*Jane Whytlaw*

# RAMBLING ON / THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

Why walk when you can drive? This question arises when I mention to those less inspired that I walk to relax. Like most forms of exercise it is addictive and most people experience a natural high from the physical exertion. The benefits are numerous, but walking for fun and relaxation is not for everyone. Historically, walking was connected with work and was generally thought a tedious necessity of daily life. Walking was "common," not usually considered worthy of comment and often associated with poverty and vagrancy, creating negative socio-economic meanings. In rural England workers trudged many miles to work each day and peasants lugged their produce to market along roads and byways. Bandits preyed on defenceless wayfarers, robbing and sometimes murdering the unwary. The infantry, or foot-sloggers, were not willing walkers: they were ordered to march, sometimes for hundreds of miles. Until the transport revolution there were only two alternatives to walking: ride a horse or travel in an animal drawn vehicle. These two options were limited to the wealthiest classes. Everyone else travelled by shanks' pony. The early coaches and buggies were rough and uncomfortable and usually travelled no faster than walking pace.

Walking gained recognition as a leisure time pursuit in England in the early 1800s, about the time the first guidebooks were published. Poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, popularised walking as an aesthetic practice and wrote about their pedestrian travels. Their wanderings were revolutionary for the time. They undertook long excursions through Wales and England, walking hundreds of miles on some tours. These walks had a profound effect on Wordsworth, who increasingly saw himself as a wanderer. Coleridge was also inspired by this peripatetic practice. The activity of walking was known as a "constitutional" amongst intellectuals at Oxford and Cambridge universities. Rambling around the countryside was educative in itself, but it was also good for thinking and problem solving.[1] The slow, continuous movement of pedestrian touring reconnects the individual with the natural world. The meditative benefit of walking restores equilibrium and enhances a sense of self, producing a tranquil effect on the mind. Wordsworth suggests that true pedestrian travel "is not to gain knowledge of any particular place, but to see and examine the moving passage between places, the process of change itself."[2] By the mid nineteenth century the rich and intellectual classes walked for exercise and relaxation. *Sunday Tramps*, a literary walking club, completed 252 walks between 1880 and 1895.[3] Urban dwellers whose lives had become divorced from the country took up walking to reconnect with the natural environment.

The transport revolution and the enclosure of agricultural land in England occurred concurrently. Common land was reappropriated and the open field system reorganised, displacing small farmers and rural labourers. With enclosure the landscape underwent a radical change, fenced fields and new roads replaced open fields, traditional walking tracks were closed and signs removed. Hostile landowners restricted the use of traditional walking tracks across their land to their friends, but the general public provoked confrontations by trespassing. There were paths regarded by custom as rights of way and British law enshrined their continued use. The *Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society* was established in 1865 to protect common land and public footpaths.[4] Even today, a path that can be proven to be in use for twenty years is considered a public thoroughfare. The benefit of mechanised transport was that it freed people from the economic necessity of walking and made it desirable to walk as a leisure activity.

In less developed countries where paths and roads did not exist, walking was still fundamental to survival. The way of life in England was worlds apart from the arduous lifestyle of the convicts and early settlers in Australia during the nineteenth century. The landscape was a wilderness with no tracks other than those formed by native animals and nomadic Aborigines, whose existence was shaped by the harsh environment. The first European explorers ventured into a desolate alien landscape. They presumed there was an inland sea and went in search of it. Many died in the attempt to discover and tame the land. Walking or riding was the only way to penetrate the wilderness, and expeditions to explore and discover new places were undertaken by eager miners and pioneers to exploit the colony's resources. Under these circumstances, walking was not an aesthetic experience, but a test of endurance. When the gold rush on the Palmer River and the Hodgkinson River in North Queensland took off, the race was on to find a way over the steep rainforest clad mountain ranges along the coast. Development of the hinterland depended on access to seaports.

Explorers and pioneers blazed trails through the rainforest, into gorges, up steep spurs, along ridges, over peaks to the fertile Atherton Tableland and the goldfields beyond. Christy Palmerston was the first white man to climb Mt Bartle Frere, Queensland's highest mountain. He made many attempts to find a route over the mountains and found the Bump Track, linking Port Douglas with the goldfields. This was the first track south of Cooktown wide enough for carts and wagons. The track, now a walk that closely follows the original route, climbs a steep spur to the top of the range, passing near Mowbray Falls and ending at Black Mountain Road, though the original track went through to Mt Molloy. James Robson found a track up a steep spur in the Mulgrave Valley south of Cairns, near the site of the Gillies Highway today. Bullock teams and pedestrians lugged supplies up the steep track to the tableland towns, but it was

never more than a track, and mishaps were common on the steep treacherous sections. Today a foot track follows the same route to the top of the range.

