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## Excerpts From A Draft for A Book of Walks

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## Excerpts from a draft for *A Book of Walks*

by Jenny de Garis

### 1. SOLSTICE STROLL

'Winter' Solstice: a longish walk on the shortest day leaves scant time for writing, except these jottings in my notebook. Thinking I might write about walking led me to face my frustration at having actually walked very little lately and the consequent irony of theorizing. So I put on my boots, found my stick and strode out to do practical research . . .

I'm now perched like a skink on a rock in warm sun, thinking how here today at noon it's as warm as the Summer Solstice towards the North Pole: images of myself rugged up and walking through sea-fog/the 'simmer dim' across high bogland to the Hermanness Bird Reserve in the far north of the Shetlands, being scarily dived at by Arctic Skuas (known locally for good reason as 'Bonksies') before visiting the wondrous Puffins (what you find out on your feet); of locals carrying their vine prunings to the peak of the Canigou to build there the bonfire for the St.Jean – the Summer Solstice festival fire of the French Pyrenees (how local culture grows out of and contributes to its landscape. . .); how this time last year Brian and I were swimming in Ullswater after walking a length of the lakeside from a forgotten stone circle to the tiny church in Martindale with its ancient yew tree, and how the English Lake District gives rise to poetry in the language of ordinary people.

Above the Blackwood Valley is where I'm sitting to write, a couple of gullies towards Nannup from Post & Rail Gully: the deep cut into the hillside made by the annual flush of heavy rains from the ridge finding their level in the brown river some 200 perpendicular metres below. Today all the gullies are dry. No sound of waterfalls announces the turn of the year and my climbing has proved less hazardous than when the slopes and granite outcrops are wet. Minute umbrellas of fungi and the vibrancy of the mandalas of moss and lichen on the shaded side of the rocks are all that bear immediate witness to this moment when Earth's southern hemisphere begins to tilt back towards the Sun.

When I left the house soon after dawn there were clear skies. Yesterday the sun rose through mist but today the valley grasses and stones flaunted their white frost. Like fashion models they would soon change gear, though not immediately. The late-rising sun is made even later by these north-west facing heights. Our house – sitting fifteen minutes' walk below the rocks bared by Beyonderup Falls and only five above the river – has sun and moonrise an hour after dwellings on the coastal plain.

In the air I'm one of those passengers who sits glued to a window or gets annoyed at being barred from a window-seat by a passenger who pulls down the blind in favour of watching a movie, reading the paper or sleeping for hours. Imagine what we're both missing! Climbing above our house I can choose to look down –

without taking the horizon into my view – the technique that aerial photographer, Richard Woldendorp uses to focus on the patterns of the landscape and produce the impression of abstract paintings. Unlike Woldendorp – who, in his recent floortalk at the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries, spoke of the brief moments of opportunity for capturing the glimpsed image – I can choose to stop and enjoy any aspect of the constantly changing view for as long as I want. The season's emerald pastures are scattered with grey-blue gums, speckled black clusters that are cows. The brown threads have not yet been etched by the stock's passage to the river, though I'm reminded of them by the near ant highways that have prevented the return of roots and shoots everywhere encouraged by the rains. The river itself is indicated by the winding line of trees tracing its course through the base of the valley it is still carving. Above it and far below me is the moss-green oval opacity, shining faintly like a ceramic tile, that I know to be our neighbours' dam.

How, Woldendorp wondered, did Aboriginal people know to put these patterns of land into their art? Perhaps because being in the landscape is to experience those patterns in the sinews of our being. In his book *Carribouddhism*, Gary Lawless, a nature writer from the Catskill Mountains, Upper Hudson, puts it:

*After days of sitting on  
driftwood beach rock  
birds too numerous to count,  
watching for eagle,  
listening for raven,  
now, even though the wind is wet,  
I begin to leave the ground.*

This kind of immersion can happen through continuous walking in a landscape. Concepts of contours are developed in the body by walking – as I learnt when first exploring these forested valleys and realized that here Nyoongar people must have found their way among the repeating trees only partially by vision. Born and brought up to the expectation of visual openings, I tend to look before I listen or smell or move or touch. This morning though, has re-minded me, providing remembrance of the way the breath is rhythmized by the pace of the feet, the muscles of heart and lungs paced by the legs, according to the inclination of the ground. Here the near-vertical slopes are returning to the wild, the only tracks made by foraging creatures – particularly kangaroos on their way between sleeping shelters under the skirts of giant balgas that have not known fire for a very long time, or returning from thirst-quenching excursions to the dams or river. So my best option for exploring where bracken may be dense, pockets of marri regrowth or abrupt outcrops of rock bar my way, is to follow the established roo network. Watching the animals long-hopping across more open patches you don't imagine the arches over their pathways through thicker undergrowth will be as low as they are. To pass I have needed to crawl, detour or break branches. All limbs legging, persistence has provided passage (at least the ticks are not abundant in June!) and unexpected magic. In one spot I lifted to standing before an immediacy of brown and buff, registering those striations of feather that signal hunting bird, the round eye, the

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hooked beak, before the brown goshawk was silently out of sight. Our feet can take us new places even close to home.

