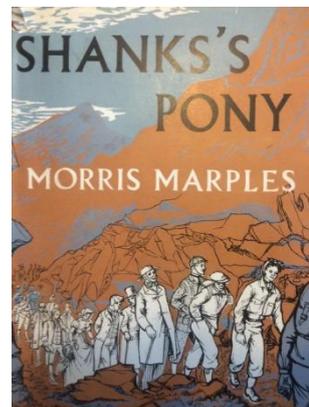


Morris Marples

Shanks's Pony : A Study of Walking

Country Book Club 1961 (1st pub 1959)
AJM May 2019



Shanks's Pony is an 18th century expression to denote travelling without the desirable horse. This classic work is a beautifully written and entertaining account of the history of walking in Britain from the C14th onwards.

1. Four Primitives

The English were known for their addiction to travel as early as the C14th: "That people are curious enough that they may know and tell the wonders that they have seen; they cultivate other regions and succeed still better in distant countries than in their own" – Ralph Higdon, *Polychronicon*, 1330.

Thomas Coryate walked from Somerset to Venice and back in 1608, and wrote it up as *Coryate's Crudities* (1611).

William Lithgow from Scotland set out (after a love affair which ended with him having his ears cut off by the lady's brothers) on a series of 'pedestrian pilgrimages' to Europe, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt & N Africa, published *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures and Painfull Peregrinations of Long Nineteen Years Travayles* in 1632.

John Taylor, the 'Water Poet' – a waterman who set out to parody Coryate. B1580, he published various travelogues including *Penniless Pilgrimage* (1618), the earliest account of a walking tour in Britain – London to Edinburgh.

Ben Jonson walked to Scotland in 1619 – if he wrote it up, it was lost in his library fire in 1623.

2. Heel and Toe

'Heel and toe' referred to a new sport of competitive walking in the second half C18th and early C19th – covering a set distance within a set time for a wager.

3. Prelude to Pedestrian Touring

In the C18th on the Continent it was normal for a man to walk; not here, as Carl Philipp Moritz found when he tried it. But by the end of the century the concept of the pedestrian-tour had come in – the beginning of a movement which endures to this day. Partly due to the increase in travel stimulated by improvements in roads and facilities, partly by the growing appreciation of nature and a new concept of the picturesque, and partly by the desire to make the most of opportunity. Wordsworth was one of the first to feel a spiritual rapport with nature (rather than shrinking away in horror at its wildness). And so began the vogue of the literary walking tour, with notable exponents Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Hazlitt, De Quincey.

Wordsworth had long walked among his native hills, but he and Robert Jones set out in 1790 on his first real walking-tour, to Europe – written up in *The Prelude* Bk 6. He would compose much of his poetry while walking – even up and down the gravel path in his garden. De Quincey calculated that by 65 Wordsworth had covered up to 180,000 miles on foot – with 15 years still to go.

4. Walking and Talking

In 1797 Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge walked along the Somerset coast, and conceived the *Ancient Mariner*, completed by Coleridge 4 months later. **Coleridge** also often composed while walking, but preferred uneven ground; he and Southey embarked on *A Pedestrian Tour through North Wales*, later written up by Southey.

Inspired by walking with Coleridge, **William Hazlitt** became the first to write specifically of the pleasures of walking in his essay *Going on a Journey*:

One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself. . . I cannot see the wit of walking and talking at the same time —I like solitude. . . . The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty to think, feel, do just as one pleases. We go a journey chiefly to

be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others. It is because I want a little breathing-space to muse on indifferent matters. . . that I absent myself from the town for a while. . . . Give me the clear blue sky over my head, and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me, and a three hours' march to dinner—and then to thinking. ... I laugh, I run, I leap, I sing for joy. 53

5. Pioneer with a Tent

Thomas De Quincey, aged 16, ran away from school and walked from Manchester to Chester; and then embarked on a walking-tour in Wales for the good of his health, and wrote it up 20 years later in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. He made himself a tent. He rented Dove Cottage, Grasmere, from the Wordsworths and remained a confirmed pedestrian for the rest of his life. He'd started taking opium for pain relief, as had Coleridge, and walking was the only way to dispel the torpor it induced.

