And Did Those Feet

Walking Through 2000 Years of British and Irish History

Charlie Connelly

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Extract

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Little, Brown

Introduction

The prospect of staying at the Norwich Travelodge is not usually one to set the heart a-flutter. There are more exotic destinations in the world. There are more exotic destinations in Norwich. But as my train pulled out of Liverpool Street station and the sunlit back gardens of the east London suburbs flitted by in a rapid silent slideshow of terraced domesticity – a child's tipped-over plastic tricycle, a mildew-darkened greenhouse with a smashed roof pane, a chained collie bucking and barking soundlessly – I caught sight of my reflection in the sun-flashes that occasionally illuminated the window. I was smiling, and I was heading for the Norwich Travelodge. Clearly something strange was afoot.

As the houses and steel-fenced, prefabricated industrial units began to thin out in favour of more and more greenery, I looked up at the rucksack strap swinging from the overhead storage shelf where I'd wedged it after an inelegant sprint across the concourse for the train and tried to think about what lay ahead. I thought about how I would soon be making this journey in reverse, and how it would take me a lot longer than this even if, as inevitably came to pass, we sat outside Witham for an hour and a half due to a points failure. I thought about how, when I got to Norwich, I would be saddling up Shanks's Pony and

walking back – that's *walking* back – with my rucksack strapped to me like a snazzier version of Dick Whittington's hanky-on-a-stick, a sturdy pair of boots on my feet and, hopefully, a song in my heart and a rainbow draped around my shoulders. I was setting out at the beginning of a series of journeys that covered not just distance, immense and daunting distance that would have me walking as far in about eight months as I had in about the last dozen years, but time too, following a chronology that would run into millennia. I wasn't walking from Norwich to London just for the sake of it. For one thing, that would be an odd thing to do and would cause people to edge away nervously if I mentioned it in conversation. No, from Norwich Travelodge I would be retracing the first of a series of great journeys from history, following a trail of righteous destruction instigated by a woman grievously scorned nearly two thousand years ago who has since passed into mythology, whose biography has been lost in the wispy caverns of time, leaving only shadowy half-truth and romantic fable. The only remaining certainty was the route I was about to undertake.

This would be the first in a sequence of journeys tracing routes taken by some of the most famous and not-so-famous figures in the history of these islands, journeys that had, and in many cases continue to have, an effect on the way we live now. We're surrounded by history. We can barely walk down the street without tripping over the stuff. We're so spoiled by the abundance of the past in our midst that it's easy to take it for granted. Not only that, with our still-too-common perception of history as an area for dusty, musty old academics poring over dusty, musty old books, we've lost a sense of the vibrancy that history hoards. The past has everything: wars, battles, power struggles, love stories, mysteries, murders, miscarriages of justice, heroism, cowardice, tragedies and the inexplicable popularity of the codpiece. It's not confined to earnest, learned books and stuffy museums with ancient, clanking central heating systems and attendants who all

look like Deryck Guyler. It's everywhere, it's around us and it's alive: we can actually reach out and touch it.

Whenever I've been to the US, pitching up somewhere with an inquisitive expression and well-thumbed guidebook, a smiling, friendly person would skip out of the door, flash me a wide and perfect American smile and say, 'OK, let me tell you a little about the history of this place.' Then they'd pause, hold their hands up defensively, their palms facing me, as if I was about to wrestle them to the ground and bite off their nose, and add, 'But hey, of course we don't have history like *you guys* have history.' Now, we can debate the millennia-spanning chronology of the Native American tribes until the steers come home, but you know what they mean – and they're right. We guys do have history, wheelbarrows full of the stuff, and thankfully for the most part people wrote it down. A great deal of it was biased, subjective and often wildly inaccurate, but then cast your eye along the front pages of the national papers next time you're in the newsagent's. Thankfully, too, for the most part the material we have is often rollicking, gripping and hand-flying-to-mouth scurrilous, and, by jiminy, I love it.