I lift my gaze now to the north-western horizon. Along the far ridge the line of plantation pines is black and sharp against the gathering cumulus. The cloud's impression of snow-covered mountain recalls the Jungfrau, my first mountain, beckoning across a Swiss lake when I was on my first walking holiday abroad with Guides from England, aged fourteen. A sequence of mountain memories is surfacing so I had better return to my desk. Focus first on descent: the zig-zagging and dug-holes avoidance required for safety, the usefulness of the alpine folding stick given me by Neil Thomas who himself died in a flash flood in the Tasmanian wilderness he loved. The stick was to help me up the Piton des Neiges, the highest of the extinct volcanoes on the island of La Réunion. But that is a distraction from the relatively small but steep slope below me now and I need to pay attention, because I have a repaired posterior tibial tendon from an injury that kept me off my feet for eighteen months. There is nothing like deprivation to make us appreciate what it is we are missing nor a missing person to sharpen our awareness of how alive we are . . .

## **2. WALKING WITH GRANDAD: The Snow-Fox**

Walking with my maternal grandfather I experienced in my earliest years the quiet communion of walking together with one other beloved human being.

The 1891 census gave him aged 11, a student. He left school the following year to become a shepherd on the local hills and later moved to become gamekeeper – with a smattering of farmwork – on a large estate further along the Pilgrims' Way. He was a man of the North Downs – the chalk-hills of Surrey, who could read the seasons better than syllables on a printed page. So, although as an infant I loved to sit on his lap while he held my mother's old book of fairy tales and remembered its stories, I was as astute as the dog at watching for walk signs.

To walk with Grandad was the beginning of my learning and perhaps the main reason I continued to learn best in nature: Grandad lifting me up to watch a bumble bee in the hedgerow honeysuckle, finding me the first dog rose, the rare white heather, the special soft grasses of summer on the Common and the deer and foxgloves through the woods. Showing me the life-cycles of ladybirds and tortoiseshell butterflies, the tiny 'oak tree' picture inside the cross-cut root of the bracken. Sharing his language.

Shocking me by taking rabbits from his traps. For my grandmother to skin. For us to eat.

Is it one particular day I remember – when endless rain streaming down the window panes kept us from our daily walk – or one of those seasonal repetitions that combine to build what seems a single memory? Either way the dull frustration of it remains by contrast with the delights of brighter days. But there were the pleasures of walking in many weathers. Outdoors. The rubbery smell and clean comfort of new wellington boots. The yellow sou'wester, rain pooling round its generous brim to run down the arms of my crisp, yellow raincoat. Those boots (alas) getting wet on the inside (much puddle-splashing) as later models did frequently when I, the eldest of

five, led my siblings on adventurous crossings of our local brook (by this time we lived down on Wealden clay).

One particular walk with Grandad I remember for sure. I saw a fire of fox against white snow. Or if I didn't see it that day I transposed later sightings of fox back to this walk, so vivid was the impression left by its traces in that frozen day.

I woke to a strangeness, an oddity of the slow, January light, a cold glow. Climbing out of bed into the icy room I faced the window where scores of small white feathers were falling as if one of my grandmother's down pillows had been punctured and flounced somewhere over our cottage rooftop. Snow! Perhaps someone would pull me down the lane to fetch the milk from the farm on our sledge?

The snow was not settled enough for that yet, but even ordinary walking became a miracle on the newly whitened earth. Nothing around or above us was untouched by the fresh falling. Everything was muted, faintly gleaming. Ice-crystals starting to form across black puddles were satisfying to scrunch with heel and toe, until their cold started to bite through my boots.

Snow to pick up and throw. Grandad promising to show me how to make snowballs when we finished our walk.

*Why?*

*Well, your fingers will soon be as cold as your toes when the snow melts through your gloves.*

So we carried on walking – right round the farm fields and into the far, deep lane down the Dell. The air that made my nostrils ache abruptly threw across our path a thin rope of warm mustiness, a slight sharpness of animal scent – the aerial equivalent of orange fur.

*Fox, said my grandfather, a fox has crossed here not long ago.*

Sure enough we found the track: that distinctive single line of prints that foxes leave. My first view of one. I would have been three or four years old.

