



# International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

Volume 7

Issue 1 *Pilgrim Bodies: An Anatomy of Christian and Post-Christian Intentional Movement*

Article 13


2019

## Wood Mountain Walk: Afterthoughts on a Pilgrimage for Andrew Suknaski

Ken Wilson

University of Regina, Regina SK, [ken.wilson@uregina.ca](mailto:ken.wilson@uregina.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp>

 Part of the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Wilson, Ken (2019) "Wood Mountain Walk: Afterthoughts on a Pilgrimage for Andrew Suknaski," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 13.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/czey-xw12>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol7/iss1/13>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).



## *Wood Mountain Walk:* **Afterthoughts on a Pilgrimage for Andrew Suknaski**

**Ken Wilson**

University of Regina, Regina SK  
[ken.wilson@uregina.ca](mailto:ken.wilson@uregina.ca)

Ken Wilson's '*Wood Mountain Walk: Afterthoughts on a Pilgrimage for Andrew Suknaski*' reflects on a 250-kilometre walking pilgrimage made in honour of the late Canadian poet Andrew Suknaski. Wilson's autoethnographic essay considers the possibilities and challenges of walking as a way to engage with land and community; Suknaski's book *Wood Mountain Poems* and the issue of cultural appropriation; what it is like to walk in a sparsely populated and arid agricultural province where trespassing laws confine walkers to roads; and walking as both pilgrimage and artistic practice.

**Key Words:** pilgrimage, walking as art, Saskatchewan, Andrew Suknaski, Wood Mountain Poems, Nan Shepard, The Living Mountain, Robert Macfarlane, The Wild Places, Trevor Herriot, Richard Long, poetry, Prairies, Western Canada, cultural appropriation, Indigeneity, First Nations, aboriginal, Settler, creative nonfiction, travelogue, journal

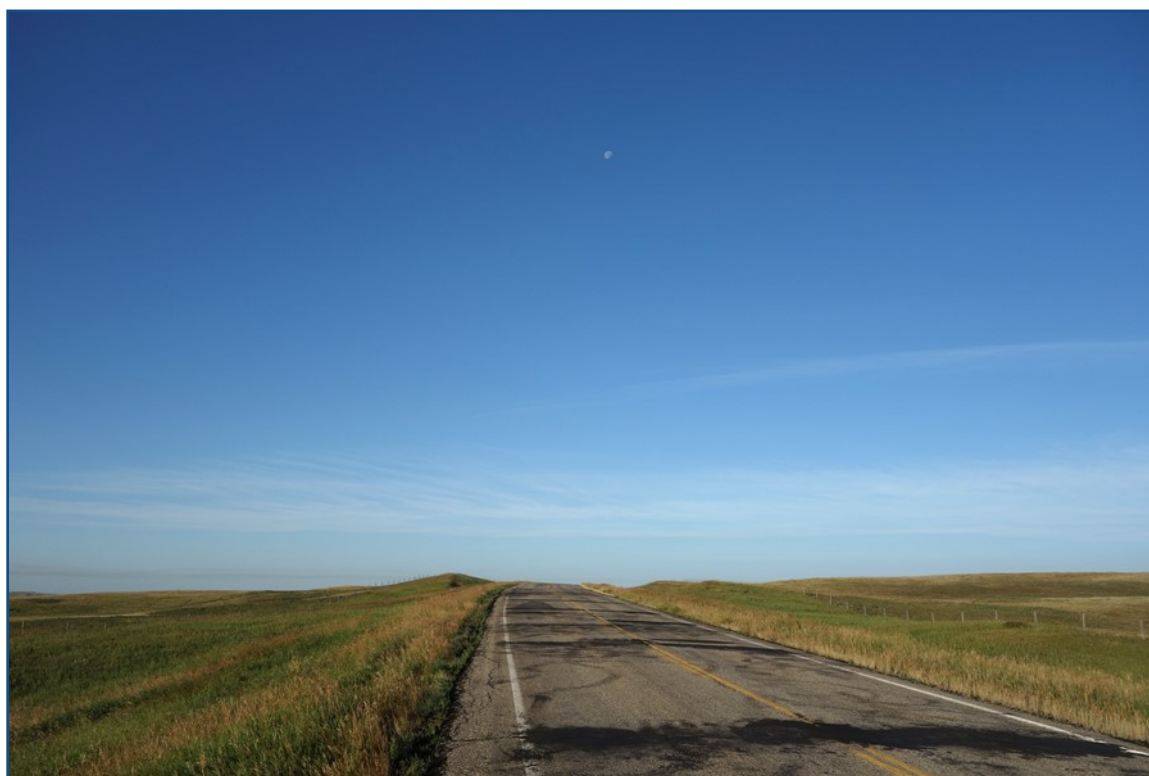
**Figure 1**



For the first three days the road cuts straight across the flat Wascana Plains. There are few deviations from its east-west line: a dog-leg at a railway crossing, a bend where it enters the valley of the Moose Jaw River. Otherwise, it's as if the road has been drawn with a ruler—as it was, in fact, by the Dominion Land Survey in the 1880s. Roads, or at least road allowances, run

north to south and east to west, dividing the land into sections. They intersect, every mile in one direction, every two miles in the other: a network, a grid imposed across the land, back in the days when the federal government envisioned small family farms every mile or so, once the land's original inhabitants had been confined to reserves. Of course, the economics of

Figure 2



farming has changed since then. Farms are much bigger now, and occupied farmhouses are scarce, and so there are more roads for fewer people here than anywhere else in the world.

