

# Setting out on the path

Tim Hannigan welcomes two new additions to the growing library of books ostensibly about walking but really about so much more

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## Between the Chalk and the Sea

Gail Simmons

Headline, 2023

ISBN: 9781472280275

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## Sarn Helen: A Journey through Wales, Past, Present and Future

Tom Bullough, illustrated by Jackie Morris

Granta, 2023

ISBN: 978-1783788095

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The literature of walking has been enjoying a sustained purple patch in Britain for the last couple of decades. British authors have been writing about journeys on foot for centuries, of course, but the current publishing phenomenon probably owes a good deal to Robert Macfarlane, who dramatically reinvigorated the genre in the first decade of this century, making it clear that bodily movement through a landscape could serve as the basis for intellectual engagement with just about anything – history, ecology, literature and, naturally enough, the self.

This trend continues in 2023 with Gail Simmons' *Between the Chalk and the Sea* and Tom Bullough's *Sarn Helen*, each concerned with a journey along an ancient route, completed in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, but each markedly different in tone.

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In *Between the Chalk and the Sea*, Simmons sets out along a path that is both very old and very new. Amongst the various 'roads' marked on the 14th-century Gough Map, she explains, the one connecting Southampton with Canterbury was only identified as a likely pilgrimage route in 2016. It has since provided the inspiration for a new 240-mile trail, the Old Way.

Though Simmons always intended to break her own journey along the Old Way into stages, early spring 2020 was an unfortunate moment to embark on a pilgrimage. The various lockdowns meant that it took her more than a year to make it to Canterbury. But the episodic structure, with each section hinged to an ancient festival – Ostara, Lughnasa, Samhain, Imbolc and Beltane – creates a lovely sense of shifting seasons as Simmons moves across the chalk landscapes of southern England.

Simmons is a veteran travel journalist, and she conveys a sense of place deftly. Quiet country churches are filled with

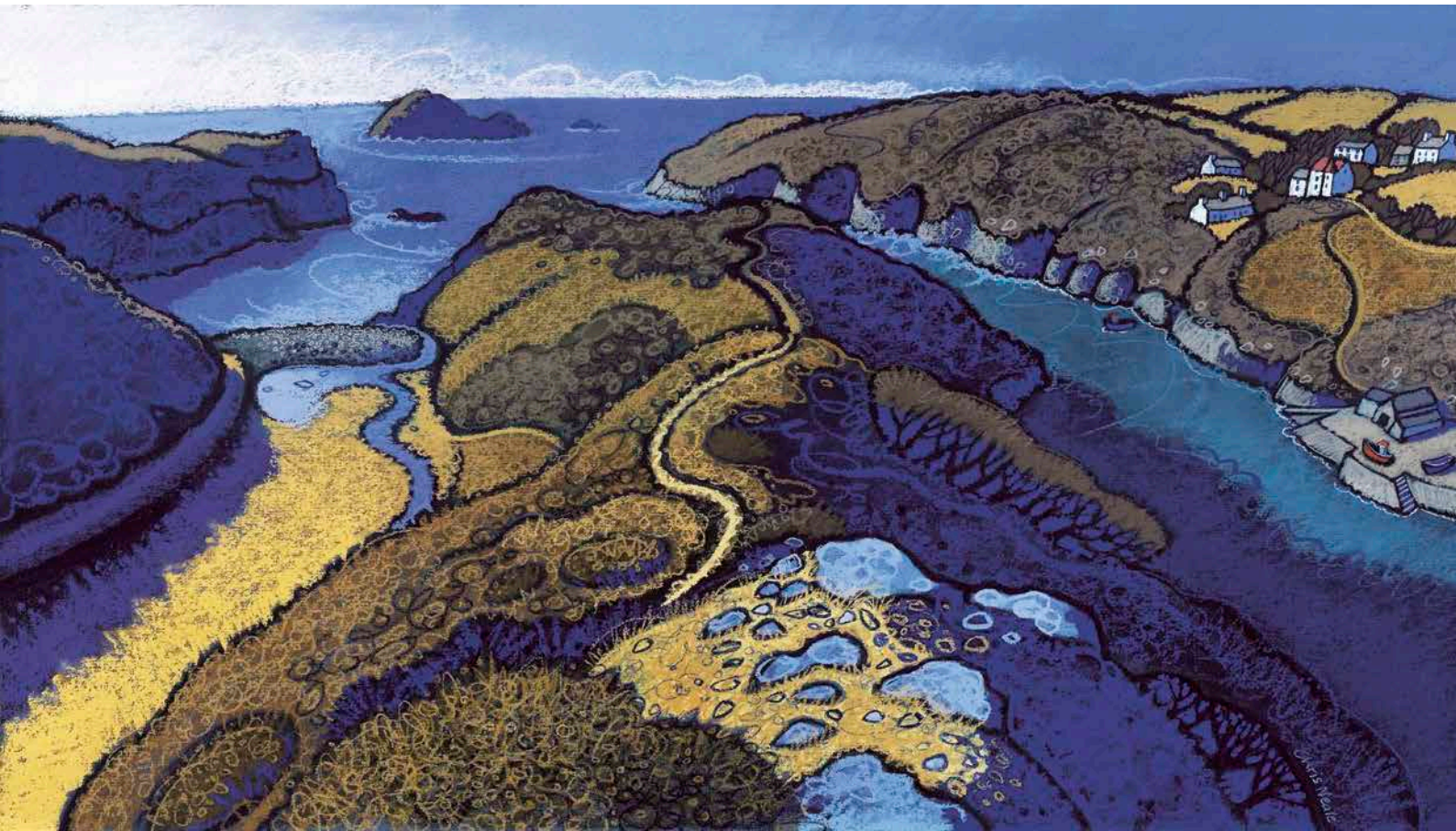
“the scent of damp stone, of candle wax and wood polish, the tangible sense of fathomless time, air laden with dust and silence”. Villages that appear as “a rapture of rose-wreathed cottages” may also be suffused with an uneasy fear of strangers.

