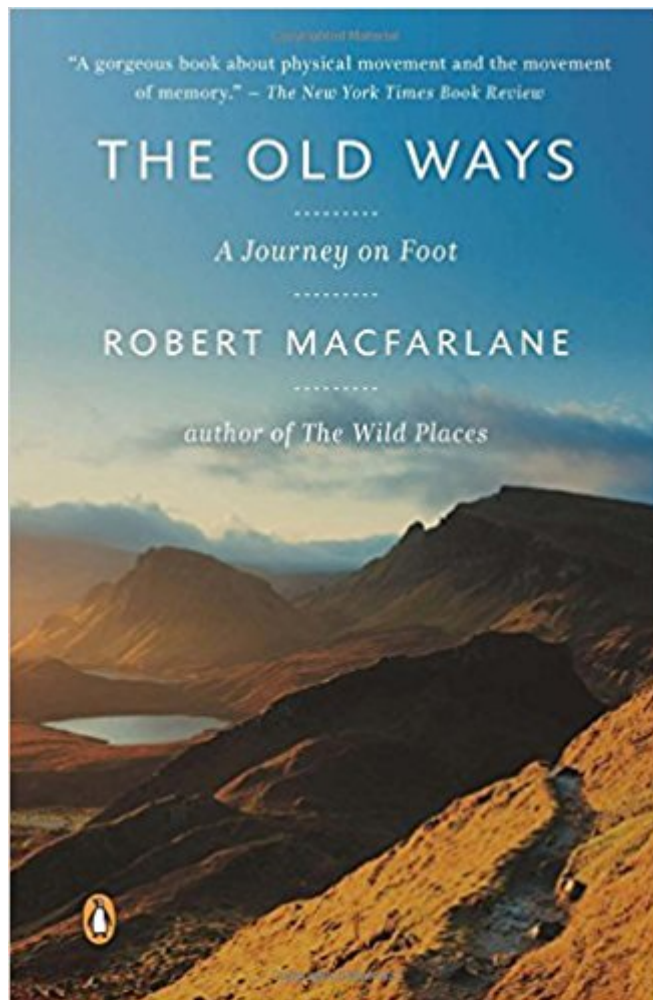


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# The Old Ways: A Journey On Foot



## Synopsis

The acclaimed author of *The Wild Places* examines the subtle ways we are shaped by the landscapes through which we move. In this exquisitely written book, which folds together natural history, cartography, geology, and literature, Robert Macfarlane sets off to follow the ancient routes that crisscross both the landscape of the British Isles and its waters and territories beyond. The result is an immersive, enthralling exploration of the voices that haunt old paths and the stories our tracks tell. Macfarlane's journeys take him from the chalk downs of England to the bird islands of the Scottish northwest, from Palestine to the sacred landscapes of Spain and the Himalayas. He matches strides with the footprints made by a man five thousand years ago near Liverpool, sails an open boat far out into the Atlantic at night, and commingles with walkers of many kinds, discovering that paths offer a means not just of traversing space but also of feeling, knowing, and thinking.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A literature professor and prodigious perambulator, Macfarlane has walked in England, Scotland's Isle of Lewis, and elsewhere and describes his experiences here. While descriptive observations of trails and vistas inform his presentation, Macfarlane's animating idea is the construction of a meditative sensibility that involves imagining history, exulting in nature, and interpreting literature. Macfarlane confides that his inspiration for walking-writing is Edward Thomas, author of *The Icknield Way* (1913), a foot travelogue that Macfarlane's

loosely replicates, routewise; England's southern hills, the chalk downs, are where Thomas ambled. Macfarlane's contemporary peregrinations partake of a fine-grained feeling for the pathway, encounters with fellow itinerants, and the occasional ghost-haunted campsite. With a penchant for neologism and literary allusion, Macfarlane seeks out ancient footpaths across an Essex mudflat, on a section of the pilgrim's way to Spain's Santiago de Compostela, within a circumambulation of a Chinese mountain sacred to Buddhism, and sea routes around Lewis. Concluding with Thomas's biography he was killed in WWI Macfarlane renders his feelings toward landscapes in ruminative, mysterious hues. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Praise for The Old Ways: "With a steady command of the literature and history of each place he visits, [Macfarlane] tries to read landscapes back into being. His sentences bristle with the argot of cartographers, geologists, zoologists, and botanists. • The New

Yorker "Macfarlane explores the meditative aspects of being a pedestrian|not so much a travelogue as a travel meditation, it favors lush prose, colorful digressions|if you've ever had the experience, while walking, of an elusive thought finally coming clear or an inspiration surfacing after a long struggle, The Old Ways will speak to you eloquently and persuasively. • The Seattle

Times "A backpack of assorted expeditions charted by a writer whose poetic and scientific skills are equal to one another|there are some splendid set pieces. • The Wall Street

Journal "A

wonderfully meandering account of the author's peregrinations and perambulations through England, Scotland, Spain, Palestine, and Sichuan. A particular gift is his ability to bring a remarkably broad and varied range of voices to bear on his own pathways and to do so with a pleasingly impressionist yet tenderly precise style.

