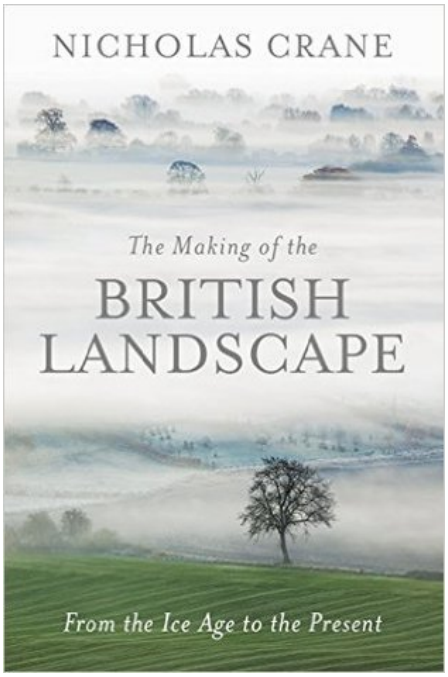

The Making of the British Landscape: From the Ice Age to the Present

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Nicholas Crane's new book brilliantly describes the evolution of Britain's countryside and cities. It is part journey, part history, and it concludes with awkward questions about the future of Britain's landscapes.

Nick Crane's story begins with the melting tongues of glaciers and the emergence of a gigantic game-park tentatively being explored by a vanguard of Mesolithic adventurers who have taken the long, northward hike across the land bridge from the continent. The Iron Age develops into a pre-Roman 'Golden Era' and Nick Crane looks at what the Romans did (and didn't) contribute to the British landscape. Major landscape 'events' (Black Death, enclosures, urbanisation, recreation, etc.) are fully described and explored, and he weaves in the role played by geology in shaping our cities, industry and recreation, the effect of climate (and the Gulf Stream), and of global economics (the Lancashire valleys were formed by overseas markets). The co-presenter of BBC's *Coast* also covers the extraordinary benefits bestowed by a 6,000-mile coastline. The 10,000-year story of the British landscape culminates in the 21st century, which is set to be one of the most extreme centuries of change since the Ice Age.

Nick Crane brilliantly illustrates how Britain and its landscapes became so wonderfully diverse.

The Making of the British Landscape: From the Ice Age to the Present Details

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From Reader Review The Making of the British Landscape: From the Ice Age to the Present for online ebook

Ruth Dipple says

This is a very broad-brush approach, interspersed with examples, which works up to a point. The main drawbacks are a complete lack of maps and plans, and a lack of specificity about the examples, particularly in the prehistoric section. For instance, the author describes on page 27 a lake with evidence of dwellings, and you think 'I wonder where that is' but there is no way of satisfying one's curiosity. There were many times when I thought 'I would visit that if I knew where it was'. The same is true of the many Roman sites that are not given their modern English name, even in brackets.

I guess the book will have done its work if the reader is prompted to follow up the chapter bibliographies with further reading.

By the way, the plural of 'temenos' is not 'temenoi' as temenos is neuter 3rd declension.

Roger Woods says

This is a large volume in which Nicholas Crane presents a wide sweep of the geographical history of Britain from the ice age to the present day. He is particularly good on the early settlement of Britain giving an insight into how our earliest ancestors came to make their lives in this "sceptered isle" (except it wasn't an island then!). This explains why the earliest Britains settled in areas which today we would regard as either inhabitable or certainly very difficult to live in. The climate changes over the centuries run like a thread through the narrative and the author also selects many examples in the different eras of history. I was surprised he does not mention the National Trust although he does refer to the National Parks.

Alex Sarll says

I began this book on a trip to the West Country, which I always think of as Britain's heartland, and where the decision to punish the Lib Dems for coalition with the Tories by instead electing Tories was part of what made the EU referendum possible. As such, I would often find myself looking up from the early chapters across the vales, and wrestling with the great mystery: how can such a beautiful land, which once made the world shake, have come to be populated by such petty, self-defeating nincompoops? I intend no especial slight on Devon here; it's a synecdoche for the whole damn nation, at least for as long as the nation holds together. After all, it's in London that our idiot leaders today pulled the trigger to fire the shot that maims the land; I can't help picturing them as a gaggle of stupid children getting ready for a Fisher King lookalike competition, all so very convinced they look so terribly majestic as the big kids of the tabloid press egg the knife party on. How topical, then, to be reminded of the cycles in British deep time. Elm disease, say; we all know about the Dutch version that denuded the countryside last century, but it was news to me that much the same had already happened millennia earlier. Similarly, we might consider Article 50 the second-time-as-farce of the tsunami which 8,000 years ago devastated the east of England-to-be, pretty much finished off Doggerland, and thus finally separated Britain from the continent. The archaeological record suggests this made our forebears increasingly isolated, fearful and backwards - though gung-ho Brexiteers unimpressed by

