

Mountaineering in Counterpane

(Report on my resignation from the AMC (Armchair Mountaineering Club))

Alec Finlay

Are paths the first human-made structures
or views?

I am keen on walking but
confined by a muscular condition
to the short walk, sometimes the *very* short walk.

As someone who edited an anthology of mountain writing,
but has never been to the top of a mountain,
today I will attempt to rebalance *walking* and *viewing*.

I felt the need to reflect on the work I have made
on these related themes and activities
over the past few years

In particular, I wanted to resolve my response
to a hostile comment an artist recently made,
to the effect that it was not proper for me to make work
on the theme of mountains, in the manner that I have been,
because I am unable to climb them; and further,
that I can never 'belong in them'.

To my mind, the harshness of these remarks
put in question, the healing function of the imagination:
something that can reach beyond physical boundaries
elude hostile political or moral claims;
a power that can, in effect,
walk beyond the *walk*.

The structure of my talk is *10 walks*.

The first was the walk I made to reach this lectern.

Walk 2

The second walk is a traditional view of the walk as a climb – thinking of the walker as a mountain-top, thinking of them as a peak – as defined by Tim Robinson in his study of *Connemara* in a passage narrating a walk up Errisbeg:

‘Any hill suggests a progression from close-up observation of what is immediately under the climber’s hands and feet, through rests for breath-catching and retrospection and glances ahead at intermediate delusive skylines that hide the ultimate goal, to the triumphal horizon-sweeping outlook from the summit.’

(Tim Robinson, *Connemara*)

Walking cannot unconditionally claim an ethical stance when its goals are described as a progression from retrospection to ultimate triumph.

As this poem, from *the road north*, admits:

bend after bend
skyline after skyline

we came this far
no further

Alec Finlay, the road north (2010-11)

Walk 3

The third walk is any one of the walks made by my great-grandfather, Seton Gordon, who studied the permanent snow patches of The Cairngorms, and stated his preference for walking around – but not always up – the slopes and contours of mountains.

The image which accompanies it shows the view towards BRUACH NA FRITHE in the Skye Cuillin from Dun Merkadale, Loch Harport.

It is from a collaborative project that I began in 2011, 'WORD-MNTN'.

Walk 4

The fourth walk is a very slow and short walk following my recovery from a serious illness made at the Hutters Republic of Carbeth with Gerry Loose & Morven Gregor in April 2011 offering a view of Dumgoyach.

The walk is described in a poem written for Alice Ladenburg whose art practice centres on the handstand and who taught me how to read backwards.

would we could
live our lives
as a novel

read back-
wards secure
in our ending

as a rope tied
or taut stay
each strand un-

twisting a moment
tense with shock
giddy for joy

love become
our delirious ending
we slowly un-

wind to the knot
of that familiar
difficult beginning

glimmering
the perfect form
of an idea

as it emerges
complete
in its own right

from out some
vague object
the craggy dome

of Dumgoyach's summit
a step away

still

we've to walk

by the old paths

at what pace

we're able – only

every now & then

we may be brave

enough to dare

a cart-

wheel empty-

ing out our pockets

seeing inside a world

turned upside-down.

Walk 5

This next walk, the fifth out of ten,
is a Zen walk-parable, as retold by John Cage.

Two monks are on a long journey.
They come to a deep river
where they meet a beautiful young woman
who is unable to cross
so the older monk carries her over
on his shoulder.

The monks walk on in silence.
The younger monk brooding
growing steadily more furious

until after a few miles walking
he blurts out to his elder
“how could you do that
when you know the precepts of our order
forbid us contact with women”

The older monk replies
“I set her down back at the river –
it’s you who have been carrying her with you
for all this time”

Which is a reminder that walking and thinking
are different things

The imagination can dominate
any physical experience.

Walk 6

The sixth walk is a daily family walk
repeated many times
always following the same circular path
from Stonypath, around the moor and back home

It represents those aspects of limit and extent
that define any walk, no matter how long or short.

I will now describe the walk briefly, from memory

(the walk)

I have come to realise a number of things
concerning this walk

Firstly, that it was an act of walking *the bounds* –
not in terms of a specific limit
defined by geography or property
but a border of the imagination and psyche

Beyond the bounds of the walk
the moor was, to my father, like an expanse of sea –
alien, waste, un-navigable.

