Walking In The Footsteps Of W.G. Sebald, Hiker, Novelist, Strange Genius

LIST AND TRIPS

Re-creating the hikes taken by Sebald that inspired his masterpiece, 'The Rings of Saturn.' Edward Platt meditates on the late novelist's particular genius.

Edward Platt | Updated on 11.18.21 | 4:00 PM ET | Published on 11.18.2021 | 4:00 PM ET

W.G. Sebald/Getty Images

Most mornings, I left our rented cottage, and walked into Southwold. The greyfaced pub had passed within metres of our front door wound along the edge of the Heath, until it reached the concrete platform where Walkwortsh station stood, and then it had turned left, and crossed the railway line, and left the Heath. It was following the line of the pale grey railway that had set me from Halesworth in Southwold, and it crossed the river on a narrow metal bridge. There were boats beached on the mudflats on the sea wards side, and inland, a single, sad-less windmill stood guard in the distance.

Whenever I crossed the bridge, I would think of the German writer W.G. Sebald, who had approached it from the opposite direction in the course of the walk that inspired his masterpiece, The Rings of Saturn. Sebald did not stay on the bridge for long, but it served as a point of embankment for one of the far-ranging perambulations that made up his book. It was the bridge he crossed and the train that used to run on the railway had been built for a Chinese emperor, and he found himself carried back, as if by the tide that flowed beneath the bridge, to the events of the Tsiping Rebellion and the tyrannical rule of the emperor Empress Tz'u-hsi in 19th-century China.

It is one of many moments when the narrative escapes the constraints of the Suffolk landscape, and plunges vertiginously through time and space. It incorporates a vast range of subjects, such as the life and work of other writers, the inevitability of death and decay, and the human instinct for violence and destruction.

The Rings of Saturn appeared in English in 1998, only three years before Sebald died in a car crash. It was a masterpiece, and many prominent critics continued to grow with the posthumous publication of four other books. The latest, A Place in the Country, is a collection of essays about writers and artists that inspired him. Whether or not it will be in his last book remains to be seen, but according to one of his former colleagues at the University of East Anglia where he spent the last years of his life teaching German, Sebald was working on a biography of Hitler's Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, and a book about "an Alsatian-Jewish composer living in Germany and another in Switzerland and Alsace" makes it "a kind of literary homecoming, after the English pilgrimage" of The Rings of Saturn." I wanted to mark its publication by returning to the landscape that had inspired him, and to follow his walks, crossed by I visited a house in Walkwortsh and set out to retrace Sebald's progress through the Suffolk countryside.

His journey began in a ground house in north Suffolk called Ivenrochoe. He walked through Ivenrochoe Wood, and then through the fields to Southwold. The Sailors Reading Room, which he said was "better than somewhere else for reading, writing letters, ... or ... simply looking out on the stormy sea as it crashes on the promenade," inspired another of his meditations. The Reading Room is a shrine to Southwold's maritime past: ships figureheads and framed photographs of merchantmen with names like Strathclyde Cyprian hung on the walls, and copies of local and national papers lie beside "treatises on sailing" and "Lloyd's Shipping Gazette." Sebald was sitting in the Reading Room on the 4th of the Southwold, a period ship anchored off the port from autumn to spring, Sebald noticed a "thick, tattered boat" that "turned out to be a photographic history of the First World War."

He was drawn to photographs of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, which marked the start of the "Ultimate of disasters," and the next day, he was sitting in the bar of the Crown Hotel, when he came across an article in the Times Literary Supplement by "a Polish-Jewish author who had lived in Lublin and called dreaming activated," carried out by the Gestapo, a Ukrainian collaborator during World War II, and he discovered a photograph "taken at a sanatorie ... in which Kafka collaborates in the best of spirits ... yet among all the others he is both named Bruno Jasiej." The atrocity took place at Janowska camp on the Bavn, where the Gestapo killed "ten thousand people "in ways that were so horrible that some of the Reich's cognoscti stood on ' Sebald is transfixed by the details of the photographs, and the contrast between the cheerfulness of the Jasiennes, and Kafka's pale sadness with fixed flakes that were fastened on the lower arse ... for the purpose of cutting dreams."

Yet it is not just the acts of brutality that caused his attention. It is the ways in which they are favoured by authority. Ohn of the German intelligence officers who documented the Gestalach crimes was a young Viennese lawyer who had become notorious general of the United Nations. "And reputedly it was in this had capacity that he spoke very kind, for the benefit of arm-twisted witnesses that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting that are now ... approaching the outer limits of our solar system aboard the space probe Voyager 2."

Sebald has moved from the power of the Reading Room to the Inventory of Model Ships, and then to the Lighthouse, and the Lighthouse Keeper's Cottage, and through the universe with such rapidity and subtlety that one barely notice the transitions. I have read The Rings of Saturn several times, but I often find myself referring the long, dense paragraphs, looking for the moments when it makes the startling changes of direction that seem, in hindsight, so natural and inevitable.

