

# Retracing, remembering, reckoning : Stuart Maconie's footsteps narrative of the Jarrow March

Autor(en): **Allen, Victoria**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **39 (2021)**

PDF erstellt am: **24.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919534>

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# Retracing, Remembering, Reckoning: Stuart Maconie's Footsteps Narrative of the Jarrow March

Victoria Allen

This essay reads Stuart Maconie's travelogue *Long Road from Jarrow: A Journey through Britain Then and Now* (2017) through the lens of memory studies to contextualize Maconie's peregrination as his way of contemplating and grappling with Brexit. Maconie retraces the iconic Jarrow March on the occasion of its eightieth anniversary, revisiting the past in order to gain a perspective on the social and political state of present-day Britain. This essay introduces the public persona of Maconie and provides background information on the Jarrow workers' 1936 protest march, drawing on the concept of cultural memory both to determine what the Jarrow March signifies today and how the book functions as a product of cultural memory. As Maconie revisits the route of the Jarrow protest march shortly after the Brexit vote in June 2016, the two historical events become intertwined through his account. Approaching both the journey and the book as cultural memory projects highlights how the Jarrow March retains its mythical resonance in the present. Consequently, Maconie's social snapshot of the current condition of England is analysed as his personal narrative negotiation of the reasons for the referendum, and of Brexit as a pivotal socio-political event.

Keywords: Cultural memory, Jarrow March, Brexit, Stuart Maconie, Nigel Farage, working-class, myth, footsteps narrative, travel writing

Stuart Maconie's footsteps narrative *Long Road from Jarrow: A Journey through Britain Then and Now* (2017) is analysed in terms of constructions

*Brexit and Beyond: Nation and Identity*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 39, edited by Daniela Keller and Ina Habermann, Narr, 2020, pp. 183-205.

of cultural memory to show how the myths and memories surrounding the Jarrow March and its working-class protesters are projected onto the present day in an attempt to explain the Brexit vote.<sup>1</sup> Maconie's book adopts the Jarrow March's iconic status within the discourse of working-class struggles purporting to use his retracing of the march as a means to examine present-day class issues in England.

*Long Road from Jarrow* joins a recent trend in travel writing of following in the footsteps of previous travellers, but unlike the typical footsteps narratives, or what Maria Lindgren Leavenworth refers to as "second journeys" (Youngs 184), Maconie's itinerary is based on an actual protest march rather than an earlier travelogue. His narrative is organized in twenty-two chapters named after the Jarrow marchers' overnight stops on the route from the north to the south of England, each chapter providing additional socio-historic background to the march and the various locations. The author interweaves social and media commentary with encounters and incidents during his own 'march' in which he apprehensively reflects on the recent Brexit referendum as the "seismic shock of the summer" (Maconie, *Long Road* 299). Though Maconie does not explicitly set out to discuss Brexit, each chapter-passage forms an integral part of his own reckoning of the outcome and his attempts to assuage the associated animosity propagated by neo-populist interests. His 'second journey' therefore does not merely "imitate" the march but "reinforce[s] the natural distance between past and present," thus creating something new and relevant to the contemporary (Leavenworth, *Second Journey* 192; see also Youngs 185). However, although Tim Youngs sees this as a "way of neutralising nostalgia" (185), Maconie still taps into a yearning for his own working-class background and thereby unveils "not only the first traveller, but [...] also him[self]" (Leavenworth, *Second Journey* 192).

### Stuart Maconie as Social and Popular Cultural Commentator

In order to understand Maconie's incentive and his references to Brexit, it is necessary to consider his role as author-narrator and popular commentator on British culture. Well known as a music journalist, Maconie notably was the editor for *New Music Express* (NME) and wrote articles for prominent music magazines including *Mojo*, *Q*, and the *Radio*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the conflation of Britain with England, see Davey 6; Habermann 3-8; Kumar.

*Times*. A renowned advocate for the 1980s and 1990s Manchester music scene, he developed his public persona as a radio DJ, co-hosting shows with Mark Radcliffe on BBC 2 (2007-11) and 6 Music (2011-present), and more recently with his own Sunday set “Stuart Maconie’s Freak Zone” (6 Music, 2017-present) (“Stuart Maconie”). This has established him as a popular culture critic in Britain. In his columns and article contributions to newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman*, Maconie proclaims his Marxist political stance (Maconie, “I’m a Marxist”) – political views that can be traced back to his northern, working-class upbringing, his study of politics and history, and his work as a teacher of English and sociology.

