

On Foot

A
History
of
Walking

JOSEPH A. AMATO



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ON FOOT



Introduction

Walking Is Talking



I^N his *Theory of Walking*, nineteenth-century French writer Honoré de Balzac wrote, “Isn’t it really quite extraordinary to see that, since man took his first steps, no one has asked himself why he walks, how he walks, if he has ever walked, if he could walk better, what he achieves in walking . . . questions that are tied to all the philosophical, psychological, and political systems which preoccupy the world?”¹ I hope here to answer Balzac’s questions as well as the questions that prompted me to write this history of walking.²

My questions focus particularly on modern society. I ask who walks now, and how and why do they walk? Do they on the whole walk less? And when they do walk, do they do so as a matter of necessity or choice? I question how changes in the history of walking relate to issues of social class and status, as well as to the

increasing control of government over city, countryside, and nation. How are the displacement of walking as a necessary activity and the birth of walking by choice—be it promenading and strolling, romantic walking and country hiking, window shopping, urban pedestrianism, or commuting—tied together? In what ways was walking displaced and differentiated by successive revolutions in transportation, industry, commerce, and urban life? Having examined the creation of the modern city and of marching national armies, the automobile, paved roads, and suburbs, I reflect in conclusion on a single question: What do we make of walking and this new humankind, which in the last two centuries sits, rides, and drives ever more, walks less, and walks more by choice than ever before in its entire history?

Approximately six million years have elapsed since our ancestors took to bipedal locomotion. Only in very recent times did truly extraordinary numbers of humans—first on horses and in carriages, then on trains and bicycles, and finally in cars, trucks, buses, and airplanes—begin to sit and ride rather than walk.

In the last hundred years, walking, which I will treat in most instances as synonymous with going on foot, has become increasingly segmented, circumscribed, and limited. At the same time, it has become a matter of choice, involving questions of health and recreation, as well as an assertion of individual lifestyle and social philosophy.

This revolution—inseparable from the triumph of seats and wheels, roads and smooth surfaces—marks a change in the use of the human body and mind. In the West, people do less physical work, and consequently they work less in the outdoors, stand, squat, and lean less, and do these things in fewer ways. People also climb, clomp, and stomp less as the need to walk on steep, uneven, and nonfirm surfaces disappears. At the same time, the revolution alters conceptions of space, distance, motion, movement, and the amount of energy necessary to invest in travel. It not only involves the story of feet and legs and the history of dress and footwear but also raises questions about roads, transportation, communication, cities, suburbs, and cultures.

The act of going on foot is joined to a time, condition, society, and culture. Walking belongs to the gender, age, class, ethnic and national group, and even race of the walker. The shoes, clogs, cleats, stilts, and

clothes that are worn shape the walk. The loads that are carried, led, and pushed, and the way this is done, determine the walk and its appearance. The surfaces and distances the walker traverses also shape the walk, and the weather—sun, wind, rain, and even types of snow (deep and soft, brittle and crusty)—determines stride, gait, and pace, and can even dictate the need to crawl and climb. The reason why the walker travels informs his or her steps from beginning to end.

An army instructs its troops on how to march, tells them when and where to march, and even determines when they can break ranks. Other groups, usually of higher status, also teach their members how and where to promenade, stroll, and window shop—and to move as much as possible as if they are oblivious to or above certain conditions or distractions. Cities likewise, though less explicitly, put their signatures on their own pedestrians and commuters, determining their pace, willingness to give way, and even willingness to stop and help, as well as their manner of moving on sidewalks, on roads, across intersections, and in and out of public transportation. Working-class and peasant folk cultures also produce their own steps and gaits, which often have corresponding dances, such as the clomping dances of wooden shoes. Subgroups on city streets produce their own struts and saunters, which are often joined to a manner of dress, a type of footwear, and ways of standing, leaning, and looking. Tennis shoes today form voices of contemporary walking.

As rich as it is in variety, walking does not compete in status and attention with movements of hand and mouth. Inseparable from the foot and the earth it treads, walking is taken to be mundane, ordinary, pedestrian, and even besmirched and polluted—and thus in all ways worthy of being overlooked or disdained. Walking often even goes unconsidered for other reasons. It is camouflaged in the context in which it occurs. It often melts into the clothing, animal power, technology, industry, and transportation that determine and mutate walking. Furthermore, walking is joined to the rich world of human gestures and nonverbal communications. Walking, that is, is not perceived independently from the person it carried or carries. It always comes in the form of a particular body shape and movement. Fast tends to radiate importance and status. The glare of the eyes, countenance of the face, turn of the neck, movement of arms, straightness of back, projection

of stomach, and rotation of hip identify and distinguish a walk and provoke a series of judgments about the walker. Likewise, the speed, stride, flow, and balance exhibited by the walker constitute the gestalt of a walk. Needless to say, walkers are known by the company they keep.

All this suggests the notion that underpins this introduction: walking is talking. It can be understood as a language, having its own vernacular, dialects, and idioms. Expressing intentionality, walking conveys a wealth of information about the walker's identity, importance, condition, and destination. Onlookers attribute their own meaning to the walker, seeing in a walk a statement of purpose or a declaration to be heeded. They also can be baffled by mixed or ambiguous messages of walking. An onlooker might not be able to suggest why a friend is on foot, or whether a change of gait is a result of illness, medicine, or weariness. Nevertheless, walking is a clear revelation of identity, as proven by the fact that radar recently developed for the United States Defense Department's battle against terrorism can identify 85 to 95 percent of individual walks as if they were personal signatures.³

A primary body language, walking always communicates something. Like waving, smiling, and greeting, walking belongs to the history of gesture.⁴ Composed of separate actions involving not just the extension of leg and foot but also posture, arms, elbows, hands, and fists (clenched or unclenched, thumb out or tucked in), walking is taught from one's first steps. Like eating, drinking, carrying, washing, defecating, birthing, or making love, walking assembles a miscellany of movements into a whole. It presents the walker to the world. It declares who walks, how, why, in what spirit, under what conditions, and at whose volition he or she walks. Walking expresses itself with varying speed, stride, gait, and associated posture, company, dress (especially shoes but also leggings and socks), place, load, condition, and occasion.