When I was at university I shared a house for a while with a philosophy student. She was a bit bonkers at the best of times, but when she'd twirl her hair while Rosie, her pet rat, sat on top of her head and say, 'I think the reason I love philosophy so much is because, you know, it's just in . . . *everything*,' while I was trying to watch *Sportsnight* I'd have to restrain myself from calmly removing my shoe and taking Rosie out like a leather-uppered, rodent-exterminating William Tell. I'd gone to university to study Russian. Actually no, I'd gone to university to meet girls and drink until I was sick, but officially I was there to do Russian. After a year or two of failed exams and missed classes the university let it be known that they really didn't want me to study Russian any more and I'd have to do something else if I

wanted to retain my right to meet girls and drink until I was sick. I sat sullenly in a meeting as various departments tried to suggest ways of keeping me there, to each of which I shrugged and harrumphed noncommittally. Eventually the history department took me under their wing and, my goodness, am I ever grateful that they did. Because, contrary to what my rat-loving housemate thought, it's history that's, you know, just in . . . *everything*. Politics, sociology, philosophy, biology, anthropology, literature, language – you name it, history's got it. And those lovely, lovely people in the history department set me right back on the road to historical epiphany even when I had yet to learn that girls rarely fancy someone mumbling insensibly with sick on their sleeve, who shares a house with a rat. Within weeks of beginning the new course I had remembered just how passionately I loved history, and how convinced I was that it's the key to just about everything. Girls still didn't want to know, though.

I've always been aghast when people in the course of a pub conversation have said, 'Actually I'm not all that interested in history, to be honest.' To me that's just like saying, 'Actually I'm not all that interested in absolutely anything in the world around me. I inhabit a vacuum, a sensually empty, silent, twilight world of nothingness in which I am impervious to anything and anyone, to be honest. Right, my shout, same again?'

OK, I might be being a bit disingenuous; of course, by not being all that interested in history they most likely mean they're not that bothered about being able to rattle off the names of the Tudor monarchs in order, or nail the date of the Battle of Prestonpans, or précis the outcome of the Bretton Woods Conference. Which is fair enough. But such textbook dryness is not what history is all about, any more than the fascinating, all-encompassing world of scientific discovery is encapsulated entirely within the periodic table.

Sitting in the pub with the person-not-interested-in-history, I'm looking around, wondering about the people who have

passed through over the years. The air-raid warden discussing events at the front with the soldier on leave. The students excitedly debating the possible implications of the Bolshevik Revolution. The blacksmith staring wordlessly at his drink, worried for his livelihood owing to the relentless progress of industrialisation. The collier, merrily drunk and rosy-cheeked, unaware that he's minutes away from being press-ganged and sent to sea, never to return. All in this room, where generations of hearts have been broken, arguments have been settled, unbreakable friendships have formed, fists have flown and some unbelievable drunken bollocks has been spoken.

To me, history is alive, current and constant. Walk down your local high street, for example. Look beyond the homogeneous chain stores and you'll see, I don't know, the butcher's shop that's been there for generations run by the same family. Two men on ladders are replacing a sign over a shop front, temporarily revealing an old, beautifully hand-painted one dating back more than a century. A plaque on one building commemorates the birth of a famous poet. The clock chimes on the tower built to commemorate victory at the Battle of Trafalgar. Women sit chatting on benches either side of the obelisk that remembers the local fallen in both world wars. An old horse trough built to water the mail-coach horses is now filled with flowers. The 'Boys' and 'Girls' chiselled into the lintels above the doors of the drop-in centre reveal that it was once a school: who studied there, made lifelong friends there, spent an entire teaching career there?

The past is all around us, in the buildings, in the landscape, in the ground we walk on. It's not in lists of monarchs or dates of battles that it truly comes alive; it's in people and places. Everyone and everywhere has a story. I've been to some places that, on the face of it, promise nothing of the remotest interest and found myself riveted by the story of something that happened there. I grew up near Blackheath in south London; to the

casual observer, just a great big expanse of grass sliced by a couple of roads. Yet it was a plague pit: during the Great Plague of 1665–6 hundreds of bodies were thrown into pits, scattered with lime and buried. In the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 it was a major rallying point for the rebels – Wat Tyler's Mound in the middle of the heath is supposed to be where the peasant leader addressed his followers. In Viking times, Ethelred the Unready's fleet moored at Greenwich and his men camped on Blackheath for the best part of three years while pillaging in the area. It was the site of suffragette rallies – Emily Wilding Davison was born nearby – and apparently also the place where golf was played in England for the first time. Dick Turpin used to ride across it. Beneath Blackheath are caverns and tunnels left by ancient chalk mines (part of the A2 collapsed into them in 2002, leaving a crater twenty feet across), and when a shaft was sunk in 1939 to see if the tunnels might be usable as a bomb shelter, the remains of an early Victorian masked ball were found scattered on the ground, as if everyone had left in a desperate hurry and the place had been sealed up ever since. For a bare patch of grass, that's not a bad record.

