

REVIEWS

Nick Havelly,

Apennine Crossings: Travellers on the Edge of Tuscany. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

As generous as scholarly, Nick Havelly's latest gift to the community of readers is a treasure trove of travelling impressions, quotes and trekking itineraries. Its richness and diversity place it at the crossroads of various literary genres, enabling reviewers to approach it – like a peak – from different sides. I will present it as the latest fruit in a genealogy of mountain writing that includes Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (written at the time of WW2, but published only in 1977) and Robert Macfarlane's mountain trilogy, opening with *Mountains of the Mind. A History of a Fascination* (2003).

What Havelly's account shares with these beautiful books is an underlying experiential, in-depth connection with mountains, which it combines with a wide-ranging, erudite but always enlivening interest in their cultural perception through the centuries. In other words, this cleverly luring volume puts readers into contact with both the living mountains and the mountains of the mind.

Havelly foregrounds his book's central trope right from the title – *Apennine Crossings*, later explaining that this term “has two linked meanings: literally, going over the ridge as all these characters did; and metaphorically,

encountering their stories, as I continued to do during and after the journey.” (7) This counterpoint mode, this juxtaposing of different melodies, informs the whole volume, unceasingly opening up new vistas. It marks the rhythm of a travelogue that aims at slow motion but always keeps the reader’s interest alive through a vibrant network of connections. The author proves so adept at shifting between different times and experiences (as distant and diverging as the medieval wanderings of exiled Dante and the misadventures of WW2 fighters) that the medieval and modern travellers who accompany us along the way turn almost into fellow hikers in our readerly experience.

This trans-historical and transnational polyphony becomes apparent already at the beginning of the book and of the author’s westward journey across the Apennines, along the GEA route (Grande Escursione Apenninica), a 425 km long itinerary that was created in the early 1980s along the ridge between the Emilia-Romagna region to the North and Central Italy. Havely’s deft time-shift technique becomes apparent when he contrasts the silence he experiences at the Bocca Trabaria pass (between Tuscany and the Marche region, not far from the Adriatic coast) with the “thud and crash of artillery firing” (14) that would have echoed up there in the summer of 1944.

Thus begins a flashback in which the Royal Horse Artillery Regiment is training its fire towards the nearby city of Sansepolcro, when a vague memory starts taking shape in the mind of officer Anthony Clarke. It is indeed in Sansepolcro, as Clarke suddenly realises, that Piero della Francesca’s Resurrection of Christ is frescoed in a room of the Palazzo Comunale. Clarke’s consequent decision to withhold fire, trusting the locals who claimed there were no more Germans in town, exemplifies the overlapping of tactical and cultural concerns that marked the liberation of Italy.

As this anecdote proves, in Havely’s eyes culture is never disconnected from the political, the social and the material. An engaged humanist, he is particularly attentive to this intricacy of (at times conflicting) motives, and ready to avail himself of journals, poetry and other forms of testimony by a variety of witnesses, including WW2 fighters. This adds further poignance to a book that celebrates both the nature of the Apennines and the layers of cultural references and historical events that sedimented onto this mountain range over the centuries.

The book also traces changes in the history of taste, contrasting the attitude of medieval and early modern travellers – for whom crossing the Apennines was mainly an experience of fear, boredom and discomfort – with the enthusiasm of those later travellers who saw these mountains through the lens of new aesthetic paradigms. Richard Colt Hoare’s 1791 visit to the Montastery of La Verna epitomises this new sensibility, “a love of those scenes, where nature exhibits her original and undisguised character; scenes which furnish gratification to the eye, and employment to the pencil.” (36) This increasing appreciation of the Apennine landscape, in the light of new aesthetic categories, is also apparent in John Chetwod Eustace’s description of his 1802 visit to nearby Camaldoli, where “the gloom of forest scenery is softened by an agreeable intermixture of lawn and down, not altogether unlike the varieties of an English park.” (52)

All through the book, Havelly skilfully contrasts this modern thirst for mountain scenery with the previous dread – not to say horror – of mountains, which often acquired an existential and theological meaning, as shown by Petrarch’s ascent of Mont Ventoux or by Thomas Burnet’s 1684 *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, where the crossing of the Alps forces the author to question his “ideas about Nature’s orderliness” (96), causing a crisis in his ongoing quest for transcendental meaning.