I'm walking on one of those roads, due west from Regina, the capital of Saskatchewan, one of Canada's western provinces, to the city of Moose Jaw, some 80 kilometres away; it's the first leg of a walk to the village of Wood Mountain, 250 kilometres to the southwest. The land here is so flat I seem to be making no progress at all. I see buildings—a grain elevator, a potash mine—in the heat haze blurring the horizon, and for hours, as I walk in their direction, they seem to get no closer. Then, suddenly, I'm there. I pass by whatever it is—the elevator, the mine—and it recedes behind me, just as slowly. Walking this straight, flat road isn't at all like walking in Europe, where the paths twist and turn, ascend and descend, where new vistas present themselves constantly. Here the land is so flat that I swear I can see the curve of the earth along the horizon.

It isn't always like this. Three days later, I'm walking south along the shoulder of Highway 2, past the turnoff to the village of Willow Bunch. I can see the Cactus Hills in the distance for most of the day, and then, the land begins to roll, and suddenly I'm there, crossing

those hills, listening warily for oncoming traffic, because unlike that flat gravel road to Moose Jaw, I can't see the vehicles coming towards me from several kilometres away. The broken paved shoulder curves towards the ditch, making it hard to walk on, so I'm trudging along the white line that marks the division between the shoulder and the northbound lane of traffic. It's dangerous. When I see, or hear, a vehicle approaching—usually a pickup truck, but sometimes something much larger—I step down off the shoulder onto the narrow gravel verge, and stumble forward through the weeds and chunks of broken pavement until it's safe to take my place again along that painted line. For two days I walk like this. It doesn't take long to decide that walking along this highway was a big mistake. I tell myself it's the most direct route to get to where I'm going, but that doesn't matter. It's a miserable way to walk, and I'm so focused on avoiding traffic that it's impossible to pay attention to anything else.

On the third day on the shoulder of that highway, I'm walking towards Assiniboia, a town where there's decent food and a shower and a bed. It's hot, 34 or 35 degrees. I'm running out of water, and what I have left is blood warm and salty. I limp on blistered feet, telling myself it's only a few more kilometres, but I'm reaching my limit. I can feel the symptoms of heat

**Figure 3 : Bird**

exhaustion building: nausea, confusion, irritability. I start bargaining with myself. I can't ask for a lift, because I'm walking, not hitchhiking, but can I accept a lift if someone offers one? People have been offering me rides all day, but I've refused them, hoping to make it to Assiniboia by foot. Now, though, when I hear vehicles coming up behind me, I find myself pleading, silently: Please stop and offer me a ride. Please stop and offer me a ride. And then, miraculously, someone does: Maurice, an oil worker from Texas, and his father, Leo. 'We passed you this morning, and you were walking a lot better than you are now,' Maurice says. 'Do you need a lift?' I throw my backpack into the bed of the pickup and ride the last four kilometres into town in the air-conditioned back seat.

Later, drinking ice water and beer at a restaurant near the hotel, I discover that I'm shaking from heat exhaustion. Maybe, I think, I could've made it on my own, if I'd had enough water, if I'd found a shady place to rest, if I'd decided to abandon my hotel reservation and camp beside the road again, the way I had the night before. But I've quickly learned that I can't walk without water, not in this heat, and there have been no farmhouses close to the road where I could ask to get my bottles refilled. I need to be more careful, I think. I need to ask for water long before I'm running dry, whenever the opportunity presents itself. I told myself before I started that I would have to rely on the kindness of strangers on this walk, but I've been too proud to make myself vulnerable in that way. I'm

going to have to change my approach. Less pride, more humility, and in an odd way, more courage, since (for me at least) it takes guts to knock on a stranger's door.

Food is the other problem. It's not that I'm running out—I'm carrying more than enough, and I end up taking much of what I've brought back home with me. It's that I don't feel like eating. I've left my stove—an alcohol stove made out of a pop can—at home, not because it's heavy, but because I'd rather carry water than fuel. That means I've only brought food that doesn't need to be cooked, and I don't like it. At home, I'll eat Ryvita crackers and peanut butter for breakfast quite happily, but on this walk, the thought of it repels me. Not all the time—the morning I make breakfast in the village of Mossbank, sitting in a chair at a table with a cup of coffee, I'm happy to spread peanut butter on crackers and eat them—but in a ditch, or on a bed in a musty hotel room, I just can't force myself to do it. I don't understand; I've never had a problem like this before. Maybe eating alone is affecting my appetite. Maybe it's the disruption in my usual routine. Whatever the reason, I end up walking every day on very little food. I stop, eat handful of dried blueberries, an energy bar, and then start walking again.

