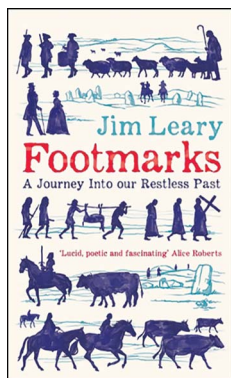




Book Reviews

JIM LEARY. 2023. *Footmarks: a journey into our restless past*. London: Icon; 978-1-83773-024-7 hardback £18.99.



In recent years, there has been a proliferation of popular books exploring historic landscapes through a genre based on the notion of ‘journeying’—a growing list that has flourished largely without the direct contribution of professional archaeologists. This burgeoning field, which combines elements of travelogue, historical narrative and personal reflection, has captured public imagination with a notable absence of archaeologist-authored works.

This trend is exemplified by works such as James Canton’s *Grounded: a journey into the landscape of our ancestors* (2023), Matthew Green’s *Shadowlands: a journey through lost Britain* (2022), and Robert Macfarlane’s *Underland: a deep time journey* (2019) or *The old ways: a journey on foot* (2012). These texts

represent a sub-genre of nature writing, a form of creative non-fiction that spans the objective description of natural and archaeological history to the subjective introspection of philosophical wondering. Building on foundations laid by British nature writers such as Richard Mabey (2019) and Roger Deakin (2007), these authors foreground personal experiences and contemporary responses to historical landscapes, reimagining archaeology not merely as a noun, but as a verb—a method of perceiving and traversing the world.

While these narratives often possess a compelling fluidity that engages non-specialist readers, they can occasionally veer towards solipsism, presenting oversimplified or factually inaccurate interpretations of archaeological sites that serve to highlight the benefits of engaging an expert point of view. Against this backdrop, Jim Leary’s *Footmarks: a journey into our restless past* emerges, offering a perspective informed by professional archaeological expertise. It is in this context, rather than the academic mode of peer review, that archaeologists should assess this book. One of ours, walking out to bat in an archaeological game that’s been merrily going on without us.

Leary, a notable excavator and Senior Lecturer in Field Archaeology at the University of York, brings substantial credentials to this endeavour. His extensive experience directing significant excavations of prehistoric monuments and landscapes, including Silbury Hill, Marlborough Hill and Marden Henge, provides a robust foundation for this exploration of human movement through time. The central premise of *Footmarks* is compelling: it seeks to shift the archaeological focus from static sites to the dynamic movements of people throughout history. Leary contends that by examining traces of motion, we can gain a more immediate and vivid understanding of past lives—an approach he has outlined previously in several other publications (e.g. Leary & Kador 2016; Bell & Leary 2020).

In keeping with the journeying genre, Leary interweaves personal anecdotes with archaeological insights throughout the text, creating a multifaceted narrative that balances subjective experience with scientific discourse. Reflections on familial loss, illustrated through the poignant absence of his brother in a family photograph, are juxtaposed with detailed accounts of archaeological methodologies and discoveries. Vivid vignettes intersperse the narrative further—his peripatetic upbringing, his father's fondness for impromptu road trips across the USA, and his own formative experiences teaching in Nepal and traversing India.

This interplay between personal narrative and scientific exposition serves to animate complex archaeological concepts, arguably rendering them more accessible and engaging to a non-specialist readership. By both showing and telling, this narrative strategy brings his central premise to life in a conjunction of form and content, cogently arguing that “shifting our focus to the way people moved, we infuse the past with the dynamism and vital force it once contained, letting it live in the present” (p.17). Here, the journeying genre is used to great effect: personal introspection synthesised with disciplined archaeological analysis to embody the idea that the past was far from static.

Leary's ambitious scope in *Footmarks* encompasses a broad spectrum of human movement, primarily drawing from evidence in the UK with an emphasis on prehistory, while also incorporating global and cross-temporal examples. The text is structured into five parts and 18 chapters, each addressing distinct aspects of mobility such as footprints, pilgrimage, ridgeways and holloways, mobility restrictions and freedoms, maritime travel and migration. This is followed by a well-served notes section, taking the inquisitive reader into an accessible bibliography of current archaeological thinking.

This wide-ranging approach serves as both the book's strength and its primary limitation. While it effectively demonstrates the universality of mobility themes across human history and geography, the breadth occasionally compromises depth. For example, at one point, John Travolta's song *Saturday Night Fever* entertainingly struts into 3.66-million-year-old Laetoli footprints and the tale of their serendipitous discovery by bored students throwing elephant dung at each other. A chapter exploring restrictions on movement and resistance begins with what looks like a deep dive into the deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy, but soon skips off to fifteenth-century enclosure, Offa's Dyke, Checkpoint Charlie, Gandhi's Salt March, the 1930s Kinder Scout mass trespass in the UK and the 2011 Occupy movement. Such rapid transitions between subjects, periods and locations may polarise some readers who find the frequent shifts disorienting or superficial.

But that would miss the point: this book is not so much a destination but a journey. It seeks equally to inform, educate and entertain, like an invigorating walk with a friend, followed perhaps by light refreshment. On that basis it represents a significant contribution, demonstrating the potential for professional archaeologists to effectively communicate complex ideas without compromising academic integrity. With hope, this will encourage other scholars in the field to pursue similar journeys and engage a readership far beyond the confines of our traditional archaeological audiences.

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BRENDON WILKINS

DigVentures

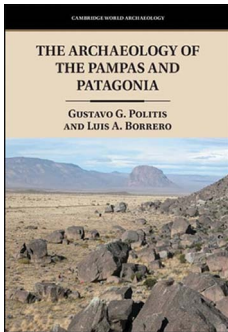
Barnard Castle, UK

✉ brendon@digventures.com

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GUSTAVO G. POLITIS & LUIS A. BORRERO. 2024. *The archaeology of the Pampas and Patagonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-0-521-76821-4 hardback £85.



The Pampas and Patagonia are the geographical representations of the nomadic forager societies in the Southern Cone of South America. These people lived almost exclusively by hunting, gathering and fishing, from their primary dispersal during the late Pleistocene until the European conquest. The book *The archaeology of the Pampas and Patagonia* is a critical and comprehensive review of the knowledge produced by archaeological scholarship and, secondarily, from related disciplines (palaeoecology, palaeoclimatology, genetics and ethnohistory) on Pampean and Patagonian foragers—and the authors, Gustavo Politis and Luis Borrero, have been the most influential researchers in this field during the past decades. The book

consists of seven chapters, which are organised into three parts. The first contains an Introduction, contextual information on the historical background and resources. The second part offers the main content of the work in chronological order: ‘The early peopling’, ‘The Middle Holocene’ and ‘The Late Holocene diversification’. ‘Final remarks’ is the third part with an overview of the principal hypothesis and interpretations of the authors. Although the content of the chapters alternates between Pampa and Patagonia, all is well integrated and does not disrupt fluid reading.

In the first part the authors summarise the environmental and, to a lesser extent, the palaeoenvironmental information of the entire area. They define and characterise 21 geographic/archaeological units, 12 relate to Pampa and nine to Patagonia. This subdivision,