such defeatist talk will be delighted to hear that catching up with Europe technologically, and then overtaking it, was the work of a mere 4,000 years. In the interim, we seem to have spent most of our time and effort on dotting the landscape with enormous cock-shaped temenoi, and accumulating the ancient world's biggest rubbish heaps. Presumably this is what that *Question Time* audience member - clearly an expert on the nation's history - meant when she talked about how Britain had been a light unto the world for thousands of years. Certainly it seems a plausible foretaste of what we can expect from a Britain freed from 'red tape' and 'cosmopolitan elites'.

Enough. It's not fair on Crane to use him as a stick with which to beat the junta; yes, the back cover does have the *Daily Heil* describing him as a treasure, but he's clearly a good enough egg to delight in using the archaic spelling 'cuntery' far more often than is strictly necessary when quoting antiquary John Leland. From the withdrawal of the glaciers through to the ascent of the Shard, he manages that incantatory quality which sheer directed accumulation of facts can sometimes take on*. Very occasionally there's a statement which took me aback - the bald assertion that "Rituals required numbers" seems at odds with everything from shamanic vision quests to Western ceremonial magic - but for the most part even assertions regarding the uncertain cultures of prehistory feel like they've earned the sense of sweeping plausibility with which they're presented. There's far too much here to take in; I'll remember bits (the importance of hazel, which I've never really considered as part of the arboreal A-list, to early humans) while knowing that for much of the rest I'll be returning to this as a reference book. But it is worth reading the whole grand sweep of it, the British history book other British history books take place within. Be warned: every 20 pages or so, you will run into a cringeworthy phrasing which suggests a geography teacher trying to be hip (an advance in axe technology, for instance, described as "weapons of mass construction") - I can only presume these are connected to Crane's appearances on *Coast*, the Sunday teatime perennial seemingly bent on proving everything fractals told us about how from one perspective Britain's coastline could be considered to be infinitely long. Sigh at them if you will; I did, but the quality of the book as a whole is well worth those occasional blots on the *Landscape*.

*If you don't like 'We Didn't Start the Fire' or the entranced lists of heroes in *Kavalier & Clay*, I make no promises that you'll get the same delight from this as I did.

John Manley says

"to care about a place, you mus first know its story"

A great read that gives uses the changes in the British landscape as a view into the forces behind the events of history. Nicholas Crane's narrative on the British landscape forms a perfect framework on which to base many a more detailed read of more specialist books. It inspired me to go delving into the OS on line maps to explore the sites he described- here are some of the pins that fascinated me, (based on the WWII chapter).

Dean Hill Royal Naval Armaments depot:
https://osmaps.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/5...

Royal Navy Propellant factory
https://osmaps.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/5...

https://navsbooks.wordpress.com/

Paul says

Britain is a unique country, not only does our little island have some of the planets oldest rocks in the Hebrides, but it is still being formed by waves in the present day. Starting way back in the Mesolithic, Nick Crane takes us back to the time when the glaciers were retreating and the first Britons made their way across the land bridge from the continent and made their home here as the land surrendered to the waves. When we became an island, our resources and place on the gulf stream made it attractive for all sorts of visitors. The Romans were the first to try, but succeeded on the second attempt. And have been followed by a whole variety of others, including Saxons, Vikings, Normans and the Dutch. Each wave of people shaped and moulded the land to their needs leaving us with the landscape and cities that we had today. These ages were punctuated with significant events; wars, plagues, the land grabs of the enclosures and the industrial revolution; adding their own to what we have today.

For a small island we have so much history that is both deeply fascinating and complex. Nick Crane has had a good stab at distilling all of that into a single book, but it cannot be anymore that an overview. It is fairly well written, the narrative is full of detail and fascinating anecdotes, but I’m not completely sure why he has ended up writing a history book, though there is some overlap in what he has done with Coast. Overall, it is not bad. I have read most of his books so far, and I must say that I prefer his travel books to this.

