Lost and Found

Local Haunts: Non-Fiction 2012-24, Adam Scovell (Influx Press)
The Lost Folk, Lally Macbeth (Faber)

Filmmaker and writer Adam Scovell runs the brilliant [Celluloid Wicker Man](https://celluloidwickerman.com/) website and is obsessed by the links that run between place and film and text. It is this which thematically underpins Local Haunts, his new collection of often revised and/or expanded essays and observations which attempt ‘to find potential connections between people, the artwork they have made and where they have made it’.

Scovell regards his writings as ‘potential maps’, although he makes clear to readers that his is a personal take which brings him pleasure, one that offers no ‘genuine geographical connection’ but relies instead on ‘cultural interest’. He shares many of his subjects with other literary psychogeographers: J.G. Ballard, Alan Garner, W.G. Sebald, Angela Carter, Derek Jarman and Nigel Kneale are, as to be expected, all present here. Perhaps more unusually so are Marguerite Duras, Robert Walser, Oulipian George Perec and M.R. James (who is very present!).

Sometimes it seems Scovell is traversing well-trodden ground and simply seeing for himself what is already documented elsewhere. The relationship between Garner and Alderley Edge, indeed his Cheshire locale in general, has been extensively discussed, written about and photographed; as has ‘The Synthetic Landscape of J.G. Ballard’ and W.G. Sebald’s  East Anglia. In chapters such as these there is little that is new or interesting to be found, they are summaries, a personal take on what is already known that adds little to our understanding.

Scovell is much better when he comes to film and television, particularly when he considers something very specific or considers a theme informed by several examples. So, for example, his wander through ‘Stanley Kubrick’s Thamesmead’, relating it to Clockwork Orange, is superb; as is his consideration of ‘Fox Hunting in Wyrd British Cinema’ and ‘The Landscape in British Pursuit Films’. Similarly, the pairing of Antonioni’s Zabriskie Point with Hopper’s The Last Movie to consider ‘Sex and Landscape’ in relation to ‘the American counterculture coming up against the wall of 1970s Nixonisms’ is inspired, and it’s good to see Jacques Tati included here, and to consider ‘The Breeze in the Trees of Blowup‘.

Scovell does not define ’emotional landscape’ and a similar problem applies to Lally Macbeth’s The Lost Folk, which is subtitled From the Forgotten Past to the Emerging Future of Folk. Here it is ‘folk’ that remains unclear as a term, and remains tangled in a web of assumptions about class, authenticity and populism.

Whilst in many ways, Macbeth opens up ‘folk’ to include events such as festive swims and storytelling, much of the book, fascinating though it is, looks backwards to what we all associate with folk: folk singing, morris dancing, bonfires, myths and legends passed on through storytelling, and local history. All well and good, but I wonder if there is not an argument to be had that, perhaps, open mics are the new folk clubs, or that digital archives may be the new folk museum? If we accept change, surely it is okay to lose or forget things as well? As the likes of Professor Hutton have shown, ‘ancient customs’ are often not ancient at all, and folklorists and participants can be very disingenuous when it comes to history and attribution.

Macbeth is keen to acknowledge change and mutation, and quite rightly critiques the likes of Cecil Sharp for bowdlerising the traditional songs he collected but this book does look backwards most of the time, and seems more concerned with a resurgence and reconsideration of traditions rather than truly looking forward. It is unclear why some events and customs are here and not others. Is the widespread adoption of Christingle as a children’s Christmas tradition not included because it has come via schools and churches? When did the recently (2007) invented Montol Festival in Penzance, to celebrate Winter Solstice, become ‘folk’ rather than an organized event?

The Lost Folk is more interesting when exploring the recent past and what has been lost. I was particularly fascinated by sections on model villages and folk museums that used to exist and are now no more, particularly the way that the latter’s contents can be sold off willy-nilly or transferred to a new home en masse. In a similar manner, lost skills and crafts are considered, although again it is hard to see why, say, making corn dollies is important in the 21st Century, and why, say again, those who can format or repair computers might not be regarded as contemporary magicians. (They certainly appear so to luddites like me.)  Singer and folklorist Bob Pegg once convincingly argued that rugby songs were folk music.

Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed this book, but at times the interesting sections, such as those mentioned above, become long lists of examples rather than evidence for anything else, and I am still unclear about what is and isn’t ‘folk’. Suggesting that certain arts, events, rituals or suchlike spontaneously arise from the working class feels both naive and classist. It is obviously important that the local exists and some things carry on (where I live it’s village fireworks, carol singing round the tree in the park and the very lowbrow and welcoming regatta) but when we try and remember the forgotten past all too often it becomes frozen history, not something we truly participate in.

Time moves on, society is transient, ‘folk’ is not lost, it transforms and mutates. There is nothing intrinsically ‘better’  or ‘more folk’ about druid rituals at Stonehenge, drunks running with burning barrels through Budleigh Salterton, the creepy pub in Sourton or acoustic guitars and lutes than Truro’s City of Lights parade, most school fetes, our village hall gigs, or the newly established Gnome Land\* off Kensington High Street.

Nothing has been lost but there is lots to find.

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Rupert Loydell

(\*For the record I would like to state I am absolutely nothing to do with Gnome Land.)