

# A LONG WALK SOUTH

AN IRISHMAN'S TREK ON THE GR5

*'Inspiring' Irish Independent*

**SEAN ROTHERY**



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*For Eoin, Colm and Finuala  
and in memory of Nuala*

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Castle, Beaufort, Luxembourg

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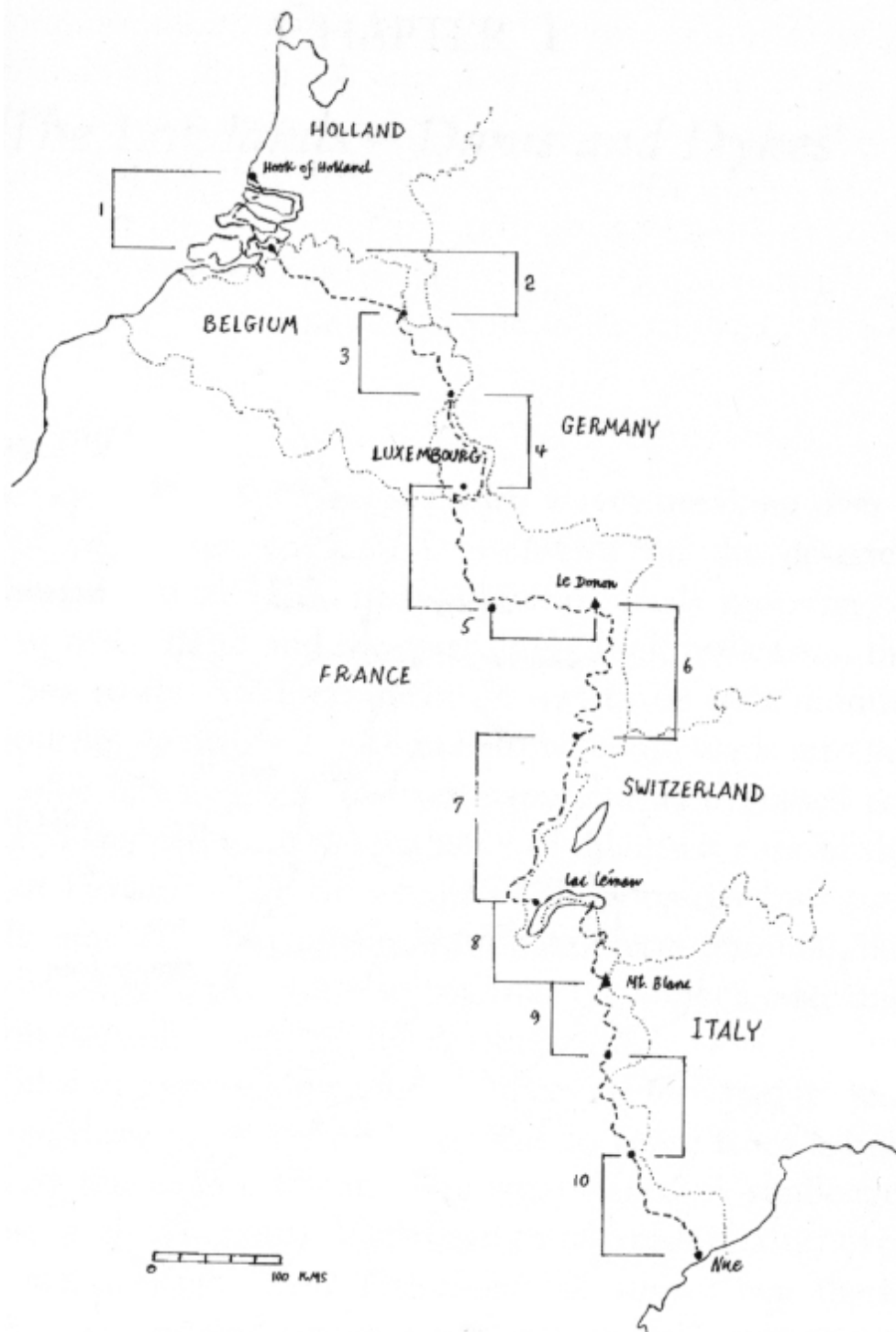
My first thanks must be to those friends who volunteered to meet me and walk some way with me at various stages of the long journey. Their companionship was for those, albeit brief, periods enjoyable and nurturing and without their support I might have lost heart. They are, in order of appearance on the trail, Petra Krieb from Amsterdam, Nanno Huismann from Heerlin, Sally Keogh from Dublin and Nuala Rothery from Dublin. As well as the pleasure of their company they were the bearers of fresh supplies such as maps, books and clothes but above all, the meeting points with them stood out as eagerly anticipated, if often distant, goals.