Did we see the fox-fire against the white coat the Dell was wearing? Against the white rise of fields beyond this small valley? It doesn't matter because 'the sudden, sharp, hot stink of fox' was there. And the matching tracks. Etched as palpably into a lifetime's mind as into the transient snow.

### 3. WALKING WITH CARRYING

*The great hills of the South Country they stand along the sea  
And it's there, walking in the high woods that I could wish to be  
With the men that were boys when I was a boy  
Walking along with me*

– Hilaire Belloc

The first time I recall carrying anything on a walk must have been when I was about eighteen months old. I insisted on taking my new grey bear. (Surprisingly: rural

England 1944; a bear I still have - threadbare now! More than any other species resembling a koala.)

*You'll have to carry Binca yourself if you take him, my mother told me.*

We weren't so far across the Common when there were beetles I wanted to inspect more closely, and my bear was in the way.

*Grandad, I can't carry Binca any more. He's too heavy.*

Some forty years later I'm into my second day of the Ridge Walk from Bluff Knoll in WA's Stirling Ranges. The ten kilo pack on my back has so far provided food and water for 24 hours and sleeping gear for a night in the high cave that looks out from the side of Pyongorup into stars. A depth of swordgrass among uneven rocks brings attention back to joint and muscle. I think of Binca. I think of my long-gone Grandad.

A time in between came the sunrise hike from a camp under canvas in Vaughan-Williams country, under Leith Hill – the high redsand outcrop that dominates its section of the Weald and the villages southwest of Dorking and that I saw again quite recently from an Emirates flight taking off from Gatwick. I remembered then walking – one of an excited group of teenage Girl Guides carrying sleeping bags and breakfasts, setting out to sleep at the foot of the Tower that makes Leith Hill the nearest thing to mountain in the Home Counties of Southern England.

As we climbed into the summer dusk the miles of lower country between us and the South Downs came slowly into view followed by the Tower above us. The evening had been clear, but even as we reached the foot of the Tower the smell of the surrounding Scots Pines became intense. The first raindrops were falling. No way could we put sleeping bags on the ground this night. Instead we must retrace our steps back to the shelter of our tents.

Dispirited, adventure terminated, we were quickly tired by the long, if downhill, march in the rain.

Then someone began singing. To the tune of 'Onward Christian Soldiers',

*Lloyd George knows my father; father knows Lloyd George . . .*

We all joined in easily as there were no further words to remember. I had no clue about Lloyd George, but the continuous chanting of his name certainly assisted movement – the swing of our limbs enhanced by matching the rhythm of sound, the synergy of sharing the song.

Several years ago I was privileged to attend a course at Ty-Newydd, the Welsh Writers Centre in Llanystumdwy, which happens to be the Lloyd-Georges' old home with a museum to David, the only Welshman to be a British Prime Minister, next door. Walking the beach there between sessions I found a certain chant running through my mind . . .

Back in the UK last year I had the pleasure of walking again for the first time in fifty years with two women who were among the singing girls descending Leith Hill with me. One lives in a Cornish fishing village and with her I walked her home section of

the Cliff Path, including The Lizard. With another I walked her now-home village and fellside in The Lake District.

The companionship of walking is very particular. It's a form of time travel for it carries the opportunity to catch up through talking, simultaneously bringing old friends together into the new present where the holding landscape is shared.

#### 4. FAMILY WALKS

My father did not come home till I was almost three because of war injury to his leg. Nonetheless he and Mum persisted in their enthusiasm for walking their home hill country. They shared this with me and my four siblings, influencing my life, especially my attitudes to the natural environment. I believe as a result of my own enrichment from our family walks, that children need to be taught close observation and appreciation of nature. Respect grows through creatively enjoyable interaction with country. I was shown the joys of noticing detail on home ground and I notice to this day on whatever ground I find my feet.

A walk we did several times with variations always included a favourite picnic spot by a clear flowing stream called the Tillingbourne. We were allowed time to play there after lunch. The splash of the water against ankles under the shade of alder trees was always a delight. I remember one occasion when I and my two brothers worked carefully to find suitable leaves and sticks for constructing a flutter-mill among the fine, red roots of the trees. Leaving our mill-wheel turning in the slight current was a triumph.

I felt similarly as I walked away from a 'Beach Creature' I'd constructed from jetsam on the white sands of Two People Bay on the Southern Ocean this February. And as I trod out my 'Pathway' in the River Art Project at Northam, constructing mandalas of grass and stones along it to represent the yin-yang of Aboriginal and settler land-use, I felt the play connections back to my childhood. In play the divisions between intellecttr and instinct are bridged.

