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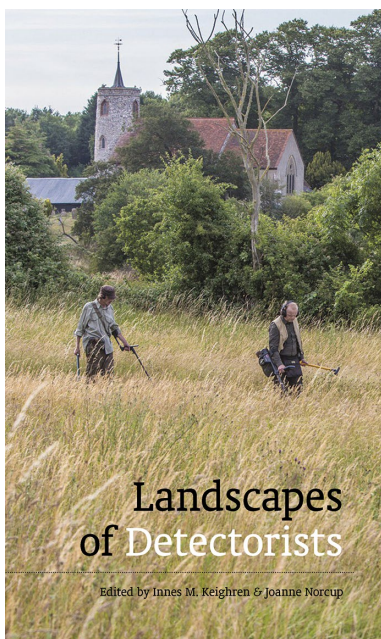


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Landscapes of Detectorists

Innes M. Keighren and Joanne Norcup, eds. Axminster, UK: Uniformbooks, 2020. 108 pp. map, illustrations, notes. \$25.15 paper (ISBN 978-1-910010-24-2).

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The BBC TV series *Detectorists* (three seasons, 2014–2017) is the kind of unassuming British comedy that invariably attracts words like *gentle*, *offbeat*, or indeed *unassuming*. It is the story of two metal detectorists, Andy and Lance, and their clubmates in the world of amateur archaeology—but it is about their relations with each other and their partners, and with their little part of England, too. The series has been available on different platforms for a while, and whereas you could in lockdown rewatch around ninety hours of *Friends*, you could binge on *Detectorists* in a tenth of the time. It is a much-loved show, garlanded with awards, and it has made it into a recent panel-moderated list of Britain’s favorite sitcoms. Its placing, though—nineteenth out of the selected twenty—feels entirely in self-mocking comic character. *Detectorists* is likely to remain in that slightly hopeful bucket of streaming content that is labeled with the likes of “cult following,” “offbeat,” or “hidden gem.”

At worst, I suppose, you would pigeonhole it as an acquired taste for confirmed Anglophiles, like warm beer or steamed pudding. There is more to this wonderful series than that, though, and it is these fictional detectorists’ relations with the English landscape that have attracted the attention of the cultural and historical geographers Innes Keighren, Joanne Norcup, Andrew Harris, and Isla Forsyth. They have proudly taken the title given out to one of the series’ characters to mock her academic pretensions: “Geography Degree.” The four “Geography Degrees” are all clearly big fans of the series, and they have the full endorsement of the *Detectorists* team: Writer, director, and star Mackenzie Crook

and series producer Adam Tandy provide a very good foreword and afterword. It is rather inspiring, in these dark and dull times, to see academics hobnobbing with comedians and creatives, and trying something different, too, by way of publication. The “Geography Degrees” end up (of course) as the equivalent of Lance and Andy’s fictional Danebury Metal Detecting Club (DMDC). It is a measure of how well this all works that I wish I was part of their club. I would even brew the tea and hand out the hobnobs.

Now, this book does not pretend to be anything that it isn’t: It is very much the landscapes of *Detectorists*, and not the landscapes of detectorists. These are essays inspired by the series, not an attempt to exhaustively investigate the

world of amateur archaeology. Keighren and Norcup, in their short introduction, make a plea for the seriousness of such “hobby geographies” (they are perfectly self-aware that theirs is a hobby project itself) and speak of the untapped potential of “comedic geographies” (they are just as aware of the potential foolishness of such an “alt-academic” project). They needn’t apologize at all. The themes that this book develops are, for all the fringe subject matter, familiar ones: landscape, Englishness, and identity, to put it in the baldest summary. What they add, though, is the idea of metal detecting as a rich resource for thinking about landscape not only as place, but also its connections to time, and to dreams and desires, too. As the editors put it, “Landscape reveals the past while concealing the prospect of future discovery” (p. 17). *Detectorists* speaks about what these men want, what is lacking in their lives, and what discoveries (about the buried past and in the world of the near-at-hand present) might mean for them in the future. There’s gold here, but also goodness and fellowship and the things you need to survive.

Historical and cultural geographers can easily assimilate the authors’ core concerns, then, even if the directions the four authors take are novel: the emotional and sensory nature of our relationship with the landscape, and the ways in which instinct, expertise, and technology lead and mislead us

(Keighren); the afterlife of dispersed objects, which suggests the seeming futility of our throwaway lives, but in their recovery promising new stories about lost and insignificant lives (Forsyth); the verticality of landscape and the comically significant disconnections between what lies beneath and above the ground (Harris); and the gendering of knowledge and expertise that this show subverts and critiques even when the focus is firmly on men and masculinity (Norcup). These are short essays, but they don't overlap, and they bring out things in the series and in the practice of metal detecting that are insightful and convincing. The academic paratext is kept to a minimum, and although heteronormativity and heterogeneity make an appearance, all the essays are very readable.

It is possible that the contributors are too fond of their subject, which means that some of the sharper and spikier aspects of detecting are planed off. The show is "affectionate," "charming," and "good-natured" (to go back to critical commonplaces), and so is this book. There is not much here on the friction between metal detecting and professional archaeology and public history. Although this is glanced at, the overall impression is of detectorists as good blokes who are largely harmless, community-minded rather than venal, and admirably inclusive in their recovery of lives long lost to time. Producer Adam Tandy's afterword suggests that detectorists who have gone over to the dark side never made it past early drafts, and there is a sense that this kind of conflict has been excised in the analysis as well as in the show. It is possible that the theme of gender is a little too easily read as knowingly subversive, and perhaps racial and class identities as well, with the focus being always on ordinary, middling people in "middle England." The well-worn focus of landscape studies on power and exclusion comes across rather fitfully here as a result. The same might be

observed for *Detectorists'* close cousin, *This Country* (three seasons, 2017–2020), which is equally funny but uncomfortably close to the bone in its depiction of the rural "underclass" youth we are invited to laugh at as well as with. More might also be said about the context for this book: Keighren and Norcup note in their introduction that this series and this volume emerged in a time of "increased political polarisation" (p. 15), and their team extols the virtues of slowness, stillness, groundedness, gentleness, and attentiveness as antidotes to "acceleration and anxiety" (p. 15). Without being in the least bit nostalgic or isolationist, *Detectorists* taps into a deep and perhaps buried Englishness that probably needs further discussion. I am thinking here of the critical and commercial success of the Netflix film *The Dig* (2020). Sutton Hoo is exactly the kind of big "Hollywood" find that our hapless detectorists can only dream of, although they share an East Anglian landscape; but both cultural imaginaries of Britain's buried past speak to present concerns in ways that call for more sustained stratigraphic analysis.

At the same time, I am grateful that ham-fisted references to Brexit or populism have not been shoehorned into this deeply likable book. As with the series that inspired it, this volume is short and it leaves you wanting more, but we won't have to fear the jumping of any sharks. This is a perfect companion to a wonderful series, and it makes you think about the landscape, the places that Lance and Andy scratch around in for buried treasure. A shout out, too, goes to the beautiful design and production by Uniformbooks, with many photographs from the series, and with the cleverest placement of footnotes I have ever seen. It's all great fun, then, but serious fun, academic but amusing, engaging without being flippant, and like the series that inspired it, quirky in all the right ways.