‘Working on Holiday’: Relationships between Tourism and Work among Young Canadians in Edinburgh

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ABSTRACT: Working holiday-maker programmes have facilitated a growing cohort of mobile young people who have an ambiguous status as both worker and tourist. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Canadian working holiday-makers in Scotland, this paper shows how working holiday-makers are situated in an ambiguous, contradictory position as working tourists, and are streamlined towards particular social and professional fields in which work-leisure boundaries are blurred. Although these blurred boundaries seem contradictory, they benefit employers who require an educated yet temporary work-force, while also meeting the desires of working holiday-makers for a lifestyle that is flexible, social, far from the pressures of friends and family, and that puts them in regular contact with other young foreigners who, like them, are at transitional points in life.

KEYWORDS: leisure, tourism, work, Working-holiday, youth

Introduction

I know what I want to study, but I’m not ready to go back and actually sit down and focus on it. If I go back to school now I’m pretty sure that I wouldn’t give it my all? Whereas this way, I’m learning a lot about myself, I’m learning a lot more about what I specifically want to do with my life, and when I go home I know I can sit down and focus on my studies, get it all done with. When I first arrived in Edinburgh I was in a hostel for two months, in an eight-bedroom dorm, and that’s how I met four of my flatmates who I lived with for six months. And they’re all from Australia. And my friend Erica1, my friend who I came over from Canada with, she left within the first month. And then we found my flatmate Kevin, who is also from Canada. He came and lived with us for the rest of our lease, until August. And it was a good house. Like, they’re my closest friends? Like we didn’t really have other friends but we always hung out together? We’re very, very, very close.

The above comments were recounted to me by Jane, a twenty year-old Canadian who had been living in Edinburgh, Scotland for eight months. Her account is not atypical of the situation of many working holiday-makers, and exemplifies many of the qualities of youth mobility articulated in Vered Amit’s and Noel Dyck’s introduction to this special journal issue even as it problematises youth travel agencies’ promotional representations both of tourism and the working-holiday experience. Residing in Edinburgh for months, holding down a job, sharing a lease on an apartment, and socializing primarily with other holiday-makers, Jane challenges the long-held assumption that ‘what is work cannot be leisure, and
what is leisure cannot be work’ (Beatty and Torbert 2003: 239, see also Graburn 1989; 2001). As such, her position and lifestyle help to unsettle further the notion that work, leisure, and tourism are mutually exclusive while exemplifying a blurred boundary between work and tourism which has been remarked upon by theorists such as Bianchi (2000), Amit (2007), and by Amit and Dyck in the introduction to this special issue.

Indeed, a number of scholars have suggested that it may be misguided to assume a work-tourism dichotomy, especially in relation to youth travel practices. As early as the late 1970s, Israeli scholars discussed the practices of young people who volunteered to work on one or other kibbutz for periods of three to six months described as a ‘working holiday’ (e.g. Cohen 1973, 1974; Mittelberg 1988, Uriely and Reichel 2000, Uriely 2001). Over the following decades this literature expanded to include studies of farm tourism (Vogeler 1977, Deroni 1983, Pearce 1990, Busby and Rendle 2000), resort staff activities (Adler and Adler 1999, Bianchi 2000, Boon 2006), and youth who hold ‘working-holidaymaker’ visas (Al-lon 2004; Clarke 2004, 2005). Although this literature spans four decades and considerable geographic variation, it demonstrates a tendency to focus on the motivations and/or lifestyle of working travellers while comparatively ignoring the motives and impetuses for employers to seek out mobile young foreigners as employees. In focusing on the motivations of travellers, scholars who have questioned the validity of conceiving work and tourism as mutually exclusive have shown that working travellers seek out certain types of work for the leisure lifestyle that these facilitate (Adler & Adler 1999, Guerrier and Abib 2003, Boon 2006), a trend which holds true for the working holiday-makers whom I met in Edinburgh.

