BOOKS I HAVE READ: OURS TO EXPLORE

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Ours to Explore: Privilege, Power, and the Paradox of Voluntourism investigates voluntourismâ€™s past and present, uncovering the complicated roots of the modern global phenomenon from the eighteenth century through today.
Category: Observations

I've already made reference to Ours to Explore: Privilege, Power and the Paradox of Voluntourism, but in this post, I'd like to say more about the book itself. TLDR: it is essential reading for anyone involved in short term mission work.

The book is very recent (published in June 2021) and has just over 270 pages. I read the electronic version, so I'm not sure how large the paperback is. As the quotes below will indicate, the book is written in a fairly racy style; it is not at all a difficult to read (though it is very uncomfortable). However, don't be fooled by the style, it is meticulously researched and referenced. The issues raised in this book cannot easily be brushed aside. It will set you back Â£23 for the paperback and about Â£12 for the Kindle edition. I realise that this isn't cheap, but ignoring what this book has to say is a good deal more expensive!

> *Voluntourism (noun): Any combination of unskilled volunteer work, or skilled volunteer work (e.g., in medicine or education) done by someone unqualified, and traveling on a short-term basis.*

The tone of the book is set by the author's own experience in East Africa. Along with a group of volunteers, she was involved in building a school room - despite none of them having any previous construction experience. One morning she was shocked to discover that local builders were tearing down the work that the volunteers had done the previous day and building it correctly. Anecdotes like this run through the whole book; unqualified builders making buildings, unqualified teachers in classrooms and unqualified and inexperienced volunteers acting in a medical capacity. The book is full of stories of people united by a desire to help, boundless self-confidence and enough money to put their dreams into action.

These stories are not the central message of the book, rather they serve as illustrations of the points that are developed through the book.

It kicks off with a look at the way in which tourism developed in the Victorian age and demonstrates that altruism has always been a strand of the tourist industry but that it has been inextricably linked with finance and profit. The book then explores themes such as the financial aspects of voluntourism, the white saviour complex, power imbalances.

However, the chapter that will interest most Kouyanet readers is the one on Short-Term Mission

trips. Religion as a motivation for voluntourism runs through the book, but this particular chapter explores the Christian volunteer movement in some detail.

The first point to note is that Biddle demonstrates that in many cases, there is very little difference between Christian and secular volunteering options. They often work in very similar ways.

A second point is the lack of integrity in some short-term mission offerings. They are presented as opportunities to witness and evangelise to potential Christian volunteers, while being described as development and social action projects to those outside of the church. You can read more about this sort of lack of clarity in Steve Schirmer's excellent ebook.

The author also has strong reservations about the right of Christians to share their faith with people from different cultural or ethnic groups. While I don't agree with her on this basic point, I do think the power-imbalance implicit in some short-term mission work does not do the gospel any credit.

From a UK perspective, I'm not convinced that her description of the short-term mission movement is accurate. I think that legitimate groups work hard to avoid the excesses that she describes as being normal. The Global Connections' Code of Best Practice for Short Term Mission, sets an ethical standard for the movement which many British agencies adhere to. That being said, I have observed some of the failings that Biddle identifies even in the best run organisations. The temptation to fall into the traps that her work identifies is always present and there is a need for regular and deep reflection on the way that we do mission and how we talk about it. Anyone who reads this book and feels that it doesn't apply to them or their organisation is almost certainly fooling themselves to some extent.

If you are involved in running or publicising short-term mission trips of any sort, you should read this book. Frankly, if you don't, you are not taking your job seriously enough. Mission agency CEOs should buy a few copies from their budget and make sure that their staff can read it. At the very least, it will identify a number of traps that you can avoid.

The book closes with a reflection on the way that Covid-19 has impacted the tourism industry and suggests ways in which these changes could be harnessed for good. There is food for thought for mission agencies here.

As ever, a few quotes (please remember that these are sourced and referenced where appropriate)..

> *Today, we know that the development of mass tourism is as likely, if not more, to augment disparity than it is to increase equality.*

> *In reality, voluntourism has more in common with the mass tourism establishment it contrasts itself against than nearly anyone could have imagined.*

> *For a few thousand dollars, someone with no medical training can pay their way into playing the role of surgical assistant in an underresourced hospital.*

> *Voluntourism is often marketed as an inexpensive vacation option, but there is room for a healthy profit margin thanks to the low costs of operation.*

> *Eerily similar photographs of predominately young, predominately white volunteers working with predominately younger, predominately darker people could be swapped from one brochure to another without anyone taking notice.*

> *Whereas marketers may sell a resort in Jamaica with sand, sex, and the promise of paradise, voluntourism in the same country is sold with images of shacks, shoddy electricity, and children with bare feet and bloated bellies.*

> *Large mission groups like X and smaller ones like Y rely on the same selling points as secular voluntourism to attract customers. Poverty must look fun, enthusiastic engagement is more important than expertise, and anyone who can buy a trip is capable of saving the world. (I've removed the names - they are in the original)*

> *...extracting personal gratification from a community while ignoring the history, sociology, and psychology of a place is an imperialistic endeavor worthy of a pith helmet.*

> *Just as foreigners in scrubs practice on patients, sometimes resulting in dangerous situations, voluntourists with bundles of pencils are play-acting teachers, frequently stunting educational outcomes.*

> *On short-term missions, voluntourists project their beliefs onto communities and use their faith as an excuse for behavior that is irresponsible and self-centered.*

> *Voluntourists do not have to earn a position. So long as they meet the minimum qualifications (age and ability to pay are the two most important ones), they will be placed somewhere.*