



**The Devil's Causeway: The True Story of
America's First Prisoners of War in the
Philippines, and the Heroic Expedition Sent to
Their Rescue**

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As the United States engaged in a bloody campaign to pacify its newly-won Philippines territory, a secret American mission went terribly wrong, resulting in a prisoner-of-war incident that foreshadowed World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. What happened next was an epic struggle for survival, a test of the human will to live, and ultimately, a crucible for heroes. Their captivity and the torturous expedition sent to the American POWs' rescue, recalled today as one of the greatest marches in U.S. Army history, features a tightly-hewn cast of characters. A sweeping military epic drawing on international primary sources, *The Devil's Causeway* tells their extraordinary story in its entirety for the first time.

The Devil's Causeway: The True Story of America's First Prisoners of War in the Philippines, and the Heroic Expedition Sent to Their Rescue Details

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From Reader Review *The Devil's Causeway: The True Story of America's First Prisoners of War in the Philippines, and the Heroic Expedition Sent to Their Rescue* for online ebook

Jason Lewis says

A well written book showcasing the whirlwind troubles and trials leading to the rescue of military prisoners of war and the punishments presented forth by those causing such a travesty out in the Philippines. Westfall creates an account following not only those directly involved in the issues at hand, but also family members who are fed bleak accounts of the status of kin during such troublesome times.

What I feel really helps the story is that he not only stops there, but also gives an account of what the soldiers' life was like after such events took place. Included in this are the soldiers' marital lives, business and career choices afterwards, and the way that many cities and towns took to remembering any of their fallen heroes.

Jojo Clemente says

I came upon this book completely by accident while browsing through a store. As someone into Philippine history, I feel that this book is a great contribution to the period known as the Philippine-American War.

Matthew Westfall has written an eye-opening account of a chapter in an oft-forgotten part of the history between the Philippines and the United States. While the main focus of the book is the account of the capture and rescue of the Gillmore party, the author has also provided snippets of how American went about its mission of "benevolent assimilation" in the islands.

Very impressive is the meticulous research Westfall put into his work. He breathes life into the personalities such as the vain Gillmore, the feral Novicio and others. The characterizations are vivid, giving the reader engaging images of all the players.

Moreover, recreating the tracks of the Gillmore party's trek through central and northern Luzon is no mean feat and all the more adds to the overall quality of storytelling.

For people with more than a passing interest in the history of the relationship between the Philippines and the United States, this is a book worthy to be added to one's library.

Ted Guglielmo says

Marvelous. I love history, especially stuff I knew nothing about. This a a tale that should be told and remembered. A group of sailors taken captive and marched miles into the mountains of the Philippines mostly barefoot, hungry and racked with disease. It is the story of their trek and rescue by heroic men. The book is obviously painstakingly researched by Mr. Westfall. It leaves nothing out, as he gibes the account of

Denville's plight and the heart-wrenching letter's of his mother that lead a half delusional garrison Captain to obsessively search for and ultimately recover his remains. The background information given on many of the men, especially LT. Gilmore adds to this great read. Thank you for putting on Goodreads giveaways.

Rise says

In 1896, the Philippine Revolution against the Spanish who occupied and governed the Philippine Islands for more than 300 years broke out. The Katipunan, a clandestine organization bent on toppling the colonial government, was discovered, and this commenced a series of bloody confrontations between Spain and the freedom fighters.

Two years later, the Empire of Spain was threatened by another interest. The Americans intervened in the Spanish government in Cuba and later defeated the Spanish armada both in Santiago de Cuba and Manila Bay. By June 1898, the Philippine revolutionary force proclaimed the country's independence from Spain. Its leader, Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo, became the first president.

The Spanish surrendered and ceded its territories to the American victors through the Treaty of Paris in December 1898. The Philippines was effectively sold to the American government who did not recognize the sovereignty of the islands. The Filipino freedom fighters woke up to find their territory annexed to a new imperialist government, once again groomed to become colonial subjects of a new master. Those who previously resisted the Spanish rule also opposed the American empire who wanted to implement its own program of expansionism. A new war ensued in 1899. The turn of the century saw the turn of another chapter in the history of the Philippines, a chapter tainted with tears and blood.