Walking and learning and play are thus for me associated, as I suppose they must have been for traditional Aboriginal people. The privilege of spending a few days in the community at Yandi Yarra on the western edge of the Pilbara included sleeping out in its impressive river country and also had me sitting in classrooms as an observer. I was a language teacher at the time so particularly interested to see what was happening in a school for children of varied original language. The teacher afterwards told me that she and her only known aunt – who had returned to Jigalong after being stolen as a child – were the last speakers of their own first language. The language she was teaching was effectively her fourth language and for many of the children in the class, their third language. This made it as removed from their reality as they, shut in the classroom, were removed from the natural source of the vocabulary on their curriculum. The teacher was showing pictures of plants, animals and landscapes familiar to her pupils and having them repeat the names. She was a good and sympathetic teacher, but I found myself happy for at least the boys who would soon be absent from the classroom for some days of outdoor initiation.

I happened to watch the film, 'Rabbitproof Fence', for the first time the other night, where Molly, an Aboriginal girl from Jigalong is imprisoned at Moore River. Her own language – the expression of her relationship to family, to particular country and continuity of culture from her grandmother to her mother to her daughters-to-be – is forbidden. She sets out to walk back to where she belongs, taking with her two sisters. There was in me a profound accord with her Aboriginal tracker and potential trapper's admiration and spoken recognition, She wants to go home.

## 5. DÉNIVELÉ

*le piolet. L'alpenstock, un sac sur le dos, un paquet de cordes en sautoir*  
 –Alphonse Daudet

A mature-age student on a French government scholarship in Montpellier in the South of France for a year, I joined three groups of randonneurs. I wanted to extend my French with French-speakers rather than other overseas students. In fact I extended myself in a number of ways, including my understanding of several new landscapes through walking in them in the company of people with language shaped by the country that had formed them. (I liked the extra tang of the nasal in their vowels, the extra weight in their utterance from the pronunciation of the final consonants, though little attention was given in the linguistics section of my academic course to how local pronunciation might relate to the older Langue d'oc or Occitane, which was the ancient language of the Troubadours and the native tongue of the entire region until it was repressed.) The first group would fill the bus they took each Sunday up into the Cevennes – the limestone hills forming the hinterland to this fast-growing metropolis, their tough garrigue or bush swept by the Mistral from Africa across the Mediterranean.

Since I prefer to walk alone or with fewer companions I soon gave this very large group away in favour of the second and third groups. These became available to me through friends living in the village of Villemoustaussou, in the Aude, heart of the old Languedoc, who invited me to spend a weekend with them each month. By leaving my last class at 'the fac' promptly on a Thursday, walking fullspeed to the bus, running from the bus to the station I could just catch the last train to Carcassonne. I'd be ready then to walk next morning with the local group of senior randonneurs, steadily, on fairly level ground, from village to village of terra cotta, round-moulded roof-tiles, noticing the wildflowers (endemic miniature hooded daffodils, wild asparagus), the almonds in blossom, picking up pottery shards from Roman goldmines; marveling at the continued existence of the capitelles – the round stone shelters built by Stone Age shepherds; the high-perched Cathar castles.

In the village group I enjoyed being the youngest, striding easily ahead, though I was happy enough to stop for leisurely lunches washed down by the good local wines. In the third group – the Randonneurs de Montagne based in Carcassonne – there was one man a lot older than me, but he was as agile as an izard. For me joining this group was even more challenging than I expected.

The two climbs that remain most imprinted in me are the first and the last.



'NOS PYRÉNÉES' : Le Pic de Baxouillade

*Hills above which Pyrenees float  
Like ghosts in a nightshirt:*

*Their lamppost of snows  
Cackles with frost after dark*

– Michael Baldwin

The first walk I had selected because it sounded high. I've always loved mountains and in Western Australia there aren't many. This excursion was listed: Dénivelé: 900m, Pic 2546m, Difficulté moyenne, piolet. That early November Sunday morning my alarm woke me at 5.00am to pitch dark, gusting wind and pouring rain. My generous host was up ready to drive me into Carcassonne but asked if I might want to reconsider going seeing the weather. Sure something would be happening I put on my boots and took my small backpack out to the car.

Outside the railway station a small cluster of people were already discussing the wisdom of changing the walk destination. Too high? Bad forecast. There may be snow? But I was listening more to the new sound of the words than to their import. I had hardly introduced myself and been introduced – Myriam, Jean-Louis, Solange, Stephane . . . before Serge, the day's organizer, was asking, with what I came to appreciate as his characteristic warmth and enthusiasm, what I wanted us to do! My vote was for high, and he announced, Bien alors. Montrons à cette australienne nos Pyrénées! ('OK then, let's show this Australian our Pyrenees!')

