

**Review of Mike Pearson's "In comes I": performance, memory and landscape'**

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## Book Review

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# “In Comes I”: Performance, Memory and Landscape

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**Mike Pearson**

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University of Exeter Press, 2006 Pb, 256pp.  
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**Reviewed by Paul S.C. Taçon**

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At first glance this book appears to be a self-indulgent romp down memory lane rather than a serious academic study. Nostalgia, self-reflection, contemplation, and a return to childhood this book certainly is, but Mike Pearson uses this trip through his own past to illustrate how integral performance and memory are to landscape. This is important for many reasons, not just the personal. Landscape archaeologists, for instance, try to recreate past landscapes from the material evidence they find on and within landscapes but as Gosden and Lock (1998: 4) so poignantly remind us:

For the archaeologist, sites are static entities, to be classed into land boundaries, burial monuments, hill-forts and so on. We arrive many millennia after the heat and urgency of daily life has cooled and cast a retrospective view over the landscape. Our dispassionate classification after the fact is a central element of the histories we create.

In this context it is important to remember that landscape meaning is not static. Instead, it is dynamic and changing, often to make it consistent with what happens at present. To that extent, we all revise history. But it is also important to remember that the places and landscapes we study were once populated with ceremony, song, performance, and play. As I continually remind my students who study rock art sites, these were not static places of silence, like libraries or some modern art galleries; rather, they were places of action, sound and, at times, great drama. Pearson captures this eloquently in

his book and by bringing the landscapes of his childhood back to life through story, song, and description of performance he translates his mind's pictures far beyond mere words. The effect is profound—readers surely feel as if they were/are a part of Pearson's childhood. But perhaps, more importantly, the readers' own past landscapes re-emerge in all their emotional, spiritual, colourful, noisy, and dynamic ways. Pearson reawakens our own memories not as fleeting pictures but as relived moments. However, because of this, and the book's unusual structure, it is often hard to read.

The recounting of the past is a universal human concern, something likely practiced for many tens of thousands of years if rock art evidence from Chauvet and elsewhere is an indication. It may also have been a concern of archaic humans. Eventually formal histories were adopted to summarize the key experiences, beliefs, and values of human groups. This concern with the past eventually diversified into a spectrum of specialist professions with shamans, story-tellers, religious leaders, visual artists, performers, philosophers, poets, musicians, and teachers taking prominent roles in most cultures (e.g. see Layton 1989). Eventually, museums, art galleries, historians, and even archaeologists emerged from the ground of the past to continue the celebration and communication of reclamation and re-creation. Pearson, now a twenty-first-century performer, creative writer, poet, and story-teller, is thus continuing a very lengthy tradition. But in this case he inserts himself into the picture of the past in a very prominent way. "*In Comes I*" is thus not only a clever form of title but a shorthand note of what the book is all about. As he states at the beginning of the

Introduction: "*In Comes I* is a book about performance and landscape, biography and locality, memory and place." And later, on page 10, he confesses:

"*In Comes I*" aspires to mystory. Its perceptions are informed by moments of a life-story, and a personal history of performance making in seeking analogous connections and affinities of practice across the region and through time. It situates itself as creative writing in an indefinite series of creative and disciplinary linkages.

Pearson was born and raised in north Lincolnshire, and much of the book is set in his formative years of the early 1950s. This is important for many reasons and I leave it to the reader to see how Pearson's experience of the 1950s is so significant. For me, however, this period signals that Pearson is a Baby Boomer. Baby Boomers across the Western world have been instrumental in changing the planet into what it is today: the fast-paced, commercially driven, technologically wired, constantly changing super-landscape of interconnected megacities. But Baby Boomers are beginning to retire and retirement brings reflection. Memories flood the mind, there are returns to the freedom or tyranny of childhood and memoirs are written. Past landscapes are recreated in the process: the fields, forests, streets, alleys, and other places we once roamed without care or concern. Even our dogs were free, as Graham Griffin, one of my Baby Boomer colleagues about to retire, reminded me recently. But now, we, our children, and our dogs are all on tight leads. There has also been so much physical change that many places of our childhood only

exist in our minds. Yet they are still real and can be shared by others. This point was hit home when my best childhood friend from the age of six to nine tracked me down on the other side of the globe via the internet. We had not seen each other for almost forty years but suddenly a past only we knew was reborn through the memories evoked by emails.

"*In Comes I*" has a similar effect but Pearson's past and present journey is likely one of the first of a flood of such books to come. However, what may distinguish his book is his unique approach, for by drawing on theory and literature of a range of academic disciplines he challenges academic boundaries and conventions. But he also challenges each of us to reflect in our own ways: to remember; to perform, to recreate,

and most importantly, to be free again. Performance artists and theorists will find this book particularly exciting but so too should archaeologists, historians, and folklorists. Even materially driven Baby Boomer bankers might find it rewarding in that it may reawaken something long forgotten of benefit to others, such as the value of creative arts to memory, landscape, and personal experience.

## References

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