THE JOY OF WALKING

Selected Writings

Edited and introduced by Suzy Cripps

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Introduction

Suzy Cripps

> 'Never did I think so much, exist so vividly, and experience so much, never have I been so much myself, if I may dare to use the expression, as in the journeys I have taken alone and on foot.'
>
> J. J. Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

You have in your hands an anthology entitled *The Joy of Walking*. Perhaps you chose it because you're already a fully-fledged walker. In which case, welcome. I'm very happy that you're here. On the other hand, there's also a chance that you'd describe yourself as more of an indoors person. In your opinion, going out for a walk is nothing short of hell and, to you, 'the joy of walking' is a phrase loaded with irony. Walking, in your experience, has meant getting wet and cold in various rural locations. It's involved the misery of a sprained ankle or a blister. Or worse, an ill-fated school camping excursion, not dissimilar to *Lord of the Flies*, where you became hopelessly lost, split off into factions and got chased by a field of bullocks.

Perhaps, as a citizen of the postmodern world, you think that walking is fine for other people, but it isn't for you. As Henry Thoreau himself says in his popular essay 'Walking': *'Ambulator nascitur, non fit.'* That is, walkers are born and not made. There are two categories, you conclude: normal human beings, and walkers, the latter being an endangered species. But I think to categorize walking in this way is an oversight; to cut off the human being from walking is to discount the large majority of life for the large majority of humankind. Most of us walk, all the time, for all sorts of reasons, in all sorts of places.

For some, walking is a cure-all. A good friend recently showed me an amusing WhatsApp exchange with her mother, where, having dramatically lamented her troubles for several hundred words, she received a pragmatic, one-line response: 'Have a banana and go for a walk. x'. But it's a lot more than a form of therapy. Beyond walking being the practical function for getting where we need to be, we also walk to pass the time. A walk has a beginning, an end, an aim, it is a life in miniature. It gives us purpose. We walk to keep fit; many people obsessively track their steps from dawn till dusk. Some people walk miles every day to survive. Some people just walk to the corner shop.

Fine, you admit with the tired sigh of a soul that has been dragged to one too many National Trust car parks, *it can't be denied that we do spend a large portion of our lives walking*. But is walking really *so* interesting a subject as to warrant an entire anthology?

It is undeniable that the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other has been an impetus for artistic expression throughout the course of human evolution. From the earliest days of literature written in English, walking has been quietly present: as a means of processing pain, as seen in the Old English poem 'The Wanderer', where the eponymous 'earth-stepper' treads the tracks of exile while pondering his grief, to the abundance of pilgrimage literature written in Middle English, where the physical journey facilitates a parallel journey of spiritual progress. What began in the Middle Ages has today evolved into a specific sub-genre, a literature of nature and walking (works such as Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* or Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* might spring to mind). Walking is intricately bound up in human existence. To pay attention to walking, then, is to pay attention to life itself, which seems like a valuable investment of time, to use the language of our day and age. I hope, however, that this anthology will suggest that walking often sublimates or distracts from the need for a 'return on investment'.

But how on earth do we begin to whittle down our choices if

literature about walking spans the centuries? It is obvious that anthologies require criteria or boundaries of some sort (if they are to be remotely portable, at least). The texts in this book span a period beginning in the mid seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. Aside from their already lionized status, these are texts that approach walking from a range of perhaps surprisingly different perspectives. Some of the extracts are from classic, cornerstone essays on walking; some are from novels, prompting us to think about walking as a rarely acknowledged spectre that exists quietly in, dare I say, most fiction. But first, we ought to warm up a little for our journey ahead, so let's take a brief tour of a few of the authors, texts and perspectives that we'll meet on the road.

In her brilliant history of pedestrianism, *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit touches upon a key issue of contemporary life, that of hurry:

> I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought or thoughtfulness.*

We may be surprised that this seemingly very contemporary statement of walking as a mindful solution to a culture of hurry is echoed in the writing of authors from previous centuries. The eighteenth-century Welsh poet John Dyer praises the sweet relief brought about by the silence of walking into the countryside: 'Oh! pow'rful Silence! how you reign / In the poet's busy brain!' In fact, a great many of the poets, novelists and essayists in this anthology were great believers in the Latin adage *Mens sana in corpore sano*: 'a healthy mind in a healthy body'. We may nod specifically towards the seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne, who associated walking primarily with the mind: 'To walk is by a Thought to go; To mov in Spirit to and fro'. Similarly, our curiosity may be piqued

by Walt Whitman's poem 'Song of the Open Road', where thought is represented as the fruit of walking: 'they hang there winter and summer on those trees and almost drop fruit as I pass'.

