

# Stuart MACONIE

NEVER MIND *the* QUANTOCKS



How country walking can change your life

# A Matter of Opinion

Dispiritingly, Cumbria is younger than me. It's 32 years old. A mere whippersnapper. Back in 1974, doubtless over beer and sandwiches and through a thick plume of Player's No 6 smoke, men in suits in a local government office decided to merge Cumberland and Westmorland, pinch a bit of Furness and the West Riding and, like magicians, conjure up England's loveliest county.

Now I can already hear the cries of dissent emanating from Devon, from Cornwall, from Derbyshire and Suffolk and Northumberland. Yes, these are beautiful places all. In the end it's a matter of opinion, and nothing divides like beauty. For me, what gives Cumbria the edge is the contrasts. Most walkers will know the grandeur and drama of the Lakeland peaks, the shattered ridges and high tarns. But if you want pastoral charm, dinky cottages and soft, rolling lowlands, you will find them in Cumbria's Lyth Valley, where the damsons grow plump and purple.

Fans of Kate Bush and Emily Brontë can find plenty to brood about on the lonely rain-lashed moors of Alston, Cross Fell and the Howgills, whilst connoisseurs of the seascape can feel spray on their face and look over glittering Morecambe Bay to the Isle of Man, or hear the wheeling gulls at lonely Skinburness. If you want to see the side that no-one ever does, take the coastal train. You will wonder, as it clanks through winnowy dunes between the stolid bulk of the south-western fells and the barren coastline, just how Dr Beeching's axe could have missed this line. A clerical error maybe, but a happy one.

Of course, there are parts of Cumbria that these days make Blackpool look reserved and serene. I'm no enthusiast for red tape and excessive regulations – and neither am I one of those nimby's that wants all the nice parts of the country to themselves – but someone really needs to do something about Keswick. While one by one the butchers and fishmongers have shut up shop, discount gear shops have grown like a rash across the town. In mid-summer, the clack of walking poles on pavement is deafening and the rustle of Gore-Tex can be heard in every pie shop.

But this is carping. Great chunks of the county are, but for the odd pub and farm, blissfully empty. Considering its size and the fact that it has tourist attractions galore, from Peter Rabbit to Sellafield, it may be England's least known county, certainly outside of the outdoor fraternity. Go to the fringes and you can walk for days without seeing another soul. Even inside the Lake District National Park boundary, if you choose your day and route with care, you hardly have to doff a cap or exchange a pleasantry all day.

No need to be like that, though. You'll find the natives are very friendly. The accent – a sort of Lancashire-Geordie-Lowland Scots – can take some getting used to and the dialect is peppered with Norse, like 'clarty' and 'lal' and 'ladgeful' for dirty, little and embarrassing respectively. But Cumbrian people are generally tough, resourceful and good-humoured. And surprising; the farmer near me in Hutton Roof will pass by with merely a nod of the head for months and then, apropos of nothing more than a squall of rain, keep you for an hour by his gatepost.

Not convinced? Then this is how the entry for Cumbria ends in a well-known online encyclopaedia: 'Cumbria is a fun place to visit, especially if you run into Ellie Cook. She is quite possibly the nicest girl in the world and will make a man very happy one day!' Her county will do for me.

# The Walking Bug

As soon as anyone starts talking about ‘being bitten by the walking bug’, some of us will start to scratch our ankles, whinge and hunt out the calomine lotion. Just as some of us are lucky enough to be irresistible to the opposite sex, so some of us are unfortunate enough to prove alluring beyond reason to midges, mosquitoes, tics, fleas, wasps, mites, gnats, giraffe weevils and horned hickory devils.

That’s a subject for another day, though. Here I’m talking about a much more pleasant bug and a much more agreeable bite; that moment when you first realise that rambling, scrambling and generally wandering about in the great outdoors is something you’ll be doing for the rest of your life.

Saul saw the light on the road to Damascus. Not a particularly exciting road compared to Walna Scar or the A817 from Loch Lomond to Garelochhead, but it was enough to convert him. It’s a matter of walker’s lore that Alfred Wainwright’s Damascene conversion, from faintly grumpy Blackburn Rovers terrace dweller to patron saint of the high places, came on a visit to a little hill above the village of Windermere.

Aged 23 in 1930, he climbed Orrest Head and later wrote that, ‘those few hours cast a spell that changed my life.’ He was to move to Kendal, write the bibles of fellwalking, and become the most famous anorak wearer in the world after Oasis’ Liam Gallagher.

For Wainwright it was Orrest Head. With me it was the Queen's Head in Hawkshead. Actually, that's far too glib, though it was teenage fishing trips to the Lakes accompanied by copious amounts of illicit drinking. I didn't really have my Orrest Head moment for a few more years.

It came, like a lot of people's does, on Loughrigg Fell, after the short, stiff pull up from Loughrigg Terrace. Gulping lungfuls of air on a balmy summer's afternoon, I saw the fells of the central Lakes arrayed in the hazy blue distance. It was truly magical, an elevated experience in the literal and spiritual sense, and I knew as I stood there with a faraway smile on my face, that this was something I'd do again and again as long as my legs and lungs would allow.