This historical gloss, familiar to most students of history, was unfortunately simplified and incomplete, like all versions of history. Nonetheless, it was a necessary background to understand *The Devil's Causeway* by Matthew Westfall. The book filled in some gaps in the Philippine-American War and provided significant facts and perspectives while recounting an untold story of combat and rescue. The details of the incident would have been forgotten, but thanks to Westfall, a spotlight was now trained on a 110-year old encounter whose significance was not lost on modern conflicts and use of force.

In a Spanish church in Baler in the eastern coast of Luzon Island, some Spanish soldiers were trapped by the Filipino Army of Liberation. The siege lasted for all of several months, prompting an attempt of the Americans in Manila to rescue the soldiers of their former enemies. A battleship, the *USS Yorktown*, was sent to Baler. Following the ill-advised command of an American officer, a gunner boat from the ship entered a river and was ambushed by Filipino soldiers. A couple of soldiers were killed. Some were mortally wounded. The commander and the rest of his sailors were held captives. The dead were buried on the spot while one of the critically wounded was buried alive by order of a cruel Filipino commander.

The rescue of Lt. James C. Gillmore Jr. (the officer) and his men was a run to the hostile mountain passes of Sierra Madre and the Cordilleras. The pursuit was more like a cat-and-mouse game. Every attempt by the Americans to corner the mobile Filipino soldiers to get to the prisoners was rebuffed. The prisoners of war were dragged deeper and deeper into the forest interior of Luzon, battling not only war wounds and fatigue but deadly tropical diseases, not to mention being exposed to the territories of notorious headhunting tribes.

Their advance brought them to steeper and rougher trails. In places, the prisoners had to crawl hand over hand, helping each other over the large boulders.... Gillmore later recalled, "The

penalty of a single misstep [would have been] to dash to death into the rapids perhaps a hundred feet below." They had entered, he colorfully described, "a veritable devil's causeway." Just before dusk, they reached the head of the dark canyon and camped for the night, "more dead than alive."

Westfall spent considerable time researching the primary materials for this book from various libraries in the US, the Philippines, and Spain, sometimes even taking the trouble to have the Spanish documents translated. The credibility of his historical narrative was due in part to his use of first-hand accounts by participants in the conflict.

A remarkable quality of his version of events was its objective presentation. One could sense the writer's attempt to tell a balanced view of events by considering both the military objectives of American and Filipino officers. Westfall, a filmmaker on the side, had the instinct of a storyteller to tell a compelling drama. He assembled a narrative that appeared at times like a detailed treatment for a period war movie. He knew when to fade out from his immediate narrative to set out the larger historical contexts and when to point out the far-ranging implications of seemingly small but ultimately decisive political and military decisions.

The use of vintage photographs was also rather effective. His motivation to pursue the story itself, Westfall admitted, was inspired by his discovery of a photograph of the then-nameless rescued American soldiers, whose stories he vowed to research and write. Appearing on the book's front cover, the photograph was one of its kind. At the time it was taken, the folding pocket Kodak camera was just introduced.

The photograph was moreover a fitting emblem of the book's photomontage style. The filmic editing of multiple narrative strands was appropriate as Westfall was able to zoom in and out of the viewpoints of a large set of characters, panning from one location to the next without loss of continuity. It would have been easy for *The Devil's Causeway* to be overwhelmed by details, but the details were used ingeniously to produce a singular photograph of a protracted war.

It was finally refreshing to read a historical narrative with a post-nationalist perspective centered on actions and motivations. By taking advantage of a novelistic framework, *The Devil's Causeway* was not weighed down by any nationalistic ideology that were sometimes detrimental to a holistic appreciation of history. It was also crucial that the writer knew who was "the center of gravity" of the war; and for this narrative, he had himself chosen a young American soldier as the conscience of his story. The latter was the boy Venville whose story of disappearance became a sub-plot from which the book gained some of its emotional tug.

In his epilogue, Westfall was able to tally up the "cost of conquest", which might as well be the cost of arrogance. The cost was no less than the life and health of many soldiers on both sides.