Beyond exemplifying an increasingly blurred boundary between work and tourism, working holiday-makers such as Jane are engaged in very particular forms of sociality. Jane’s international experience is of a bounded sort, providing her with ample opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with particular kinds of people while limiting her contact with others. It is not incidental that Jane – like many other working holiday-makers that I encountered in Edinburgh – primarily engaged with a mix of other Canadians and Australians of similar age, at similar stages of life, and with similar levels of educational and socio-economic privilege. This speaks to travel as a privileged activity and also as a vehicle for ‘life-cycle transition’ (Amit 2007: 6; Riley 1988).

Vered Amit, for instance, observes that while privilege is always relative and travellers, especially the young, are not necessarily wealthy, those who travel by choice are aided by a variety of resources be they ‘money, time, or credentials’ (2007: 2) to embark on such journeys. While only a few working holiday-makers may have a great deal of disposable income, being young they all have ample time, and many have educational credentials. Facilitated by a variety of youth travel institutions such as student travel agencies, hosting centres for new arrivals, and back-packer hostels who partner with these agencies, almost immediately upon arrival these holiday-makers are put in contact with other young people of a similar background and life stage as themselves. These new friends typically serve as companions throughout the duration of the working holiday.

As explained above, Jane was facing some significant decisions when she chose to embark on a working holiday. Having finished high school, sure that further education was on the cards but not feeling quite ready to embark immediately on post-secondary studies, Jane faced a great deal of uncertainty as well as considerable pressure to make decisions about her future that she felt unmotivated and ill-prepared to make. As such, she had a lot in common with the young ‘budget travellers’ discussed by Riley in her 1988 study of ‘road culture’:
[Budget travellers] are escaping from the dullness and monotony of their everyday routine, from their jobs, from making decisions about careers, and desire to delay or postpone work, marriage, and other responsibilities (...). A smaller number said they were escaping from a romantic relationship and pressures to marry. These people are at one of life’s junctures. For example, they have just completed a college degree or are between jobs. Many are at a stage in their lives where they are unsure of the future commitments that they want to make (1988: 317, emphasis mine).

Similar observations have been made by Darya Maoz, who points out that most back-packers ‘travel at times of transition in their life; some have experienced “life crises” prior to their journey’ (2007: 127).

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Edinburgh with young Canadians like Jane who held working holiday-makers visas for the United Kingdom. This fieldwork was part of a larger study directed by Vered Amit and Noel Dyck that focused on several different forms of student and youth international mobility. Interviews and fieldwork for the larger project were conducted in Canada, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom with officials and policymakers (see Amit this volume and Dyck this volume) as well as students and youths who engaged in these forms of mobility. In this article however I focus only on the fieldwork and interviews conducted in Edinburgh.

The Working Holiday-maker Visa

The U.K. government defines the working holiday-maker visa as: ‘... an arrangement where a person aged between 17 and 30 can come to the U.K. for an extended holiday of up to two years. You can work but only if this is not the main reason for your stay. The holiday should be the main reason for your stay’. In addition to this age requirement, these visas are only available to individuals who have sufficient funds, who have no dependent children over the age of five, and who have never previously held a work visa for the United Kingdom (U.K. Visas 2008). Moreover, working holiday-makers should not intend to settle in the United Kingdom, and may neither work as professional sportspersons, nor set up their own businesses. Working holiday-makers are not entitled to public funds such as social security and housing benefits, and are not eligible for nationally funded medical care. The visas can only be procured before entering the country (U.K. Visas 2008).

Working holiday-maker visas are available to citizens of many nations, not just Canadians. They are valid for two years yet only permit 12 months of legal work during this two-year period (SWAP Working Holidays 2006). This restriction, however, was implemented on the 8th of February 2005; prior to this date working holiday-makers were entitled to work for the duration of their visa. Since I carried out my research in 2006, I became acquainted with a number of working holiday-makers who had been legally working in the United Kingdom for over a year.

