

# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

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Review of:

## ***Food on Foot: A History of Eating on Trails in the Wild***

Demet Güzey. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Food on the Go Series, 2017. Pp. xii, 197, notes, bibliography, index.

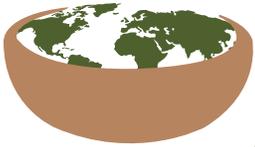
By: Robert James Smith

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The front cover of *Food on Foot* promises much in the way of adventure travel, with its picture of Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa guide Tenzing Norgay in a relaxed camp setting amidst snow, with a steep peak behind. While the implicit criterion for coverage in the book's chapters appears to be any food eaten outside the home space and without mechanized travel, the subtitle "on Trails in the Wild" specifies for us what is meant here by foot. Indeed this work recounts gustatory history across a range of journey contexts in its eight chapters, but prominent are the two longest chapters "Polar Explorations" and "Mountain Expeditions," where the author shows his greatest enthusiasm in moments of lyrical prose on the harshness and the sublime effect. These two chapters work through the history of journeys in both settings, and identify the types of food and drink that sustained those on foot.

There are many interesting details throughout the work, such as the prominence of wine in early mountaineering, the collection and eating of the fungus *tripe-de-roche*, or the eventual use of a pressure cooker to boil water in high altitude mountaineering. Decisions made on food and its preparation are traced over time and contexts: for example "pemmican," a "concentrated mixture of fat and meat" (38) that was essential for polar exploration then also came to be used for high mountain expeditions. While some found the taste and specific combination of ingredients challenging, pemmican was nevertheless effective and many attempts were made over the decades to increase its acceptance. What emerges here is solid coverage of the ongoing struggle to provide food that was both nutritious and sufficiently high in calories for the task and journey undertaken, while being light enough to carry over the required time frame.

This dominant theme of the relationship between food and travel *in extremis* is



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also traced in chapter 5, “Desert Travel,” and in chapter 7, “Army Rations.” Yet subsequent sections do not address severe challenges, and so the final chapter, “Street Food,” seems somewhat tame.

While much of this book is informative and makes for enjoyable reading, long sections seem too discursive, however. Frequently the first sections of chapters give historical background but make no reference to either “food” or “foot.” The section on cannibalism (105) in Tierra del Fuego is merely an account given to the captain of the *Beagle*, and conjures awkward thoughts about whose foot journey or trail is intended. In chapter 6, “Pilgrimage,” the page and a half considering Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (129-130) has good detail on food but no mention of walking. At other places then, when either “food” or “foot” is mentioned, the topic seems an arbitrary inclusion. But this is part of the problem of the topic. As the fourth book in a series entitled “Food on the Go” (the other three cover mechanised forms of transport), one can see that this work requires broad coverage.

The geographical coverage of the work is impressive. For example, as an Australian, I would not have not expected much coverage of my continent in this relatively short work, yet Güzey details a wide range of Australian topics on pages 2, 20–31, and 147. However I was concerned when the First Fleet was mistakenly dated as 1838 (20) when it actually arrived in 1788. In a later section, Napoleon Bonaparte (136) and Napoleon III (138) are both referred to in close succession solely as “Napoleon.” While such points give some disquiet—since one wonders how many other facts might not be relied upon—all appears well grounded in primary sources, or the earliest printed accounts available, and is detailed in the notes and bibliography. Taking on face value those early accounts, such as Favenc (1908) on Australian exploration, does tend to ignore, however, the important contributions of subsequent scholarship that at least deserve mention in passing.

I suggest that Güzey’s work is largely a musing upon walking and the discussion of related food. Folklorists will find broader enjoyment in it for, in effect, its mode is of an extended campfire yarn, where scope and interesting detail are valued, and especially where the story of food may aid progress along the trail, or perhaps survival. Even the attractive front cover has a relaxed Hillary and Norgay looking to their left off frame as if something interesting has just been said. This book’s many interesting details will instruct, amuse, and be readily recounted by those in calm times on their own trails.