Preamble

from *preambulare*: to walk before
May 2011

Last year I was writing a book. It was about walking: a travel book. My editor at Auckland University Press, Anna Hodge, had suggested it. My previous book had been a volume of poems, with copious notes, about time spent in Ireland. She thought travel suited me.

I decided I'd write about walking. It would be a simple book. What could be simpler than one foot in front of the other? I'd write about travelling on foot. It is, in my opinion, the very best mode of travel. So slow, so steady. The world slips into close focus: the few metres ahead, the next climb, the next corner, the row of ants marching across a sun-warmed step, the herd of caramel-coloured cows grazing in a buttercup field, heavy bells ringing.

Travelling by car is a swift swoop, suited to men with appointments elsewhere. It's fierce and competitive out there on the highway: people, perfectly pleasant no doubt when encountered on foot, become frantic. *I* become frantic. Stuck behind a campervan crawling up the hill into town, I can feel a ridiculous impatience: Come ON! Pass the truck! You've HEAPS of room and this is the only place you can get past

for MILES! I am neither a good nor decent person driving a car. Some kind of fantasy takes over my head and hands: a person who rally-drives the Haute Corniche, wearing fingerless mittens for extra grip on the custom-made wheel. I have no idea where this person exists when I'm not in a car. I have never driven in a rally, nor wish to, and my notion of hell would be to stand on an embankment watching cars racing round bends and skidding into gravel. You can't even tell who is winning. So why is it, as I take the wheel of our Subaru to pop into town to pick up a bottle of milk and the paper, that this impatient neurotic competitive individual slips into my skin and fastens her helmet? Over unlikely greying hair? Who the hell is she? She is quite literally driven. Overwhelmed by the urge for speed, even if the object of that speed is a litre of trim, not the magnum of champagne gushing orgasmically over the losers.

When I travel on foot, I am calm. I am kind. I talk to strangers, enjoying their company. I am attentive to small children. I am not driven, but peaceably ambling to the rhythms of nature. I am rambling. My feet ramble. My mind rambles. The sun is on my face, the wind in my hair. The fantasy figure who slips into my skin then is romantic: someone in a high-waisted dress walking across heather-clad moorland with billowing clouds overhead. She's a pilgrim, a poet, someone from history or fairytale, setting out to seek her fortune.

She's also a relatively recent fantasy. For much of my life, walking was done from necessity. We walked when we were children because we didn't have a car until I was ten. We walked to school, which was just next door anyway, through a loose

place in the corrugated-iron fence at the end of our section. A quick dash from the warm kitchen, clutching a piece of toast in one hand as the bell rang, through the fence, and I could be lined up with the others, all ready for Colonel Bogey and the march to class. (This has left me incapable of getting anywhere else on time. I still adhere to the belief that I can be eating toast and be wherever I am expected to be in the twinkling of an eye, like Superman. It's a dreadful legacy.) On Friday nights, my family walked downtown for the groceries and the library books, puffing back up the hill at nine o'clock with a pushchair loaded with supplies and kids demanding to be carried. At weekends, we didn't walk for recreation. Instead, my sister and I were taken out to visit my aunt and uncle on my dad's bike: a big heavy Raleigh with a seat on the carrier and another on the bar. Cycling was perfection: Dad puffing as he pedalled up Holmes Hill between high hedges of fluffy white hawthorn and the sensation of speed as we swooped back down in the evening, Dad cheerful after several hours of whisky and cribbage, the wind driving my hair back from my face on the way home to Sunday tea — proper shop-sliced white bread with raspberry jam and whipped cream.

Cycling was much to be preferred to walking. Walking was slog. A bore. A tedious tramp with my sixth-form geography class to view a glacier and hanging valleys and other dull geological features, goaded on by a young man whose muscled thighs strained at the khaki of his ranger's shorts. He looked like a boy scout. I loathed his silly legs, loathed the dripping bush, loathed the muddy track where my sneakers slipped and stuck. Loathed the glacier when we finally reached it, which

was grubby and not, as I had hoped, pristine icy white. Loathed the clammy grip of my borrowed plastic parka. Loathed the way my legs ached that evening and for several days afterward.

