

The Long Walker on 'Escapism'

COLIN FLETCHER'S "The Thousand-Mile Summer" (Howell-North; \$4.75) has been stirring considerable interest, some among those who have never heard of him before, but perhaps more among the thousands who followed his memorable Chronicle series several years ago. The series, and now this handsome book, recount his six-month walk from Mexico to Oregon through remote areas of California deserts and mountains. I have no reason to change the opinion I gave in a recent daily column that this is one of the most remarkable outdoor journals I have ever read and I recommend it unreservedly as a rare treat.

While Fletcher is usually a quiet, humorous man (he claims to be the only Welshman who knows he can't sing and doesn't want to in public), he can be annoyed—and one of the things that lights up this particular Fletcher facet is a word which has been applied to his long walk and to another, which he made later through Grand Canyon. It is "escapism," and the following is what he has to say about it. —W.H



Illustration from "The Thousand-Mile Summer"

COLIN FLETCHER SETTING UP CAMP ON WHITE MOUNTAIN SUMMIT



By Colin Fletcher

AS A KIND of compulsive long-distance walker I'm always being asked, "But why do you find it necessary to escape from reality like this"? The question puts me on the defensive of course, and gives rise to another question. Why, I ask myself, and now you, are people so ready to assume that chilled champagne is more "real" than water drawn from an ice-cold mountain creek? Or a Montgomery street sidewalk than a carpet of desert dandelions? Or a Boeing 707 than a flight of graceful white birds soaring in unison against the sunrise?

Why do people assume that the acts and emotions and values that stem from city life are more "real" than those that arise in time from the silence and solitude

and beauty of wilderness? I'm damned if I understand it.

Just the other day, the thing touched bottom: I was gently accused of escapism during a TV interview about the book. Frankly, I fail to see how going for a six-



month, 1000-mile walk through deserts and mountains can be judged less "real" than spending six months working eight hours a day, five days a week, in order to earn enough money to be able to come back to a comfortable home in the evening and sit in front of a TV screen and watch the image of some guy talking about a book he has written on a six-month, 1000-mile walk through deserts and mountains.

As I said, I get put on the defensive. The last thing I want to do is to knock champagne and sidewalks and Boeing 707's and TV. Especially champagne. These things distinguish us from other animals—they can also limit our perspectives. And I respectively suggest that they—and all the stimulating complexities of modern life—begin to make more sense, to take on surer meaning, when they are viewed in perspective against the more certain and more lasting reality from which they have evolved. From the reality, that is, of mountain water and desert flowers and soaring white birds at sunrise.

Here endeth the lesson.