These bounds defined the relationship between
our home and his garden, with the wider wilder moorland

This boundary was eventually demarcated
by a one-word poem:



('FRAGILE', Ian Hamilton Finlay, with Sue Finlay, Stonypath, Little Sparta;
photograph by Robin Gillanders)

Every boundary has two sides
defined by *belonging* or feeling *alien*,
as every walk reaches a crossing point
even if it is only the moment one turns for home.

This boundary walk inscribes the effects
of my father's agoraphobia
which first impelled him to create the garden –
physically, a landscape to walk around
imaginatively, a world to walk within.

The distance to and from the garden
remained the same, *physically*,
but History and Art lengthened it, *imaginatively*.

The fragile garden became increasingly focused on boundaries
metamorphosing into an armed Republic of the imagination,
re-named 'Little Sparta'.

The moor, however, always remained a moor.
It represented the zone beyond home –
a place to walk through
but never tarry in.
It also represented a refuge
free from the imposition of the poet's own imagination.

On this walk one passes near the *natural spring* up on the moor
upon which the water of our home his garden depended upon.

This wild spring was reimagined in the garden, as a *source*
bubbling out of a stone
bearing a carved quotation from Virgil.



(AF, The Source, Stonypath; photograph by Alistair Peebles)

The source is *Little Spartan*; the spring is *Stonypathian*.

This walk around the moor
between the source and the spring
is the most important walk
in terms of understanding my father's art.
It appears in none of the literature.

When my father became too old
to walk around the moor
then a memory of it was placed within the garden
in the form of a *sheep fank, stell or fold*.



(‘Fold’, Ian Hamilton Finlay, with Pia Maria Simig, Stonypath, Little Sparta;
photograph by Robert Gillanders)

This circular walk also recalls the platonic perfection of
the isle of Rousay, Orkney
my father’s perfect ‘black sheep’
where he became a poet in the late 1950s.

My friend Alistair Peebles took me to Rousay this June
There he passed on a charming story
that relates to the single road
which circles the island
and which my father labored on.

When the tarmac came then so did cars.
Alistair asked an islander if Sunday drives
circumnavigating the island became repetitive?
To which the islander replied
in the Orcadian manner:
*“Well, no, of course not,
you’d only to turn the car around*

and drive the other way”

Which is a reminder that even on a short walk
we can see the world from opposite directions.
Also that people in gardens and islands
feel they live in a world
(moreso than the metropolitan mind sometimes allows).

We can walk imaginatively.

We may have to –
through illness, age, confinement
dispossession, limits imposed on the right to roam
even imprisonment.

Walk 7

Next, another longish short walk, the seventh.

In fact, this is a series of walks made in August 2001 & 2002
from the wooden huts of the campsite at Vaasbakken
to the site of Wittgenstein’s house
at Skolden, Lusterfjord, Norway –
walking in blue wellingtons
with Guy Moreton, Nina Sverdvik and David Connearn.

This walk passes through fields and a woodland hillside
of rowan, pine and birch,
past the remains of the small stone anchorage
where Wittgenstein anchored his rowboat
and the remains of the pulley mechanism
which he devised
to bring water from the lake.

It finally arrives at the plateau
where the foundations of the philosopher's house remain.



(The Wittgenstein Hut, Skjolden. Alec Finlay & Guy Moreton; photograph by
Guy Moreton)

The position of the house was unusual
being neither an alpine hut, nor an integral part of the village –
being close to and at the same time
held at a remove from society.

Wittgenstein chose to be a short walk and a row away
because he *needed* to be.

The view Wittgenstein found is a conspectus
It represents one of the ways in which he attempted
to *do* philosophy without language
mapping paths, overlooking a forest.



(The Wittgenstein Hut, Skjolden. Alec Finlay & Guy Moreton; photograph by Guy Moreton)

The walk is described in a poem
From which these are extracts.

The Wittgenstein House (Skjolden)

I went back to Skjolden
and the dark circle of mountains
to look for my own place
in the glen of a shadowed world
where what I find is shown
in how I think and live.

In the north day gives way
to night slowly: evening
stretches for miles through
a landscape suffused with light.

The clouded Fjell peaks
are gone again into white lift.
There is seeing, there is rain,
a smirr gives way to sun.

At Vasbakken the waterfall
gleams whitely in the dark.
What I forget each time is how
the rush of falls fills the valley,
as just under my window
the burn clinks away softly.

