

Striking images, but a misleading interpretation

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Losing Ground by Donovan Wylie An exhibition of photography at the National museum in Exile, Bradford, West Yorkshire, England until November 1, 1998
Donovan Wylie: *Losing Ground*, published by Fourth Estate, £9.99

Donovan Wylie was born in Belfast, to Catholic and Protestant parentage. He is the youngest photographer ever to be accepted by Magnum--the distinguished professional photographers' society. Starting in 1993, he spent a period of 24 months photographing the lives of a group of people living in a community of drifting caravans and buses. Commonly referred to as "New Age Travellers", Wylie found them in a lay-by between Bath and Stroud in South West England. His exhibition and book entitled *Losing Ground* introduces a striking set of images of their lives.

Wylie's black and white shots are roughly divided into two halves. The first half of the photos are from parts of 1993 until late 1994. The later shots were mainly taken in 1995-96. The contrast between the two halves could hardly be more startling.

The earlier images have an almost idyllic air. The travellers and their children appear content, even happy, in their surroundings. In one of the photographs, taken in Gloucestershire in 1994, a group of children, of about five or six years of age, are playing in a furrowed field with the camp dogs. They are evidently enjoying themselves. The clothes the children are wearing are dirty and threadbare and their hair is unkempt. An older girl is holding an engine cooling fan, which makes it look like a children's drawing of a sun in the sky. Another shows a man in the foreground lifting a small child above his head, while his fellow travellers can be seen sitting here and there amongst the convoy of old cars, buses and trailers that stretches into the distance. There is a picture of one of the kitchens; everything is neat and tidy, maybe a little at odds with the litter and general mess outside.

When Wylie caught up with the travellers to take his concluding shots almost everything had changed. The travellers' convoy had largely broken up. Many had drifted off into the cities and began to beg on the streets. Amongst those that stayed, we are told, drug addiction was rife as well as heavy drinking. In virtually all of Wylie's later pictures either someone can be seen drinking from a beer or vodka bottle or one is lying empty somewhere in the frame.

One of the photographs taken in the winter of 1995 shows a particularly heart-rending scene. It is of a small boy crying in the snow, his little face leant against the closed door of one of the old caravans. Bits of furniture can be seen protruding from the snow and in the far distance, on one of the withered trees, hangs a simple swing. The boy's face is contorted with a pitiful expression.

In another photograph a group of travellers sit around a table. One of them is sketching a sign reading "HUNGRY", probably just about to leave for the city streets. Many of the photos were taken in the squats (abandoned houses) of Whitechapel and North London. These are truly disturbing photos.

In his endeavour to capture the lives of his subjects on camera, Wylie has produced images that are both evocative and often very moving. There are, however, problems of presentation. The basis of the division between the exhibition's two halves is the passing of the Criminal Justice Act in 1994 and its impact on the New Age Travellers.

Andrew O'Hagan, a columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper, wrote the book's foreword, which forms the commentary accompanying the exhibition. O'Hagan describes how Wylie went in search of the traveller convoy to record poverty, but on arriving was told by a girl, "There's no poverty here. This is paradise." O'Hagan proceeds in starry-eyed fashion to declare that this is a

truth of sorts. And he recounts the happy children in the photos and the smiling faces in between the old cars and buses. He admits the untidiness, but counters it with "a sense of order" and "a notion of provision". Ultimately "things are all right as they are."

Referring to the second half of Wylie's collection, O'Hagan goes on, "Then something happens and, pushed out by the Criminal Justice Act, their choice of life no longer seems like a choice. They are taking drugs ... necking bottles of vodka, or shooting-up. Some of them drift off to the cities to beg, or to lose themselves ... the change is immense: no making, no music, and no interest in the land, no baking. The people in Whitechapel and Bethnal Green seem ill and hunted, their days given over to emptiness and boredom, the bottle, the needle. They stare off into nowhere. They eat from McDonald's cartons, draw signs saying 'Hungry'. They sit in a dreary garage full of broken baths, the remnants of some other life...."

O'Hagan concludes that Wylie has caught these people, "in the middle of a journey from an alternative life to no life at all," a group "who made a society for themselves and then watched it die away."

There are two related problems here. Firstly, Wylie and O'Hagan are inadvertently helping to preserve one of the central myths surrounding the Criminal Justice Act.

The CJA is an undemocratic piece of legislation directed primarily against the working class. It enables the police to seize and confiscate vehicles at a gathering of more than 12 people. It criminalises trespass that occurs with the intention of "disrupting the activities of others", which covers anything from pickets and demonstrations to rock concerts and raves. It can be used to ban "assemblies" of any number of people, even on public land and highways, and allows the police to carry out unrestricted "stop and search" operations.

To justify the need for such legislation, however, the then Conservative government and a servile media scapegoated the New Age Travellers. They insisted that the Act's main purpose was to police and break up what they defined as "socially undesirable" groups of "welfare scroungers", "troublemakers", "drug users" and "thieves". Though Wylie clearly disagrees with such a brutal assessment, he falls into the trap of accepting that this was indeed the government's intention.

Secondly, Wylie's somewhat naïve depiction of an "alternative" lifestyle obscures the fact that the existence of the convoys was, in itself, an expression of a social breakdown. A booklet to accompany the exhibition,

"Missing the Potential Energy", contains personal statements by travellers that, albeit unintentionally, contradict the assertion that they had simply chosen an alternative way of life. These are, rather, society's victims that have been driven onto its fringes by often harrowing experiences as children and young adults.

One statement, "What was Care Like?" reads: "At first terrifying but once you get used to moving from one family to another it's not so bad and you get given money. I felt like I had been wronged but I always thought everybody's dad was the same, I didn't know any different."

Another, entitled "My worst Memory", states, "Living at home as a small child with my step dad. He used to hit me and my older sister a lot, he was very abusive and violent. If I was, for example, a bit loud whilst he was watching TV, he would punch me and physically throw me around the lounge, that was quite often."

"One day I was 5 minutes late from school, my mum was working. He started punching me and then dragged me to the kitchen and shut my head in the freezer and then put my head under a hot tap, I had a scar."

Many of these people must have been deeply emotionally scarred by their previous experiences and in need of care and assistance in getting decent jobs and housing. They received nothing other than a fortnightly payment of social security. Wylie often focuses on the smiling faces of young children in order to show the merits of traveller life. But despite the joy of childhood, these young children had no access to a decent education, diet or health care, let alone the necessary conditions for wider social development.

The CJA did indeed have a terrible impact on the travellers. But it did not destroy an alternative lifestyle so much as drive an unfortunate layer from one squalid existence into another, even worse.



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