I met many people along the way, at least in the latter stages of the trail, but a handful of fellow walkers shared a few days with me. My thanks to Sandrijn Vink from Utrecht whose company through the early parts of Lorraine was a pleasure. The all too short encounter with the Dutch couple, John and Marie Haandel from Blaricum, in Luxembourg, raised my spirits at a time when I felt I was the only person mad enough to plod daily the long distance walk. I crossed paths in the Vosges and again in the Jura with the young Frenchmen, François and Christophe, and enjoyed the sharing over bottles of wine. There were many Dutch on the trail and I joined Yvonne Netenboom and Connie Van Zanten from Gravenzande for several stages in the Jura and they were agreeable dinner companions after many solitary evenings.

There must be a special thanks to the Belgian couple Mady and Jaques Bouckaert who showed such hospitality to Petra and myself when we invaded their Kalmthout home, hot and thirsty on that day in May.

Finally I am deeply grateful for the patient advice and careful editing skills of Jonathan Williams.





Map 1: Hook of Holland to Nice



Map 2: Holland

# CHAPTER 1

## *The Lowlands – Dams and Dykes*

10 May 1994

A grey sky and a colourless sea with waves breaking over a froth of yellow-white foam. I undressed on the deserted beach and ran naked into the cold ocean. Early morning on the coast of Holland and the start of my long walk from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. It was to be four months and a journey of nearly 2,300km before I could wade into the warm, blue bay at Nice. The sun came out as I crossed the dunes and stepped onto the pathway of the town park of the Hook of Holland. The first stage of the long-distance trail officially started at the railway station and ferry terminal, but it seemed more appropriate to begin at the water's edge and thus link the cold North to the warm South.

The idea of undertaking a long journey on foot had its genesis some three years before I was due to retire from a fulltime academic career. My motives were mixed. A challenge, perhaps, to growing old? A celebration of freedom after over 40 years as a wage slave? The cliché 'because it was there' seemed reason enough since I am a long-time lover of mountains and wilderness. William Hazlitt's essay 'On going a journey', which I first read at fourteen, made a lasting impression.

*The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do just as one pleases.*

The taking on of a reasonably hard physical task was given an added impetus by my attendance at a 'retirement course', organised with philanthropic zeal by the institution which had decreed that every

worker over 65 was no longer capable or useful. The various speakers were harmless if anodyne, but the doctor, an overweight forty-something, who came on to lecture the ‘senior citizens’ about their health, was patronising with his admonition for us to take long walks, ‘at least two or three miles’! I resolved there and then to go on a real journey, not quite a Patrick Leigh Fermor walk to Constantinople, but something nearly comparable and dramatic – a long journey on foot through space and time.

Leigh Fermor walked to the Danube and then on to Constantinople from the Hook of Holland in the 1930s. This was long before the vast road networks and monstrous traffic levels of the late twentieth century made such a journey today seem like madness. After the Second World War, the French were amongst the first to establish long-distance footpath routes through whole regions of their country. These were given the name *Grande Randonnée* and cleverly linked up old bridle paths, forest trails, canal towpaths, riverbanks, transhumance paths, Roman roads, minor roads and mountain passes, to create a huge and intricate network of walking routes. One of the earliest of these was the *Grande Randonnée Cinq*, popularly known as the GR5, which originally stretched from the northerly tip of the Vosges mountains, through the Jura, before traversing the French Alps to Nice. In the last two decades the GR5 was extended through Lorraine to the border of Luxembourg and then northwards through the Ardennes and across Flanders to Holland. In the 1980s the Dutch extended the route to the Hook of Holland; thus making it the North Sea to the Mediterranean Long Distance Walking Trail – the E3.

