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Mike Parker

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Bestselling Rough Guide author Mike Parker lives in Esgairgeiliog near Machynlleth. His book published in February 2006, 'Neighbours from Hell? English Attitudes to the Welsh' looks at the English perception of their nearest neighbours. He's been answering a few questions about his work.



When and why did you start writing?

When I was at school; I always loved playing with words, especially for comedy purposes. I found out that you could deflect all kinds of awkward situations by making people laugh, and I was hooked. I mixed the interest in writing with my interest in trundling around different places, and travel writing seemed the obvious career choice. Not that it's exactly a traditional "career".

When and why did you move to Mid Wales?

Spring 2000. I'd been travelling around and writing about Wales for the Rough Guide since 1992 and loving it more and more. Recent connection to the internet had shown me how portable the life of a writer could be, millennial blood-rush was coursing through my veins; I decided to move and was installed in a small flat between Aberystwyth and Machynlleth within weeks. It was, without doubt, the best decision I ever made.

How long did it take you to write 'Neighbours From Hell? English Attitudes to the Welsh' and how did you find the process?

I'm slightly ashamed to admit that it took about 5 years to write: Y Lolfa (the publishers) were very patient as various deadlines slid past. The problem was simple: there was so much good source material for research that I just kept collecting more and more of it, and not processing it into the actual book.

Eventually, I had to force myself to stop adding more and start shaping it into the text. It was a great process that I thoroughly enjoyed: there's nothing better as far as I'm concerned than an absolutely fascinating topic and the chance to have a really good rant about it.

What themes are dealt with in the book?

Neighbours From Hell? looks at the way English cliches and stereotypes about Wales and the Welsh have percolated down the centuries. To that end, it looks at the cliches about different aspects of life: the Welsh character (long stereotyped as shifty, verbose, lazy, heathen and even oversexed!), the Welsh language (ugly, dead, the "secret language of extremists", not a proper language), the Welsh landscape (either the "very rubbish of creation" as one Englishman put it in 1700 or as the embodiment of the

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Picturesque and the Romantic), Wales at the Margins, the English invasion and some thoughts on the future of this ancient relationship.

Do you draw inspiration for your writing from your locality?

Absolutely. Physically, I utterly depend on the Welsh landscape for inspiration. If I'm stuck, there are places within walking distance that I can go to and just be in for a while, and almost always the thoughts and inspiration will flow again.

If I need something a little stronger, within half an hour's drive of my front door, I can be up a mountain, on a beach or moor, in a wood or glade, by a waterfall, river, lake or stone circle - all of which give me different kinds of oomph. Much more than that though, I find Welsh culture, and my wonderful Welsh friends, phenomenally inspiring to be surrounded by.

When was your first book published?

1991 - the RAW Guides to Birmingham and Greater Manchester, youth-oriented guide books that were published to a wave of yawning indifference.

How many books have you written so far?

Written or co-written 10 guide books, 1 work of fiction, and 2 more general non-fiction books, this one included.

What was different in writing this book compared to the Rough Guide books you've written in the past?

This was much more fun. I've really had enough of writing guide books, especially for big multinational companies who want you to write to a very tight formula. The gap between Rough Guide Wales and the Wales that I see around me was growing wider by the day. I want to write about the real place, not the marketing version of it.

Do you write for a living or do you have another job?

I've eked a full-time living out of writing since 1991; I'm absolutely unemployable now in any normal sense. It's more than just sitting hunched over a word processor, though. For the past five years, I've written and presented travelogues for ITV Wales (Coast to Coast and Great Welsh Roads), so that's been a very pleasant diversion.

I do like the performance side of writing very much: I did a few years as a (rather hopeless) stand-up comedian in the late 1990s.

What are your plans for the future?

I've been writing almost exclusively about Wales since moving here in 2000 and I'm very keen to broaden that out a little next. My next project is to work on a book about my life long love affair with maps, an obsession that I know I'm not alone in cultivating! 'Map Addict' is published on April 30, 2009 by HarperCollins. It's a lively and loving celebration of the humble map and its place in our history and culture. There's lots about Wales in there, but the book also travels all around the rest of the British Isles, throughout Europe and as far afield as Thailand and the USA.

What advice for a would-be writer?

Be ruthlessly honest with yourself. Don't try and manufacture interest in things that really don't do it for you: stick to your

true enthusiasms and go deep, deep into them. And don't be put off by the sniff of failure: everyone has had copious rejection letters. Also, be wary of the internet: it's great, but it's not the last word in either research or opinion."

Q & A with author Mike Parker

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your comments

Dave Hubler, West Des Moines, IA USA

My daughter brought me a copy of Map Addict from GB over Christmas, as it is not yet published in the US. Had to read it with a atlas/map in one hand and a dictionary in the other, but found it fascinating. Have been to England twice and also 7 days in Wales and this just prompts me to get back there soon. Hope to see it in the US soon.

