

# Walking by water

LAURA MARCUS

Olivia Laing

TO THE RIVER

A journey beneath the surface  
283pp. Canongate. £16.99.  
978 1 84767 792 1

During one hot week in June, the writer and journalist Olivia Laing carried out her plan to walk the forty-two miles of the river Ouse in Sussex, from its source near Haywards Heath to its outlet in the sea at Newhaven. "I am haunted by waters", she writes at the opening of *To the River*, in which she uncovers a history, or histories, "compiled by way of water", fluid, transient and "full of submerged life". As the book wends its way along the course of the Ouse, we move between myths, historical narratives and literary episodes, and the experiences and perceptions of the present moment.

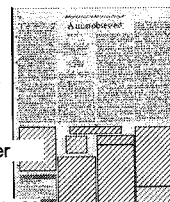
The Ouse is not a major waterway and the histories which, for Laing, were most closely bound up with its course are separated by seven centuries and are of very different kinds: the Battle of Lewes, in 1264, and the suicide by drowning of Virginia Woolf in 1941. Laing writes that the Battle of Lewes, in which Simon de Montfort defeated the royal army, was a shaping story for the nation and for the landscape: "There are places where the past gathers as thickly and as insubstantially as pollen". There are echoes here of the "psycho-geographical" writing that has been so influential in recent years: this includes the idea that history – and particularly the violent occurrences of the past – makes its mark on the places in which they have occurred, which become peculiarly charged sites. Laing, however, touches lightly on this. She adopts a questioning approach to the ways in which the past affects the present. Her book works through associations and recurrences, but she is also aware of her own "apophenia", a tendency to seek "meaningful patterns in the scattered, senseless data of the everyday".

Any construction of past events, moreover, brings with it the knowledge that "the future is also contingent and to read every event in terms of what is yet to occur disjoins the

moment in which life is lived". Laing asserts this as she considers the recurrent watery imagery of Virginia Woolf's writings, and it serves to counter the view that there was an inexorable movement in Woolf's life towards her watery death. The impulse towards life was as strong in Woolf, Laing argues, as the death drive. Woolf's words – from her diaries, letters and fiction – are very much present to Laing as she makes, and recounts, her journey. She observes how intimately linked walking and writing were for Woolf, who noted in her diaries that sentences and stories came into being as she strode across the Sussex Downs (or, indeed, strolled through London squares).

Laing does not explore the longer history of walking and writing, which would take in Rousseau and Wordsworth as well as Woolf, and within which her own book has its place. It is the act of solitary walking which can result in more intense perceptions and sensations than companionable life tends to afford, and which brings into being the dialogue of the self with itself that ultimately becomes the matter of the written text. Laing's project also brings to mind the work of W. G. Sebald, and in particular *The Rings of Saturn*, whose opening sentence runs: "In August 1992 . . . I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work". Sebald's re-inscriptions and subversions of travel writing, with their digressive, embedded stories and their unanticipated narrative routings, will undoubtedly have many imitators, though his texts are, ultimately, not reproducible.

Laing's "journey beneath the surface" does not run as deep as Sebald's, but it has its own strength and fascination. She conveys vision and sensation – the glimpse of a bird in flight, the stickiness of a hot day – with great clarity and vividness. She is a flesh-and-blood narrator, bringing herself into the frame of what she describes, but the "I", to borrow Virginia Woolf's words, never blocks the sky. Her acquired knowledge of the history of place and people along her chosen route is interwoven skilfully with her record of the moment as she lives it. She writes powerfully of the



Source: Times Literary Supplement {Main}  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Friday 9, September 2011  
Page: 22  
Area: 289 sq. cm  
Circulation: ABC 32253 Weekly  
BRAD info: page rate £2,828.80, scc rate £20.80  
Phone: 020 7782 3000  
Keyword: Canongate

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human shaping of the landscape through which she travels, and of the ways in which the natural world reclaims space on this spoiled earth. Of Olivia Laing's prose, we could simply say that words have a way with her and that her delight in language is at one with her absorption in the living world.