

## **From Telford and Stephenson to Haw's "Brooklyn Bridge": Revisiting the Menai Bridges as cultural history**

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### **Abstract**

The publication of Richard Haw's "Brooklyn Bridge: A cultural history" (Haw 2005) was a notable landmark in the historiography of technological production and consumption. It was the first book-length, historical exploration of the cultural and mythical place of a bridge in the life of a nation. Haw's account theorised its cultural evolution from its construction in 1883 through its changing, and often contradictory, impacts and perceptual effects on the public psyche, as symbol of nationhood and modernity over the century that followed. The analysis was based on materials that included: official records; journalistic accounts; a wide range of illustrations; and in the diverse and surprising ways in which the bridge had been represented in popular cultural forms exemplified in music, pulp fiction, feature films, tourism narratives and mass advertising.

Thirty years before the Brooklyn Bridge was projected, Thomas Telford's Suspension Bridge (built between 1819 and 1826), and Robert Stephenson's Tubular Bridge (opened in 1850), jointly spanning the Menai Straits, became national landmarks in Wales, and symbols of a spectacular modernity that invite comparisons with Brooklyn.

This purpose of this paper is to evaluate some of Haw's main concepts and methods, and then apply them in a cultural analysis of the two Menai bridges focusing on their dual impacts as domains of representation and public perception. Representations will be examined using as sources: official documents; gazetteers and guidebooks before and after the bridges were built; engraved view books; and a range of artefacts including mementos, keepsakes and ornaments. Public perceptions will be assessed using the testimony of visitors, among them the polarised accounts left by the author, George Borrow, and a contemporary diarist who was a Lincolnshire, hardware merchant on holiday in Wales. The paper concludes with a summary of the cultural contrasts between Brooklyn and the Menai bridges revealed by adopting Haw's analytical procedures, with comments on the contribution the latter afford in understanding the evolving, public meanings of bridges in society.