This history book that reads like an adventure novel was a riveting look at the earliest American "adventure" in the Philippines. Westfall prefaced the chapters in the book with excerpts from Joseph Conrad's contemporaneous *Heart of Darkness* (1899), making clear his position on the vagaries of imperialistic war. Time and again, a nation's soldiers fought and waged war in the name of the flag – the flag which was the easiest way for the war machine to solicit blind obedience. As Harry Wilmans exclaimed in Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1916):

With bullying, hatred, degradation among us,
And days of loathing and nights of fear

To the hour of the charge through the steaming swamp,
Following the flag,
Till I fell with a scream, shot through the guts.
Now there's a flag over me in Spoon River!
A flag! A flag!

I received an advance reading copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads.

Malak says

The Devil's Causeway is a fascinating story about the hardship a group of American soldiers who went to the Philippines in a mission to free Spanish soldiers, but because of one selfish decision, they became the hostages instead.

It is clear that the author, Matthew Westfall, spent a great amount of time researching his story since it is told with great details. The reader comes to know the life that every person involved left behind as they traveled to the Philippines. This made the first part of the book a bit heavy and hard to go through, but by understanding the personality of each, it allows a better flow to the rest of the novel.

I personally love the last part since there was more action and decision making. The chase, the confrontation, the fight against the enemy and against disease, the chase of the promised glory and the scared lives of the soldiers were all described in a captivating fashion.

This military historical novel does not only bring the facts to the reader, but also the emotions of the people involved. I felt the fear of the soldiers, the anger of the captains and the sorrow of the waiting mothers. I felt sacred at times and at others I felt worry.

I defiantly enjoyed reading this book and recommended to the curious-minded.

Lili says

I thank the author and Goodreads giveaway for allowing me to read this. It is a stupendous book, brilliantly written and annotated, my favourite read this year.

A true story, well researched and illustrated, this is the moving account of the rescue of American Prisoners of War in the Philippines. An epic book that includes first person accounts and is a truly magnificent piece of knowledgeable writing. For the American Historian an indispensable device, recording accurate material on this period of their country's military history.

The USS Yorktown was sent to free Spanish prisoners from the town of Baler, whereupon a small group of these sailors led by Lieutenant James C. Gilmore were captured, imprisoned, tortured and moved from prison to prison along "a veritable Devil's Causeway." Alongside their ordeal is the daring and hard fought struggle to free them from their Filipino gaolers in what was one of the greatest marches in Army history.

In writing this book Matthew Westfall has accomplished what all historians hope to achieve, “to put flesh on the bones.” Intermingled within the facts are also the individual real stories, poignant and heart breaking. The tragic demise of the boy Denzell Venville or ‘Bembio’ as he was affectionately known, Edward Nygard, cruelly cut down, never to see the daughter soon to be born, the gruesome death of Ora McDonald by the soldiers of Phillipian leader Novico; and more, much more!

This volume is the revealing account of the consequences that follow; an error, a misjudgement, a mistake; call it what you will, by one man, Gilmore, that resulted from his ill-advised actions and also triggered catastrophic events for years to come

Tanya says

As an amateur historian, I have a huge gap in my knowledge when it comes to the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection that followed its close. Reading this book did much to fill the gap, but I can't really recommend The Devil's Causeway. The title focuses on the catchy subject of POW's, but their rescue is wrapped up with 100 pages to go, pages that dealt mostly with the stamping out of the Philippine Insurrection. Not a problem, necessarily. My biggest complaint is Westfall's anti-climactic writing style. The prologue starts out with the rescue, and only afterward does the rest of the story unfold. When the rescue is reached in the narrative it is passed over quickly and completely lacks drama. What does all this add up to? A book that you push through rather than are pulled into.

Barely 3 stars.

Jennifer says

The Devil's Causeway is an incredibly written glimpse into the past and the ordeal that America's first POWs went through. I knew very little of our war in the Philippines prior to this book, and it left me wondering about all those things you don't learn in your history classes.

