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# WANDERINGS AND EXCURSIONS

BY

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## *Note*

**T**HE great bulk of the articles here collected appeared in the *Forward*, to whose Editor grateful thanks are returned for permission to reprint them; also to Messrs. Cassell for permission to extract the preface to the 'Life of Keir Hardie'; to the Editor of the *Contemporary Review* for the study of Jaurès; and to the Editors of the *New Leader*, *Venturer*, *Daily Chronicle* and *Nation* for contributions originally appearing in their pages.

## *Introduction*

THE papers included in this book were written to fill a corner in ephemeral sheets, or as comments on passing moods and events. Their life was meant to be brief and they had no expectation of resurrection. I have been asked frequently to collect some of them, but have thought that they might be allowed to lie comfortably forgotten amongst leaves that, through tints of yellow and brown, hasten to dust, taking with them all that has been printed upon them. Some friends, however, have been importunate. They have flattered me that if I took their advice, a few more feet might be induced to take to the open road and moor, and a few more thoughts turned to the rising and the setting sun. If the publication of these papers does that, it will do a good service.

The wanderlust is perhaps the most precious of all the troublesome appetites of the soul of man. It makes him keep in his cupboard a friendly old suit of comfortable wear that has paled under the fervent eye of the sun, and been matured by dust and mud and rain, and with that, a pair of honest boots nailed like the oak door of an ancient keep which of themselves direct one's way o'er moor and fell and bog and bypath away from the offence and clamour of cars and trains; it saves his soul from being lost in the vain attempt to keep itself alive by indulging in the vices of the smart or the flashy inanities of those to whom the jewels of life are paste or glass; it keeps his windows open to the winds of heaven and his heart to the song of birds. What better service

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can be done either to the body or the soul of man? So I have given a licence to dig and select, to take this and reject that. Therefore, whilst I have paternal responsibility for the papers, I am not the judge who has sent 'ane to heaven an' ten to hell.'

It is fitting that the sentences introducing a collection of such miscellaneous moods and subjects recalling wanderings in the by-ways of interest and life, should be written not only under strange skies but almost one by one disconnectedly amidst the distractions of a steamer's deck and smoking-room, the enervating heat of tropical hotels, and the wayside halts for rest and refreshment in forest and plantation.

I am ready to argue that the colour, gaiety and romance which are our portion in life come into it, in the main, during the first fifteen of our years. If we then fall in with our heroes and come under their spell, if we then come into possession of the great things of nature and the pulse-stirring achievements of men, if we then know where are the pilgrim and knightly shrines whither we must wander in our dreams and, God willing, on our feet later on – it is well with us. However dull our lot in life may be, or however much we may fail to keep our heads and hearts above the muddy waters of decorum and respectability, our weariness will never be too oppressive and the lifelessness of our materialistic and darkened minds too numbing to prevent us, when our grey hairs come, from having a voyage of an evening with Captain Kidd or a wild march through Darien forests with a band of swashbuckling black-

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guards recruited at Port Royal. We may pull ourselves up wondering at our own iniquities and at the primitive man who sleeps in us – and that with one eye open, too. The fact, however, is – and this is our justification as well as our apology – that Time is like a good mother in her care that the crimes and the follies of the strong and the reckless shall be clothed in glowing vestments, and whilst rigidly condemned in the courts of justice have a more tender judgment passed upon them at our firesides. We punish their badness but confess to their interest. We shun them like the plague upon the actual stage of life where we play our daily part or preach our weekly sermon, but in our moments of wanton privacy we enjoy their company. The spirit of adventure, like a core of the hard primitive fluxes of which the earth is made, stands out like blue mountain peaks seen from a distance and receives in fine glory the lights of dawning and of sun setting, whilst the softer earthy stuffs of passion and folly are washed away by the years and become the virgin soil for the cultivator of morals. Some admiration for the old disreputables does the living reputables no harm but much good. So, the Spanish Main, the Windward Passage, Darien, Hispaniola, Panama, are names that will make our hearts beat and our pulses throb so long as life is in our bodies. In those regions these sentences are being written.

I have passed by the tortoise-like island of Tortuga, the den of the buccaneers; in one of its bays lay a sea-beaten and weather-paled greenish-grey craft from the decks of which it was easy to imagine the plank was fixed for the skeletons now lying down below in



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the Windward Passage to walk to their end. I have skirted the coast of Hayti with its one hero, Toussaint, and its many worthless rivals and failures. I have been through the Costa Rican forests and swamps on a railroad which is one of the wonders of the world, and have seen the blue of the mountains of Central America which is surely unmatched by any blue of this earth. I have seen the miracle done by the Americans at the Colon end of the Panama Canal showing how the will and intelligence of man can subdue Nature whether in her most gigantic or her most minute powers and terrors. I have wandered over the hills, floated down the streams, bathed in the bays and shuddered in the decaying ghost-haunted Halls of Jamaica. Every minute of the days has been golden, and I return with no pained conscience that I have enjoyed myself but with a wish that it might be possible for all who hold the world and men in reverence to have the chance of at least one such journey before the earth and all it contains ceases to trouble and interest them.