It was love at first sight. The eyes-across-a-crowded-room moment beloved of romantic novelists. Not reciprocated of course. I have no idea what Crinkle Craggs thought of me, but I was smitten. What was the initial attraction? A sense of otherness I suppose, a sense of being suddenly beyond the dull constraints of ordinary life, the traffic jams, the train delays, the stuffy offices and the factory gates.

With their unbeatable 'Ta-da!' factor, mountains are the perfect place to get the walking bug. They're real head-turners. But you can get the bug anywhere.

WH Auden went on a childhood holiday to the Northern Pennines, now an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but then an overlooked bit of semi-industrial limestone country, and found his spiritual home. He dropped a stone down a disused mineshaft, waited for the

splash, and in that moment of silent boyhood wonder, began the ripples that run right through his poetry.

You can tell when someone has got the bug. And when someone remains unbitten and immune. Time after time, I've taken a friend walking and, on our return, they've said 'that was nice' or words to that effect, but you know by the look in their eyes that they are not infected. By contrast, you know immediately, by the way they demand to borrow your guidebooks, or ask you to identify distant hills, that they are in the thrall of the love affair, too.

Every one of us knows the moment when the simple act of putting one foot in front of another stops being a method of propulsion and becomes an adventure. And wherever we are, just like Arnie, we know we'll be back.

# Right to Roam

A while ago, as we headed south down the M6 and crested the summit of Shap Fell at 69mph (officer), we noticed with some pleasure and surprise that we had several hours of weekend left and that it had turned into a really rather fine Sunday evening in Cumbria. So we pulled in by the Shap memorial, dedicated to the haulage heroes of the old arterial road who braved snow and fog and ice to take sausages and hats and washing powder to Dumfries, pulled on the boots and went for an impromptu walk.

The fences and barbed wire and lack of footpaths would have put me off once, but not now. For on my new Explorer series map, all of these lonely moorland heights from Little Yarlside to Whatshaw Common are now coloured a sickly yellow. The hue is unappealing but the message gladdens the heart. Thanks to recent legislation, these are now access areas and, though the gates may be padlocked, you and I have the right to roam. So roam we did, 'til the hum of the traffic receded and the cold got into our bones and the sun dropped behind the Howgills.

That sickly yellow has become my favourite colour. I love the warm glow of satisfaction that it brings. I don't think of myself as some Che Guevara of the hills. I don't think all property is theft – I quite like my iPod, for instance. But there is something about the notion of 'trespass', particularly on the high hills, that has always irritated me. What possible harm could I be doing, I've always thought? My anorak is made by Dolce and Gabbana and I always take my pork pie wrapper home with me.

Of course, my mere presence might be an affront to some. They say an Englishman's home is his castle so maybe an Englishman's back garden is his empire, even when that Englishman is an ageing rebel. Rolling Stone Keith Richards initially wanted to keep ramblers away from a field adjoining his Redlands mansion in Sussex, scene of one of the infamous 'sleepovers' of the 1960s.

Now, of all people, Keith should know that a walk a day helps you work, rest and play. Happily, he withdrew his application. Madonna is neither a man nor English, but she wanted to stop the Open Access legislation applying to a small patch of her Wiltshire estate. Having seen her last movie with Guy Ritchie I'd have thought she'd want any audience she could get. But what do I know?

Then of course, there's Nicholas Van Hoogstraten, multi-millionaire property developer, robust landlord and friend of Robert Mugabe. One of Hoogstraten's lesser misdeeds was to unlawfully obstruct a footpath on his vast estate near Uckfield. This was to keep us ramblers at bay since he thinks we're all 'perverts'.

Mind you, he also once declared, 'I don't believe in democracy. I believe in rule by the fittest,' and that, 'The only purpose in creating great wealth like mine is to separate oneself from the riff-raff.' That's us, kids. Riff-raff with rucksacks, the worst kind.

The grumpy old man in me fears that the 'younger generation' probably think that the Kinder Trespass is some kind of offshoot of the Kinder Egg, an odd German kind of chocolate trespass containing a cheap plastic gift.

But to many, it's the defining moment, the red letter day, the crowning glory of the walking fraternity that in 1932 united the ramblers' cause to obtain greater access to roam across the country.

After all, a very senior authority, more senior some would contend than any landowner, lawyer or Rambler, did once say, 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Madonna and Keith and Old Nick – he will surely join his more senior namesake one day – should maybe remember that.

# Carry On Camping!

Camping. What a carry on! But a carry on that doesn't even offer the meagre entertainment value of Sid James chortling whilst Babs Windsor loses her bra doing some PT exercises. Tin mugs, rehydrated pasta, queuing for shower blocks. Can't you just feel that involuntary shudder?

Call me a snob, but anywhere that doesn't have a microwave and a device for crushing ice counts as camping in my book. And my book, by the way, would be *The Great Gatsby* rather than the *Which? Guide to Camping and Caravanning*. That was what I used to think, anyway.

These thoughts came back to me the night that found me pacing around a flattish square of rough ground by the shores of Sprinkling Tarn, in the Lake District, wondering where to pitch my tent and actually using, out loud, phrases like 'adequate drainage' and 'degree of slope'.

