

## Forks in the Road

It was mid summer and the forecast was good: a dry day ahead, but with a light south-westerly breeze and wispy clouds to stop it getting too hot. I had decided to trek along the Roman road about twenty miles to Kelchester, now a small village but once a Roman settlement. A bus went through there each hour which would bring me back home late this afternoon.

I began my trek early around 6.30 a.m. when it was cool and all was quiet. The first part followed the main road out of town. After two hours or so I came to a fork in the road beside which stood a café called, appropriately, 'The Fork in the Road.' It had a large parking area and was used mainly by lorry drivers. The food was plain, but good and plentiful. I was ready for a leisurely breakfast.

As I took my time over a hearty breakfast, I got my iPhone out and started browsing. I found this was not the only café called 'The Fork in the Road'; there were two or three others of that name in Britain. I thought, maybe, it would make an interesting title for a poem for the poetry-writing group I belonged to; but I was somewhat dismayed to find that many others had written poems called 'The Fork in the Road' or, more simply, 'Fork in the Road'. They were almost all about making a decision in one's life and almost invariably along a path that led to good or one that led to ill, and were often moralistic, though in some I felt the moralizing was contrived.

But among the many poems found by Google, one was different; it was 'The Road not Taken' by Robert Frost, and possibly one of his most misunderstood poems. People note the last verse:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

and see this in a moralizing way: the poet avoided the common route and heroically took the least popular way and made good. But they forget lines 9 to 12:

*Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.*

It was a choice arbitrarily made when two options, apparently just as good, present themselves; which often occurs in life. The poet in later years nostalgically looks back and wonders what would have happened had he taken the other path but kids himself he took the less common route which made all the difference. It was well written and its message subtly put. I liked it better than the other poems.

But time was pressing on. However pleasant it might be sitting there in the café, I should be starting out again. I packed away my iPhone and set out once more. The fork ahead was not exactly Y-shaped or, at least, it was a lopsided Y. The right branch was decidedly rightwards; but the left branch bent only slightly leftwards. It was the latter I took, leaving the main road behind. This side road continued for another two miles or so before bending sharply to the left while the old Roman road continued straight on, being now just a track across the heathland.

I enjoyed this part of my trek, walking across the heath, listening to song birds, watching

butterflies and meeting the occasional dog-walker. As I walked along I thought of those ‘Fork in the Road’ poems; some were perhaps good, but some seemed trite to me – one way leading to good, the other to evil is somewhat of a cliché and life is rarely as simple as that.

I made good progress and as noon approached the path went into a wooded and more shaded area. It was time to take a break and have the small picnic I had packed. I thought again about Frost’s poem; I had saved a copy on my iPhone. I looked again. It began:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler ...*

I was in a wood, though it was too early in the year for it to be yellow. But Frost’s being sorry he could not be one traveller on both paths reminded me that according to one of the many-worlds interpretations, each possible choice corresponds to a different universe; therefore the traveller would take one path in this universe and the other one in another universe. The one traveller would be in each universe on a different path.

‘Help’, I thought, ‘if every possibility that occurs in my life generates two or more different universes in which I follow the various possibilities, how many universes am I already existing in following different paths of life? And I’m only in my twenties. How many different clones of me will be existing in how many different universes when I’m in my eighties? If this applies to all the umpteen gazillions of humans that exist or have ever existed, how many different universes are there?’

‘Come on,’ I said to myself. ‘Stop this nonsense; get back to reality and get on with your walk.’

So I cleared up my bits and pieces, put the iPhone away and set off. I had gone only a little way along the track when I saw it: a fork in the road – not a division in the track but an actual pronged implement on the old Roman road. It was encrusted with dirt, but the three prongs were obvious enough. I picked it up and, wrapping it up, put into my backpack. Without further thought, I carried on along the path to Kelchester, where I arrived in mid afternoon.

There was half an hour to wait for the next bus home, so I sat down and thought again of forks in the road, or at least about the poems I had read, but I had forgotten about the fork in my backpack. When I got back home, tired but happy with my day, I unpacked my things. I put the dirty fork I had found in my garden shed, thinking to come back to it later, and then forgot about it.

Several days later, my friend Rowena called round. She saw the dirt-covered fork in my shed and asked me about it. I told her how I had found it.

‘Right’, she said, ‘let’s have a look at it. It’s a bit odd with that great blob at the end.’

‘That just a load of dirt, isn’t it?’ I said.

‘Not so sure,’ she replied as she began carefully removing the dirt and brushing it clean.

‘What?’ I exclaimed. ‘It’s certainly a fork at one end; but it looks like a spoon at the other end?’

‘That’s right,’ said Rowena. ‘It’s Roman. It must have been dropped way back in Roman times and have recently been dislodged by animal activity, maybe badgers borrowing nearby.’

‘But’, I said, ‘I thought Romans ate with their fingers. I didn’t know they used forks, let alone spoons as well.’

‘Well,’ said Rowena, ‘you’re right about them using their fingers for eating. But these things are not uncommon made of bronze or as, in your case, of silver. They used the prongs to serve things into their own bowls, not for putting things into their mouths as we do. And the spoon bit was used for getting snails and eggs out of their shells.’

‘Wow!’ I said, ‘Are they rare? Is this valuable?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Rowena, ‘they are not particularly rare and do not fetch a great deal of money.’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘in that case I’ll give it to our local museum.’

This is exactly what I did and there, dear readers, you may see it with other local Roman artefacts.