

Windswept

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Windswept

WALKING THE PATHS OF TRAILBLAZING WOMEN

ANNABEL ABBS



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To Saskia, the perfect walking companion

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WALKING WOMEN

This book explores the walking lives of eight remarkable women, some well-known, some less known. For the sake of context and clarity, I have decided to introduce them here, at the very outset.

FRIEDA LAWRENCE NÉE VON RICHTHOFEN (1879–1956) was the German wife of D. H. Lawrence, but also the author of a memoir, *“Not I, but the Wind,”* and several essays. She was the model and inspiration for numerous characters in Lawrence’s novels and stories, playing such a pivotal role in his work that she’s often considered his collaborator.

GWEN JOHN (1876–1939) was a Welsh artist who lived and painted in France all her adult life. Now regarded as one of Britain’s pre-eminent female artists, she spent most of her career in the shadow of her brother, Augustus, and her lover, Auguste Rodin. She is best known for her luminous portraits of women, one of which (*Dorelia by Lamplight, at Toulouse*) recently sold for over half a million dollars at auction in New York.

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CLARA VYVYAN NÉE COLTMAN ROGERS (1885–1976) was an Australian-born writer who grew up in England, where she earned a first-class science degree and trained as a social worker, later working in the slums of east London. She nursed during World War I, then began a career of writing and market gardening from her home in Cornwall. An avid traveller and walker, she wrote over twenty books, all of which have now faded into obscurity.

NAN (ANNA) SHEPHERD (1893–1981) was a Scottish author, poet, essayist, and educator, whose memoir of hillwalking in the Cairngorms, *The Living Mountain*, is now justly recognised as one of the great pioneering pieces of nature writing.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR (1908–86) was a French writer, existentialist philosopher, and feminist theorist, now best known for her radical (at the time) feminist work *The Second Sex*. Her output was prolific: diaries, memoirs, essays, letters, and award-winning novels. Although she lived in Paris all her life, she escaped regularly to rural and remote landscapes.

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE (1887–1986) was an American artist, now considered one of the most significant artists of the twentieth century, and an icon in her own right. Famed for her flower and landscape paintings, she began her career in Texas but spent the latter half of her life in New Mexico. Both places inspired her until she died.

Also included, but without their own chapters, are:

DAPHNE DU MAURIER (1907–89) was a hugely popular English writer, best known for her novels *Rebecca*, *Frenchman's Creek*, *My Cousin Rachel*, and *Jamaica Inn* (all of which have been adapted for screen). She also wrote plays, short stories, biographies, and books about Cornwall, where she lived, not far from Clara Vyvyan. Much of her work reveals her deep love of wild landscapes.

EMMA GATEWOOD (1887–1973), better known as Grandma Gatewood, was an American pioneer of extreme hiking and the first woman to solo-walk the Appalachian Trail (2,050 miles), a hike she repeated three times, latterly aged seventy-five.

Careful readers will notice that some women are referred to by their surname and others by their first name. After much thought, I decided to use the name that felt right as I wrote. Frequently this was also the name that I imagined each subject would prefer. For example, I felt that Simone de Beauvoir would prefer to be known as Beauvoir rather than as Simone. Likewise O'Keeffe.

Frieda Lawrence (née von Richthofen) acquired four surnames during her lifetime but always thought of herself as simply Frieda. I suspect she would have laughed uproariously at my sleepless nights fretting over what to call the women in this book.

While a painter of Gwen John's stature should perhaps be referred to as John, the John name was appropriated early on by

her artist brother, Augustus, leaving Gwen in a nominal vacuum later expressed through a disinclination to sign her paintings. For this reason she is Gwen here.

Clara Vyvyan published under both her maiden name (Coltman Rogers) and her married name. But because Vyvyan also resembles a first name (as does John), I felt the text read more clearly when I called her Clara. As Daphne du Maurier appears in the same chapter, she is Daphne.

Where I felt the choice of name made no difference, I deferred—in male literary tradition—to the surname.

For the purposes of this book, I have defined a *walking woman* as one who walked for pleasure, not drudgery, and who was able to make something of her walking rather than simply doing it of necessity. Sadly, this made it difficult to find historic women of colour or women who walked with their children or impoverished women. These women rarely had the opportunity to head off into the wilds for catharsis, adventure, or pleasure. However, they are unsurpassed when it comes to sheer mileage and endurance.

Finally, I have used the words *wild*, *remote*, *unpeopled*, and *rural* in their most general forms to indicate landscapes that are essentially non-urban and often unpopulated. The terms are not intended to denote specific topographies or geographies.