And sent someone off for more cordes (ropes) and piolets . . .

It was a two-hour drive through the St. George Gorges and Axat where we stopped at a boulangerie for snacks; eight o'clock before we passed the beautiful lake towards the base of our target mountain with enough daylight to see it. The rain had stopped, the sun was shining and the heights were white. Again there was discussion and slightly reluctant agreement to follow the leader. I was excited.

We began to climb a narrow, well-worn track with all the exhilaration of gaining height, until, looking up ahead rather than back down over the expanding lake and landscape, there was a general intake of breath. We all stopped. My own gasp was one of straightforward awe. Way up above us fine fringes of snow were spinning in the wind. The sun was dancing with a million miniature clones of itself as they flung from tiny angles of ice.

*On monte? (shall we go on up?)*

For me, mesmerized by beauty, Serge's question seemed rhetorical. We all stepped out again, towards that distant glitter.

The air was growing colder. The valleys falling away were lost to sight completely as we rounded a bend and saw the first grounded snow just ahead. Then it was soft underfoot and what I had come for. But surprisingly deep. That, I was told, is because it's newly-fallen so we need to go carefully. Such snow makes dips and rocks in the path invisible. The piolets were excavated from someone's backpack and distributed. There was some chuckling at the unorthodoxy of my

receiving a first lesson in their use on an actual climb. Round a sharp bend someone slipped. Jean-Louis behind me told me to watch how this climber was using his piolet. He seemed to me to have slid rather a long way before he managed to get a grip with his axe on the snow. Serge called a halt.

Time for the ropes. We form two lines and I am roped into the second. For the first time I feel nervous. Especially when the woman on the rope in front of me starts to slip. She decides to go back. Serge asks if anyone else wants to go. No-one does, so a man volunteers to accompany her. Serge asks me directly, *What about you? Don't hesitate if you want to go. You can come with us all the way next time perhaps.* I say I'd rather keep on, provided this isn't making things harder for everyone else.

We go on. The snow suddenly gives under me: one leg is difficult to retrieve from a deep hole. Someone says this path is easy in dry weather, but in wintry conditions not. And we are now at a point where it is taking us over hidden scree. The smooth slope beside us runs towards the perpendicular. I'm finding the turns in the path difficult: the piolet needs to change hands constantly. And being on the rope takes away the possibility of an individual pace: I am now one being with the line, must move with it. Between me and Jean-Louis behind the rope tends to go slack so it comes between my legs, and since we were re-roped Solange is rather close in front of me so sometimes I'm pulled into taking the next step before I'm ready.

The cold intensifies. My mountain gear is minimal. I'm living on a student grant - as simply as possible. I have adequate socks and sturdy boots and a beanie pulled well down, but the cold is penetrating my lightweight rain-jacket and the two long-sleeved items under it, which are not thermal. I'm exceedingly glad of my gloves and over-trousers. Especially when it comes to sitting down for lunch. We're close below the peak with shelter from the wind. Just as well as we wouldn't want any more than the couple of facefulls of loose snow that hit us shortly before we stopped. The odd *raffale* that does reach us makes my hands so cold I can't imagine how some of the others are managing to pull out their tiny paraffin burners to make hot drinks or soup. The idea of the effort stops my envy. I realize I'm feeling exhausted.

Even thoroughly chilled, my sandwich, a chocolate bar and water help me appreciate the impressive vista of the chain of snow-capped Pyrenees roped together roughly north to south (the way they finished up against each other over 25 million years ago, and over as long a period before that were the edges of micro-continents in collision) as much as east to west (the way they now run making a natural frontier between France and Spain). I am sorry I don't have a camera with me (or am I?). Also that I don't have binoculars. No-one does and I'd have liked a closer look at the several distant groups of *izard*s we have passed. I'm told they are a kind of chamois. To me they looked like a cross between a mountain goat and a deer. They were certainly dramatic both on the skyline and against the new, bright patches of snow. And they move more easily here than I do as I tighten my bootlaces, heave myself up and re-adjust my pack. My knees in particular have difficulty in straightening.

The main challenge is yet to appear. Doesn't do so until I'm well into one foot in front of the other in a more regular way and thanking goodness I have the support of these others on the same rope. At last lifting weightily over our shoulders is what I take to be the final peak.

Only as I approach it closely do I realize how high we are, how small and precarious. The white cloak of snow hangs loosely over and straight down three sides of a massive, sharp upthrust of rock and to reach it there's a small saddle to cross. Now we use the ropes as handholds. Stephane, our *araignée de montagne* (mountain spider) goes ahead with the rope tied to him and to a strong rocky outcrop on our side. Once across he attaches the rope at the new end also, then inside and holding the rope-rail, re-descends to act as a human buffer above a gully that opens into an abyss. We will cross one at a time and wait on a ledge of rock that, from where I am, looks far too narrow to hold us all.