Maconie has published a range of books, often written from a biographical perspective or based on his expertise in popular British culture and music. Examples of his music interests include the autobiographical *Cider with Roadies* (2005) and *The People’s Songs: The Story of Modern Britain in 50 Records* (2013). His writing tends to mix social observations with personal anecdotes and reflection, contextualized with historical background information and delivered in a mild, wry style to comment on contemporary cultural issues. This is the formula for his popular piece on the north-south divide, *Pies and Prejudice: In Search of the North* (2008) and the sequel *The Pie at Night: In Search of the North at Play* (2015), as well as the travel account *Adventures on the High Teas: In Search of Middle England* (2009). These three books illustrate Maconie’s preoccupation with the cultural, social, and economic differences and delineations between the north and the south of England, a major component of the contemporary discourse on Englishness (Kumar 10, 17). His most recent publication, *Long Road from Jarrow* (2017), is a continuation of this north-south exploration and an attempt to capture the ‘condition of England.’ Although Maconie marches from the north to the south of *England*, he tends to conflate England and Britain by suggesting – with his book title – that his writing is a consideration of the ‘condition of Britain.’ This conflation is both quite common in discourses of national identity, and politically problematic, especially considering that Brexit was made largely in England, and it is predominantly English identity that is at stake.

In his writing Maconie notably draws on a number of renowned works which have established this type of travel writing: H. V. Morton’s *In Search of England* (1927, followed by other *In Search of* volumes), J. B. Priestley’s *English Journey* (1934), and George Orwell’s *Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). Documenting their encounters with ‘ordinary’ people, these writers were commended for their perceptions of the *zeitgeist*, despite the



marked difference in their agendas and political visions. Maconie draws on these texts, particularly those by Priestley and Orwell, in order to exemplify the living and working conditions of people from the north of England around the time of the Jarrow March. More than merely paying homage to these two celebrated left-wing social commentators, his self-stylization and referencing of Priestley and Orwell place Maconie's *Long Road from Jarrow* in this tradition.<sup>2</sup>

In his latest work, Maconie pursues his personal interests such as food and drink, music, sports, media, literature, local history, and politics – well recognized topics in his previous books and commentaries. Employing these themes as foci, he juxtaposes historical events with contemporary issues. The travelogue format of this book project, in particular, showcases him “as a keen walker and advocate of walkers’ rights” (“Stuart Maconie Named”).<sup>3</sup> For his travelogue *Long Road from Jarrow*, he puts his own advice of “exercise and experiences” (“Stuart Maconie Named”) into practice by following in the footsteps of the Jarrow marchers.

#### Incentive for Maconie's March from Jarrow

*Pies and Prejudice* (2008), *Adventures on the High Teas* (2009), and *The Pie at Night* (2013) illustrate Maconie's penchant for using his travels as inspiration for his writing. All three travel texts conform to Youngs's description of the travel-writing genre as “predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator” (3). The incentive for Maconie's *Long Road from Jarrow* was the eightieth anniversary of the Jarrow March. In tribute, he retraces the route of the protest marchers who set off from Jarrow to

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<sup>2</sup> In *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow*, Ina Habermann illustrates how Morton's (61-80), Priestley's (80-95) and Orwell's (95-104) English journeys engaged in creating a mythological sense of Englishness in the interwar period. Maconie's account can be read as a contemporary middlebrow attempt of writing back to Morton and echoing Priestley and Orwell, revisiting Englishness as a ‘symbolic form’ at the present political conjuncture. An in-depth comparison of these works is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, just prior to the publication of *Long Road from Jarrow*, Maconie was appointed president of the Ramblers – an organization whose mission is to encourage outdoor pursuits on foot. As he explains, the Ramblers organization “works to help people get access to the great outdoors in Britain, to encourage you to walk, to encourage you to get out there and enjoy both the exercise and the experiences that putting one foot in front of the other in the Great British countryside can give you” (“Stuart Maconie Named”).

Westminster. Using the journey as a way of engaging directly with the people, he asks those he meets along the way if they have heard of the 1936 Jarrow March. These *en route* encounters enable him to include personal impressions and memories of witnesses in his documentation.

Along with Maconie's intention "to compare the England of now and then, to see if the shadow of 1936 really did fall across 2016," he also wants "to get to the heart of England today first-hand" (*Long Road* 17), indicating his physical experience of the journey – an attempt to re-embody and, thereby, re-activate memory, allowing him to evince more considerate and reflective responses than those that dominated the debate in the public discourse of Brexit. This is evoked through the imagery of the heart and its association with a sense of care combined with having a more profound understanding and relationship with the people of contemporary England. This physical tie is strengthened in the use of "first-hand," which evokes a sense of authenticity through lived experience.

