

Bread and Ashes – A Walk Through the Mountains of Georgia by Tony Anderson.
Jonathan Cape 2003.

Travel writing at its best conveys not only a sense of place but those vital background details that sets the place in its context, both in the here and now and in terms of history.

The Caucasus in general and Georgia in particular have a special place in the heart of Tony Anderson, and he conveys this with brio in Bread and Ashes. The journey that he makes in the region – actually journeys would be more accurate – is replete with larger than life characters encountered on the way, against whom are balanced the explorers from history, mostly, but not exclusively British, who travelled through the region in the 19th and 20th century.

For me it was the history of the region rather than its present reality that was the most intriguing part of the book, not least with regard to the Jewish presence in the area, about which Anderson has some fascinating theories, tracing it back, potentially, to the ninth century BC (sic) when the Ten Tribes of Israel were driven into exile by the Assyrian King Shalmaneser*. Anderson also writes with engaging passion about the empire of the Khazars, converts to Judaism who dominated the region between the 7th and 12th centuries.

Ultimately one is left with an overwhelming sense of a region whose greatness lies in its past, whose spirit was almost crushed during the years of Soviet rule – in spite of the fact that Stalin was a Georgian – and whose citizens struggle against the harshness of their surroundings and its poverty. I finished this book with sense of great sadness, but was ultimately glad that I had nevertheless been allowed an insight into a part of the world of which I had hitherto known little.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh

*According to Jewish history, the tribes were deported in the eight century (722 BCE) by the Assyrian King Sargon II.