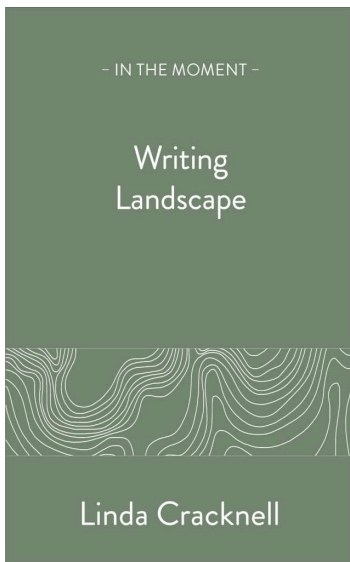


'Writing Landscape', by Linda Cracknell

Review by Matthew Macdonald



In this small volume of essays, Linda Cracknell explores both physical landscapes - crossing through Scotland, France and the south coast of England - and the inner landscapes she inhabits when writing works of fiction and non-fiction. Wide-ranging in its study of 'the dialogue between landscape and creative processes', *Writing Landscape* is a revealing and meditative reflection on writing and the facilitation of writing.

In the opening essay 'Script and Scrape', Cracknell comments that 'The small weight of a notebook and pen in my pocket is my passport to feeling alive'. *Writing Landscape* documents the natural world with the observational analysis of a scientist or writer, but it also scrutinises why people write and what pushes writers to explore and document in the way they do. Cracknell calls for a purposeful engagement with the natural world when writing on landscape and offers personal explorations into how this craft can be better understood and practised, turning at times to those in whose footsteps she follows. Having been a vocal proponent of the inescapable connection between the act of writing and the art of being grounded in the surrounding natural world, Robert Louis Stevenson is a prominent figure in two of the essays, 'The Writer, the Island and the Inspiration' and 'The Great Affair: Writing with the Flow'. The term 'great affair'

comes from a Stevenson quote that Cracknell includes in the text of the book - ‘... The great affair is to move...’ - and the sentiment of the often-omitted extra phrase - ‘*And to write about it afterwards*’ - is a recognition that writers need experience as subject matter.

Movement is a key part of Cracknell’s explorations and travels, evident from the opening line of the volume - ‘I pedalled from the Highlands to the Lowlands over a small bridge crossing the Inchewan Burn.’ Whether cycling across the country, walking around the island of Erraid, or river-swimming in the French village of Grez, Cracknell is almost continually in motion in these essays, as are the readers who are swept along in the slipstream of her enthusiasm.

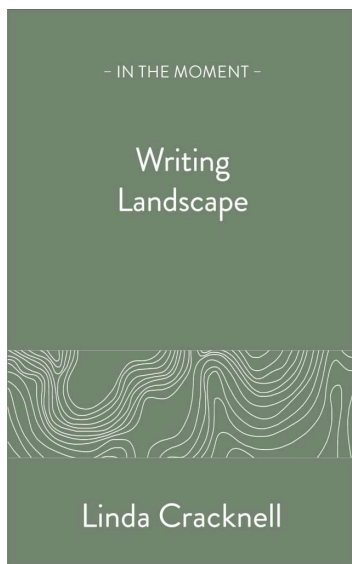
As expected from a collection focused on the natural world, Cracknell’s deep engagement with and love of nature runs through the essays, particularly woods and the coast. The seascapes of the Rosneath peninsula in Argyll and Bute are the backdrop to ‘Lunar Cycling’, an essay that examines our relationship to the ocean and how it is so close yet in some ways so far apart from us. Cracknell finds a bike pedal washed ashore that has, during its time at sea, acquired a nest of barnacles. The level of attention paid to the barnacles pushes them to the forefront of the essay, almost but not quite as central as the discussions of ebb and flow, turn and return, and the lunar pull on the human soul.

What elevates these essays from mere ‘discussions of landscape and writing’ is their sheer depth and range. The connections drawn and comparisons made across each one make them feel far more than the few pages in which they are contained, with most of the essays being around seven to ten pages in length. The profusion of content in such a small space is one of the best things about this book. Want an essay that touches on art, creation, archaeology, remembrance, forgetting, Iron Age wheelhouses, found poetry, beachcombing all in the space of six pages? Then ‘Getting Away From It All’ is for you.

For all that these essays are interlinked with the natural world and the flow of nature and life, Cracknell still makes space for the city. ‘Street Play in Edinburgh’ features the same themes of motion, play as creation, observation and interdisciplinary learning that marks the other walking essays, but transposed over to the thickets of buildings rather than trees. That a city has been constructed doesn’t make it any less of a landscape to be walked.

These essays, presented in a book no bigger than a pocket notebook, are a fantastic insight into the creative process and the necessity of the wilderness to the construction, presentation and consumption of art. Whether to help your own creativity or simply to learn the art of Serious Noticing, this book is an inspiring read for every writer or nature-lover.

Writing Landscape is published by Saraband



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