As well as a place for the cerebral, the reflective act of walking can soothe the emotions. Harriet Martineau notes in her autobiography that walking always left her with 'a cheered and lightened heart'. It can also stir up stronger passions. Thomas Hardy's narrator in 'At Castle Boterel', for example, relives the sensations of former romance as he retraces paths where he once walked with a lover. It goes without saying that walking and emotion were primary concerns of the Romantic era of poetry, represented in this anthology by Dorothy Wordsworth, John Clare, Robert Southey, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and William Wordsworth. For them, walking sometimes borders on a spiritual experience. Contrastingly, flights of the imagination are parodied in the brilliant Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, as walking in the city excites the heroine to such an extent that she is unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Walking is a place for romance in this era, a rare space for privacy, as seen in Bathsheba Everdene and Sergeant Troy's meeting in the woods in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, or in Rosa Nouchette Carey's *Not Like Other Girls*, where Dick and Nan treasure their walks together.

Walking is, however, firstly and most evidently about movement. There is the latent possibility of venturing away from our quotidian, to 'close each book, drop each pursuit', as Jessie Redmon Fauset suggests in her poem 'Rondeau'. Walking, like travel, presents a sense of possibility, of spontaneity and of freedom. Walking offers us a chance to find the answer to a question that the young Cathy Earnshaw asks in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: 'I wonder what lies on the other side'. Indeed, journeying on foot can give us a taste of what it might be like to depart from all our trappings. In Wilkie Collins's Cornish travelogue *Rambles Beyond Railways*, the author describes the walker becoming a kind of human tortoise, carrying around all

their worldly goods in 'knapsacks, which now form part and parcel of their backs'. Walking, by definition, unless we have some kind of lackey, requires that we leave everything but the essentials of life behind.

Walking is not just about going on a long-distance hike in the manner of Collins. Many of the texts were chosen for their ability to describe accessible day-to-day acts of walking, recording the experiences of individuals who understand the vital and precious moments that walking can lead us into in everyday life. As Jenny Odell puts it so brilliantly in her book *How to Do Nothing* (2019), exploring is a vital aspect of strolling:

> wandering some unexpected secret passageway can feel like dropping out of linear time. Even if brief or momentary, these places and moments are retreats, and like longer retreats, they affect the way we see everyday life when we do come back to it.*

This means that both rural and urban walking can be of equal value in sustaining a lifestyle where we find regular refreshment and make new discoveries on foot. Christopher Morley boasted that he could find refreshing seclusion while walking the streets of Boston, claiming to be 'as solitary in a city street as ever Thoreau was in Walden'. More than that, there is great potential in walking in a city where a subliminal sense of adventure is always present when on foot. Lucy Snowe, the heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), thought that 'to walk alone in London seemed of itself an adventure'. In fact, the flâneur – a gentleman stroller who observes city life – became a literary trope in the nineteenth century. Charles Baudelaire gives a textbook example of the flâneur's escapades in his poem 'To a Passer-by', where the narrator describes his fleeting glance at a beautiful woman: 'Ah, how I drank, thrilled through like a Being insane, / In her look, a dark sky, from whence springs forth the hurricane.'

The city becomes a playground for the gentleman walker, providing him with a smorgasbord of sensory stimulation ready to be sampled. Modern scholarship has more recently pioneered the idea of the female equivalent (the flâneuse). However, walking the city has historically been considered a male occupation, a space viewed in literature primarily through the male gaze. For women, walking the streets was more commonly associated with selling your body.

Walking in general, in fact, was a white and male-dominated activity in the assorted historical contexts of this anthology. Henry Thoreau poses a pertinent question in his lecture 'Walking' when he talks about the fate of womankind in his day: 'How womankind, who are confined to the house still more than men, stand it I do not know; but I have ground to suspect that most of them do not *stand* it at all.'

He is right: the women in this anthology do not stand it, and so they walk. By and large, however, we notice that walking is written about and approached in a different way for women. It is not an aimless activity to pass the time, but one of the few methods of finding relief from the restrictions they face in society. Elizabeth Gaskell sums up this sentiment perfectly, referring to her protagonist Margaret Hale in *North and South*: 'Her out-of-doors life was perfect. Her in-doors life had its drawbacks.' Indeed, there can be an ecstasy in walking for women. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora roams the gardens of Leigh Hall feeling 'so young, so strong, so sure of God!' Outside this personal sense of fulfilment, however, the lifeline of pedestrianism is often met with responses of anxiety or disbelief. Many of these texts are a rebuttal to these kinds of voices. Be it Elizabeth Bennet's defiant (and muddy) walk to Netherfield Park in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which is deemed 'silly' by her mother and 'incredible' by other women. Or Mrs Maple's sensible words in Fanny Burney's *The Wanderer*: 'What else has she got her feet for?' At any rate, the walking woman is a contentious figure.