The year was 1889, and the United States had only newly claimed the Philippines as its territory and with the Spanish under fire, Admiral George Dewey sent the USS Yorktown both rescue the Spanish troops and to ensure that their newly claimed territory was stabilized. However, it took just one person to change the course of events. Lieutenant James C. Gillmore made a huge mistake by ignoring orders and blindly went ahead and in that moment the lives of the men around him would be forever changed. That decision led to the United States first prisoners of war, and Matthew Westfall has written a true account that will draw you into the ordeal that these men went through with after their capture by Filipino insurgents and the rescue that was eventually occurred. It makes you wonder at the end how this story could have been almost all but forgotten. I received a complimentary copy of this book courtesy of Goodreads first reads program.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Uncle Sam had just defeated Spain during the brief Spanish-American war and part of the terms of surrender

was the ceding of the Philippines, a Spanish colony for 300 years, to the Americans. The Filipinos, who had been fighting Spain for independence long before the Americans came into the picture initially believed the hokum of America's announced intent of a "benevolent assimilation" for the Philippines but later realized that it was really a malevolent imperialist colonization the Washington-based politicians were after so they resisted and they were led by a small, frail-looking politician-soldier named Emilio Aguinaldo from Cavite who had unmistakable Chinese features.

Now in a remote, sleepy town in the northern part of Luzon (the Philippines' biggest island) was a town called Baler. Holed up inside the Spanish adobe church there were Spanish soldiers who refused to believe the emails and text messages coming from Madrid saying that their Mother Spain had lost the war and they should therefore now surrender. They thought this was just a tricky propaganda of the ragtag group of Filipino soldiers laying siege upon them. This siege would last for almost a year and ended only after the leader of the Spanish soldiers barricaded inside the church got hold of a Spanish newspaper where he saw one detail which convinced him that the news of Spain's defeat was not a hoax after all. So they finally surrendered to the Filipinos who were equally happy that they can now use the church again for worship and fiesta celebrations.

(My teenage daughter went to Baler a few months ago to attend a debut party. I told her to visit this historical church and take pictures as I haven't seen it myself. She didn't go there and instead went to the beach).

This book chronicles the ill-fated rescue mission staged by the Americans to free these Spanish soldiers a few months after the start of the siege. They sent a ship which docked on a nearby beach (maybe where my daughter went with her friends, so it's possible she got a little bit of history too during that trip), sent an advance party which was headed by an inept rich-boy-turned-soldier and was promptly captured by local Filipino guerillas after severely wounding two of them (one of which was later buried alive).

There followed, therefore, another American rescue mission this time for this would-be rescuers of the Spaniards and this involved a chase, mostly on foot, from Baler, down Luzon, zigzagging up again at the other side--a murderous trek where even the sturdiest camel would have died. In the end they were rescued, and even the bodies of the American dead were located, dug up, and brought home to their grieving families in the US. Including the few remains of that teenage private who was killed by a native headhunter, his head with blond curls taken for a ritual, his hands and feet severed and taken also as souvenirs. Countless letters by his mother addressed to politicians and even to the American president were traced and presented in this book.

This is supposed to be a book of history, a retracing of an important past in Philippine-American relations, but as in similar works this also sadly reflects what appears to be the prevailing attitude of Americans towards the world at large, especially towards non-white people: American lives have more meaning and significance than these others.

So here, once more, you'll see Filipinos given short shrift, presented as mere statistical numbers, Filipino names and local places misspelled, whereas if it's American, everything is precisely researched, minutely discussed, the dead almost always dying heroically, with postscripts of their lives and those who survived.

One example of this treatment is December 4, 1899. The American forces were encamped in Vigan, 250 men "majority of them on the sick list," so less than 125 of them healthy enough to fight. The Filipino forces led by General Tinio, with 400 fighting men, staged a surprise raid in the early morning hour of that day. Describing the battle which ensued, the author painted a picture of a Thermopylae-like defense by the Americans with phrases like:

1. "(Filipino) insurgents spilled from the cathedral and took up strategic positions around the plaza";
2. "(American Lt. Col.) Parker's bleary-eyed men (rocked out of their sleep) stumbled out of their palace quarters and into the pitch-black plaza, most still in their nightwear. They fired blindly...";
3. "(Filipino) rebels...with excellent lines of sight, fired mercilessly upon the disorganized Americans";
4. "Parker...ran headlong into an explosive volley of gunfire. He threw himself to the ground, losing his revolver...";
5. "Filipino soldiers swarmed Outpost Number 3 and fired wildly at the sentries on duty. One was killed instantly; his comrade fell, wounded";
6. "From this perfectly defensible, bunker-like position (the Filipinos) were able to unload on the Americans...Despite an incessant barrage, the Americans were unable to dislodge the enemy"; and
7. "As the fighting raged, ammunition ran low among the Americans at the hospital compound's wall."

