

Beginning

YOU WOULDN'T EXACTLY call it a mountain. More of a hill. But where I grew up, in the border country between England and Wales, it was the tallest thing around, 1,200 ft and pointed, a distinctive triangle rising up on the backs of the Deri, the Rholben and the Llanwenarth Breast. To me, the Sugar Loaf was certainly a mountain. In fact, I thought it was a volcano, although my father in his clear, schoolmasterly way, explained several times why it could not be. It was very smooth, silhouetted against the sky. The scrub oaks that grew over the softer slopes of the three lower hills stopped as they came within sight of the Sugar Loaf. Too steep. For me as well as them.

But we often climbed it. Round the side of the Sugar Loaf, where the landscape opened out on to Forest Coalpit and the Black Mountains, there was a boggy place where globeflowers grew. There were kingcups everywhere along the streams of my uncles' farms, but the globeflower – paler, taller, more poised – was a rarity and we went every year to admire them, a kind of pilgrimage for my mother. She was a great botanist – in the old-fashioned way. She could name every different kind of grass in any field she walked through. She made a collection of them, pressed pale and bleached in a book of cartridge paper, with their names, common and botanical, written in white ink underneath.

She could name the owner, too, of almost every farm we looked out on to from the high sides of the Sugar Loaf. She'd been born in this landscape. So had my father. It was intimately known. We climbed up on to the flanks of the Sugar Loaf to gather winberries, always in the same china cups, too cracked to hold tea, but too pretty to throw away. The day before my geometry O level, my mother was waiting after school with a picnic in a basket and we climbed up through the beech trees of St Mary's Vale to a spring on the side of the Sugar Loaf where she tested me on my theorems. Pythagoras would stick better, she firmly believed, if it was taken in with a view.

So the square on the hypotenuse is inextricably mixed still with bracken, tall and green, the slightly damp acid smell of the turf always cropped short by the sheep on the hill and the view back down over the Deri and the Rhollen to the Usk shining in the valley below. Beyond the river was the Bloreng, where we never went.

Partly this was a matter of geography. We lived just underneath the Deri, so naturally it was the landscape we were most often in, the one we knew best. We would have needed transport, which we did not have, to get over the river to the Bloreng. And it was a big, bare, forbidding hunk, with a dip in the flank that faced our house, where shadows gathered too early. There was another reason to stick to our side of the river. The Bloreng was a kind of gatekeeper to another country. Lying in bed at night, I could see from my window the great flares that lit up the sky from the furnaces of the iron masters, Guest, Keen and Nettlefold in Brynmawr and Blaenavon. Over there, the valleys which had once been green were bounded by grey-black heaps of slag. So, I suppose the fragility of a landscape was stitched into me from the beginning. And a need for land to go up and down if I'm to feel comfortable in it.

There were maps in our house, but they were for people staying with us. We never needed them because, though we had no notion of footpaths or other ‘rights of way’, we knew exactly how to get anywhere we wanted to go in the hills. Mostly we were roaming around without parents. Up the lane, through Angry Native’s farmyard, up the steep pasture where we sometimes found mushrooms, over a couple of stiles, past the guinea fowl with their nervous ‘Go back. Go back. Go back,’ and into the scrub oak woods of the Deri, where every winter we built a kind of headquarters. The sides of these hills were littered with small quarries where stone had been carted down to build a cottage or a barn. It was not difficult to roof in one of these dugouts with branches cast from the scrub oaks and thatch them with bracken, brown and dry. The fronds would last all winter.

At the top of all three of the hills, the land flattened out and wide grass paths, kept open by the endless nibbling of sheep, led forward to the smooth cone of the mountain that was with us all our time out there on the hills. Not sublime. Not even as beautiful as other places I discovered later in life. But resilient. And deeply familiar. In hot summers, fires occasionally broke out in the dry whin and heather on the tops of the hills. Then we would burn fires of our own on top of the ash poles we carried, bracken and scrub stuffed inside sheep skulls (plenty of those on the hillsides) to make lanterns held high. We marched along the wide path on top of the Deri, six of us, in single file, our beacons aloft, with the wild fires burning either side of us. Celts against invading Romans. Welsh against English – none of it overtly expressed, but absorbed subliminally perhaps, because of the landscape in which we lived and the things which had happened there.