\* \* \*



Figure 4



I'm walking to Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, in honour of Andrew Suknaski and his first book, *Wood Mountain Poems*,<sup>[1]</sup> and by extension, in honour of all of the writers and artists who live and work in this province, which is known more for its vast crops of wheat and canola and its endless boreal forest than for its literature and art. In some ways, Suknaski and his book were poor choices for this pilgrimage. The poems that address the issues of rural life that Suknaski knew, either directly from experience or from family stories, are successful and, I think, important, even though their focus is a settler experience that tends to be the only story that is told about this place. But Suknaski's poems about the Lakota are less successful, partly because of his distance from the material, and partly because of my own discomfort with the easy slippage between a legitimate desire to engage with Indigenous history and cultural appropriation. In the poem 'Indian Site on the Edge of Tonita Pasture,' for instance, Suknaski writes:

*the meadow lark's song  
heralding spring  
waters lazily flowing from wood mountain's peat moss  
springs  
to become twelve mile creek running north  
through this coulee where i caught fish  
and swam in boyhood unaware  
of three rings of stones that nearly vanished  
beneath dust from a field  
lee soparlo's father worked trying to feed his family  
in the thirties  
and this great centre ring and something  
holding me around my heart the way  
a wired stone anchors  
the cornerpost of the nearby fence running north  
and west to the village  
where i grew up—i claim these things  
and this ancestral space to move through and beyond  
stapled to the four cardinal directions  
this is my right  
to chronicle the meaning of these vast plains  
in a geography of blood  
and failure  
making them live<sup>[2]</sup>*

1. Andrew Suknaski, *Wood Mountain Poems* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1976).

2. Suknaski, *Wood Mountain Poems*, 78.

Suknaski is claiming his right to write about the place of his birth, from its natural elements (the meadowlark's song, the creek where he swam and caught fish as a boy) through the history of settlers (Soparlo's struggle to feed his family during the drought of the 1930s) to the tipi rings themselves: they are his 'ancestral space to move through and beyond / stapled to the four cardinal directions.' Those lines commingle the settler experience ('stapled' reminds the reader of barbed wire stapled to a fence post) with Indigenous ways of understanding (in the use of the phrase 'four cardinal directions') in a way that is both bold and, from the perspective of 2018 if not 1976, troubling. And yet, the notion of something in this pasture holding Suknaski around his heart, 'the way / a wired stone anchors / the cornerpost of a nearby fence,' is a powerful evocation of his connection to the place of his birth, and the tangible character of that image, the way it merges the poet with the fence, makes that evocation almost uncomfortably visceral. Many of Suknaski's other poems are jokes or tall tales, part of the engagement with the oral culture of settlers that was in vogue in the 1970s, and they are successful examples of that moment. Some are ekphrastic responses to photographs. Some are family stories. Suknaski stopped writing in the 1980s. I don't know what he did for the remainder of his life, but he died in 2012, in Moose Jaw. That's a long time for a poet to remain mute. I wonder what happened to silence his voice.

Along with the history of the settlers, though, Suknaski claims the right to interpret the Lakota experience, and that's a problem, one common to many settlers who are interested in and sympathetic to Indigenous people, who want to make a stand against the ongoing colonial history of Canada and who care about the ways of knowing and living of the people who were here before settlers arrived, people who were removed from the land through treaties that the Crown claimed were real-estate transactions instead of invitations to share the land, people who were then starved onto reserves so that the great march of progress could rip up the grassland and create ephemeral homesteads and towns. Suknaski goes too far, particularly in the poem about the Métis scout and translator Jerry Potts, but also in the poems that reflect on the Dakota words he's learned. Yet what is worse: to go too far, or to fail to attempt to make the connection in the first place? I'm reminded of my hosts at the Limerick Hotel, who talked about the history of homesteading as if nothing came before it, who said they'd been on the Wood Mountain Lakota reserve only once and had been

surprised to discover it was a tidy village and not a rural slum. Such casual racism from people who were otherwise kind and generous to me was shocking, but it shouldn't have been, since this is a province where some farmers feel justified shooting Indigenous men who trespass on their property, and where juries feel justified finding those farmers not guilty. So many of us can't be bothered to connect our stories with those of the people who lived here before us, who still live here; so many of us think we're in this land because we deserve it, not because the Cree and Saulteaux chiefs invited us to share this place with their people. We have a lot to understand and a lot to make right, and so few of us are willing to begin to imagine how to do either.