Methods

This article is based on six months of qualitative research carried out in Edinburgh. During this time I engaged in participant observation among Canadian working holiday-makers, participating in the organised activities – such as pub nights and tours – offered through the local student travel hosting centre, as well as a variety of informal activities, such as shopping, dinner parties, or going to pubs arranged by young travellers themselves. In addition to the Canadian sojourners on whom my research focused, some of these activities inevitably put me in contact with other English-speaking working holiday-makers of various national backgrounds, notably Australians and New Zealanders as well as some young Americans, who used and/or staffed facilities such as hos-
tels and back-packer bars and hosting centres. Likewise working holiday-makers’ social circuits often encompassed a similar diversity of national backgrounds.

In addition to these forms of participant observation, I conducted 26 formal interviews with Canadians who held Working Holidaymaker visas for the U.K., one with a Canadian who held a Working Holidaymaker visa for the Republic of Ireland, and one interview with a Canadian who also held British citizenship and who was temporarily living and working in Edinburgh. These young Canadians ranged from 18 to 28 years of age, and came to Scotland from various cities and smaller towns across Canada. Although they were not a homogeneous group by any means, they all had at least high school education, some had several post-secondary degrees, and many had aspirations to pursue further education in the future. All came from a background which could be considered broadly middle-class which is in keeping with the observations of contemporary researchers who have noted that individuals who travel voluntarily tend to be middle-class and educated (Harrison: 2003, Craik: 1997).

The ‘Working Holiday’ Experience: Observations and Implications

Studies of youth travel frequently refer to hedonism as an integral aspect of this kind of touristic experience (Kale, McIntyre & Weir 1987, Mewhinney, Herold, & Maticka-Tyndale 1995, Smeaton, Josiam, & Dietrich 1998, Carr 2005). Carr for instance notes that ‘traditionally, the young adult population has been identified with a preoccupation for socialisation, partying and travel/holidays’ (2005: 797). The lifestyles of the working holiday-makers I observed in Edinburgh similarly displayed hedonistic behaviour more reminiscent of touristic leisure than of standard working life. For instance Jane, who worked as an administrative assistant for a social worker, recounted the following ‘routine’:

I get up, go to work at half-eight, work until five, probably go out for a couple after-work bevvies, go back home, probably go out again. I’m a bit of a partyer. Yeah, and go to bed around 3:30, get up at eight. I’d like to say I do a lot of things on the weekends, but usually I end up sitting on the couch being hung over.

This kind of intense socializing was especially typical of those who worked in back-packer hostels. For instance, Steve, who had recently finished a B.A. and who was working at a hostel in exchange for accommodation, related the following:

My first couple weeks here [at the hostel] I did a lot of drinking, a lot of just getting to know the people, and stuff like that, and you imagine it’s a hostel, there’s a lot of young people here, and a lot of people saying ‘let’s go out for a few pints,’ and, I didn’t come over with a great budget, but I ended up drinking quite a bit, and drinking my budget away quite quickly.

Perhaps the richest insight into the social life of hostel employees came from Keith, a 26 year-old Canadian working holiday-maker who was Assistant Manager of a back-packer hostel and who befriended me on my first day in Edinburgh. Reflecting on life in the hostel, Keith told me that:

A lot of time [at work] is spent socializing as well. I mean it’s the nature of the beast, it’s a hostel, people are always coming and going, most of them are interesting, and most of them have questions about the city if they’re not from here. So a lot of the day is spent just talking to people. It’s good times. I really enjoy it.

The degree of hedonism engaged in by most hostel workers reflects a large trend among working holiday-makers towards choosing employment that facilitates a leisure-oriented lifestyle. Thus in an analysis of resort workers in Hawaii, Adler and Adler argue that resort hotels provide unique and valuable environ-
ments in which to study work and leisure ‘because they stand at a pivotal point in the leisure-work nexus: they manufacture and service leisure for their clients’ (1999: 370), while Bianchi (2000) makes similar observations about young northern Europeans who work at resorts along the Mediterranean. The irony of this situation is that these so-called leisure workers are employed partially to make it seem as though work is far away. According to Bryman, workers in these industries must ‘convey a sense that the employee is not engaged in work, so that the consumer is not reminded of the world of work and can get on with the happy task of buying, eating, gambling, and so on’ (1999: 43).