Bill Smith's failed attempts to find a track from the Hodgkinson goldfield over the ranges to the coast ended at the Barron Gorge, where he glimpsed Trinity Inlet in the distance. John Doyle, the first white man to see the Barron Falls, also saw the coast from the top of the range. Smith and his team decided on a different approach and sailed south from Cooktown in search of the inlet, and found it. They battled through a maze of swamps to the Barron Gorge and found a way up a steep spur to the top of Stoney Creek and beyond to the goldfields, where they received a hero's welcome. Smith's group and another party led by Sub-inspector Douglas, passed each other, unaware of the fact. Douglas found a track on the opposite side of Stoney Creek Gorge, down a steep spur to the base of the escarpment and through to the coast. These two tracks were never any more than foot tracks; they were too steep for pack animals, let alone a wheeled vehicle. Many of the routes discovered by the explorers, including Smith's and Douglas tracks, followed "bama pads," paths used by Aborigines to travel between the coast and the hinterland. Most of the tracks were abandoned when the Cairns to Kuranda railway line was built, but recent interest has seen some original tracks reopened as walking trails. Today's adventurers can follow in the explorers' footsteps in a more leisurely mode.

Walking is an eccentric activity. It can be a solitary pursuit or a shared experience, depending on individual preference. The Romantics popularised the peripatetic practice as a leisure pursuit. Explorers and adventurers walked into unknown and often hostile territory to satisfy their curiosity and adventurous spirit. Walking was integral to the itinerant lifestyle of tramps in England and swagmen in Australia. Pilgrims walked long distances to worship at holy shrines. The ubiquitous backpacker, the modern day wanderer, is a self sufficient traveller who carries all that is needed to survive in a state-of-the-art light weight pack that serves as a substitute home. Wanderers have generally been regarded as unusual, and are observed with suspicion by those whose movements are restricted by choice or necessity.

English novelist, Bruce Chatwin, has a theory that the earliest humans were nomadic, and walking is genetically ingrained in our psyche. He suggests that humans are wanderers and to rediscover our humanity we must cast off attachments and take to the road.[5] French philosopher Blaise Pascal said "Our nature lies in movement; complete calm is death."[6] In Asia they believe that wandering re-establishes the original harmony which once existed between man and the universe.[7] The action of walking was used by Muslims as a technique for dissolving worldly attachments and allowing men to lose themselves in God.[8] Politicians and bureaucrats, whose control

relies on a settled society, assure us that the wandering lifestyle is an aberrant form of behaviour and in the interest of civilisation must be suppressed.[9] The Australian government used this tactic to restrict the migratory movements of Aborigines, confining them to reserves and missions. European governments have herded Gypsies, natural wanderers, into permanent shanty towns where poverty and disillusionment are now a way of life.

In Australia today, networks of walking tracks provide access to remote and dramatic landscapes in state forests, national parks and conservation parks. Unlike England, these tracks rarely pass through private property. Busy roads and enclosed cultivated land have limited walking opportunities to rough inaccessible places not suitable for agriculture. The increasing popularity of walking has spawned a plethora of walking tours from short strolls through areas of botanic or cultural interest to long distance endurance walks into wilderness areas. As society has become more mechanised the need to escape the pressures of modern life has prompted people to commune with nature to relax. Walking is soothing and the process of placing one foot in front of the other induces a state of trance. Walking can be obsessive or a form of escapism for competitive people, who often set personal goals and challenges rather than walk for its own sake. Emphasis is often placed on the physical benefits of walking: it improves and maintains overall health, strengthens bones, increases cardiovascular fitness, reduces excess body fat and boosts muscle power. Despite the benefits, walking itself cannot bring happiness and contentment, but it can enrich our lives and help maintain vitality and balance, mentally and physically. So, why drive when you can walk?

## Endnotes

1. Miles Jebb, *Walkers* (London: Constable, 1986) 99.
2. Anne D Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 73.
3. *Ibid.* 171.
4. *Ibid.* 168.
5. Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Picador, 1988) 181.
6. *Ibid.* 183.
7. *Ibid.* 200.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.* 199.