Of course, the best thing to do would be to listen to Indigenous voices instead of playing at being a ventriloquist, to get out of the way and remain silent, but that's hard, especially when you have all these words bubbling up, struggling to find their way onto paper—or, less charitably, when you're used to being the one doing all the talking. It's not impossible, though; the poems in Laurie D. Graham's book *Settler Education*<sup>[3]</sup> display her engagement with the history of Indigenous / settler relations, but she writes about that theme without pretending to be able to speak from an Indigenous perspective. Graham gets the balance right. Forty years ago was a different time, of course, and maybe Suknaski's overstepping can be understood, if not excused, as a product of the 1970s. But some writers today make the same mistakes: witness Joseph Boyden, the Canadian novelist whose claim to be Indigenous has been rejected by Indigenous people. The resulting controversy may have ended his career. I found my copy of his recent book, *The Orenda*,<sup>[4]</sup> in a box just yesterday, while looking for something else. What made Boyden believe that the story of the sixteenth-century war between the Wendat and the Haudenosaunee in what is now southwestern Ontario was his to tell? I find it hard to imagine what he was thinking, the hubris of considering every story to be your property.

In a way, maybe all of this makes Suknaski's book the perfect choice for this pilgrimage—if that's the right word. Like Suknaski, I'm learning one of the languages indigenous to this place—Cree, though, rather than Dakota—and, like him, I'm interested in the

- 
3. Laurie D. Graham, *Settler Education: Poems* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2016).
  4. Joseph Boyden, *The Orenda* (Toronto: Penguin, 2014).

Figure 5



connections between settlers and First Nations. When Suknaski's poetry steps over the line into cultural appropriation, it becomes a cautionary tale for me, a warning not to tell someone else's story, to stick to telling my own. Not that I have the kind of deep knowledge of this place that Suknaski had; I certainly couldn't write about the settler experience the way he does. I wouldn't even try. I'm new here. I've only been in Saskatchewan for 20 years. I know that's not a long time, and that I might always come at the prairies from the perspective of an outsider. That's why I've decided to walk in this place, to see how much walking can teach me about this land. Because even though I'm a stranger here, this land speaks to me, even if I can't always understand what it's saying, perhaps because it speaks Cree or Saulteaux or Dakota, not English. Maybe, if I keep studying Cree, I'll begin to comprehend its voice. Or maybe that idea is entirely too optimistic.

Candace Savage borrowed the phrase 'geography of blood' from Suknaski for the title of her wonderful book<sup>[5]</sup> about the southwestern part of Saskatchewan, although she omitted the words 'and failure,' and failure is what defines those villages, and the

homesteader experience in general. The economic model they both represent did not endure, and as farms grew bigger and farmers fewer, the towns and villages started to die. Suknaski was aware of that failure 45 years ago, and if those places were dwindling back then, what a visitor sees today is merely a shadow of what Suknaski knew when he was writing his poems. Today it's mostly the old who live in rural Saskatchewan; the young have fled for opportunities elsewhere. In less than a generation, these villages, and their inhabitants, will be memories.

Wood Mountain is also a place where a walker might hope to find grassland instead of cultivated fields. Because the climate is drier in the southwest, more of the grassland was left intact there, rather than being ploughed under and replaced with fields of wheat and barley and canola. At least, that was my hope; in the end, I'm disappointed. I see very little grassland as I approach Wood Mountain, except where the hills are too steep to plough. One of the things I always think about when I'm walking in this place is the ecocide that's been committed here by settlers: the extirpation of the buffalo and the extinction of other species, and the conversion of the grassland ecosystem to industrial agriculture. Yes, the vast fields of wheat or flax or canola are lovely to look at, and I know they're an economic necessity for this province, but they're not a functioning ecosystem. While I'm walking, I see few

5. Candace Savage, *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape* (Vancouver: Greystone, 2012).

animals—a couple of deer, a badger, a porcupine—and surprisingly little roadkill, and often there are no birds at all as I walk alongside those vast fields of grain. The birds I do see aren't the grassland species which require native prairie habitat, because it's mostly gone. Those birds, as the writer and naturalist Trevor Herriot has warned us, will not survive unless we leave some prairie unploughed, something we seem unwilling to do, since more native grassland disappears every year.<sup>[6]</sup> You can't blame the farmers: the land's worth more money if it's cultivated or the site of an oil well. Of course, it's worth more than money to the animals and birds who live on the scraps of grassland that are left. But almost nobody pays attention to them.

\* \* \*

The land may have become industrialized, but as the late Métis artist Bob Boyer once told Herriot, it's still sacred ground, all of it.<sup>[7]</sup> I was hoping to come to some understanding of what Boyer meant on this walk, to apprehend that sacredness, to experience the land more deeply. But it's harder than I imagined it would be to enter into some sort of intimate relationship with the land when you're walking—particularly when you're walking down the shoulder of a busy highway. That's another reason to choose less-travelled routes, even if they're less direct. As well as being safer, they might allow for a greater intimacy with this place. But walking, not unlike driving, is still a form of passing through. It does allow for a closer experience of the land than driving; there's no doubt about that. I recall a symposium where a colleague said that every experience of the land is framed by the edges of a windshield. No, I wanted to say, that's not true, not if you're on foot. When you're walking, you hear the birds, the millions of crickets singing in the fields. You feel the wind. You sense the contours of the land with your legs and feet. The more slowly you go, the more you apprehend. And yet, according to that logic, the best thing to do would be to stop.