In the 1960s, when the GR5 existed only as a waymarked route down the eastern side of France from Alsace in the north and southwards through the Alps, John Hillaby, the prince of long-distance walkers, saw the possibility of linking the seas of the North and the South. His book *Journey through Europe* was the story of that epic walk. Reading that account was an inspiration to me. The GR5 today, however, is substantially different, and longer, from the way Hillaby went and, except in a few places, notably the southern Ardennes and Luxembourg, the routes rarely match.

The clouds had now vanished. The sun was warm. Birdsong and the wild flowers of late spring made it a great start. A Dutch friend, Petra Krieb, had joined me for the first day of the journey and we set out strongly eastwards on smooth, hard and very flat paths.

A decision had to be made when planning the journey whether to seek companions for the whole trip or to attempt the walk alone. A solitary expedition was tempting, despite the obvious drawbacks – potential spells of loneliness, possible dangers and the real difficulties of carrying a heavy load and resupply of necessities. Hazlitt had no doubts about the merits of travelling alone:

*One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me. I am then never less alone than when alone.*

Regarding dangers: I never felt unsafe, except when out in thunderstorms in the Alps, and companions would not have helped there. ‘Were you not afraid of being alone?’ was the question most asked before and after the trip. The equipment to be carried and the resupply of essential items were more serious problems. A compromise on the solitary journey was accepted where I would meet friends at different stages for companionship, as well as to provide me with maps, guidebooks or any replacement clothes. Petra was to rejoin me for two days in Belgium. An early stage rest-stop was Maastricht, where I would stay with another Dutch friend, Nanno Huismann, who lived in nearby Heerlen. He also had agreed to meet me for a day or so in the Ardennes. In Lorraine I was to meet an Irish friend, Sally Keogh, who would walk with me towards the foot of the Vosges mountains. Finally my wife, Nuala, along with Nanno, would join me for the first stage in the French Alps. I spent 110 days on the walk and eighteen of these were with companions. Several more days were in the company of stray fellow walkers met on the way, but I mostly walked alone.

For the first hour or so I was subdued at the thought of the enormity of the journey ahead, but soon I felt exhilarated and almost

had to hold myself back from striding out too fast on the flat paths. The waymark for the GR5 was now becoming familiar – a horizontal white stripe over a red stripe. The French described this waymarking as *balisage*. Throughout my journey I was always on the lookout for these strips of paint. They might be found on poles, fences, on the ground, tree trunks, walls or boulders. Usually they were plentiful and easy to spot but sometimes they were maddeningly scarce or absent over whole stretches. It became a daily obsession to find the route but it was a joy to come back on course after an hour or more of confusion. Following the first woodlands there was a long stretch along the Oranjedijk, on a straight asphalt path, and it was now getting warm. The great wide Waterweg appeared, with a procession of ships gliding along up to the port of Rotterdam, leaving v-shaped washes rolling on to the embankments. At the outskirts of Maasluis, a winding path with a lovely soft surface took us right into the old dock of the town.

To avoid the urban jungle of Rotterdam, laced with motorways, the route required that we take a ferry across the Waterweg where the trail began again in the little town of Rozenburg. Hillaby had no waymarked route to take him around the concrete conglomeration of this great Dutch city and his description of dodging the roaring traffic on a motorway intersection is hair-raising. We stopped at a café and sat on a sunny terrace: the first of many such respites to follow in the long hot summer to come. The route then threaded its way along and over a complex of waterways, starting with the Coalandkanaal. This is an engineered landscape of skeletal concrete and steel bridges, with ships improbably sailing through countryside. Over ruler-straight canals and intersecting roads with rivers of traffic, we could see our first night's destination – the ancient town of Brielle. We scrambled down a grassy embankment onto a peaceful path along the edge of the Brielse Meer, a waterway with pleasure craft and masses of water birds. I was dog-tired; my rucksack felt like a ton weight and my feet were burning from the continuous pounding on the hot, asphalt surfaces.

