

from rediscovering. And yet not without ceremony: the Consecration, the traditional keypoints of the liturgy were very much present and given a heightened significance through the quiet which accompanied them. All such a contrast from the ratter tatter Catholicism along the way.

Saturday 9th December (my 28th birthday)

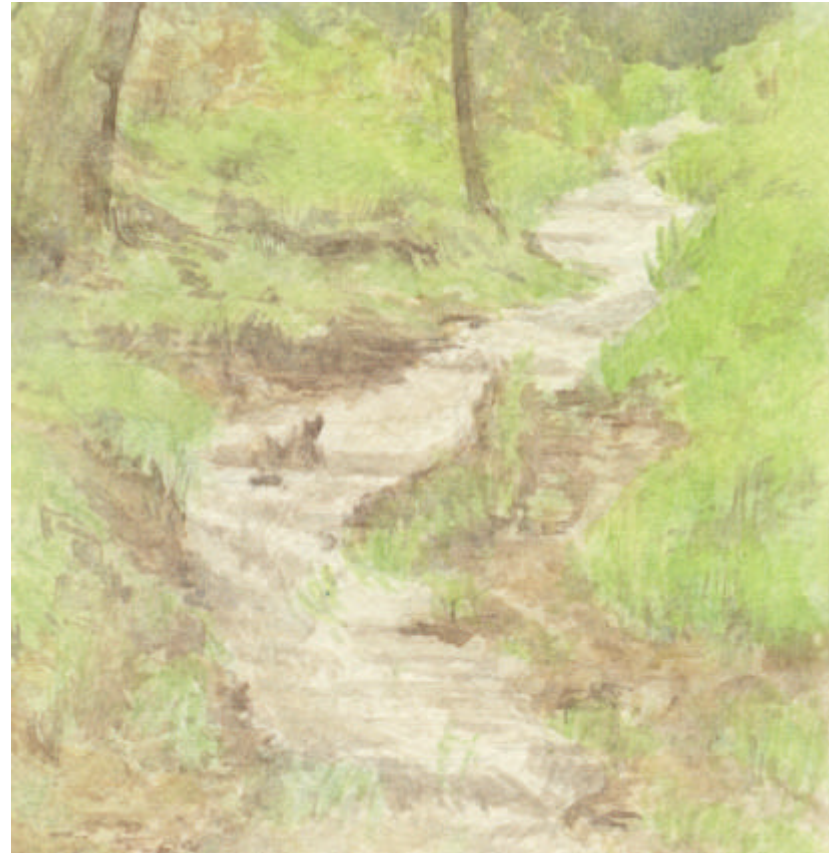
Today started early, the machinery necessary to put forty children on the road firing up 1½ hours before first light. I was disgruntled at being short-changed of sleep, but as I ate my banana and drank my milk in the kitchen, a chorus of beaming and hitherto unknown faces broke into “Happy Birthday”. I have no idea how they all knew, but it was a delightful surprise. We’ll all be at the same place tonight and will arrive together tomorrow. What a joy.

It’s dry as everyone sets out and just as Hoare begins to think that the lack of rain might be a birthday present from above, the hubris is immediately punished, first with drizzle, then with several hours of the proper stuff; for four hours water is the principal theme of a watercolour, for I can’t omit to acknowledge the *agua*, given its overwhelming presence this last week; and this painting, like all the others, is painted brolly up and head down.

This evening in the refuge at Arca, as I enter the common room, the lights are turned out - and in comes a candle-lit birthday cake, a Tarta Santiago. *Oh la la*: this from complete strangers, most of whom don’t even know my name. Then we have *Queimada*, a flame-topped Galician brew to ward off the evil spirits. The fire is radiant and crackling, there’s the gentle caress of a guitar in the background and singing and strumming into the night. Could things have worked out any better? What a shame that Francisco isn’t here too. I don’t know where he has stopped, but tomorrow, surely, we will meet in Santiago.

Sunday 10th December

Everybody here wants to leave early in order to arrive at the Cathedral in time for the main midday Mass. A fantastic idea. So we start walking at 7am, the first time I have set out in the dark.



The others walk fast. I can keep up, but it’s not a relaxed pace. We never stop for a moment, and so navigational mistakes are made. At one point we even find ourselves walking away from Santiago. One of the lessons of this journey is that it is better to take a little more time and not to rush. For if you rush forwards, backwards and forwards again, wouldn’t you have been better off keeping steadily in the right direction?

For the first day in ten, it isn’t raining and at 9.30, just as the sun is peeping up over the eucalyptus forest, I stop for the rest which I know I need, and I let the others continue. There’s time in hand, for 10 km should be comfortably manageable in 2½ hours.



Soon I will reach Monte de Gozo, a hill from which the towers of the Cathedral are said to be first apparent; this hill was developed in the 1980s to provide an open air amphitheatre and accommodation for over 1000 people. My guidebook tells me that some people regard the development as a 'desecration' of a beautiful hillside, others think it a 'useful facility' - two descriptions, possibly both accurate, both in different languages. What a shame that the development couldn't somehow sanctify the place and be a useful facility.

The cathedral is barely visible until you're almost upon it, at which point it's scarcely believable that you might actually be here.

My mind was elsewhere during Mass and I sat restlessly in my pew. And it was only when the great thurible swung after Communion, unexpectedly rigged, heaved up high and set in motion by six or seven men, slowly climbing, dropping again, each time higher and higher, finally almost kissing the south transept's ceiling, far above my head; then plummeting, following a wavering course, passing close to the floor in front of the altar, billowing clouds of incense as it rose and fell, the sunlight streaming through the haze of smoke, the delicate scent gently spreading along each row and into the side aisles - only then did a spirit of calm and thanksgiving enter me.

"This is not a spectacle" the presiding priest said, "it is an expression of our thanksgiving".

It was a spectacle, but so obviously a spectacle of thanksgiving and of wonder too. And it left a peace in its wake, a peace which wanted just to say, "Thank you for this journey".