6. Two Poets

Poetry and pedestrianism went hand in hand while the influence of Wordsworth was supreme. It spread to **John Keats**, a Londoner who knew nothing of the countryside. In 1818 he decided a walking tour in the Lake District & Scotland was necessary. He set out with Charles Brown in 1818, and they slogged through inhospitable terrain and inclement weather. Keats became ill, and was ordered to give up (after 642 miles). His health never recovered – TB three years later.

Shelley walked as a student in Oxford, then went to Wales. He walked, but only set out on a walking tour once, travelling on foot to Switzerland with a young woman not his wife with whom he had fallen in love.

7. Pedestrian Antiquary

From 1800 it became worthwhile to publish guide books for pedestrians.

William Hutton was a Birmingham businessman, a walker and antiquary. He walked the length of the Roman Wall and back.

8. A Young Lady Reproached for Taking Long Walks

Women were not supposed to walk. Jane Austen did; only within Hampshire, but often. There is scarcely a novel without a lady who walks. But the revolutionary was **Dorothy Wordsworth**. She walked constantly, alone and with William. From a stay with her uncle in Norfolk in 1791 she wrote:

I rise about six every morning, and, as I have no companion, walk with a book till half past eight, if the weather permits. . . . Sometimes we walk in the mornings, but seldom more than half an hour, just before dinner. After tea we all walk together till about eight, and then I walk alone, as long as I can, in the garden. I am particularly fond of a moonlight or twilight walk.

and then, referring to a time when William was also staying there:

We used to walk every morning about two hours; and every evening we went into the garden, at four or half past four, and used to pace backwards and forwards till six. Unless you have accustomed yourself to this kind of walking, you will have no idea that it can be pleasant; but I assure you that it is most delightful, and if you and I happened to be together in the country (as we probably may) we shall try how you like my plan, if you are not afraid of the evening air.

From 1794 she walked long distances with William. Her first walking-tour (the first undertaken by any woman?) was with William and Coleridge on the Somerset coast in 1797; but there were many others.

9. 'I dearly love a scramble'

Ellen Weeton was the most redoubtable lady pedestrian of the early C19th, other than Dorothy. In a life of tribulation and disaster she found pleasure in walking, and kept a count of her mileage. Unusually, and fearfully, she walked alone.

10. Men and Mountains Meet

The modern cult of the mountain is one of the consequences of the romantic movement, and in this country owes much to Wordsworth, who climbed Snowdon at least twice as a young man. Contrast Dr Johnson, who had found Ilam / Dovedale awful and horrifying.

11. A Romany Rye

George Borrow's (b1803) chief works were largely inspired by pedestrian travel. *Wild Wales* is his account of a walking tour in Wales, with long accounts of his interactions with the people he met.

12. Constitutionals and Walking-tours

During the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries walking for pleasure was associated particularly with the intellectual classes. They walked for relaxation and exercise, in the intervals of their work; and spent their holidays on walking tours. **Thomas Hobbes** had had an ink horn fitted into his walking staff in the C17th, so he could jot down his ideas. Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote poetry, Shelley and Macaulay even managed to read while walking. In C18th Oxford, walking became popular with undergraduates not interested in sport; regular routes became known as 'grinds' – in Cambridge, the Grantchester Grind, the Gog Magog Grind. These kinds of walk were also known as 'stretches' – one might go for a good 12 mile stretch. Later the word 'constitutional' was coined. Many Oxford and Cambridge men became walking addicts.

The other form of walking was the tour, also an invention of the universities, and definitely the thing to do by the mid C19th – helped by the spread of the railways.

13. Walking Parson

Rev A N Cooper, later **Canon Cooper**, set out to encourage working class men to walk. He had a passion for long solitary walking tours, and a belief that it was his duty to induce others to make them too. In 1887 he walked to Rome. He became a celebrity; he lectured about walking, was interviewed, and sold a succession of books in quantity.

