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## **Is the End to End (Land's End to John O'Groats or vice versa) a Pilgrimage?**

### **Introduction**

We are walkers and we often talk and write about walking. This paper reflects on twenty years of walking and on one particular walk: The End to End. This is the name given to a journey between the two farthest places on the British mainland: Lands End and John O'Groats. We have all three walked the End to End between those two places but by different routes, which from south to north, our direction of travel, is also called LEJOG (the route in the other direction is called JOGLE). In this paper we will briefly give a history of the End to End as a walking route and a personal history of our own walks.

Using autoethnography, we have reflected on the meaning of the End to End in our experience, developing a core narrative that has emerged from our writings and discussions concerning the End to End as a pilgrimage. Examples will be given from the narrative to illustrate ways in which pilgrimage and tourism overlap in our experience of the End to End, and affirm that it is a journey for anyone to undertake.

## **Brief History of the End to End as a walking route**

Walking may seem an everyday activity for the majority but as Solnit (2001) notes: 'It has sometimes been, at least since the eighteenth century, an act of resistance to the mainstream'.<sup>1</sup> As walkers we are mindful that we tread in the footsteps of many, living as we do not far from Kinder Scout, site of the Mass Trespass in 1932<sup>2</sup> but that, compared with many walkers, especially from the Global South, we also walk with privilege being relatively free to do so as a leisure activity.

Although there is much debate about the End to End it has been a magnet for travellers for over 150 years. The first recorded End to End walk was in 1871 and was actually from north to south (John O'Groats to Lands End) by brothers John and Robert Naylor. In 1960, Billy Butlin, the tourism entrepreneur, set up a walking race that began on 29th February of that year.<sup>3</sup>

Into the twenty first century the route attracts people of all ages and abilities, for leisure, for charity, for record attempts and many other reasons.<sup>4</sup> Janet was passed by the current holder of the world hand-cycle record, paralympic athlete Mel Nicholls, in June 2019, when she set the current record at 6 days, 22 hours and 17 minutes. Janet was walking.<sup>5</sup>

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1 - Solnit, R. (2001), *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. London: Verso, p. 268.

2 - Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout, Derbyshire, 23th April 1932, for the right to roam in England.

3 - Details from the Lands End exhibition on the End to End, visited on 2nd April 2019. One of the competitors to get a special mention for completing the course was a 62 year old grandmother, Maud Nicholas

4 - A long but not complete list can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land%27s\\_End\\_to\\_John\\_o%27\\_Groats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land%27s_End_to_John_o%27_Groats)

5 - <https://melnicholls.co.uk/Handcycle-Britain-World-Record> Nicholls described the End to End as 'The great British iconic endurance journey'.

## **Personal histories of the End to End**

We are participant observers in the End to End, but we are not disinterested or disconnected. We think, write and talk about the End to End because we have walked it ourselves.

In 2003 Bob Warwicker, an ordained minister of the United Reformed Church, walked LEJOG for his first ministerial sabbatical. <sup>6</sup> Working as a Chaplain with the South Yorkshire Workplace Chaplaincy <sup>7</sup> at the time, he decided to reflect on life on the economic and social margins as he walked. This determined the things he wrote about, the blog diary and prayers he developed, and the route he took. He completed the walk in 71 days and his work influenced the walks made by Janet and Hannah. <sup>8</sup>

In 2012 Hannah Warwicker walked LEJOG as a young adult emerging from her A Levels and anticipating her transition to university. Hannah had been 9 years old when Bob walked LEJOG. Aged 18 when she walked it, completing in 63 days, she later said she'd been 'planning it for half of my life'. <sup>9</sup> When asked to describe her walk, she said it was 'a pilgrimage before I knew what the word signified'. <sup>10</sup> It was also about emerging into the adult world and as such something of a rite of passage, but not just a one off event as it has gone on to resurface many times in her adult life.

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6 - Ministers of the United Reformed Church may take a paid 3 month sabbatical for every ten years of active ministry.

7 - SYWC: South Yorkshire Workplace Chaplaincy, formerly Industrial Mission in South Yorkshire, was an ecumenical team of chaplains, lay and ordained, that operated in South Yorkshire Workplaces for several decades. Bob Warwicker was a member of that team from 1998-2008.

8 - Bob's diary, reports and prayers are at <https://bobjanet.org.uk/lejog/index.htm>

9 - HLW personal communication, 1st June 2022. Much of the material for the paper is like this, made up of comments, conversations and writings that we have shared together about the End to End.

10 - *ibid*.