This was not – I see it now – a landscape to be given a capital L, the way the Landscape of Snowdonia in the north



of Wales was. And the Lakes. Landscapes to be written about. Landscapes to be painted. William Gilpin scarcely gave the Sugar Loaf a glance, on his way west to Brecon from his famous journey down the Wye. The border country round Abergavenny is important to me because it is where I was born and brought up. Roots, if you are lucky enough to have them, still have an influence on the way you respond. That landscape, which I knew so closely, predisposed me to feel a connection with certain other landscapes later on. This isn't an unusual trait, this almost animal response to a new place. Do you feel comfortable here? Could you be sustained by this view?

What do we feel should be in a pleasing landscape? Sky, streams, rocks, trees are often assumed to be necessary components. I'd add hills. And pasture. The landscapes I prefer have an element of man's hand in them. Not too much, but enough to be able to add stone walls, plough and hedges to the view. And sheep. William Cobbett, on his travels through England in the 1820s, often mentions them. 'I like to look at the winding side of a great down,' he wrote, 'with two or three numerous flocks of sheep on it, belonging to different farms; and to see, lower down, the folds, in the fields, ready to receive them for the night.'¹ But everything depends on the balance of the two.

In Wasdale the tamed and the wild exist cheek by jowl. Here, in the Cumbria High Fells, is some of the toughest and most spectacular scenery in England, cursed by farmers, sighed over by poets and battered, since the whole concept of tourism was invented, by hordes of us visitors. I could never make the High Fells my home – that now lies in the soft, enclosing valleys of West Dorset – but it is where I go, like millions of others, to capture the sense of awe and splendour that only big mountains can give. North of Keswick you have Skiddaw



and Blencathra. To the east of the Langdale Pikes is beautiful Helvellyn; to the west are Sca Fell and Pillar, a favourite with Edwardian members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club, who photographed each other in splendid moustaches and boots, striking poses on the summit.

I am not one to see landscape as a series of things to be conquered: a river to be swum, a peak to be climbed, a cliff to be scaled, but Sca Fell attracts the conquering type. At 3,210 ft, it is the highest point in England. It is also a potent memorial, for in 1920 Lord Leconfield, its owner, gave it to the National Trust in memory of the men of the Lake District 'who fell for God and King, for freedom, peace and right in the Great War'. Four years later, the members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club bought the land of twelve further Lakeland mountain tops, each more than 1,500 ft high, 3,000 acres in all, to commemorate (in an unusually fitting way) their dead comrades. A discreet but superbly lettered bronze tablet was unveiled on Great Gable on 8 June 1924:

In glorious & happy memory of those whose names are inscribed below – members of this club – who died for their country in the European War 1914–1918, these fells were acquired by their fellow members & by them invested in The National Trust for the use & enjoyment of the people of our land for all time.

'If there is any communion with the spirits of dead warriors,' wrote W. T. Palmer, describing the event for the club's journal, 'surely they were very near that silent throng of climbers, hill-walkers and dalesfolk who assembled in soft rain and rolling mist on the high crest.'² Remember them when you look out over the glinting landscape of lake and tarn, scree and scrub that spreads out around you from Sca Fell's crest.

Did Neolithic man ever feel the urge to storm Sca Fell? He was close, fashioning axes on the slopes of Great Langdale from the Ordovician rock. Or did he stay sensibly on the lower contours, where later in the Dark Ages, farmers started the slow process of clearing and enclosing patches of land for their sheep and cattle? The small fields, with their stone wall buffers, represent survival in the harshest of environments. You see it nowhere more clearly than at Wasdale, a long thin valley where scree tumbles precipitously into the dark, enigmatic embrace of Wast Water.

