

## Review of Jonathan Skinner's *Before the Volcano: Reverberations of Identity on Montserrat*

By Cielo G. Festino <sup>[1]</sup>

Kingston: Arawak Publications, 2004.

219 pp. ISBN 976-8189-21-5.

The name that Skinner gives to his book points to the time and place of the narrative, the result of his own trip to the Caribbean British colony of Montserrat (a British Dependent Territory) before the volcanic eruption of Mount St. Peter in 1995, at a time when the tremors were not only geographical but also political due to questionings of identity, nationhood and independence, as the author points out.

From an anthropological and postmodern perspective, Skinner claims the status for his account of Montserrat of 'an experimental ethnographic exemplification of an impressionistic anthropology' that, in his own words, 'grows out of individual and group experiences, converging as intersubjective constellations, diverging as incommensurable positions. They are multiple. And they are partial - partial in the sense that there is a diversity of impressions, but not one complete and whole impression' (xiii-xiv).

Skinner's impressions are organised in six chapters, written in a collage fashion and in counterpoint to each other, that are interspersed with his explanations and reflections on his own readings and writings on Montserrat, and due to the author's repressed desire for linearity also offer a guideline for the reader in coping with this fragmentary narrative.

The passage from one chapter to the next is marked by short vignettes [2] that remind the reader of the volcanic quality of the island and the imminent eruption of Mount St. Peter, amid all the nationalistic muddle. Chapters and vignettes superpose *English* with *english*, oral narratives with essay pieces, shreds of political discourse with domestic discourse, voices of politicians with voices of musicians, singers, poets and acquaintances the anthropologist met during his stay on the island. Throughout, the

narrative reverberates - to use Skinner's own term - with references to the Irish Catholics who fled in the wake of Oliver Cromwell's invasions in the seventeenth century and to Montserrat becoming known as 'the Anglo-Irish Colony' (45). Skinner mentions a brief guidebook written by the poet and professor Howard Fergus (1992) for tourists on the island, in which he describes it as a place where 'Afro-Irish combines [...] with a *New World* interpretation' (46). Later on in the text, Skinner will define these Afro-Irish as '-a quirky, quaint, inter-racial brotherhood of former fellow slaves equally mistreated by the English' (154).

Skinner devotes chapter 6 "'The Way the Caribbean Used to Be": The *Black Irish* and the Celebration or Commemoration of St. Patrick's Day on the *other* Emerald Isle' to addressing the *Irishness* of the island. In order to better understand Skinner's text, I will make some references to the previous chapters in which the author and anthropologist defines the quality of his narrative voice, reflects upon the structure of his book, the quality of his research, and places the Irish question in perspective.

In Chapter 1 'Montserrat Place and Mons'rat Neaga,' the narrative focuses on Skinner himself as he delineates his attempt at positioning himself not above but inside the discursive calypsonian impressions through which he recreates the island of Montserrat. The two issues that stand out in the chapter are his miming of the accent and cadence of Montserrat English *You young t'ing, you t'ink you white people can come and tell us what we want. Us dat live here. On my Montserrat* (14) and his feeling flattered when considered as a 'neaga', that is, Black Irish.

This transpires as he mingles with Montserratians, attempting to overcome his identity, in his own words, of 'inquisitive interloper' and trying to 'connect, argue, and disagree' (26) with all the people he comes across, so that he and the locals do not end up trapped in 'identity's hurricane shelters' (27). Hence this first chapter, rather than being narrated through a third person ubiquitous narrator that knows all about the island's geography, presents 'the partial point of view, position, experience, reality of the anthropologist' (28).

In Chapter 2 'Barbarian' Montserrat', Skinner reflects on his own method of writing and reading his anthropological research as he plunges the reader into one of his glimpses of Montserrat, a session of poetry reading led by the poet Howard Ferguson, one of the 'barbarian poets' writing from an anti-colonialist perspective.

