

Stephen Robertson

Walking in winter

“Every mile is two in winter.”
—George Herbert

Berkshire, 1962-3

This year it snows on Boxing Day.
The country road not cleared for days
—and then of course it snows again.
One afternoon for one brief hour
the air is warm enough to melt
the topmost layer. The frost returns
to make a crust. The next two months
are clear and fine and bitter cold.

Every step,
your foot upon the crust, you think
‘This time, it will hold my weight.’
But every step it drops you down
into soft snow, up to the tops
of your gumboots. The mile or two
to the village shop to seek supplies
becomes a daily ritual.

Suffolk, circa 1958

After the floods of fifty-three
they raised the ramparts: giant concrete blocks
on piles all along the shingle beach.
The mile south to the Martello tower,
we walk along the banked-up track
behind the wall, level with the top,
running the gauntlet of the winter storm.
The tide is high, and every wave tries hard
to breach the wall. And when it hits just right
the spray rises a mile into the air
(or so it seems to me), to crash back down—
you must be nimble.

Later we discover
that that was just a sideshow: all the while
the crafty sea is also digging down
beneath the piles. Then one stormy night
it pulls the final prop. A hundred yards
of man's best effort at defence
drops thirty feet into a hole.

Cambridge, circa 1966

One cold winter's afternoon
we walk to the edge of town and on
the mile across the river meadows
to Grantchester. As we walk back
against the wind it starts to snow.
A snowdrift forms against the wire brush
of David's thick black hair,
staying in place until at home
the small gas fire has warmed the room
against the cold outside.
(But that was forty years ago
—these days his hair is white all through.)

—

'Every mile is two'? no, hardly thus.
Some miles are ten, while others swiftly pass.