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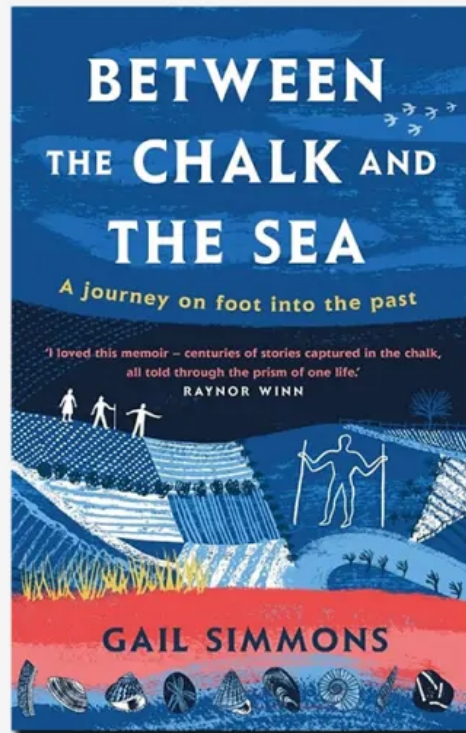
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Down the Old Way

A leisurely pilgrimage from Southampton to Canterbury

By **Jonathan Buckley**





IN THIS REVIEW

BETWEEN THE CHALK AND THE SEA

A journey on foot into the past
352pp. Headline. £22.

Gail Simmons

The long walk recounted in *Between the Chalk and the Sea* is determined by a pilgrimage route that connects the harbour at Southampton to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. Now known as the Old Way, the route is one of many marked on the Gough Map (c.1360), but had been largely forgotten until recently. Gail Simmons's book is the first to describe it at length.

Her trek - or pilgrimage, as she terms it - is an episodic one. She tackles the various sections at different times of the year in order to experience every

season. In Southampton, in her unlovely hotel room, she creates an imaginary thirteenth-century pilgrim to be her companion. Alice, as she names her, will be an intermittent presence throughout.

The pace is pleasantly unhurried. Simmons observes the natural world with precision and affection, from the modest summit of Ditchling Beacon to the sopping lowland of the Weald. Potted histories of villages and buildings are supplied at every halt, augmented with etymological detail. Becket's biography is delivered piecemeal, with an instalment in every chapter. There are autobiographical diversions and conversations with people encountered en route, some more illuminating than others. This is a thorough and informative description of the Old Way, but much of the text is more a guidebook than an exploration.

“The link between the past and the present is most powerful, most visceral, on the smooth chalk of the Downs”, Simmons asserts. The assertion is insufficiently tested, as are others. At a church in the Sussex village of Firle she reads of the vision of Christ that was reported by a local shepherd in 1940, and remarks: “Except for the bowler hat, Fred's way of life was little different from that of the Neolithic shepherds who first cleared the land for grazing some 5,000 years ago”. The hat is the least of it, surely?

Recording a blissful experience of something like timelessness at a humble church in Romney Marsh, Simmons observes that “it's not only in the great cathedrals ... that you encounter holiness”. But her journey ends, as it must, in a great cathedral. Though she has described herself as someone who adheres to no “formal religion”, she accepts a blessing from the archdeacon. This is bestowed in the magnificent Norman crypt, and it's a moving moment for her, standing where her Alice might have stood. It's the perfect coda to Simmons's adventure. Yet there's an element of performance here -

the blessing has none of the meaning it would have had for Alice, for whom the salvation of her soul would have been at issue.

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