

“Palestinian Walks” a personal review.

The book lent to me by a friend as it was about landscape. It is also about Palestine in which I have a deep emotional interest having taught at the American University of Beirut during 1965/6. There I worked with and enjoyed the company of many Palestinians including the department head Professor Ziad Beydoun, Oxford PhD, who had mapped the geology of the Wadi Hadramaut,. One person in particular remains always in my thoughts, a student once from Tul Karm, where very early on in the occupation of their land by Jewish settlers, her family, a notable one, had lost home, land and orange groves. So reading this book had a special significance for me. I write this at the time of the Gaza Incursion now being called the Gaza Massacre (660 hundred dead on one side 6 dead on the other) and am fiercely but ineffectively pro Palestinian.

“Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape” by Raja Shehadeh.

Published in 2007 by Profile Books, London EC1R 0JH.

The author takes a series of walks through landscapes that he knew as a child. They are not huge walks and they span year from the 1970's up to today. They cross both land still in the ownership of Palestinian villagers and land taken by the Israeli Government. His drives to points where he can access these walks is often difficult in that many areas have been cut up by new roads, blocked off by restrictive notices or encircled by settlement. Where once he knew the small village and the fields of named farmers stretching out from them, he now passes urban expansions and lands expropriated. For him the old lands with their *qasrs* — little agricultural ‘castles’ — are beautiful fusions of work, land and love for place and a part of his childhood.

But Shehadeh is a human rights lawyer and spends his life representing Palestinians whose land is to be ‘legally expropriated’. He is fighting a long and losing battle and views the menacing urban sprawl of Israel’s settlements — with all the modern American style infrastructural engineering that accompanies it — with dismay. He and his people are alienated from their own places, their landscapes their way of life and their one time rights. As a walker with his English wife he goes in fear of being challenged by the soldiery and by armed vigilant settlers. He has been made an outsider in his own landscape.

I ask myself how different all this is from the urban sprawl that ruins many one time lonely rural places in England. There is a difference and a fundamental one. I cast my mind back to land expropriations by Normans or the English colonisation of the quality land in Ireland. How the dominated and abused are obliged to live as second class people with their new landed masters.

The book takes a number of walks and comes to some reconciliation but only as one is reconciled to a sorely bruised head after years of smashing it against a wall. It is both a deeply moving and a frightening book. It portrays landscapes of fear. And should be on your reading list.

Bud Young

My personal views are not necessarily in line with those of LRG.