Later, as I ate my aforementioned rehydrated pasta by the glimmer of a smouldering mosquito coil, I wondered at just which point I had gone mad and gone back on the cosy and sophisticated habits of a lifetime.

That night, my first wild camp ever, was, without doubt the most uncomfortable night I have ever spent; and I have been on tour with Birmingham Grunge-Metal outfit Napalm Death by the way.

Yet not only have I repeated it, voluntarily, I shall be doing it all again with a spring in my step as soon as possible. No, I didn't sleep. Yes, it was awkward and smelly.



Yes, I missed my G&T. No, I didn't ever really manage to get the hang of the sleeping bag zip attachment. And yes, I did keep rolling to one side of the tent and find my ear poking out from under the fly-sheet.

But all of these discomforts evaporated when, on finding myself needing what the Americans would call 'a comfort break' at around 6am, I muttered an apology to my smugly sleeping wife, shuffled on my hands and knees toward the tent opening and whipped back the zip.

There before me was the huge and imposing wall of Great End. Barely glimpsed last night through the evening murk, it was now, bizarrely and gorgeously, pink from the first rays of the sun. It looked like God's Christmas cake or a giant Pet Shop Boys stage decoration, both monumentally awesome and a little camp, looking down on our little camp.

It was one of the most glorious sights I have ever seen. Moving like a zombie, it lured me from the fug of the tent, walking damp-footed through the dewy grass. Turning I saw Sprinkling Tarn shining like a newly-minted coin in its rocky bowl and beyond it, Seathwaite was filled with cloud like a pill bottle stuffed with cotton wool.

Suddenly, it all made sense. I knew why people deserted their soft beds and ice-crushers and drinks cabinets. I knew why the people who'd been coming down from the hill the night before had looked at us a little enviously when we said we were 'spending the night up there.'

I knew it even more profoundly when, an hour later, while people were still eating their toast and checking the

weather forecast in Keswick, we were on top of Great End, looking down at the drowsy morning world.

I still don't see the appeal of organised site camping, unless you're on a budget. The cars and the cramped sites and the shower blocks still give me that shudder. But I'll go wild camping again as soon as I can. And so should you. It is damp and sticky and uncomfortable. And you will absolutely love it.



# Seeds of Destruction

STUART MACONIE: NEVER MIND THE QUANTOCKS

On an unseasonably hot Sunday in spring, I set out to climb Clough Head in the Lake District, by the forbidding looking but tantalisingly named Fisher's Wife's Rake. Then, according to my announced itinerary, I would spend the best part of the day heading south along the undulating whalebacks of the Dodds before descending Sticks Pass and getting my pre-arranged lift to Keswick where beer and curry awaited.

That was the plan and I was pleased with it. But just as Karl Marx said, wrongly as it turned out, that capitalism carried within it the seeds of its own destruction, so I carried with me my own downfall in the shape of a portable radio, a really nice organic sausage and mash pie and the knowledge that Wigan Athletic were playing Tottenham Hotspur in a vital relegation clash at the JJB stadium that day.

That, and the heat, and the fact that even the short pull up the quarry track had me mopping sweat from my brow, meant that a new and attractive plan soon occurred to me. Namely, walk the Matterdale Coach Road, find a nice spot, eat pie, sunbathe, doze and carry on into Dockray where a cold pint of beer had, I felt sure, my name on it.

Now I don't feel bad about that. Walking is about fun not duty. I was out in my favourite landscape with the sun on my face and the sound of lark song all around, albeit vying for supremacy with Alan Green's commentary on BBC Five Live. I didn't mind this at all. As the blessed

Alfred Wainwright nearly said, the fells are eternal, but Wigan may well not be in the Premiership by the time you read this. AW founded the Blackburn Rovers Supporters Club and would have understood. I didn't feel guilty. I just felt stupid. Which is why I hid myself in a grassy hollow far from the track and every time a fellow walker passed, would cover the radio with an OS Map which I pretended to be studying intently.

It just felt wrong. Faintly city-ish and silly and certainly something a real walker wouldn't do, like doing Striding Edge in slingbacks or an Armani suit. When David Beckham scored his famous redemptive penalty against Argentina in the 2002 World Cup, myself, my wife, two friends and their kids were all glued to the match on a hand-held telly atop Hallin Fell (our cottage had no electricity), but we were all vaguely embarrassed, and pretended to be admiring a mountain flower or rock formation when anyone passed.

It's crazy really. Walking shouldn't have rules. If it will get them out and about in the fresh air, let your kids take their PlayStation or Nintendo DS with them, let Kylie take her iPod and let dad take his radio pressed to his ear. None of these things are any more offensive than the wannabe Jeremy Clarkson's in their off-roaders who churn these lovely places in their hateful 4x4s. Or those hearty Baden Powell types who feel it necessary to shout out the names of every peak in stentorian, self-satisfied tones. Compared to these, I was discretion and quietude itself, blending into

the verdant slopes, head on my rucksack, radio by my ear.  
Until Tottenham scored their winner of course...