It's this passion for the past and my firm belief that history is alive and everywhere that resulted in me boarding the train to East Anglia. In *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon wrote that 'history is, indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind'. He may well have a point. But for me it's much more than that: it's about individuals and their stories; how they contributed or otherwise to the themes of history and the great events of the past. I wanted to meet people from the past, sit them down in the corner of a pub with a couple of pints and ask them what it was like. I mean, what was it really *like*? When Julius Caesar and his ships appeared out of the fog, approaching the Kentish coast in 55BC, who were the locals who massed on the white cliffs and menaced him away? How did the word

spread that something was afoot? How fantastical did the Roman vessels appear to them? Repelling one of the greatest military leaders in world history was some feat, yet we've no idea who those people were.

What must it have been like to slide around the Thames Frost Fairs, drunk on cheap beer? When London Bridge had houses and shops on it, who lived there? Who plied their trades there? Did the boggly-eyed, slack-jawed heads on poles give them the willies when they loomed out of the darkness on the way home from the tavern? When Sir Walter Ralegh came back from the New World, did anyone really give a toss about the potato? Was Charles II's relentless philandering the talk of the taverns, spoken of in tones of impressed reverence by the men, and of appalled condemnation by the women?

It also struck me that much of our history has been created and influenced by travel. There are the epic journeys of discovery by the likes of Magellan, Columbus and Amundsen, the expansion of empires, centuries of emigration and forced transportation. Closer to home the countryside has, over the millennia, been criss-crossed by journeys of people from all facets of society, from monarchs to minstrels, pilgrims to protesters, navvies to noblemen. Those journeys were conceived out of trade, rebellion, love, fear, necessity, greed, adventure, desperation, recreation and just plain old wanderlust. They are all soaked into the landscape; many were determined by it; yet more have altered it – ancient trackways becoming major thoroughfares, towns and cities springing up from stopping-off points on trade routes. Journeys of all kinds have helped to form the Britain we know today, undertaken by the itinerant musicians, the peddlers, the jugglers, the glee-men, the messengers, the quack doctors, the herbalists, the armies on the move.

I wanted to travel those routes too. As I looked out of the train window while we flashed through the little station of a village so quickly that I couldn't even read its name, I reflected that

my chosen mode of transport was the right one. That village we just passed had its own history: it grew up on a trade, generations of families had called it home, it'd had its boom years and its slumps, its scandals and its crimes, and I'd just shot through it in seconds without even knowing its name. I was glad that I'd chosen to walk.

There can surely be no better way to ease your way to a healthier mind and body than by walking. It's leisurely, it's good for you, it's easy. You don't need any special equipment; you don't need any particular skills or training. Walking is a scandalously underrated and ill-appreciated human trait. Ever since our ancestors first stood on their hind legs, started moving about, quite liked the sensation and the higher view, and turned to their friends and said whatever the Mid-Pleistocene for 'Hey fellas, look at me! Woo hoo!' was, we've scored over other mammals thanks to our sheer upright ability. As children, arguably the most significant moment in our development, the crucial parental 'I was there' event, is when we take our first steps. The first time we, in similar fashion to our ancestors millennia ago, planted our feet flat on the ground, nappied bottoms rampant, and raised the top halves of our bodies to an angle roughly perpendicular, put one foot slightly in front of the other, wobbled precariously and then brought the other one level to the loud applause of those privileged to witness baby's first steps, we were setting out, literally, on the journey of a lifetime.

An average person, if such a thing exists, will take more than twenty-two million steps in their lifetime. I have to confess I probably lost count of mine pretty soon after the first one, but just imagine: twenty-two *million* steps. Breathing aside, is there anything we do so often without really appreciating its significance? Now, I'm probably too easily impressed by things like this. Electric windows on cars still inspire awe in me. But, for heaven's sake, walking – ain't it something? When you stop and think about it, ain't it really something?

