

Williamson Park – My Exercise Yard

by

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Time for exercise: start the clock. Just inside the recommended 60 minutes, I can manage one tour of Williamson Park and the adjoining woodland. Williamson is my local park and a landmark for the city, topped as it is by the Ashton Memorial. Domed and grandiose, the memorial's visible all over Lancaster, but not from my street. Here it's obscured by houses and, perhaps, by the curve of the hill.

Stepping out of my front door, halfway up the hill, I can make out the silver thread of Morecambe Bay then, closer in, the clock tower on the smoke-blackened Town Hall, and, nearer still, the slender cathedral spire.

My days are marked by the chimes of the Town Hall clock – even more so during full lockdown, when our streets fell silent. On Sundays the cathedral bells used to summon people to Mass in measured tones. But I miss Monday evenings, during practice, when they were far less inhibited, boisterous even, tumbling through rounds and changes with giddy abandon. An irresistible sound, impossible to ignore. I find it both calming and unsettling, uplifting and foreboding.

And, for me, walking has a similar duality.

First, as an unhappy teenager, I walked to get away from an inner turmoil I couldn't contain. Escaping outdoors, I paced around the maze of roads on our housing estate in Carleton, near Poulton-le-Fylde. Trying to shake off my feelings and leave them behind.

I never succeeded. Those feelings had to be faced, no matter how far or fast I walked away from them.

Soon, though, I started walking towards things. During a gap year before university I spent six months as an au pair in Paris. It was a big adventure: my first time away from home on my own, in a city I already knew I was going to love.

I discovered it on foot.

I strolled along boulevards where students had built barricades, and drank coffee in cafés where artists and thinkers used to talk into the night.

Then, to join the dots, I visited high places - the hill of Montmartre to the north, Montparnasse tower further south, the Arc de Triomphe to the west, the cathedral of Notre Dame in the middle. Each high place filled in a different section of the map that was forming in my mind, until Paris was etched on my memory as indelibly as on a metal surface.

As I walked, I created what I now think of as a cityscape, an inner and outer world, layered and perfectly synced, that was mine to inhabit. Over time, I added to my cityscape. One entry is for the novelist Colette, who had an apartment in Palais Royal, an astonishingly severe and conventional location for such a free spirit. And it isn't a palace, as its name suggests; more like a cross between an Oxford college quad and an elongated London square.

Other entries that spring to mind are those for Simone de Beauvoir or Samuel Beckett. Both of them lived on the left bank where, after university, I would eventually spend two happy years in my first jobs as a bilingual secretary. Beckett once described the neighbourhood as being full of prisons and hospitals; he was right, and I pocketed that thought and carried it with me, hearing it rattle in my memory whenever I passed the Val-de-Grace hospital close to my apartment.

I didn't realise it then, but I was already walking myself into a place that I loved. Somehow, by treading the streets of Paris – taking in the look of it, the smells, the sounds, the names – I was making it my own. Leaving my imprint on it like invisible graffiti: Mary was here.

Now, I do that consciously. Last summer, I was preparing to move out of London after thirty-five years. Before leaving, as well as spending precious time with friends, I walked whenever I could.

Especially in favourite places like St James's – a neighbourhood so drenched in history and personal links, a complete roll-call would take hours. But special mention must be made of St James's Square where I once temped in a grand white building; St James's Park with its pelicans on the lake and civil servants on its benches (at lunch time, anyway) and the playground where I always took my son on our trips to the West End.

And finally, St James's church, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, always full of light and grace no matter what the weather or the time of day.

It's also, incidentally, where Lord Peter Wimsey's butler was married.

Because, you see, fictional characters play their part too. They add to that interplay of memories, associations, history and happenings, buildings, statues and fountains, steps, streets and parks that make up my London. So, Bloomsbury isn't only the place made notorious by Virginia Woolf and the rest of her set; it's also where Harriet Vane lived and worked in the mind of her creator, Dorothy L. Sayers. When I walk around Bloomsbury, those lives – real and imagined – give it an added resonance that chimes in me.

I'm not alone in being fascinated by dwelling places. Frieda Klein, protagonist of eight novels by Nicci French, walks obsessively around London at night and is especially drawn to its underground rivers.

Then there's Belladonna, an ageing rock star with a taste for the macabre. She walks through medieval Ludlow by night in Phil Rickman's novel, *The Smile of a Ghost*, in his words 'infusing her essence into the fabric of the place'. She goes to great lengths, secretly placing her bodily fluids at strategic points around the town.

Well, I've no desire to do that, but I think I understand the impulse behind it. And I do feel that by walking through a city repeatedly, doggedly even, I can connect with its very essence.

Yet, that's the opposite of what happened this spring. Instead of walking myself into a city, I found myself walking through a season. Humans went into hibernation just as spring erupted onto the scene; that, in turn, caused a reaction which – like the cathedral bells in full flight – was impossible to ignore. And it was, for one season only, the only show in town.

Do we have an affinity with the season we were born in? I was born in April, and all my adult life I've found spring the most thrilling of the seasons. The one I look forward to with the deepest longing and relinquish with a reluctance that grows as I get older.