The suggestion of authenticity is pertinent in relation to the footsteps genre where "second journeys illustrate a contemporary search for the authentic" (Leavenworth, *Second Journey* 13) since the second traveller is compelled to "use, recycle and emphasise the first texts, which originate in a past in which authenticity is believed to be attainable" (14). Aligned with this is his emphasis on sensorially experiencing England in 2016, accentuated by slow travel and taking the time to 'savour' the journey: "I wanted to see, to hear, smell even what England was like close up by walking it, moving along its length at a speed where I could look it in the eye, shake its hand, maybe buy it a drink" (Maconie, *Long Road* 17). The many descriptions of meals suggest that he is literally eating his way through England and his consumption of culture and cuisine is framed as engagement with the country's most staple elements. The humanizing narrative strategy of feeling England's pulse or tasting it underlines that he actually meets and interacts with its inhabitants as equals, 'eye to eye.' This is a feat he promises to achieve with the open, inquisitive, and transient friendship of a traveller who captures his own experience and provides an authentic and accurate snapshot of the English people.

Despite Maconie's attempts to capture the 'real' north of England, as if it could be grasped in the shape of a (homogenous and tangible) person with whom one is able to 'shake hands' and 'have a drink,' his encounters are nevertheless filtered by his personality. He does not reflect upon his own role as traveller-narrator or his editorial power but appears to enjoy the limelight as popular cultural commentator, which is

masked to a certain extent by Maconie's self-deprecating humour and his asserted allegiance with the disaffected working-class, typical for conservative left-wing sentimentalism.

Maconie positions himself as well-suited to comment on the working class of the north of England as a 'professional northerner' with a working-class background. His route from the north to the south of England allows him to trace a national cultural and political dichotomy – an established trope within English socio-political and media discourse which has a far reaching socio-economic and cultural impact (see Russell; Kirk; Ehland). After the referendum result, it was commonplace to think that the majority of the working-class population had voted Leave and that the north of England fundamentally contributed to the Brexit outcome. This myth has been undermined by scholars such as Danny Dorling, who commented that “[t]he outcome of the EU referendum has been unfairly blamed on the working class in the north of England” (1; see also Jorgenson-Murray). He elucidated further that “most people who voted Leave lived in the south of England [and that] of all those who voted for Leave, 59% were in the middle classes (A, B, or C1).” Leave voters, nevertheless, constituted a majority in almost all northern counties and Maconie's footsteps narrative aims to explore and create an understanding for the marginalized English region that is commonly known as the former industrial and working-class heartland.

### Jarrow and the 1936 Protest March

Jarrow is a once-industrial town in the north-east of England situated in the Great Durham Coalfield along the River Tyne, located between Newcastle and Sunderland. By 1930, the majority of those employed in Jarrow worked for Palmer's Shipbuilding & Iron Company Ltd. or in the various trades linked to the local shipbuilding industry (Robinson and Waller). The company closed in 1933, putting 80% of Jarrow town out of work (Morton; Maconie, *Long Road* 23-24). A similar fate befell thirty-seven other British shipyards. Therefore, as a nationwide measure to rein in the excess capacity in British shipbuilding and to keep ship production low and profitable, a decree by the National Shipyards Security Ltd. (NSS), the government, and other still-operating shipyard owners was issued. The decree determined that once yards such as Palmer's were closed and dismantled, none could be re-established on those sites for forty years (Maconie, *Long Road* 24).

The socio-economic effects on Jarrow's inhabitants were harrowing as no alternative employment was secured for the workers whose skillset was specialized in shipbuilding and steelworks. These grim conditions were noted in detail by J. B. Priestley when he passed through Jarrow during his research for *An English Journey* (1934). Published two years before the march, this book included impressions that reflected the state of the town just after the closure of Palmer's:

Wherever we went there were men hanging about, not scores of them but hundreds and thousands of them. The whole town looked as if it had entered a perpetual penniless bleak Sabbath. The men wore the masks of prisoners of war. A stranger from a distant civilisation, observing the condition of the place and its people, would have arrived at once at the conclusion that Jarrow had deeply offended some celestial emperor of the island and was now being punished. He would never believe us if we told him that in theory this town was as good as any other and that its inhabitants were not criminals but citizens with votes. (314)

At the time, the Labour MP for Jarrow, Ellen Wilkinson, illustrated Jarrow's dire situation following the effects of the shipyard closure.<sup>4</sup> She articulates, more explicitly than Priestley, the sense of the town being let down, or even punished by the government and the NSS, as expressed in the evocative title to her book *The Town That Was Murdered: The Life-Story of Jarrow* (1939). Wilkinson's description of the town gives an overview of the ebb and flow of different waves of capitalism and industrialization, which also saw the coming and going of the pits and mining life in Jarrow (Maconie, *Long Road* 22). She rebuked Sir Charles Palmer, owner of the Jarrow shipyards and steelworks, for the exploitative working conditions and lack of care for his employees who were working in unsanitary and intolerable living conditions, which further deteriorated once this branch of his business had been closed (Wilkinson in Maconie 23).