The process of moving from one location to the other on foot has also earned itself wider significance than merely moving from A to B. When there's a widespread social grievance leading to a mass outpouring of displeasure against authority, what do we do? OK, apart from signing an online petition and then going back to poking random strangers on Facebook. What we do, from the Peasants' Revolt through the Pilgrimage of Grace and Martin Luther King's Freedom Walk right up to the Buddhist monks in Burma, is we go out and we walk en masse. Take the monks: their dignified progress through the streets in their scarlet robes was one of the iconic images of this fledgling century. It's the most basic way we can possibly make our presence felt. Walking makes us all equal; it's something pretty much everyone can do and as a mass action is an incredibly eloquent display of united opinion. Sometimes the walking protest can be taken to extremes. In 1953 a former Philadelphia socialite named Mildred Norman Ryder set out to walk around the US for world peace and didn't stop for twenty-eight years, until eventually her real name was entirely forgotten and she became known simply as Peace Pilgrim, the name she had adopted when she set out. She relied on charity – she never asked for accommodation or food – and had covered thousands upon thousands of miles when she was killed – get this – in a car crash after agreeing to be driven to a speaking engagement. Walking is resolutely democratic: it's easy to do, and it shows that a whole bunch of aggrieved people is truly not to be messed with.

Talking of pilgrims, when we want to show our religious devotion, to prove it goes far beyond just reading prescribed texts, praying and generally being nice to people, we go on a pilgrimage. We walk. From Croagh Patrick to the Hajj via the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, we use walking as an expression of our devotion. The further we walk, the more devoted we are. Indeed, Arthur Blessitt has carried a twelve-foot-high, forty-pound cross for more than thirty years of walking, in what is

believed to be the longest continuous journey ever, taking in more than three hundred countries and approaching some forty thousand miles. And there was me thinking the bloke who shouts about Jesus through a megaphone at Oxford Circus was dedicated.

I would have a long way to go to approach Arthur Blessitt territory, but the more I thought about walking the more excited I became by it. Certainly, in the past lengthy journeys on foot had never really bothered me. I used to walk the four-mile round trip to school every day with no qualms whatsoever. The only time I've ever been stopped by the police was in the late eighties, when I was walking home from the main local library, a distance of around four miles that necessitated passing through some of the swankiest streets for miles around. Clad as I was in an old green bomber jacket with frayed sleeves and a tatty baseball cap pulled low over my eyes, it's no wonder that my carrier bag and I aroused the suspicions of passing plod. When I told them whence I was walking, and opened the bag to reveal nothing more than a Happy Mondays LP and a couple of Aldous Huxleys, rather than the video recorder and selection of credit cards they'd been hoping for, the two policemen looked at me with first suspicion, then amazement, then pity before offering me a lift, which I declined. I preferred walking.

These days, however, my life has become a little more sedentary. I work from home. My days usually involve getting up, making tea, showering and then parking my rear end on a chair for the rest of the day. I don't even walk to a bus stop or railway station. Thanks to modern technology I can work, listen to music, watch the news, chat to friends, write to people, book tickets for a gig and even order lunch without ever getting off my arse. OK, I'd have to get out of the chair and answer the door in order to get my lunch, but one day I'm sure even that hardship will be taken care of somehow. Nearly every apparent technological advance seems to be designed to make us move around less. It started with the car, progressed to the television

remote control and now involves just about everything. Every new gadget might as well run a marketing campaign that says, 'Sloth: isn't it the nuts?'

I was well into my mid-thirties. I was getting undeniably podgy. I could go days without leaving the house. If I ran out of milk I'd often drink black tea or coffee rather than walk to the corner shop a hundred and fifty yards away. I wasn't so much a couch potato as a whole sack of immobile sofa-top Maris Pipers.

The more I thought about it, the more I could see that there were no drawbacks to walking. Everything about it is good for you, not to mention self-improving. All that fresh air and thinking time – it had to be a good thing. After all, many great writers and thinkers have praised the intellectual stimulation of a good stroll. Henry David Thoreau was of the opinion that 'the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau agreed with him: 'When I stay in one place, I can hardly think at all.' Indeed, it could possibly be argued that the road to the *Discourse on Inequality* began one evening when a fifteen-year-old Rousseau arrived back from a walk in the countryside later than anticipated and found the gates of Geneva closed for the night. Rather than hammering on the gates or attempting to scale a wall, the young thinker paused a moment, sighed, turned round and started walking. And walking. A walk that would take him as far as Italy and France. 'My body has to be on the move to set my mind going,' he said, presumably to the sound of his mind whirring like a turbine.