Grim-Anal King says

I have no idea of the accuracy of this account. Presumably this is an area where no description could be comprehensive, so inevitably it comes down to the author's choice of hobby horses. Again I have no clue how representative Crane's choice is. The writing is pretty engaging (anyone who can make BC (or whatever they call it these days) vaguely interesting in any medium is doing very well), so although progress was slow it didn't feel like a desperate slog (in contrast to life in the British landscape in....).

I could have done with a little more signposting as we bounced around the country and between decades and the book would have benefited from some maps. These would have lubricated a lengthy journey, but I made it to the destination which is where I've always been aside from that spell living abroad.

Jt Raymond says

a very readable book. a new perspective considering man's history viewed from the impact on our landscape.

I felt it ran out of steam when it reached the modern day focusing on certain areas rather than our impact as a whole on our landscape. but overall a good read.

Daniel B-G says

In the end, I had to call time on this. I read this in two bursts, the first tailed off as I really struggled to make

progress, which I ascribed to time of the year and mood, the second attempt was much shorter, as I realised that the issues I'd had before weren't an artefact of circumstance but an unbridgeable gulf between us.

The central issue, it's directionless. Beyond the natural course of time's arrow, there isn't really any structure that I can tell, though it keeps hinting that it would like to have one. Lots of potentially interesting information is included, though more often than not it's just data, meaningless static that tells no story. Sentences are structured as if there is going to be something revealed, some conclusion reached only for it to fizzle. There are hints every so often of a larger thesis that is being built towards, but it is included in such an oblique way to be of little use. There were several bits that proved quite interesting, saving it from a complete trashing, but not enough to make we to slog through the remaining 300 pages.

Richard Carter says

This book wasn’t what I expected. Not that that’s a bad thing.

From its title, I assumed *The Making of the British Landscape* was going to be all about geophysics, geology and physical geography: plate tectonics, mountain-building, fault lines, erosion, glaciation, cwms, clints, grykes, drumlins, escarpments, longshore-drift, all that malarkey we did in geography. While glaciation, in particular, features prominently in the early chapters, and the impact of climate-change is a recurring theme, this book is far more about how the land was altered over thousands of years by human beings: it’s about how *we* made the British landscape with our tree-felling, earthworks, religious observances, settlements, farming practices, industry, transport networks, and so on.

The former archaeologist in me was pleased to see Nicholas Crane dedicate around a third of this book to British prehistory. We tend to forget the majority of our island story occurred *before* the Roman Conquest—some of it, indeed, as Crane describes, before Britain was even an island. But we do, as you would expect, eventually get round to the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans, and everyone else, bringing us right through to the current day. It is a magnificent and highly enjoyable read.

I did have a few minor quibbles with the book. In the introduction to his bibliography, Crane explains his decision to avoid disrupting the narrative with 2,721 footnotes. Although I understand why he did this, in the early chapters in particular, I was sometimes frustrated by not being sure which statements were generally agreed views, and which were Crane’s own conjectures. Either way, judging by the extensive bibliography, it is clear that Crane has done his homework.

In the same early chapters, Crane also occasionally adopts the device of not referring to prehistoric and early historic places by their modern names. Whether this is for dramatic effect, or to avoid anachronistic labels, I found it irritating: *Where the hell is he actually talking about?* I kept wondering. In most cases, I could guess an answer by consulting the bibliography—but I felt I shouldn’t have to guess.

Finally, as a proud inhabitant of the region, I was disappointed by the relatively small amount of space in this book dedicated to the North of England, compared with Scotland, Wales, and (in particular) the South of England. But this is a complaint I could (and do) make about many books.

But, minor quibbles aside, I thoroughly enjoyed this ambitious and entertaining book.

Recommended.

Judith says

A very informative overview of the history of the British Landscape. Much more comprehensive than Hoskins book about the English landscape. Well written and very readable.

Geevee says

Enjoyable, informative and a solid overview of the British landscape from the time of land formations and the ice age to modernity.

The achievement here is to fit in a sweeping tour of a geography and the changes made by man that touches everyone who lives or visits Britain.

The coverage and detail was big but at the same time readable; although at times I wanted more info that explained some aspects but that is this reader. What worked for me was how influential some aspects were: I knew of the marks made by Rome and their roads and Hadrian's wall, and of course railways, canals and airfields but I'd not considered (in this books context) that of the clearances, the Black Death and trade. This last by the granting of a market and how that influenced not only the town where the market was granted by royal charter but the surrounding areas.