I watch those crossing and my own legs become jelly-like. It's my turn. I have a pang of regret at having not turned back when the chance offered. There can be no hesitation here. I can feel the tension mounting over how much longer than anticipated this walk is taking, how the light won't last. I tell myself in three or four hours I'll either be oblivious down there, deep in the snow, or being driven safely back to town in a cosy car. And I step forward, my entire focus the encouraging smile and voice of the man firmly planted on the rope. The strength of the hand that holds me gives courage. Two long steps to the next hand and I am miraculously up in the balancing huddle of others.

I'm aware now that I've been writing in the present tense as I've relived the experience of twenty years ago. I've just opened my diary from the time. It says:

'The descent was, even more than the ascent, hairy. The peak looped down in a series of pointed outcrops. We continued to use ropes to cross between these. The worst was waiting perched between one stretch and the next until everyone had used a rope. I don't know how difficult I would have found it without the snow – but the snow certainly changes the nature of a mountain. Some of the sliding was fun, but where the crust of snow was not well established danger lurked, especially with the risk of the wind.'

Yes, once we were clearly on the down-mountain trail some speed was gained from deliberate sliding on slopes where this was judged to be safe. For me, whose habit is to linger on heights once gained, going down had never seemed so good. This was palpably also true for the more experienced, judging from their increased levity and the playful sliding, on feet, bottoms, sides, plastic bags. Although the lower slopes became more gentle, as twilight enveloped us we entered the woods. The track here was wider, but crossed by slippery tree roots and several of us had not brought torches. Ironically it was here in the gloom that I tripped and received my only real bruise of the day.

A complete stranger to this group of long-time comrades, I'd exchanged few words with them, yet they made me welcome as one of them, remaining patient despite my part in our taking on a more hazardous venture than they had planned. The sensation of having shared mortal danger so closely together was for me a bonding initiation – both with them and their Pyrenees.

## AROUND THE CANIGOU

We were not doing the climb I'd hoped for as there would be too many locals along the path to the 2784 metres height of the Pic du Canigou. However, this, my last walk with my mountain-walking friends typified what I'd come to enjoy in their company: the being together yet the acceptance of individual space and pace when conditions were good.

The Canigou, one of those strongly enticing mountains, dominates the Eastern Pyrenees. Why we were not going to climb it directly was due to its other attraction: *le Feu du St. Jean* (St. John's Eve fire) or Flama del Canigó in Catalan. The festival has the two names equally, just as the mountain itself belongs to the Catalan people who live either side of it, be their other language French or Spanish. And their annual trekking up its slopes, burdened like ants with bundles of vine prunings for the fire, had just begun.

We were on a two-day tour of the humbler peaks around the Canigou's majesty. We left from the Refuge Forestier de Mariailles and climbed to a mountain gite where it was hoped we could spend the night, but arrived just after a party of Spaniards so had to resort to tents. There was a barbecue: pastis followed by rice salad local style (hunks of *lardon*, onion and black olives), then a local red wine with *pâté de campagne*. At the lively Catalan campfire someone played a guitar and sang Verdaguer i Santalo's poem: *Lo Canigó és una magnòlia immense que en un rebrot del Pirineu se bada . . Grandiose beire on beu olors l'estrella . . .* (The Canigou is an immense magnolia that blooms on a branch of the Pyrenees . . . Vast cup where the star drinks fragrances . . . The whole poem gives a sense of the mythical quality of the mountain and its relation to the surrounding landscape: you can find it in Wikipedia under 'Canigou').

The fire contrasted with a very cold night that didn't set me up well for the big walk next morning, especially as I'd only just finished exams and sorting gear for finally leaving Montpellier, so was already tired. Some stayed at the fire until the small hours but they'd opted for short walks next morning around the camp area. I woke to the sound of cow-bells and to Jean-Louis thoughtfully bringing a mug of warm chocolate to my tent through the thick mist.

Only six of us set out to scale seven 'small' peaks! (I hadn't paid attention to what I was letting myself in for – again.) Listen though, to the name changes: Col de la Roquette 2083m, Col de Beaucour 2281m, Pic des Sept Hommes, 2661m, Puig Roja 2724m, Puig Dels Tres Vents, 2731m, Gorges du Cadi: how *peak* runs from *pic* to *puig*. We were truly in Catalan country.