Aristotle is said to have taught and thought only while pacing up and down. Which is something we all do: think of times when you've had to think intensely and quickly about something. Rather than sitting there pondering and wishing you had a beard to stroke, you're out of your seat and you're walking up and down, right? Other devotees included John Stuart Mill, John Keats, Thomas Hobbes (who even had an inkwell

built into the top of his walking stick for when mobile inspiration struck), Jeremy Bentham and William Wordsworth, who made almost an entire career out of walking. He wouldn't stop. 'I love a public road: few sights there are that please me more,' he wrote in *The Prelude*. 'Such object hath power o'er my imagination since the dawn of childhood.' He did most of his writing while walking up and down a gravel path at the back of Dove Cottage, whatever the weather. Thomas De Quincey calculated that by the time he turned sixty-five, Worsdworth must have walked somewhere between 185,000 and 190,000 miles. And even then he wasn't finished. Not by a long way. So, by the simple process of walking, of putting one foot in front of the other, I could expand my mind, possibly even find myself, learn loads about all kinds of things, all the while getting fit, losing weight and earning myself the pertest pair of buttocks I've ever had in my life.

More recently than the likes of Wordsworth and Rousseau, what was arguably the greatest and most iconic moment of the twentieth century? It was when man walked on the moon. Not Kennedy being shot, not the Berlin Wall coming down, not Everest being conquered, not even Clive Mendonca's hat-trick for Charlton Athletic in the 1998 Division One Play-Off Final. Not the first satellite going up, not poor old Laika the dog being shot into orbit, not Yuri Gagarin being the first human in space, not even the first missions to send back images of grinning astronauts floating around in zero gravity, spinning cutlery in mid-air and giving thumbs-ups to the camera. No, the moment that had most of the globe spellbound was when a man walked on the moon for the first time. When Neil Armstrong did just what all of us do more than twenty-two million times in a lifetime, but on the moon.

As Neil Armstrong, the American civil rights protesters and the Burmese monks proved, walking makes history. So what better way for me to explore history than by setting out through

it on foot? By following some of the journeys that shaped the history of our lands and their people?

I set to work immediately, to identify some likely contenders. I spent day after day in the British Library, trying to plan my itinerary. I wanted to find a good spread of geography and chronology, covering as much of these islands as I could in as wide a historical timeframe as possible. I wanted to find a range of journeys, not just monarchs (and all too frequently that would be male monarchs), but regular folk too. Alas the nature of recorded history made the latter difficult – the best recorded journeys are inevitably those of the big cheeses, the royals and aristocrats with the means and education to keep an account themselves, or to have people do it on their behalf.

I found that many potential journeys overlapped. The Jarrow Crusade followed much of the same route as King Harold hot-footing it from Stamford Bridge to Hastings, while my plan to recreate the Shakespearean actor Will Kempe's *Nine Daies Wonder*, where he morris-danced from London to Norwich, was thwarted by it being the reverse of the Boudica route I was about to begin. I had hoped to follow the route of the bluestone from south-western Wales that makes up part of Stonehenge, which, I deduced with some excitement, might well be the earliest traceable journey in our history, but then I read that the stones were most likely moved by glaciation; had they actually been moved by humans they'd have probably gone by sea. But eventually I had my itinerary and then commenced many an evening of poring over road atlases.

I also thought about how authentic I'd need to be. While researching Harold's march from Stamford Bridge to Hastings I'd discovered the story of a man named Chas Jones, who walked from the site of the Battle of Fulford to Waltham Abbey to see how the messenger who delivered the news of the Vikings' success at Fulford might have made the journey. Not only that, he did it dressed in a woollen monk's habit over a linen shirt and

what he mysteriously described as 'medieval underwear'. He slept in the open and did the journey in six days (although he did admit to thirty-five miles' worth of lifts when the route was too dangerous to walk). I considered at length whether I should try to make my journeys as authentic as that, but then wondered where I'd draw the line. If I was to follow Boudica to the letter, I'd have to burn down Colchester, London and St Albans on the way. While there might be a number of people who'd be vigorously in favour of this, it was probably more trouble than it was worth. Similarly, I didn't much fancy taking an arrow in the peeper at the end of the Harold journey; nor did I particularly relish the thought of dressing as some kind of down-at-heel Danny La Rue to emulate Bonnie Prince Charlie crossing the Minch disguised as Flora MacDonald's maid. No, total authenticity was unnecessary; the journey was the thing.