Skinner then immediately commences an academic commentary in which he highlights his own method of doing ethnography, saying that each one of the impressions recorded that evokes daily affairs is 'fleeting and partial' but helps him to reconstruct 'human characters, inconstant individuals with fickle personalities and inconsistent practices' (29), a true record of the 'constant muddle' that society is. He concludes that this 'strategy of indeterminacy' (34) points to the indeterminacy of culture.

Chapter 3 'Conversing Montserrat: Two Place-settings evoking two constellations of realities on development and dependence' is articulated through the juxtaposition of two dinner parties, one with development workers, the other with members of the Montserratian British Dependent Territory Citizens, during which Skinner discusses the development of the island. In line with his theoretical perspective, he calls both experiences 'constellations' and reads their opinions from the perspective of Stanley Fish's interpretative communities (1988) and Nigel Rapport's (1993) idea that world views are diverse, multiple and partial.

In the same anthropological research style, in Chapter 4 "Rum & Coke and Calypso: Explicit

Commentary in Private and Public Spaces', Skinner focuses on calypso, underlining both its impromptu aspect as well as its quality of social commentary; 'social expression, social situation, social issues, ills and opinions' (83), thus likening it to the barbarian poetry of Fergus and his group of poets. In a Pan-American gesture, Skinner also compares calypso to reggae songs in Jamaica, 'with their disclosure and affirmation of ghetto values, concerns and discontentment' (88) and Brazilian *capoeira*, only that the kick is 'in the song rather than the foot' (89).

The impressions recorded by Skinner in Chapter 5 'Black but not Irish: Chedmond Browne's Teaching the Past, Protesting the Present, Altering the Future', are markedly different from those of the previous chapters, not in the method of composition but in the persons interviewed. Chedmond Browne, 'Cheddy', is a 'West Indian, a Vietnam veteran, a Pan-Afrikanist, a politician and General Secretary of the Montserrat Seamen and Waterfront Workers' Union' (110). Skinner records Browne's different identities through his direct political discourse and action and not through artistic forms like poems or calypso that, as Skinner points out, allow them to 'influence society with impunity' (23).

In line with his theoretical argumentation, through the use of storytelling that, as he explains, is based on the way in which the writer relates to the world, Skinner then gives a full account not of Browne's 'extremist arguments and opinions in a history of Africa, the West Indies and Montserrat' but of his 'impressions' of Montserrat (111). In turn, the Browne that is evoked in Skinner's narrative is the result of his own impressions obtained through 'interview, newspaper dialogue, anthropological narrative and case study of island politics' (133). He is at times Mr. Browne and at times, Cheddy, depending on the levels of the relationship that Skinner establishes with him.

Skinner's impressions on Browne revolve around two main issues, connected with Browne's concept of race. The first one is 'white racism, the superiority of the white race'

is 'based solely on the lack of pigmentation in the skin' (122). Browne is the son of a black mother and a white European father. However, contrary to the colonial belief that fair skin helps a man in life, Browne wants to 'blacken himself and his family, with a strong African gene pool' (115). For him, power should come from direct action, as shown in his union activities, and not the colour of his skin: he identifies himself as black, but not Irish. Skinner quotes him as saying, in one of the interviews: '98 percent of the population of Montserrat is of pure African ethnicity regardless of what they gonna tell you at the Tourist Department, and regardless of what they tell the Irish people' (123).

The second issue, 'the invention of Greek and Roman histories and traditions at the expense of African civilisations' (122), finds expression in Browne's publication of his newsletter *The Pan-Afrikan Liberator* that aims to unite 'black people of the diaspora and black Africa' (122). Skinner defines Browne as 'harassed by the British for proposing an alternative future, for protesting the present colonial condition and for teaching a blackened history of the island's colonial past' (111).

To highlight the quality of Browne's thought, Skinner contrasts him with Fergus, stressing that 'the differences in their individual realities, actions and convictions all stem from their different personalities, personal experiences, skin colour, upbringing and positions on the island' (118). While Browne is in favour of a more revolutionary policy, Fergus is associated with the conservative powers of the island. While Browne is the anti-colonial historian of the island, Fergus, through his equivocal poetry that fosters the African connection, still contributes to the *status quo* of Montserrat.