We entered through the gates of Brielle, crossing the moat and through the protective dyke with the brick bastions thrusting into the water. The hotel De Zalm was right in the centre and could not have come sooner.

That evening I was exhausted and my feet had monumental blisters. I was also very despondent about the next stage since my programme was to complete the section through Holland, to Bergen-Op-Zoom, in four days. Places to stay were also a problem since bed and breakfasts or hotels were few and far between; I had been warned about this in the tourist office at the Hook of Holland on the evening before I started. I was now almost overwhelmed by the immensity of the task I had set myself. Only 30km covered and over 2,200 still to go. It seemed impossible to me that first depressing night.

After some hard thinking, I decided to change my plan and add a day to the Dutch section. I felt better at once and went to bed early.

### *11 May*

A beautiful morning, calm and mild, with blue sky appearing from the early cloud. Petra returned to Amsterdam and I set out strongly, enjoying the prospect of the easy day's stage ahead. The waymarks began again at the Gothic church in the centre of Brielle, an unfinished building which looked strange, almost as if it had been sliced in half. The route then led around the marvellous fortifications with their star-shaped, angled bastions, some with cannons pointing out towards the misty, flat and watery Dutch landscape.

Brielle is a famous town in the history of the Netherlands, associated with the uprising against the Spanish in 1572. The invaders had occupied the town in 1567 but some of the inhabitants managed to flee across the North Sea to Dover from where they planned a rebellion. The rebels, called the Watergeuzen, were again forced to leave and their fleet sailed for Germany. A sudden storm drove the ships back and the rebels recaptured their town. To the Dutch, this event marks the start of the liberation of the Netherlands.

Across the moat, the route first led me along the waterway called the Brielse Rak and then by the edge of the Oosterlandse Rak. For the

first hour or so I walked alone, relishing the solitude, but then was overtaken by a large party of Dutch joggers. These were mostly women, dressed in multicoloured shorts and sweatshirts, but they were being marshalled along by a couple of fit-looking men. These specimens of good health, who were obviously leaders or coaches, leapt up and down, sprinted for a few metres, sometimes backwards, all the time keeping up a shouted commentary of orders to their unfortunate, sweating charges. I felt tired just looking at them.

When the route left the waterway, it led into an immense estate of little bungalows or more properly, 'wendy houses' which the Dutch use as weekend retreats. Most of these have tiny gardens and look like somewhat larger and more architectural versions of the allotment huts you see in England and Wales. They are so closely packed together, it is a wonder they can be seen as a means of getting away to the peace of the country. The Dutch are so used to living in densely populated cities and in tall apartment blocks that just being at ground level at weekends, close to their vegetables and flowers, must be their way of connecting with the earth.

I crossed under a big viaduct which takes the motorway out to Europort – just visible on the horizon as a fretwork of great oil tanks, chimneystacks and pylons, all softened and surreal in a purple heat haze. A path wound on to what was called on the map a *boulevard*. Surprisingly, this turned out to be a narrow track alongside a wild and beautiful empty expanse of marsh and tall golden reed beds, full of birds. Dropping my rucksack, I flopped down on a bench, drinking in the peace and resting my burning feet which had been pounding hard surfaces practically every metre since I had left the beach. The writers of the Sierra Club guidebook to the GR5 had remarked that the flat walking in Holland was not to be assumed to be an easy effort. They were certainly right and the continuous hard surfaces and unchanging rhythm were cruel on my feet and leg muscles. I kept saying to myself that I would be all right after a week or so.