When I began to tot up the potential mileage I'd cover I soon twigged that to undertake these journeys, some of them running into hundreds of miles, I would have to go through some kind of training and make sure I had at least the basic equipment necessary. Taming my sedentary lifestyle, I began walking to places. Sometimes I'd walk somewhere even though I didn't need to go there. I was walking purely for pleasure and exercise. For the first time I began properly to explore my locality on foot, and by chance one day found an old abandoned railway line that was a gorgeous, tree-lined walk through long-abandoned stations and tunnels and platforms well on the way to being reclaimed by nature. That was certainly something I'd never have discovered at home with my feet up, watching *Curb Your Enthusiasm* box sets and eating Quavers. Eventually, rather than descending daily into the fetid Piccadilly Line I began walking to my research sessions in the British Library, a journey that took me the best part of a couple of hours. I'd read somewhere that humans walk at anything up to three or four miles an hour. Naturally I fancied myself at the speedier end of that range, and deduced that the

distance I was covering to King's Cross was about six miles. Call it seven. And a half. The return journey meant that I was covering the best part of fifteen miles every day, which was quite something. It was only much later, when I consulted a pedometer, that I learned the real distance was almost exactly four miles. And walking both ways was very much the exception. My training mileage wasn't anything like as much as I'd convinced myself it was, but at least it was more than I was doing before.

It may only have been four miles to the library, but those early walks exhausted me. I kept finding myself nodding off over the books, proper head-on-desk snoozing that would leave me puffy-eyed, shiny-faced and with a flying buttress of hair sticking out from the side of my head when I woke with a start. One day I jerked upright from slumber to realise I'd left a big blob of dribble across two pages of a well-regarded history book. On another occasion, having woken up, lifted my head from what I'd been reading and decided to splash water on my face to help revive myself, I looked in the bathroom mirror and realised I'd just walked through a crowded floor of diligent readers with the *Independent*'s football results imprinted across the right side of my face.

One other legacy of my early training walks was learning, the hard way, that you really do need the right equipment for this sort of thing. As a lifelong proponent of denim trousers and casual sports footwear, I'd naturally assumed that I could do these epic journeys in jeans and a pair of trainers. If I threw some T-shirts, jumpers and underwear into a holdall and slung it over my shoulder that would see me right. After a couple of days of arriving at the library walking like John Wayne and sweating like G. K. Chesterton in a Turkish bath, I realised that I might need some specialist advice.

In this regard I sought out my old friend Polly. Now, Polly is the poshest person I know. She's also a born adventurer in the mould of the great Victorian travellers. Although she's one of my

best friends, Polly frightens me slightly, not least because she can drink me under the table and thrash me at arm-wrestling. When Polly decides to do something she doesn't do it by halves. When she fancied a bit of cycling, there was no question of wobbling around the cycle path in her local park. No, Polly packed her panniers and cycled around Spain. When she realised she quite liked life on two wheels she decided to learn to ride a motorbike. Not for Polly a snail's pace slalom through traffic cones in the playground of a local primary school on a Sunday morning to the lawnmower accompaniment of a two-stroke engine. No. She went to New Zealand, donned leathers, bought a snarling two-wheeled beast of a thing and set off around the mountains. Polly is a formidable gal well versed in extremes. If anybody knew the equipment I'd require, it was Polly.

I met her in a café in London prior to my shopping spree. Despite having only recently returned from winning a yak-wrestling tournament in Siberia or something, Polly had come well prepared and went through a list of items that she considered I'd need. She used words I'd never heard before, words like 'wicking' and 'tog'. The list she'd made looked frighteningly long. My list hadn't really got beyond 'rucksack', 'cagoule' and 'biscuits'.

Fortunately, I already had a good, stout pair of walking boots. A couple of years earlier I'd decided to go to Reykjavik for new year and, thinking Iceland might be a bit snowy and slippery underfoot, deduced I'd need something more than trainers on my feet. At my local travel store they saw me coming. From miles away. I am a shop assistant's dream because I find it so hard to say no. I think, they've taken all this time and trouble to help me, it would be rude not to buy all four pairs of shoes, even though two of them are the wrong size and one pair is for women. There's one born every minute, and it's usually me.

