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Helen Saunders, 'Review of *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*
by Robert Macfarlane'

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Reviews

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The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot by Robert Macfarlane
London: Penguin, 2012

To begin by considering the end: at the close of *The Old Ways*, Robert Macfarlane, who has already written two other nature books, notes that it is impossible to write a book independently of those who have already written about the same topic; that the idea of a 'clean register' is an impossibility, as by writing one unavoidably treads where others have already left some mark (p.412). He extends this argument, first put forward by Henry James, that the marks we make on the footprints that came before (even if they are our own footprints) and the steps we make in error, are in themselves creative acts. This observation, made at the very end of *The Old Ways*, could stand as a précis for the whole work, weaving insightful 'print-trails' respectfully and usefully through the work of his predecessors in the field (p.412). This book represents a love-letter to nature, a paean to the path.

The format of *The Old Ways*, visually similar to a travelogue, with its pictures, routes and chapter headings, contributes to a rich stylistic tapestry as Macfarlane's journey moves from land to sea and back again; from the Icknield Way, England (in the chapter entitled 'Tracking'), via Scotland ('Following'), and Europe and Palestine ('Roaming'), to Sussex, England ('Homing'); from the present, to recollections of the past, to thoughts of the future, and back to the present. At times, also, *The Old Ways* reads like a novel: moments of despair and loss, tempered with tenderness (the writing about his grandfather's funeral is particularly affecting), are balanced by instances of deathly fear (an attempt to descend a ledge on the side of Minya Konka, with Macfarlane's calm, quiet assertion that 'death looked more likely ahead than it did behind' (p.286), provides a crisp example of heart-in-mouth reading). These instances are in turn nuanced by moments of reflective humour, and an infectious delight for nature.

The author's ability to embrace nature is not, however, always reciprocated by his subject. The fourth chapter of the book ('Silt') recalls an almost supernatural account of Macfarlane's journey across Broomway, the 'unearthliest' path recounted in the book (p.60). The Broomway is a footpath not far from the Essex coastline that until 1931 was only accessible by boat; Foulness, the island at the far end of the path, is now used by the Ministry of Defence for firing tests. Macfarlane spends a good deal of time describing the history and reputation of the path ('If the Broomway hadn't existed, Wilkie Collins might have had to invent it', (p.60)). This evocatively sets a ghostly scene, which is rivalled for eerie richness perhaps only by Macfarlane's description of spending the night sleeping under the stars at Chactonbury in 'Flint', and he describes a number of failed previous attempts to walk the path ('wade' may be a more appropriate verb, given the permeable, marshy, ethereal environment). When the tide is at its highest, Macfarlane's ruminations on how history and the natural world might shape each other, and how our contemporary lives might one day be etched on the earth, become most fluent, almost grave in tone. He suggests the term 'xenotopias' (p.78) to describe boundaries that, though unmappable, undeniably exist and expose 'continents within countries' (p.78). Macfarlane's skill lies in his ability to identify fractures in the scene around him, and his ability to harmoniously accommodate these into a discourse of nature writing. Such thoughts sit alongside typically playful moments, with, for example, Macfarlane recalling his fellow walker

David taking an irreverent photograph of a Ministry of Defence sign instructing ‘Photography is Prohibited’.

It is in ‘Silt’ that the influence and importance of Macfarlane’s companions is first evoked: he deftly characterises Patrick, his local would-be guide, David, his companion, and those who have previously, if unsuccessfully, attempted to walk the path. Throughout *The Old Ways* we are introduced to Macfarlane’s guides, both living and literary, each as much a part of the story as the author. It is in the next chapter, ‘Following’, which recalls his travels by both water and land in Scotland, that some of his richest characters come through. Not only does he rely heavily and eruditely, on Nan Shepherd’s writing of the Cairngorms, but his meetings with various hosts illustrate the collective effort that underscores Macfarlane’s endeavours. If *The Old Ways* verges on the novelistic, Macfarlane’s friends and guides are richly drawn characters. His account in ‘Roots’ of Miguel Angelo Blanco’s basement library in Madrid, stuffed with objects he has found on his walks and subsequently archived in hundreds of small wooden boxes, reads like an earthly fairy tale. When Miguel invites Macfarlane to open three – any three – of the boxes, a sense of the magical possibility contained within the objects strikes the reader. Throughout his travels, Macfarlane’s people are as important to *The Old Ways* as the paths themselves.

This ability to ‘write people’ as well as ‘write land’ is most evident in the penultimate part of the book, ‘Ghost’. This section provides a short, evocative account of the final years, and then days, of the poet Edward Thomas, who not only becomes a ghost in this account, but has been a ghost from the beginning of the book; a line of Thomas’s work, along with a quotation from modernist Nan Shepherd, provide the two epigraphs to the whole work. Macfarlane writes insightfully about Thomas’s depression and the relationship between it, the natural world surrounding his Sussex home, and his poetry, while his use of Thomas’s diaries and letters only increases the abundant empathy with which he describes his subject. Macfarlane’s novelistic capabilities become clear again at the end of this section when the abrupt, staccato descriptions of enemy fire reflect the final, ghastly days of Thomas’s war, as well as the brutal effects of war on the landscape.

Indeed for a book that is such a pleasure to read, it is not without such sad moments. In ‘Limestone’ Macfarlane discusses the politicisation of paths, describing a visit to Ramallah, Palestine and recalling the violent situations his friend and guide Raja has been subjected to in the area, including being fired at (by both Palestinians

and Israelis) and a confrontation with armed thugs. While this is a brief description, it encapsulates the potential dangers that can occur alongside the pleasures of walking. While out with Raja, the two men stumble across a deserted family villa in Dolev, empty since 1967. Raja enters the villa, and Macfarlane's shock and anxiety, having seen a metal glint coming from the home, indicates the perils that walking can inadvertently and unhappily uncover. In the end the villa actually represents a safe haven; the metal glint turns out to be sunlight reflecting off a baby carrier that a father holds close to his chest, and it transpires that the family, including a mother-in-law with Alzheimer's, have returned to visit this family home, even breaking her visa restrictions to do so.

The book is a delight, but some editorial oversights are frustrating. First, while all the chapters have a picture at the start, these are not labelled. This inadvertently provides some perverse pleasure in guessing the location of, as it variously is, the sunset, or tree, or mountainside, but some annotation would be welcome. On this note, more maps would be useful for the reader not familiar with Macfarlane's route: while this book functions perfectly as an armchair fantasy for the sedentary city-dweller, the more adventurous reader may wish to map the paths more exactly. Additionally, more photographs would be ideal: at one point Macfarlane describes an aerial photograph of the historic Icknield Way, the darker soil pattern of which makes it still visible from above (p.49). While his prose is evocative, an image here would not go amiss. These objections stated, his work is impeccably well researched: it benefits from an extensive bibliography, and is stuffed with footnotes. Macfarlane's understanding of the language of nature, and his concise and precise etymological explanations of the walker's vocabulary, bring depth to his work. His ear for natural rhythms in both land and language ('the iamb of the "I am"', (p.201)) indicates his affinity with the material of his work.

To end by thinking of the middle: 'Gneiss' begins with a description of Macfarlane's friend, the artist Steve Dilworth, who lives on the Isle of Harris. At one point, Dilworth hands Macfarlane a feather: the author comments that the feather 'longed to fall, dragging my arms down. This was its brilliant contradiction as an object – it was a feather that yearned for the earth, a flight-object supercharged with gravity' (p.175). The inverse of this description could stand for *The Old Ways* as a whole: while the dense paperback is long, stretching to nearly 400 pages of discussion, it is a remarkably light read.