

TRODDEN WAYS

ESTHER CLARK WRIGHT

Here on the heights we see things hid from those who tread
Like sheep the dusty trodden way . . .

Bernard Freeman protter.

WHO does not know the yearning for the heights, for the mountaintop experiences, for the far vision, for the remoteness and the solitude? And yet, for most of our days, we are compelled to follow a beaten track, to and fro, to and fro, from home to work, from sleep to daily task. Nevertheless, there are compensations about these trodden ways, and we who tread in them see more than the poet, in the fervor of his hill-top ecstasy, would grant. The ways our feet have trod, day after day, week after week, month after month, season after season, become a part of us, of that intricate interweaving of the impressions of the world about us and our reactions to it that makes up our experience of life. All the outward surroundings, all the inward reflections, all the contacts with human and animal life, that are the accompaniments of the daily beat, although they seemed at the time to pass unnoticed, have nevertheless made their impression upon us, and will often, when the curtain is lifted, show themselves, etched with surprising clearness.

Who has not, after changing from one abode to another, found himself at the old home, without once having realized that he was directing his steps thither? The feet took the old familiar ways, while the mind was busy with other things. Therein lies one of the compensations of the oft-trod way, that one can pass over it with a minimum of attention to the mere mechanics of the passing and can concentrate on other matters. Sometimes the act of setting one's feet upon a once familiar path is sufficient to recall to mind a series of thoughts and speculations that had been long forgotten. Conversely, a certain train of thought will associate with pictures of the road where the feet walked while the mind busied itself with that sequence. "Grow old along with me" and a dingy street, once a part of my daily beat, which I tried to ignore by memorizing "Rabbi Ben Ezra," are inextricably associated in my mind; calculations on the cost of living in London and Tottenham Court Road; the immanence of God and a certain stretch of country road.

It is one of the compensations that this footless age will never know. The driver of a car cannot let his thoughts roam as freely as the pedestrian can, and he can never have that complete absorption in some inner world of thought or fantasy that often comes to be the daily companion of him who walks. Perhaps that statement should be amended; the driver of an automobile may achieve that complete absorption once, but that moment will in all probability mark the end of his career as motorist. Henceforth he will probably walk—in fields of asphalt, or over blistering pavements.

Another compensation denied the motorist is the enjoyment of the life along the way. He flashes past too quickly to see it, even if he did not have to keep his eyes and attention on the road, the traffic, the side streets, the traffic lights, the traffic policeman. The pedestrian's leisurely passing gives opportunity to get to know the children playing about the door, the babies sunning in their carriages, the dogs that bark and the dogs that eye him warily; washday and the clothes on the line, cleaning day and the rugs on the verandah; the new coat of paint, the moving van; the Christmas wreath upon the door, the insignia of the undertaker; the shutters closed in holiday time, visitors' car with a license from a distant state; the play of fire-light before the shades are drawn, the house ablaze with light and thronged with guests.

The friendships of the way are another reward that comes to the man who walks. He has chance for a more leisurely conversation with the man he overtakes as they fit their steps together and pursue their onward way than has the motorist with a pedestrian he may pick up. He may get to know the people who travel in the opposite direction, too. Morning after morning they meet, they begin to nod, they smile together over some incident along the way, acquaintance grows, and even friendship. The motorist may pause to drop a friend at his door, but he has no opportunity to see, as does the fellow walker, the children who run up the street to greet their sire's return, or catch the welcoming light that streams out from the opened door, or sniff the odors of the dinner cooking. The motorist, too, has not time to give his dwelling that close scrutiny the man on foot can give as he approaches, to note where the lights are burning and guess what each member of the family is doing, to mark how well the flowers are blooming, to observe how far the tree's shade extends, to savour all the indications, dear and remembered, of activities past and present.

The pedestrian acquires an intimate, detailed and exact knowledge of the trodden way. Motoring maps may distinguish certain types of roads as all-weather roads, but it is the man who walks to and from his daily work who knows the road in all weathers, in sunshine and in rain, in heat and in cold. He knows the stretches where the wind blows most fiercely and the unshaded portions where the sun beats down most hotly; he knows how quickly the distance can be covered when the thermometer records below zero temperatures, and how long the road seems when he trudges home after a hard's day toil; he has seen the morning mist hanging in the treetops, and the setting sun reddening the sky, and the dust-filled air beneath; he has watched the patterning of a gentle shower upon the dust and the smoking of the pavement when the sun comes out; he knows the little gullies caused by a heavy rain, and the slippery place where the sun has not melted the ice.