Just as fewer women writers were published within the time frame of this anthology, the same applies to writers of colour. I have included some important texts: Rabindranath Tagore's letter collection *Glimpses of Bengal* (1885–1895) gives us a take on walking from the Indian sub-continent. I was also inspired by ideas in Camille T. Dungy's anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, where the editor notes that nature writing by African American authors is often held captive by 'political' readings, when really, the corpus of work is far more thematically diverse.* To do this justice, I chose texts that offer different perspectives from African American writing in the era: firstly, an account of walking from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). It is included to provide some nuance to the idyllic picture of the world that is painted by more privileged authors in nineteenth-century walking literature. Secondly, I include Jessie Redmon Fauset's poem 'Rondeau' (1912) alongside this, because it is an example of African American writing about walking from the appropriate era that is not specifically considered to be a poem 'about race'. An anthology focusing on twentieth- and twenty-first-century accounts of walking could no doubt include a more diverse range of experiences. Nonetheless, the following texts give us a foundational insight into walking literature, broadly speaking from the English-speaking world, in the mid seventeenth to the early twentieth century.

It is my hope that you enjoy dipping in and out of the texts in this anthology. Perhaps that it might even inspire you to venture outside, after all, appreciating walking means paying attention to what is, for most, the cornerstone of existence, and thereby to the fact that you are alive. That seems worth exploring.

Henry David Thoreau
1817–1862

Henry David Thoreau was an American essayist, poet and philosopher. He was a proponent of Transcendentalism, a literary and philosophical movement whose core beliefs included the innate goodness of mankind and nature. Thoreau is best known for his book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), which recounts his two years spent living in the forest. In the following extract from his lecture-turned-essay 'Walking' (1862), he explains how walking takes us away from civilization, forcing us to encounter both nature and our own selves.

from 'Walking'

"The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild, and what I have been preparing to say is, that in wildness is the preservation of the world."

—THOREAU

"I believe in the forest, in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows."

—THOREAU

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee, and every one of you will take care of that.

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*: which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *à la Sainte Terre*," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*," a Saunterer—a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering.

He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea. But I prefer the first, which indeed is the most probable derivation. For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels.

It is true we are but faint-hearted crusaders, even the walkers, nowadays, who undertake no persevering, never-ending enterprises. Our expeditions are but tours, and come round again at evening to the old hearth-side from which we set out. Half the walk is but retracing our steps. We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return—prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.

To come down to my own experience, my companion and I, for I sometimes have a companion, take pleasure in fancying ourselves knights of a new, or rather an old, order—not Equestrians or Chevaliers, not Ritters or riders, but Walkers, a still more ancient and honourable class, I trust. The chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in, or perchance to have subsided into, the Walker—not the Knight, but Walker Errant. He is a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People.

We have felt that we almost alone hereabouts practised this noble art; though, to tell the truth, at least if their own assertions are to be received, most of my townsmen would fain walk sometimes, as I do, but they cannot. No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence, which are the capital in this profession. It comes only by the grace of God. It

requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker. You must be born into the family of the Walkers. *Ambulator nascitur, non fit.* Some of my townsmen, it is true, can remember and have described to me some walks which they took ten years ago, in which they were so blessed as to lose themselves for half-an-hour in the woods; but I know very well that they have confined themselves to the highway ever since, whatever pretensions they may make to belong to this select class. No doubt they were elevated for a moment as by the reminiscence of a previous state of existence, when even they were foresters and outlaws.

"When he came to grene wode,
In a mery mornynge,
There he herde the notes small
Of byrdes mery syngynge.

"It is ferre gone, sayd Robyn,
That I was last here;
Me lyste a lytell for to shote
At the donne dere."

I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements. You may safely say, A penny for your thoughts, or a thousand pounds. When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shopkeepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them—as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon—

I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago.

I, who cannot stay in my chamber for a single day without

from the tan and callus of experience.

When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us if we walked only in a garden or a mall? Even some sects of philosophers have felt the necessity of importing the woods to themselves, since they did not go to the woods. "They planted groves and walks of Platanes," where they took *subdiales ambulationes* in porticos open to the air. Of course it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head, and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?


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Let me breathe a little here.
Where am I, Nature? I descry
Thy magazine before me lie.
Temples!—and towns!—and towers!—and woods!—
And hills!—and vales!—and fields!—and floods!
Crowding before me, edg'd around
With naked wilds and barren ground.
    See, below, the pleasant dome,
The poet's pride, the poet's home,
Which the sunbeams shine upon
To the even from the dawn.
See her woods, where Echo talks,
Her gardens trim, her terrace walks,
Her wildernesses, fragrant brakes,
Her gloomy bow'rs and shining lakes.
Keep, ye Gods! this humble seat
For ever pleasant, private, neat.
    See yonder hill, uprising steep,
Above the river slow and deep;
It looks from hence a pyramid,
Beneath a verdant forest hid;
On whose high top there rises great
The mighty remnant of a seat,
An old green tow'r, whose batter'd brow
Frowns upon the vale below.
    Look upon that flow'ry plain,
How the sheep surround their swain,
How they crowd to hear his strain!
All careless with his legs across,
Leaning on a bank of moss,
He spends his empty hours at play,
Which fly as light as down away.
    And there behold a bloomy mead,
A silver stream, a willow shade,
Beneath the shade a fisher stand,
Who, with the angle in his hand,

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