The weight of my rucksack was a problem. It was a shock for me to read that Hillaby had carried between 30 and 40 pounds on his epic trek, but I was even more discomfited to learn that he took long



training walks with 50 pounds of cast iron discs sandwiched between the thick volumes of the London telephone directory! I had no desire to look like a walking rucksack and in any case I was, at 66, at least twenty years older than Hillaby when he had started his journey. When planning mine, I spent a long time deciding what was important and which items could be forsaken. Essentials like maps and guidebooks would have filled a rucksack alone. There were eleven guides for the whole route and innumerable maps. The best maps for walking were to a scale of 1:25,000 but if I took these for the whole route I would have needed a van, or a team of porters, to carry them. I had to settle for a scale of 1:50,000, which was just acceptable, and 1:100,000 which turned out to be almost useless. Even at these scales, there was an enormous bundle of maps and I had what I thought was the brilliant idea of cutting each map down to just the section I would walk on. Later, this turned out to be less than wise when I needed to go off the route to find a town with lodgings.

The weight of paper to be carried was considerably reduced by my reliance on supporters at different stages of the route. Since the enterprise was to be undertaken throughout the summer, I took the chance of drastically limiting my clothes. A lightweight fleece jacket was to suffice for chilly days or nights – wool sweaters were out! A lightweight rainproof jacket turned out to be worse than useless, but in the end the problem was heat and drought rather than wetness. A small medical kit was essential and since I intended to make drawings to illustrate my journey, a sketchbook, a variety of pencils and a bottle of fixative built up the weight. An essential item for me was reading matter and a big question at an early stage was which book or books? I settled for the nine stories which made up Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* which was available in three thick paperbacks. Volume one was to last me to Nancy in Lorraine; volume two as far as Lac Léman and the final book would take me across the Alps to the Mediterranean. I finally set out with just under twenty pounds which, for the first month or so, still felt too heavy.

Emulating Hillaby, I took a few training walks but without an overloaded rucksack. The most important of these was a nine-day trek

around the Kerry Way in the wild south-west of Ireland. Apart from getting fit, I learned a lot about clothes and equipment. I found that the boots I had planned to use were a disaster, leaving me with spectacular blisters after three days. Settling for wet feet, I finished the trail in light trainer-type shoes. These became my choice for the long walk and were largely a success. I brought two pairs and wore one pair out after 1,500km.

I came out on to a wide area of sand dunes on the tip of the island of Voorne with winding paths through stunted pines. Here I lost the route and eventually blundered out on to a suburban road. There was nobody about, so I walked on to find a sign or anything to tell me where I was since I was now obviously well off the map in my guide. Around a corner I spotted, to my relief, a VVV, Dutch Tourist Office, but, just like the café, this was closed. There was a large map outside and I was able to work out a route back to the GR. Coming into the village of Rockanje, I met my first serious walkers, complete with rucksacks. These were two middle-aged Dutch women who were walking the Holland section of the GR5 in the opposite direction, the variation which kept to the coast of Holland. It was reassuring to meet someone else in the pursuit of the same eccentric pleasures. After an exchange of stories I walked on with a stronger stride and a pack which felt slightly lighter. I would not meet another fellow walker for more than three weeks.

I had booked ahead into a bed and breakfast and arrived outside the neat suburban house in the late afternoon. An elderly woman opened the door but she could not speak English and seemed agitated at my sudden appearance. My Dutch was almost non-existent, but I recognised enough to understand that her daughter was the owner and was out until later in the evening. She allowed me sit on the shady patio and brought me a pot of tea. I saw my first swallows of the summer and after a huge Dutch dinner with lots of chips, a speciality of the Netherlands, went to bed early.

*12 May*

Sun and blue skies again. I savoured the prospect of a short day, with lots of rest to ease my sore feet: hoping I was learning to take each day as it came and not think about the immensity of the distance ahead. The official GR route wandered off behind the line of dunes, past acres of glasshouses, at the edge of the suburbs, and looked pretty boring. I decided to strike out directly for the sea about one kilometre through the broad band of sand dunes. Some of these were over four metres high and the land behind was just below sea level. As I crested the last high dune, the ocean was before me.

The tide was out and a wide stretch of sand led out to a shining sea. I had all day before me and only 13km to walk, so I decided on the luxury of lounging in the sunshine on the beach for a few hours. This being Holland, there was the freedom to go naked and when the day became hot it was a pleasure to make a few quick dashes into the icy waters of the North Sea. I felt better now that the journey was well started.