Walking manifests health, sickness, and deformity. Not to walk constitutes living a different life.⁵ Individuals may display a hobble, limp, sway, or even a lean from a lifetime of work. Arthritic knees, shoulders, backs, and elbows testify to years of carrying buckets of milk and water that pull people's arms permanently down at their sides. With varying degrees of subtlety, a walk announces or discloses a person's

feelings and moods. It signals a pedestrian's vibrancy, energy, and enthusiasm, or lassitude, fatigue, and dejection. Even though observers can mistake a walk, for instance confusing a sufferer of Parkinson's disease with a drunk, they most often intuitively read the meaning, character, and intention of a given step. Human eyes read legs and feet to decipher meaning.

Along with marching and dancing, which express at once personal styles and group solidarity, individuals move differently according to mood, physical condition, and circumstances. They have multiple walking styles for different inner thoughts and feelings and myriad situations and occasions. Individuals can even effect a hobble or limp. Accompanying posture and body gestures, along with slightly averted eyes, a tilted head, projected elbows, clenched fists, or an exaggerated swing of one arm, form distinct signatures distinguishing one walker from another.

Anatomy and conditions differentiate individual walks and make them emphatic over a lifetime. The plane of the foot, the length of the stride, or other mechanics of bipedal locomotion distinguish toddlers almost from their first solo jaunts. They mark out youth as they parade across the stage in a graduation ceremony, and still distinguish the old who are still capable of pacing the halls of their nursing homes.

Orthopedists, podiatrists, and physical therapists are among our primary and most literal interpreters of human bipedal locomotion, that singular system of movement that amounts to going forward by falling from foot to foot.⁶ Even in our sedentary society, an average person takes almost nine thousand steps a day. Five percent of the United States population has ingrown toenails or other foot problems, and according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, there are nearly four million annual visits to the emergency room in the United States for knee, ankle, and foot and toe injuries. (This is nearly three times the number of visits to a physician for other reasons.)⁷ Trained in the biomechanics of walking, those who specialize in feet and walking are quick to perceive and use technical language to describe walking defects, which until a generation or two ago were known by popular phrases such as "clubfoot," "a clawed foot," "flat feet," "toe walking," or "heel walking." Experts now know that walking problems can be mechanical or vascular. They might arise from being

overweight, improper posture, ill-fitting shoes, or prolonged standing, or they may have their sources in the brain, inner eye, or nervous, respiratory, or circulatory system. Likewise, problems can be directly traced to the inner ear, back, knees, tendons, ankles, or the feet themselves, in which reside one-quarter of the body's 206 bones (there are 27 bones in each foot).

Language itself commits humans to an interpretation of walking. Each synonym for going on foot offers a description and brings an interpretation with it. Passing people are said to slink, slither, stalk, shuffle, slog, trudge, hike, stroll, strut, swagger, promenade, gallivant, jaunt, mosey, wander, peregrinate, amble, or saunter. Analogies are also freely drawn from the animal kingdom. This walker is said to waddle like a goose, strut like a peacock, or resemble the high-stepping crane, while that one moves like a cat, scurries like a fleeing dog, or wobbles like a newborn colt. The Greeks called man "a featherless biped" *Ἀνθρωπος ἐστὶ ζῶον δίπουν, ἄπτερον*.⁸

The speech of walking is rich in all languages and has generated a dazzling array of English verbs of motion.⁹ Walkers prowl, perambulate, sidle, ambulate, roam, take a constitutional, gad about, lumber, parade, or prance. And the vernacular has the walker going on shanks' mare, hoofing it, or mucking about. Nor do we lack for adjectives. Walkers are variously characterized as toddling, tottering, lurching, or limping—as being knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, hobbled, or lame.

The English word *walking* itself has a history that conforms to the notion that all living things can trace their origins to the sea. The eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon word *walking* meant "to roll about and toss" as the sea does.¹⁰ Moving from shore to land (as earthly travel so often does), by the thirteenth century the word broadened to mean "to move about" or "to go on a journey." At this time of emerging commerce and expanding pilgrimages, it acquired its contemporary meaning of "going on foot."

Words associated with walking also have a rich etymology. *Marching*, which came to mean "to walk as soldiers do," derives not insignificantly from the deeper etymological sense "to trample down." *Promenading* has its origin in the French notion "to go for a walk" and the Latin "to drive forward." The curious word *saunter* in the seventeenth century referred to a self-reflective form of walking. It had its

origin in the Middle English word *santer*, which meant “to muse.”¹¹ *Amble*, “to move slowly and even leisurely,” has its source in the Latin verb *Ambulare*, “to go.” *Peripatetic*, which meant “to walk around” and was aptly derived from a school of Greek philosophers who walked as they philosophized, came to refer to itinerant traders and travelers.¹² *To stamp*, which in its original German form meant “to pound with one’s foot,” became in nineteenth-century American English *stomp*, which in the following century came to mean “a dance,” “a fight,” “a heavy gait,” “thick shoes,” or any “beating of the feet.”¹³ And then there is the nineteenth-century English verb *to hike*, of unknown origin, which first meant “a long and disciplined walk through the countryside” and now also can simply mean “to take a walk.”¹⁴

Rich connotations go with such phrases as “walking the carpet,” “walking a chalk line,” “walking the plank,” “walking on water,” “walking through fire,” and “walking on air.”¹⁵ An array of expressions tied to the word *step*—found in such phrases as “first step,” “final step,” “stepping in,” “stepping out,” “step on it,” and “step to it”—suggests how much being on foot forms the core of human experience and is an important source of speech and metaphor.

