Chapter 1: Time to Go

It's April 30th: time to go.

I have packed and repacked, weighed my underpants, spread every item over the floor, rejected as too heavy the plastic container I normally keep needle and thread and other such necessities in during walking trips, reinstated it on the grounds that needles would make a hole in anything lighter, sawn my toothbrush in half only to decide that was a case of being penny-wise, and woken in the night full of fear that the whole enterprise is a ridiculous waste of time.

And why am I doing this anyway? "Is it for religious reasons or something personal?" someone asked me.

It is a question I find hard to answer. There is nothing religious about it. Well, not in any obvious sense.

I have known France all my life. I was even married to it once. I have written guide books about it but always wanted to do a journey of my own unencumbered by the need to give an account, as Laurence Sterne would say, of every town I pass through. Like him I have always found, to parody the opening of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, that they order many matters better in France and wondered that twenty miles of sea and air can ring such transformations.

I like to walk. I am not driven by any great urgency to fly south, like poor Sterne with the threat of death by TB at his heel. It is my sixtieth year and that, making allowances for increased longevity, must be about the equivalent of the rumbustious medieval French poet, François Villon's *en l'an trentiesme* (thirtieth year) *de mon âge*, [1] and we all, do we not, have our accounts to settle, both with ourselves and others. And *Aprille* after all is the proper month for pilgrimages.

As for a route… If you are going to walk across a country there is a sort of logic to going through the middle. France, well-ordered country that it is, being a neat hexagon in form, lends itself to exact bisection. The line that divides it is the Paris meridian, which until usurpation by Greenwich in 1884 was the *point de départ* for all French navigation; indeed French clocks were not changed until 1911. It was first measured in 1669 and re-measured between 1792 and 1798 when it was used to fix the standard length of the new Revolutionary

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[1] I am going to use quite a lot of French in the course of this tale, especially when reporting conversations. I will provide an English version, when I think it really necessary; translation is at best only a version, it can never give the flavour of the original. I do it with reluctance and a feeling of shame; in my father's generation it would not have been necessary and I do believe that if you have any claim to all-round culture you should at least have a basic understanding of the neighbour's language.

metre, at one ten-millionth part of the quadrant of the meridian. It comes out of the North Sea at Dunkerque (I have used the French spelling throughout this book), in that corner of France that is nearest to England and seems always to tether us as we have swung and tugged like a sulky little boat trying to slip the connection for ever, but unable of course to do so. From there it runs south, passing slap through the centre of Paris and nowhere much else until it crosses into Spain close to the Mediterranean end of the Pyrenees. A true journey through the heart of France.

In the year 2000, it was christened *La Méridienne Verte* – the Green Meridian – and used as a focus for France's millenium celebrations. Commemorative trees were planted in the 337 communes it passes through and on July 14th they all held celebratory picnics – in the pouring rain, but well attended nonetheless – using lengths of the same special issue table cloth: a marvellously imaginative celebration of the bucolic, the political and the collective.

On a more mundane level, the *IGN,* the French equivalent of the Ordnance Survey, and the French walkers' association, the *Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre*, published a map, a special ten-metre concertina-ed map, of two Green Meridian routes, one for walkers that as far as possible followed existing footpaths and the other for cyclists. *Le Monde* had one of its journalists, its culture correspondent, Emmanuel de Roux, now alas taken from us very much before his time, walk the meridian to test the pulse of the nation. In the last of his eight articles he described his frustration and disappointment at being forced by heavy unseasonal snow to turn back from his journey's end at the very last stage. And who should be his guide and comforter at this point but my friend, Marie-José, keeper of the last mountain refuge hut before the Spanish border.

Evelyn Waugh, in a 1920s travel book, *Labels*, distinguishes various types of traveller. One of them, the "pilgrim," he says, was invented by Hilaire Belloc and I have to say I do partly recognise myself in this not particularly flattering portrait of one who "wears very shabby clothes," carries in his haversack a map, garlic sausage and a piece of bread; "knows the exaltation of rising before day-break…talks with poor people in wayside inns and sees in their diverse types the structure and unity of the Roman Empire…has an inclination towards physical prowess and sharp endurances…" Waugh clearly thinks this desire to "rough it" is a response to never actually having had to "rough it." Referring to this invention of Belloc's, he says, "That was in the days (i.e. pre-World War One) when it was an unusual experience to have marched with an army; since then there has been the war."

Well, I have certainly never had to march with an army. I missed National Service. And I had thought of camping, but have actually decided against it, partly because equipping myself for camping would involve lugging too much weight and partly because I reckon that if I pitch a lonely tent every night in the corner of a wet wood I will never see or speak to anyone, not even "poor people in wayside inns." So I am going to aim for a hotel bed and a meal every evening.

