

## TRAVELLERS CLUB MEETING

### HIGHWAY INTO SPAIN

The final meeting of the Travellers Club for 2008 was held at St. Ignatius College, Riverview, on Sunday, November 9. The speaker was Bruce Ryan, Emeritus Professor of Geography at the University of Cincinnati, USA. Bruce is also a Councillor of the Society, and its Public Officer. He goes to jail if the Society misbehaves.

His topic was the 52-day walk from Paris to Madrid that was completed in 1926 by Marcel Auroseu (1891-1983) and Max McCullough (1904-1993). They were the first to climb over the Pyrenees in the early spring of 1926, during a blinding snowstorm, with snow up to their thighs. Auroseu turned 35 exactly half way to Madrid, and surmised that both the journey and his life were half over. Having been wounded twice in France, he longed for an adventure that might “sweep the last, carrion vestiges of the War from my soul and give the world its old, sweet odour.” He had been awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Military Cross. McCullough was 22, and thought the escapade might be a lark. He wore knickerbockers on the trip. The two men had become friends at Columbia University in New York, while Auroseu was working at the American Geographical Society.

Auroseu later became the executive secretary of the British Government’s Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (1936-55), which was housed in the Royal Geographical Society, London. Having returned to his native Australia in retirement (1956), Auroseu was elected President of the Geographical Society of New South Wales (1959-60). He compiled, translated, and published the letters of Ludwig Leichhardt (1968).

McCullough was a county official in Texas, a wartime bureaucrat in Washington, D.C. (Deputy Administrator for Rationing), and the US Department of State’s Consul in Glasgow. He also ran the State Department’s UNESCO program.

Both men wrote accounts of their journey, but only Auroseu’s was published—initially in London as *Highway into Spain* (1930), and then in two American volumes, as *Highway into Spain* and *Beyond the Pyrenees* (1931). McCullough’s 644-page manuscript account was later found by his daughter in Wilmington, Delaware. Neither kept notes during the walk, but together spent five weeks in Paris reconstructing their narratives.

Before setting out, Auroseu and McCullough shared a “mouldy little cottage” in Paris for four months (1925-26), writing poems, stories, and plays, none of which found publishers. In whimsical exasperation, Max had said, “let’s do something, A,” to which Marcel spontaneously replied: “all right, let’s walk to Madrid.” They left one month later, exiting Paris through the Porte D’Orleans. Each of their rucksacks weighed exactly ten pounds. They cut their nine maps into strips five cm wide (geographical sacrilege!), to save weight, and to glue them to a pre-determined route through Mehun (where Auroseu’s ancestors had lived), Bourges, the Massif Central, Toulouse, Andorra, and Zaragoza. They carried a Kodak camera,

Robert Frost's *New Hampshire*, and Arthur Machen's *The Shining Pyramid*. They averaged 32.7 km per walking day, stopping to rest for ten minutes after every fifty minutes on the road.

Much that they saw remains today, including the Hotel Charles VII in Mehun, where Joan of Arc had lived in 1429-30. Much has disappeared, including the now-submerged town of Tiurana. They encountered French gendarmes and Spanish civil guards, priests on bicycles, and three other tramps, while Marcel had imaginary conversations with Cervantes, Don Quixote, and such recent colleagues as Isaiah Bowman and Edgeworth David. They were received as both intellectual *caballeros* and as "two English gentlemen on a spree." Max concluded that getting accommodation in France always required (a) an explanation of what they were up to, (b) jingling ready money in one's pocket, and (c) an effusive compliment to La Belle France. He also advised any traveller to first acquire a foreign country's abusive language.

In 2007, Marianne and Bruce Ryan drove over the course that the walkers had followed in 1926. Max McCullough and his wife, Frances, had already retraced the walk in 1976, by car, to mark its fiftieth anniversary. Max had then arranged for a bottle of Chambertin to be delivered to Marcel in Sydney, as a reminder of the wine they had drunk in Le Havre to celebrate their journey's completion in 1926.

The Travellers Club talk was illustrated by digital images taken in 2007, and by literary snippets from the two accounts of the remarkable walk.

The Geographical Society is very grateful to Peter Steffan of Riverview College for making possible these meetings of the Travellers Club. He provides a well-equipped science laboratory for the presentations, and obtains permission for our members to socialize and have afternoon tea in the staff common room. He also helps with setting up and operating audio-visual equipment, even on Sundays. Those present are also indebted to 'Ela Taranto and Michèle Barbeau for organizing the Travellers Club meetings so efficiently, and for serving such succulent, diet-denying afternoon teas (and other mood-elevating beverages).

Postscript: After this talk, Bob Solomon offered to guide the speaker back to the proper freeway entrance for those proceeding home to Kiama. He told Bruce to follow his silver Honda Jazz, but Bruce followed a cream Honda Jazz by mistake, and ended up lost in Abbotsford, thus quenching all ambition of ever becoming an ASIO spy assigned to follow the Queen's enemies.

Bruce Ryan