What all these chapters show is the other face of Montserrat, the problematic one that the tourist, thirsty for the paradisiacal image of the Caribbean, with the help of the local Tourist Board and their equally ambiguous tour guides, reduces to an image of the picturesque. It is precisely this idea that Skinner tries to problematise in the next chapter as he aims to deconstruct the feature that characterises

Montserrat in the eye of the tourist: its 'Irishness.'

Chapter 6 'The Way the Caribbean Used to Be': The *Black Irish* and the Celebration or Commemoration of St. Patrick's Day on the *other* Emerald Island' is introduced by a vignette that acts as historical preface: the volcano theme gives way to the Irish theme, and is significantly and ambiguously named 'Taken by Storm'. Hence the imminent eruption that is about to come over the island gives way to the narrative of the European white men who invaded the island, another kind of tempest. Echoing the Tourist Board's description of Montserrat, Skinner explains that it describes Montserrat as 'being the Caribbean's only 'Irish' island' (136) to the point of making 'much play of the Irish connection' and explaining that it is '3000 miles to the West of Ireland and lists some 73 Irish surnames to be found on the island: Fagan, Farrell, Maloney, O'Brien, O'Donoghue, Reilly, Ryan and so on' (136). Furthermore the islanders are Catholic, celebrate St. Patrick's Day, the island crest depicts Erin with her harp and, as you come through immigration, your passport is stamped with a shamrock (137).

Not only that, but according to Skinner, there are many apparent similarities between the islanders and the Irish: 'both share a casual, anything goes, what-the-hell attitude to life; they have in common an enthusiasm for religion and a passion for music and poetry, for debate and rhetoric, and for drinking and dancing' (137). At this point, Skinner questions himself whether there is any more to Montserrat's Irishness (137). In order to confirm that, Skinner did some field research, interviewing a Miss Sweeney 'a light-skinned woman with 'soft' hair' but came to the conclusion that 'she seemed about as Irish as reggae music or rum punch' (138).

It is this so-called Irishness and colonial character of Montserrat, as Skinner points out, that is the main attraction that the Tourist Board tries to promote, in order to set this island, that curiously bears Ireland's national colour, emerald, apart from the many other Caribbean island which are exactly the same:

sand, sea and sun paradises, and thus attracts a variety of visitors, 'from British monarchists to American republicans' (141).

In order to problematise the Irishness attributed to the island by the tourist guide discourse on Montserrat, he focuses on one of its national holidays: St. Patrick's Day. From a theoretical perspective, Skinner defines St. Patrick's Day in Montserrat, quoting Eric Hobsbawm (1992) who refers to these events as an 'invented tradition' and he resignifies them as 'a constructed and formally instituted set of practices claiming a link with an immemorial past' (153). He then goes on to superpose the way in which local historians, Montserratians and tourists (insiders) and academics (outsiders) read this invented tradition, to show how St. Patrick's Day has a different reality for different people (155). Skinner's focus is then 'upon the contemporary understandings of St. Patrick's Day, upon present-day meanings and uses, and not upon the historical specificity or roots of the event' (155).

He first records the voices of the local historians such as the poet Fergus and the political activist Browne. Skinner points out that Fergus wants to change the character of national *celebration* of St. Patrick's Day to that of a *commemoration* when in 1768 'the slaves on Montserrat attempted to overthrow their Irish and British masters' (143-144). For Browne, St. Patrick's Day should be known in Montserrat as 'Heroes Day or Slave Rebellions Day' (145). Skinner interestingly points out that Browne is critical of Fergus's reading of the events on the grounds that in his many narratives of those historical events, he has omitted such details as the names of the slaves, the estates they worked on, or where they were executed because 'the possible lack of specificity surrounding the slave uprising strengthens its mythical status furthering a nationalist agenda which concentrates upon the present rather than the past' (156).

As for the Montserratians, if for Missie O'Garro, the cleaning lady, St. Patrick's Day 'celebrates a slave's victory in the 1768 revolt', for Doc 'St. Patrick's Day is a time for

additional work during the day and partying during the night'. For the Irish-American tourists visiting Montserrat, St. Patrick's Day can 'at last be celebrated in a hot and sunny climate' (154).