Seven out of the 28 sojourners I interviewed had, at some point in their visits, worked in leisure environments such as tourist bars and back-packer hostels, and two worked in other capacities in the youth tourism sector. In reflecting on the staff of a hostel where she initially stayed as a guest and to which she eventually returned as an employee, Susan recounted that the staff seemed more like clients than employees of the hospitality industry:

You know what; there are a lot of travellers [working here], like I know the people that I met that were working there were travelling as well. They might have been there a couple months, or even up to a year or something like that, but a lot of them seemed like travellers themselves.

In their study of the complexities of work and leisure among British tour reps in Spain, Guerrier and Abib (2003) argued that, when on the job, leisure-workers themselves walk a fine line between work and leisure. Indeed, the boundary between work and leisure is often so vague that one’s time off often involves many of the same activities as when one is at work. Similarly, in my own study, Brett commented that in Edinburgh his network of friends and leisure partners was largely comprised of his workmates, while Alison, a hostel receptionist, admitted that her friendships were comprised primarily of other foreigners whom she had met through her work:

Brett: Here in Edinburgh itself I’ve mainly just become friends with all the people I’m working with.

Alison: I haven’t really made that big of an effort to go find other friends? ’Cause most of the friends I have I’ve met from the hostel, and they seem to be good enough for me for now. One is from Canada, one is from New Zealand, and one is from Ireland.

As a result, even when these individuals were not technically ‘on the job’, individuals who worked in this industry could still be restricted by the role that they were expected to perform in their job. For example hostel staff participated in ‘Hostel Challenge,’ a weekly activity that took place at a local back-packer bar.

I participated in Hostel Challenge early in my fieldwork, when I was living in a back-packer hostel and searching for longer-term housing. Hostel Challenge was an organised evening of amusing, competitive team ‘games’ involving trivia, stunts, and heavy drinking. Activities included timed relays where ice-cubes were passed from mouth to mouth, as well as a sculpture competition that tested team skills at sculpting sex positions out of plasticine. Teams were made up of a mix of staff and guests from various hostels in Edinburgh who were awarded points for their performance in each activity, competing for the ultimate prize of a substantial quantity of beer.

Over the course of the evening I noticed that Keith, the assistant manager discussed above, was an active participant in almost every activity. I also observed that he repeatedly bought shots of alcohol and passed them around to both staff and guests from his hostel. Keith later confided that in addition to working as an assistant hostel manager, he also had a part-time job as a deejay at the back-packer bar. This entitled him to substantial discounts on drinks of which he took advantage to treat his guests
and employees on Hostel Challenge nights. He explained that as an assistant manager he felt some responsibility to ensure that hostel guests had a good time in Edinburgh, and that using his staff discount to buy drinks for his staff and guests was one way of ensuring that guests had a good time and that his employees thought of him as a ‘good guy.’

The blurring of work and leisure in this situation is evident. On the one hand, Keith was choosing to spend his unpaid leisure time both socializing with and spending money on hostel staff and guests. He was also aware, however, of his staff position in relation to the guests and employees of the hostel and interacted with both in a way that was congruent with his work relationships. This situation also shows that businesses and employers that target travellers and working holiday-makers contribute to this blurred boundary between work and leisure by providing incentives for their employees to use their workplaces as a leisure space. By offering Keith a discount on alcohol at the bar where he worked, the owners of the bar were assured of a regular clientele of hostel guests and employees.

This example is only one among several that I encountered in which bars that employed working holiday-makers offered incentives, such as staff discounts or vouchers for free food and alcohol, to encourage their employees to combine work with leisure. Other businesses with a large youth-travel clientele took a similar approach. For instance, the employees of several hostels received substantial discounts on back-packer bus tours. In another instance I was invited to attend a play in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival by a hostel employee who had been given ten free tickets as a reward for selling a large number of tickets to hostel guests. Apart from me, the other eight people whom he chose to bring along to the play were all preferred guests of and fellow staff from his hostel.