Thu Mar 4 12:26:58 2010

Roger Bashforth, Taunton

Map Addict, page 108, line 8for "north-westwards" read "north-eastwards"?

Mon Jan 4 09:45:26 2010

Anna, York

I've just finish reading Mike's most recent book Map Addict (an impromptu gift from my boyfriend based on my inherent map appreciation!)and throughly enjoyed it; More than just an account of 'maps' it's a witty, knowledgeable and insightful journey. So much of it either got me nodding in agreement (opening passage about neighbours who moved to the area without a map) or taught me some glorious new trivia (the solsticial wonders of yet visited Milton Keynes!). Cheers Mike, the boyfriend will be reading it next!

Tue Aug 11 14:43:17 2009

Ian McNeill, Dyffryn Ardudwy

i have just read Neighbours From Hell? I read it cover to cover in two days ... brilliantly written - funny insight which any one planning on moving to Wales should read before embarking on the move. There are so many truths echoed and identified and rumors dispelled...made me laugh too, looking forward to seeing Mike in Barmouth this year ...

Fri Aug 7 15:07:17 2009

David Jones from SWANSEA

I have always followed the Great Welsh Roads series but was bitterly disappointed by comments made by Mike Parker when he visited a WW1 war memorial in Trawsfynydd. He referred to those officers from upper classes who were safely behind the front, implying that they were all safe. I would refer Mike to a publication called officers died in the Great War 1914-1918. The names of tens of thousands of officers is testament enough to their huge losses.

Wed Jul 9 14:50:29 2008

Wilson, Aberdare

Have not read any of mike parker's books, but both my husband and myself really enjoy his great welsh roads programme. It should be on for longer than half- hour! We were both so very sorry to hear of patsy the dog's death, as we know what that feels like to lose a lovely dog

Mon Mar 31 16:20:32 2008

Susan Meredith-Jones, Newport, Pems.

I enjoyed all the programmes very much. More please! I didn't know about the books but will look for them now I do! I too am very sorry about Patsy. I "lost" my both my cats last year and know what it feels like. Can someone tell me the name of - and contact details for - the shoe maker visited in the last programme please? Many thanks!
Sun Mar 30 19:00:28 2008

Alan & Diane Griffiths from Holyhead

Watched the last prog in series 'GWR' and the end nearly had us in tears. So sorry to see Patsy had gone to 'the big kennel in the sky'. we know the feeling too well!. Di is from Walsall & I'm from Kidderminster - been here for 50! years. Went to school in Aber, lived in Devils Bridge etc. We go down to Llanidloes frequently for hols. Good Luck with Life Mike...
Fri Mar 28 11:13:02 2008

Jane & Dave Mills, Llandrindod wells

Just finished watching your program which we love--couldn't agree more about your comments on the true reality of victorian life. But we're truely sorry to hear about Patsy-our dog Finn was born in the same great year-i hope you're managing ok. Next time you're in Llandod, try Cefnlllys lane/shakey bridge road and climb the castle mound -drop in for a cuppa at the Backen trust anytime-again thinking of you and your faithful Patsy.
Fri Mar 28 09:52:26 2008

Claire Ashton

You look too young to be the ex beat friend of someone who is 60..are you the same parker?
Thu Jan 31 14:51:14 2008

Barry Williams now in Market Harborough

Think its a good read and echos most of my experience in my 53 years. Gentle condescension by some and vitriolic by a lot. Don't hate English and can't understand why so many of the (mainly men) hate the Welsh. Recent gene thing on BBC showed 52% of population genes are Celtic. Think Mike is now Welsh whether he likes it or not. Given we're all related, being Welsh is a state of mind. So glad to have him on board.
Tue May 15 10:09:14 2007

T. Walters from Abercraf

Neighbours from Hell. What a patronising, paranoid and antiquated polemic. It advances or promotes nothing but prejudice, but is this not classic nationalism? Had he made the last chapter the first he'd have saved me a lot of time.
Sat Mar 24 18:15:53 2007

I for Gimson, Llandrindod Wells

No I have not yet read any of Mike's books but what he say's here makes a lot of sense, I have watched his ITV program "Great Welsh Roads" and thoroughly enjoyed them, so it very likely that I will soon be taking an interest in his books. Thank you Mike.
Sat Mar 10 17:06:12 2007

Jean Farmery, Machynlleth

Mike hasnt mentioned his faithful dog !!!Havn` t read mike`s books but i do enjoy his TV programme "great welsh roads". We came to machynlleth 28 years ago and wouldn`t want to be anywhere else, so we understand exactly how he feels.!!

Fri Mar 9 16:52:47 2007

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