The cold North Sea: start of the GR5

The beach was nearly deserted at 10 a.m., but since it was a national holiday in the Netherlands it did not take long for people to drift out of the dunes and settle down into little groups on the beach. After a pleasant few hours I reluctantly hoisted my rucksack and set off across the wide sands towards the distant great dam and sluices: the Haringvlietdam and the Haringvlietsluizen.

Three great rivers of Europe converge at this point to form the delta of south-west Holland. The grandest of these is the Rhine which, fed by waters from the northern slopes of the Swiss Alps, flows 1,300km to the sea. The Maas starts life as the Meuse in eastern

France, while the Scheldt journeys 430km from northern France. These rivers create a bewildering lacework of waterways when they reach the lowlands. When it crosses the Dutch frontier, the Ijssel splits from the Rhine and then flows north into the former Zuider Zee. The Rhine itself becomes the Waal and is joined by the Maas, splitting again into dozens of waterways to form the delta.

On the night of 31 January 1953 the vast cluster of islands which formed the delta was battered by a ferocious storm. The protective dykes which surrounded the low-lying land gave way and the sea poured in over huge areas of land. More than 1,800 people died, overwhelmed by the waters. The islands all but disappeared and the inundation spread far inland.

The Dutch, who had lived with this apocalyptic prospect for centuries, responded in characteristically robust fashion. The Delta Plan, prepared for such a catastrophe, began three years later and over the next 30 years a stupendous engineering achievement finally tamed the waters. The separate, vulnerable islands of the delta were stitched together by an astonishing network of canals, dams, bridges, dykes, sluices and barrages. The line of outer dams protects against the ocean and creates huge inland lakes. These are used for fresh water supply, as well as recreation, for one of the most densely populated countries in the world. A further line of secondary dams, near the multiple mouths of the rivers, controls flood waters and all the dams and barrages carry roads on top which link into an intricate system of motorways. I was soon to plunge into this new tectonic landscape.

Walking on the damp sand was sheer pleasure after the hard surfaces of the paths. More and more people appeared, stripped for the sun and sea and largely ignoring the solitary walker with the rucksack.

The huge bulk of the dam loomed in front and, as I left the beach, the red and white sign of the GR reappeared and led me on to it. The structure was almost 4km straight across, with the sea on one side and the great inland lake of the Haringvliet on the other. Two lanes of fast and continuous traffic flowed along the top of the dam but there was also a narrow concrete service road, free of cars, and I plodded along this, counting off the sixteen concrete and steel sluices.

On the other side of the dam, the route turned sharp right, past the Stellendamhaven, filled with smart boats, and led out onto an area of scrub-covered dunes. I lay down to rest my hot and blistered feet. The hard surface of the dam had not improved matters. It was restful to lie in the long grass at the top of a bank and watch kestrels working the canopy of dwarf shrubbery below me. Cuckoos called and there was birdsong everywhere. The sun got far too hot for lying down so I reluctantly set off again. The path ahead was hard-surfaced and I hobbled along with fiery soles until I got into my own rhythm and stride, all the time watching out for aggressive Dutch racing cyclists tearing along the paths shared with the walkers. It appeared that the mad cyclists have the right of way. Although this was supposedly my precious 'short' day, the last few kilometres seemed unending.

The village of Goedereede, with its squat church tower, appeared and on its outskirts, the modern motel where I had reserved a room. I reached the halfway point of my route through Holland at Goodereede, the pronunciation of which was almost as difficult as the famous Scheveningen – a sort of rattle at the back of the upper palate. I had walked only 60km, but needed to give myself some encouragement at this juncture. Daily targets, hours walked, kilometres in an hour, minutes per kilometre, how long to reach that distant landmark could become an obsession.

The GR turns east here and follows the shore of another new inland waterway, Grevelingen, and then along the canalised river Scheldt, before finally leaving the North Sea far behind. The motel was surprisingly full of people, but I realised at dinner that they were mainly Dutch, having a meal after the holiday: few guests were staying overnight. The manager told me about two Canadian walkers, Charlotte and Sven, who were ahead of me and going all the way to Nice. I first heard about them in the Hook of Holland, where they had stayed at the same bed and breakfast as me and were seven days in front. I wondered if I would ever catch up with them and if so where. While I was sitting alone in the cheerful dining room, with animated talk in Dutch all around me, I was confronted with the loneliness of the solitary long-distance walker. A half bottle of wine helped, followed by a bath and bed.