But I remain attached to my arbitrary line of a route: a wavering trace across the face of a land, a journey from somewhere to nowhere in particular, with no particular point, scenic, historical or cultural: a line that would bring what it brought and efface itself as quickly as a vapour trail. No need to describe cathedrals or trace the influence of Saracen art on Catalan sculpture as filtered through the experience of returning Crusader knights. I can ramble and daydream and flirt with the flower girls. Like Sterne, I have been "in love with one princess or other almost all my life" and like him "I hope I shall go on so till I die." "There are worse occupations in the world," says he, "than feeling a woman's pulse."

"One of the compensating discoveries one makes, when, for any reason, one finds a period of celibacy imposed on one," – inevitable in a long solo walk: Waugh again – "is that everyone one meets, and many of the commonplace events and occurrences of daily life, become suffused in a delicious way with an air of romance." You have to concur with that.

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And now it is time to say goodbye. I am not going far and it is hardly a dangerous journey. I am not afraid we will never meet again. Yet there is always a moment of reluctance, of

lingering, of tormenting apprehension. I do not want to tear myself from the warp and weft of domestic love, the warmth of the bed, the familiar voice, the exchange of thoughts and quotidian news that normally is renewed before the coming of the next nightfall. Yet I have been schooled to it all my life; my parents saw to that by sending us away to boarding schools.

For a week or so as the end of home life draws near, a silent, invisible, inward adjustment takes place. In fact, it is more a removal. I leak out of the doors and windows; I absent myself so that when the point of parting comes all that is left to remove is my carcass. And the lingering, the reluctance is really no more than a dishonest charade. I have gone. There is a cruelty, a self-protecting hardness in it, which I am not very proud of. Like the raindrop, viscously wobbling, trembling beneath a sill and seemingly attached, a dependent part of something bigger, the moment it falls, it is whole, separate, gone. When I step over my threshold, rucksack on back, I am gone too. I do not look back. You can't, if you are going to be a traveller. It is not an umbilical cord that links me to home and princess. It is more like Donne's metaphor of *gold to ayery thinnesse beate* and the *stiffe twin compasses*; if I am the one that *must obliquely run*, she is the *fixt foot* that *draws my circle just*.

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I prefer now to arrive in France by train, slipping smoothly, quietly out of the Tunnel, accelerating into continental Europe without frontiers or barriers, like pushing a door open as you enter or raising a lid, into that wider and more open world. But on this occasion the traditional route of train from Victoria and ferry seems more appropriate.

I buy a paper and miss the grey landscapes of south London. Shabby stations, mean housing. What do foreigners think, what do refugees who've risked their lives to reach the promised land of gold sovereigns and milords think, of this, their first view of the great metropolis? The compartment is full of Americans and Japanese going to Canterbury for the day. I could ask them, but I don't.

At Faversham, the intercom suddenly announces that the train is going to London Victoria. The electronic signboard tells the same story. There is consternation among the passengers. Two employees of the train company get on. "Is this train going to Dover or to....?" I ask, taking upon myself the responsibility of allaying our fears. "Yeah, must of got the wrong code," they say, their tone and demeanour making it plain that, in spite of their company uniforms, they are not going to take any responsibility whatsoever, not even by reassuring people in an informal way that they are on the right train.

Ah, by contrast, the courtesy of the French who still at least say *Bonjour* and shake each other's hands. "The Bourbon," as Sterne found already in the eighteenth century, "is by no means a cruel race: they may be misled like other people; but there is a mildness in their blood."

The hedgeless fields wheel by. Though newly greened with the first growth of young wheat, they look bare and unprotected, nature peeled back to stark and unappealing nudity: no dells or dingles, hummocks or bumps, nothing to break the force of wind or rain. How much more appealing the ranks of orchard trees white with blossom.

And here is Dover. A cold and unlovely old bus is waiting in the back yard of the station to take us down to the ferry. The other passengers are a couple of retired men in shiny windcheaters and two elderly women. They are regulars, on the bargain run for cross-Channel fags and booze.

At the ferry terminal I go into the waiting room out of the wind. In the middle of the hall is a corral made of imitation wood panelling and fake greenery. It's a café area, representing in the designer's mind, no doubt, a foretaste of the continent, all that chic drinking and dining *à la terrasse*. Except that these patrons are pudgy, pasty, and dressed in accordance with the English predilection for moss and sludge-coloured shapelessness. They are not engaged in sparkling conversation or elegant dalliance, but sit morosely, drinking Fanta and lager from the can. Fat ugly girls showing broad doughy backs and hips as they bend down to attend to

their mannerless brats. Their men, when they have any, are pink and violent-looking, with shaven skulls and pendulous guts.