What I wanted was a car, and when I was twenty-one and married we bought one. A grey Mini-Minor, in which we hurtled along English motorways, our friends pallid in the back seat as we raced past the spinning hubcaps of Eurolorries or attempted to change lanes round Marble Arch. I adored it, as I have loved all the cars I've owned since: the crimson Fiat with the kiddie seats in the back, the Ford station wagon that accommodated the family's bikes and tents, the beige 1967 Cortina of divorce, the trusty Subarus that now churn doggedly each winter through the snow on the hilltops of the Peninsula and bring us safely home to Otanerito in the valley.

It was not until I was middle aged that walking — walking as travel, walking for miles — really came into its own. When I was forty-eight, I went to live in Menton for six months. A fellowship took me to work for a year in the garden shed of the villa in which Katherine Mansfield had stayed for a few months and written 'Miss Brill' and 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel'. We lived in an apartment overlooking the town, up a steep little hill. We didn't have a car.

We walked instead. A network of tracks lined the hillside behind the town, the shadowy lines of the old footpaths that preceded the corniches, low, medium and, above them all, the multi-laned high road into Italy, flung across the ravine on towering trestles. The tracks marked old routes between tiny villages, overgrown olive groves, chapels with locked doors and leaves like flakes of dead skin piled deep on the porch. They wound between the stone walls of pastures carved from the steep limestone slopes and the rubble of former farm buildings. They zigzagged at a manageable slant, trodden into the ground by people who had had no choice but to walk and wanted to make as little necessary effort as possible. Sometimes there were flights of broad shallow steps, each stone tread worn to a smooth declivity at its centre by the passing of centuries of mule trains carrying salt from the coast to the interior. We followed in their hoofprints, up and down the hillsides, picking twigs of thyme and rosemary to flavour our casseroles. We walked between the little villages, finding the contour, approaching not with the roar of the sports car taking out each corner on the way up, but quietly, discreetly, past vegetable gardens where the tomatoes were strung on twine and the peas clung to crisscrossed bamboo stakes. When we became hot and sweaty, we dipped our hands in the laundry troughs set with such ingenuity to capture the flow of some mountain torrent rushing headlong to the Mediterranean far below. On its way, it had been briefly diverted to the task of cleaning sheets and bearing away the soapy sediment of living. There were sometimes towels and shirts strung on the wire fences, though the old communal customs were clearly giving way to whiteware and individual clothes driers.

As the weather that summer became warmer, we headed further inland, to the mountains of the Alpes-Maritimes. Our walks became longer: over hills to villages several hours' walk apart. We stayed in small hotels in near-deserted places where the

empty streets echoed as we walked about after dinner and the cool mountain air smelled of damp stone and fallen rooms. It was as though the village was reverting to some earlier phase, of piled stone or before that: to the cave. Enough remained, though, to supply the necessities of life: a bakery, a school where children squealed as children everywhere squeal as they play. A church with mass once a month. New people were arriving. Sometimes in the hills we'd come upon their settlements: a caravan, a teepee with the usual confusion of dogs and children's toys, a pink plastic tractor lying on its side among the beans. At midsummer in Saorge, a quiet place ordinarily, the square suddenly filled with dreadlocks and people smoking dope and dancing all night to pipes and drums. The children ran wild along the balustrades above the sheer drop into a ravine where the Roya was a silver thread in the moonlight. They threw crackers at one another in the careless mayhem. In the morning, we stepped over bodies sleeping peaceably in the sunshine on the little round-backed bridge that led up to the scented pinewoods and the track to the next village.

I was enchanted. I had rediscovered walking. Walking at my own pace with no yapping ranger at my heels, it was not only possible to cover long distances — hundreds of kilometres, across the whole width of a country, across peninsulas and from one province to another — but to enjoy doing so. From then on, we spent nearly every penny we earned working over summer on going walking here or overseas.