By now I was habituated to the group's usual methods of walk-at-your-own-pace-and-we'll-catch-up-at-the-next-stop-agreed-on. I was particularly happy to be able to do this when we came down into the valley to find the GR10 leading back towards Mariailles. The snow I'd witnessed arriving in November had gone from the lower peaks, but was still thawing on the higher tops and consequently the Cadi meadows were an early summer delight. The Canigou towered into the cloud and a dark wheel effect was apparent where the snow was leaving to make waterfalls every side of where I walked. Along the clear streams bubbling through fresh grasses grew

clusters of huge golden kingcups. Beyond them a myriad rock surfaces glistened in the sunshine. Back at Mariailles there were gentians – blue, blue, blue, insides as richly patterned as my newly-acquired Provençale skirt; all sorts of vetch – from a mini single-flowered yellow one carpeting the ground to banks of a larger-flowering purple species.

I was sad to farewell the *randonneurs* and resolved to return sometime for more walking time with them in their marvelous mountains. There was some consolation waiting for me in a shorter midnight walk I was soon to do from a house in Bages, not far from the mountains, in response to the song of a nightingale across the vineyards . . .

These are the images with which I remember the friends made through walking in 1989 – 90. Three years later more than half the group, including Serge but not Jean-Louis, went on an overnight excursion to which only the films in their cameras would bear witness, retrieved from an avalanche with their frozen bodies – their laughing over supper in a mountain gite.

It happened that I and my husband, Brian, were in France some months after this tragic accident. I'd written to Serge hoping for another climb together, with no reply. One from his widow inviting us for a meal caught up with us just in time. She said that without us she would have kept putting off gathering back together the surviving *randonneurs*. Jean-Louis said he'd been thinking of trying to organize a walk, but had done nothing. Even I was thinking how I might have been in the photos we looked at together. I said how much my walks with the group had meant to me. Some plans were made for a first low walk in the Corbières for the following month.

## LA FOURNAISE

Going back to a place is never possible because it's always a time as well. You can't share walks you've already had, but when I wanted to share something of my experience of The Indian Ocean Island of la Réunion with Brian it turned up trumps – eventually.

I started going to the island in 1986 when I was helping run a linguistic exchange for French students in WA schools with English students in Reunion schools, the island being an overseas *département* of France.

You can drive round the island's periphery at sea level in a day while large parts of its centre remain inaccessible. Made of three volcanoes, two extinct and one, *Le Piton de La Fournaise* (the Furnace), known affectionately as Le Volcan (the Volcano), still active, there are amazing land-forms and huge contrast over a small area. Previous visits had rewarded me with walking on the results of a recent lava flow adding to the littoral. The new beach of still-bubbly-looking black rock under our feet might not stay, it was pointed out to me. A year later I picked up new pebbles of lava already smoothed by the sea. I'd climbed the steps carved into an old lava flow to the door of the church at the small town of Sainte Rose. (The local Créole

populace had prayed to their *Vierge Noire* (Black Virgin) to stop the flow heading for the town: It did stop – at the church door - after knocking down the police station.) Recounting the rewards of walks here would take too many words and could not all be re-discovered on the ground for Brian either. We could count on walking close to one of the several waterfalls that drill out vast funnels of rock. But I could only hope for an eruption.

We were due in St.Denis, the island's main port and capital, in the July. In March a friend emailed to say, *Le Volcan – ça coule!* I replied, *Merde! (shit! )Right year, wrong month. Now of course the lava flow will be finished well before we arrive!*

Oh well, I had two other unfulfilled ambitions on the island: to climb the 3069 metres of the Piton des Neiges, the highest of the volcanoes, and to walk into Mafate – the main area inaccessible except by helicopter, donkey-feet or your own. I'd been having trouble with a knee and working hard at regular physio and exercises, to the extent of getting up in the dark in June to go up and down the steps to the dog beach at North Cottlesloe where we were living at the time. Each day I increased my number of times and my speed up and down to the bemusement of dog-walkers, so determined was I to manage the big volcano peak where one of the island's poets had stood to write a poem about seeing the entire island under the full moon. We weren't able to time it for the moon but otherwise we managed it: the only difficulties about the climb being the need to:

- keep on up the made staircase all day;
- sleep in the crowded and freezing gite all night;
- get out of bed when someone announced in a loud, gruff voice out of the dark, *C'est l'heure!* (It's time!)
- walk on up into the dawn despite the fact that it was raining and the locals had all got out of bed and gone straight back down saying there would be nothing to see this day;
- walk back down having seen nothing but rain and cloud
- and down knowing we weren't making it fast enough
- and down arriving just too late for the last bus from the Cirque de Cilaos back down to the coast and our lodgings.

This taught us that neither of us walks purely for exercise.