The major thematic focus of the book is the history of pilgrimage, with fascinating excerpts from medieval pilgrimage literature. But the walking pace allows for plenty of digressions. Simmons considers the murky origins of the Long Man of Wilmington and touches on environmental tensions around land management. Despite the popular conception of sheep as “woolly maggots”, she notes that “when the sheep disappeared from the South Downs so did the flower-rich grassland.” She also reflects on the gender imbalances of pedestrianism. Even today, “walking alone is still a radical act for women,” she writes, noting her own jealousy of the fit young men who jog along the path blithely unbothered by concerns for personal safety, and her own unease on the darkly wooded sections of the trail. Nonetheless, this is a happy book, perfectly capturing the invigorating airiness of a slow journey across an elevated landscape.

Like Simmons' book, Tom Bullough's *Sarn Helen* describes a walk along a trail with a deep heritage – the titular Roman route that spans the length of Wales from south coast to north. Unlike the Old Way, though, Sarn Helen was never 'lost'; indeed, it was embedded in Welsh mythology and named for the Celtic Saint Elen. Like *Between the Chalk and the Sea*, *Sarn Helen* describes a journey broken into stages, shadowed by social distancing regulations, and used as a foundation for any number of intriguing digressions – with early Celtic Christianity amongst the key themes. But here the tone is far darker.

Bullough – an established novelist – is supremely well placed to write about Wales and the issues besetting its landscapes. He grew up in a farming family in Radnorshire, so is sensitive to the experience of seeing himself through other people's eyes in literary representations of rural Wales, and to “the old Welsh terror of annihilation, culturally, linguistically” raised by calls for radical shifts in land management. He is also sensitive to the multiplicity of histories and identities that Wales contains, noting that official Welsh-language place names on road signs in Radnorshire – English-speaking for centuries – might themselves be an alien imposition, overwriting local tradition.

The travelogue sections of the book are interspersed with italicised interviews, conducted via Zoom, with climate scientists, coastal geographers, ecologists. At first, these seem like a slightly awkward intrusion – perhaps an obligatory nod to the climate crisis in a book really about something else. But it quickly becomes apparent that this is in fact the driving impetus. ‘An area the size of Wales’ has long been a trope in narratives of environmental destruction, and looking out



Solfach by Chris Neale  
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across the country from a high hilltop, Bullough is struck by a sense of vulnerability: “Wales: you could just blot it out with your thumb. It feels that small, that threatened. And this is no black, passing mood... The thought that comes has come to me daily, probably for half my life.”

Bullough’s habit of identifying the cars he sees in village driveways – an Isuzu Trooper, a Toyota Starlet – as other writers might itemise bird or plant species is no mere tic, we realise. The huge change that came to rural Wales in the 20th century – change in which his own family partook – “was entirely the result of fossil fuels, of the ability to make hydrocarbon-supported decisions”.

And those decisions had consequences. The shift from hay to silage, for example, was catastrophic for ground-nesting birds: “There has been no aspect of this revolution without its dark corollary.” That towards the end of the book we find Bullough away from Sarn Helen, inside a London magistrates’ court after his arrest during an Extinction Rebellion protest, feels entirely natural. After all, everything – everything – he has seen and described along his journey is at stake.

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Both *Between the Chalk and the Sea* and *Sarn Helen* are

welcome additions to the ever-growing library of contemporary British walking literature – and this is a particularly British genre, not replicated in other anglophone countries. Established traditions of Nature and travel writing play into this. But there is also a practical and seldom remarked reason for the outpouring of walking books in recent years: they are possible because England and Wales are both uniquely enmeshed by public footpaths – 140,000 meticulously mapped miles of them, by far the largest network in Europe. There is nothing comparable even in countries with more generally progressive land access arrangements.

Recently, plotting my own 300-mile walk through Cornwall for a book project, I was able simply to sketch a meandering line on a large-scale map, confident that I’d find enough paths on the ground to make it a reality. But now, considering a similar journey in Ireland where there are almost no public footpaths, the map presents a daunting blank. Simmons writes: “Public footpaths not only allow us to walk across the landscape, they also validate it.” And they also give rise to the uniquely vibrant modern literary tradition to which these two excellent books belong. R

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Tim Hannigan’s latest book is *The Granite Kingdom: A Cornish Journey*, published by Head of Zeus. [www.timhannigan.com](http://www.timhannigan.com)