**INTRODUCTION:
Where Are the Women?**

For once I felt truly free.

—MATHILDE BLIND (1841–96),
unpublished autobiographical fragment
on walking solo in the Alps, 1860

I'm walking the green crest of a hill, following my shadow which is long and blue and blurred. To my right lies the ocean, sequinned with sunlight. To my left the ridge falls away, turning to hedged squares of mustard, saffron, russet. The wind stirs in my hair and plucks at my shadow legs which are stretched surreally tall upon the grass. My brain trundles over and over, trying to locate the landscape: Where am I?

And then the image is gone and I'm elsewhere, crouched tight against the rocky flank of a mountain. Above me the sky is black and pitted. A vast orange moon lulls in the darkness. Someone is pulling my hand, urging me up. I stand and walk, step by steady step, along a narrow flinty path doused with moonlight. A stone pierces my boot, prodding the blistered sole of my foot. Again my mind churns, struggling to place my disconnected body. Where am I?

For hours I slip from one wilderness to another: from dazzling light to plunging dark; from air that is damp and sullen to air that flares with frost and ice; from oak forests to sandy moors to the ripening grass of . . . of where? Sounds come to

me: the crunch of shingle beneath my feet; poplars soughing in the wind; the blunt teeth of sheep tearing at turf; the rawking of crows; the song of a thrush. I hold on to the sounds, storing them in the backs of my ears, hoping they'll reveal where I am, where I've been, where I'm going.

When I open my eyes, the room is blindingly white. A nurse in a blue dress is cranking up my bed. Tens of wires run from the back of my hand to a saline drip with a flashing red eye. The thrush sings dimly in my ears, but the drip is louder, bleeping urgently into my cubicle. I'm not marching over hills with a stiff breeze tugging at my hair. Nor am I sidling along the vertiginous lip of a mountain. I'm in a hospital bed. Slowly the wildernesses of my mind fade away. The electronic stutter of the drip amplifies, blotting out the hectoring crows, the chanting thrush. I remember where I am: London's Charing Cross Hospital. I've fallen and cracked my skull on the pavement, a fall so violent my neighbour will later say she thought it was the supermarket delivery man dropping a stack of palettes on the road.

There's nothing wrong with my legs, but I can't walk. Every movement is accompanied by rolling waves of giddiness. As if the earth tilts constantly beneath me. As if I'm drunker than I've ever been—or ever want to be.

"Your dinner's coming," says the nurse, pushing back the plastic curtains that surround my bed.

"When can I walk?" I don't want to eat, or drink. I want only one thing—to walk.

"Not long now," she says. But I'm not listening. Through the open door I see the corridor and the room opposite. I see people walking, balancing trays and carrying bags, a child

dragging a plastic scooter, a man on a walker. Some are moving quickly, almost jogging. Others are strolling or limping or slowly scuffing their slippered feet along the linoleum.

I watch them, mesmerised by their movement. From somewhere I cannot locate—my feet? my gut? my head?—a deep inner ache swells. I try to place the ache, to attach it to my injury. But it's nothing like the hammer thud of my head. And it has none of the tenderness of a bruise or the sting of a cut. As I stare at the people walking past my cubicle, the ache spreads through me, pricking my eyes, catching in my throat, coiling in my stomach.

In that moment two thoughts strike me:

I have never fully appreciated what it is to walk, stride, shuffle, hobble, run. To be bipedal.

Without my legs I am captive. A prisoner.

My inner ache feels like a yearning, a longing to have the privilege of my legs returned to me. But it's a longing rimmed with regret—regret for all those years in which I walked without thinking. And for all those squandered years of sitting—in cars, in front of screens, at tables and desks and bars, in deckchairs and beds and baths.

The nurse peers into my eyes. “Oh dear . . . cheer up! Are your family visiting tonight?”

I blink and nod, even as I make a vow to myself: When I can walk again, I will do so at every opportunity. And I will nurture my legs as if they're the most precious possession I have.

“You'll be walking round this room in no time,” says the nurse, as if she can read my thoughts.

Through my fuzzy-edged eyes I take in the plastic and concrete of my room, the cinder-block view through the window.

Everything is grey and white. It smells of . . . detergent? bleach? The heavy thrum of traffic drifts through the double glazing—sirens, horns, the screech of a motorbike. There is something not-right about walking here.

“I have to go back,” I croak.

The nurse frowns, then smiles. “I’ll bring your painkillers and refill your drip.”