The foot itself embeds walking in a trail of metaphorical language.¹⁶ Aside from all the associations to be made with the clubfoot, the six-toed foot, the dirty foot, the big foot, and the callused and worn foot, the word *foot* simply means “down” or “bottom.” The king’s foot was literally the first measure of distance in the kingdom. While *foot* describes the bottom of a bed, the base of a hill, or the foundation of a building or bridge, *foot* can be used in an array of expressions such as being on “equal footing,” “having one’s foot on someone’s neck,” “finding one’s footing,” “losing one’s footing,” or “having one foot in the grave.”¹⁷

Like other major bodily movements, walking is inseparable from the language of cultural interpretation. Walking, which presents itself encapsulated in balance, stride, gait, posture, and appearance, invariably expresses something about the walker. Walking can reveal strength, sociability, gender, and age, and it manifests, or is seen to expose, character and intentions.¹⁸ Observers from within and often even from outside a culture intuitively understand the walks they observe. For this reason, playwrights, directors, and novelists draw on the universal

language of walking, relying particularly on the feet themselves (think of the large, hairy feet of the Hobbits!), type and condition of shoes, and a character's first steps to introduce their creations' personalities and situations. Audiences don't have to be primed to laugh instantaneously at the jittery, antic steps of Charlie Chaplin any more than they have to be taught to tremble at the sight and sound of the tottering, thudding clomps of Frankenstein's monster.

Whether pinched or full, hesitant or bold, every walk articulates a specific type of energy and emotion. The proud take big, loud steps, especially when wearing boots, while the timid tiptoe around or "pussyfoot about." Novelists exploit our inevitable tendency to equate walks with characters when, for instance, Joseph Conrad described his protagonist Little Fyne in his novel *Chance* (1913) as an aggressive walker who marched with crashing boots—to see his walk was to hate him, we are told.¹⁹ In *Journey to Italy* (1829–1830), German writer Heinrich Heine carried his characterization of *walk's* expressive power to enunciate religious states of mind when he wrote, "A Catholic priest walks as if Heaven belonged to him; a Protestant clergyman, on the contrary, goes about as if he had leased it."²⁰

Entire cultures interpret and value walking in different ways. The Japanese, to take a single example of the prescriptive power of culture to determine human movement, walked differently from Westerners until the Meiji era (1867–1912). "The traditional posture of the Japanese population, which consisted mostly of peasants, was that of a stooped back, with the chin thrust forward, and four limbs bent. Even while walking, the knees were kept bent and there was no counterbalancing swinging of the arms."²¹ When the Japanese were instructed to swing their arms, which served the purposes of their new army, they would, with constriction, move right arm and leg forward at same time, and then move left leg and right arm forward. This special style of marching called the *namba* had been traditionally taught at home.²² In this century, the Japanese exhibit "a richer variety of walking styles than Westerners."²³

Greeks established the fundamental evaluation of Western walking, which is the primary focus of this book. They classified and valued forms of walking.²⁴ Powerful warriors, Homer prescribed, must be long striding. The slower gait, later Greek writers concurred, displayed

an aristocratic background and a deliberative nature, and even indicated a man of great soul. Yet, they cautioned, men must guard against strolling too slowly, lest they be considered effeminate or lackadaisical. Women who wiggled too much when walking on the streets ran the risk of being judged courtesans, while a wag-tail male would be titled *sauloprokitao* (lizard butt) for what they took to be his effeminate stroll.²⁵

Walkers were interpreted not just by how and with whom they walked but also by what they carried and how and why they carried it. At one time, of course, walking almost universally meant carrying things, which activity could be as different and differentiating as holding such precious objects as a gold chalice or a long spear, or hauling, as the great majority did, such diverse encumbrances as logs, sticks, bales, buckets, and ropes.²⁶ In older cultures, like the Egyptian, in which women, according to Herodotus, carried things on their shoulders while men carried them on their heads, human transport was vital.²⁷ It was an important reason to own slaves and it was essential to make use of their heads, shoulders, waists, and backs for carrying rather than simply using their arms and hands, as unencumbered contemporary walkers do. Material cultures afforded yolks, shoulder harnesses, poles, baskets, and pots for carrying and instructed people how to transport water, wood, grain, animals, sick humans, and babies.²⁸ Bearers, whose individual strength and collective inferiority was measured by the load they bore, learned how to lift, shift, and transport things passively. (The word *rock*, which is so important to American popular music, English urban commentator Peter Hall proposes, “derives from the old tradition of rocking and staggering to lighten the weight of loads carried by black burden bearers, roustabouts and longshoremen, who brought traditions from black Africa where there had never been wheeled vehicles or animal transport.”)²⁹

Shoes themselves express their wearer’s ways, conditions, and status. A pair of peasant shoes, philosopher Martin Heidegger observed, voices a distinct relationship between the wearer and the earth.³⁰ In more prosaic terms, my local shoemaker in rural southwestern Minnesota explains how a shoe’s wear reveals the occupation of its owner: farmers, for instance, wear smooth the part of the sole that touches the metal ladder on which they enter and exit their tractor cab.³¹

Cultures draw elemental distinctions between those who can walk and those who cannot, and they even speak of imminent death as being on “one’s last legs.” Until recent times, those who could not walk well, or at all, were negatively classified. Those who were seriously impaired or unable altogether to stand, move, work, and travel formed the lowest ranks of humanity. They needed the help of others to do what humans must do. With distorted bodies, they moved, if at all, slowly, clumsily, or, in the worst instances, like an animal, crawling on their stomach or swinging along on their knuckles. Literally lower than others, they were contaminated by being in more intimate touch with the netherworld of waste and decomposition. Sharing these negative views, Greeks exposed the lame at birth and Old Testament Hebrews prescribed against them becoming priests. The Greeks and Romans attributed defective character to the bowlegged. The inventive Italians, calling them *storti*, took them to be quarrelsome, while making their word for lame, *zoppo*, also mean unsound, defective, and imperfect.³²