Now guess what the final casualty count was? Eight (8) Americans dead, 3 wounded, none captured. For the Filipinos, FORTY (40) dead, 32 captured including 2 badly wounded unnamed officers. Played down was the fact that the Americans, though outnumbered, had much superior firepower, with the Filipinos fighting mostly with bolos and outdated Spanish rifles. If there was anything heroic here, it was the charge, not the defense, yet that is how American war literature always has been. Not one of the Filipino dead was named. Not one daring or heroic act in battle was mentioned.

Marilyn says

While reading this book, I couldn't believe that I was totally unfamiliar with this event. The one in a million or more odds to one that the cover photo was taken of those that were rescued is mind boggling.

Outstanding research and a well-written work are sure to be enjoyed by those that like military history. I highly recommend it for history buffs. The book is an interesting read.

Rayah says

I received this book in a First-reads giveaway.

A fascinating account of a part of American history I've known very little about: American imperialism in the Philippines, resulting from the end of the Spanish-American War. The book focuses on the failed rescue mission of Spanish prisoners, which resulted in American captives, further rescue missions, and death, disease, and heroics on all sides.

Author Westfall is scathing in his criticisms of Lt. Gillmore, whose sense of entitlement and quest for glory essentially caused the debacle. He also tells the story of the unlucky Naval Apprentice under Gillmore's command, Denzell George Arthur Venville. Venville was a well-liked 18-year-old from Oregon who survived the ambush of Gillmore's cutter *Yorktown* and became a prisoner of war.

The Devil's Causeway is history told as a dramatic adventure tale, painstakingly researched and backed up with incredible photographs and indexes of notes and sources. A great read for anyone interested in American or World History.

Steve says

An excellent read that I couldn't put down and read in a day, which occasionally I do if it's that good!!!! This is a story I never heard of before and it was very interesting. It is set after the Spanish American War in the Philippines (which the United States acquired after the Spanish American War). In 1899, Admiral Dewey sent the USS *Yorktown* to rescue Spanish soldiers being attacked by Filipino rebels. The U.S. Navy Lieutenant James C. Gillmore Jr. defied orders and was ambushed that killed four of his men and the rest were taken prisoner. The POW's faced brutal treatment and became the first American POW's. They were later rescued and the captors faced trial and some were executed.

Tom says

When I first got this book, I thought it was going to be a story of WWII as that is where I associate prisoners being held in the Philippines to be. Then, as I first started reading it, I immediately saw that it was a book about a group of sailors who were captured by the Philippine rebels during the Spanish American War.

Considering myself to be a history buff, I realized that to my dismay, I have never read anything about this war. It was a complicated war, the Filipinos were revolting against the Spanish for independence, while the Spanish were at war with the United States and the United States was attempting to defeat the Spanish and colonize the Philippines at the same time.

While we all know the outcome of the war, I was surprised to read about the hardship the Americans, both prisoners and rescuers went through during this time. Lack of food, clothing rotting off their bodies due to the wet warm climate, the prominence of sickness and disease, and how short it cut the lives of those who served.

It is not an easy book to read, and I would advise anyone not being familiar to this war to read something lighter but, as this is the only book I've read on the Spanish American War, I can offer no suggestions.

K.D. Absolutely says

For me, this book has three objectives. First, to correct what have so far been written about the life of **Lieutenant James C. Gillmore** whose troop was held as the first prisoners-of-war (POW's) during the turn of the century in 1899 to 1900 here in Luzon, the biggest island in the Philippines. Second, is to tell that complete tale in details. One day, the author, Matthew Westfall saw a picture (the one that is on the front cover of the book) with a caption "The Rescue of Gillmore" and he knew nothing about it. He consulted the existing war and history books regarding that period in the history of the Philippines, and found them wanting or incomplete. Lastly, to give tribute to his grandfather who was an American but chose to be Filipino because he found his happiness here in the country during that period. Westfall says that he also has a Filipino citizenship even if he is an all-American boy in terms of looks and language. "He divides his time between the Philippines; Pacific Palisades, California; and Nantucket, Massachusetts," says the blurb at the back cover of the book.

