



## Book Reviews

### **MAKING ONE'S WAY IN THE WORLD. THE FOOTPRINTS AND TRACKWAYS OF PREHISTORIC PEOPLE BY MARTIN BELL**

*Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2020. 306pp, 107 figures, 2 tables, hb, ISBN 978-1-78925-402-0, £50.00*

I was excited to be asked to review this book and really looked forward to getting stuck in. Starting out my archaeological career at Flag Fen has left me with a lifelong interest in prehistoric (and especially Bronze Age) trackways and the way people travelled and moved through the landscape in the past. This book didn't disappoint. It's incredibly wide ranging, detailed and thorough. All the things I'd hoped to read about were there in spades along with an entire tranche of evidence and opinions that were new to me and kept me happily turning pages, right to the end. I'd definitely advise this book for anyone with an interest in prehistory.

Martin Bell is currently a professor of archaeological science, with a broad range of interests spanning environmental archaeology and geoarchaeology as well as coastal and maritime archaeology, experimental archaeology and the Mesolithic in general, to name a few. Bell's range of knowledge and long-term engagement with field archaeology is certainly brought to bear within this wide-ranging volume. The book has a fantastic dual sweep to its structure, moving from the most ancient evidence to the most recent and at the same time from the most intimate of traces, in terms of individual footprints, to the consideration of possible long distance routeways at the end of the prehistoric period. At one end of this journey are the hunter-gatherers of the northwest coast of the Americas and at the other are British Roman roads and, in some cases, their possible prehistoric origins. Despite this grand sweep of time, space and scale, Bell never loses site of the individual people who travelled these paths – a truly impressive feat.

The clearly signposted contents and the thorough index make this a great research tool, allowing the reader to turn straight to the page they need if dipping in. The illustrations and photographs are frequent, clear and well deployed. The addition of several digital appendices listing an array of additional underlying catalogue data will be of great use to researchers. The case studies that are peppered throughout the book provide interesting moments of focus to this wide-ranging consideration of the available evidence on a national and often transnational scale.

The first chapter provides a broad outline of the theoretical approach that Bell has employed and an overview of the unexpectedly expansive datasets that can enrich our understanding of trackways, from the harmful effects of early theories of lay lines to the positive contribution that

human intestinal parasites can make... it's all in there (or out there). Bell sets the scene by explaining the interplay between the retrogressive study of past fossil landscapes frozen in our own world and the wealth of documentary, ethnographic and archaeological evidence that can be called upon to conjure up the movement of prehistoric people. This is considered through the lenses of differing theoretical approaches to landscape studies and indeed to past (and present) people's perception of their landscapes. Bell goes on to discuss the fascinating interplay between thought and movement both in terms of people who created past routeways and the need for archaeologists in the present to walk those same routeways.

Chapter 2 takes the reader on a fascinating tour of the wealth of ethnographic and documentary accounts which complement the physical remains of the trails of the first nation peoples of the American northwest coast. The subtle interplay between people and environment and the rich seam of cultural meaning imbued by people onto the routeways in their landscape is sketched out for the reader. I was particularly fascinated by the role of culturally modified trees – from marking the trunks to braiding their limbs. Bell makes clear the interwoven and interdependent agency of people, plants and animals in the formation of paths.

The niche construction and co-evolutionary forces of people, plants and animals in forming what might once have been described as 'natural' landscapes in North America at the time of European contact is discussed in detail, as is the role of the landscape and the paths through it in terms of the histories and identities of the people who moved through them – the term 'following an ancestors footsteps' brought into stark and literal relief.

Chapter 3 sees Bell again advocate to move away from site-based analysis and to remember the importance of movement and interconnectedness, this time via hunter-gatherer routeways in northwest Europe. The sacred and practical importance of movement is explored, and we are reminded of the vital nature of movement, from procuring food resources to ensuring genetic diversity. Having thoroughly interrogated unconscious traces left on the landscape, Bell goes on to consider conscious traces in the form of early monument building associated with possible routeways, before touching on the isotopic traces that can be left in peoples bodies by the spaces they inhabit and the food they consume.

