

A corner of every English field, forever foreign

John Gimlette

The Green Road Into the Trees

by Hugh Thomson

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The story of the English countryside is richly exotic. We've always known that foreigners have shaped this land: traders, settlers and, most importantly, invaders. But scratch the surface, and the detail is remarkable. Who'd have guessed that the so-called 'Amesbury Archer' (a 4,000-year-old corpse, found near Stonehenge) actually started life in the Alps? Or that Neolithic England was a hub of European trade? What's more, archaeologists now think that our landscape was formed not by the Romans (as previously thought) but during the Bronze Age. Back then, a huge, mysterious and varied population had deforested the countryside, tamed it, tilled it and made themselves rich. All the Romans did was make it theirs.

Such surprising history has left us with plenty of oddities. Surrey is now England's most densely wooded county, and the Norfolk countryside has — over the last 200 years — emptied of people. As for all those white horses carved into hillsides (some over 3,000 years old), they've only survived thanks to an English fondness for debauchery; the annual 'scouring festival' was always an unmissable rave-up. Meanwhile, we're lucky to have any prehistoric stone monuments at all. In the Middle Ages, they were regarded as unhealthy pagan, and many were smashed to bits.

None of this will come as a great surprise to professional archaeologists, but in *The Green Road Into the Trees*, the writer and film-maker Hugh Thomson makes it all delightfully accessible. He does so in the form of a travelogue, describing a walk of 400 miles along the ancient Icknield Way (from Abbotsbury, Dorset, to the Wash). It begins impulsively, with Thomson returning from Peru, and just setting off with knapsack and jet lag. But, actually, he knows exactly what he's looking for, and he's soon linking up with experts (including archaeologists, falconers, poets and painters) and clambering knowledgeably over hill-forts.



He even has a tie and clipboard with him, so he can wander unmolested.

Meandering diagonally across the country, Thomson is fascinated by this land, layered in stories. Pretty soon, he forgets the process of walking (time, distance and accommodation are never mentioned), and instead he expounds on what he sees. Modern life seldom intrudes. In Wessex, he explores Alfred's country, and the obsessions of the Saxons (hawking and consanguinity, apparently). In Ewelme, a gruesome tomb prompts an evaluation of that 'psychotic age', the 15th century, and then there are the haunts of countless writers. I was surprised that *The Wind in the Willows* (that idyll of riverside living) belies Kenneth Grahame's fear of anarchy and his dread of family life. But most intriguing of all is the cottage where Orwell lived in poverty (mice 'pushing the china off the shelves'). It's still a horrid, pokey house in Wallington.

Endless stories can get exhausting without a secret ingredient. Here, it's Thomson himself. He makes a compelling literary companion, and this book is as much about his own journey into middle age as anything else. On the one hand, he suffers the curse

*Endless stories can get exhausting
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Here, it is the author himself*

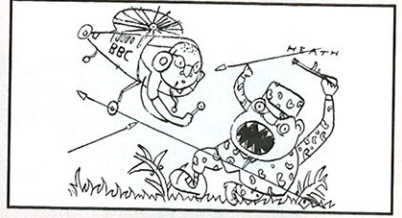
of a happy childhood, and the tone is engagingly nostalgic. He believes all travel writers 'love a good disappointment', and that regret is a trait of all Britons. Even his language can sound lodged in the past, as he talks of 'buttonholing' people, 'courting' and 'latrines'.

On the other hand, there's his anger, which is darkly funny. He's frank about the trials of adult life (divorce, 'exile' and eviction), and can be wittily cruel in response. These are clever rants, worked up in solitude and elegantly formed. Few of us could or would express them in writing, which makes them fun to read. No one escapes his barbs, including Anglicans, (too apologetic), the aristocracy (too self-interested), bearded men (fanatics), and Prince Charles for creating Poundbury ('like the village in *Shrek*'). He even takes a fellow travel writer to task for being too fat.

Although there's much to disagree with, *The Green Road Into the Trees* is an immensely enjoyable book: curious, articulate, intellectually playful and savagely candid. I'm not even sure that I agree with the central premise, that the noble and ancient English countryside is worse off than ever. I've always rather suspected the opposite, that the countryside of our ancestors was a foul, overcrowded place, enjoyable only to the upper crust. Still, on this we do agree — with its weird and exotic history, it makes a fabulous walk.

BOOKENDS

From our own correspondent



'Interviewing Afghan warlords is always something of a delicate dance,' writes roving BBC reporter Nick Bryant in *Confessions from Correspondentland* (Oneworld, £10.99), and, given that he has also observed the methods of warlords from Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, his word counts for something. Though he acknowledges the journalistic allure of 'shouting into microphones over the din of exploding ordnance', Bryant's memoir of his time as Auntie's man in South Asia (and Washington, and Sydney) is refreshingly free of the macho stuff. Instead, he is concerned with analysing (not to say justifying) the changes in news presentation during his time on our screens, from the growth of post-Diana 'how do you feel?' reportage to the susceptibility of even foreign journalists to the wave of US jingoism that broke after 9/11.

Bryant is particularly sharp on how reporters struggled to find words to compete with the unforgettable image of the Twin Towers in flames, and how John McCain's basic decency cost him the presidential nomination in 2000. (There is a vivid portrait of a stiff-armed McCain celebrating his early victory in New Hampshire 'like some smiling zombie in a low-budget science-fiction flick looking for a victim to strangle'.)

The book ends with the author explaining how fatherhood led him to hang up his flak jacket after 15 years in the field. 'Bryant is good,' says the quote from Christopher Hitchens on the book's back cover. On finishing *Confessions From Correspondentland*, you might well conclude: yes, he is, rather.

— Andrew Petrie