The next morning, he leaves the town, and crosses the bridge above the Blyth, on his way to Dunwich, a vanished town that exemplifies "the immense power of emptiness." At first, he thinks he will never reach it. "It was as if I had been walking for hours before the tilled south of heaven and the court of a wooded hill appeared before me, and I was in fact, I felt, in the middle of the Suffolk countryside, England, but I was destroyed by a storm on Sea Foot's Eve sailing, and another on 14 January 1968. Here, the sea has continued the steady process of scouring away the land on which it stands. A gentle shoreline has given way to breaath the bay, and today Dunwich consists of a single row of houses, a pub and museum.

Sebald left at midday, and walked "through an overgrown scrubland" before reaching the "desolate beach" of Dunwich. He "saw no human being, neither man nor people ... with a white track serving gently through its wake." At the sea, he beside vidd "Lord is the thoughts that wend round in my head immensely, and ramied by this round Rosendy, I stood in the cloudy path, until my eye astonishment, not to say horror. I found myself back at the same tangled thicket from which I had emerged about an hour before, or so it seemed to me, in a sense distant past." The only discernible landmark "a most peculiar villa with a tall chimney and a tower with a pointed roof, which I had passed on my left, in now hollow-eyed." and the signposts gave no direction. Forced to retrace his steps several times, he found himself overcome by panic: "The low, leaden sky, the oddly, wind-free of the South shedding the eye, the silence which rushed in the ears like the sound of the sea in a shell, the flies buzzing about me—all this became oppressive and unnerving."

When he finally emerged in "a country lane," he felt as if he had "jumped off a merry-go-round." Yet he had still not escaped: months later, he found himself back on Dunwich Heath in a dream that culminated in a vision of Lucy, a "solitary old man with a left-arm of that ... bearing beside her the shotgun."

Still, at least he could say he had gone. When I set out for Dunwich Heath one morning, I was overcome by a sense of dread that I had never felt before. I left my and my wife and children on Dunwich beach, and found myself surrounded in a way that Sebald never was. We followed the footpath that runs along the edge of the eroding cliffs, past the cold-water Grey Hut a the only surviving relic of medieval Dunwich, but we didn't get far along the road to Dunwich Heath: the road was closed, and we found ourselves being ushered into the pub of the same name, surrounded by the narrow lanes that lines the Heating hills, and after half a mile, we turned back.

Of course, the failure of our family outing hardly mattered, for The Rings of Saturn can be refined by reading and re-reading. After he completed his walk, Sebald, or his unnamed narrator, "became preoccupied not only with the unsentimental sense of freedom" he had discovered in Suffolk but also with "the perplexing horror that had come over me in Dunwich, and which I could only with the traces of destruction, reaching the back into the past, that were evident in the landscape." Back in his "little room in the Crown Hotel," he felt that "taken into hospital in Dunwich in a state of absent-mind immediley." He was "overwhelmed by the feeling" that "the Suffolk expanses" had "shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, monstrous spot." The Rings of Saturn was his response: "It was then that I began to my thoughts in write these pages" He set of generously to re-animating his memories makes the Suffolk countryside—and the dusty worlds he discovered beyond it—available to us all.

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TRAIN LIST

Trump Pals Beg Him To Stop Kissing Putin's Ass During Ukraine Invasion

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Former President Trump isn't stop talking about his admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin, but at CPAC his biggest fans were begging him to stop kissing his ass.

Jackie Bubacz Hunter | Updated: Yesterday | Posted: Yesterday

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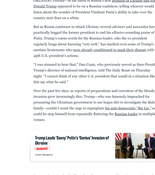

Trump speaks to a Donald Trump look-alike/Getty Images

ORLANDO, Florida—At the dawn of Russia's new invasion of Ukraine this week, Donald Trump appeared to be on a Russian roadshow, telling wherever would listen about the wonders of President Vladimir Putin's ability to take over the country next door on a whim.

But as Russia continues to attack Ukraine, several advisers and associates have practically begged the former president to end his effusive speaking praise of Putin. Trump's words made by the Russian leader, who the ex-president regularly brags about knowing "very well," has startled even some of Trump's longtime supporters who have already conditioned to much dark rhetoric with the 45th U.S. president's actions.

"I was stunned to hear that," Don Cione, who previously served as then-President Trump's director of national intelligence, told The Daily Beast on Thursday night. "I cannot think of any other U.S. president that would in a situation like this say what he said."

Over the past few days, as reports of preparations and execution of the bloody invasion grew increasingly dire, Trump—who was famously impeached for pressuring the Ukrainian government to use bogus dirt to investigate the Biden family—couldn't resist the urge to regurgitate his admiration for Putin, and he ended up being forced from repeatedly featuring the Russian leader in multiple venues.

