

On the beaten track

The Ways of the Bushwalker: On Foot in Australia

By Melissa Harper

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Reviewed by Paul Gillen

Walking, if noticed at all, is usually assumed to be a more or less incidental, unproblematic aspect of some seemingly weightier topic like tourism, exploration, pilgrimage, sport, poetry and so on. Understanding it as a distinct subject with a history of its own is a recent development, perhaps no more than two decades old. The majestic peak of this new genre is Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust*. Solnit discusses walking from evolutionary, spiritual, philosophical, literary, political, artistic and architectural perspectives. Her history encompasses a *Paradise Lost* of recreational walking, from its rise with the Romantic Movement in the second half of the eighteenth-century to its suburban fall in the second half of the twentieth. Melissa Harper zooms in on a small sector of this big picture—the Australian, non-urban, recreational one—but traces the same pattern of ascent and decline. She is sensitive to the wider context of ideas that have shaped the very existence of 'walking' as a worthwhile field of study but for the most part sticks to straight historical narrative. And she engages with some aspects of walking that have largely escaped notice; especially notable is her focus on sexuality.

Like many books about walking, *The Ways of the Bushwalker* is itself like a walk, and self-consciously so. The track it follows is more of a scenic ramble than a grand expedition. Harper is a cheerful, chatty companion. She is eager to show us around but does not burden us with tendentious opinions or too much information, although she does have a weakness for amateur psychologising, and her style is sometimes a little breathy for me. 'The pant-suit caused quite a stir in the small mountain community [of Mount Buffalo in the early 1900s]', Harper hypothesises of one Alice Manfield, 'but Alice secretly enjoyed incredulous looks' (22). Later she tells us, obscurely, that 'Brereton and Grainger's recollections [of their experiences of the bush as boys] are decidedly romantic and it is crucial to ask how much their representation of an Edenic childhood experience came from a desire to stress a persona that was more appropriate to their adult selves' (95).

Many curious things divert the reader along the way. In 1788, a little bunch of men strides away from Port Jackson for a few nights of camping out, armed with

some salt meat, a brace of muskets, and 'a Bottle of O be joyful'. A century later, John Monash takes a train from Melbourne to explore Mt Buffalo. Dot Butler, barefoot and wearing very short shorts, strides across the landscape. If you peer behind a bush, you might catch Havelock Ellis ejaculating—but let us move on, our leader does not wish to seem like a voyeur. We find ourselves held up by a horde of randy young plodders on one of the popular 1930s mystery hikes and intrepid wilderness-seekers scale awesome Tasmanian peaks. Through much of the book, Miles Dunphy and Marie Byles crusade tirelessly for national parks.

The term 'bushwalking' was not coined until the 1920s. Its heyday as an iconically Australian activity occurred in the following decades, coinciding with the heightened communitarian fervour and pursuit of self-discipline that accompanied the political and economic crises of the first half of the twentieth century: compulsory schooling, athletics, exercise and dieting regimes, temperance laws, tighter immigration controls, xenophobia, militarisation, totalitarianism and organisations intended to instil social responsibility and loyalty in children. (Incidentally, the Boy Scouts probably deserved more attention from Harper as a major source of recruits for bushwalking clubs and of widespread knowledge of bushcraft. Unfortunately, while there are some good studies of scouting in other countries, the Australian branch of the movement has received little attention from academics).¹

Bushwalking is chiefly a twentieth century phenomenon, but nearly half of *The Ways of Bushwalker* is set in the nineteenth. Apart from the intrinsic interest of the earlier material, Harper has another justification for this bias: she wants to show that bushwalking has longer, deeper and more complex roots than is often recognised. At the same time, her treatment is necessarily selective and shaped by the nature of the archive. Women walkers are well represented, although perhaps more could have been made of their common parodying of bushwalking men and the male bushwalking ethos, described in Allison Cadzow's doctoral thesis *Waltzing Matildas*. The south-eastern states predominate: people began to bushwalk in them earlier, and there have always been more people there. With some exceptions, like the south-west corner, neither the terrain nor the climate of the rest of the continent is as pleasant for walkers and campers.

Harper distinguishes bushwalking as a modern leisure pursuit premised on escape from urban life, which is why Aboriginal people before colonisation, who walked in the bush all the time, never bushwalked: 'walking in the bush for pleasure was a European concept. Indeed, it became a crucial marker of what Europeans confidently thought of as civilisation' (xiii). This approach means having to enforce a separation of bushwalking from walking in the bush for reasons of travel, work, pilgrimage and so on, a distinction that Harper admits is 'blurry' (91).

Actually, the very idea of leisure—'spare', or as the French say, 'lost time'—is implicated with modernity and with an economy that pays for working time. A leisure *pursuit* is an attempt to reclaim time, to put lost time to good use. But the desire to escape civilisation is not confined to modernity: for thousands of years people went out from towns and cities to discover spiritual insights and to have visions, and also to hunt and kill wild animals for pleasure. Chinese literati sought refuge from the demands of court life in bamboo shacks shrouded in mountain mists, and legendary Indian princes wandered in forests before returning to win back their kingdoms. Such escapes are often played in a religious key, but in Australia the abstract, rationalising Protestant traditions of most of the settlers impeded the sacralisation of the colonial landscape. As a recent article in *Australian Geographer* shows, many recent immigrants—especially Buddhists and Daoists—have proved less inhibited in re-enchanting Australian nature.

Romanticism, like Protestantism, tends to resist endowing specific landscape features or species with enchantment. If anything is to be sacred, let it be Nature as a holistic abstraction. This is what Solnit calls the 'artificially natural' (Solnit 119); it is not what people usually do with nature, not what they do 'naturally'. What Romanticism most values in our experience of nature is essentially passive. In the wilderness we 'walk through and look at'. Romantic nature is 'not invested with the human' (Solnit 174). This is the informing ideal of Harper's 'real' bushwalking: getting off the beaten track, as far as possible from other human beings, taking nothing to or from the bush (i).

The Ways of the Bushwalker is no circular walk. In the final chapter we arrive at a place we know well: the here and now, with its camp fire arguments about sandshoes versus walking shoes, battles between conservationists and four wheel drive enthusiasts, the environmental impact of large numbers of walkers and campers, newspaper controversy about the costs of finding lost bushwalkers, and 'the complex philosophical tangle' (301) over wilderness and land rights. In approaching these questions, Harper worries about the elitism of 'real' bushwalkers. Her impulses are democratic and favour human flourishing over the biological kind. She leaves us pondering: how can these ideals be realised in an era of ecological disaster?

Until recently Paul Gillen lectured in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at UTS. He is currently catching up with lost time.

Works cited

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Notes

¹ For books about the history of scouting overseas see Hans E. Ihle, *Hitler's Boy Scouts, Dictator-Fighters: Along the Razor's Edge* (Lanham: UP of America, 1993); Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); David I. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: the Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).