To have walked along a road day after day, in season and out of season, is to have made that road one's own. The road, with all its turns and twists, the buildings and the fields along it, and all the little happenings along the way, become part of one's permanent possessions. I own nearly the whole of Brattle Street—the shops, the Radcliffe buildings, the stately homes linked with the great names of New England, the old glass in the windows of the brown house and its great central chimney, the elm tree along the way, the first crocuses to bloom in spring, the long sprays of forsythia, the two horse chestnut trees that stand side by side but are always a week apart in blooming, the unevenness of the brick pavement and the glory of the sunset through the trees, the corner of Sparks Street (where I had to leave the 18th century and return to the 20th and the problem of dinner, and whether it was necessary to go around by the shops or could I continue along Brattle Street). I own, too, a dusty road in California, the tall eucalyptus and the live oaks along it, the thousands of crates of tomatoes from the long field where myriads of Japanese women set out the plants, where a stream of water gushed out when needed and was carried along the channels dug throughout the length and breadth of the field, where Mexican laborers came to cultivate and small armies of many nationalities to pick the ripened fruit.

And there's a river, beside which I have walked for years uncounted, and which I have come to own, the sweep below the town, the meadows and the elm trees, the tangle of roses and the

clusters of choke cherries, the centuries-old willows that stand along the bank, the railroad bridge and the highway bridge that span the river, the river steamers, the lumber rafts, the canoes, the yachts, the iceboats. I know that river satin-smooth beneath the moon, and angrily gray before a storm; shrunk to summer level and lapping at the top of the bank in freshet time; a smooth sheet of ice crowded with skaters, or a lonely snow-swept plain where lines of spruce trees marked the road for winter travel.

I own a hillside in Nova Scotia and the path through the orchard (except when the swallows are nesting in the little houses and then they must have undisputed possession); the road through the town that becomes imperceptibly countryside; the comfortable homes, the gardens and the orchards, the long stretch of dyke, where the snow drifts in solid waves in winter; the bridge and the river, in which there is always mud but not always water; the village, the orchards, the little hill; another dyke and an aboideau, a field of rhubarb, orchards and more orchards, and the steep pitch down to the shore where the waters of Minas Basin advance and recede over miles of oozy mud.

Also in my possession are Magdalen Bridge and the Cherwell underneath, Magdalen Tower in the morning mists, the wet pavement of the High, and the red light of cars and bicycles gleaming in it, Long Wall and New College Lane, the Bodleian and the Sheldonian and the bookshops of the Broad. I own whole squares in Bloomsbury, too, Great Russell Street, its bookshops, teashops and curio shops, the portico of the British Museum, where the curious and the serious enter; a corner of Hampstead Heath and the old streets nearby, the blackbird that sang in the tree in front of the house where Keats had lived (almost I thought it was the nightingale, but *The Quarterly* killed John Keats; and the North London Railway, when it shrieked and plunged underground, frightened away the nightingale.)

It was a path through the woods that first made me realize how important it may be that a way has been trodden. On a moonless night, we had to find our way by the feel of the path beneath our feet; we developed a sense of touch about paths that has often since proved useful to us and puzzling to our friends, who cannot understand our scorn of electric torches to light us along a path. This sense of path must have been very acute among our primitive forebears before the laying down of pavements became general. The hard, smooth surfaces, which free

us from the discomfort of dust in summer and of mud in winter and make possible indulgence in fine footwear and fine carpets, have tended to make us forget the feel of the trodden earth beneath our feet and have deprived us of a simple, elemental joy that we might share with earlier generations, the joy of finding again beneath our feet the indications that others have passed along the way, of knowing that wandering through the unexplored forest or over the trackless plain is ended for the time being. To find the way across a field, or through the woods, on a dark night, by the feel of the path beneath the feet, is to discover that there is a permanence and reality to the beaten path that concrete and tar have not achieved, that there is a linking up of the past and present and future by making use of the tangible record of the past and, in thus using it, making possible its use in the future.

In the age of the automobile and the railroad, we were forgetting about trodden ways, but the age of the aeroplane has reminded us of them again. The merest hint of a path across a field, hardly visible to the men on the ground, shows up with startling clarity to the observer aloft. It did not take long to learn the nakedness of roads across the terrain when aerial warfare developed, and to devise means of masking this nakedness so that enemy eyes could not see what use was being made of the trodden ways or what new ways were being trodden.