The Jarrow March was organized as a protest in 1936 as one of the numerous hunger and unemployment marches and was also known as the Jarrow Crusade. Calling it a crusade demonstrates the organizer's reluctance to aggravate political powers and industrial stakeholders that they relied on for employment infrastructures in Jarrow. Labelling their protest with a religious term framed the marching petitioners as "god-

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<sup>4</sup> The activist, journalist, communist, trade unionist, and feminist Ellen Wilkinson, also named Red Ellen "because of her fiery auburn hair and politics to match" (Maconie, *Long Road* 21), was one of the first female Labour members of Parliament.

fearing citizens,” rather than demanding, “bolshy” workers which at the time would have been perceived as part of a communist threat (Maconie, *Long Road* 215).

Two hundred men, on certain stretches accompanied by Wilkinson, marched three hundred miles from Jarrow to London to request government support for a new steelworks to be built (Maconie, *Long Road* 26). Carrying a wooden box containing an estimated 10,000 signatures, it took over three weeks for the Jarrow marchers to reach The Houses of Parliament in Westminster (343). The march gained national attention through the national press, radio, and newsreels, partly due to two journalists being amongst the marchers, which helped them garner support in the form of food and shelter at their various overnight stops along their route to Westminster. However, upon their arrival in London the then Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, refused to meet the men. Instead, they were invited on a boat trip along the River Thames “ostensibly as a reward for their efforts, but actually to avoid any ugly scenes in the House [of Parliament]” (347-48). Afterwards, they were informed that their petition had been presented and discussed in their absence. The whereabouts of the petition – a particularly notable piece of people’s history – is still unknown (Picard; Maconie 348).

The way the petition was ignored by the Houses of Parliament indicates a contempt for working-class voices and causes by political institutions. Nevertheless, as Matt Perry posits in *The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend* (2005), the march memorializes working-class struggle, solidarity, unity, pride, tenaciousness, perseverance, and peaceful protest. Despite, or because of, parliament’s casual treatment of the protesters’ concerns, the event has captured the popular imagination, and different versions of the tale have been reincarnated in various forms of popular art and culture (see Perry, *Jarrow Crusade*). It is, therefore, crucial that Maconie chose to record and retrace the route of the Jarrow March eighty years later as the year 2016 can be notionally considered the transitional moment when first- and second-hand memories become entrusted to cultural memory. Cultural artefacts, such as Maconie’s book, are therefore required in order to retain meaning in contemporary culture and shape today’s understandings of the historical event.

### Mythologization of the Jarrow March in Cultural Memory

The Jarrow March is on the verge of shifting from “communicative” to “cultural memory,” as the people who witnessed the event and who



were still able to ‘communicate’ what occurred in order to generate a sense of identity and belonging are ageing and gradually passing away (Jan Assmann 113-14).<sup>5</sup> Their communicative memories thus become cultural memories after eighty to one hundred years (111, 117). According to Jan Assmann, once this period of time has passed, cultural memory is retained and functionalized by a community or a collective through the production of culture or cultural artefacts. Drawing on his joint research with Aleida Assmann, he posits that

[o]n the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not “have” a memory tend to “make” themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. This is what we call cultural memory (111).

Regarding the concept of cultural memory, it is important to question when, by whom, and why events are deemed worthy of remembrance. This is particularly the case in commissioning public artefacts such as monuments and statues, where the question of funding, potential political and ideological motivations, or desired effects of such an institutionalized form of remembering should also be taken into consideration (see Aleida Assmann; Erll and Nünning; Erll et al.). The fact that Maconie’s re-enactment occurs on the cusp of these two types of memory throws into relief the relevance of *Long Road from Jarrow* for inquiries into what Aleida Assmann terms “cultural functional memory” (127-28) at the juncture of remembering and forgetting.

The predominantly oral communicative memory within families and communities finds new ways of remembering the march, which then become institutionalized as collective and cultural memory. Furthermore, the various forms of retelling and remembering articulate different nuances of the same event with different meanings for different audiences, so that narrating the Jarrow March feeds into ideological processes of myth-making. Indeed, Maconie claims of the march: “It has attained the status of a national myth akin to the stories of Robin Hood or King Arthur, and like those, has become negotiable, malleable, debatable. While its status is unarguable, its details are anything but” (*Long Road* 5-6). Maconie’s recourse to folkloric legends that have been used

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive overview of memory studies see Olick et al. For further reading on the concept of cultural memory which has informed my approach, see Aleida Assmann, as well as Erll and Nünning.

to narrate and establish a sense of Englishness illustrates his awareness of the political potency of how the Jarrow March has come to represent the voice of the 'ordinary' working-class people of England.

In *The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend*, Perry traces how this historical event has become a collection of potent myths, and, as part of his analysis, he has compiled a selection of poems, paintings, songs, and novels inspired by the memory of the Jarrow March and popular cultural references to the event in radio, film, and television shows. These show the breadth and variety of cultural artefacts which, in diverse ways, help to recall and retain the memory of the march on a regional, national, and global level. Perry's work highlights the reification of the Jarrow myth, arguing that its construction should be understood as processes active in chronological phases with specific geographical domains, driven by individual initiative, institutional receptiveness, and cultural production ("Myth" 130). Maconie, also, observes that "[p]opular art has kept the name of Jarrow and its complex associations – struggle, hardship, heroism, failure even – alive down the decades" (*Long Road* 28).