13 May

I felt wonderful after a comfortable night's sleep. I took a needle to my huge blisters, drained and dressed them and felt I was good for a few more stages.

At breakfast I was seated near a table of three men: two English, with North Country accents, and one Dutchman. The conversation was all about getting Mercedes cars into Britain and the necessity for respraying them. I speculated as to whether I was listening in to a genuine business conversation or if murky deals were being done.

The early morning was again splendid: wide blue skies and a cool wind. As I left the hotel, I turned east towards the mainland of Holland. For most of the marvellous day that followed, I met hardly anyone, I saw no cars; even the noise of traffic, constant in Holland so far, had disappeared.

I was now finally turning my back on the North Sea. The hinterland of Europe lay ahead. An hour's walk on an empty straight road, across a table-flat geometrical landscape had me lost in thought, something that would occupy me more and more and I found myself increasingly slipping into daydreaming in the solitary months ahead.

In 1950, I had set out on a similar journey across Europe. I was 22 and a student of architecture. This was my first visit to mainland Europe and just five years after Second World War, travel was becoming possible. My plan was to cycle to Rome and back, a sort of plebeian version of the Grand Tour. In the tradition of students of architecture, I carried a sketchbook along with my Brownie box-camera. Landing at Dieppe in the middle of August, I rode to Paris via a bombed-out Rouen. Paris was an enchanting place to me then, although, as an impoverished student, my only experience of French cuisine was from an army steel ration tray in a camp site near the Rodin Museum. The road to the south-east, although a *Route Nationale*, was quiet in those days and my memory is of huge distances covered along straight roads lined with tall poplars.

Past Vesoul and Troyes, I went through the Gap of Belfort and into Switzerland, to be amazed by the cleanliness, order and obvious wealth of that country after the shortages and economy of the war

years. Everywhere in France there were signs of destruction: smashed bridges, ruined buildings and walls pockmarked by shells and bullets. Lake Lucerne was an intense blue and the first sight of the Alps enrolled me as a would-be mountaineer for life. I remembered my shortness of breath on the summit of the St Gotthard Pass, the chill of the high altitude air on the summit and then the sheer exhilaration of the 50-km downhill dash to Lake Como, swooping around bends on largely empty, beautifully engineered roads.

A combination of boredom and exhaustion, following day after day of punishing pedalling, made me give up in Milan. The great Galleria and the spiky marble pinnacles of the Gothic cathedral were wonders to an aspiring architect. The temptations of a slow train and a very cheap ticket took bicycle and me to Rome. I stopped off in Florence to experience the architecture and made a drawing of the Ponte Vecchio, the only intact bridge left over the Arno: all of the others were destroyed by the retreating Germans. Student beggars and pavement artists were common then and I tried my luck with my hat on the path as I made my drawing. The miserable few liras thrown in did not take me very far. In the centre of Rome, having little money left, I queued at a centre for pilgrims and was rewarded with free accommodation and basic meals for a week, way out on the Via Aurelia in a concrete, Fascist-style apartment block.

The return journey was a lesson in survival. I had very little money and crawled along the Mediterranean, lodging and eating when I could in monasteries, Salvation Army hostels; sleeping on the beach and surreptitiously eating grapes and digging potatoes from the edges of fields. It was the end of the summer; the youth hostels were nearly empty, and the kitchen shelves held opened packets of unfinished food, particularly a kind of porridge oats. This free food kept me alive. Monte Carlo, Nice, Cannes, St Tropez all slipped past until Marseilles gave me the opportunity to see Le Corbusier's famous and newly built *Unité Habitation*.

The long haul up the Rhône valley in a half-starved state remains a blur of sensations; eating a gift of slabs of nougat in Montélimar; being fed by two kindly Australian women tourists near Avignon and