SEA TO SEA: DUNKIRK TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

Activpursuits, 8 May 2002

June 7th. Approaching half way: some 700km behind me, another 700 to go. The afternoon was cold and grey, visibility no better than half a mile. I was trudging the road to save time. It had taken too long to get round the lake of Sidiailles and then I had got lost for a couple of hours, pushing on through dripping woods against my better judgement, until, finally, the compass persuaded me I was heading in the wrong direction.

I had been on the road for five weeks. I left Dunkirk on May 1st, my goal to dive into the Mediterranean at Banyuls close to the Spanish frontier. Usually when I walk I go to the mountains and follow some established route. I know more or less what to expect: dramatic and beautiful landscapes, the exhilaration of physical challenge. This was quite different. I had chosen to cross an entire country by an arbitrary route smack down the middle. What gave me the idea was the Paris meridian, newly baptised the Green Meridian for France's millenium celebrations. Used as the basis for determining the length of the revolutionary new metre in 1799, it stretches from Dunkirk to Barcelona, passing through Paris and a couple of other reasonable-sized towns and nowhere much else. For the millenium the French walkers' association, the *FFRP*, had produced an itinerary to accompany it and that was my basic route. As far as possible, I followed footpaths and farm tracks, though many of the latter, while appearing on the map, have been ploughed up or become impassable in recent years.

Obviously I knew that France is a highly developed modern country. Yet somehow I had not expected to be quite so alone. Between Dunkirk and the Pyrenees I met two other people travelling on foot: two women doing the meridian in reverse, giving public readings from Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* as they went. There are no peasants chewing a blade of grass under the hedge any more. The farmers are off in the distance cocooned in the cabs of giant tractors. The rest of the nation does its business by car. Walking has become a sport that takes place in designated areas. I was a freak, an alien, an unfamiliar sight that drove the countless dogs imprisoned in ever more private gardens wild with rage. But in a way an alien also gets a privileged view.

I felt the weather on my face: the sting of wind and rain, the mildness of spring, the heavy warmth of summer. I walked sometimes for two or three days through tunnels of beech and oak, my ears full of birdsong and the drilling of woodpeckers. Suddenly under my feet would be the vestiges of a road as old as the Crusades, perhaps older. I walked along the beach in Dunkirk where the remnants of the British army waited beneath the bombs to be ferried home to England in 1940. I watched the landscape of the north change from the sea-level polders to windswept plateaux where pylons march across a hedgeless desert of wheat and beet, where life is concentrated in the swampy little valleys, where the derelict slagheaps bear the last witness to the coalfields of *Germinal*, as defunct now as their English equivalents with whom they still share the passion for pigeon-racing.

I crossed the whole of Paris, working my way surprisingly far into the city down corridors of forgotten greenery, past the moats of old fortifications transformed into beautiful allotments and along the banks of the Canal St Denis. Down through the revolutionary districts of east Paris, through the courtyard of the Louvre and across the Seine running so high with the winter's floods that the barges only just fitted under the bridges. And out to the south through miles of highrise mixed with prewar villas and gardens, past ancient farms rotting in industrial wasteland along the Seine, recolonised here and there by dodgy characters living in the interstices of modern society.

I saw the glorious stained glass windows of the cathedral in Bourges, the abbey of Conques, the towers of Carcassonne, hundreds of lovely parish churches and granite villages. I saw the beeches and oaks of the north give way to pine, sweet chestnut, cypress and peach. I watched the architecture, of the old houses, change from region to region according to the local materials: brick, limestone, slate, granite, wooden shingles, schist slabs. I crossed the Loire and the great rivers of the southwest, the Dordogne, Lot, Tarn, Aveyron and Viaur, running in their tremendous gorges. I crossed the Viaur, illegally between trains, by a viaduct built by a disciple of Eiffel of the Tower and met an old man who in his boyhood had raced his friends up and down the girders more than a hundred metres above the river.

Above all I talked to a lot of people, unfailingly courteous and friendly, who wished me luck and *bon courage* and wished they too had the time to go on such a long walk.

The conventional physical challenge of the mountains was confined to the last day. The last refuge on the slopes of Mt Canigou before the Spanish frontier is run by a friend. “There is a variation of the trans-Pyrenean High Route I have always wanted to do,” she said. “It’s an all-day ridge walk with a couple of dodgy stretches. Will you do it with me?”

I did. There were a couple of dodgy places. It was nine o’clock at night by the time we reached the old iron ore mines at Batère. I had not had a single blister since Dunkirk but I was stiff after that ridge.

All day I had watched the Mediterranean and my journey’s end. In the morning I said to Marie-José, “I’m going to do something terrible. Let’s get down to the valley and take a taxi. I know a fantastic restaurant in a vineyard by the sea.”