I knew it was faintly ridiculous. Sometimes it involved a long initial flight across the whole width of the world: that trial by

constriction in the economy section of Singapore Airlines. I'd look out at the vast red mass of Australia with its inscrutable squiggle of dry watercourses, at strange Singapore where millions roost in those white towers, at the sprinkled lights of the Indian subcontinent by night, while the cabin dozed behind eye masks and the little TV screens blinked with another rerun of *Friends*. Then it would be morning and we'd be passing high over all those wars and bombs and tensions, and then the land would crinkle and soften and disappear behind a web of grey cloud and there was Europe: London, or Paris, where we'd find the train. And the next day we'd start walking through a beech forest with bluebells or along one of those old French mule paths. Absurd. Self-indulgent. Pointless. Perfect.

So when Anna suggested a travel book, I thought, I'll write about walking. I'll think about places where I've walked. I'll write about the things I thought about when I was walking there. Because the way I think when I walk is different from the way I think when I am seated at my desk. The rhythm of my feet, the pendulum swing of my body, alters the way I think. My mind as well as my body wanders. My mind as well as my body rambles. I'll write down the things I saw on my walk, and the things I heard, the books I read on the way, the people we met, the food we ate. I'll remember it all and it will be like walking all over again.

I felt a little timid about writing like this: it would be non-fiction after all, and I've always written fiction. The demands of the story provide a useful cover. I don't like the feeling of being exposed, have never settled happily into the public side of being

a writer. I like the quiet secluded side, concealed in a hut in a paddock in a valley a hundred kilometres from the nearest city. When I'm writing, I'm absorbed in solving a puzzle. I set up some difficulty — characters, a setting — and see if I can figure out how to make it all turn into fiction. The moment when that shifts into marketing — the launch, the interviews, the festival appearances, the panel discussions, the Hour With . . . — makes me jumpy with nerves. I cope by planning for weeks beforehand. I prepare. I over-prepare. I buy a new pair of shoes to look at when I'm tempted to run off the stage mid-session, and I get by. But it's not the part I like. It's not why I do this.

Writing non-fiction felt like another kind of exposure, a new kind of challenge. I was anxious, too, that this kind of travel account would seem banal. After all, there is nothing novel about walking. Thousands of people go walking. Our house is on a walking track. Over 40,000 people have stayed in our front room in the twenty years I've lived here. All summer I can hear their laughter down in the valley from my desk in the hut in the paddock. The magazines are filled with advertisements for walking trips in the Wairarapa with catered dinners, in England with a van to carry your bag, in Italy with optional trips to Assisi to see the frescoes or accommodation in a Tuscan villa. It's a favoured vacation choice of the middle-aged middle class. It's a passion fuelled by thousands of books: Aboriginal songlines and men walking away from the bank in their new sneakers have sold in their millions.

It's an expression of privilege. In countries where walking is the normal way to get about, it is not regarded as recreation.

This is why, I was told, walking tracks are few in Ireland: the era of people forced by poverty to walk the roads, carrying their spades on their shoulders, of children with bare feet blue with cold and studded with stone sores — all that is only a generation or two distant. Walking as recreation was more popular in wealthy England among people for whom country paths had some conveniently distant romantic allure. There's a whiff of muscular Christianity about it, the Bible class tramping group, the hairy-legged puritan insistence on mild discomfort and effort bringing its just reward.

I know all that, but still I love the simple sensation of moving steadily through a new landscape. It makes me feel grounded, steady, balanced on solid earth. My travel book would be about walking.

And then something happened that threw all that into disarray. I became anything but grounded. One night in September, the earth under my feet became anything but solid. I lost my balance.

This book has been written on either side of a couple of major earthquakes and more than 5000 aftershocks. That fact has left cracks across the surface of the text, rupturing it the way the earth ruptures. A muddy rift rips through the surface of pages that had been as orderly and purposeful as a flat Canterbury paddock with its stock rotations and regular rectangular borders of fencing wire.

Writing about walking is not so straightforward any more.