

# On Walks on Various Ways: Some Field Notes

By David Borthwick

1.

The Maidenbower path links the area of Dumfries known as The Crichton — home to the University of 'School of Interdisciplinary Studies — and curves between farmland and woods towards the suburb of Georgetown. The path begins by the new Midpark Hospital, and contributes to the hospital's work by providing a place where patients and their families can walk, or sit under the trees that line the early part of the route. Beside the path at intervals are calf-high red sandstone posts — suggestive of early milestones, waymarkers, a pilgrim's reassuring guide — and carved on these are phrases which move across two faces, gently insistent: 'the earth / a curve' whispers one; another, 'the wild geese / turning'.



Waymarker, Midpark Hospital, Dumfries, part of the Healing Spaces project, commissioned by WideOpen

This latter is my favourite. The Solway Coast is home during winter to the Svalbard population of Barnacle geese (*branta leucopsis*), welcome migrants — over thirty thousand in number — whose characteristic yapping can be heard frequently overhead this close to the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust reserve at [Caerlaverock](#).

The poems on these waymarkers are by Gerry Loose: poet, gardener, activist and landscape artist who has described himself as ‘dissatisfied for always with the act of writing — at odds with direct experience and practice.’ As a result, his work often takes forms he has described as ‘plantings and inscription’.<sup>1</sup> This waymarker has a clear lineage in work by Ian Hamilton Finlay at Stonypath near Biggar, and in many places elsewhere. This is, if not concrete poetry then poetry set in stone. The phrase ‘the wild geese / turning’ has the animals’ change in direction physically enacted by the poem’s being placed over two adjacent faces of the marker. Writing on similar concrete ‘poem constructions’ by Hamilton Finlay, Stephen Bann observes that the poem ‘does not mimic the forms of nature, yet it belongs intimately to a particular context’. Indeed, I took the photograph in October 2014 as a skein of Barnacle Geese veered low overhead, turning down towards their roosting grounds nearby. Bann also notes that the poem is ‘not simply a decorative project [...] but a field for private interpretation’.<sup>2</sup> In this context, at a hospital, this waymarker is inherently personal. The curvature of the earth, the changing direction of geese (or, in summer, alluding to their need to return in September, to leave home for home) is suggestive of turning and returning. The walker’s internal journey is waymarked just as their physical one is: a journey back to health, to home, the promised turning of all — and echoed in the fields around the site, in their seasonal flaring and resting — and so the poems are ultimately a gentle encouragement to persist, to weather, to be altered in a way that means to heal. These are poems uniquely tied to context: both the landscape, and the walker’s experience of it. The stone insists on the permanence of flux.

## 2.

In recent years, innovative forms of writing and artistic practice which use walking as a methodology have experienced a renaissance across the UK and drawn the attention of a variety of audiences. [Robert Macfarlane](#)’s explorations in, for example, *The Old Ways* (2012) and, more recently, *Landmarks* (2015) are

perhaps the most publicly visible examples. In Scotland, the examination of walking as an activity and practice has flourished in other diverse ways. A wide range of topics have been engaged through walking — its benefits to health, the dialogues it creates between people, the ways in which place might be more accessible to those outside the traditional walking fraternity — have emerged in the work of academics, writers and artists alike. Notable examples include my colleague Dee Heddon's [The Walking Library](#), Linda Cracknell's re-treading of significant journeys in *Doubling Back* (2014), and the work of [Deveron Arts](#) in Huntly, whose [Walking Institute](#) 'explores, researches and celebrates the human pace by bringing walking and other journeying activities together with arts and other cultural disciplines and people from all walks of life.'<sup>3</sup> A discussion of the emergence of the wider movement in the UK (dare I invoke something we may call 'the new walking'?) would take in everyone from Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915-2011) to W. G. Sebald (1944-2001), Iain Sinclair to Tim Robinson. In Scotland we might examine — in the order that they come to me — the quiet patience of Nan Shepherd's (1893-1981) *The Living Mountain* (1977), the race around Scotland in Robert Louis Stevenson's (1850-1894) *Kidnapped* (1886); it would remind readers of the great writer-mountaineer W. H. Murray (1913-1996), whose work contributed to much to conservation in Scotland. It might even gesture to John Buchan's (1875-1940) *The 39 Steps* (1915) and a statement from his hero with which I most frequently identify: 'I fixed on Galloway as the best place to go.' These are examples, and certainly not exhaustive. Such an essay would need more space, and more depth, than is available here. It is a walk I hope to take in the future.

### 3.

[The Land Reform \(Scotland\) Act](#) (2003), together with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, came into effect in February 2005. The act permitted unambiguous access rights to the majority of Scotland's land for recreation, education and 'for the purposes of carrying on, commercially or for profit, an activity which the person exercising the right could carry on otherwise than commercially or for profit.'<sup>4</sup> Arguably, citizens in Scotland had always had this right, but the act made these conditions of access unambiguous. The act was not merely about enshrining in law what many had done for decades, it was also an insistence that access to land should not be a privilege of a few. The well-loved and well-established walking routes in Scotland were augmented with a legal framework which

encouraged exploration beyond the sanctioned and well-trodden paths, to enter areas well off them to engage with features and places that the act refers to as 'natural and cultural heritage'.

