

Sharon Bohn Gmelch and George Gmelch. *Irish Travellers: The Unsettled Life*. (Bloomington, IN: 2014, Indiana University Press. Pp. 220, ISBN 978-0-253-01453-5.)

Stephen Kiraly

Volume 36, Number 1-2, 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037624ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037624ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kiraly, S. (2014). Review of [Sharon Bohn Gmelch and George Gmelch. *Irish Travellers: The Unsettled Life*. (Bloomington, IN: 2014, Indiana University Press. Pp. 220, ISBN 978-0-253-01453-5.)]. *Ethnologies*, 36(1-2), 521–523.
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“Irish Travellers: The Unsettled Life” serves as a photographic and narrative record of a relationship that Sharon Bohn Gmelch and George Gmelch have developed and maintained with a group of Irish Traveller families over a period of four decades. In 208 pages of photographs, text and interviews, the anthropologists from the University of San Francisco document a way of life that has been increasingly under attack in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe. The book, along with the documentary film that was made during the Gmelches’ 2011 visit, offers an insider’s look at an often misunderstood world that is usually only seen in sensationalist media coverage that serves to stereotype the lives of Irish Travellers.

The authors write about Irish Travellers as a special and distinct genetic and cultural people within the general population of Ireland. The Travellers featured in the book and the documentary are portrayed as a people whose traditional way of life has become lost to them for decades now because of legislation that essentially outlaws a nomadic existence in Ireland. Camping in horse-drawn barrel-top wagons has always been an integral part of Traveller culture but they are now not allowed to travel with their horses or to camp outside of designated public campgrounds, which has transformed many aspects of Travellers’ lives.

In 1971, the Gmelches came from the United States as young academics to study Irish Travellers and their culture, immersing themselves in the Travellers’ world. They lived with a group of Travellers for a year in a traditional barrel-top wagon, observing and participating in camp life, and becoming fully engaged in that community and developing lifelong friendships in the process of their work. From the earliest interactions, the Gmelches appear to have a well-developed sense of what an ethical observer-participant paradigm should look like and treat their informants and their stories with sensitivity and respect.

The book offers an account of the Gmelches’ visit with a group of Traveller families forty years after their original research trip. Because of the popularity of reality television shows like *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, Irish Travellers are often portrayed in very two-dimensional ways, with an emphasis on an ostentatious lifestyle and overtly promiscuous behaviour on the part of younger people. The Gmelches address this problem head-on in their book and, through interviews, attempt to debunk this mythology

by portraying Travellers as real people and not caricatures. For example, many of the people interviewed in the book proudly show off their modern homes, and compare them to the extremely poor living conditions that they spent their childhoods in. Gone are the ramshackle galvanised metal shacks and piles of garbage – they have been replaced by three and four-bedroom suburban homes with yards and garages.

While the book has been written in a balanced and fair tone, the authors can hardly be said to be neutral, due to the relationship that they have with their informants, and the participant-observer methodology of their study. In fact, it is the long-term relationship that the authors have had with the families that gives the authors such intimate access to the Travellers and allows them to give the readers a unique perspective on their lives. The Gmelches are not mere voyeurs; they have chosen to fully participate and be immersed in the world that the Irish Travellers inhabit. Indeed, this familiarity might be the source of the one flaw I saw in the book. The Gmelches often interrupt their informants when they are being interviewed or just simply having a conversation, in order to interject their own stories. This comes out very strongly in the documentary film that was developed to complement the book. It is less obvious to readers in the book. The narrative flow of the interviews in the book is more harmonious and less interruptive.

The close relationship the Gmelches forged is also likely to be the reason that the Irish Travellers were willing to talk quite openly about the problems that they have integrating into “settled” society. They share their experiences with alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, violence, property crime, domestic abuse and unemployment, and are honest about how these social problems affect them and their families. The nuances of the informants’ narratives come through very well in the companion documentary to the book but the book also does an excellent job of framing the Travellers’ personal narrative with background information from the Gmelches. In their interviews, the Travellers speak candidly about the most difficult aspect of their lives – the transition from a nomadic life to a settled existence. The stories that the people tell, and the pain that is apparent when they speak of losing their horses and their freedom, is sometimes heartbreaking. The voices of the travellers, while sometimes obscured by sensationalist TV shows and unflattering news stories, shine brightly in the pages of this book, and the Gmelches have worked diligently here to illuminate them for the reader.

Previous to the original research undertaken by the authors in 1971, there was little or no academic research or writing about the lives of Irish Travellers. The Gmelches opened the world of the Travellers up to the public eye in a way that was simultaneously insightful and wonderstruck. The book offers readers a complex and ongoing narrative constructed by the Gmelches and the Irish Traveller families and serves as durable testimony to the relationship that the couple have developed with these families. Reading some of the interviews, it is almost as if no time had passed between the Gmelches' first visit and their 2011 trip to Ireland. The Gmelches are part of Traveller lore, as pointed in one interview, and their research and interest in the lives of their informants has made a lasting impact on the Traveller community and its perception of itself.

Stephen Kiraly
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Lisa Gabbert. *Winter Carnival in a Western Town: Identity, Change, and the Good of the Community*. (Logan, UT: 2011, Utah State University. Pp. xiv + 257, index, ISBN 978-0874218-29-9.)

Gabbert's *Winter Carnival in a Western Town* blends the study of material culture, customary folklore, and verbal art into a single concise and seamless text, giving readers an accessible understanding of the dynamics and social processes within the winter carnival of McCall, Idaho. Focusing on the carnival's ritual and festive qualities, as well as how such qualities reflect both local and global concerns, Gabbert invites the reader to better understand how a once-a-year festival influences the remaining days of the year. Through focusing on the informal, vernacular understanding of the festival, and positioning it in relation to wider community concerns, the author also demonstrates how membership and engagement with community is defined through festival.

Drawing upon an interdisciplinary approach, which she claims is necessary in the understanding of ritual and festival, Gabbert's theoretical framework is written in a way that is neither overwhelming nor overstated. Discussions of scholarly concepts on topics such as community and ritual