Luster fjord is black, lake blue,
river eddies copper-green.
The damp makes me rheumy,
glandy, eyes gone bleary -
with my nose sunk in tea tree
and some sun my only remedy.

*The human body is the best picture
of the human soul.*

Make your way past
the wooden sign
WITTGENSTEIN

Along the lane wild rasps
& nettles line the verges,
puddles fill the track.

All the small fields meet up

in corners, each with its
own suitable barn -

stone huts, wood shacks
or corrugated iron lean-to's;
stacks of felled thinnings
like pencils in a box

Step into the wood
through willowherb, elder,
rowan & birches.

The path walks up
through Guy's arch
of bending branches,

down beside the lake –
take care over slippery rocks,
ferns & brambles.

You'll see the walled harbour
where his row boat anchored.
Follow the spray-marked 'W's'

on the two scarred findlings
that seem to be resting on
each other's shoulders.

To your right are still tides
of scree winter washed
down the slope
splashed with grey and orange lichen.

Then, when the trees get too thick,

turn and zig-zag
up the steep path.

Here, on the plateau, perched
above the lake, the foundations
are a man-made rock.

Stand where the verandah was
and look out over
the grey curtain of mountains

and their rippled reflections.
See the view that W chose:
a landscape utterly simple.

*I would like to set out my life clearly,
to have it plainly in front of me,
to survey all of the connections.*

*I can't imagine that I could have worked anywhere
as I do here at Skjolden.
It's the quiet and, perhaps,
the wonderful scenery;
I mean its quiet seriousness.
There it seems to me that
I gave birth to new paths
of thought within me.
There I had some thoughts of my own.*

*I have built my house away from anyone.
I long to see a human face in the morning.*

If I am unable to grasp
the mechanism
of thought

then from this view
I can still learn
how to see.

The foundations
are a razed
platform.

Two white birch
grow from
the open cellar.

*Somehow, I must find
my way out
of this forest.*

(Alec Finlay, 2005)

Limits define any walk.

What may seem a short walk to one person
is a walk to the farthest edges of possibility for another.

A walk defines a distance to or from society
physically and also in terms of the *psyche*.

The meaning of a walk is defined
by the interpenetration of the body and memory.

It exists on a spectrum running from the purely physical
to the purely imaginative.

Proust journeyed far
using only Railway Timetables
stacked on his bedside table.

The sailors of Croisset took their bearings
by the light of Flaubert's lamp
as he wrote deep into the night.

Stevenson had his *Land of Counterpane*
patrolled by leaden soldiers and fleets
and dominated by the 'pillow-hill'.

Walk 8

The eighth walk consist of some sentences
written as a commentary to accompany a project
creating poems, or 'word-maps', for walks and views in The Peak District.

The lines of each poem were composed as typographical skylines
and also made available, in situ, as audio QR-code.

white peak / dark peak

poem: line in time

horizon: line in space

skyline: earth drawn line

peak: line in dialect

each poet is a view
without outline there is no shape
walking the skyline always changes
burns to walk to, rivers to walk along
the tors cast stone as celebrity
next time *you* walk this
sunbathing, mountaineering, hiking: pursuits have to be invented
each car has an A–Z torn on the page-spread for home

Walk 9

The final two walks follow on from *white peak* | *dark peak*.

The first belongs to a year-long project, *the road north* journeying round Scotland, using Basho's *Oku-no-hosomichi* as a guide.

To many people this project suggested a series of long walks or one continuous journey.

Some people were disappointed that myself and my collaborator Ken Cockburn didn't stay on the road full-time, or travel by horse and sleep in tents and bothies.

The project adopted and updated Basho's practice of *haiku*, or *hokku*, and *renga*, two forms of poetry which he renewed and revolutionised –

It also took on the practice of *gingko*
which translates, roughly, as:
walking-to-be-composing-poetry

And the traditional Japanese poem *tanzaku*
an inked poem on paper gifted or left in a place
which we adopted as the *hokku-label*.

Using these forms and practices
the project also became an attempt to rebalance
walking and *viewing*
by placing a greater weight on the view.

We also gradually included other actions
such as libating with whisky
and collecting 14's (for Ken's daughter Isobel)

Before I describe this project in more detail
I need to briefly mention the most difficult walk of all.

I don't wish to go into my muscular illness
in detail here, but to sketch a context for *the road north*
I will describe a walk in The Meadows
a park in Edinburgh, which I lived beside.

