



Poverty safari? Don't forget the pith helmet

Artist Ellie Harrison is treading in the illustrious steps of Steinbeck and Dickens, but is it voyeurism?



DJ Taylor

The creative type with whom I felt the most sympathy in the first week of 2016 was a 36-year-old Glasgow resident named Ellie Harrison.

I will happily confess to not knowing anything about her activities until references to the controversy in which she is currently embroiled started to appear in the newspapers a few days ago, but that does not lessen the extent of my fellow feeling or the rush of craft solidarity that the case seemed instantly to inspire. For Ms Harrison, an artist who has just embarked on a year-long project in which she will not leave the confines of Scotland's largest city, barring ill-health or the death of a close relative or friend, has been accused of taking part in a "poverty safari".

And why so? Well, news of this "action research project/durational performance", booked to investigate the consequences of city-bound sequestration on career, social life, family ties and mental health, first appeared on a Facebook page accompanied by a somewhat stereotypical image of greasy chips.

Worse, the study has been named "The Glasgow Effect" thereby invoking a phrase often used to describe the poorer health and lower life expectancy of Glaswegians compared with those from other parts of the UK. Worse even than this, perhaps, is that Harrison has been given £15,000 of taxpayers' money to finance the undertaking in the form of a grant from Creative Scotland.

Social media, naturally, found this irresistible. One of the more temperate comments was filed by Ellie Koeplinger, who observed: "I've lived here all my life, and I've found that

many of my peers have never left the Greater Glasgow area. I'm not sure what this project attempts to achieve." Ms Koeplinger professed herself "shocked" that the first artefact that the artist associated with living in Greater Glasgow for a year was a plate of chips and added: "Our culture is so much more than that. I don't believe you need £15k to see that."

A Creative Scotland spokeswoman described the object of its largesse as a "recognised artist" with a master's degree from Glasgow School of Art.

In Harrison's immediate defence, it should be pointed out that she has apparently lived and studied in Glasgow for nearly eight years, and can be presumed to know at least a little about the environment whose psycho-geography she now intends to map. And if, as Ms Koeplinger concedes, many people who live in Greater Glasgow have never left it, then surely this is a phenomenon worth investigating, even if the reason for this habit of staying put turns out to be poverty or straightforward inanition. The "ordinary boys" of the Morrissey song, who are "happy going nowhere", are a sociologists' dream merely because of their tethering to a landscape from which they won't or can't abscond.

As for the accusation that Harrison, by taking Government money and posting a picture of a plate of chips, is somehow launching herself on a "poverty safari", then it is worth pointing out that this complaint has not only been levelled at artists for upwards of 200 years, but that the argument attached to its framing is, from the artist's point of view, quite unwinable. Choose not to study the effects of poverty and deprivation and you are ignoring the artist's manifest duty of taking stock of the world outside the window. Go and have a look, and whatever the sincerity of your response, the length of your stay or the nature of your techniques, you will doubtless be accused of "voyeurism" or, worse, "exploiting human misery".

However unfair this double assault, it is, at the same time, rare for an artist to emerge out of one of these engagements with his, or her, integrity



entirely intact. Take, for example, the case of John Steinbeck's celebrated Depression-era novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which tracks the flight of a family of ground-down Oklahoma sharecroppers to California – promoted to them as the American Dream in *excelsis*, but in reality a kind of charnel house of misery and exploitation. It is a work of something very near genius, which had the additional effect of alerting thousands of Americans to a tragedy being enacted on their own doorstep, and yet Steinbeck's biographers have noted that the author, while certainly familiar with the deprivation he described, robbed much of the personal detail from research notes compiled by a US government employee and shared with him by her superior.

Does that make Steinbeck's mid-1930s trips down Route 66 and his cruises around the Bakersfield area a poverty safari? Or does the impact of his reportage cancel out the great authorial crime of not acknowledging your sources?

'In the 1930s you couldn't throw a stone at a pithead without hitting a journalist'

The same dilemma hangs over Charles Dickens's pursuits of mid-19th-century London lowlife, which both drew attention to social evils, which the majority of Victorians were disposed to overlook, while offering a reliable source of material, and ultimately income, for the writer. And it will presumably have occurred to the photographer or essayist who turns up at a Calais refugee camp – that queer feeling that nearly every writer or painter experiences once in a while at the realisation that moral outrage is surprisingly easy to monetise.

Although there had been many an outlier – Jack London's *People of the Abyss* (1903), say, or WH Davies's *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908), the golden age of the British poverty safari – if that is what it was – came in the 1930s, when, as a critic once waggishly put it, you could scarcely throw a stone outside a pithead without hitting a journalist engaged on a story about the plight of the unemployed miner. It was the age of JB Priestley's *English Journey* (1934), of George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) or HW Massingham's *I Took Off My Tie* (1936), which follows its well-bred hero into the depths of the land-lord-loathing East End.

The curious aspect of many of these investigations is the relative confusion of motive. To one or two scholars, Orwell's tour of the poverty-stricken North of England was a

ONE MAN'S PLIGHT
Ellie Harrison (inset) is not alone in turning poverty into art and then money. Reporters and photographers who visit the Calais 'Jungle' face the same dilemma REX

significant milestone on his journey to socialism, but much of the evidence suggests that when he set out Orwell was merely a journalist in search of saleable copy and barely knew what the Labour Party was. There were other writers for whom the implications of the task that they had set themselves eventually became too uncomfortable to be borne.

Beverley Nichols, for example, who announced in 1933 that he was to spend several weeks in Glasgow researching the conditions of the unemployed, lasted 10 days in his tenement lodgings before booking himself into a hotel, the reason being, his biographer tells us, "that he found it impossible to articulate his anger and despair in a way that would result in action".

There are interesting parallels here with Harrison, for Nichols, too, was accused of being a poverty tourist and told by one Scottish newspaper that, for any good to come of them, his researches would need several years rather than several weeks.

What is the non-Glaswegian to feel about this "action research project" and its government funding? My own view is that, even in an age of austerity, so much public money is thrown away by the state that £15,000 to an artist is the smallest of small beer.

Meanwhile, it's a fact that Harrison has managed to annoy many people. In an age where most art attracts only the most negligible response from its potential patrons, this can only be a good thing.