Two such cultural memory artefacts are displayed in Jarrow today. The first of these is the mural at the Jarrow metro station designed by Vince Rea, eponymously called *Jarrow March* (1984). The low-relief sculpture was adapted from photographic footage of the marchers to give a sense of having captured the actual event; the use of recycled steel from a scrapped ship is a poignant, material reference to the closure of the Jarrow shipyards and its aftermath ("Jarrow March"). Placed prominently along the Tyne and Wear metro line at the metro stop of Jarrow, the mural is the first icon of local and national history that presents itself to visitors entering the town. It marks the place as noteworthy for its working-class history, symbolizing a pride in the past that is linked to social prestige and is of cultural value to Tyne and Wearside – a region characterized by its recent de-industrialization.

The second exhibit is based on a similar motif of an assembled group depicting a collective of flat-capped men holding a banner, along with a woman holding a child, and a dog alongside them. The collective emerges from the hulk of a ship. It is designed by Graham Ibbeson and located outside of the Jarrow branch of Morrisons supermarket. The life-size bronze sculpture, named *The Spirit of Jarrow* (2001), was commissioned by the supermarket to mark the sixty-fifth anniversary of the march. In a similar manner to the metro mural, the statue of a collective representing the marchers, erected outside a heavily frequented shopping centre, stands as a reminder for the ongoing symbolic relevance of the crusade for the self-identification and representation of the town.



The choice to depict a group including men, women, and children signifies how this event is remembered as affecting the entire working-class community of the town, which no longer thrives on the ship- and steel-building industries.<sup>6</sup>

Such representations only partially retell historical events, or perhaps only capture a vague sense of memory and, therefore, become mythologized (see Barthes). As Jonathan Bignell explains, “[w]hat myth does is to hollow out the signs it uses, leaving only part of their meaning, and invests them with a new signification which directs us to read them in one way and no other” (22). To evade contributing to a myth-making that seeks to channel one particular signification through the more complex picture, Maconie assures us that he is aware of the multitude of “takes” the march has created:

Jarrow has its own murky legacy of half-truth, partial truth and downright falsehoods. The old northern term “romancing” seems appropriate here as most of these myths are attempts to appropriate the teary romance and sentiment of the Crusade. (*Long Road* 328)

This demonstrates Maconie’s awareness of how the memory of the march is utilized to evoke a certain myth: “It resonates down the years and like all good myths you can bend it to your own ends in any era” (11). In recent years, the march has been sentimentalized in working-class nostalgia with Maconie again cautioning the reader that “it’s wise to remember that you’re working on hallowed ground and dealing with emotive, if not entirely accurate, memories” (8). The myth of the Jarrow March has, thus, not only found various forms of expression, but has also been appropriated to serve different functions.

How the cultural memory of the Jarrow March is functionalized on a local and national level is exemplified in Alan Price’s folk-pop homage to the protest march against unemployment and poverty, which reached number 6 in the 1974 May Music charts (“Jarrow Song”) and was written in relation to the 1972 and 1974 UK miners’ strikes. Price’s *Jarrow Song* (1974) epitomizes how the memory of the Jarrow March is recalled and rearticulated in cultural memory artefacts at specific moments in time when the past is employed to comment on the present. In “The

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<sup>6</sup> The effects of unemployment that affected the whole family were also institutionally constructed because, as Christine Collette elucidates, “[t]he wages of all family members, and any household assets, were taken into account when deciding whether or not relief should be paid. This meant that in some cases redundant men were dependent on their daughters or wives, a situation that did not fit in with the mores of the time.”

Myth of the Jarrow Crusade and the Making of a Local Labour Culture,” Perry demonstrates how memory and myth have on several occasions been politically appropriated and revived by the local Labour party of Jarrow as a means of “regenerating the distinctively local labour culture in the area” (137). Analysing Jarrow memorials, such as the aforementioned statues and additional place names, Perry concludes that these cultural memory artefacts have “afforded the local party the opportunities to insinuate the Crusade into the brick, tarmac and asphalt of Jarrow,” which has contributed to Labour’s sustained political and “cultural hegemony” in Jarrow since the time of the march (137). It was not until the march’s fortieth anniversary, in conjuncture with mass unemployment in the 1970s, that the myth attained national resonance and became institutionalized, primarily through the efforts of the BBC and the Labour Party (142).<sup>7</sup>