In 2019 Janet Lees, who has been a school chaplain and is a writer, walked LEJOG on retirement as a pilgrimage. Aware of the toll recent experiences had taken on her mental health, and of the increasing ecological crisis for the planet, by then an overweight 60 year old, Janet is the most recent member of her family to walk the End to End, taking 117 days.<sup>11</sup>

Although all three walked alone, we also walked together and with others, both in personal and virtual accompanists. We supported each other, sharing some of the routes and being part of the support mechanism providing food, water, bag carrying and advice. The best for us has been a mix of these but also each doing our 'own thing'.<sup>12</sup>

### **Our stories, our selves**

Using our convenience sample of three, we have searched and refreshed our data for nearly twenty years. Each one tells their own story of the End to End but also reflects on the shared elements of the story together. The data itself is in notes, conversations, blogs, prayers and photographs amongst other personal sources. We have used autoethnography as a prism for viewing our experiences of the End to End: a form of qualitative research that uses personal experience and the narratives generated by those experiences to develop social meaning and understanding. A cross discipline method related to ethnography, it is defined by Ellis (2004) as 'research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political'.<sup>13</sup>

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11 - Her book 'Come Wind, Come Weather' was published by Wild Goose (Glasgow) in 2024 and is available at <https://www.ionabooks.com/product/come-wind-come-weather/>

12 - details of the routes we used are available on line at <https://bobjanet.org.uk/pilgrimage/lejogroutes.html>

13 - Ellis, C. (2004) *The Autographic I*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, p. xix.

Criticised by some for the way in which personal over-reflection may lead to narcissism, we have tried to overcome some of these methodological shortcomings by sharing our narratives and reflections on our experiences. As Ellis goes on to say: 'Narrative is the way we remember the past, turn life into language and disclose to ourselves and others the truth of our experiences'.<sup>14</sup> With a depth of data to explore we present the following examples from our narratives for discussion.

### **Developing a narrative of the End to End as pilgrimage**

It is perhaps to some extent down to Billy Butlin in 1960 that the End to End has been linked to tourism but from our experience it is not necessary to view pilgrimage and tourism as opposites. The Loch Ness Monster shops of Drumnadrochit High Street may look like pure tourism to some but just back on the track is a small cave which each of us has found to be a tranquil place for a pause in a green cathedral.<sup>15</sup> The End to End is just one example of the overlap between the two. Defined in many different ways, pilgrimage is generally seen as a journey that takes a person away to find a new meaning to their identity or chosen life path and from there return to their life with renewed understanding. Traditionally the destination was important, chosen for spiritual reasons it would have been a religious centre of some kind. But the things of pilgrimage have expanded to include nature, encounter, relationships, places and stories and definitions including 'Bring your own Beliefs' have moved towards greater inclusion.<sup>16</sup> The End to End includes all of these aspects and more.

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14 - *ibid*, page 126

15 - On the Great Glen Way, a 79 mile path from Fort William to Inverness: <https://www.highland.gov.uk/greatglenway/>

16 - The British Pilgrimage Trust has this underlying aim and can be found at <https://britishpilgrimage.org/>

People make journeys of spiritual importance to them in the course of their travelling or tourism in other contexts. They may visit places which have connections to their family history, or which have a vocational aspect, like a gap year, or a physical challenge like a marathon or triathlon. As far as we can tell these are all linked by a sense of people seeking some sort of fulfilment and renewal through the journey itself.

Hannah Warwicker writes that ‘The placement of pilgrimage and tourism as opposites feels rather outdated to me, a “millennial” who has grown up in a more secular UK (Warwicker, 2022). To say something is “just tourism” feels like the sort of put-down you get from more formal folks who are part of institutionalised religion. Faith and spirituality should not be “us versus them”. Faith communities are starting to get the hang of cooperating with and welcoming other faith communities. However, they still seem at a loss as to how to welcome those of no faith, occasional faith, or less formalised faith’. <sup>17</sup> Developing more inclusive views of pilgrimage may be one challenge to such attitudes.

Whilst the End to End has a beginning and end point, our reflections reveal that the journey itself is more than its start and finish. The beginning of the journey requires as much thought as the end particularly when you include all the planning detail required and the post journey reflection. Here is an example of that point, also by Hannah:

‘People always comment on “that’s a long way” or “two months - what a lot of walking” or “you must have got really fit” or “did you get blisters?”. But it’s not the physical aspects that I remember or the physical challenge which made its mark on me. I do recall the first part being tough, but the physical challenge wasn’t what defined the process for me. Instead I remember the highlights, but mostly the logistical frustrations along the way! These are the kinds of things which make good anecdotes, but also since I was doing it as a transition to adulthood I think they stick with me as examples of frustration and resilience, especially that moment five