This occurred some 15 years ago –
again this is from memory

(the walk)

The Meadows was also where I came across
the idea for the road north, over a decade ago.

The poems prologue sets the scene.

When was it I first had that dream
of roving the glens up and down
guided by Basho's oku?
leaving behind the pink lanes of gean
blossoming in The Meadows
heading off to look
for Shirakawa

ten years on
the gean's pink again
in Pilrig Park
and there's a flitting in the offing
swopping one hill view for another
familiar streets
Pilrig, Rosslyn, Bonnington
exchanged for hills
Tinto, The Buchaille, Roshven

packing old pink & new orange maps
a picnic blanket for the dog
yellow bottles of Rescue Remedy
miso packets, rice noodles, oatcakes, flasks
and chocolate
compass, gazetteers, pens
pencils for rubbings
wee muji notebooks
hokku-labels to tie

a handful of CD s
Neil Young's Jukebox
Annie Briggs

Lucy & Johnnie

naming our band

shafts of sun

naming our album

bands of rain

setting out to see

the best view of all

where the land meets the sky

letting our looking

with extensive view

survey Scotland

from Monreith to Polewe

turning down another glen

east west into low sun

keeping going

that's the thing

singing

the kettle's on summersgone

running my fingernails

along the contour lines

gauging the incline

and fatigue that will result

are we going then?

yes, let's go

up Balvraid cow-track

weighing the lag in our legs

against the last task

fording Dragonfly Burn

to the broch at Dun Grugaig

finding other kinds of happiness
making honey of our failures
at its best the world's a nest
at its worst sharp with thorn

Walk 10

One of the things we learnt
from our close reading and walking of Basho
was the places he choose not to visit
or where a poem wasn't written.

And we found time and again
that the neolithic duns we visited
offered the best views
were *conspectus*, like Wittgenstein's plateau.

We began to absorb a kind of ritual looking –
connecting up landmarks
peaks, tors, points, islands.

A reminder that in many ancient cultures
mountains were viewed, but not climbed

And a kind of imagined seeing
viewing places through the descriptions of poets
Burns at Aberfeldy, Sorley Maclean at Hallaig.

In one of Maclean's interviews he describes Raasay
as a *conspectus*, without stating the term directly.
I have adapted it here into poetic lineation

to clarify the different elements.

Raasay conspectus

Raasay is a centre-point
with such a wonderful

situation in relation to Skye
and the mainland
of Wester Ross

from Raasay
we could see the Cuillin

from Sgurr nan Gillean
to Bruach na Frithe

and further to the south-east
the great landscape
of Blabheinn and Garbhheinn

from Raasay
we could see the coast of Skye

from Beinn na Caillich
in Broadford

to Rudha nam Braithrean
in Staffin

and there must be very few
stretches of sea in the Highlands
more spectacular than

the Clarach
seen from Raasay

(*the Clarach*: southern sound of Raasay)

Adapted from 'Sorely Maclean: Some aspects of Family and Local Background, an interview with Donald Archie MacDonald' (*Sorely Maclean: Critical Essays*: ed. Joy Hendry and Raymond J. Ross, Scottish Academic Press, 1986).

And so the tenth and final walk
is one that is just beginning
where my non-mountain climbing
becomes the heart of a project.

Where others do the climbing
or join me in viewing hills and mountains
from such low lying conspectus.



('WORD-MNTN (BEN RHINNES)', Alec Finlay &)



('WORD-MNTN (BEINN BHEARNACH)', Alec Finlay & Heather Yeung)



('WORD-MNTN (GLAMAIG)', Alec Finlay & Emma Nicolson)



('WORD-MNTN (SGURR NAN GILLEAN)', Alec Finlay & Emma Nicolson)



('WORD-MNTN (SGURR NAN GOBHAR)', Alec Finlay & Emma Nicolson)



('WORD-MNTN (BLABHEINN GARBH-BHEINN)', Alec Finlay & Emma Nicolson)

'word-mntn' is an ongoing index
of the hills and mountains of Scotland.
Their names composed as poems, 'word-mntn'
which are then returned to their locations
as poem-labels – the same *tanzaku*
that the artist took such exception to –
where they are recorded photographically.

The project is collaborative.

note: Armchair Mountaineering Club; formed by Alexander Maris and
colleagues in London. Alec Finlay was formerly an associate member; he
resigned his 'cushion' in August 2011.