Still, I do think walking can lead to a deeper engagement with place, though. The Scots writer Nan Shepherd, for instance, in her repeated walks in the Cairngorms, a mountain range in the Scottish highlands, came to know them intimately.<sup>[8]</sup> But the key word is 'repeated.' She visited and revisited the same places, always on foot, and that's how her

understanding of them deepened. On this walk, though, even on a relatively quiet grid road, my experience is different. I'm passing through, just more slowly. And on a busy highway, my attention is on the traffic that's roaring past, and not so much on the land around me. Maybe I have to accept the limitations of what I might call through-walking. Or maybe I need to take different routes, walk shorter distances, stop more often. But stopping is hard. Sitting in the hot sun is almost as tiring as walking, and there's little shade available on grid roads. At least there are bales of hay in the wide ditches along the highways, where a walker can find a little shade, even when the sun is at its highest.

Let's face it: there's no easy way to walk here, and no easy way to experience the vastness of this place, of this land. You'd have to follow Shepherd's example, and visit and re-visit one place, some remnant prairie, a community pasture, perhaps, in different seasons, different weather. But I live in the city. I wouldn't know where to begin. Maybe through-walking is the best I can do, for now. Or maybe the connection I can make by walking is enough.

\* \* \*

Walking isn't likely to lead to an engagement with the people who live here, either. I remember how, the morning I'm leaving Mossbank, an old fellow asks me to stop at the Seniors' Centre for a coffee. I'd chatted with him the day before, when I had a hamburger at the hotel in Ardill, the last business left in that empty village. But it's seven o'clock in the morning, and the day's promising to be hot. I'd hoped to be walking by six, but I've slept in after walking some 35 kilometres the day before, and I know I need to cover some distance before the temperature begins to rise. So I make a quick decision—one I still regret. 'No thanks,' I say, 'I'm all coffeed up.' It's true—I'd made a cup in the kitchen where I was staying—but it's also a lost opportunity.

I wave at passing vehicles when I'm walking, the way drivers wave at each other in rural Saskatchewan. Sometimes people wave back. Rarely they stop and ask what I'm doing or offer me a ride. Once a farmer rolls down the window and gives me a bottle of cold iced tea. 'You look like you could use this,' he says. He's right. Another time a woman stops and passes me her water bottle. One fellow, who knows something about

6. Trevor Herriot, *Grass, Sky, Song: Promise and Peril in the World of Grassland Birds* (Toronto: Harpercollins, 2009).

7. Trevor Herriot, *The Road Is How: A Prairie Pilgrimage Through Nature, Desire, and Soul* (N.Y.: Harpercollins, 2014), 17.

8. See Nan Shepherd, Nan. *The Living Mountain: A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011. First published 1977).



pilgrimages, tells me he admires what I'm doing. But those interactions are rare. The best I can usually hope for is a return wave.

If I'm going to engage with people, I'm going to have to stop and talk to them, listen to them. I could walk with them, if that were possible. I'd like that. Walking with people is a great way to get to know them. But over the nine days it takes to walk to Wood Mountain, I don't see anyone walking outside of the boundaries of a town or village. Walking between towns is a crazy thing to do. The next place is too far away. Driving makes more sense. What I'm doing is completely impractical. That explains the shocked looks I see on the faces of passing drivers. And it's also one of the reasons this walk is a work of art. But if these walks are going to provide for possibilities of connection with the people who live here, I'm going to have to do them differently, and I'm not sure what that kind of walking would look like.

\* \* \*

There's a long history of walking as an aid to creative inspiration. The poet William Wordsworth, for example, is said to have walked some 180,000 miles in his lifetime.<sup>[9]</sup> Some of those walks were long treks across England, even across Europe, like the one he and his friend Robert Jones made across France and over the Alps in 1790.<sup>[10]</sup> But many of Wordsworth's walks, especially later in his life, were in his garden, pacing back and forth, while he worked on one poem or another. So many other writers have taken to walking for inspiration: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Dickens, Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, or to pick someone more contemporary, Will Self. Philosophers, too: Immanuel Kant made the same walk at the same time every day in his hometown of Königsberg. He was so regular in his walking habits that people set their clocks by his appearances in the street.<sup>[11]</sup>

But there's also a long history of walking as an artistic practice in its own right, beginning with the Dadaists in Paris in the 1920s. The Situationists in the 1950s developed something called the *dérive*, a kind of spontaneous walking across cities, following the suggestions of the walker's unconscious. Many walking artists today consider themselves to be psychogeographers, one of the ways the Situationist

walkers described themselves. In the 1960s, walking became a recognized form of performance art. But not just performance art, either: the sculptor Richard Long, for example, documents his long walks in photographs and maps and text works. Because he sometimes leaves marks of one kind or another behind as he walks—he will leave a stone at the side of the road every mile, for example—he considers his walks to be sculptures.<sup>[12]</sup> They are both works of art in themselves, and also inspirations for the text works, maps, and photographs he makes to document them. Other artists organize opportunities for people to walk together, curating experiences of walking. My artist friend Hugh Henry has done that kind of work for several summers now. I've walked with him, and with other friends, and I've loved that experience.

