

Trees Woods and Literature – 39

A Walk in the Woods

Not long after I moved with my family to a small town in New Hampshire I happened upon a path that vanished into a wood at the edge of town. A sign announced that this was no ordinary footpath but the celebrated Appalachian Trail [AT]. Running more than 2,100 miles along America's eastern seaboard, through the serene and beckoning Appalachian mountains, the AT is the granddaddy of long hikes. The Virginia portion alone is twice the length of the Pennine Way. From Georgia to Maine, it wanders across fourteen States, through plump, comely hills whose very names- Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberlands, Catskills, Green Mountains, White Mountains - seem an invitation to amble. Who could say the words 'Great Smoky Mountains' or 'Shenandoah Valley' and not feel the urge, as the great naturalist, John Muir, once put it, 'to throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in an old sack and jump over the back fence'.

For the Smokies are indeed a very Eden. We were entering what the botanists like to call 'the finest mesophytic forest in the world'. The Smokies harbour an astonishing range of plant life - over 1,500 types of wild flower, 1,000 varieties of shrub, 530 mosses and lichen, 2,000 types of fungi. They are home to 130 native species of tree. The whole of Europe has just 25... (When at last the ice sheets drew back, the native northern trees began the long process of returning to their former territories. Some like the white cedar and rhododendron are only now reaching home, a reminder that, geologically speaking the ice sheets have only just gone).

And yet, here is the thing. Shenandoah National Park is lovely. It is possibly the most wonderful national park I have ever been in, and, considering the impossible and conflicting demands put on it, it is extremely well run. Almost at once it became my most favourite part of the Appalachian Trail... Surprisingly considering its modest

dimensions and how little room there is for real back country, the park is remarkably rich in wildlife; bobcats, bears, red and grey foxes, beaver, skunks, raccoons, flying squirrels and our friends the salamanders exist in admirable numbers, though you don't see much of them as most are nocturnal or wary of people. Shenandoah is said to have the highest density of black bears anywhere in the world - slightly over one per square mile.

In 1840, during the presidential campaign, Daniel Webster gave an address to 20,000 people on Stratton Mountain in Vermont. Had he tried the same thing twenty years later (which admittedly would have been a good trick, as he had died in the meantime) he would have been lucky to get an audience of fifty. Today Stratton Mountain is pretty much all forest, though if you look carefully you will still see old cellar holes and the straggly remnants of apple orchards clinging glumly to life in the shady under-story beneath the younger and more assertive birches, maples and hickories. Everywhere throughout New England you find old tumbledown field walls, often in the deepest, most settled woods- a reminder of just how swiftly Mother Nature reclaims land in America.

These extracts¹ from the beginning, middle and towards the end of Bill Bryson's account of his adventures with his friend, the reformed alcoholic and pseudonymous Stephen Katz, along the Appalachian Trail do not do full justice to the colourful pilgrimage. The book, *A Walk in the Woods*, describes the fraught preparations involving often unlikely and inappropriate equipment and provisions, the dawning realisation that this would be no walkover, nocturnal encounters with real or imagined forest denizens, meetings along the way with eccentric fellow travellers such as Chicken John who was perpetually getting lost, near heatstroke and hypothermia and the acceptance, when faced with the formidable "one hundred-mile Wilderness" in Maine, that the trail had beaten them, are described by Bryson with gentle (and sometimes not so gentle) irony. He also makes some well-honed observations on a few American (US) environmental, industrial and societal institutions and their impacts.

The explorers did, however, manage a considerable achievement, walking 870 miles in four main stages or a third of the AT from spring to autumn. The first stage from Georgia to Tennessee, skipping next to Virginia and New Hampshire where Katz took a break leaving Bryson to explore the trail in New Hampshire and Pennsylvania

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by motor incursions, extended by daily walks. Finally the pair came together again to complete the Wilderness in New England. In total, 99.7 miles of boreal forest without facilities or paved roads, dotted with lakes and steep valleys and mountains lay before them. A short distance into the wilderness saw Katz lost and Bryson spending the next day searching for him. Katz realising he had missed the trail and rambling on in a random fashion fortunately found it next day where Bryson, retracing his steps, found him. The final paragraphs describe what then ensued.

There was something in his look. ‘You want to go home?’ I asked. He thought for a moment, ‘Yeah I do’. ‘Me too’.

I won’t say that the experience changed our lives and I can’t speak for Katz but I certainly gained an appreciation and respect for woods and wilderness and the colossal scale of America. I lost a lot of weight and for a time was remarkably fit. Best of all, these days when I see a mountain, I look at it slowly and appraisingly, with a narrow, knowing gaze, and eyes of chipped granite.

Bryson went on to further writing and travelling and he and Katz, who remained sober, kept in contact, but didn’t hike together again. *A Walk in the Woods* isn’t necessarily just about the trail and at times the observations about the woodlands seem sparse, but the landscape of the Appalachians as shaped by its geology, the people he met there, its historical context and the nature of the institutions which manage and impinge upon it, give a valuable and intriguing insight into a substantial slice of American life.

William McGuire (Bill) Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa in 1951. Despite dropping out of college in the 1970s to travel, he has had a remarkable academic and literary career. He met his wife, Cynthia Billen, in England, returning with her to Des Moines to complete his degree. He went back to England in 1977 and lived there with his family in North Yorkshire working, among other fields, as business copy editor of the Times and deputy news editor of the Independent. He returned once more to America in the 1990s where he settled in New Hampshire and wrote this book. He now lives, again, in England since 2003 and has been involved in public issues there, particularly the protection of the English countryside, and is the recipient of many honours including chancellorship of Durham University, an honorary doctorate from Kings College, London, an OBE, Fellow of the Royal Society and the James Joyce literary award, nearer to home, from the UCD L&H Society. He is the author of numerous humorous travel books, anthologies on place, language, science and history as well as memoirs and biographies. *A Walk in the Woods* was first published

by Doubleday in 1997, which edition includes attractive line drawings of the AT by David Cook. The book is now the subject of a film starring Robert Redford and Nick Nolte and was released in the current year (one wonders about the casting decision to use veteran actors to portray their forty something-year-old counterparts). A selection of his other books include *Lost Continent* (1989), *Notes from a small Island* (1996), *A Short History of Everything* (2003), *Life and Times of a Thunderbolt Kid* (2006), *One Summer, America 1927* (2013) and most recently *The Road to Little Dribbling* (2015).

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