

Reflections on the Slow Marathon

By Alan Macpherson

The story of the courier Pheidippides' original run from the Battle of Marathon to Athens in 490BCE, to announce Greek victory over the invading Persians, is well known. After completing the twenty-six-mile journey Pheidippides, as legend has it, pronounced 'Joy, we've won!' and promptly died on the spot. With his ultimate act Pheidippides marked out the territory for every subsequent marathon, each one run, whether knowingly or not, in his honour. What if he had walked?

As a first-time participant in the Berlin marathon in 2011 Deveron Arts' director Claudia Zeiske became disillusioned by the legacy that has grown up in Pheidippides' name. In the run up to the event the competitors (many of whom of course enter in a spirit far removed from competition) were submitted to its organisational circus, culminating in a drawn-out registration event that entailed trudging for kilometres through a maze of sponsors' tents and merchandise sellers laid out in the (now defunct) Tempelhof airport, like a twisted alternate reality where IKEA does marathons. During the race Claudia witnessed the inevitable agonies of runners reduced to crawling, and others, even less fortunate, unable to finish through injury or exhaustion, being carried from the route through the sea of plastic cups and bottles that had been discarded in the streets.¹ The whole thing seemed futile, even barbaric. And yet, something had impelled her to do it, just as it had impelled the

¹ There's a surprising shortage of information available about the environmental impact of large scale marathon events. Having said that, many big events now pay attention to recycling plastic bottles and cups and using sustainable materials in the production of merchandise etc.

other runners in Berlin that day, and the many thousands who run marathons around the world every year. In recognition of this urge, but with the critical eye induced by her Berlin experience, Claudia deigned to intervene; she met Mihret Kibede, and the Slow Marathon was born.

The Slow Marathon

Slow Marathon was the title of Mihret Kebede's residency with Deveron Arts in 2011-12.² It was Mihret's intention to walk to Huntly, the market town in Aberdeenshire where Deveron Arts are based, from her home in Addis, Ethiopia, a political-aesthetic performance which would respond to impositions on mobility. Ironically, unnavigable deserts, un-crossable borders, and visa restrictions made such an act impossible. Instead, Mihret devised the idea of a cumulative participatory walk. By enlisting 125 walkers, each walking 26 miles, Mihret could accumulate the 3250 miles that separate Addis and Huntly through a symbolic, collaborative gesture. By organising the same level of participation back in Ethiopia, she could gather the same number of symbolic miles needed for the return journey, while also extending the collaborative and participatory nature of her project across continents and cultures.

The idea of a slow marathon manifests in two distinct ways in Mihret's project. On the one hand, participants could log miles walked day to day through Deveron Arts' website; commuting, walking the dog, walking to school, taking a hike in the mountains. In this way, it was possible for individuals to contribute to the gesture of Mihret's project through their own cumulative marathon, even if walking 26 continuous miles was out of their reach. On the other hand, an event was organised and a walking route was mapped across the four

² I italicise Mihret Kebede's project, *Slow Marathon*, distinguished both from the 'slow marathon' as concept and 'Slow Marathon', the annual event in the Deveron Arts calendar.

hills that surround Huntly – the Ba Hill the Battlehill, the Clashmach and the Bin – referencing the traditional Huntly poem which continues ‘They all form a circle and Huntly lies within’. The route would traverse old drove roads and forestry tracks in a circumnavigation of the town that extended to 26 miles: a slow marathon. One hundred walkers took part, generating a one-day total of 2600 miles walked. A companion event was



organised in Addis on the day following the Huntly marathon to take the artist back.

Given the context in which the Slow Marathon was conceived it may seem strange

that one of the recurring questions that I found directed toward it in April 2015, in its fourth incarnation, on a route designed by artist Stuart MacAdam as an extension or extended output of his 2013 *Lines Lost* residency with Deveron Arts, was whether the Slow Marathon was ‘art’? On their website, Deveron Arts describe the Slow Marathon as ‘both an endurance event, attracting walkers from all walks of life, and a poetic act, bringing art and walking together’.³ This is a fitting definition which addresses the relationship between the walk as art, or as methodology, and the walk as a walk. There is a care taken not to imply that the Slow Marathon as an event *is art*, but rather that art is an integral component. In any case, to some extent this question is irrelevant, especially since the inception of the Walking Institute pushed the output of Deveron Arts beyond the arts, extending their pursuit of practices and activities concerned with walking in all its manifestations beyond walking conceived in the first instance as aesthetic practice. And yet, despite the seeming

³ See: <http://www.deveron-arts.com/slow-marathon-2015-portsoy-huntly/>

reductionism of the question, to interrogate what is 'art' about an event, practice or situation, to ask the fundamental question 'where is its art', is a useful line of critique.