Hierarchies of class and status were commonly built out of and around walking. Those who could walk—the strong and able bodied—stood, so to speak, head and shoulders above those who couldn’t walk, who as a consequence were closer to the ground, couldn’t as easily express their will, and were often dependent on others. In turn, across the ages those who had to walk and stand were judged to be inferior to those who were privileged to ride and sit. The latter literally or figuratively had the power and money to move on the back of the former or of an animal. Those who were required to traverse long distances on foot, encumbered with goods—such as itinerant merchants or even armies—were inferior to those like king and bishop, emperor and pope, and the greatest merchants, who need not go out into the world. As the highest and most powerful, they were seated in court or city and the world was brought to them. The highest of them—occupying royal thrones and holy seats, radiating earthly and heavenly power, existing at the very juncture of society and nature—needed only to process in ceremonies, in which they might be carried on litters, or to stand on the altar before the sacrificial table. On knees with bent heads and lowered eyes, not daring to stand fully erect or make eye contact—all approached these holy sitting ones as inferiors and all

retreated in the same way, bowing and walking backwards, endeavoring not to insult by appearing to depart abruptly or show the lord their backs. The very notion of worship, at least etymologically in one sense of the Greek verb for worship, *proskunes*, means to prostrate oneself in oriental fashion before king and superior.³³

As we see through history, those who had to walk formed the legions of the inferior and less powerful. They went on foot because they couldn't ride. They were compelled to walk because of the force of circumstances or at the command of others. Walking out of necessity rather than by choice, they literally inherited the inferiority of the foot, which fastened them to the soiling earth. Walking belonged to feet and legs, which lacked the dexterity of the hand and the elevated position of the mind. Those compelled to walk suffered "the travail of travel," two words that were etymologically joined by ages of painful movement on foot. Those who had to walk belonged as well to the inferior kingdom of the working foot. Once immensely vast, that kingdom was home to the bootblack, the shoeshine boy, the footman, legions of pages, porters, bearers, doormen, messengers, waiters, street walkers, and infantrymen who came and went on foot at the command of their superiors. It also contained the despised boot licker, foot smeller, and street sweeper, along with the *footer*, eighteenth-century British English for an idle, worthless person.³⁴

Even though nomads and wanderers were often envied for their freedom and the simplicity of their lives, they were viewed through the ages as inferior to members of sedentary (sitting) society, for they were compelled to move and they sat and ruled nowhere.³⁵ Medieval law defined vagrants as nuisances and even as threats. The homeless, beggars, and the lame, all of whom live primarily on foot, have long been seen as bringing with them disease and disorder. Still today whether one walks or sits and rides continues to be an elemental marker of relative status. The numbers of miles of paved roads in a given country, along with the numbers of cars and trucks per capita, are key in differentiating developed societies from underdeveloped ones. By this measure, Africa remains a dark continent because the great majority of people still travel on foot.

Going barefoot, which could in different contexts be a sign of humility, mourning, or intimacy, has for ages almost universally been

understood as a confession of poverty and inferiority. Wearing coarse and unkempt shoes is a sign of indigence.³⁶ In the early part of the twentieth century, at least among the increasingly well-heeled, emerging middle class that now owned a variety of machine-made shoes, wooden shoes and shoes in poor condition immediately evoked a negative judgment. The wearer of peasant or run-down shoes was presumed to possess only one pair of shoes, to need to work in dirty places, and to have to travel considerable distances over rough and filthy surfaces. As affluence has increased in the West, the majority of people have come to own different types of footwear to express a variety of activities and even attitudes. Ill-kept shoes can express disdain for the mundane activity of shoe care, while wearing cheap sandals or workers' boots allows well-off youth to assert, with their feet, their affinity for the people. In effect, the abundance of footwear brought to an end the era when young schoolgirls feared crossing their legs lest they reveal the hobnailed shoes their fathers had made for long wear.

Shoes, of course, are implicated in a more complex culture discussion because of their ever-so-close association with the foot, which functions as a symbol of death and sexuality.³⁷ The foot evoked sexuality and fecundity in both Europe and Asia.³⁸ In sixteenth-century Spain an aristocratic woman's foot was neither to be seen nor to be touched. The Comtesse d'Aulnoy, for example, locked her door to put on her stockings. She claimed she preferred death to having a man see her feet.³⁹ China, where the appearance of women's feet was given priority over their use, crippled its women for a thousand years. Courtly women were kept in seclusion "as far as possible from the street."⁴⁰ Foot binding of the female child, which began at age seven, satisfied the nation's sexual preference for small feet and ensured that wives wouldn't run away from home. Matchmakers reportedly asked, "How small are her feet?" and contended that "poorly bound feet are a sign of laziness."⁴¹

Western courtiers, who wore jeweled and precariously high-heeled shoes, wished not to have callused and wide feet lest they be taken for earth-bound peasants, who their ancestors in fact may have been. Having small and slender feet assured superior footing over those who laboriously trod the earth. The long-lasting prejudice of the foot-gliding and -sliding court, and the urban middle classes, that evolved in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against the stomping inhabitants of the countryside is captured in part by twentieth-century Breton writer Pierre Jakez Hélias. In his memoir of the early twentieth-century countryside, he describes the country walker that city pedestrians criticized.

In town the peasant goes at his own pace, that is, with his daily rhythm. He does not travel the pitted paths, the worn earth, the prairie itself underfoot like a city sidewalk. . . . The peasant in the city is a wanderer and gazer, a type of tourist. . . . His slowness, this admirable economy of body, which isn't heavy or clumsy, is imposed by the rhythm of his work.⁴²

The prejudice of city walker against country walker as slow and clumsy is still perpetrated across the world. Hmong mountain dwellers in Laos, for instance, are immediately identifiable when they descend to the lowlands, as a visiting Western doctor among them recently observed. "Accustomed to frequenting steep, rocky paths he [the peasant] would forget he was walking on a smooth, flat road, and he would raise his foot too high with each step, as if he were climbing a staircase. On the plain, a Miao (a tribe of the Hmong) was as much out of his element as a sailor on dry land."⁴³

Discoverers and settlers noted that Native Americans, who have diverse traditions of running and body movements, walked in different ways than the Europeans. The Canadian fur trader and geographer David Thompson, who explored the whole of the Columbia River system during the early 1800s, admiringly interpreted the gait of the Black Foot Indians (the Piegans).