Finally Skinner considers in counterpoint the reading of these events by the anthropologists Michael Mullin in *Africa in America* (1992) and John Messenger in 'St. Patrick's Day in "The Other Emerald Island"' (1994) to show how St. Patrick's Day 'remains an example of contestation, of colonial and tourist impressionistic histories versus independent and nationalistic impressionistic histories, with many Montserratians also happy just to enjoy the week-long extension of the weekend' (163).

Skinner reads Mullin as establishing a relationship between 'slave acculturation' and 'the changing nature of slave resistance' (157). He explains that the main difference between the historian's interpretation and that of Browne and Fergus resides in the fact that he 'allows the reader to appreciate the position of the Creole leaders of rebellions trying to gain support from slaves' (157) while the Montserratian historians 'persist with the theory that the relationship between *all* African slaves and masters was a relationship of tension, struggle and revolt - the St. Patrick's rebellion being just one instance' (157).

Messenger, on the other hand, through his 'spiteful comments directed at the unnamed 'Afrophiles', casts doubt upon the St. Patrick's Day conspiracy', basing his interpretation on the reading of an account based on court records in 1930 'by a colonial agricultural worker and believer Mr. T. Savage English' (1930) who refers to the St. Patrick's conspiracy in 1768 in a derogatory fashion as

*a legend collected by English or a predecessor, and implied in it is that on this day the Irish would be vulnerable because of the drink customarily imbibed. To some locals, basing a festival on an unsuccessful slave revolt, possibly recorded only in untrustworthy legend, is as questionable as the effort by Afrophiles to change the name of the island* (160).

In the same way that he refuses to treat the uprising as a conspiracy, Messenger, according to Skinner's reading, developed his 'Black Irish' theory of the inhabitants of the island based on a 'voluntary inter-ethnic marriages between slaves or freed slaves and Irish indentured labourers, freemen and landholders' (162). In order to further the Montserrat-Ireland connection and his claim that the Irish left an indelible genetic and cultural imprint on the island' (162), Messenger in his many articles written on Montserrat, says Skinner, hammered home the controversial claim that 'the Irish landowners treated their slaves with more care and kindness than did their English and Scottish counterparts' (162). What comes out of all this debate, as Skinner points out, is that 'there is, at the very least, an agenda for each person involved with the *Irishness* debate on Montserrat' (163).

Skinner provisionally closes his narrative of Montserrat, 'though life on and around Montserrat continues apace' (171) with a scene of the disaster caused by the deadly eruption of the volcano and the urgency and despair of the evacuation that seem to drown all the voices involved in the politics and ancestry of the island, as well as their 'loose collective sense of Irishness' (166), as half of the British colony's 11,000 residents are forced to flee the island.

Skinner's *Before the Volcano* is a very enticing narrative, true to his own postmodern convictions, as he does not place himself above the discourse of those being interviewed, is always conscious of his borderline position in Montserratian culture, tries to articulate all the voices and all forms of discourses and continuously reflects upon both his own role as researcher and the construction of his own text.

Cielo G. Festino  
University of São Paulo

### Notes

[1] Cielo G. Festino holds a Ph.D. from São Paulo University, Brazil in Literary and Linguistic Studies in English and is currently doing a post-doctorate in travel writing at the History Department of the same university. She teaches Literatures in English at the Universidade Paulista, São Paulo, Brazil.

[2] The word vignette, as used in the present review, has the aim of highlighting the author's enticing style, as through his own narrative voice, he brings together different types of texts that act as historical contextualisation to each one of the chapters.