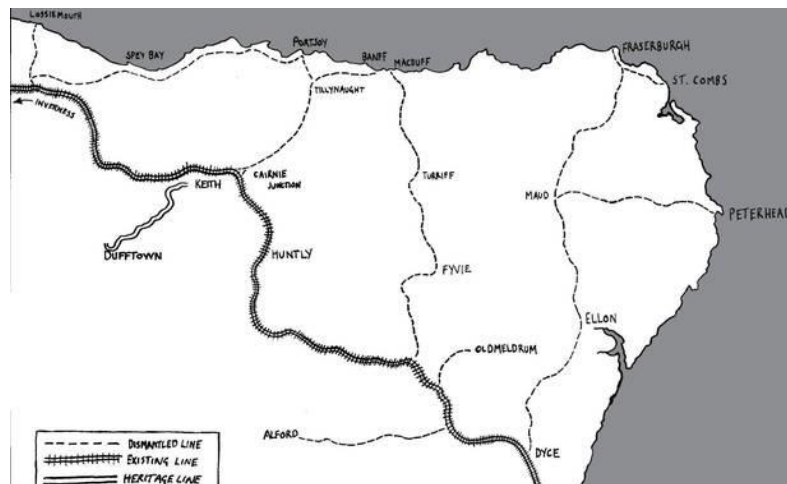
The most obvious answer is present in the design of the Slow Marathon routes which reference or emerge from artist residencies. Strangely, though, and despite referencing the traditional Huntly poem, in this sense, Mihret's route is the most arbitrary to date. Perhaps this is telling. For Mihret's project, distance was the central concern. As outlined above, the terrain followed to arrive at the prescribed distance was less relevant and stood essentially as a symbolic substitute for an equivalent stretch of terrain somewhere on the line drawn on the map between Addis and Huntly.⁴ But as the project which conceived of the slow marathon as an artistic output, or rather as both the material for producing the work and the work itself, the specifics of Mihret's marathon route seem irrelevant in terms of understanding the first Slow Marathon as art. Subsequent Slow Marathon routes have emerged directly from terrain covered in walking-based residencies that have taken place at Deveron Arts. Both the 2013 and 2014 marathons emerged from the multi-artist, two-year-long collaborative project, *Hielan' Ways*. *Hielan' Ways* brought together a collection of artists, writers, historians and musicians to explore and respond to the ancient network of drove roads that cut across the now sparsely populated terrain lying to the south and west of Huntly and stretching to the foothills of the Cairngorms and the Ladder Hills. For the duration of the project, artists including Simone Kenyon, Paul Anderson, Gill Russell and Ron Brander spent hundreds of days walking both on and off trail, mapping routes and features. It was, thus, work which could easily be adapted to plot twenty-six miles for a slow marathon, twice over. Such routes emerge and are made possible through an art practice

⁴ Thinking about ways of representing this palimpsestic layering of terrains is an interesting prospect in its own right.

based in experiential research of the landscape. The second and third slow marathons can therefore be considered as singular performances which are also extended outputs of the *Hielan' Ways* project. Stuart McAdam saw the 2015 event in a similar context.

Lines Lost

The 2015 *Slow Marathon* was the first I'd participated in. The route followed a broken line extending from the village of Portsoy on the Banffshire coast more or less directly south to Huntly, covering a distance of twenty-six miles. It followed, as far as possible, the line of the



former Banff, Portsoy and Strathisla Railway. This line was one of the many severed from the railway network following Dr Richard Beeching's 1963 report on *The Reshaping of British Railways*, in what came to be known as Beeching's cuts. Stuart's *Lines Lost* project with Deveron Arts' Walking Institute in 2013, involved his exploration of the abandoned railway line on foot over a period of months. The line exists now mainly in remnants of track-bed, sidings and some former railway buildings.⁵ In late 2014, Claudia invited Stuart to return to Huntly and devise a Slow Marathon route from his earlier explorations. However, as Stuart notes, neither his attempts to walk the line during *Lines Lost*, nor the subsequent mapping of a Slow Marathon route, were straight forward undertakings, for a variety of reasons.