Their walk [is] erect, light, and easy, and may be said to be graceful. When on the plains in the company with white men, the erect walk of the Indians is shown to great advantage. The Indian with his arms folded in his robe seems to glide over the ground; and the white people seldom in an erect posture, their bodies swayed from right to left.⁴⁴

The formation of new North American society staged an encounter of diverse walking styles. In *The Reshaping of Everyday Life*,

1790–1840, the historian Jack Larkin notes one of the elusive yet mostly taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life in nineteenth-century America: “New Englanders moved heavily. The immense physical demands of pre-mechanized agriculture gave men a distinctively ponderous gait and posture. Despite their strength and endurance, farmers were heavy, awkward and slouching in movement” and walked with a “slow inclination from side to side.” Already in the 1830s black slaves—perhaps in no rush to get to another man’s work—showed “a preference for rhythmic rather than rigid bodily motion.” At the same time, American city dwellers, who moved to the quicker pace of commerce, were distinguishable from heavy, slouching farmers attuned to slow seasonal rhythms.⁴⁵

Offering one of many comments on the difference between country and city walks, American novelist Larry McMurtry remarks that to this day in his native Archer County, Texas, the descendants of the Germans who settled there more than a century ago have not lost their old country walk. “Their posture . . . was different from that of the cowboys and oil field roustabouts I knew. . . . I can spot [one of them] by their more measured, more deliberate way of walking, and also by the extreme concentration they bring to their work habits.”⁴⁶

Today, as comfortable sitting and convenient riding increasingly dominate Western society, walking still continues to take new forms. Walkers, though more and more sedentary at work and even in leisure, learn as pedestrians born in the era of mass transportation to travel sidewalks and to obey traffic signs. Already in the late nineteenth century, armies, parades, and demonstrations instructed people how to march in mass, as other institutions, including schools and businesses, taught them the etiquette of public walking and movements. They took up their newly learned stepping on the same smooth surfaces and sidewalks, utilizing the same transportation and communication systems, on increasingly shared schedules. With considerable idiomatic variation, walking, thanks to uniform material conditions, has come to speak a common language.

At the same time, as wealth and leisure spread, window shoppers, mall walkers, park and zoo strollers, recreational hikers, bird watchers, and ambling tourists become identifiable groups of walkers. In the twentieth century, to ever larger audiences, art, photography, and es-

pecially film and television, principal agencies of mass culture, show the contemporary world how to go on foot. French anthropologist Marcel Mauss pointed out that already by the late 1920s and early 1930s Hollywood films were starting to teach French girls ways to move and walk.⁴⁷ As spreading affluence permitted the poorer to imitate the richer, high fashion offers the rich luxurious and shocking clothes to distinguish themselves from “the aping poor.” With origins in nineteenth-century Paris, high fashion, just as aristocratic culture from centuries before did, promotes nonutilitarian clothes, distorted bodies, and even the exaggerated catwalk of contemporary fashion halls to flaunt wealth and superfluity.

Before I formally embark on this history of walking, I must affirm that this book is not a story of great and monumental walks, which every age had. Also, it is not a collection of unique trips on foot across the ages, although many such walks and trips are mentioned here. Rather, it is intended to be a narrative of human walking through the ages, the story of its major forms and transformations.

Leaving an examination of non-Western and traditional peoples’ walking to the anthropological and historical work of others, I have principally devoted this history to a narrative of walking in the Western world. I believed that any attempt to integrate into my work world history or microcosmic investigation of types of walking in traditional groups and transitional societies would prevent me from writing a coherent narrative of walking. Furthermore, by keeping essentially, though not exclusively, to the main trails of Western history—those of European and U.S. history—I took the easier and in fact only route possible for me: I would remain, as best I could, faithful to my own knowledge and skills, which were derived principally from the study of Western history.

By choosing to construct a narrative of the main stages of walking in the West, I intended to make the topic of going on foot and of human movement a creditable subject for subsequent material, social, and cultural studies. By specifically charting the displacement of walking as a necessity and its emergence as a choice, I sought to develop this irreversible alteration in Western walking that occurred in the last two centuries. This, in turn, should define the significance of ongoing

revolutions in contemporary society's relations to space, speed, motion, travel, locality, and community. And insofar as the West sets the direction and pace of the world, I hope to offer a consideration not just of the plight of walking in a sitting and riding world but also of the fate of a bipedal creature who sits more, walks far less, and does so increasingly by choice.

I hope to recount as an overarching theme how walking went from occupying the center of human life to assuming a much-diminished place in it. I intend to show that, like so many other human activities, such as running, swimming, hunting, and fishing, it passed from the realm of necessity to that of leisure and choice, from the commonplace and ordinary to the occasional, eccentric, and symbolic. Offering a general history of human movement, I illustrate the universal history of the foot's dethronement, with specific reference to the histories of shoes, walking sticks, chairs, horses, carriages, courts, roads, cities, cars, suburbs, and many other subjects.

A critical narrative of walking must ultimately be more evocative than comprehensive given the impossibility of writing a complete history of anything, much less a subject that at every step, so to speak, is joined to the entire history of humanity. Nevertheless, a critical history can, with reference to class and place, suggest who walked, when, why, how, how much, and under what natural and social conditions. By classifying types of walking and distinguishing specific periods of walking, the historian assigns a place to walking in human experience and, thus, records stages of humanity's altered relationship to its own body, as well as to space, community, society, and the world.