Two knowledgeable assistants soon had my flanks covered, sensing a sucker ripe for the fleecing. 'Iceland, eh?' they'd said

when I told them why I was there. 'You'll be doing some trekking then?' Now, my plans for that long weekend stretched no further than strolling between welcoming bars for beer, steaks the size of dustbin lids and whatever the Icelandic for 'Auld Lang Syne' might be. I categorically would not be doing any trekking, not by any stretch of the imagination. But there I was, confronted by two sinewy, weathered men experienced in the outdoors. I wanted them to think I was like them, not the good-for-nothing layabout I really am. In the split second after the question, my brain must have hit the button marked 'psychological emasculation' and set off the sirens. Macho autopilot kicked in. 'Yeah, I'll be doing a bit,' I lied, nonchalantly. I may even have shrugged slightly, to give the impression that a thirty-mile yomp across volcanic permafrost was the sort of thing I'd do before breakfast. This pathetic bravado led to the purchase of a lightweight, slipper-comfortable pair of Brasher walking boots for about five times as much as I'd intended to spend. Which served me right, of course. Especially when I arrived in Iceland to find that the Reykjavik pavements are thermally heated, and hence no more challenging than a stroll to the chip shop after a bit of light drizzle.

But at least I had the boots. Now I just had to work from the ankles upwards, and, my goodness, Polly was rising to the task. She pushed a piece of paper across the plastic chequered tablecloth. It contained terms I'd never even imagined existed. 'Hyper-' this and 'breathable' that. And what on earth are internal storm flaps? It turned out that Polly had e-mailed a man she'd met a few weeks previously, while she was driving a dog sled across the Yukon. I pictured this guy in a tin shack, head to toe in furs, a laptop balanced on his knees while the odd cloud of snowflakes blew into his face like W. C. Fields in *The Fatal Glass of Beer*, little realising that the recipient of his equipment expertise was someone whose idea of a winter trek was catching the bus to Oxford Street for a bit of Christmas shopping. The

advice, of course, was fulsome and expert and made me feel even more of a useless big girl's blouse.

It was then that I was distracted by a vintage advertisement for Newcastle Brown Ale on the wall behind Polly. It reassured me, chiming as it did with the way I wanted these journeys to turn out. It was from the thirties, I guessed, and showed two happy-looking coves outside a tent, one lying on the floor with his shirtsleeves rolled up but his tie still neatly knotted while his friend sat in a camping chair in shirt, tie and sweater, pouring out a glass of ale from a bottle. Both looked supremely contented, as if there was no greater combination in the world than the outdoors, plus-fours, manly conversation and strong drink.

'When you are "under canvas",' read the ad, 'you can always keep in touch with civilisation by including a few bottles of Newcastle Brown Ale in your camping equipment. When sultry days in the open air bring a thirst that must be quenched, or when the weather lets you know whether your tent is really waterproof, in either case Newcastle Brown Ale meets the occasion.'

Although in the event of discovering a leak in my tent my first thought might not be, bloody hell, what I wouldn't give for a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale right now, this was my kind of advice, and at nine shillings for a dozen pints I wasn't going to argue. Polly was still running her finger down the items of equipment I'd need, her eyebrows knitted with all the determination of Madame Defarge with a cardigan to finish. I was about to suggest adding a dozen bottles of beer to the bottom of the list when Polly said, 'Right, now the thing to remember is to keep your pack as light as you possibly can.' Righto, I'll just take the ten bottles. 'You're going to be carrying everything you need on your back, so you've got to take lightweight equipment and even then keep it to an absolute minimum.' Half a dozen bottles, then? My shoulders began to droop. 'We'll get you the lightest clothes, probably a maximum of two items of each. There's nothing else for it – if you're away for a while you're going to smell.'

This wasn't really going how I'd thought it would.

'Are you going to camp?' she asked. 'Will you need a tent?' I hadn't really thought about that. An image of me standing proudly next to a freshly and expertly erected tent flickered into my mind. Seemed plausible. Then I remembered that I am the least practical person there is. Getting a cork out of a bottle is a major operation, let alone slotting together poles, lining up eyelets and bashing in tent pegs. Plus I am a yellow-bellied scaredy-cat. Sleeping outdoors was not something I'd done or really even contemplated since the time my younger sister and I had decided to spend the night in her Wendy house in the back garden, when I was about ten. We were both terrified of the slightest noise, even the summer breeze gently tugging at the plastic, but neither of us wanted to let the other know until our mother came out and made us both go in anyway. It was probably about nine o'clock. And still light.