⁵ See the illustrated map Stuart produced of his project: Stuart McAdam, *Lines Lost: Huntly – Portsoy, Cairnie Junction & Tillynaught*

Perhaps the most pressing of these was the difficulty Stuart encountered in accessing the rails:

The main problem early on was how to link Huntly to the Cairnie Junction Loop, as trains still run on this section of the line. Initially I tried to walk parallel with the line, but this proved difficult. The line runs through an overgrown wood which was tricky to negotiate. It passes through fields with numerous barbed wire fences and cows. There are bits of boggy no man's land, and there is no firm crossing of the [River] Deveron for the pedestrian that stayed faithful to the line. (McAdam, *Lines Lost*)

Eventually he overcame this issue by relinquishing such faithfulness, and in the process found that there was as much value in deviating from the line of the railway as there was in sticking strictly to it. It was only through such deviations that he 'was able to form an impression of the [railway line within a] bigger picture in the landscape' (ibid.). However, as he later writes, obstructions, such as this, causing an impediment to his movement, were a recurring theme throughout the project. Such barriers, Stuart notes, 'influenced where [he] walked and what [he] did' (ibid.). The result was a somewhat convoluted route for the Slow Marathon which required, in addition to the map, a pamphlet of thirty-one instructions with sixty-two accompanying photographs to guide the participants along the twenty-six miles. On one hand this testifies to the amount of work that went into preparing the route. During *Lines Lost* Stuart had, along with help from others, done considerable clearing of overgrown stretches of the line as well as improving access across barbed wire fences, but for an event on the scale of the Slow Marathon, involving up to one hundred walkers of varying abilities, more preparation was required. Alongside the clearing and waymarking, there was the issue of negotiating access with landowners; the route took us not only through several fields and farms, involving numerous fence-crossings, but also through at least one garden. In the end, it was remarkable that a route was devised which followed the old railway as faithfully as it did. However, one of my abiding impressions of the walk was the discrepancy between the

convolutions and complexities of the route we followed and the notion of simply walking, for twenty-six miles, the uninterrupted iron lines of a railway. In itself, this difference demonstrates the very complex land appropriations and changes of use that underpin all inhabited places as they develop over time, and as such offers its own comment on the topographic aspect of the effect produced by the railway closures. We were provided with the instruction pamphlet at the registration event on the night before the Slow Marathon. Claudia and Stuart guided us through each of the thirty-one instructions. No doubt this was a necessary precaution, but I left the meeting feeling distinctly uneasy about getting from one end of the walk to the other without losing my way.

On the morning of the March 15, two buses left from The Square in Huntly to transport the walkers to the beginning of the route in Portsoy. We got off the bus at Portsoy harbour and Steve Brown led us off with a rousing tune on his bagpipes. Passing through a gap in a wall that marked our entry onto the old railway line, Stuart handed every walker a mock train ticket: one-way from Portsoy to Huntly. This bottle-neck start enabled the group to spread out along the path; from my position about half-way back I could see the line of walkers gradually fragmenting along the track-bed as people established their pace and walking partners. For the first several miles there were always other walkers within view in front and behind, so the chances of getting lost were slim. That said, the route remained tricky to follow.

In a previous essay on the *Hielan' Ways Symposium* I noted how the effect of walking communally as we did both there, and here, in the Slow Marathon, was, at least as far as I was concerned, to neglect navigation entirely, relying instead on the apparently superior route-finding knowledge of my companions. In this case, almost everyone that I walked with

or alongside during the Slow Marathon had some familiarity with the route either through their assistance in preparing the route, or having participated in some of Stuart's earlier *Lines Lost* walks. After a while there seemed little need to take care over the instructions or map, as others were doing it for me. It would be reasonable to think that by neglecting my navigational responsibilities and dispensing with representations of the topography – in maps and directional aids – and walking instead with my head up rather than bowed over a map, I would see more, have greater range of vision and more time for contemplation, and that this experience would result in a deeper appreciation of the landscape. But I think the opposite is true.

The whole *Lines Lost* project, and the Slow Marathon to emerge from it, took place in the vicinity of the now defunct railway. We walked where trains had once rolled. Our



position was thus one of both pedestrian and passenger (on a spectral ghost train, if you like, such as the one we stopped at along the way to eat

shortbread and drink from our flask). This makes for an interesting perspective from which

to experience place. The experience of active railway lines is familiar from any number of

cultural artefacts – Rob Reiner's *Stand By Me* (1987) springs immediately to mind, as does

the recent series three of Hans Rosenfeldt's *The Bridge* (2015), and numerous early films.

