

**WHEN IN ROAM...**  
**Hiking Into the Heart of English Literature**  
By Richard Taylor  
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After tunnelling through an arbour of vanilla-scented gorse, we come upon a vast field of sulphur-yellow rapeseed, so bright it seems to reflect the heat from the sunlit English Channel filling the horizon. Our walking path is visible for miles ahead along the rugged coastline, a ribbon on the rolling hills etched with fringes of hedgerows leading to our destination - the crowned spire of a medieval church.

We pass our evenings at a charming riverside cottage in the tiny village of Notter Bridge near Plymouth, among the British who until their empire crumbled, thought they had the God-given right to rule the world. Yet, that said, here lies the cradle of English literature.



A love of language and a stout pair of hiking boots is all it takes for a ramble in Southwest England, the cradle of English literature where such eighteenth-century poets as Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth once roamed.

Each morning, my wonderfully unhinged brother-in-law, Vic, and his two other fairly well behaved retired schoolteacher friends from Ottawa and myself drive to a new destination. Then we pull on our hiking boots to explore the coastline of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset, passing through sudden fogs, by ancient churches, lonely farms, ruined castles, gardens, across empty heaths, downs and moorland, slaking our thirst at such pubs as The Ships Inn, The White Hart, The Rat and Parrot.

Because England's southwest has been called the birthplace of English Literature, this trek is becoming a literary and historical journey of many unusual surprises.

Eight out of 10 Britons are walkers. Writer Paul Theroux says Great Britain is the most widely tramped piece of geography on Earth. According to the Lonely Planet's guide, *Walking in Britain*, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act passed by parliament allows walkers to roam where they please. Footpaths are protected and marked off by a network of public rights of way. Most landowners voluntarily open their property with gates and stiles to encourage others to roam across their land.

Quite literally, you can walk through the entire British Isles. Everywhere, it seems, unless you happen to amble onto Madonna and husband Guy Richie's 1200-acre estate on the Wiltshire-Dorset border. Apparently, her nine million dollar country retreat isn't big enough. In court, they've insisted that allowing public access to their land would breach their rights to the undisturbed possession of property.

You know a bridge is old when a sign says that it was widened in 1819. Even though the perilously narrow roads in rural England are legendary, that doesn't make them any easier to bear as we each take turns, piloting our small rented car along these stone-walled, ivy-covered luge runs, whose only redeeming quality is that they keep us all frisky.

Beneath a cathedral of towering beech trees, on a trail carpeted by blue bells and wild garlic the locals call "stinky onion", our stroll up in Exmoor National Park in northern Devon traces the footsteps of 18th century poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They moodily wandered here together and were inspired to write their joint publication, *Lyrical Ballads*, which launched the Romantic Movement in English Poetry.

In single file, the four of us trek in quiet reverie along the riverbank. There's nothing but grazing sheep and wind in the trees and I think how potently lonely this place must have been two hundred years ago. Despite historic, economic and political happenings in the wider world, nothing has changed in Exmoor. Certainly the mood swings of people haven't altered much either. Nowadays, caught in our virtual realities, more than ever we seem cut off from nature and authenticity.

An acutely imaginative thinker, Coleridge was impassioned by his nature walks and opium-induced dreams. Living in an isolated farmhouse near here, and forced to go into his imagination like a contemporary insomniac surfing the web late at night, he wrote his most visionary poems, *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (both 1816). His soul mate, Wordsworth, no doubt thinking of modern life, wrote:

*"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours...  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune."*

Together they transformed ordinary life and their deep love of nature into enduring art. So we finish our day by driving into the village of Nether Stowey where Coleridge's house still stands.

Though it is closed, I peer into small windows, hoping to glean some of the dark subterranean poetry from the poet who had "drunk the milk of paradise."

Before melancholy gets the better of me, I hear Vic's gleeful cry: "Hey Ricky, the fooking pub across the street is called *The Ancient Mariner*."

What strikes me as touching about these aging Canadian lads I tramp alongside, who are a decade older than I am, is that they still seem to be vibrant, mischievous young men even though they are operating in bodies that are tightening, wrinkling and shrinking. Vic has gone stone grey, Dwight wears a hearing aid, Ed has false teeth, and I'm losing my hair.

Deteriorating with grace - much like the British Empire as it passes the baton to the new American Empire. Although nothing lasts forever, in some ways, aging encourages one to appreciate everything much more intensely.