They make such a contrast with the pretty young French girl with her smart luggage returning from a course or work in England. She is elegantly dressed. Her hair is done. She is sexy: which means she is full of life, hope, energy, sensuality and self-respect. Her lips are full, her smile engaging and acknowledging when I make way for her to board the harbour bus. Flirtatious, you might say, but actually just acknowledging the complementariness of masculine and feminine, of physical presence and attractiveness. How boring that argument about female beauty being nothing more than the intolerable imposition of male fantasy on women who have better things to think about...

We board the ferry. It is many years now since they gave up all pretence of looking like ships and turned themselves into a combination of down-market shopping mall, entertainment arcade and burger joint. Every time I leave the shores of Great Britain – and the first time was in 1958 – I feel liberated. Maybe it is no more than the feeling everyone gets when leaving their worn and familiar runs. Or maybe things really do seethe and foment more in the confined space of a little island than on a continent where your horizon, metaphorically at least, is open all the way to Vladivostok. Today's *Guardian* quotes a survey showing the British are less interested in and less informed about Europe than the citizens of any other member state of the Union.

As the ship drew away from Dover I climbed to the open boat deck. The white cliffs shone as luminous and sharp as they must have appeared to Julius Caesar in 55BC. Beautiful, imposing and a bit forbidding, as if the country were born baring its bottom at the continent in a sort of geological mooning. Murdoch and his *Sun* needn't have bothered with their undignified posturing: geology beat them to it.

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In Calais I had a couple of hours to wait until there was a train for Dunkerque. I wandered up the shopping street. Even in unexciting Calais, the shops are lively and inviting. There are still many more small shops than in English towns, in spite of the steady development of edge-of-town *grandes surfaces*, gigantic places where you can buy anything from a packet of lentils to a yacht and a car. Particularly food shops: bakers, *pâtissiers*, *traiteurs*, butchers and fishmongers - species almost extinct in England - with their stylish and abundant wares sumptuously displayed. Dough, meat, fish, in a variety of shapes, cuts, transformations and mutations that is bewildering and even intimidating when you come to buy. The butcher asks you for refinements of taste and specification that go way beyond the limits of my narrow English food vocabulary. And if you want advice, about cooking or what goes with what, you will be given a detailed account of exactly how to proceed.

One thing that has always puzzled me is why our English fishmongers have almost disappeared. Why are they so many more in France? Why are they so richly stocked with such a variety of fish, not just the gleaming currency of the deep but the armadilloes too, all those horny, spiky, mechanical things? And the shellfish? Their Atlantic coastline is not half the length of our Atlantic and North Sea shore. Why don't we eat all those marvellous creatures too?

Train time. On the grey platform I am alone except for a couple embracing fiercely and a black girl with a cute tight arse and shiny sandy-coloured skin. *La Voix du Nord*, the regional newspaper, announces that homosexual victims of the Nazis are for the first time to be allowed to lay a wreath with the other organisations of *déportés* in Lille on May 8th, France's Armistice Day. The *déportés* are the many tens of thousands of people deported from France to the factories and concentration camps of Nazi Germany during the Second World War. It is the time of year when all the *anciens combatants*, *résistants* and *déportés* associations wheel out their fast-dwindling bands of veterans to remember and be remembered.

The train leaves Calais behind. Its spires and towers fade to a smudge of deeper tone beneath the grey of cloud and drizzle. Northwards the landscape is windswept and flat. The fields are waterlogged. This is Flanders, *polder* country, kept from reverting to marsh only by the narrow reed-lined drainage canals. The houses are little brick *pavillons* with pink-tiled roofs

and vegetable gardens - *potagers* ridged and ready for planting, but not planted because the grey soil has been saturated by the extraordinary wet season.

Coming out of Gravelines, the pylons from the nuclear power station march in sullen files like a migration of beasts across the landscape. Funny, how France with its visceral attachment to soil and tradition has also boldly embraced the modern. From hydro-electric to nuclear power, from the glass pyramid in the courtyard of the Louvre to Norman Foster's glass-fronted cultural centre overlooking the Roman Maison Carrée in Nîmes. And an early attachment to functional architecture, inspired by Auguste Perret, father of concrete: all those distinctive post offices, schools, railway and other public buildings of the twenties and thirties.

At Bourbourg, the station sign is in art deco tiles. The Café de la Gare is shuttered and closed. The brave new world that architecture celebrated has run into the buffers. It is cheaper in Malaysia.

A line of poplars in new leaf bends to the wet wind. There are cowslips bright as stars in the brown marshy grass beside the track.