Chapter 4 explores the moments of people's lives frozen in their footsteps. The sheer volume of such evidence now available was surprising, and the inferences which can be made regards past lifeways impressive. Footprints and the small-scale mobility they reveal are used to traverse the boundary from hunter-gatherers to farmers. Bell then begins a consideration of early farmers, their monuments and their landscapes in Chapter 5, interpreting the available evidence as perhaps often describing 'bands of movement' across the landscape, as opposed to rigidly

defined pathways, echoed again in Chapter 7 when barrow alignments are considered in terms of routeways.

I was looking forward to Chapter 6, which considers routes in and across wetlands. This is a subject close to my own research interests and Bell has done a remarkably thorough job of weighing up the available evidence. However, like many before him, Bell struggles to link the wet and dry worlds together with only a few of the wetland trackways being linked to dryland routes – this reflects the available evidence and not Bell's analysis of it.

As with many aspects of archaeology, the mists of time draw in closer the further back we look. The earliest evidence for routeways is often sparse and somewhat general, looking at the recurrent use of locations, alignments of monuments or sites and palaeoenvironmental and topographic clues. However, as we travel through time and the traces that people left within the landscape become more frequent and more dense, routeways through landscapes become easier to 'see'. As Bell reflects on routeways in the agricultural landscapes of the Middle Bronze Age and beyond in Chapter 8, the evidence becomes more concrete with some potential ancient routeways still in use today. There is a particularly interesting look at holloways and dating methodologies. Similarly, Bell considers the potential role of the horse in the final Bronze Age and Iron Age as an agent for change, perhaps leading to a shift from routes in river valleys that suited pedestrians to ridgeway routes that provided better footing for horses. Bell tackles the thorny issues of the antiquity of southern England's ridgeways head on, with some interesting views on the matter.

In Chapter 9, Bell presents a multitude of evidence for the importance of river, coastal and sea travel in prehistoric northern Europe, arguing for an approach which brings maritime, coastal and terrestrial archaeology together to consider the role that wider waterborne communication played in the social and economic lives of many prehistoric people. The potential role of long-distance travel in terms of acquiring both esoteric knowledge and exotic goods in order to sustain elites is particularly compelling.

The case studies of the Wealden district covered in Chapter 10 provide lavishly illustrated and well-argued examples of how through combining landscape archaeology with geoarchaeological approaches some trackways can be shown to have prehistoric origins, which are sometimes still reflected in modern landscapes.

This incredibly broad ranging book leaves no stone unturned, thoroughly exploring all avenues of evidence available to a researcher considering prehistoric routeways. This book is very much about the interplay of agency in creating routeways: the intersecting roles of topography, geology,

natural events (such as fire and storms), plants, animals and people are carefully and thoughtfully addressed. The rich variety of practical and social drivers which cause people to move are explored in fascinating detail.

The ethnographic and archaeological evidence that Bell draws in from as far afield as the Americas certainly stimulates new viewpoints on the interrogation of prehistoric routeways. Bell's consideration of much of the evidence closer to home describes some interesting approaches on how to bring the available evidence to bear and the volume certainly gives a thorough overview of the evidence for British prehistoric routeways. The analysis really hits its stride with the case studies in the Wealden district towards the end of the book, showing us how a detailed study and multidisciplinary approach can yield insightful results.

The central narrative – that movement is an essential and fundamental part of the human experience, interwoven into every aspect of people's lives – is one that is hard to disagree with. One must therefore agree with Bell's opinion, although he is certainly not the first to express it, that archaeology can be far too focused on the 'site', and that a much wider consideration of the landscape – not only people's place within it, but their movement through and indeed their shaping of it – must be at the heart of our understating of past lifeways. I for one agree with Bell that as archaeologists, many of us need to embark on our own personal journey to broaden our perception of the past, and enjoy his suggestion that one of the ways to do this is by walking through the ghosts of ancient landscapes that are all around us. I may not, however, go as far as doing so barefoot.... I rather like my walking boots.

The key thoughts I took away were that although identifying, dating and understanding past routeways can indeed be challenging, Bell correctly makes the case that it is often achievable, and by reminding us of the importance of movement to the lives, economy, society and indeed mental wellbeing and growth of human beings, Bell reinforces that it is a necessary effort, perhaps key to furthering our understanding of past human lifeways.

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