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17 - Hannah Warwicker, unpublished notes about the End to End, June 2022.

nights from John O’Groats at Tain where the tent blew down and my jacket potato went cold, which I was discussing with one of my students recently’.<sup>18</sup> A year after her End to End, Janet Lees reflected on a similar point: ‘From Land’s End to John O’Groats the things most people asked about were my feet. It seems to be a common assumption that if you’re going on a long walk it’s your feet that will suffer, hence the hundreds of foot based conversations. But my feet were largely fine. I was wearing Hannah’s socks, as they’d not worn out from her 2012 walk, and had a rotation of four pairs of boots. My Nike<sup>19</sup> inspired mile nibblers kept my plates of meat<sup>20</sup> more or less on the straight and narrow for 117 days and 1110 miles. My next to little toe on my right foot does have a little ridge, not Striding Edge<sup>21</sup> stuff, but it can niggle. It will rub a bit on a seemingly seamless sock and from time to time it did make an attempt to dramatise the foot related aspects of the walk. But the End to End is not just about feet’.<sup>22</sup>

Even so, we have wondered about the ways in which pilgrims of other times and places might have reflected on their experiences as we have ours. Janet was concerned what they may have done on the route to Canterbury in the Middle Ages when diarrhoea struck as it did on the Severn Way. Hannah thought: ‘I bet what they really remembered was that time a stray dog stole their breakfast somewhere near Rochester’.<sup>23</sup> As with any outdoor activity in

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18 - Ibid. Hannah, now 28, teaches teenagers and has the End to End on her CV as a talking point.

19 - Nike, Greek goddess of victory.

20 - ‘plates of meat’, Cockney rhyming slang for feet. Janet’s family have links to the east end of London through her father who was born within the sound of Bow Bells, the traditional definition of a Cockney, people that use the dialect.

21 - Striding Edge is a ridge in the Lake District.

22 - <https://foowr.org.uk/lejoblog/2020/04/page/3/>

23 - Ibid. One of the criticisms of autoethnography is the way it may blur the line between fact and fiction, but this is also one of its strengths in creating a meaningful narrative.

Britain, the weather came up quite often as a theme in reflections and conversations. It's not possible to walk for a few months without the weather having some impact. Hannah walked from July to September in 2012, which was said to be the wettest summer in 100 years. With changes in the climate induced by human activity making more of a global impact it is right that we reflect on the weather. With his background in science and an interest in the weather, it was a subject near to Bob's heart and one he shared with Hannah and Janet. 'It was a cold, sunny day. In the part of the day when I had to dawdle, I lay down in the shelter of some gorse out of the easterly breeze and in the sun. It was like summer, with winter five feet away'.<sup>24</sup>

It was this observation that led to the phrase 'Gorse bush viewed from a recumbent position' joining our shared narratives such that we would often look out for one.

There were other common themes in our narratives: hospitality and companionship were two that came up quite often. All of us remember people who went out of their way to welcome us or offer their company and we tried to be welcoming and supportive in turn. At Kelso, Bob noted: 'Once again I've been made welcome. I've spent the day as I pleased: bathing, getting the air to my toes, sitting by the fire looking at maps and dreaming of what lay ahead'.<sup>25</sup>

Although each of us has our own list of highlights of the End to End it is the crossing of Rannoch Moor that takes the top spot. This long day walking on the West Highland Way crosses a remote and challenging terrain with awesome views.<sup>26</sup> Bob's observation sums it up: 'It will never be better than this... I've been in this great theatre where a show of light and cloud and sky and massive peaks and shining lochans has been playing out all around me. Other people are in this theatre... They have seen the same light and shade and

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24 - <https://bobjanet.org.uk/lejog/12150.htm>

25 - <https://bobjanet.org.uk/lejog/12184.htm>

26 - Opened in 1980, the West Highland Way is a 95 mile route from Glasgow to Fort William.



rock and water and maybe they have been caught up in it too. But we each have our own scripts: we each have our own ideas of the play to which these elements belong’.

His blessing from Rannoch Moor is the one we have most often used since returning from our walks.

