



**Kerri Andrews, *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking*  
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Reviewed by

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Three days after I began reading Kerri Andrews's *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking*, I was 'pinged' by the NHS track and trace app and told to self-isolate for eight days. Over the last year it seems many of us have rediscovered the importance of, as well as a love for, walking and being outdoors. As one such person, the irony of being confined to my small London flat while reading the histories of notable women who walked was not lost on me. Scanning the contents page, I was excited to see fellow London-dwellers such as Virginia Woolf included there. As well as familiarising me with these important and rich histories, I hoped the book would provide some escapism and inspiration to walk more after my eight-day self-isolation sentence was spent, and I was not disappointed.

*Wanderers* is a carefully structured volume with separate chapters devoted to each of the ten women Andrews has selected for the study, ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day. These are ordered chronologically for the most part, and each chapter concludes with a brief but engaging description of Andrews's own walking in relation to that of the woman described. Andrews finishes the volume with a chapter on 'The Female Tradition' and a 'Coda', which are less biographical than the main body of the text. Throughout the volume, Andrews describes the threats faced, and attacks endured by women for whom walking is important. If the act of walking was also an act of defiance against such threats for some of the women Andrews writes about, this point is slightly

weakened by the positions of privilege, whether due to skin colour or economic circumstance, held by all those considered in the text.

Beginning with eighteenth-century English poet, linguist, and classicist Elizabeth Carter, Andrews provides a compelling overview of the importance to Carter of the act of walking and its impact on both her writing and her sense of self. Walking the Kent countryside where she lived provided 'stimulation for her intellectual pursuits' but, just as importantly in Andrews's description, allowed Carter to momentarily escape her upper-middle-class social status so that 'she might exist simply as a human' (38, 45). Perhaps Carter's frequent visits to, and subsequent retreats from, London society increased her desire for escapism by walking the countryside. Interspersed with extracts from letters and memoirs, the book quickly builds an entertaining image of Carter as an adventurous rebel, 'playful, light-hearted and whimsical', who aspired to be accused of vagrancy due to her extensive roaming (42), although her economic and social privilege would have prevented this. From Andrews's descriptions, Carter's intellectual achievements appear staggering, and Andrews credits these to her 'life spent almost entirely as a walker' (56). For Carter, the act of walking inspired and helped to produce the many great works for which she became known.

In the chapter on Dorothy Wordsworth, Andrews makes the argument that she has unjustly been ignored as a great walker due to her brother's fame and his well-documented walking endeavours. This is an argument she develops over the course of the volume, showing how historical sexism has often concealed the achievements of the women considered. Andrews details how Wordsworth engaged in a process of first creating and then recollecting memories through her repetition of favourite walking routes, and argues that walking 'was how she understood and manifested her relationships with those she loved' (82). In Andrews's evocation, it is as though Dorothy's pacing of the Lake District resurrected lost loved ones and allowed past experiences to be not merely remembered but felt in their fullness once again. Walking was equally a 'means of experiencing both her new-found independence and her new home' – once settled in Grasmere, Wordsworth could at last put down some roots and become the self-reliant and autonomous woman she had long aspired to be (61).

Working through the pedestrian endeavours and histories of women walkers including Ellen Weeton, Sarah Stoddart Hazlitt, and Harriet Martineau, Andrews moves on to develop a rich cartography of women who walked, the land they came to know, the impact of walking on their lives, work, and selfhoods, and the differing restrictions to freedom they endured from illness and child-rearing to house-keeping responsibilities. The city street walking experiences of Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin are a refreshing change of pace to the pastoral stories of the preceding chapters. Andrews's work on Woolf is particularly insightful, offering rich and vivid depictions of Woolf's writing process, which was so closely tied to her habitual walking of London's streets. It is well known that Woolf felt a deep connection and fascination with the city of London, both in terms of the people she watched there and the landscape of the city itself. Recounting the embodied

experience of walking for Woolf, Andrews describes her as a 'passive instrument', channelling the rhythms of the London streets into her novels, footsteps becoming syllables, words, and sentences (157). She finds in Woolf's extensive diaries and letters evidence of her belief that her writing was brought into existence by the process and act of walking, and that inspiration seems to hang in the very air Woolf breathes as she paces. Woolf's experiences of the medically and morally unjustifiable 'rest cure' are brought into sharp relief with Andrews's use of diary extracts which document Woolf's anguish at being confined to a single room, 'forced to do nothing', the constraints this put upon her writing, and the immeasurably detrimental effects of the supposed 'cure' on her mental health (163). It is no exaggeration, therefore, when Andrews states that '[w]riting without walking was, for Woolf, inert, dead, "inanimate"' (161). For Woolf, the physical effects of walking on the body gave her writing vitality and energy.

