether different agenda, would be very beneficial for the future. The visitor comment books give us a glimpse into the variety of different, yet in some cases thematically similar, experiences people have from their Museum visit. The information that has emerged can serve as an

¹⁹ Falk, John, H., "Reconceptualising the Museum Visitor Experience. Who visits, why and to what affect?", 2011, ICOFOM Conference paper, p.1

²⁰ McDonald, S., "Accessing audiences: Visiting visitor books, .p.122

excellent baseline reference point for carrying out this more targeted visitor research when the resources become available.

While this analysis proves largely positive for the NMI-CL, it must be tempered with the caution that although visitor books can be seen increasingly as a valid research tool, they only represent a sample of all visitor opinion. As writing in them is optional, it can only be roughly estimated how many people do sign them and how many do not. Neither do they provide any supplementary information related to the visitor demographic, apart from name and provenance. So as to create a more comprehensive picture, it is necessary to gauge opinion from the wider Museum audience, and not just those who comment in the books. Equally, it would be as relevant to survey sections of the public who do not visit the Museum and discover the reasons they do not. It is also advisable to remember that not all visitors learn in the same ways or even at the same rate. The conventions used in the exhibitions at the NMI-CL may have been largely successful with visitor book commentators, but there may have been other visitors who did not feel their particular needs were fulfilled in the same way. For a more balanced view and to make exhibitions that appeal to the widest possible audience, such issues would have to be appropriately addressed.

Exploring a sample from the ten years of comments from the visitor books at NMI-CL has demonstrated the undervalued nature that such books have as a medium for recording visitor opinion. From the brief analysis carried out here, it seems that they are a worthwhile resource for capturing the often insightful and perceptive reactions of our visitors within the context of Museum environment. It provides a starting point by bringing to light the existence of a number of interesting themes and potential relationships that are worthy of more detailed exploration. Perhaps in time and used in a more strategic manner, these books may come to be viewed as a fundamental tool within the exhibition planning and subsequent evaluation processes.

Note on Visitor Figures 2001-2011

On 26th August 2010 The Museum of Country Life welcomed its 1,000,000 visitor; this was almost exactly nine years since it opened on 10th September 2001. In order to estimate how many people wrote in the visitor comment books over the ten years from 2001 to 2011, I counted the number of comments written in one visitor book representing a single calendar year. This gave me a figure of 983 comments, which I rounded up to 1,000. Using this figure as a guide for one year I then calculated across the ten years, the resulting figure was 10,000. The figure arrived at is only to act as a guide. It does not take into account fluctuations in the levels of comment in the books, e.g., if there was an event held at the Museum such as an exhibition opening, more people may have signed the books on such occasions.

For more Information on the Museum and its Collections:

www.museum.ie

<http://turloughparkhouse.wordpress.com/>

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