Aengus Woods, themillions.com "Macfarlane seems to know and have read everything his every sentence rewrites the landscape in language crunchy and freshly minted and deeply textured. Surely the most accomplished (and erudite) writer on place to have come along in years."

Pico Iyer "Luminous, possessing a seemingly paradoxical combination of the dream-like and the hyper-vigilant, *The Old Ways* is, as with all of Macfarlane's work, a magnificent read. Each sentence can carry astonishing discovery."

Rick Bass "In Macfarlane, British travel writing has a formidable new champion. Macfarlane is read above all for the beauty of his prose and his wonderfully innovative and inventive way with language he can write exquisitely about anywhere.

William Dalrymple, *The Observer* "In this intricate, sensuous, haunted book, each journey is part of other journeys and there are no clear divisions to be made the walking of paths is, to [Macfarlane], an education, and symbolic, too, of the very process by which we learn things: testing, wandering about a bit, hitting our stride, looking ahead and behind.

Alexandra Harris, *The Guardian*

This is a memorable book. It proceeds at its own pace, drawing the reader in slowly but inexorably until it is only with the greatest reluctance that can one take a break in reading. The book is about walking, landscapes, and the mutual effects of landscapes on people and of people on landscapes. But that short summary does not do it justice, nor can I find one that does. The only way to find out is to read it and be patient, just let the author's writing work its magic on you. The paths that Macfarlane takes us on are varied, sharing only that they are old and traditional. Their precise location is not important, nor is their length. What we gain from this book is insight into the nature of the relationship between people and natural places, how places shape people just as people shape places. Several people, living and dead, accompany Macfarlane on his perambulations. We learn little about their personal lives, or about Macfarlane himself. This does not matter; even the living have dematerialized, become, like the dead, wraiths of the landscape. The one exception is Edward Thomas, a walker and writer whose life straddled the end of the Nineteenth Century, who recurs throughout the book. Macfarlane devotes the penultimate chapter to the story of Edward's life and death. Thomas's life turns out to

be unexceptional: Except in his passion for the English landscape, his personal life was one of mundane selfishness. This chapter jarringly broke the spell with which the book had captured me: The final short chapter being insufficient to heal the wound. Notwithstanding this disappointing ending, the book is one of the best that I have ever read and will remain in my mind for a very long time.

Loved the slow ambling pace of this book. Each chapter is a treat. I've always enjoyed books about walking and slow travel. Luckily for we readers, Mr Macfarlane is able to describe his observations in poetic prose with deviations into bits of history and other musings. I didn't want the book to end.

I love *The Old Ways*. I read it on my iPad which was perfect so that I could highlight the paths and find their images on the Internet. Plus I could look up the definitions of the words that Macfarlane uses. He has an awesome, far out and precise vocabulary. He introduced me to the philosophy of walking and made me appreciate why I love to walk, especially on old paths and sea roads. He made me want to know more every step of the way, especially about literary figures and artists that are part of the old ways. Because of *The Old Ways*, I am reading Thomas's *The Icknield Way*.. My book group in San Francisco has selected it for our next book so I'm rereading it, and I love it even more. It's also on Audible, by the way, which would be another great way to read the book -- listen to it while walking or while driving down one of our old ways, like The El Camino Real in California. By the way, after *The Old Ways*, you will want to read Macfarlane's other books in the trilogy.

Robert Macfarlane writes well and engagingly, and *THE OLD WAYS* does not disappoint the reader. You join Macfarlane for his wanderings and it is every bit like taking a long and interesting walk with an erudite good friend. And, like all good friends, you may not always agree (I found one of Macfarlane's disparaging references to another author both out of place and petty) but that doesn't wreck the trip. Most of the historic references and mentions of other authors, particularly W.H. Hudson, made me want more information. I like a book that peaks interests and broadens your horizons without being preachy or pedantic. This was my first experience with Macfarlane and I am quite sure it will not be my last.

This is a wonderful book for anyone with a deep sense of place, any place. Walking for pleasure is always a mediation on place, a way to engage with world around us on many levels. While I've never walked in any of the places described in the book, I've spent much of my life walking the old

ways of the high desert of the Colorado Plateau. Macfarlane has taught me more about seeing my personal geography in a new light than most of the trail guides and maps occupying my bookshelves. If there is some place that you keep returning to in your dreams, this is the book for you.

Great book! I am a big fan of Macfarlane. I ordered this book both in print format and as an audiobook (Audible). The writing is superb!

Wow, what a book on meaning and connection, and so well written. A wonderful book for your own memory of what's really real, and important ~ the ancient cultures and footpaths that have known and loved the land as source of self and community. Very moving and inspiring.

It took me through the first chapter to fall into the book and after that i was trapped. I loved the words. Similiar to reading an Ivan Doig book whose books always seem to be like listening to music. I purchased this book for a dear friend who would rather be out on a hike that just about anything else and has spent time in several of the locations Robert wrote of in the book. I got it to give as a gift, but must also get a copy for my own library. A book I know I will go back to again and again.

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