We take a steam train in south Devon on a



Agatha Christie and her character Hercule Poirot rode the Paignton & Dartmouth Steam Railway, seen here crossing an aqueduct near Torquay.

former Great Western Railway branch line, passing through Totnes, Cockington and Buckfastleigh. Vic, who has an impressive bookcase of train books, is transported back to his English childhood as we sit in a refurbished rail car taking in whiffs of burning coal and steam wafting into the windows, listening to the “I think I can, I think I can” chuff of the engine as it builds speed up the steep grade. As we rattle alongside the swift-flowing River Dart, Vic sticks his head out the window and hollers in utter abandon.

The port city of Torquay, Devon, on the English Riviera is home to the world's once-greatest crime fiction writer, Dame Agatha Christie. Born in Torquay, she also worked here during WWI as a nurse where she acquired knowledge of poisons, which were central to the plot in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920).

Torre Abbey, dating back to 1196, houses her favourite armchair, 1937 Remington typewriter and handwritten manuscript of *A Caribbean Mystery*.

We jump onto the Paignton & Dartmouth Steam Railway that follows the coastline and was often a journey undertaken by Christie and her character Hercule Poirot in *The ABC Murders* and *Dead Mans Folly*, and we ruminate about lost souls who rode these rail cars.

Built for the June 6, 1944, D-Day invasion, cement ramps still run from the quayside into Torquay's harbour and are visible at high tide. Twenty-five years earlier, I was with Vic and our two young wives in this town. Our father-in-law, Ernie Gosselin, had been stationed here during the early 1940s as a Spitfire pilot. Family legend has it that he sang with Ivy Benson's all-girls band.

A couple of days later, while driving through morning rush hour to get an early start on another hike, Ed quips: "It's Monday. Anybody feeling blue?"

The Lizard Coastwalk begins with a mysterious fog rolling in off the Channel. As we walk the high rugged cliffs, we spot the wreck of a freighter on the shoreline and understand the awesome power of the sea that surrounds this small island. So much of the history that has shaped our world began on this southwest coastline. Sir Francis Drake set out on his daring global circumnavigation and later, with 60 ships, he defeated 130 galleons of the Spanish Armada and saved Elizabeth's England. The Pilgrim Fathers sailed out of Plymouth to begin a new world. The voyages of both Cook and Darwin



began here. During the Second World War, an armada of warships departed from this coast to reclaim France from Nazi Germany.

Along the footpaths, we meet jaunty hikers, trampers, ramblers and trekkers, some with walking sticks, canes, leashed dogs, binoculars, notebooks or paperback novels. Local walkers possess the insular, polite reticence of island dwellers. One old chap with an arthritic dog in tow says: "I rarely switch on the telly anymore. The world goes on. Nothing changes."



British law allows hikers to roam where they please as Rick Taylor and three Ottawa friends discovered.

On the telly last evening we watched Bush and Blair backpedal from the new Vietnam they've created in Iraq. And as the Prime Minister of Thailand puts in his bid to buy the illustrious Liverpool Football Club, many sports fans seem to have their knickers in a knot, even though it will mean cheap labour and a boon in Liverpool memorabilia sales all over Asia.

It's easy to be seduced by the magic of this island kingdom. Yet in the past 400 years, more than 20 million people have left the UK to begin new lives.

While gazing out from the cliffs, I understand why so many artists, writers, explorers, entrepreneurs and the disadvantaged had such a deep longing to see what lay beyond the horizon.

Nowhere in England is more than 150 kilometres or so from the sea, so for a break we go inland to the empty beauty of Dartmoor's granite crags. As a child, I'd been cozily terrified by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1902 novel *Hound of the Baskervilles*, set on the eerie fog-shrouded hills of Dartmoor.

Above the village of Witecombe-in-the-Moor, after one of our longest hikes, the four of us stretch out on a mossy peat bog surrounded by wild, shaggy Dartmoor ponies. Even in sunlight, this bleak place haunts the imagination like Conan Doyle's ambiguous hero Sherlock Holmes, who some say was a bisexual, violin-playing, drug addict who had more than a passing interest in evil.

After a rigorous looping hike of Land's End with sea mist spritzing our faces, we end up in a small fishing village of Sennen Cove at Myrtles on the Beach. We treat ourselves to the very pretty Myrtle, who is the wholesome romantic who runs the cafe with her young son. Out on the terrace, we butter thick clotted cream onto each half of our scones, then dab on strawberry jam and sit back with warm cups of tea.

As we take in the lines of swells rolling down the empty coastline, Dwight says: "This is another place I'm going to bring my lady when she retires."

Thirty years ago, I took an English course at Simon Fraser University from a bearded, longhaired professor who wore leather boots up to his thighs. Along with D.H. Lawrence, Pinter and Shaw, he goaded us into reading a gothic Daphne du Maurier novel, whose opening sentence, "The first thing I noticed was the clarity of the air," hooked me into



Hiking along the coastline allowed Richard Taylor to take occasional dips in the ocean.



literature, and writing.