A more recent example of how the proletarian iconography of the Jarrow March myth has been appropriated for political and ideological means on a national level is the *March to Leave* led by Nigel Farage as a part of the *Leave Means Leave* campaign promoting the newly formed Brexit Party.<sup>8</sup> Setting off from Sunderland in the north-east of England, only fifteen kilometres south from Jarrow, the “Brexit betrayal march” was scheduled to take place over two weeks, culminating in an organized demonstration in London’s Parliament Square on 29 March 2019 (Parkinson). The city of Sunderland was chosen as the starting point for the *March to Leave* as the traditional, ‘safe’ Labour city was the first to announce the outcome of their vote to leave the European Union on the 24 June 2016 referendum broadcast by a majority of 61% to 39%, which resulted in the media-produced notoriety of Sunderland as ‘Brexit City’ (Rushton 3-4). While it was not explicitly stated that the *March to Leave* was a re-enactment of the Jarrow March, choosing the march, which has iconic status for the Labour Movement (see O’Neill and Roberts), combined with starting from Sunderland, a city known for its historic Labour allegiance, the *March to Leave* becomes a statement for the disintegration of both the new and old Labour Party after Brexit.

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<sup>7</sup> For the fiftieth anniversary, a repeat march was staged from the north-east to London to raise awareness of the high rates of unemployment, where the “context of Thatcherism, deindustrialisation and industrial conflict combined to make 1986 the most powerful anniversary” (Perry 142).

<sup>8</sup> Much of the coverage on social media and in the left-wing press focused on the small turn-out of marchers in the wet weather conditions and Farage’s noticeable absence from various legs of the journey, despite being the poster face of the event (Drury; “March to Leave”; “Nigel Farage”).

The Jarrow myth is evoked to form a narrative that is purportedly sympathetic to English working-class needs which builds on the cultural memory of unemployment marches, tapping into inter-generational fear of poverty and neglect exacerbated by the decade-long implementation of austerity after the financial crisis in 2008. In this instance it is used to garner support and legitimize the political agenda of the *Leave Means Leave* campaign. In a BBC 4 radio feature on the *March to Leave*, Maconie remarks on the temptation to compare the Jarrow March with what he describes as Farage's publicity stunt:

By the time it [the *March to Leave*] arrives in Parliament Square, Nigel claims that 20 million people will have joined them [marchers] in spirit. Quite what he means by this is hard to fathom, but if by spirit he means ghosts, well, the ghosts of the Jarrow marchers are clearly still with us, still clattering these roads, a spirit army that can be pressed into service by any side it seems and its opinion we will never know. (*World This Weekend*)

Maconie again points out how the malleable memory of the original marchers is open to political and ideological appropriation by the political right and left. This exemplifies clearly that while memory is an account of something that has occurred in the past, its power lies in generating resonance with the present. In that sense, it is important to treat *Long Road from Jarrow* as a cultural memory artefact that, as such, helps to retain the memory of the Jarrow March, but has its own agenda as well – an agenda that deserves further exploration.

### Maconie's Narrative Negotiation of Brexit

As is indicated in the subtitle "A Journey through Britain Then and Now," Maconie's commentary on his commemorative journey attempts to navigate the past and present. His travelogue, through both the rural and urban areas of England, appears as an anthropological quest to collate and balance contemporary opinions regarding the Brexit vote, markedly because he only begins his walk about three months after the referendum. Since travel writing not only provides the reader with "impressions of the travelled world" but also lays bare the travelling subject (Korte 6), *Long Road from Jarrow* needs to be read in terms of the author-narrator's personal "culture-specific and individual patterns of perception and knowledge" (6). This allows us to then situate Maconie's book project as a personal reckoning with his current and erstwhile class status, where his metropolitan outlook is contrasted with the provincial

towns he visits; towns that are reminiscent of his own upbringing in Wigan, a former industrial town, imbuing his political and social appraisal of Brexit and the changing socio-cultural construction of the country with a nostalgic notion of an England conflated with Britain.

The walk through the de-industrialized, agricultural regions – predominantly in the north-east of England – to the more urban areas in the south-west, reflects a perceived political divide along which the fronts of Leave and Remain gradually became entrenched during the referendum campaigns (Rostek and Zwierlein 7-8, 10). Since the announcement of Britain’s intention to leave the EU, these oppositional views have become more hardened (Asthana et al.). This is evident in the national and social media debates aiming to clarify what Brexit actually means and its social, political, and economic implications.<sup>9</sup>

Maconie is openly apprehensive about the Brexit referendum, and the sojourns, the conversations he has with people he meets, along with his contemplations of them, read as an attempt to reconcile an apparently divided country with an ever-widening rift in terms of class inequality. Comparing the times of the Jarrow Marchers and the England he encounters on his journey, he states, “[d]espite a genteel nervousness about it these days, class supplied the great splintering fault line through British life in 1936 and the crack is still wide. As I ventured further south, I and the men of Jarrow, would feel it between our feet” (*Long Road* 278). Maconie, hereby, claims the now-dead marchers as comrades in both his wrangling with the present and the continued struggles of the working class. It may also be suggested that by embedding himself in an alternative temporally distanced context, Maconie creates the sense of Brexit Britain as a foreign land which allows him to journey ‘abroad’ experiencing “[t]he foreignness of a travelled country” through “an act of construction on the part of the perceiver,” and defining Brexit Britain’s “otherness against his or her own sense of identity, his or her own familiar contexts” (Korte 20) where “the observing self and the foreign world reverberate within each work” (Blanton xi).

