

Life & Times

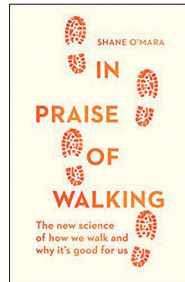
Books

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In Praise of Walking. The New Science of How We Walk and Why it's Good for Us Shane O'Mara

The Bodley Head, 2019, HB, 218pp, £16.99, 978-1847925015



AFOOT

Professor O'Mara is a neuroscientist with a passion for walking. He argues that bipedalism, an ability to walk upright on two feet, is beneficial not just in evolutionary terms but also for our wellbeing. His book celebrates the joy of walking and urges readers to get up and walk their way to a better life. He presents well-referenced evidence for the benefits of walking; improved cognition, creativity, and mood. He explains the effects of walking on increasing blood flow to the brain and in reducing measured body fat, emphasising the importance of regular walking and attention to diet.

As a keen long-distance walker, I enjoyed the chapter on the delights of walking in a city. Walking allows us to connect with our environment; the smells, dirt, sights, lights, and snatches of conversation; however, city planners give motorists priority over pedestrians. The author makes a plea for green spaces, improved crossing points, and trails to enhance the 'walkability' of our cities.

O'Mara quotes Hippocrates: 'walking is the best medicine' and salutes the Shetland GPs who prescribe walking for their patients. He maintains that you are never too old to take up walking and gain the benefits for both body and mind. He describes eloquently the beneficial effects on learning and memory and how the brain is permeable to influence from muscle activity in the body through positive feedback.

A chapter on how walking can improve creative thinking and problem solving made me wonder why we spend so much time sitting in front of screens. Walking facilitates 'mind wandering' and divergent thinking. The 'flow', a subjective experience of concentration and deep enjoyment arising in many sports, can be felt while walking longer distances. Social walking with others offers a chance for conversation to evolve in ways that would not occur if you simply sat together. One remembers when president Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev left a summit conference to walk together alongside Lake Geneva.

Walking a mile in another's shoes is often used as a metaphor for empathy. On foot we can interact with each other at a human level. O'Mara argues that we should not be cooped up in conference rooms, we need to get out and walk.

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