The walks I describe as works of art aren't like that. I walk alone, in response to the history of a place, and as a way to learn more about it, to experience it. I walk alone because I don't think other people would want to walk the distances I travel, or eat the meagre food I carry, or sleep in ditches beside the road, as I did twice on my way to Wood Mountain. And yet, I'm aware that I'm no ascetic. I'm not like, for instance, the English writer Robert Macfarlane, who describes sleeping on the top of wind-scoured mountain peaks, and waking up covered in snow in one of Scotland's few remaining old-growth forests, in his book *The Wild Places*.<sup>[13]</sup> Macfarlane seeks out those experiences; even if better accommodations are available, in a pub or a hotel, he prefers to sleep out-of-doors. I'm not like that. I only slept outside on the way to Wood Mountain because I had no alternatives. And because I knew there would be times when I had no alternatives, I carried a sleeping bag and a bivouac sack with me. But I always prefer to be indoors, preferably with a decent meal inside my belly. I lack Macfarlane's self-denial, or his spirit of adventure, or something. Perhaps that's the reason I admire his walking so much.

Not every walk I make is an art project. I always know which walks are going to be art, and which are just walks. A walking vacation—touring the Cotswolds in England on foot, for example—is not art. Nor is walking a well-trodden route, like the Camino de Santiago in Spain. When I walked the Camino, I considered it a pilgrimage, but not an art project, even

9. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (N.Y.: Penguin, 2000) 104.

10. Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 116.

11. Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking* (transl. John Howe; London: Verso, 2014), 154.

12. R. H. Fuchs, *Richard Long* (N. Y. and London: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum/Thames and Hudson, 1986).

13. Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (N.Y.: Penguin, 2008).

though the notion of pilgrimage has influenced my walking ever since. What is this walk to Wood Mountain if not a pilgrimage in honour of Andrew Suknaski? I don't consider the walks I participate in that are supported by vehicles to be part of my art practice, either, perhaps because I'm more influenced by Long than I am by, say, Marina Abramovic, who walked, with her then-partner, Ulay, along the Great Wall of China as a performance.<sup>[14]</sup> She didn't sleep on the Great Wall, and neither did Ulay; every evening, a van picked them up and took them somewhere they could eat and sleep. There's nothing wrong with that, and the vehicle-supported walks I've shared with friends, the ones Hugh Henry organizes, have been wonderful experiences. For some reason, though, I'm drawn to the purity and self-reliance of Long's walks, or Macfarlane's. Perhaps I aspire to Macfarlane's way of walking after all, even if I prefer a bed to sleeping under the stars.

Not that sleeping under the stars is a bad thing. There's something about sharing the land with its other inhabitants, about hearing coyotes singing and cows complaining and distant (at least, I hope they're not close by) dogs barking. It's just that, unlike the U.K., where Macfarlane's walks take place, in Canada there's no tradition of wild camping. Landowners are jealous of their property, and there are No Trespassing signs everywhere. And sleeping beside the highway is both dangerous and probably illegal. (The legality doesn't really matter, in a way, because I only saw one Mountie during the nine days I was walking. I was hobbling towards the town of Limerick, alongside Highway 13, and he gave me a surprised look as he drove past.) Besides, where else can a walker sleep? The right-of-way on grid roads is very narrow, so there is little room to sit, let alone camp. Maybe farmers would let me bed down in their shelterbelts if I told them what I was up to. Maybe they wouldn't. And even if they gave me permission, their dogs might have other ideas.

Dogs are a problem when I'm walking in the country. They hate pedestrians. They think a walker poses some kind of threat, maybe because they're not used to seeing people walking. I know that as a man, and as a *môniyâw*, a white person in Cree, I have a lot of privilege: I don't have to worry about sexual assault or getting shot if I walk into a farmyard. But I do have to worry about some things, including dogs. I've been bitten while walking. I carry dog biscuits to bribe my

way past angry canines, and that's worked, so far; the one time I was bitten, I didn't have any dog biscuits with me. And getting bitten by a dog whose owners can't be identified can mean the end of a walk, and a series of rabies shots instead.

I'd never slept outside without a tent before the walk to Wood Mountain. A tent provides a sense, however imaginary, of privacy and security. A bivouac sack gives you neither. I spread out my sleeping pad and my bivouac sack for the first time on an abandoned road, underneath a scrubby ash tree, next to a condemned bridge over the Moose Jaw River. It's the second night of my walk. The first night, I'd stayed in Pense, at a pub that also rents rooms. There's no way I'm going to be able to get all the way to Moose Jaw on the second day. I knew that well before I started walking. So I'm going to have to sleep outside. I'm apprehensive. I don't know what to expect.