This phobia of mountains reaches a climax in the travelling accounts concerning the road between Bologna and Florence, which a large number of travellers were forced to take in order to reach central Italy, and which posed the twin obstacles of danger and inconvenience. While the 17th- and early 18th-century travellers who crossed the Apennines through the Giogo Pass either gave vent to their complaints or simply kept silent, things started to change at mid 18th-century, when the road was redesigned to cross the mountains at the nearby Futa Pass. This material change combined with a new gothic sensibility, engendering a darkly narrative approach to this stretch of road. The presence of mysterious fires in the vicinity of the aptly named village of Pietra Mala coalesced with a series of criminal events that took place at the turn of the century either in that village or in nearby Covigliaio (as variously reported by travellers), exerting a new fascination. This aura of terror was experienced – and duly reported – with various shades of pleasure by entire

generations of 19th century travellers until it turned into a stereotype to be disproved.

As Havelly moves westward along the Great Apennine Excursion, new cultural connections materialise, as shown by his beautiful chapter on the Garfagnana region and poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The Shelleys' love for the spa resort of Bagni di Lucca is well known, but what a smaller percentage of readers may be aware of is the debated question of whether Shelley actually undertook a poetic pilgrimage to the nearby shrine of San Pellegrino in Alpe between 12th and 13th August 1820, as indicated by Mary Shelley in her journal. The question becomes of wider interest since it was this trip that ostensibly inspired the writing of "The Witch of Atlas", but reaching the shrine in the space of a day was not an easy feat to accomplish.

The connection between hiking, reading and writing comes to the fore with utter felicity in this chapter, which shows Havelly literally following in the footsteps of Shelley in order to prove that he may have reached San Pellegrino in Alpe on foot thanks to a path that subsequently dropped out of use and was forgotten... The material dimension of hiking combines here with poetry when Havelly's own descriptions of the Apennine woods symbiotically resonate with lines from "The Witch of Atlas", ultimately inviting readers to rediscover both Shelley's poem and the Garfagnana valleys in the light of this happy literary conjunction.

As is hopefully apparent from my comments, Havelly's book is a pleasure to read, but reading it also amounts to a philosophical experience, like hiking, when the mind reaches a quieter state and opens up to a different kind of thinking. In the author's words, *Apennine Crossings* "affirms the value of slow encounters with remote landscapes" (9-10). It is about looking around oneself and noticing and describing, which can translate precisely into a burgeoning form of poetry, as previously hinted. The book also amounts to a meta-narrative reflection on the act of story-telling, enriching the experience of hiking in the here and now with a trans-temporal stream of lives and gazes, translating the present into a kind of augmented reality. These cultivated narrative digressions are moreover matched by a number of material detours, some of which are part and parcel of the Great Apennine Excursion while others are entirely unexpected.

As Havelly clarifies, *Apennine Crossings* includes “several accounts of travellers (including myself) getting lost.” (9) In the kind of pilgrimage he describes what matters is not reaching the ultimate destination, but rather the quality of the journey. Getting lost, as every true traveller knows, results at best in an act of serendipity, at worst in an adventure, the skirting of danger, the ordeal of fatigue and distress we would have never opted for willingly. These experiences become in turn a source of anecdotes that surprise and delight, often in a comic vein, as when a desperate author resorts to the trick of showing passing cars a 50,000 lire banknote in the attempt to obtain a much-needed lift...

I could go on describing the many beauties of *Apennine Crossings*, which resonate deeply with my own life-long experiences of the Apennines, but I will let readers discover the book by themselves. I cannot conclude these remarks, however, without addressing heartfelt thanks to Nick Havelly, whose passion for these mountains combines with a number of other qualities, starting from a welcome combination of cosmopolitanism and localism.

While collecting travelling impressions and related forms of Apennine experience, Havelly moves freely across a variety of boundaries, tracing connections between the experiences of medieval and modern Italian poets (from Dante to Dino Campana), British, American and continental travellers, Risorgimento fighters and WW2 soldiers who are often portrayed in their relations with the local population, from partisans to peasants... Yet, his attention to individuals and places in their singularity is never flagging. Each person and each place is worth his firm gaze, his authorial concentration, which stems from a lifetime of reading and studying and hiking. This unflinching interest, this form of deep-set respect for the singularity of every being and place and time is one of the great lessons of this book, which has much to teach us in an age of TikTok videos and other forms of shallow entertainment.

Apennine Crossings is vibrant with energy. It stems from concentration and demands concentration, but a quiet and meaningful concentration, the kind of concentration people used to find in the past, while we now often unconsciously pursue forms of unproductive tension. I would like to think there is a connection between Havelly’s imaginative focus and the application the locals instinctively practised while building a stone and wooden barn or

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even the absorption of a nest-building bird. We still need to seek this intensity in the accomplishing of an effort, as hiking teaches us. We also need to revere our being rooted in nature if we wish to avoid getting lost, this time in the unproductive maze to which the easy paths of consumerism lead.

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