*Lorg-coise / footprint* (2014) is a book of 'fourteen thematic maps with texts' which resulted from walks taken by the artist [Gill Russell](#) — designed in collaboration with artist-poet [Alec Finlay](#) — which explore the Heilan' Ways region 'between the heartlands of Aberdeenshire and Moray to the North, and the Cairngorm Mountains and Ladder Hills to the south'.<sup>5</sup> This is an area 'dominated by two vast shooting estates within which is contained a web of ancient footpaths and tracks'. Commissioned by Deveron Arts, the walks documented in the book 'were created by the practice of "lorg-coise" (Gaelic), which John Stuart-Murray translates the finding of foot — that is, by walking widely, and often slowly [...] identifying sites or landforms of significance' (Russell, p.4).<sup>6</sup> All of the walks documented have been mapped for future walkers to retrace, and are available at no cost from the [Walking Institute's website](#).

Some of Russell's observations are a litany of placenames which once held significance as the dwelling lands of a vanished community: 'Nettie Burn / Cline Burn / Allt na Greine / Water of Buchat' (Russell, p.10) while others are prose statements that read like raw field notes: 'Patches of burnt heather and numerous traps for vermin are evident in the landscape' (Russell, p.26). Russell renews contemporary contact with ancient routes, taking learning from texts and sources back to their origins in the land, from text to textual landscape — the return of tale to its grounded reality: 'the Pict road' walk takes a route for which there is 'strong evidence' of association with the movements of Pictish tribes, and including a 'rich history and mythology, including giants, "worms", "ghosties" [...] and a Neolithic henge' (Russell, p.38). Other notes provide faithful recordings of what Russell and her walking companions have seen:

burn with the sun backing on  
facing north in deep pines  
dwarf willow has taken  
where it can blue cartridges  
among bird bones Glenbuchat Lodge  
the laird leaving  
in his helicopter (Russell, p.16).

Interactions with other humans are rare. On one solo walk: ‘young keeper asking / am I lost?’ (Russell, p.32) and elsewhere ‘confronted by a man / with a gun’ (Russell, p.28). New stories are generated by searching the ground for old ones.<sup>7</sup>

4.

Pondering what it means to be ‘A Man in Assynt’ (1969), Norman MacCaig perceives that:

this landscape is  
masterless  
and intractable in any terms  
that are human.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, familiarity with a landscape can help one begin to grapple with its intractabilities (as, no doubt, the Assynt Crofters’ Trust could attest). Gerry Loose advocates walking as a means of trying to see and read a landscape with greater fluency, and find oneself a part of that landscape and not merely an authoritative observer:

To walk a place day after day, season after season is to become aware of the passing of a different sort of time from the human [...] It’s to know ourselves become, in time, something that is experienced by other creatures as we experience them; to understand in a profound way that we are part of this commonwealth of plants, animals and hills.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Living Mountain*, Nan Shepherd aimed for a similarly holistic experience, a sense of being in place and a part of it, and attempting, at least, to reduce the traditional authorial presence that seeks to make wild places tractable:

[...] under me the central core of firs from which was thrust this grumbling, grinding mass of plutonic rock, over me blue air, and between the fire of the rock and the fire of the sun, scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, wind, rain and snow — the total mountain.<sup>10</sup>

In her 1982 essay ‘Teaching a Stone to Talk’, Annie Dillard emphasises the moral importance inherent in trying to observe one’s environment with clarity and humility: ‘That is why I take walks’, she explains: ‘to keep an eye on things’.<sup>11</sup>





The first section of the seed sentence: 'a pair of trees' | Seeding the John Muir Way, artist concept Alec Finlay, photography Morven Gregor

Many of the seeds were harvested by Gerry Loose, photographed to show in their physical forms and colourations the translation of a poem to a seed-script — the walk's potential future in germ form. It is a poem-sentence about a journey, about growth, about adaptability (the seeds were harvested in the wild and in Botanic Gardens as close to the route travelled as possible for reasons, Finlay says, 'of provenance and suitability to climate').<sup>14</sup>



Gerry Loose harvesting seeds, photograph by kind permission of Morven Gregor

The poem planted along the route exists now in a language of seed and soil. These seeds are free to germinate or not; survive, or not. The poem may lose its coherence with its original design, and become instead a line of intermittent trees. The trees themselves may succumb to the rigors of contemporary and future environments. The poem has become the life of the seeds. Walking the route in the future may be as a means of re-reading the poem for absences and gaps, for stressed syllables and sudden caesura. If even a pair survive, new life has been opened.

[Thomas A. Clark](#) once wrote that ‘The line of a walk is articulate in itself, a kind of statement.’<sup>15</sup> While much of the work discussed above centres on walking of one kind or another, the interventions are pre-walk, or emerge mid-walk, or are adapted from field notes during the walk. None of them are about walking, albeit that walking is the method. The poetic works are not ‘nature poetry’ in any traditional sense either, with no hint of pastoral. The work exists in the landscape, or emerges from it, yet cannot properly be said to be about it; it is rarely mimetic. There is very little attention to a fabled ‘re-connection’ to the natural world, the work preferring to espouse mindful looking, a suggestion of the embodied and situated. Much of the work might be said to be said to encourage as a by-product different kinds of health: of individuals and ecosystems, of healthy attitudes to land itself. In a 1967 lecture entitled ‘A Poem is a Walk’, the American poet A.R. Ammons opined that ‘A walk doesn’t mean anything, which is a way of saying that to some extent it means anything you can make it mean — and always more than you can make it mean.’ Walking allows potential meanings to arise through the conjunction of the walker and the landscape walked. In this sense, to quote Ammons again, ‘Walks are meaningless. So are poems.’

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*