Down and Out and About

*Underworlds*, Stephen Ellcock (Thames & Hudson)

*Weird Walk* (Watkins)

Stephen Ellcock is a curator of images and accompanying information, an expert at creating clusters of themed ideas on the page (and online) which encompass material from science, art and the uncanny, in fact anywhere relevant and surprising.

Following previous explorations of Albion's Psychic Landscape and The Cosmic Dance, Ellcock now offers readers 'a compelling journey through subterranean realms, real and imagined.' We start with an Introduction that makes it clear Ellcock is going to resist the human inclination to 'blaze our floodlights over every secret' and instead wriggle into the dark corners of both earth and mind.

So there are caves and caverns, potholes and niches, tunnels and stations, microscopic views, medieval illuminations, visual documentation of mermaids and early alchemical illustrations explaining how the world works. There are magical creatures, devils and demons, buried sculptures and ossuaries, sleepers abed in art installations and visits to the chambers of hell. Almost everything, with the exception of Lyonesse and The Wombles (thank you Ros), seems to be here, accompanied by astutely chosen quotes and relevant introductory commentaries.

It's a gloriously diverse and engaging compendium, as is the *Weird Walk* volume, which is subtitled *Wanderings and Wonderings Through the British Ritual Year*, although honesty compels me to admit it isn't quite as exciting as their Instagram feed suggests and I expected.

The Weird Walkers (there are no authorial names) tread a narrow line here between walking guide, coffee table book, mystical sightseeing manual and hardened drinkers' recommendations here: it's unclear if they totally embrace the magic others find at stone circles and ritual events, or just enjoy the views and the nearby real ale houses after a bit of a hike. This confusion isn't helped by scratchy drawings, deliberately partially sun-frazzled photos, notes of where to park your car and the odd map reference.

Scholars such as the pagan academic Ronald Hutton have shown that many of the strange ritual and celebratory events marking the cycle of the year are not as old as once thought, and that much of the conjecture around what stone circles, long barrows and stone avenues were for, is just that: conjecture, with little evidence involved. Weird Walk are careful to sit on the fence, even occasionally getting tongue-in-cheek enough to undermine their whole enterprise a little.

In the main though, this is a book of delighted engagement with Britain's historical and eccentric past and what is to be found in today. So there are plenty of (mostly ruined) burial chambers, cairns and standing stones along with man-made hills and landscape drawings, not to mention visits to watch the drunken runners with tar barrels alight on their backs in Ottery St. Mary, and the stag dances at Abbots Bromley. There's also the odd inclusion of a trip to Dunwich, undertaken as a kind of meditation on the power of nature, as witness to the sea swallowing the land.

Much of what is reported here is secondhand, and offered as possibility not certainty: ley lines, mystical spots, druid temples and ancient centres of pagan worship, offer destinations for those who choose to 'step out' on what the afterword deems 'ancient paths that still hum with vibes'. I like the fact that vibes are enough, rather than claims to hidden knowledge or occult clarity, like the fact that although the weird walkers 'teased out nuggets of knowledge' they note that as 'the pedometers notched up some significant miles, the pubs kept us in (un)healthy balance'.

So here's to landscape and proper beer, and to whatever lies or lurks below. To the decaying, missing and departed, to what is left and what remains of the past; to the weird and uncanny, the things we can't fathom or work out; to all those who wander and wonder, then share it with us.

Rupert Loydell

(649 words)