“I need to walk in the country . . . not cities or hospitals . . .” I slur to her departing back.

I close my eyes and make another pledge—all holidays, from this point forward, will be walking holidays. Our youngest child is seven. Our oldest is fourteen. No more lounging on a beach. No more lying by a pool. From now on, we’re climbing stiles and mountains, walking over hills and through valleys, hiking along cliffs and ambling through forests . . . My wonderful, car-loving, speed-adoring, screen-gazing children will walk.

—

I grew up carless. My parents could not drive and steadfastly refused to take lessons. We walked because we had to. But we also walked, daily, for pleasure.

Much later, I fell in love with a mountaineer and my childhood ambles became mountainous treks through the remotest regions of the Himalayas, over the Alps, through the Peak District, the Lake District, the Brecon Beacons, and the Black Mountains of Wales. The mountaineer disappeared, eventually replaced by Matthew, who also loved walking and whom I married. Our weekends and holidays were spent hiking: Snowdonia,

the South Downs, the Devon coastal path, Dartmoor, the Yorkshire moors, Mount Kilimanjaro.

The walking ceased abruptly with the birth of our first child. After our third child was born, I swapped a career I loved for the tyranny of domesticity. In an instant my world shrank.

—

Raising small children in a confined urban space left me hankering for greenery, for remoteness, for air. There were mornings when I craved trees so viscerally I thought my head would split, sending all remaining shreds of sanity into orbit.

I dragged my children to the local park. But this was a poor reconstruction of the supple, unenclosed spaces I was pining for. Instead I began reading about walking and nature, becoming adept at holding a book in one hand while using the other to load the washing machine, wipe noses, clean grazes, and build Lego. Every night I struggled through a few more paragraphs before sinking into exhausted, broken sleep.

For a while, reading was enough. I roamed imaginatively over mountains tipped white with snow, through ancient forests where light scattered from the high branches of trees, along vernal valleys fringed green with willow. In my mind's eye I rambled beside dashing streams and tumbling rivers, across moors and dales and waterlogged fens, while falcons and hawks wheeled above.

But something gnawed at me. Something I couldn't articulate. A vague, uneasy sense that these books were not really *for* me, that they were merely palliative. I tried to fend off this growing sense

of disconnect, because without my vicarious reading I feared I might crack beneath the weight of domestic restraint.

—

One evening, as I turned off my lamp, my eye was caught by the books on my bedside table. I looked at the spines and noticed something I'd never noticed before: every book carried the name of a man. I felt a baffled surprise, because although I considered myself a feminist, I'd never paid much attention to the gender of an author when I bought or borrowed a book.

My book buying in those days involved a harried trip to the children's section of my local bookshop. As we rushed out—scooters, stuffed animals, stroller bulging and tipping with bags—I'd grab something from a passing table for myself, ideally with a bird or trees on the cover.

Seeing them stacked, spine by spine, a line of men, made me pause. I wondered if this was why I felt an odd disconnect, if this was why my reading felt more like medication than inspiration.

—

Eight days after my fall, I returned from the hospital to rest and let the plates of my fractured skull knit together. I was walking very slowly, on the arms of friends and family, but my brain was teeming with Big Ideas for Big Walks.

I looked through my books and noticed, again, the absence of women. As I tottered round my kitchen, my blundering brain turned over and over. I couldn't shake the image of rugged

men striding out, sticks in hand, wind whisking through their hair, barely a domestic care upon their muscular, untroubled shoulders.

The juxtaposition between the compressed, constricted space of female domesticity and the vast vistas through which these unburdened men roved hung vividly and disruptively in my wide-awake mind. These “walking men” had mothers, wives, even children. But where were they? Why were they so rarely mentioned? Could it be that the absent women were creating the very homes that enabled these men to step out with such nonchalance and exuberance?

I wasn't angry with these men (most of whom were dead anyway), but I was angry at their unexamined dominance. And I was angry with myself for not expending more effort in seeking out books by women. For surely women had walked—and written about their experiences of walking?

—

I started exploring online, prowling around second-hand bookshops, investigating library catalogues. Women remained elusive. As Rebecca Solnit, one of the few female writers on the subject of walking, wrote: “Throughout the history of walking . . . the principal figures . . . have been men.”¹

Every now and then, Virginia Woolf's name appeared. I'd spent my teenage years in the shadow of the South Downs, where Woolf had lived and walked for much of her adult life. My parents were still there, so whenever I got the chance I plotted a Woolf route and began tracing her footsteps over the

South Downs. On these walks I felt my equilibrium return, my mood improve. I could breathe again.

