

Review of The Book of Trespass

The author Nick Hayes is an established artist, illustrator and political cartoonist who has published four successful graphic novels and this is his first “conventional” book which is richly embellished with his own striking linocut illustrations.

The main theme of the book is his passionately expressed indignation that so much of our countryside is owned by such a tiny number of people and institutions, with the result that 92% of our land and 97% of our waterways are in private hands and so out of bounds to ordinary citizens. He responds to this indefensible state of affairs by embarking on a number of trespassing forays into private estates owned by wealthy landowners including the dukes of Norfolk and Buccleuch, the Earl of Carnarvon (Highclere Castle aka Downton Abbey) and Paul Dacre ex-editor of the Daily Mail.

Interwoven in all this is a wide range of excursions into history, folklore, politics and philosophy. He argues that the physical boundaries, the walls and fences, which separate the people from their land have their counterpart in social inequality and the divisions which separate people along lines of class, race, gender, health and income. The power of landownership that underpins so much injustice is wielded in perpetuity with no democratic checks or accountability, and has its origin often centuries ago in force or fraud.

He describes how many large private estates were originally financed by the profits from the slave trade or exploitation of the colonies and really now represent a form of domestic colonisation. English access laws, with their presumption of exclusion, are compared unfavourably with Scottish law with its presumption of access. He notes the absurdity of English law of trespass whereby no distinction is made between intruding into a remote corner of a 10,000 acre estate and tramping through someone’s back garden. And he emphasises that every single one of the trespasses in the book was carried out in precise accordance with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. As he says “we need the full right to roam; we need the right to camp and we need the right to make a fire. Without this we are treating the natural world like a museum, isolated exhibits of a culture long gone, some thing to be observed behind a red rope. How can we care about the life outside human walls, the world that exists beyond the Rights of Way and designated public spaces, if we can’t see it, hear it and experience it for ourselves.”

Henry George gets a favourable mention as does his Single Tax (Land Value Tax) remedy with its recognition that it is largely the community, not the landowner, that confers value on land and so deserves compensation through LVT.

Although the book is primarily concerned with access to land and the author is hoping to start a movement to increase access which readers are invited to join, it encompasses all aspects of the politics of land which are really all inseparable and include housing, equality,

power and freedom and as such it performs a useful service in dragging the politics of land into the daylight, a process not helped by our language in which the phrase “private property” can be applied correctly both to the biro in my breast pocket and to a landed estate of many thousands of acres.

You won't agree with everything that Nick Hayes writes in this book but I believe that you will be inspired by his passion and commitment and the extent of his research; I urge you to read it, confident that you won't be disappointed.