I decide I don't like the first place I choose as a camping spot. The chokecherry bush I'm sitting under gives little shade, and the sun is hot, and the ground isn't flat. I decide to push on. Good thing, because I soon discover that I'm lost. All the roads in the valley lead to quarries. The road to Moose Jaw, the road I've been walking on for two days, the road that's marked on my map as carrying on into the city, seems to have disappeared. I'm afraid I'll have to walk out to the busy Trans-Canada Highway to get to Moose Jaw—a long detour. And I don't want to walk alongside that four-lane highway; that's the reason I chose this route. The highway would be dangerous and loud, a miserable way of walking. But now it doesn't look like I have a choice.

I flag down a passing minivan: a family heading somewhere. 'Is there a way out of this valley?' I ask. 'I'm trying to get to Moose Jaw.' Oh, yes, the driver explains: I needed to turn at the sign back up the hill that says Road Closed and then follow the abandoned road to a condemned bridge. 'You couldn't drive across it, but walking across would be no problem,' he says. If I'd waited for the following morning to start walking again, it would've been too early to meet anyone passing by who could point me in the right direction. I can't believe my luck.

I follow his advice. I'd seen the Road Closed sign as I walked down into the valley, but I hadn't paid attention to it. The road's been closed for years, from the looks of it, but map still shows it as being open, leading directly to the North Service Road beside the highway

14. Maria Abramovic and Ulay, *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1989).

in Moose Jaw. I wonder how often these maps get updated. There's no gravel, and the dirt is soft under my feet. A young man riding a trail bike passes me. He nods. I hear the sound of people target shooting: gunfire and laughter. I cross the bridge. The Bridge Closed sign has been peppered by buckshot. The sun is getting low. I see the ash tree. It's been a long day and I'm tired. So I eat something, and drink some of my next day's allowance of water, which I know is going to be a problem in the morning, and make camp. The guy on the trail bike goes home. The gunfire and the laughter stop. I'm alone.

It's a cold night, and sometimes I'm shivering too hard to sleep. I'd figured that I'd be so tired that I'd drop off right away, despite my anxiety about sleeping outside, but I haven't predicted the cold temperatures or the effect they have on me. I lie awake in my bivouac sack, listening to the sounds of the night. Macfarlane writes about similar experiences, about being unable to sleep in the cold, looking up at the stars. When the sun comes up, I eat something, break camp, and start walking again. I run out of water on the way into Moose Jaw, but I buy some Gatorade at a gas station on the service road, and I eat another breakfast before walking into the city. I've survived my first night outside without a tent.

Thank goodness it didn't rain, I think. My bivouac sack is second hand—British army surplus—and I don't know how waterproof it might be. One of these nights, I'm likely to find out.

\* \* \*

Walking is a repetitive action. One foot after the other, left leg, right leg, over and over again. A controlled forward fall, over and over again. For hours, if you're walking any distance. 'Doesn't it get boring?' my friend Kathleen asks after the walk is finished and I'm back home, and I have to admit that it does, sometimes. Hour after hour of the same action, the same horizon, the same road. I compose my blog as I walk, and type it into my phone when I take a break. That helps to pass the time. But walking alone in this place turns out to be harder, psychologically, than I'd anticipated.

Walking is a way of experiencing the world at three miles per hour, Rebecca Solnit tells us.<sup>[15]</sup> Three miles per hour equals five kilometres per hour. I walk that fast, sometimes even faster, at the beginning of the day, usually for at least three hours before I stop for a break. In those three hours, I cover at least 15 kilometres,

perhaps half of the distance I plan to walk that day. It takes the rest of the day to walk the second half. I get tired, my pace slows, my blisters start bleeding again, my stride shortens and becomes more of a hobble. It's my boots, I think. They're waterproof, and that makes them too hot for summer walking here, in this heat. My feet sweat until they're soft and pale and pruny, as if I've just stepped out of a long bath. That softness makes them blister, despite everything I do to keep that from happening, the Vaseline I rub on them in the morning before I start walking and the silk liner socks I wear and the walks I took around the city to toughen my feet before I left. None of it seems to matter. Now every step hurts. The most painful day is the walk from Assiniboia to Limerick, where I stay at the old hotel and eat fried chicken for dinner. It takes all day to limp the 20 kilometres along the shoulder of the highway. I'm exhausted when I arrive, and when I take off my boots, I discover both feet are bleeding. I think about the following day with dread. There's no way I'll be able to walk the whole way to Wood Mountain, I tell myself. I'll have to divide the 40 kilometres left in my walk into two parts. My feet just won't carry me any farther.

