

Review of 'Black Sea' by Neil Ascherson

Although some of us were a little daunted by the level of detail in this hugely knowledgeable history of the peoples who have lived for thousands of years on the shores of this inland sea, we felt rewarded by our perseverance. In describing the waves of migrants who have followed each other in settling in these lands, Ascherson provides useful parallels with modern times – reminding us that we are all migrants and that our cultures have emerged from this melting pot. For example, he includes a lovely local anecdote about the Sarmations (Indo-Iranian) soldiers who helped guard Hadrian's Wall and who, remaining in Lancashire after the Romans left, merged with the local population.

Ascherson examines how people define themselves ethnically, culturally and linguistically and how a diaspora's view of its 'homeland' (where it may not have lived for centuries) can be frozen in time.

The book is simultaneously a historical account and a travel book. Ascherson vividly describes his travels through the lands surrounding the sea and his encounters with those he meets. His account of travelling through the former USSR during the 1991 attempted coup against Gorbachev is fascinating, particularly as he draws parallels with his father's experience as a sailor on one of the British battleships that transported fleeing White Army Cossacks - the father witnessing the start of the Revolution and the son observing the end of the Soviet Empire.

The book (first published in 1995) is additionally pertinent to modern times in its examination of the negative impact of mankind on the Black Sea itself (pollution, over-fishing, invasive species), leading to real fears of an environmental catastrophe. Fortuitously, two of the group had read the 2015 revised version of the book and were able to report that there are some signs of progress in protecting the eco system.

Finally, as a Scotsman, Ascherson frequently draws on his roots – at one point nicely translating the name of the Russian village, Nedvigovka, as 'No Surrenderville'!