The observation of the world through the window of a train is also a common trope in

literature and thought. Michel De Certeau, Walter Benjamin, Ford Madox Ford, W H Auden,

Edward Thomas and Patrick Keiller all use it, to name only a few. Benjamin, Ford and Keiller

in particular note the value of the glimpsed ephemera that one encounters from this

vantage point. Keiller, in his introduction to *The View from the Train*, recalls Benjamin's

observation, in his essay titled 'Surrealism', of the revolutionary potential of sights

witnessed from such a vantage point. Benjamin writes of Andre Breton and Nadja, that they 'are the couple who take everything we have experienced on dismal railway journeys [...], on godforsaken Sunday afternoons [...] and redeem it through revolutionary experience, if not action'.⁶ Railways here are less dramatic than those of the films cited above, more aligned with the everyday experience of modernity, the mundane, which for thinkers like Breton, Benjamin and Keiller suggests at all times a potent subversive dimension, precisely because it is so often overlooked. But perhaps it is Ford Madox Ford, writing as Ford Madox Hueffer, in *The Soul of London*, who provides the best point for reflection here. In his chapter on 'Roads into London', Ford offers the reader a series of vignettes witnessed from the windows of train carriages moving slowly towards the city:

One sees [...] so many little bits of uncompleted life [...] a ragged child turns a catherine wheel in the road, and holds up her hand to the passengers. Suddenly a blue policeman steps into the roadway. The train moves on.

[...] A little farther on a woman ran suddenly out of a door; she had a white apron and her sleeves were tucked up. A man followed her hastily, he had red hair, and in his hand a long stick. We moved on, and I have not the least idea whether he were going to thrash her or whether together they were going to beat a carpet.

[...] Incidents so definite as these are more or less the exception, but the constant succession of much smaller happenings that one sees, and that one never sees completed, gives to looking out of train windows a touch of pathos and of dissatisfaction. It is akin to the sentiment grained in humanity of liking a story to have an end.⁷ (Ford, pp. 60-61).

Ford continues to note that one would never get anywhere if they stayed to see each tragedy glimpsed like this through to its conclusion. 'If one stayed to think', he suggests, 'one would like to know what kind of poor wretch set the fifth stone in the third layer of the Pyramid of Cheops' (Ford, p. 62). For Ford, then, the interest that lies in these everyday details, these micro-histories, is unapproachable for the reason that, despite the infinity of

⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism' in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, translated by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 143-160, p. 148. Cf. Patrick Keiller, 'Introduction' in *The View From the Train* (London: Verso, 2013) pp. 1-8.

⁷ Ford Madox Hueffer, *The Soul of London* (London: Alston Rivers, 1905).

fascination that he exemplifies in his Pyramid of Cheops example, to pursue each one would disable any forward movement whatsoever. Yet it is perhaps exactly this impediment to 'progress' and the relentless unfolding of history where the revolutionary potential of the everyday lies.

It is, in a way, precisely this tension between moving at speed in order to arrive, and moving slowly in order to explore and observe; or between looking, through the fleeting frame of a window on a train, or, having stepped from a train no longer mobile on to a track no longer used, stopping awhile to appreciate at greater length, in greater depth, the 'constant succession of much smaller happenings', that I find replicated in this question of navigation. Of course, slowing down is at the very heart of the Slow Marathon concept, but it is exaggerated further still in thinking about the details of the route. Re-reading the Slow Marathon instructions some months after the event, I am struck with a desire to do the walk again, alone, forcing myself to pay the necessary attention to match the visible things of the phenomenal world to their representation on the map and to the language of the instruction pamphlet. For it is surely in attending to the mundane details of 'a double gate near some trees'; 'the edge of the gorse'; 'the old railway bridge'; that one begins to engage more deeply with place and the 'poetic act' of bringing walking and art together. Could it be the case that the Slow Marathon just isn't slow enough?

Looking back on my Slow Marathon now is a little like taking a Fordian railway journey. Certain things remain clear, but can only ever offer a fragmented picture of a day's experience. I remember the first section of overgrown railway cutting, which had caused so much trouble for Stuart and the others to clear in order that we might pass along it; it presented a narrow path that could only be taken in single file. I remember the haunting melancholy of the ghost train; of leaving it and walking dutifully around the perimeter of the

adjoining field; of crossing barbed wire fences and walking along a now overgrown section of raised track through birch trees; the light in the glorious Scots pine wood above the anCnoc distillery that we entered shortly after taking a wrong turn, despite being led by Clauida; and the wee dram that was waiting for us there; I remember the downpour that started just after sitting down to eat lunch on the edge of the road by the distillery, and how it prompted me to go on without a break, taking up with Jason and Harris Williamson who had just returned from a detour, running up Knock Hill and adding miles to their journey just to admire the view.⁸ I remember the pile of massive boulders by a gate between two fields which Jason remarked looked like a stone circle in storage; how we sat under the railway bridge to drink coffee and eat sandwiches, wishing for a train to pass overhead; then the sign on the window of the first building we saw as we entered Ruthven, that read

‘Trespassers will be shot’, and the subsequent marvellous hospitality at Ruthven; and again as we crossed into the field at the Huntly-Portsoy road, where someone had made a straw bed which we



took turns to lie down on;⁹ I remember the delightful walk along the banks of the Deveron; Tim Knowles’ subtly positioned Exploration Aid near the confluence of the Deveron and the Bogie which, in the simplicity of the steps and handles he had carved into a fallen tree, charmed us; and discovering that there was another element to it suspended high in the branches of a tree, but which none of us noticed until it was later revealed in a photograph.