14. Philosophers of the Road

After Hazlitt's essay nothing was written on walking for another 50 years. The thread was picked up by **Sir Leslie Stephen** (essay 'In Praise of Walking', 1901) and by **Robert Louis Stevenson** (*Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, 1879, and essay 'Walking Tours'). All his walking was between 1874-79. The donkey journey was in 1878, and he'd invented a sleeping bag to take. Why walk? Stevenson agreed with Hazlitt:

'A walking-tour should be gone on alone, because freedom is of the essence... There should be no cackle of voices at your elbow, to jar on the meditative silence of the morning'

and secondly to get away from the unnatural rush of modern town life. The poor townsman is so dominated by clocks and watches and chimes that he has no time to live:

'The great affair is to move; to feel the needs and hitches of our life more nearly' to come down off this feather-bed of civilization, and find the globe granite underfoot and strewn with cutting flints'. 151.

He was the first to write of the joys of camping. In 'Walking Tours' he muses:

'You sink into yourself, and the birds come round and look at you; and your smoke dissipates upon the afternoon under the blue dome of heaven; and the sun lies warm upon your feet, and the cool air, visits your neck and turns aside your open shirt. If you are not happy, you must have an evil conscience.' 152.

15. Pilgrim to Rome

20 year gap after Stevenson.

Next was **Hilaire Belloc**, *The Path to Rome* 1902. Belloc was a great walker, first in Oxford, then in Britain, then to Rome, following a straight line he'd drawn on the map. 'The countryside for him is not mere scenery: it is an embodiment of history. He meets a Swiss:

'I watched the Phocean. I thought of a man of his ancestry three thousand years ago, sitting here at the gates of these mountains talking of his travels to dull, patient, and admiring northerners, and travelling for gain up into the Germanies, and I felt the changeless form of Europe under me like a rock.'

'This wonderfully expressive phrase puts the matter perfectly. Wherever he goes Belloc does indeed feel the changeless form of Europe under him like a rock. Few other walkers, except perhaps Stevenson, have had this feeling for the reality of history, and Belloc's walking books ... owe much of their unique quality to it.' 158

Belloc also broke new ground by setting out to follow historic trackways – the Pilgrim's Way to start with – produced *the Old Road* (1904).

16. Travellers in Little Things

Others followed suit – Codrington, Cox, Watkins. **Edward Thomas** produced *The Icknield Way* (1913), which stands in a class apart. Walking didn't just give Thomas intense pleasure - it was the only way he could escape depression – walking, as for De Quincey and Ellen Weeton, was the great antidote.

Jefferies, Hudson and Thomas had in common that they were, in Hudson's phrase, 'travellers in little things' – intensely interested in the dramas of wild life, the small-scale incidents of field and hedgerow, as well as in the life of country people. Jefferies was not so much a walker as a loiterer.

17. Essayists on Foot

C2th. **AH Sidgwick**, *Walking Essays* (1912) treats of walking from different angles – walking and conversation/music/as a social form/ in literature/ alone etc. One should walk in company, but not talk. It seems that confirmed walkers were seen as neglecting their social responsibilities by setting off on walks when they ought to be paying calls.

GM Trevelyan 'Walking' essay (in *Clio*, 1913). Trevelyan is in favour of weekend walking in company. His point of view, sensitive, hedonistic, romantic, perhaps essentially pagan, is still alive today among the intellectual minority of walkers. His essay does not date like Sidgwick's.

18. The Gentle Art of Tramping

Stephen Graham. Mood of near mysticism:

Why do we stare at beautiful things? We see them – is not that enough, can we not merely glance and pass on? We stop and we stare, at that mountainside, at that flower, at that dreaming lake. We cannot pass at once. We seem to be looking intently, star-gazing at something further off and yet more kindred than the stars, but we are not using our physical eyes. Perhaps we are not using our eyes at all. We are listening. Nature is trying to tell us something; she is speaking to us on a long-distance wave. 179 (from *The Gentle Art of Tramping* (1927).

19. 'I'm happy when I'm hiking'

Hike is a new word which appears to describe C20th pedestrianism; walking spreads to all social classes.