The chapter on Anais Nin is equally fascinating. Andrews details how Nin 'did not walk with a map, but walked to create a map, one that charted not geographical mundanities but the metaphysical wonders of people's lived experiences, the glimpses of people's lives' (211). Andrews also paints Nin as a woman who fell in love both with the cities of London, New York, and Paris, and with the streets themselves. Andrews notes how, on a visit to London, Nin's 'eye is indiscriminate, finding interesting subjects in any and all things, both high status and low' (211). This draws a parallel between Nin and Woolf, both of whom enjoyed economic security but felt a great interest in all strata of society, especially those outside their own, and especially when walking in London. As it is presented in *Wanderers*, a key moment on Nin's path to a level of self-confidence and fearlessness was the discovery of her pansexuality: through the act of walking in busy cities, Nin experienced harassment and assault, but also gained a newfound sexual and self-confidence. This in turn facilitated the 'development of her literary voice' which itself was 'bound up with the ways in which [Nin] walked through the city' (219). From the passages of Nin's diaries that Andrews quotes, it seems that, although the city streets she walked presented dangers to her personal safety, her growing self-confidence and developing sexuality were always of greater importance to the writer and her work than any potential threats she faced. Andrews concludes the chapter with a short description of her own experiences of walking the streets of Boston and evokes a community of walkers when she states that '[w]e were streetwalkers, and these were our streets to walk' (229). The reclamation of the defamatory term 'streetwalker' here is a powerful gesture that asserts both Nin's and Andrews's feeling of empowerment born of the act of walking in cities.

These chapters are carefully considered and well-illustrated histories of the women on whom they focus, but the book can feel repetitive: the stories Andrews tells of relatively affluent white women who felt a great passion for walking and an intimate connection with the land they inhabited, who took inspiration from their walking in their writing careers and experienced problems or difficulties which were mediated or in some cases overcome by walking, are remarkably similar.

These issues of homogeneity and overlap are doubtless a result of the worthy task Andrews has set herself to draw attention to the lives and achievements of notable women who have been wrongfully cast aside by history due to their gender, or sometimes cast into the shadow by the fame of their male relations. This argument, however, is problematised by the fact that some of the women Andrews considers are well-known enough in their own right. Much has already been written, for example, on Virginia Woolf as a London walker, writer, and feminist pioneer of the Modernist era, while her husband Leonard Woolf receives considerably less attention. One feels, therefore, that such writers whose histories do not necessarily need to be uncovered have been included in the book due to the narrow criteria the author uses for subject selection. As Andrews focuses on women who (broadly speaking) walked for leisure or pleasure, the book is necessarily limited to those who had the time, money, and social security to roam long distances and to write about the experience. In my view the text would have been greatly enriched by attention to women of colour such as Rhiane Fatinikun who recently founded the 'Black Girls Hike' walking group, or other historical women of colour who travelled on foot such as Sarah Winnemucca or Mary Seacole. Inclusion of such figures, and some exploration of why the quantity of white middle-class women of historical significance outnumbers any other social group, would have extended Andrews's arguments beyond the purview of simply saying that men have wrongfully been considered the primary walking figures of their generations.

Unfortunately, the final chapters of *Wanderers* feel slightly rushed. The segment devoted to Cheryl Strayed offers little that could not be gained from Strayed's own memoir *Wild* (2012). Andrews writes well, but briefly, on Linda Cracknell and the tradition of women walking, drawing links between the walking lives of women from previous centuries, and the present. But this chapter is lacking in historical depth and introduces new figures of importance without including the rich detail that made earlier chapters so enjoyable.

There was another reason why my reading of *Wanderers* at this moment was timely. The day before I finished Andrews's text, Wayne Couzens pleaded guilty to the murder of Sarah Everard, abducted in South London as she was walking home. The 'Reclaim These Streets' campaign, begun in the wake of Everard's murder, seemed to reverberate retrospectively through the book, giving it a new urgency and importance for its handling of the history of abuse, harassment, and violence women have faced while walking alone. All the women Andrews writes about experienced or feared harassment, danger, or legal ramifications in their walking habits. That this remains a constant throughout the centuries spanned by *Wanderers*, and is still apparent today with devastating consequences, makes clear how much work is still to be done to ensure the safety of all who wander. One cannot help feeling, however, that the text would have benefitted from more variation in the array of women Andrews considers. In present society, women of colour and women of the working classes face proportionately higher levels of risk from attack when walking alone than others, and readers of *Wanderers* must

remember that if the women Andrews writes about found empowerment in the act of walking, this is a privilege not available to all.

Despite a lack of diversity and a slight reduction in the richness of Andrews's writing towards the end, however, *Wanderers* is an impressively well-researched and thoroughly enjoyable account of ten women who walked. An inspiring and lively tradition of women walkers is established, and the case Andrews makes for discovering and uncovering more participants in this is not only convincing but exhilarating.

### **Works Cited**

'Black Girls Hike UK C.I.C', 2020 <<https://www.bghuk.com/>> [accessed 29 July 2020]

### **Note on Contributor**

Oliver Case has just started the second year of a PhD at the University of Worcester. His research focuses on Virginia Woolf's later novels with a particular interest in the author's experiments with and explorations of the nature of time and nonhuman subjectivity in these novels. In this he takes inspiration from several movements in critical theory and philosophy to reposition Woolf as a key author for the posthuman turn in literary studies. He is currently collaborating on an index for the *Woolf Studies Annual*, will soon be delivering a paper at the London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research International Conference on Ecocriticism and Environmental Studies, and is an active member of the Contemporary Literary Cultures Research Group at Worcester which held its inaugural symposium earlier this year.

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