The merging of work with leisure, customary in the hospitality industry, is not uncommon in other sectors in which fellow employees socialise outside the work environment. The fact that the majority of hostel and back-packer bar workers socialised primarily with other foreigners makes logistical sense: foreigners constitute the bulk of social networks because many live in their hostel workplaces, and work provides limited opportunities to meet local residents. But it is noteworthy that most of the working holiday-makers who did not work in this hospitality sector did not establish many friendships with their co-workers. Rather, many reported that they preferred to befriend other travellers who, like themselves, would only be in Scotland for a limited period.

For instance, Lisane, a French-Canadian, worked primarily with local residents as an event planner at the local stadium. She had come to Edinburgh initially for a four-month period, then returned home for eight months before returning to Edinburgh once again for the remainder of the time left on her visa. When asked about her network of friendships in Edinburgh she commented:

The first time I came here I was with a friend from school? So, at least I knew her, and I already had [Canadian] friends in Edinburgh? And then I met this other girl, this other Canadian girl on the plane, so we were three that really, like, stuck together and did things together. I find that I’ve become friends with a lot of other Canadians that are here? French-Canadians? Mostly, yeah. Met a lot of them.

The lack of effort in establishing friendships with local colleagues suggests that many working holiday-makers approached their employment as a temporary, touristic interlude rather than a long-term commitment. This non-committal attitude seemed to carry over as well into ways in which they approached their work. I met Laura, a 28-year old Canadian working holiday-maker who managed a hostel, through Keith. Older than many of her fellow working holiday-makers, Laura, was formerly an assistant bank manager, and eschewed the party lifestyle of most hostel staff.
Fond of, yet often exasperated by many of her hostel employees, she offered valuable insight into some working holiday-makers’ attitudes to work:

It’s different in that all the people that work [at the hostel] aren’t going to be there for very long? They don’t really care, you know? I mean, when you’re in the bank, this is people’s career. And they either want to move up, or they want to keep their job. So they work a little bit harder, when you tell them that they gotta do this, they go ‘okay, I’ll do that.’ And there’s not as much pushback or, sort of, lax attitudes towards things, and, it’s different, the people are different, the attitudes towards work is different.

Indeed, many working holiday-makers explained that their employment abroad was at best a financial necessity undertaken to fund their travels:

Kristy: My only reason for coming to the U.K. was the whole work thing, and using it as a base to go out into Europe, to see the rest of Europe, ‘cause I just want to see as many countries as I can. So my aspirations for being, for here in the U.K. are just I just want to enjoy my time here, have fun, make a little bit of money to fund some trips.

Others were less ambivalent about their temporary employment, and approached this work as part of a well-rounded experience abroad:

Trevor: I always did want bar experience, but never for a job, I just, I used to always just want to be experienced. Like I would have been a doctor just for the experience. Not to actually do it as a job.

Ironically, however, when asked why they had opted for a working-holiday rather than a typical vacation, a number of people emphasised that they did not think of themselves as tourists. This was the case even for those who had never previously been abroad. Susan, for instance, was a bubbly and resourceful nineteen year-old who found work at a hostel in the Highlands where she had first stayed as a guest on a back-packer bus tour. Susan had been inspired to come to Scotland for the summer having seen a poster at the student travel agency on her university campus. At the time of our meeting, Susan had only been in Scotland for two weeks, she had never previously travelled outside Canada and, before leaving Canada, she had not been acquainted with anyone who had undertaken a working-holiday abroad but she was still able to adopt a confident and authoritative tone in her reflections on her sojourn in the U.K.:

When I travel I don’t like to be the typical tourist, and I don’t like to stick out like a sore thumb, and I thought that with a working visa it gives me a chance to actually be a part of the country that I’m in. You know, working with the people and being right in day-to-day life and that sort of thing.