And yet — and yet. — In a day or so I shall be back in the land of Rob Roy and Johnnie Armstrong, of the Grampians and the West Highland hills. If the exile in the West Indies sighs:

‘And in my dreams I see the Hebrides —’

his dreams are not bad. No people doomed to remain confined within the limits of their own country have a richer storehouse of treasures to explore than have ours. All we need is to know something of our own land, to keep our minds lyrical and our feet and

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boots in good condition. To turn in at Tibbie Shiels' of an evening, to go up the Enterkin in the dead of winter, to sleep out by Loch Avon; to know the foot-paths by instinct as a child of the wilds does, to trespass wherever the hills or the moors invite and whether or not the barbed wire and the notice boards forbid, to be independent of wind or rain or sun, to be at home at every inn fire when the day has closed and the blessing of drowsy weariness lies like God's boon upon you, to know the sweetness of the sleep of the labouring man whatever the bed may be; to walk on the footsteps of the men you revere, to enjoy their company by the firesides at which they sat, to wander over their homes and haunts, to be hunted with them on the moss hags and go reiving with them on the hill-sides — what lusty and gallant happiness greater than that has life to give?

And let no man think that he has possessed this happiness to the full till he can walk alone with his own thoughts and songs. The true wanderer sings by the way though he would be ashamed if any human ear were to hear his improvised outpourings. Walking and singing go together. The mood is everything. It is the note which Nature's finger touches in the soul and we must be free to give it forth. If it catches one gossiping of other things or dallying with other thoughts, it fades away and may not sound again. Moor and mountain are reserved for better concerns than the troubles we bring upon ourselves in the course of our trafficking with men and things. A book for the wayside and the evening between supper and bed — Wordsworth, Milton, the Elizabethan lyricists, the letters of Burns or Cowper

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— light for both pocket and hand to hold, and an inch to the mile ordnance survey map, are the essential companions. If any really good guides existed they too would be essential. Macmillan's *Highways and Byeways* Series are unequal, but are on the whole the best; though bulky and heavy, and get destroyed if carried in the pocket and lie like lead in a knapsack. The *Thorough Guides* give good walking directions and are plainly written by men who walk and not by compilers who move about by train — by folk who love the country and not by people who see nothing but churches and tombs. But I have found some of the best guides in cheap local publications, and it is a good rule to ransack those little book and news shops found in every country town for handbooks. Beyond that, never trust local information on anything. Only if you are either in dire extremity or careless where you may find yourself at the end of the day, or how many miles you may have to walk, should you seek advice from people you meet on the road. An inquiry suddenly made by a stranger flurries the countryman, or, to him, the highway is the only way upon which any respectable man would ever think of walking, or the person encountered really does not know or has vaguer notions than yourself. In any event, it is well to remember that if you cannot get yourself out of difficulties by a knowing and a useful head, the wayside adviser is likely to put you deeper into them.

When he was fifty-three, Mr. Gladstone at Balmoral wrote in his diary: 'Walked 24½ miles. Found it rather too much for my stiffening limbs. My day of long stretches is, I think, gone by.' It is a good

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thing to be able to say that one has beaten Mr. Gladstone at anything. But even if I can claim 30 miles without finding it 'too much' at fifty-three, there will be a walk which, looked back upon, will be recorded as 'the last.' Then when the fire dances, flashes on the fender, fills the room (where the blinds are drawn to keep out the cold and the night) with red light and black shadows, our truant memories will wander back upon the years; the winds will blow upon our faces, the sky be blue overhead, the birds call in our ears, the rattle of reaping machines come up from the distance, and we shall know that when the evening comes there will be the inn door open and that we shall be guided to it by the light from its hearth and its board lying across the dark road.

J. RAMSAY MACDONALD.

*Jamaica*, 1925.

## PART I: AT HOME

1. ON OLD FOOTSTEPS
2. THE OLD DOMINIE
3. IN MORAYSHIRE
  - (1) HOPEMAN
  - (2) THE TOP OF THE KNOWE
4. ROB ROY'S COUNTRY
  - (1) A FAR CROONIN'
  - (2) GREGALACH
5. YARROW
6. THE GRAMPIANS
  - (1) IN TUNE WITH THE ELEMENTS
  - (2) SCOTLAND'S HILLS FOR ME
  - (3) FERRIES