*The House on the Strand's* drug-induced hero, Dick Young, imagines himself back in time. Who would have thought that in middle age I'd be a writer wandering both the contemporary and 14-century parts of a novel I'd studied in my youth.

Even though the seaside town of Fowey had just finished a ten-day Daphne du Maurier Festival of Arts and Literature, we hiked through wooded ravines and to remote beaches, passing by two of the houses where du Maurier lived and wrote bestselling novels, including *Rebecca*, *Frenchman's Creek*, *Jamaica Inn*, and short stories like *The Birds* and *Don't Look Now*, which were made into famous movies.

Driving through a myriad of lost villages, we approach St. Ives on the southwest coast of Cornwall. With the tide still going out, an enormous golden beach gives the illusion that St. Ives is much bigger.

Barbara Hepworth, who lived here along with so many other writers and artists, was instrumental in pushing modern sculpture into abstraction. Her art-filled studio is housed in a local gallery.

Because at Carleton University I goad my students into reading the novel *To The Lighthouse*, I know that Virginia Woolf spent halcyon childhood summers at a seaside cottage in St. Ives. The beckoning light of Godrevy Lighthouse out on the distant point inspired her to write her most tender, autobiographical novel about domesticity and the passing of time.

Taking in whiffs of rank, vegetal seawater and the scream of gulls, I think about Ottawa writer Norman Levine, and his many years of self-imposed exile in St. Ives. In Ottawa, I had met Norman; we had exchanged letters and books. I liked the integrity of the man, and his autobiography written as fiction. In one of his stories, he speaks about certain days that bring a terrible longing that is almost physical. While writing his lonely Canadian stories by the sea in Cornwall, he was no doubt hoping for a literary windfall that never came.

At dusk, as the boys drink scotch and check out soccer news and Coronation Street, I slip out to chat with a bloke who fishes along the river. Because he has two young daughters and I miss my girls, we've connected. He says, "I swear on my two children," and launches into a story about his friend's

grandfather who rode the Pony Express 300 miles through Indian Country with Abraham Lincoln's inaugural speech in his pouch.

His obsession with the myth of the Wild West is as out of proportion as our fantasies about Robin Hood's Sherwood Forest, King Arthur's Court or the lost literary worlds of Thomas Hardy, Dickens and D.H. Lawrence.

Another day, we end up in the Roman spa city of Bath, appreciating the beautiful young Jane Austen disciples whose genteel propriety seems to infuse the preserved Georgian architecture and Regency terraces that were the background to her work while she lived here, reluctantly, from 1801-1805.

We explore the back streets, exquisite gardens and promenades where much of the novels *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* are set. Nearby are the townhouses of the portraitist Thomas Gainsborough, the Victorian explorer David Livingstone and our own General James Wolfe.

Even though there is much heavy breathing and unrequited desire in Austen's world, it's understandable why so few relationships were ever consummated, as one character in *Persuasion* laments, "We are not boy and girl, to be captiously irritable, misled by every moment's inadvertence, and wantonly playing with our own happiness."



The inner courtyard of Salisbury Cathedral, which, at 754 years old, is revered for its "divine radiance."



On our way to London to catch a plane home, we nip into Salisbury in Wiltshire to see the cathedral that was built in 1250 and houses one of four existing copies of The Magna Carta. While wandering inside, I meet a devout old woman polishing an alabaster tomb.

England has so much living history one is constantly reminded of mortality, as though, perhaps much of the country is a well-preserved tomb. This chaste old soul, who is in charge of taking care of the tombs, tells me that William Golding, Nobel prize-winning author of *Lord of The Flies*, used to teach in Salisbury, and wrote his novel, *The Spire*, which of course, is about the symbol of symbols. Thomas Hardy, whose novel *Jude The Obscure* is also set here, would see the spire on moonlight rambles, and felt that Salisbury Cathedral is the closest human beings have managed to get to a physical manifestation of divine radiance.

After driving 2,700 kilometres, hiking more than 160 kilometres, and even taking a cathartic dip in the English Channel, for me, Salisbury Cathedral says much about the England that novelist Angela Carter called “an advanced industrialist Post Imperialist country in decline.”

In one corner of the cathedral, huge gears of an enormous medieval clock slip and notch one gear after another as one rope lifts and a stone ballast drops, and measured time slowly ticks away. Along another wall, a row of limp flags representing Imperial glory from the Boer War to the Second World War, slowly rot with age. But despite this erosion of time, something remains, as Coleridge once asserted: “Methinks, it must be the possession of a soul within us that makes the difference.”

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