Similarly, Melissa emphasised the importance of getting a taste of living ‘like a local’:

I’d done a lot of backpacking, moving around, but I wanted to go to another country and actually become part of the community, and like, know the city well enough to get around, and not just be a tourist, like be a local.

Although none of the working holiday-makers that I met embraced the label of ‘tourist’, most approached their work with the assumption that they would leave their job quite often to go travelling. While there was considerable variation among working holiday-makers in terms of how much travel they actually managed to fit in around their work schedule, the usual intention was to travel as much as possible. Indeed, quite a few individuals sought out temporary work partly because short contracts afforded them the freedom to leave after a few weeks or months of work, provided they had managed to save a portion of their wages. For example, working holiday-makers with skills in fields such as office work and child-care used temporary placement agencies to find work. Others had the good fortune of finding seasonal work during the tourist high season when temporary workers were in demand.
The attitudes and behaviour of working holiday-makers clearly exhibit some contradictions. They are adamant that they are not tourists, yet consider travel and experience abroad to be a major motive for being in the U.K. in the first place. Moreover, although they want to live abroad rather than simply vacation there, many prefer to establish friendships with other temporary visitors in similar circumstances. At the same time, their focus on travel and socializing, combined with a non-committal attitude enabling them easily to undertake temporary, low-skill employment, is out of keeping with most working holiday-makers’ competence and level of education.

Such contradictions however may render these working holiday-makers attractive to employers for several reasons. While not being as committed to their jobs as they would be at home, their very lack of commitment can mean that these youngsters are willing to take on work that they would be less inclined to accept were they pursuing longer term careers in Canada. Ordinarily such short-term contracts with little opportunity for advancement, few benefits, and limited job security would have little appeal to middle-class youth at home and to local middle-class British youths as well. But what would not be acceptable as a long term career path in Canada takes on a different light in the course of a working holiday in the U.K. where young sojourners are willing to prioritise travel and socializing over workplace advancement, an orientation which accords with their sense of themselves as temporary sojourners. At the same time, this very orientation combined with the profile of a well educated, articulate, and fluent English speaker, can make them very attractive as temporary employees in sectors that emphasise seasonal flexibility and customer service.

The obvious question, at this point, is why these working holiday-makers are willing to take on low-paid, low-skilled work abroad at jobs that they could easily procure, or indeed would not accept, at home. The flexibility to travel offered by temporary employment is one obvious reason. Yet many of these young sojourners could have saved money at home, and then embarked on a more typical backpacker vacation. Those who had settled into jobs after travelling around Europe could have gone home, if they wished. This suggests that neither work nor travel alone encompass what working holiday-makers are trying to get out of their working-holiday experience.

A Time Out

As I noted in the introduction to this essay, virtually every working holiday-maker that I met had been at some critical life juncture prior to embarking on a working-holiday. Many had just finished some phase of schooling and were unsure of what to do next. Yet they were aware that staying at home was likely to exacerbate their anxiety; as Trevor told me, he felt the pressure to go abroad because ‘If I had stayed in my city, [I would feel that] I’m stuck here.’ Even worse, in some cases settling for an unskilled bar job at home would expose them to friends and family who would perceive their indecision as inactivity, and would encourage them to undertake particular courses of action – most often to get a professional job, or to pursue a professional degree – that they felt unwilling or unready to take up. When I asked Steve why he had decided to go abroad he explained:

I have a few reasons, I think. One of them being recently coming out of university, and I’ve been in school my whole life since I been five years old, and I just really felt like I needed to get away from it. I’m not sure exactly what I want to do with my life, you know. So, I’m pondering my future, more or less. I mean, I’d like to know what to do with myself, and I really have no idea, so I’ll stay over here until it really hits me, I guess, what I really want to do.

