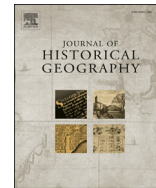




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Review

Landscapes of Detectorists, Keighren & Joanne Norcup, M. Innes (Ed.). Uniform Books, Devon (2020). p. 108 pp UK£12.00 paperback

Landscapes of Detectorists is a wonderfully esoteric and enthusiastic work. As editors Innes Keighren and Joanne Norcup make clear, this is collection that aims to be “more than simply an exercise in dovetailing our geographical interests with our appreciation of *Detectorists*” (p.21). It arises at the confluence of the academic and the personal; an unashamed passion project in the best possible sense, driven by palpable affection for both the source material and ideas.

Arising out of what the authors characterise as a “risky” session at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in Cardiff, 2018, *Landscapes* traces a variety of lines of enquiry and connection between Mackenzie Crook’s wonderfully earthy, downbeat sitcom about English metal detecting hobbyists and contemporary questions of the rural landscape: its meaning and perception, its everyday materiality, and its entanglement with the idea and performance of Englishness. Such themes are explored over the course of four essays, focussed on the topics of landscape’s interpretation, uncanny mattering, mundane verticality, and entanglement with the (re)production of gender norms. Complementing these academic reflections, the foreword, by the show’s writer/star, Crook, and afterword, by producer Adam Tandy, work to flesh out the process of writing and making *Detectorists*, offering valuable context and reflection on those scenes, narrative arcs and moments of character development that variously elicit academic attention.

In the first of the collection’s essays, Keighren considers practices of landscape interpretation, perception and knowledge. He discusses how the characters’ search for the lost burial site of a Saxon king during the first series serves to play with the idea of the land as a text ripe for (mis)readings, tracing the tension between more ‘tacit’, instinctual readings of the topography, and the expert, ‘objective’ perspectives offered by technologies (such as Google earth) or codified knowledges (including geographical map interpretation) with which the protagonists engage. This friction between an experiential understanding of the lie of the land, the feel of the solid earth and its contours; and the ways in which that same earth can be abstracted or represented in ways that serve to change our perspective, or open up new lines of engagement, allows the programme to enrol the viewer as “reader of the landscape” (p.38), encouraging appreciation of its palimpsest-like and storied nature.

Continuing a notion of the land as layered, messy and over-written, Isla Forsyth’s essay examines the often-comical encounters between the detectorists and the detritus of modern capitalist consumption. Doing so offers a prompt to re-evaluate detecting: less treasure hunting (in the vein it is presented by more traditional archaeologists), more a slow process of “caring for small stories

embedded in the landscape” (p.47). In amassing this “mundane hoard” of “uncanny” objects, Forsyth describes how the show allows us to encounter the “inevitable transience” of a seemingly timeless, permanent present (p.43). As producer Adam Tandy notes in his afterword: “No-one had given a second thought to the wrapper of a Burton’s Mint Viscount biscuit until [the show] came along” (p.99). In the process of unearthing things strangely family, yet weathered and decayed, the characters witness a “tangible present passing into history”; those possessions that matter amidst everyday life becoming the matter of landscape. The result, as Forsyth concludes, is a landscape of “banal hauntings” (p.55) and a more minor archaeological project attentive to that often ignored in history’s grand narratives.

The third essay, by Andrew Harris, likewise considers the earth beneath the detectorists’ feet, yet in tandem with the sky above them. Examining the quotidian verticalities characterising the show’s account of landscape – shuttling, by way of special effects manifest as a ‘treasurecam’ – he injects a sense of the voluminous into the horizontal scenes of the show’s Essex county. Harris examines to a key scene from the opening episode – one discussed in different ways by different authors within the collection – to consider the ways in which landscape is encountered along the vertical axis. Here, one of the main characters, Lance, misreads the Google watermark on a satellite image as the spectral outline of an iron age settlement. As Harris remarks, through such moments the show makes clear how ‘top down’ renderings of landscapes interact with - and are countered by - those from below, resulting in “misinterpretations and disconnections” (p.62). The vertical perspectives incorporated into the show convey a sense of the landscape’s material and temporal depth as complex and non-linear, as well as reminding us that it is also shaped and managed in relation to what lies above it. The future development of a solar farm that concerns the third series, suggests Harris, counters the notion that treasure only ever lies beneath.

The final essay contribution to the collection, by Joanne Norcup, examines the show’s depiction of gender in and through the landscape of the detectorists, recalling geographers’ long interest in landscapes as sites for the (re)production of normativity. Rather than merely a depiction of downtrodden men seeking escape the domestic scene, Norcup reveals how the show subtly plays with and often subverts the normative gender performances of hobbies and their geographies. The two lead characters differently navigate aspects of masculinity in crisis. Lance’s ‘old school’ male identity, of pin-ups and bawdy aprons, has to reckon with and accommodate the more complex absences, presences and agencies of female characters, such as ex-wife Maggie, daughter Kate and new partner Toni. Andy, meanwhile, is consciously anxious about his economic status (his partner Becky being the main economic provider for both he and, later, their child), as well as the need to be a ‘good’ parent and man. These are not thumbnail sketches of maleness,

but complex workings out of masculinity in recognisably twenty-first century communities. As Norcup also discusses, the show likewise plays with and subverts the historical exclusion of women from the spaces and practices of hobbies, demonstrating the reliance of the male detectorists on their female partners and peers for their activities to endure, and succeed. And yet, as Norcup shows through her examination of the near-silent female character of Varde, such women are often still spoken over, or spoken for, regardless of their enthusiasm or knowledge. Thus, she prompts a reading of *Detectorists* that foregrounds how the show works to “acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of lives in the English rural landscape” (p.91).

Despite each essay's explicit orientation towards, and contribution to, contemporary academic debates within historical and cultural geography the writing in this collection is refreshingly unburdened by acts of conceptual ground-clearing. Economical discussions of scholarly ideas appear as needed, but never obscure the object of interest. This reflects the spirit of the work: this is not an act of analytical imposition, but one of “drawing out [...] geographical resonance,” ideas and themes (p.16). Attentively, empirically, each chapter proceeds, via distinct yet overlapping routes, to traverse the series' topography of characters, settings and stories with slow deliberation. There is room to dwell on a scene, or a character, or an exchange of dialogue. In a way, the essays move forward in a manner not unlike that of the detectorists they concern – slowly panning an analytical eye, back and forth, across screenplay and screen, structure and (meta-)narrative, stopping to dig deeper

whenever something glints below the surface.

In sum, this is a rich collection that “[gives] geographers the permission to take comedy seriously” (p. 16). Indeed, the collection raises fascinating questions about the *situatedness* of the sit-com, and the manner in which comedy unfolds in dialogue with the characters' geographies: constructed to confine and constrain, certainly, but also affording and opening onto comedic possibilities. There is also much here for those interested in understanding the meaning and status of landscape (and its representations) in contemporary England. The book demonstrates how cultural texts like *Detectorists* are rich, empirical examinations of inhabited geographies in their substantive and imaginative qualities, heterogeneity, and knotty spatio-temporality: “simultaneously local and global, of now and of the past and the future” (p. 18). Above all, though, this is a project brimming with genuine love for its subject matter. It is borne of an organic shared appreciation of overlapping academic and personal passions. It champions writing of, and for, an unconventional subject. That the editors write of being “enriched” by the process of crafting this collection is no surprise: it is enriching to read.

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