No, a much more appealing image was of me strolling, ruddy-cheeked and healthy, into a village as the sun began to set, presenting myself at the bar of an ancient thatched inn and being shown to a well-appointed bedroom with clean sheets and an en suite bathroom before returning to the bar for steak and kidney pie and a pint of Grunston's Old Funtbuggler, or somesuch. Weighing up that against the image of me wrapped in a damp sleeping bag, shivering in the darkness of a half-assembled tent convinced that at any second an anaconda would slither out of the undergrowth and inhale me, the tent and my rucksack into its slimy, acidic belly, there was no contest, even if I wasn't quite sure whether they actually had anacondas in Lincolnshire.

'No, I won't need a tent,' I replied, and Polly crossed some things off her list.

After lunch Polly marched me to a large outdoors shop and within seconds had the staff running around at her command. They learned as quickly as I did that you're best advised to do what Polly says. I, meanwhile, stood there like a bewildered,

whiskery mannequin. All sorts of phrases whizzed around as Polly and the assistants earnestly consulted each other as if I wasn't there. A sixty-litre rucksack or forty-five, they discussed. Litres? I'm going to put clothes in the thing, not fill it with diesel. But no, rucksacks are measured in litres. They're also known to people who take this kind of thing seriously as packs rather than rucksacks – I'd need this kind of lingo when meeting fellow walkers out in the sticks. Now I'd know that a passing nod and 'nice pack' wasn't some kind of proposition. The time began to pass in a blur of micro-fleeces, water bottles and the latest developments in waterproof textile technology (which had apparently moved on considerably, even in the few days since Polly's Yukon friend had penned his advice). My shopping basket was filled to the brim. I had walking trousers and waterproof overtrousers. I had fleeces. I had socks of different thicknesses. I had strange little clips, the purpose of which I would never discover. I had a water bottle with a Swiss flag on it. At one point I was convinced that Polly was telling me how important it was to have a good bass player. Before I could remind her that I was in fact going walking, not forming a funk band, Polly put her hand in the small of my back and propelled me towards a rack marked base layers.

When I thought I could carry no more and was about to saddle up and head for the tills, Polly stopped dead in her tracks, closed her eyes, clicked her fingers and bellowed, 'Underpants!' I presumed this was some kind of adventurers' swearword substitute, but no, she had me by the elbow and was leading me towards a display of special walking underwear. Again, these were blessed with the magical gift of wicking and were guaranteed not to chafe. These were the most special, hi-tech undercrackers that had ever been parked against a human posterior. At this point even I, the biggest sucker going, began to suspect that I was being hornswoggled; I mean, whoever heard of special pants for *walking*? Hadn't I walked in every pair I'd ever

owned? Clearly I was being taken for nothing but a mooncalf and a jabbernowl, and even dear old Polly was in on the racket. It was then that I remembered taking nearly ten minutes to sit on a chair at the British Library thanks to chafing that later required so much baby powder around my nether regions that I spent two whole days effectively walking around waist deep in a cloud. Yep, Polly knew best, as usual.

'Only two pairs,' advised Polly. 'You'll just have to rinse them out at the end of every day.'

Two pairs of pants soon balanced on the top of the basket. I would be going away for weeks on end and taking only one change of underwear. Whatever you do, don't tell my mother. I heaved my purchases to the till, waited as each item was scanned, was informed of the total price, passed out on the floor, was revived with smelling salts, handed over my credit card, had it processed and handed back to me glowing red hot between industrial pincers, and made my way gingerly out of the shop, pale, wan and suffering from my first walking ailment, namely a definite lightness in the wallet region.

Meanwhile, my itinerary was slowly coming together. Many a satisfactory evening had been spent with a road atlas on my lap and a large Jameson's in my hand. I got the traditional atlas game of looking up amusing place names – Cocking, Bell End, Twatt – out of the way quickly and got down to the serious business. A gaggle of great journeys was researched, traced and either discarded reluctantly or added to the shortlist. Finally, after many weeks of poring over books and websites, and watching DVDs, not to mention actually leaving the flat and walking about, I settled on a selection that I thought provided a good range of geography, chronology and rattlingly good stories, packed my new gear into my new rucksack (sorry, pack), and headed out of the door for Liverpool Street station. I had a date with a warrior queen and I was about two thousand years late.