‘Am I really ready to join the skilled workforce?’ ‘Do I actually want a degree in chemical
engineering?’ ‘Do I want to stay here in this same job and this same apartment now that my partner has left?’ The working holiday-makers I encountered were, for the most part, asking themselves such questions, and were taking the time to work out what answers were right for them. In the meantime, they were engaging in an exciting activity that was viewed favourably by their peer-group, which also provided a welcome distance from the expectations of and pressures that could be exerted by family and friends. For most of these sojourners, their work in Edinburgh did not provide them with much of a challenge in and of itself, but their friendships with like-minded, similarly-positioned compatriots offered support and respite through these transitions. Most would have agreed with Brett’s hopeful statement that ‘eventually I’ll come up with a solid idea of what I want to do, and I’m sure I’ll discover it whilst travelling.’

As noted by Amit and Dyck in the introduction to this special journal issue, the structural mechanisms of student travel agencies, governments, and the backpacker tourism industry encapsulate working holiday-makers, streamlining them into particular social circuits and jobs. As I have shown in this article, this encapsulation seems to suit many of them very well. But while most of the working holiday-makers I met in Edinburgh are now back in Canada, either working or in school, and at most only meet up with their fellow working holiday-makers for a beer and a meal when they pass through town, for a few, their experiences in the U.K., however circumscribed, leave a lasting, if unintended, impact on the subsequent course of their lives.

For instance, Keith and Melissa, both now 30, are married to Scots whom they met in Edinburgh and who have since immigrated to Canada. This is perhaps surprising given that both Keith and Melissa were working and socializing primarily with foreigners, Keith at the backpacker hostel and Melissa at the temp agency mentioned above. Less surprising, however, is that Keith, Melissa, and their spouses are now engaged in career-oriented occupations in Canadian cities where they plan to remain indefinitely.

Similarly, two working holiday-makers, – including Jane, who felt little need to make friends outside her hostel crew – are still in Scotland, having enrolled in university undergraduate programmes as international students. In late 2007 I had the pleasure of attending the wedding of Karen and Dylan – from Ontario and British Columbia respectively – who met at a hostel in Edinburgh early in their working-holiday and are now settled into careers on Vancouver Island. While no one came from the U.K. for the wedding, several returned Canadians whom they had met on their working-holiday in Edinburgh were in attendance, including two former working holiday-makers.

**Conclusion**

Working holiday-makers present some ironic contradictions. They want to travel, but do not want to be tourists. Few want to work, yet all of them realise that they must work in order to fund their travels. Why this kind of temporary unskilled work should be taken up in Scotland rather than Canada is something that is rarely stated explicitly, but, as I have shown, is frequently alluded to by working holiday-makers in their reflections on why they have chosen to embark on a working-holiday at a particular transitional point in life. While many recount that they want to feel like locals, some nonetheless seek out work that brings them into contact mainly with other visiting tourists and most socialise primarily with other foreigners. Nonetheless, these blurred work-leisure boundaries often work out well when it comes to finding work.

While employers and working holiday-makers have very different objectives, the relationship is in a sense symbiotic: working holiday-
makers get an opportunity to experience life abroad relatively unencumbered by the expectations of long term work-place commitments which they might face at home, while employers can draw on competent, articulate, and largely compliant employees who are willing to take up temporary work on short notice and with modest compensation. Most importantly perhaps, the temporary sojourns that are enabled by these low-skill jobs afford an opportunity for some time out while coming to terms with how to spend the next years of one’s life, far from the pressures of friends and family and in the company of new friends who are facing similar dilemmas, and are therefore unlikely to disapprove of these choices.

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Notes

1. To preserve confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms in place of actual names of the people participating in this study.

2. In order to apply for this visa, Canadian applicants must produce a bank letter stating that they have a minimum of $2,500 CAD in their account.

3. For a full list of the benefits that are considered Public Funds, see http://www.ukvisas.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xceleratte/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1018721085371

4. For a full list of the Countries participating in the United Kingdom’s Working Holidaymaker scheme, see Appendix 3 of the Immigration Rules, available on the ‘Home Office’ Website of the British High Commission in Canada.

5. The exception being the few French-speaking Quebecois who were hoping to improve their English while working and travelling aboard.

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