Transport and warfare and industry (from early bronze making to modern) feature heavily. Sometimes as strands but more often of course as linked partners. Again the Roman roads built to supply outward garrisons to naval/mercantile shipping facilities (dry docks, ports and storage facilities) to airfields - some 4000 by WWII's end - and airports. One area I was pleased to see the author cover was that of defences. Those defences that register with the majority of people such as castles and earthworks but the perhaps today lesser known pillboxes, tank traps, underground bunkers and factories of WWII.

Surprisingly for me the author quotes a statistic at the end of the book: 98% of Britain has not been built on. For those of us living in here, and in England especially, this can seem a far-fetched figure, but a journey from London to Birmingham and onto Newcastle by train - that iron road that transformed Britain's towns, cities and livelihoods in the 19th century - does help remind one of the green and pleasant land we have under our feet here; importantly too is how yesterday's grey, smoke-filled, poisonous industrial landscapes can rejuvenate. The challenge, as the author ends the book on, is how do we keep making changes to our landscape that also means we continue to nurture, protect and use the wealth and natural richness without destroying, poisoning or covering over habitats and countryside.

Andrew McClarnon says

This has been one of those books that keep on prompting a look at the map. Its been a fascinating journey, in

skilled hands that have found a balance between the scholarly, and a sense of the story. I particularly enjoyed the way the author occasionally stepped into the story, for example when we visited the 'Claudian invasion ditches' with him at Richborough Castle. The long eons of pre - history where way marked, and somehow the Romans seem to have become recent ancestors. This one will sit on the shelf handy for frequent reference.

Lord Zion says

My copy of this came with a major printing error 290 pages in: a section from an entirely different book appeared, removing the same number of pages from Nicholas' book! Thankfully, the replacement is OK so I can resume reading without the confusion of trying to work out why a witch called Zelda suddenly appeared.

I started another book whilst waiting for the replacement but, unless this book takes a drastic u-turn in the last 100 pages or so, I see no reason why I cannot rate it as 5 star right now. Fascinating read.

ClareT says

Nicholas Crane looks at the changes within the landscape in Britain in terms of human settlements and the effect they had on the wilderness that was Britain after the Ice Age. He looks as ups and downs in population whether through climatic cycles or pestilence and invasion. The making of some of the early monuments and barrows is discussed including how long they would have taken to build / dig which did put things into context. He also covers some of the changes in buildings in the larger towns - including Roman baths and temples through to more modern additions to architecture.

I went through various cycles with this book. I found the early parts of the book really difficult. It made me realise that my knowledge of the British Isles is based on towns, rather than rivers or geological features. Of course 10,000 years ago there were no towns. And, not coming from the south of England I found it difficult to work out where some of the areas were based on them being downland or near a particular river. A map would have been really helpful in the first couple of parts of the book - but there was nothing to help. Even a reference to modern day Britain might have been useful. I didn't want to resort to the internet and interrupt my reading.
The account from medieval Britain onwards was easier to follow, but whilst I realise London was by far the largest city, I am sure there were others that were just as important within the landscape, but most were glossed over.
That said I did actually enjoy this book, much more than I thought I would when I was trawling through the earlier sections. I do need to improve my knowledge of the British Isles and I did learn quite a lot. I found some of the accounts of the settlements in Orkney fascinating and was glad there were illustrative photos.
The book is connected together because of the constant reference to 'place' - whether this is legitimate I can't say, but it did feel a bit of a laboured point as it was brought up again and again.
It does have a lot of references in the back, a couple of which I am going to buy, but, if the book is ever reprinted please include a map because I almost gave up reading in the first few chapters.

Georgy Wilband says

I liked reading this but I have issues with the seemingly 'skippy' editorial style at times. Long witty

descriptions have you waiting and scratching your head until you get to the end of a whole paragraph/section to realise 'oh that is what he's on about'.
As a geographer and somewhat naïve historian I also have issues with some of his 'facts' - such as, claiming that Wales had no towns in periods where I am absolutely certain that at least Carmarthen was a town from and indeed before Roman times as I am sure were others - there is a lack of flow in his chapters, they skip, they stagnate and sometimes they are absolute gems of writing. I would recommend it to anyone who has an interest in landscape and history but as a serious tome for research it is but a starting step. I feel overall that there is a lot missing from Crane's stumbling walk into Britain's Landscape History. I forgive him his rambling style however, as it was indeed overall enjoyable.