This year, like many of us, I saw it in close up. Every day observing something new. At first, I didn't recognise the copper beeches that crown my entry route into Williamson Park. Their early leaves were a delicate pink I'd never seen before. Then, overnight, there they were in burnished glory. They'd acquired their copper sheen, like birds taking on adult plumage, grey cygnets becoming gleaming white swans.

While human life came to an abrupt stop, nature seemed to be on fast forward. Once activated, the woods behind Williamson Park briefly became my colouring book: in March, there were black lines on white space. But with gathering speed the spaces were filled in until the wood was dense with green, secretive and mysterious. Now, I walked with a tingle of unease, thinking of romantic poetry and Grimm's fairy tales, where travellers – or children – enter the woods at their peril.

While trees in the wood went about the serious business of greening, in the park they were putting on blossom, pretty in pink and white, gaily getting ready for the annual outing. No one else was going anywhere, except those of us on our dutiful round of daily exercise.

Walking felt different in so many ways. It became a timed activity, one small chunk of freedom from days spent indoors, Zooming, decluttering, binge-watching, anxiously checking news websites and government briefings. But it wasn't freedom in any recognisable form. We had to keep our distance from each other – something that required a surprising amount of effort and thought. Other people had become a threat, but exercise would be taken, whether or not we were in the mood – because how would we feel if the weather turned and we'd left it too late?

Paradoxically, I had more contact with fellow Lancastrians during lockdown than in the previous 9 months. Not knowing anyone at first, I'd always felt like an outsider when I went into town. There were no answering smiles from familiar faces to tether me here.

But early in lockdown, when the world seemed empty and infinitely spacious – when the suspension of our normal lives seemed to dislodge them, so that they floated away like so many balloons on a string – during those empty weeks while the world waited, I nodded to people. I shared greetings, met strangers' smiles with my own, thanked them for standing aside to let me pass when the path narrowed – or waited in my turn, acknowledging them as they went past.

All those brief interactions meant a great deal to me. I felt part of something for the first time in months – at a time when most people were feeling brutally disconnected.

As soon as lockdown restrictions were relaxed, I got in my car and drove to Morecambe. The sheer relief of being somewhere different brought home to me how monotonous life had become.

I walked by the sea, found a café serving takeaway and drank my first latte in weeks, looking out over the bay. It was sunny, breezy, warm. As I sipped my coffee on the terrace, voices ebbed and flowed around me and a sense of normality flooded me with wellbeing. Until that moment I didn't know how much I'd missed the simple comfort of being with other people.

And now it's high summer, a languid time. After a cool rainy July, we've had a run of hotter days so I'm slightly less daunted by the imminent prospect of autumn. Nonetheless, my weeks of lockdown have left me with a profound sense of loss. Conscience tells me I shouldn't feel this: after all, I haven't suffered any bereavements during the crisis, nor have I been ill or otherwise traumatised. I may be single, but my seventeen-year-old son still lives at home so I'm not alone.

And yet. I feel the loss of freedom, sunlight, movement, variety – society in every sense of the word. I'm tired of keeping my distance from people and long for the time when we can hug or shake hands or just be together without moderating our every move.

Did the crisis shake us out of complacency? Or did it just give us more reasons to be anxious? The state of the economy, the lack of jobs, the unknowable shape of our future lives. My son will soon be taking mock A levels after a term of studying at home: how will that be? His cousin, and some of our friends' children, have just received their grades for exams they didn't sit. How will that work out?

And what of me? At sixty-one, I belong to an age group that's one of the most disadvantaged by the pandemic, but also likely to be one of the government's lowest priorities afterwards. There are so many difficulties we face – more now than before the crisis – and too many reasons to be fearful.

So, the thought of winter, with its long dark evenings and short grey days, fills me with more dread than usual. Will it be a hard winter? Will I feel trapped, by rough weather or the memory of a spring and summer pent up in lockdown? Or will I venture further afield at last – to see more people in other places? Will I work and write and plan and move forward, through those darker days? I know I must.

For now, when I'm not striding along the promenade in Morecambe, I walk in Lancaster, taking in the canal, the castle, the river, the bridges. But I never walk in Williamson Park, at least not for now. It's still lovely, even without the fresh bloom of spring: those rocky outcrops, the dips and curves of its pathways, the follies and glades, the breathtaking views across the Bay to the Lake District fells beyond. But in my mind, Williamson Park is still the exercise yard into which I was released every day for an hour; it's the circuit I can complete in sixty minutes door to door.

Soon, wherever I walk, I'll be crunching on leaves. Or slipping on them in the rain, as I negotiate the treacherous leaf-strewn pavements on my way down to Dalton Square.

I know the leaves will fall and the winter dark will come, but spring – another spring – will return.

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'Williamson Park – My Exercise Yard' © Mary Ainsworth 2020 is one of three podcasts sent in to Litfest in response to our public call-out in July following publication of the two 'Walking Solo' podcasts by Jenn Ashworth and Polly Atkin, which were commissioned by Litfest with support from an ACE Emergency Covid-19 Fund grant.

If you enjoyed Mary Ainsworth's 'Williamson Park – My Exercise Yard', you might also like to listen to or read:

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