Throughout, Maconie’s weighty socio-political assessments are buoyed by humorous reflections on his own persona and class status. This is epitomized in his purchase of a flat-cap for the journey – the symbol of working-class masculinity; the irony of buying it in Fenwick’s – Newcastle’s answer to Harrods – is not lost upon Maconie. However,

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<sup>9</sup> For a snapshot of the divisive post-Brexit media discourse at the time of Maconie’s Jarrow journey and to date, see Coslett; Erlanger; Kensington et al.; Taylor; and Wallace.

it does serve as a symbol for Maconie's 'donning' the working-class voice in his writing, while in open acknowledgment that although his roots were working-class he is now middle-class – a recognition of his own navigation between classes. It is interesting to note that Farage also wore a flat-cap when launching the *March to Leave* – an equally arch recognition of the symbolic power of artefacts in creating contemporary resonance. In Farage's case, however, it is evident that this is a calculated choice within a larger appropriation, with a more explicit political aim, of a prior protest movement myth, using it as a vehicle to express, or create, a contemporary sense of disenfranchisement. However, whether openly acknowledged or not, both Maconie and Farage doff their respective caps to the power and mythology of the Jarrow March.

While neither the title nor the blurb hint at Brexit, post-referendum Britain is heavily referenced in Maconie's descriptions of the current state of the country. Indeed, his discussion of Brexit begins in his prologue where he asserts: "In truth whether England is little or large and whether you want its borders iron clad or porous. Brexit proved that one thing is not in doubt: we are a divided country, chiefly along the lines of geography and class" (*Long Road* 12). Maconie perceives the referendum vote as exacerbating an already existent social fault line in Britain. He openly states his own position as a 'remainer' in the Brexit referendum debate, but emphasizes that he does not write against those who had voted to leave the European Union:

That's the walkabout that took us away from Brussels, and whilst I don't agree with that decision, I can understand it. In the three months between the seismic shock of the Brexit vote and me setting out from Jarrow, I read and heard countless leftist commentators and writers airily, and I think snobbishly, waving away some of the concerns of older, non-metropolitan working-class voters as racism and bigotry. (81)

Rather than voicing his displeasure with those who voted against his political views and opinions, Maconie criticizes the social and media discourse following the referendum from peers and, indeed, people who share his political position. Through both his walking and writing he appeals for more understanding for the rationale of a particular demographic of Leave voters, who come from different, often less privileged backgrounds, to echo his own footsteps and consideration of opposing views. This is to foster acceptance for their reasons to opt out of the EU, rather than simply categorize their vote as uninformed and motivated by racism or xenophobia.



Rather, Maconie argues that austerity is the fundamental factor in the increasing social divide in Britain, which he sees as having culminated in the referendum. An instance of this transpires in Maconie's visit to the Quaker House pub in Darlington. Talking to the landlady, Stella, he follows on from her account of how Darlington was affected by austerity, stating:

Here is another quietly smouldering impetus for Brexit that many commentators have either failed to notice or chosen to ignore: after the economic crisis of 2008, one largely brought about by the wickedness and greed of bankers, it has been ordinary people who have borne the cost, in reduced services and savage cuts. Rightly or wrongly, the EU is seen as aligned to that protected cabal of affluent and seemingly untouchable financiers. Brexit was an attempt, however clumsy and misguided, to land a punch on them. (91)

Maconie aims to relate and legitimize the perspectives of 'ordinary' people by providing a counter narrative to a nominally divided and broken Britain in order to offer a different perspective than the simplistic dichotomies that mark contemporary political discourse in Britain. As explained in Anne-Julia Zwierlein and Joanna Rostek's categorization of realist and panoramic Brexit literature (132), *Long Road from Jarrow* is an attempt at creating panoramic representations of regional and demographic complexities. Maconie also uses the oft-deployed technique in Brexit literature of what Zwierlein and Rostek call "the testimonial or verbatim," by, at least notionally, talking with a diverse range of England's population "to produce or at least aim at multivocality and an equal distribution of representational space across the opposing parties" (129). Thus, Maconie's walk functions as a restorative, all-encompassing gesture against increased media reports of the social, class, generational, and familial fissures appearing since the referendum.