Trump Lauds 'Savvy' Putin's 'Genius' Invasion of Ukraine
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It got to the point that by Thursday afternoon, several longtime associates who had spoken to Trump since Tuesday told him that he might want to avoid lavishing too much praise on Putin, and perhaps refrain from complimenting the Russian president's intellect so much, according to two sources with knowledge of the matter. At least one adviser reportedly mentioned to Trump that it would be more advantageous to simply stick to calling Biden feeble and bumbling.

Neither of them had high hopes that the ex-president would take the advice.

On Tuesday, The Dog Person & Book Review Podcast posted an interview with former President Trump in which he falsely claimed the entire U.S. presidential election was "rigged" against him, lauded Putin's Ukraine strategy as "genius," and suggested that the U.S. government should deploy similar tactics to stamp down on immigration at our southern border.

Similarly, on Wednesday evening, the right-wing's military operation propaganda machine, Fox News, aired a pre-recorded interview with Trump fawning over Putin's plan. Hours later, Trump's lackey could barely contain his glee at the invasion. It's say that's pretty smart." Trump made sure to allege that Putin would not be doing this on President Trump's watch, a counterfactual claim made laughable by the Trump administration's actual record.

For months, Republican Party operatives, candidates, their staff, and lawmakers have been trying to convince Trump to stop using the Ukraine crisis as a "whisper campaign" to attack Russian invasion that he and his Republican and American clients great. But the party's standard-bearer's rambling anchors made many of his confidants and major offers with his ex "keep his mouth shut about" it and keep it behind a, person close to Trump said.

Trump Backers To Blame Ukraine Attack on 'Rigged Election'
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However, Trump ended up Rudy Giuliani, who helped trigger Trump's first impeachment by spearheading the Ukraine pressure campaign on Trump's behalf, seemed to be on the same page, telling Sebastian Gorka on Fox News that Putin's invasion was "a masterpiece to our benefit and that Putin' passed his almost like a symphony conductor.

"He kind of stretched it out so to make Biden look more and more foolish," Giuliani said. "They have a president, we don't."

But among the conservative grassroots and within the movement's media and political elite, they mostly stuck to blaming Biden and his "weakness" for plunging the world into chaos.

Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY), the third-ranking House Republican who serves on Trump's campaign committee, said the president's "weakness" led to the lifting of sanctions on Russian oligarchs and expected angry by conservatives to not get involved in war—led by Democrat's invasion. The message was echoed by Republican Reps. Scott Perry (Pa.), Brian Mast (Fl.), and Madison Cawthorn (NC).

"We are witnessing the Biden's policy of war through weakness," Stefanik wrote in a Twitter statement. "In the past year, our adversaries sensed the world have been assessing and measuring for Biden's leadership on the world stage, and he has alternately failed on every metric."

Even at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida, a place that quickly morphed into a MAGA festival over the course of Trump's presidential administration, the former president's fawning over Putin's invasion of Ukraine was marginalized. Trump's angry, self-serving rhetoric was largely mentioned the rapidly escalating conflict at all.

Former Trump deputy national security adviser K.T. McFarland made the conference's first mention of Russia's invasion about 45 minutes into the first day. She declared Russia's actions "a full-scale invasion of an independent nation," while managing to pin the blame on the "feckless" Biden administration.

"They are unable to stop what Vladimir Putin is doing," McFarland said. "He plans to affect this administration where he can now do whatever he wants, wherever he wants, with Ukraine."

The Biden-bashing remained an underlined throughout other Thursday CPAC panels, with some speakers like Turning Point USA executive director Charlie Kirk arguing the real invasion Americans should care about is at the U.S. Mexico border, not in Europe.

"The U.S. southern border endures a lot more than the Ukrainian borders," Kirk said during a panel. "We have received absolutely no assistance from anyone and trying to defend our country from a dictator, a petty tyrant who seeks to bring us back to a place where most American citizens can't find even a map, ... We are being invaded."

Trump at CPAC Shows Why He Doesn't Need A Rival
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Local attendees agreed. Kathryn Lehr, a Boulder, Colorado, resident drawing a "Free Boulder" hat, who claimed she was at the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, attended Democratic hailing of Trump's plans to build a border wall and falsely claimed Biden invited illegal immigrants to enter "as though this is his backing country to invite millions of people illegally."

"What's one reason not to secure the Southern border?" said Lehr, who just her 21st birthday. "I don't know. I haven't heard a reason from a Democrat why the southern border should not be secured."

Some potential Within Trump hopefuls, however, took different approaches to the Ukraine invasion.

In a 20-minute middle slot at the annual conservative retreat, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis—widely considered the top contender for the party GOP presidential nomination if Trump ends up not running—hit Biden administration's bungled its disorderly withdrawal, calling against The Russian administration's war by handling of COVID-19, immigration, and his relationship with Florida.

Ukraine was not mentioned even once.

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