I also felt exhilarated, walking as I imagined Woolf had walked—taking in the soft, sheep-nibbled curves of the Downs, the wrinkled silver sea in the distance, the larks springing from beneath my feet, the slack summer sun. I imagined Woolf's curious, disobedient mind drawing it all in, absorbing it, filtering it, transmuting it into art.

But the same old question kept nagging at me: Surely women, other than Virginia Woolf, had walked? Surely other women had written about the consolations of walking in rural places? A few names cropped up: Dorothy Wordsworth, the Brontës, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* . . . but none were accorded the celebrity and attention of the men piled up beside my bed.

—

My hunt for female walkers became more rigorous: although the wilderness has typically been the preserve of men and their yomping, touring, climbing, hunting, shooting, and fishing exploits, more and more accounts (often unpublished or out of print) of women walking long and remote distances were coming to light.

In the cool, modern interior of Munich's Alpine Museum, I found sepia photographs of women walking and climbing in tight corsets, trailing skirts, and wide-brimmed hats. And yet most had no recorded name. The men who appeared throughout the museum—alongside first editions of their books, examples of their paintings and photographs, sets of their original crampons—had named and dated plaques. But the women

stared out from photographs, nameless and identity-less. I asked the museum assistant who they were.

She shrugged. “We do not know. Perhaps wives or sisters.”

—

If walking in wildness is such a powerfully restorative and rejuvenating experience (and science increasingly bears this out), why has it been denied to women? Or has it? And if it hasn't, where are they? And why don't we know about them?

Many of the women who boldly embarked on hikes—and could have inspired later generations—have been carelessly lost in the fog of history. Some, like Nan Shepherd, are creeping back, their accounts rediscovered, reprinted, lauded. Others, like Simone de Beauvoir, are well-known, but not for their walking. Many more have disappeared, the casualties of a self-referencing male canon of walking and nature literature, of men-only hiking and climbing clubs, of publishing firms historically run by men, of misguided concerns for female safety.

And it's my fault too—for not seeking out these overlooked women earlier, for not promoting the small circle of women quietly walking and writing beyond the limelight. A circle, incidentally, that has grown enormously—and to great acclaim—in the last decade.

As I began researching—digging around in libraries and archives—I slowly amassed a collection of evidence suggesting that women, like men, have always walked. History is littered with invisible females for whom rural walking was a daily necessity, but in unpublished and out-of-print guidebooks, in letters,

manuscripts, and paintings, I began finding women who also walked for inspiration, consolation, and liberation. Moreover, I had a growing sense that these women walked with infinitely more bravery, audacity, and complexity than their famous male counterparts. Unlike most male walkers, they hadn't served in the military or been educated in the ways of navigation or self-defence. To be seen alone in the wilds risked their social reputation as well as their physical safety, an outcome few men had cause to worry about. To hike as these women did required a level of courage—rashness, even—unimaginable to us now.

What sparked their sudden reckless urge to escape? What drove them to carry a rucksack for miles and miles, often alone, frequently in isolated and remote places? How did their experiences affect them?

I knew I didn't have enough space, either in my head or between the pages of a moderately sized book, to include all the remarkable women I'd discovered. So I chose a group of women for whom rural or wild walking had proved life-changing: Frieda Lawrence née von Richthofen; Gwen John; Clara Vyvyan née Coltman Rogers in partnership with Daphne du Maurier; Nan Shepherd; Simone de Beauvoir; Georgia O'Keeffe; and—in brief—Emma Gatewood.

What I discovered was often shocking, frequently dramatic, sometimes tragic, but always profoundly illuminating. These women walked not to “enjoy all the freedom a man is capable of having” (as the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau did), nor for exercise, nor because the drudgery of circumstance necessitated it. These women walked in order to find minds of their own. They walked for emotional restitution. They walked

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to understand the capabilities of their own bodies. They walked to assert their independence. They walked to *become*.

Through the lens of these women and the landscapes in which they walked, I came to understand truths not only about them but about myself. Although I didn't know it at the time, my journey in their footsteps was also an attempt to walk and write myself free.

Because, like so many of the women I investigated, I too was walking away from something. As I walked in their footsteps—over deserts and plains, through valleys and mountain ranges, along canals, rivers, and the coast, imaginatively across maps—the *thing* I was escaping began to take shape. It wasn't quite as I expected. It was bigger, more unwieldy. And so this book became as much about tracks of thought as the tracks worn by female feet. And as much about how we walk as about how we become.