⁸ This was a foolish move: the Williamsons run up hills for fun. I do not. And even though the pace they set for the second half of the marathon seemed fine (and was, for them, probably slow), my lack of preparation meant that by mile twenty-five I was in serious trouble and by the time I arrived that the Deveron Arts offices my legs had entirely given up on me and I could barely speak. I had hit the wall. Jason, in the end, had to half-carry me to his car and drive me the half-mile home. Fortunately the whole ‘episode’ passed within an hour.

⁹ This was another foolish move; it was on standing up from my little sojourn here that I realised my legs had more-or-less seized and that to stop again would quite possibly mean the end of my Slow Marathon.

Then I remember the pain of having to detour over the Huntly railway bridge in order to make up the twenty-six miles, and the struggle I had to reach the finish without collapsing. But the whole walk was punctuated with reflective conversations with friends and new acquaintances, and it is this element, that was also a feature of the *Hielan' Ways Symposium* walks, that stands out as the real merit of walking in this distracted, cordial way, in an organised event. Thus, what might be lost in singular closeness with the terrain can be replaced by an at times quite intense sociability.

The Pathmaker's Gathering

It has become tradition that on the day following the Slow Marathon a Pathmaker's Gathering is held, to relax, eat and think about walking in the muscle-sore aftermath of the previous day. This time around it was held at the Huntly Cricket Club clubhouse. Two of the speakers couldn't make it, but John Sparshott did, and told us about his work developing the Six Dales Trail in Yorkshire. Marylin Lennon spoke about the influence walking the Camino de Santiago had on her work on cultural projects around the troubled borders of Northern Ireland and Eire. Anthony Schrag and Tim Knowles stepped in to speak about their respective walking-based projects, *The Lure of the Lost* and *Exploration Aids*, running concurrently with Deveron Arts, and Ali Pretty talked about her walking projects at Thurrock, Essex, including the *Thurrock 100*, a series of ten, ten-mile participatory walks spanning key locations around the geographical area.

After the marvellous Rhynie Woman feast, we all sat down for a discussion around the Slow Marathon. The question of art arose again, expectedly. To what extent does the artistic element of the event get subsumed by a walk conceived as non-aesthetic or non-political? Is the balance between the 'poetic act' and the 'endurance event' achieved, or

achievable? As we look ahead to the 2016 event the Slow Marathon methodology seems firmly defined. This forthcoming route will develop the walking undertaken by musician Jake Williams and artist Anne Murray who each walked the length of the River Deveron, tracing its course from source to mouth and from mouth to source, respectively, for their collaborative project *With and Against the Flow* (2012-13). The event is undoubtedly successful, attracting increasing interest and selling out quicker year on year, and this is arguably a result of the balance that inheres to the structure of the concept, making the event attractive for walkers, artists, and walking artists alike. But during the Pathmaker's Gathering conversation such assumptions were questioned. Tim Knowles suggested that the Slow Marathon be made slower – a marathon undertaken over twenty-four hours, for example. Immediately the logistics of such an event are made more complex and its appeal to a broad audience diminished in turn. However, by the very suggestion, Tim points us back to the radical beginnings of the concept.

The slow marathon concept emerges as a creative and – I think – subversive response to the large scale marathon events that so alienated Claudia, and as an artistic solution that subverts the multiple barriers to migration that threaten to become ever more intrusive and impenetrable in our globalised world, while enabling a collaborative, participatory action. This is exemplified in Mihret's originary project. But such beginnings have, I think, gradually diminished as the years have gone on. The slow marathon is an aesthetic-political concept. On the one hand, the innate transferability or mobility of such a concept – its ability to be repeated anywhere – holds real potential in this regard. Walking always has, from protest marches to revolutions. But more than this, Tim's suggestion points to the fact that 'slow marathon' should be an open concept, one which might be reinterpreted again, appropriated more creatively, its parameters explored and exploded in

new configurations. And perhaps it is in this way that the Slow Marathon's artistic, subversive, and political potential can be fulfilled. It needs to be asked, then, how else might we re-think the very notion of the marathon? How else might that question, 'where is its art', be answered?

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