While Maconie's samples of the social flavour of England rest heavily on supping – eating, drinking, and social consumption – he finds the taste of Brexit overpowering and the media manipulation of it unsavoury. Maconie admits to his own fatigue in this regard when he comments that "Brexit takes up most of the front page" (*Long Road* 133) or remarks:

As is now customary, the day's other news is uniformly 'Brexit,' an event which seems to have thrown every conversation and interaction, every

normal daily event into an uncomfortable kind of relief and shine a strange, harsh new light that refracts the world differently. (144-45)

Maconie paints a picture of this Brexit-infused country as a new, estranged, even foreign land. The modern-day mirroring of the Jarrow March serves as comparative and reparative journey for the author, navigating (his) past and present in an attempt to comprehend the contemporary divide caused by Brexit. Indeed, he makes direct comparisons between now and 1936, informing us that

[s]ome parallels between then and now suggest themselves immediately: A Conservative government recently returned to power with an increased majority. A Labour Party led into disarray by a leader widely seen as divisive and incompetent. The rise of extremism here and abroad fired by financial disasters, a wave of demagoguery and ‘strong man’ populism. Foreign wars driven by fundamentalist ideologies leading to mass displacement of innocent people. A subsequent refugee ‘crisis.’ The threat of constitutional anarchy with conflict between government, parliament and judiciary. Manufacturing and mass rallies resurgent as popular but questionable forums of political debate. Explosions of new forms of media. Inflammatory rhetoric stoked by a factionalised press. Football a national obsession, its wages, profits and morality constantly debated. (*Long Road* 11)

This enumeration, to which the impact of a pandemic disease could now be added, riffs on Juliet Gardiner’s opening passage to *The Thirties* where she states that the thirties have come to represent a decade of “confusion, financial crisis, rising unemployment, scepticism about politicians, questions about the proper reach of Britain’s role in the world” (xiii). Maconie’s juxtaposition summarizes the key concerns he reiterates throughout his travel narrative which he describes as contributing to “the particularly weird, fissile state of England” (*Long Road* 11) which has culminated in the Brexit vote. In doing so, he creates a memory motif in his minding of the march that serves as a ruminative space to untangle a socio-political knot and, in parallel, assuage his personal apprehension with comprehension.

Maconie concludes his travelogue with a reflection on the wealth of experiences and insights he claims to have had on his journey, writing wistfully in his “Postscript”:

I walked from the top to the bottom and into the heart of England. I looked it in the eye from morning till night and I never grew tired of it. Like the marchers, I learned something from those long days, evenings and nights that no amount of TV news or opinion pieces or well-meant docu-



mentaries could have given me. I learned about England now, about England then, and about England's secrets, its scraps and footnotes. I hope I have done it justice. Sometimes it baffled me, sometimes it irritated. But I came to know that, to quote that old maxim, yes it is my country right or wrong. It seems to be wrong about something almost every day now, but I understand some of its discontent, its bristling dissatisfaction with how it has been ignored, patronised and marginalised. (353)

Maconie's elegy to his journey foregrounds a newly found fascination which is also a trope in condition-of-England writing: a love for the land and the history of the country he has just traversed. Maconie suggests that by making the journey on foot, the pace affording a 'slower' engagement with people and places, he has been able to gain a more fundamental understanding for how and why the Brexit referendum was used as a protest vote. It is also a profound reckoning with his own sense of patriotism, which Maconie constructs as a realization attained along his journey. This is a common motive for travel writing set in the author-narrator's own country, since pride in the greatness of the country is paired with curiosity both in the historical roots of that greatness and its contemporary manifestations (Korte 67).

Even though Maconie's trip ends in the twenty-first century and his travelogue promises to make sense of the present condition of England, he cannot resist the nostalgic pull of looking back rather than addressing the future at the very end of his travelogue. Towards the end of the "Postscript," his tone of acceptance and consideration is tinged with unease and foreboding: "In 2016, for the first time for me, it was not glib chatter or student drivel to think that something very like fascism was arising again out of the depth of history, a rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born" (*Long Road* 355). Drawing on the last two lines of William Butler Yeats's poem *The Second Coming* (1919), Maconie, like many other current social and political commentators (see O'Toole), re-employs Yeats' allegory of the menacing atmosphere of political disturbance and anxieties in inter-war Europe, culminating in the rise of fascism in Europe to the present day:

Both countries, the England of 1936 and 2016, seemed to be in state of seizure, of quiet, twitchy convulsion, and jittery anticipation – dread even – of the next chapter in our national story. Both times, both moods, reflected our vexed relationship with the continent of Europe. (359)

In this way, Brexit, and the less readily observable undertones that it represents, haunt Maconie's trip down memory lane. Maconie's own

allusion to the Jarrow March warns of the potentially shattering waves of a seismic socio-political shift that is emerging with uncertainty pervading national and international relationships. While his attempt to examine and propose a mode of reconciliation to Britain's (England's?) widening class and geographical rift is well meant, it also creates a sense of continuity and homogeneity between 1936 and 2016 that is not ultimately conducive to an accurate understanding of the complexities of the present day. Instead, looking back remains a national pastime.

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