*May God bless you on the journey.  
If it rains may you not arrive wet.  
If the load is heavy, may it not break you.  
If the path is steep, may you not fall.  
If you are tired, may you find rest.  
If you have far to go, may a friend greet you at the end.* <sup>27</sup>

Even after it is over ‘a good pilgrimage can be revisited and recycled’ wrote Hannah, contributing a ‘permanence and significance’ to our memories and ourselves. We revisit our journeys separately, together and with others. They are more than a trail of stories or lists of the best habits or frequently asked questions. <sup>28</sup> There are rituals that pop up on other walks or other days, like our habit of nominating a Tree of the Day as both a celebration of the landscape and our lament of the climate crisis. Simplicity is something we all learnt from walking the End to End, as Hannah wrote:

‘I think this End to End taught me a thing or two about simplicity. All my life I’ve handled my anxiety by being over prepared for every eventuality. This was the first time I really found myself noticing that there is an easier way!’ <sup>29</sup>

Of course, a traveller may not reach the end. We are three who have completed the End to End but many more must start and not reach that goal or leave bits out. Janet often thought she wouldn’t

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27 - <https://bobjanet.org.uk/lejog/12195.htm>

28 - Janet did a reblog of her whole journey from April 2020 during the Covid19 pandemic when the UK was in lockdown: <https://foowr.org.uk/lejogblog/2020/>

29 - Hannah Warwicker, unpublished notes about the End to End, June 2022.

make it to the end of a day let alone John O’Groats, as these words about day 105 illustrate:

‘There is that moment almost every day of the walk when I think I might not get to the end. Often it’s on strenuous uphill sections when my legs ache and I wonder why I’ve taken this route. Predictably this happened again today on the way up to the pass out of Glen Loth.’<sup>30</sup> But Bob, her pilgrim guide, would come back towards her on the track and shepherd her home. It was a team effort in the true spirit of pilgrimage.

This spirit did spill over into other personal interactions too. Bob writes of this encounter on the way through Northumberland;– “In Safeways at Ponteland, I met a woman by the fruit juices who had the same problem as mine. She was visiting someone in hospital and only needed one carton, but they were packed in threes. We arranged to split a three between us...”<sup>31</sup> From the Canterbury Tales to the Camino, the pilgrim spirit has also often been about a journey and accommodation shared with strangers who are doing the same thing. This was true of the three of us to a degree, but such encounters were sparse along the whole route. There were plenty of meetings with people who were not on LEJOG, and numerous interactions through the internet with supporters and followers. We made the most of this connectivity, which maybe not so much in the classic way of pilgrimages and is perhaps a sign of the changing times. The opportunity to use the internet to connect with other pilgrims and as a space for personal reflection is something we have used to our advantage. It is this development of that pilgrim spirit that had made us into the travellers we are today. Hannah puts it like this, writing ten years after her own End to End:

‘You don’t stop being an End-to-Enders. You certainly don’t when it’s the family business and your mum does it a few years later. I never stopped being a walker. I didn’t walk a great deal for a while, but during the pandemic I managed to string together enough

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30 - <https://foowr.org.uk/lejogblog/2019/08/>

31 - <https://bobjanet.org.uk/lejog/12180.htm>

progress to start going for a little walk most days. These days my “great outdoors” is a dodgy patch of wasteland/woodland where the police are occasionally pursuing the local drug dealers. But walking is still inherently an act of pilgrimage for me; that’s a behaviour I’ve grown up with and I’m not going to unlearn it now.’<sup>32</sup>

There is the obvious question of what to do after the End to End. Like all pilgrimages it feeds into other journeys and we have each of us taken up other challenges, walking between cities when moving house or ‘joining up the dots’ between walks during the Covid 19 pandemic : going End to End teaches walking as a vehicle for handling changes of all kinds.

### **Resources for the End to End**

You will find the End to End mentioned in guide books, magazines and on websites. The route you choose will depend on many variables: the form of travel you intend to use, whether you prefer roads or off-road routes and if you travel with a time constraint or not. There is no set route, although you will find plenty of advice online.<sup>33</sup> You are most likely to meet other End to Enders near the beginnings and the ends of the route, and at the Solway Firth where the ‘back road’ is the only route for non-motorway traffic on the west side of the England/Scotland border. Listen to their stories too.

These and much more are part of the cultural heritage of the End to End, making up the knowledge, skills and practices, including songs, drama, festivals and so on, that are the lived experiences of End to Enders and their associated communities.

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32 - Hannah Warwicker, unpublished notes about the End to End, June 2022.

33 - The routes for our three End to Ends are listed at <https://bobjanet.org.uk/pilgrimage/lejogroutes.html>

## Conclusions

There's no need to create any division between pilgrims and tourists, to downplay some journeys over others. Faith can be found on any route and it can be renewed and challenged by any journey as our narratives illustrate. Just as we do not all express our faith by turning up for formal acts of worship in a specified time and place, so too we can grow and change through many kinds of journeys, of which the End to End is one example. However, making a route like the End to End inclusive in ways that encourage travellers to bring their own spirituality is a challenge to us all. Anyone can go End to End and in our dreams we still do.

## References

- Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: Altamira.
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