Walking constitutes a continuous and changing dialogue between foot and earth, humanity and the world. There can be no full history of this rich conversation, which, as shown in chapters 1 and 2, extends from bipedalism to Roman roads and legionnaires, and thence to medieval peasants, mendicants, craftsmen, scholars, and pilgrims—all of whom played out their destinies on foot. Walking begins to become more stratified by class and status in the seventeenth century, when upper classes, the subject of chapter 3, began “to put their best foot forward” and to make much of their promenading, strolling, and traveling as matters of pleasure, education, poetry, and even self-discovery. Increasingly, the carriage rides of aristocrats and the bourgeoisie

ended with fashionable promenades on garden pathways, in parks, on large boulevards and refurbished city ramparts, and on palisades. Tourism, which originated as a necessary ingredient of an upper-class education, began over time to serve middle-class recreation as improvements in principal roads, bridge building, and policing occurred. As seen in chapter 4, walking met the multiple needs of the Romantic spirit and the pens of such figures as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Alexander von Humboldt. More than convenient, going on foot was a way to sing a song of self and countryside and explore inaccessible ruins and nature, while defying the conventions of riding society.

During the nineteenth century, as the European and the American countryside became populated, foot, horse, boat, and train travel increased as industry, commerce, cities, and migration grew. In this context walking, especially in the new and expanding urban centers, was transformed from being a condition of material survival into an activity of choice and self-enhancement. The Sunday leisurely amble, the ramble in the woods, and the long-distance and strenuous hike took their place in the expanded horizon of middle-class recreation.

For Thoreau, the quintessential American romantic, walking constituted a means for ongoing religious, aesthetic, and scientific explorations. As he circumambulated Walden Pond in the 1840s and 1850s, walking took fresh forms and moved at invigorated speeds in expanding urban centers, where pedestrians moved amidst increasing traffic. Concentrations of population, unprecedented construction, and the development of urban and interurban travel created the new urban walker, discussed in chapter 6 with a particular focus on London, who was transformed, city by city, region by region, into the pedestrian we know today: the traffic-imperiled biped. His steps would be regulated to fit the routes of omnibuses, trams, cars, trucks, and buses, and the accelerated pace of the expanding urban world. Not only would the dangerous and menacing urban crowds have to be policed, ordered, and regulated, as well as educated, sanitized, and socially integrated, but they would also have to be taught—as argued in chapters 7 and 8, with particular reference to Paris—how to get in step with democratic national society. They would have to learn to stand in lines, pass through doorways, march in civic and military

parades, and attune their steps and movements, at work and play, to mass institutions.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, in response to new economic, technological, and demographic orders, the majority of Westerners, as shown in chapter 9, learned to sit and ride. The car became a common mode of locomotion. The wheel—put under everything humans or animals once pushed or pulled—eclipsed the foot. Sidewalks, cement surfaces, and roads reshaped city and countryside. People sat more, went on foot less, and carried little, while walking played a dramatically diminished role at home, on the farm, and at work. Curtailed, segmented, minimized, or displaced altogether, as illustrated in chapter 10, walking—a poor competitor among such appealing sports and leisure activities as running, tennis, swimming, mountain climbing, bicycling, skating, and skateboarding—lost its claim to set the standard and ruling pace of human movement. Reduced to the ordinary and truncated tasks of shopping, exercise, and vehicle-supported tourism, walking today increasingly seems largely superfluous and antiquated, a mere adjunct activity in a sitting and riding society.

Yet, to anticipate my conclusion, precisely in this diminished and relegated condition, walking still mutates to fit new technologies, conditions, and environments. While it increasingly becomes a matter of choice, it also assumes a powerful symbolic role as a means of protest and develops an enhanced potential to evoke alternative worlds and experiences. Indeed, walking, variable yet coexistent with human history, still holds a key to where we have been and where we are headed.

1

In the Beginning Was the Foot

*Walking from the Origins of
Bipedal Humanity to
Marching Roman Legions*



SINCE time immemorial walking has been the primary mode of human locomotion. Since the very beginning, walking and being human have coexisted. On foot humans crossed the earth, experienced life, and defined their relationship to the environment. On foot they carried their children, supported their old, hauled their tools and goods, and herded their animals. Similarly, they fled, chased, and killed, hunted and gathered, sought food, water, fuel, and habitat, traveled, played, courted, and enacted, often with the elaborate and fancy footwork of dance, their defining rituals. For millions of years, our proximate and distant ancestors moved across history on foot, rendering truth to the notion that we have walked our way to our being.

With as much as half of human time and bodily energy dedicated to walking and other

supporting modes of locomotion such as running, jumping, crawling, and climbing, changes in the conditions of walking altered lives and societies. Many such changes occurred in the vast period of prehistory, reaching from the first steps and early migrations of our first bipedal ancestors to the agricultural revolution and the emergence of sedentary river-valley civilizations of ten thousand years ago.

These civilizations in the Indus, Tigris and Euphrates, and Nile river valleys marked a profound transformation in elements of human walking. Hallmarks of these civilizations—a fixed place, an annual food supply, domesticated beasts of burden, specialization in tool making, storage, utilization of the wheel, command of a river, and dominance of major trails and routes—were all factors that shaped how, why, where, and who went on foot. The first and dominant lines of status and class were drawn between those who sat, received goods and offerings, and commanded, and all the others of the kingdom, who walked, worked, carried, traveled, fought, and served principally on foot.

Of all early civilizations, the Roman empire, at the apex of its thousand-year history, reached furthest in space. Its roads, built principally to project its army's power and state authority, formed a system of movement that identified walking with smooth surfaces, increased carrying capacity, and unified routes of travel. Its system of land travel, which utilized oxen, horses, and carts, but was based on and principally required walking, was not surpassed in Europe until the eighteenth century. If walking set the common but variable standard of local human locomotion, the marching speed and distance of Roman's legionnaires set the upper limit of prolonged land travel and defined an order of domination unrivaled since humanity first trod this earth.