I wake up in the morning wondering what the road will be like and whether I'll find a decent place to camp. It's a cloudy, cool day. The weather forecast is predicting rain. The farmers will like that, I think, in this second dry summer. At supper, the night before, everyone was talking about the drought. As I walk towards the highway, I'm surprised that my feet no longer hurt. I'm walking normally. The painful limping of the day before is a memory. By noon, when I stop to eat lunch on the steps of an abandoned schoolhouse in the former village of Flintoft, I figure I've already covered more than 25 kilometres, and I'm optimistic about finishing the walk that afternoon. I call Christine, my partner, who has generously agreed to pick me up in Wood Mountain. 'I'm going to try to get there today,' I tell her. 'I should be there by six o'clock.' That will mean being on the road for 12 hours, but I'm confident I can do it. She agrees to drive down to meet me. I shoulder my pack and start walking again.

The last 15 kilometres feel much longer than they are. I'm carrying extra water and my pack is heavy. My feet start to hurt again. A thunderstorm blows up behind me, and it starts to rain—not a downpour, but enough that I stop to put on my raincoat. (Why not? I've carried it this far, so I might as well use it.) I check and recheck my watch. Am I going to be there in time? I stop to take a break, and I can barely haul myself to my feet again. I pass a farm where my hosts

15. Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 14.



Figure 6



at the Limerick hotel told me I'd find a welcome. I could've camped there, I think, in the shelterbelt. Maybe I've made a big mistake, trying to finish today.

I don't dare take a break during the final eight kilometres: if I sit down, I'm afraid I won't be able to get up again. I shuffle down the road. At least it's not hot, I tell myself. The wind reaches under my pack and cools my sweaty shirt. Finally I reach the spot where the highway turns towards Wood Mountain. I have five kilometres left. I'm hobbling again, the way I was the day before. In the distance I see a green highway sign: Wood Mountain 1. The line of trees on the horizon that marks the village looks a lot farther away than that.

You don't have to walk too far into the village, I tell myself. Just get there and find a place to wait for Christine. There's a sheep farm on the outskirts, and then I reach the village itself. The line between farm and village is no longer clear, as if the farm is consuming the village. I half expect to see sheep wandering the streets. I pass the community centre. It looks abandoned. The whole village looks abandoned. I'd been warned that there's nothing in Wood Mountain, that almost everyone has left. Across from an abandoned garage, I see a plaque, installed during the provincial centennial 13 years before, listing businesses that were once here but are long gone, and a kiosk with information about Grasslands National Park, which is not far away. I take pictures of the plaque, to prove I was here, and then I sit down by the kiosk. There's no one around, no one to ask where I've come from or what I've been doing. I didn't expect

there would be. I'm alone. I'm hungry, too, but even more, I'm exhausted. I've never walked so far in a single day. I consider searching through my pack to find my clean shirt, which I've been saving for this moment, but I'm too tired. I take out my phone, thinking I can finish the day's blog entry, but a familiar car pulls up. It's Christine. She helps me to my feet and we embrace. 'You did it,' she says. 'I knew you could.' She carries my pack to the car. I take off my boots and put on the sandals she's brought for me, then I gingerly lower myself into the passenger seat.

'Do you want to look around the village?' she asks. I do, of course, after looking ahead to this place for nine days, but I want to eat, and I doubt there's anything to see, so I say no. We turn around and head back the way I came. Over the next three hours, I watch as nine days of hard walking unspools through the windshield, as the land becomes reframed through the shatterproof glass. This is how people travel here, I think. This place—or the way we live in it—is impossible without petroleum. What will we do when there's no more, I wonder. I point out landmarks I passed along the way, tell stories about the walk. I close my eyes. Tonight, I think, I'm going to sleep in my own bed. It's a happy thought, and I smile. My pilgrimage is complete, my small adventure a success. And Andrew Suknaski hasn't been forgotten—not yet, anyway. Not by me. I have the blisters to prove it.<sup>[16]</sup>

16. I am grateful to Matthew Anderson, Danica Klewchuk, and Christine Ramsay for reading and commenting on drafts of this essay.



**Bibliography**

- Abramovic, Maria, and Ulay. *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1989.
- Boyden, Joseph. *The Orenda*. Toronto: Penguin, 2014.
- Fuchs, R.H. *Richard Long*. N. Y. and London: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum/Thames and Hudson, 1986.
- Graham, Laurie D. *Settler Education: Poems*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2016.
- Gros, Frédéric. *A Philosophy of Walking*. Translated by John Howe. London: Verso, 2014.
- Herriot, Trevor. *Grass, Sky, Song: Promise and Peril in the World of Grassland Birds*. Toronto: Harpercollins, 2009.
- Herriot, Trevor. *The Road Is How: A Prairie Pilgrimage Through Nature, Desire, and Soul*. N.Y.: Harpercollins, 2014.
- Macfarlane, Robert. *The Wild Places*. N.Y.: Penguin, 2008.
- Savage, Candace. *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape*. Vancouver: Greystone, 2012.
- Shepherd, Nan. *The Living Mountain: A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011. First published 1977.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. N.Y.: Penguin, 2000.
- Suknaski, Andrew. *Wood Mountain Poems*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1976.