Westfall achieved all those objectives. Reasons:

1) His research is thorough as one can see in his footnotes, cross-references, notes and sources and never-before-seen photographs during that time in our (Philippine) history. It's amazing really for a Filipino like me to know that my knowledge of our own history has gaps or blindsides. To think that I finished many Philippine History subjects in the elementary, high school and even in college and I am fond of reading.

Westfall did not have any qualms debunking previously-held belief that the Gillmore party, that was taken as prisoners-of-war by **Kapitan Teodorico Novicio**, was treated properly or gently. How could previous historians miss this if the American soldiers were asked to walk on foot from Baler, Aurora through Bangued, Ilocos Norte to the Mountain Province? I mean, the American and Filipino soldiers walked from Bataan to Cabanatuan during the Death March following the Fall of Bataan during World War II and if you look at the Philippine map, in terms of distance, that is a lot shorter compared to what the American POWs had to traverse not in days but weeks.

2) Westfall's revelations in this book first comes as shocking to me. During the Spanish occupation, Filipinos have been portrayed as helpless victims of the Spaniards. This notion was greatly perpetuated by our National Hero, Dr. Jose Rizal. However, in this book, the predators are the Filipinos particularly Captain Novicio, **Lieutenant General Simon** and even **General Emilio Aguinaldo**. The victims and the preys are the American soldiers especially the 17-y/o **Denzell George Arthur Venville**. However, Westfall did not take sides. He presented both the stupidity of the American characters while, as a Filipino, I can't also help but sympathize with them. On the other hand, Westfall also showed the bravery and the consistency of the Filipino soldiers and he explained quite well why they behaved that way. In the end, I would say that Westfall's presentation is fair and balanced. He only wanted to tell the story without bias or prejudices on either of the two sides. Something that only Westfall, who claims to love both races, can do.

This is a book that all history-loving Filipinos should read. Especially for those who would like to know more about how Aguinaldo tried to hold on to his game in his pursuit to pressure the United States to grant us our independence as a nation. Once again, war can turn men into beasts. Some men can be blinded by their love for their country. Considering everything, we all understand that, don't we?

Thank you Matthew Westfall.

Terri says

A candid, albeit sometimes too candid, coverage of the cataclysm of events that began with the Spanish departure from the Philippines (having been bought by America from the Spanish for \$20,000,000) and a Spanish Garrison holed up under siege by Filipino Revolutionists in an isolated church at Baler - a small town on the coastline of Luzon in the Baler Bay. Then it ends with an attempted rescue of those Spanish soldiers at Baler, and the resultant capture by Filipinos of some American Marines, and the events that followed that to its conclusion.

There was much I liked about the book. The author did a marvellous job of collating photos and research into a story of understandable detail. He brought humanity to the research and gave life to the men taken as prisoner's of war.

However, I found some detail far too graphic and the author's need for over gratuitous description of violence and violent death to be rather befuddling. It was gratuitous description that might be better left in low quality fiction novels and Hollywood action movies.

The reader understands, for example, what happens when someone gets shot in the head.

The morbid fascination with crime scene style description certainly is a peculiar addition to *The Devil's Causeway*. I read a lot of military history (non fiction) and I have never come across anything quite this needlessly explicit.

The constant descriptions of back of heads being blown off, top of skulls being blown out and splattering brains all over the wall/the men's faces behind him/all over the boat, blood splattering people, misting across faces, are unnecessary and stood in the way of this being a much better offering.

Another element of the book was the over detail of tangential topics. Long sections of the book devoted to the life stories of certain people profiled in the tale. They came at the wrong place, and they were far too detailed.

Sometimes, it seems, because authors devote such time and energy to their research, they want to include it all. They want to give the research life in perpetuity through their book, and in many cases, it is to the detriment of the work.

A last niggling annoyance? Dollars were not always converted (in brackets following figure quoting) to current approximate value. It was there in the last half of the book, but not in the first half. I found this a small inconsistency, although it did not contribute to my rating.

On the positive side, there was a story within the pages worth telling and many parts are told fairly well. I enjoyed the way the author included the Indian War history of some of the war veteran's involved in the events.

I learned a goodly amount about this period of history and about the siege at Baler and that is of value to me.

The Devil's Causeway is a good first time offering from Matthew Westfall and I would guess that over time, with some constructive criticism from hardened non fiction readers, he will have a lasting career in this genre, if that is his wish.

