

CARVING AND WALKING

As a young man of twenty, I too walked the path of many before me, from Land's End to John O'Groats. A path of a thousand arduous miles. The reason for walking I can only put down to a youthful spirit of adventure, a restlessness and a wanting in some way a 'trial of life'. Joseph Conrad's novella 'Youth' was a great favourite of mine in those days: "Oh, Youth! The strength of it, the faith of it, the imagination of it! To me she [the ship] was not an old rattle-trap carting about the world a lot of coal for freight – to me she was the endeavour, the test, the trial of life."

After two or three weeks we became accustomed to walking long distances. With each day the process became more of a meditation. The struggle to get up, eat, pack and walk became more automatic, leaving room for thought and conversation, to enjoy the journey perhaps. Mostly however we thought about the end: how many miles to go, how many days left. We sped along; nobody overtook us anymore. I marvelled at our fitness. Our favourite pastime became the description of the longed-for bath we would have at the end of the road. We would take it in turns, luxuriating in even the smallest detail: the heat, the steam, the taps, the water – washing in streams along the way had long since lost its charms.

Our arrival in John O'Groats was strangely flat. I sat and stared out to the islands of Orkney. Had I secretly hoped to find fulfilment or some truth? The lady sitting next to me on the bus back to Edinburgh changed seats as soon as one became available.

Several years later whilst walking in the Himalayas I fell ill from dehydration from climbing up to too high an altitude too quickly. Three days were spent in bed and a fourth day drinking endless cups of tea to recover enough strength to walk at all. Leaving the rest lodge on the morning of the fifth day I fell in with a man from China. We both walked very slowly, but only he out of choice. Not only did he walk impossibly slowly, but he was forever stopping. Just outside the village he stooped to examine a blue flower remarking that the colour of the same flower in the valley below had been much less vibrant. A little further on we leaned over a wall to watch a girl ploughing with a buffalo. He had a conversation with her, having learnt a little Nepali. At the end of the day after countless stops and distractions we had covered only about a mile. Had I been in good health this lack of progress would have frustrated me and at first only my lingering illness kept us together.

After a few days however I began to enjoy his company, the rhythm of his days, the incongruous half moon glasses that were brought out from his pack every time something needed really close examination and then perched high on his balding head while he talked. He had great curiosity and gave the impression he was where he wanted to be. One day while sitting on a wall he told me that there were two types of climbers. Those who climbed to reach the top and those who climb to discover what is along the way. This simple observation struck me at the time and has been bubbling away on the ‘back-burner’ of my mind ever since. There seems hidden in the words not only a truth about walking, but different approaches to life and to my particular interest – carving. That concealed truth has become pivotal in my approach to all three.

I started to carve stone with the help of an eccentric man I met several years after leaving art college. I began a sort of apprenticeship. ‘Sort of’ because there was no formal arrangement. I helped him as the young often help the old, with enthusiasm and strength. Not only carving stone under his direction, I hoed onions, moved boats, and patched chimneys. In return I received payment in marmalade, elderflower wine, and occasionally some cash. With tirades and comical insults flying regularly from this roaring bear of a man, our days were never boring. Sprinkled among the storms there were sporadic nuggets of wisdom. When he recognised my tendency to hurry things, he advised and encouraged me to work in stone. Stone would, he said, slow me down. He urged me to work entirely by hand avoiding all machine tools, thus slowing me down further. As it’s hard to rush in stone and mistakes are difficult, or impossible, to rectify, this still seems to me good advice.

Machines are noisy and clumsy and a further barrier in the translation of thought, feeling and emotion from mind to stone. Working by hand does, however, go against the ‘modern way’ which is to use machines, such as pneumatic chisels, to work more quickly. Unfortunately the excess dust and vibration that these machines produce has caused many sculptors to retire early.

There are perhaps a million footsteps on the path from Land’s End to John O’Groats. A million blows of the hammer in a carving. In fact it matters little how quickly I reach the end, what counts is what I discover along the way. I am aware that if my mind wanders while carving, if I start to become distracted by the radio, then the carving becomes dull, weaker. This is perhaps not surprising, but what is more surprising is that even the simplest marks seem to suffer in the same way. The quality of a

carving seems to come, at least in part, from the intent. The unimpeded flow of intent (or lack of it) remains in the stone. Where the intent was strong throughout the carving the work shines. Each chip is a thought and each step a record.

In the fifteen years since my walk from Land's End to John O'Groats the approach that I had then has become completely undermined. Perhaps this has as much to do with passing from the impatient twenties to a calmer thirties as with the acceptance of a philosophy. Indeed I find myself wanting to swim directly against the current of our time. Not to get from A to B as fast as possible, but as slowly as possible.

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