The aeroplane has been able to see not only the trodden ways of the present but also those of past centuries. Where for hundreds of years men trod along their little paths, they left traces that generations of ploughing and of cultivating the soil have not been able to obliterate, and the keen eye of the observer in the aeroplane has detected these traces, and the keener eye of the camera has recorded them. They have shown, too, the tracks of packhorses across the downs, with the story plain to read of the impassable track and the attempts to make new tracks alongside the old, muddy ruts.

Getting rid of the muddy ruts is accomplished in the 20th century by covering over the earth along the trodden ways. The laying down of pavements has become one of the major industries of our time; it has usurped the leading role among the preoccupations of local governing bodies; it has brought many a less populous region to the verge of bankruptcy and shares with war the doubtful honour of being responsible for the tremendous increase of funded indebtedness of governments.

And yet, despite the skill and ingenuity of modern highway

engineering, despite the resourcefulness of modern industry, despite the demands of modern vehicular traffic, Dame Nature still has methods of making the trodden way important. Sand and snow, these are her aides, and where these abound, trodden ways retain their old importance and significance. To the men who must cross the limited wastes of the desert, where sand dune and rock, dry wadi and hillside succeed one another in unending monotony, each indication that man or beast has passed along the way is of supreme significance, and the record of the trodden way becomes an open book wherein they read with unerring skill and accuracy.

In *Yesterday and Today in Sinai*, Major Jarvis gives several instances of the skill of Arab trackers. Once several smugglers were captured, but denied ownership of the goods they were carrying.

A tracker was sent to examine the tracks at the landing-place and reported that there had been present seven fishermen, fourteen Arabs and one person who normally wore boots, though he was barefooted on this occasion.

The Egyptian law allows conviction on the corroborated evidence of a tracker, and in this case—as an important arrest might follow—two more trackers were sent separately to the spot, and returned with precisely the same account as the first Arab. One man was asked how he could tell the difference between the tracks of a fisherman, an Arab, and a merchant, and replied, in a pitying manner: "Isn't it quite clear that the feet of a man who has worked always in the sea are not the same as those of a man who works in the desert? And as for the feet of a man who usually wears shoes, well, a child could detect those at twenty paces."

The suspected merchant, loudly protesting his innocence, was arrested, and the identification parade arranged. A large patch of sand was swept and some ten officials and clerks removed their shoes and socks and walked across it, together with the suspected man. The first tracker was then brought out and, with the air of a Master of Arts asked to do a simple addition sum, pointed at once to the suspect's track. He was removed and the second tracker brought out with the same result; and when the third tracker followed suit, the merchant burst into tears and confessed.

The reputation of the Mounties of the Northwest, that they "always got their man", may have been partly due to the fact that they worked in a region where Nature used her other instrument for frustrating knavish tricks and for revealing the importance of the trodden way, namely snow. Tracks in the snow, the records left upon that beautiful, white, untouched

page that Nature has spread out before the northern peoples, make the most fascinating reading. Here a skunk lumbered along; here are the long broad marks of the hind feet and behind them the short dots of the forefeet of a rabbit that hopped along; tracks of a weasel and the occasional brush of its tail; here a moose passed on its way to drink at the spring. Indians and woodsmen of all races become as expert as the Arabian trackers in reading the accounts before them.

There is much to be learned about people by watching their tracks in the snow. Sheeplike they tend to follow the way the first man treads out through the falling snow, and it is extraordinarily difficult to straighten out a path when once it has been made, no matter how erratic the direction of the original path may be. The first people to follow the path probably walked along with heads bent against the driving snow and stepped in the track already made. By the time the snow had ceased to fall, the trodden snow was a firm path upon which the passerby instinctively kept his feet, well-knowing that if he strayed he would flounder in the unbeaten snow. When snow has drifted across the paths, or when additional snow has fallen, the feel of the trodden way becomes important, even sometimes a matter of life and death.

Unto the hills around do I lift up
My longing eyes . . .

It is good to escape to the heights, but it is good to have walked along the dusty trodden ways, to have shared the common life, to have experienced the beauties and the blessings of the road, to have walked where other men have walked, to have known the feel of the trodden ways in earth, or sand, or snow. The ways our feet have trod, day after day, week after week, month after month, season after season, have become a part of us.