"In the beginning was the foot," wrote anthropologist Marvin Harris.¹ The earliest hominid species walked on two feet from two to four million years before a subsequent hominid species made tools, and from four to six million years before *Homo sapiens*, our kind, appeared about a hundred thousand years ago.² "Anthropologists and evolutionary biologists are now agreed," science writer John Noble Wilford recently wrote, "that upright posture and two-legged walking—bipedality—was the crucial and probably first major adaptation

associated with the divergence of human lineage from a common ancestor with the African apes.”³

Biologists and anthropologists dispute where and when a bipedal species abandoned its arboreal habitat and got up and off its knuckles.⁴ Using only patchy material evidence and conjectures based on the molecular clock of genetic change, anthropologists writing the narrative of bipedal humanity struggle to determine when our African ancestors abandoned the forest for the prairie. Scientists have yet to explain when our earliest ancestors emigrated from the African plains or to establish connections among tool making, meat eating, and increased brain size. Earlier hope of finding a single, featured actor in this multimillion-year narrative has steadily faded as a growing consensus has emerged that until the unexplained disappearance of Neanderthal man thirty thousand years ago, the earth was home not to a single species but to multiple bipedal hominid species.

Bipedalism produced and depended on an anatomy that differentiated human from ape.⁵ Being anatomically vertical and going on two feet altered the human pelvis and limbs. The thickness of the pelvis set limits on the size of infants at birth, which resulted in longer postnatal nurturing and the development of family life. The freeing of hands opened the way for human tool making. Upright walking required hominids to dedicate a considerable portion of their muscle and torso to balance rather than to forward thrust. Integral parts of the balancing act of walking, human shoulders and arms, formed a marvelous system of extension in the service of ever-grasping hands. Bipedal locomotion also facilitated humans’ capacity to walk and talk simultaneously.

This form of locomotion, which arguably saved as much as 35 percent more calories than knuckle walking and allowed humans surplus calories to supply their brains, which, even at rest, demand a “whopping 20 to 25 percent of adult energy,” nevertheless has a considerable cost in pain and effort.⁶ As science writer Jay Ingram puts it, “Each stride of normal walking involves a cascade of little tricks that we perform unconsciously.”⁷ It requires spending three-fourths of one’s time on one foot or the other. As one strikes the ground with one stiff leg after another, all of one’s weight is set against a descending heel, only to be transferred to the big toe as one rotates hips and redirects the

plane of foot and leg. (One tightens the buttock to keep erect when climbing.) In effect, humanity has tortuously walked across the ages on two feet with a skeleton designed originally for four-legged travel. Flat feet, swollen feet, distorted toes, blisters, bunions, hammer toes, trick knees, herniated discs, and bad backs, not to mention hernias, hemorrhoids, and other maladies associated with our bipedal locomotion, remain the price of standing proudly erect.⁸

Human history also carries another energy cost; we must forever lug children who have not yet learned to walk or cannot keep up.⁹ Young children are always falling behind and must be goaded to keep up or must be picked up and carried.

Psychologist Robert Provine speculates that bipedalism permitted hominids to make fuller use of their breath and vocal cords, enabling them to issue more complex and diverse sounds than their sniffing and panting cousins did. Or, more vernacularly, they had to walk before they talked and laughed.¹⁰ Perhaps song and rhyme evolved to sustain them on their long marches across landscapes as well as to help them identify and commemorate special places along the way.

Afoot, humans could carry myriad objects across immense distances, especially as they learned to make use of their heads, necks, shoulders, backs, and waists. With daunting effect, they could hit and throw, smash down, and kick. They also could reach and pick more efficiently, especially as their species developed a thumb that could be used in opposition to the index and middle fingers. Free hands enabled them to examine objects, make and utilize tools, and start, set, carry, and control fire—the latter a discovery presently credited to *Homo erectus*. Each of these functions supported and reinforced one another.¹¹

Humans sacrificed an arboreal life to become bipedal earth dwellers. Afoot, humans could better exploit the environment, climbing hills, traversing wetlands, wading ponds, and fording streams, plus—weather and terrain permitting—traveling, as walking humanity perennially has, up to three miles per hour. Able to transport significant quantities of food, water, and goods, they could sustain themselves over considerable distances. This mobility, which included the ability to carry children, haul tools, transport provisions, and, later, lead animals, gave humans great migratory powers.

Liberated hands played leapfrog with the use of tools and the shaping of the environment. In *The Hand*, neurologist Frank Wilson postulated that the brain's development followed rather than preceded the use of tools. Arguably, *Homo erectus* completed the remodeling of the hand, which opened "the door to an enormously augmented range of movements and the possibility of an unprecedented extension of manual activity" as well as to "the redesign, or reallocation, of the brain's circuitry."¹² In turn, sometime during the last fifty thousand years, human thought permitted a great revolution in control over the environment, allowing our species a choice of the paths we would travel and the places we would inhabit.

With a rotating periscope head, strong legs, and unbounded dreams, the walking species became ruler of the earth. A mean and glorious microcosm, it stood between earth and heaven, among dust and stars. Walking provided its first hold on space. At the same time, walking was the evolutionary foundation of a dominant eye, hand, and brain.¹³ Subsequent complex historical cultures that crossed great seas and dreamed of flying did not acknowledge the humble feet on which they stood and the modest gait by which they proceeded. Free of aches and pains, humanity unthinkingly relied then, as it does now, on its trusted feet.

More than climbing and crawling, running was crucial for escape and attack. It was vital to hunting and herding. Runners—couriers, whose root is the Latin *currere*, to run—delivered important messages. To run fast over great, even extraordinary, distances—like a hundred miles between sunup and sundown—is a skill that still survives today in the running traditions of Native Americans and Kenyans.