After that we thought we were looking forward to the Mafate adventure for which we'd booked beds in the gites. But La Fournaise intervened.

The March eruption inside the high caldera had continued in fits and starts, stopping only just before our arrival. Now unusually it started again from a new, small crater on the flank of the volcano.

Borrowing the car of the friends who were hosting us in La Rivière we drove down their mountain. Later, leaving the car at the volcano car park we set off on foot following a few other eruption seekers. Low clouds were catching the firelight, clue to its whereabouts. But we had come at it from above, from the ridge above the Plaine des Sables that runs parallel to the main thrust of the active caldera. We thought we were following a track that would take us straight to the lip of the eruption where we

could see tiny figures teetering on the edge. But we somehow missed our way, so decided to keep going on this high track as it was giving good views sideways on. We began to hope we might see the lava flows running down the slopes towards the main road and the sea. Still tired from our mammoth mountain climb we were aware of having seen no-one apart from a small group coming the other way near the beginning who had warned us of the track getting slippery and narrow, as it now was. And it was getting dark. We had torches (I had learnt that lesson in the Languedoc!) and refreshments. We continued. Until we came to an end.

Brian was in front of me and annoyed me by standing there as if he'd been turned into a tree. When he stepped back and let me forwards I too stood like a statue.

We were seeing down some 2000 metres to the sea. In front of us were low clouds billowing so that we could simultaneously see their upper and lower sides. They were shimmering with the light of the large moon above and glowing below with reflected fire over Sainte Rose. Visible at last to our side was the flank of the volcano plunging to the dark sea, carrying the river of molten lava. Neither of us has any idea how long we stood there, taking it in turns to step on to the rock where a clear view could be obtained.

Two days later we would drive round the coast road to experience the lava in all its stages, to climb to where it was making the trees keel over and burst into flame; walk on it until our boots began to sizzle and an Arab dressed in flowing white said, *Suivez-moi*, showing us how to pick our way safely off the flow, inspecting the extraordinary formations made by the cooling Earth magma . . . But that's another walk and this one isn't yet completed.

Eventually we sat on the rock to eat supper and keep gazing at the spectacle we'd come to so unexpectedly, only reluctantly stirring to start the return walk.

The first time I thought to look at my watch it was two in the morning. No wonder I was beginning to feel as if I were sleep-walking! And where was Brian? We'd become separated by continuing to take turns at stepping up from the path to watch for new bouts of lava being spat from the fissure. The path had worn a hollow in the top of the long, narrow ridge it followed and which fell away steeply on both sides. The sides of the path, bounded by bushes and small trees, prevented us from seeing out except where a gap occurred in the shrubbery. While one of us looked the other would walk on to the next gap.

I must have overtaken Brian without seeing him. Or had he overtaken me?

I called, but there was no reply. Remembering the whistle in my backpack pocket I was relieved – except that I wasn't sure Brian had his with him. He didn't, so heard me blow mine but couldn't reply. Thinking he might be ahead I increased my pace. This was checked when I came to a fork in the path. Which way to go? I decided don't panic, go back now for ten minutes. If I don't find him return and follow the path towards the light of the gite which is surely close to the car park. If it isn't, there will be someone at the gite who can help.

Five minutes and we met.

Then it was the long drive down and back up the winding roads towards breakfast and bed – when we could find the right road. Despite the hour there were plenty of people abroad to ask for direction, but they all turned out to be too drunk

to make sense: France had just won the World Cup! While we, kicking our heels as productively, had witnessed the earth boiling over.

## END NOTES

\**Dénivelé* is the 'difference in altitude between two levels' according to the 'Robert' dictionary. Experienced it is the steepness of the climb, that may or may not be part of the difficulty. It is measured by muscle expansion and contraction, thus on walk schedules refers to the speed at which the incline might bridge the gap between the height above sea level at the start of the climb and the height at the top.

\**Piolet* is the small pic-axe (sic) for self-anchorage needing to be close to hand on ice or snow-covered slopes especially above sheer drops. (1868 – word from the Val d'Aoste from the Piedmontese 'piola' meaning 'little axe' – Robert) 'Ice-axe' in English.

\**Randonnée* is a hike or trek and a *randonneur* one who walks it.

\*The GR is a *Grande Randonnée* (French) *Grote Routepaden* (Dutch) *Grande Rota* (Portuguese) or *Gran Recorrido* (Spanish), one of the number of long-distance tracks that criss-cross Europe. The GR10 goes 1000kms from Hendaye on the Atlantic coast to Banyuls on the Mediterranean and crosses through the Pyrenees.

\**un paquet de cordes en sautoir* – a coil of rope over the shoulder