### Author's Reply

I am writing to thank Ms Festino for such a sympathetic and generally detailed review of my book. On the whole I find her comments pithy, accurate and I take them as complementary as I believe they are intended. Certainly, in the narrative, I explore questions of identity, nationhood and independence on and about Montserrat, a British Dependent Territory in the Eastern Caribbean (now, more recently, a 'British Overseas Territory' as the British seek to do away with explicit *labels* of dependency if not the *mechanisms* of dependency). This collection of impressions of Montserrat is indeed composed of six chapters which are 'written in a collage fashion and in counterpoint to each other' as Festino rightly points out; and there is, I suppose, a 'repressed

desire for linearity' in the text, just as there was a repressed desire for positivistic data whilst I was working in the field. Ms Festino has read my text and read through to my construction of the text with a sharp, eager and - to use her words - 'enticed' eye. It is more the pity then that I feel it necessary to add some corrections to this most thorough review - corrections which I did point out when I read her draft review of my book.

Ms Festino wrongly attributes the authorship of the chapter-prefaces at the start of each chapter in the book. What Festino considers to be a narrative vignettes written by myself so as to introduce the chapters and their topics, are in fact real reports and documents - largely from newspaper - which either complement the text, or close it as in the case of the final newspaper

account of the pyroclastic mudflows destroying the part of the island where much of the book is set. All of these newsgroup or newspaper reports are referenced in full with the author and the website or newspaper (eg Stewart, *The Independent on Sunday*, 4 February 1996: 51-52 [p.140 my book]). Further to this, I discuss the nature and intention of including these chapter-prefaces in the text at the start of the book (p.xxxiv) and at the end of the book (pp.172-173): there I refer to them as volcano updates which intersect and interrupt the 'Before the Volcano' narrative which is written in the conventional ethnographic present. These chapter-prefaces thus highlight the 'artificial frame' (p.173) around the main narrative, though it is a clear mis-reading to consider them artificial and fictional in themselves as Festino does. To do so leads Festino to misattribute a number of comments which I was citing rather than constructing myself, comments which are antithetical to my own theses expressed in the book: for instance, all of her comments about the 'vignette' opening chapter six come from Stewart's newspaper article and not from me, and so include the contents where Festino cites my purported interview with a Miss Sweeney, and comments about islander and Irish identity, Irish surnames and other details. In an earlier draft of her review Festino prefaced this section with the following - 'Assuming his theoretician's voice, Skinner explains that Montserrat has ...'. This misreading was pointed out, but unfortunately the subsequent version of the review has not taken this on board and has become more emphatic.

Furthermore, I should like to correct several distinctions or definitions which Festino has read into my text. Firstly, the term 'neaga' which I use in Chapter 1 does not translate to 'Black Irish'. Rather, it is an inclusive term for 'blackness' or 'folk' as it is used in the expression 'Mons'rat neaga' - 'Montserrat people'. I make no such Black Irish association

in my book. So Festino is wrong in linking me to any claim for Black Irish ethnicity when I use this term or felt flattered when I was included "in" it (see Chapter 1). Secondly, in her review, Festino picks up from the text a definition of the Afro-Irish of Montserrat: 'Later on in the text, Skinner will define these Afro-Irish as "-a quirky, quaint, inter-racial brotherhood of former fellow slaves equally mistreated by the English (154)." Here, Festino is picking out an extract from the book where I was paraphrasing the types of self-projection given by the likes of the Montserrat Government and Montserrat Tourist Board to attract tourists to the island. This should be more clear when read with the preceding two sentences from my book: 'There would appear to be a variety of local and non-local understandings of St. Patrick's Day, different realities held by a range of different people. No doubt, this is the case even amongst the tourists enticed to Montserrat by Government and Montserrat Tourist Board adverts to visit this Caribbean island and to celebrate vacation time of St. Patrick's Day alongside Irish-Africans - ...' (154). I would not want to be held to a definition of an 'Afro-Irish' identity from these writings, or indeed from my experiences on Montserrat.

Apart from the above mis-readings, I am happy with and grateful for Festino's reading and reviewing of my book. She has summarised a number of the chapters very well and linked them together as I intended the reader to have done. I will reflect further, however, upon the nature of reader-response theory and the control of meaning in a text given the above possibilities which have arisen from a generally keen and careful reading.

Dr Jonathan Skinner  
Queen's University Belfast  
Northern Ireland