The place of dance in primitive life also escapes our present comprehension. Dance, which can be considered illustrative walking, formed the spine of ritual and ceremony. Arguably, myths had their origins in describing the meaning of dance. Articulate, dramatic, rhythmic footwork could bring to life what eluded even the glib and liquid tongue. Engaging whole bodies, it could imitate and express what hands and words could not. Capable of limitless forms and multiple functions, dance imitated nature—the hesitant steps of the stalking crane, the burst of the charging lion. It dramatized first experiences, it initiated novitiates, celebrated hunt and harvest, declared

who was ready to marry, and recognized who had married. Ecstatic, fanciful, and calculated, dance steps melded meaning and joined participants and observers. As walk preceded mind, so dance could well have preceded language.

IF YOU DON'T WALK, YOU DON'T EAT

A recent theory suggests that *Homo erectus*—the walker, the direct ancestor of our own species—emigrated from Africa at least 1.8 million years ago, spreading all the way to China and Indonesia.¹⁴ No single theory, however, explains why or where human groups migrated any more than scientists have yet to offer a single accounting for bird migrations. Walking upright did not require travel. It did not dictate paths and destinations. Movement, migration, dispersal, and colonization each constituted separate phenomena, which did not follow a uniform pattern or have one source. Archaeologist Clive Gamble argues in *Timewalkers* that “large brains, proper feet, nimble hands, fire, stone tools, and a range of feeding patterns” were in place before humans moved in any significant numbers from Africa to midlatitude Asia and Europe between one million and two hundred thousand years ago.¹⁵

Wherever they settled, humans altered places to fit themselves and themselves to fit places. It is hard to imagine early peoples wandering or strolling, which activities require specialized places for leisurely walking. It is just as difficult to picture them marching, for that involves the numbers, homogeneity, and coordination that come with organized society. Only civilization affords the leisure to meander and the regimentation to march. Primitive peoples lacked the squares, gardens, and public places to promenade and the weapons, logistics, and maps to form disciplined armies. Primitive tribes shaped their walking to the landscape, terrain, climate, and objects they carried.

Adaptation can be seen in the recently discovered Ötzi man. This fully preserved frozen Alpine walker and his five-thousand-year-old clothes, weapons, and tools reveal an experienced snow traveler. According to anthropologist Konrad Spindler,

his clothes, including a grass cloak, were surprisingly warm and comfortable. His shoes were remarkably sophisticated: Waterproof and quite wide, they seem designed for walking across the snow. They were constructed using bearskin for the soles, deer hide for the top panels, and netting made of tree bark. Soft grass went around the foot and in the shoe and functioned like warm socks.¹⁶

Since this ancient European walker was well equipped for his icy journey, we are left to wonder what unexpected event overtook him.

Small bands of humans moving on foot were pushed by necessity and attracted by abundance across the ages. Changing weather patterns, increased and diminished forests, and advancing and retreating glaciers moved them over periods of thousands of years. Over shorter periods, they responded to the availability of plant and animal life, the changing seasons, the scarcity of mates, and growing and diminishing populations. They took to their heels to flee flood, fire, or enemy. Migration was related to food gathering, tool making, pastoralism, and slash-and-burn agriculture. Neither humanity nor its environment was static. Walking was shaped to place and place was shaped to walking.

Early human cultures turned on the changing of seasons and the migration of animals. Similar to the early human, the contemporary Mardudjara aborigines of Australia survive by scouring their landscape for plants, animals, and, especially, water, and this keeps them on the move. In contrast to the Kalahari of Africa, who typically occupy a camp for many weeks before they “eat themselves out of house and home,” the Mardudjara, according to anthropologist R. A. Gould, “eat their way into a camp by first exploiting all the food resources near the outlying waterholes before settling at the main waterhole. Then they consume staples between a five- and ten-mile radius of that waterhole before beginning the trek toward (but always *directly* toward) another reliable waterhole.”¹⁷ Women, who gather 60 to 80 percent of the food from reliable sources like vegetables and small game, mind the children as they go. Frequently they remain separate or trail behind the men, who often socialize with other groups and hunt alone or in pairs. Hunters require great skill to stalk and spear skittish and easily panicked desert animals.¹⁸

Whenever food and water sources permit gathering, Mardudjara aborigines seek sociability. "Despite the fluidity of their nomadic life," writes scholar Robert Tonkinson, "they are not rootless wanderers who lack territorial attachments. As individuals and group members, they maintain strongly felt and enduring bonds to stretches of territory, and within their home area, to particular sites of totemic and religious significance."¹⁹ Male initiation involves a trip on foot that, among other things, serves "to acquaint the novice with the totemic geography of distant, hitherto-unknown territories."²⁰ The need to be mobile, which alone can provide life-giving water and food, finally trumps sentiments of care for Mardudjara elderly and infirm.²¹

Early peoples, in truth, could not go as far as their legs would carry them. Anthropologist E. Adamson Hoebel suggests that forest dwellers could not become pastoralists, and dwellers in grasslands and deserts could not readily become gardeners. "In dry grass and steppe areas," he adds, "men on the lower levels of economic development may be collectors or hunters. If they move on to higher levels of economic development, they must become herders. Only when civilizational techniques produce the plow can agriculturists successfully move into the more favorable semiarid regions."²²

Animal trails and prominent geographic features defined the early hunters' landscape. Indeed, for generations the first immigrants to the Americas followed animals across the frozen Bering Sea and down the continent. Early North American horses, big-horned bison, camels, mammoths, and mastodons not only offered large meals but also made trails that led to water, food, protected valleys, and salt licks, as well as through mountain passes. White explorers and settlers used the same trails in their move west. "Daniel Boone," anthropologist Peter Farb wrote, "followed a bison trail in laying out his Wilderness Road across the Cumberland Gap, and many railroad beds through mountains followed routes pioneered by bison."²³

Domestication only extended prehistoric groups' oscillation between the two poles of movement and settlement.²⁴ Animals—chickens, ducks, pigs, water oxen, donkeys, camels, sheep, and the like—allowed people to stay at home. These animals increased the supply of natural materials, and they supplemented humans' diet. At the same time, animals required their keepers to seek out good pastures. Agri-