The best thing about Wasdale is that it lies at the end of a No Through Road and once you have threaded your way in, there is little reason ever to get out. Its relative inaccessibility means that it has changed far less than other more-visited parts of the Lakes. Electricity only came here in the late 1970s. The road through it eventually bumps its nose into the fell at the end, conveniently close to the door of the Wasdale Head Inn. Yewbarrow sits humpily to the left. Black Sail Pass stretches ahead and Sca Fell beetles over the brow of the fell on the right.

But, if you are not the look-at-me-on-the-top-of-this-rock type, you can forget poor, exhausted, emasculated Sca Fell and make instead for Illigill Head, where you can spread-eagle yourself in bracken and whin, a mere two thousand feet above sea level. Here you can cruise, like a glider, watching the pattern of peaks and fells, tarns and rivers rearrange themselves as you swing round the crescent of the fell ridge. Often, particularly in autumn, when views seem curiously suspended in time, the lake is so still it throws back a perfect mirror image of fell and rock, scree and sky. Shadows, Brobdingnagian in the morning light, scud across the landscape or lie in silhouette on the other side of the valley. The sky may be startlingly blue, but then from nowhere, weird

heavy clouds will pull themselves together to drape heavily over the shoulders of Great Gable.

From the saddle of land above Fence Wood land drops on one side over fans of rough scree into Wast Water. On the other side, views stretch to Eskdale and beyond that, the sea, gleaming hazily around Seascale. Between the high peaks, the saddles are made from heath and mire, peat and acid grassland. In patches of soggy moss you can find huge colonies of sundew, one of the few carnivorous plants native to Britain. It hugs the ground, a rosette of small, reddish, spoon-shaped leaves which bristle with hairs, each tipped with a drop of fluid. Insects land on the plant, stick to the hairs and are doomed. The leaf closes in on itself and the flies are dissolved in the sundew's home-made soup.

You can drop off the top of the fell alongside Pickle Coppice, typical of the sparse plantations of evergreens that hang on to the sides of the slopes. In the valley bottoms, deciduous trees predominate: ash, alder, sycamore. When it has been raining, the sides of the hills here splinter into small streams, charging through moss and ferns to empty themselves in the River Mite below. Once in the valley, you can turn back up the hill, climbing between two narrow flanks of forestry plantation to come out on Tongue Moor, easy walking among rough-coated Herdwick sheep. Burnmoor Tarn, black and treeless, lies on the right, Sca Fell beyond it. By teatime you will be back on the saddle below Illigill, and by six o'clock you will be taking your boots off at the inn, which at dusk shines like a beacon at Wasdale Head.

The flat land of the valley head (and there is not much of it) is divided into a jigsaw of tiny, irregular fields, bounded by thick boulder stone walls. W. G. Hoskins, the grandfather of English landscape history, describes it as a medieval landscape. The National Trust, who own more than 30,000 acres of land

in this area, date it to the sixteenth century. Whenever it was, it represents hard labour and thin pickings. But viewed, say, from the windy flanks of Pillar on a bad day, the valley, with its pattern of bright green fields and silver river, looks like Nirvana. To reach Pillar from Wasdale, you may take the Black Sail Pass, now an unfortunate motorway of a trail, then strike off to the left, past the Looking Stead on to the switchback of rocky mounds beyond. If the sun is still shining and the sky is still blue, the bulk of Yewbarrow will be cutting Wast Water into two shining halves with the gleaming disc of Burnmoor Tarn above it. But often on the final scramble to Pillar, when you are at close on 3,000 ft, a wind strikes, a vicious, malevolent, exhausting wind. With every step, you battle for balance like a novice tightrope walker. The High Fells show their cruel side and, like an animal, you crawl into the lee of a sheltering rock.

The weather, which we are used to dominating, needs to be taken seriously up here. The wind can pick you up from the ground and drop you in places you'd rather not be. Windy Gap, lower down, presents a potential escape route. You either keep to the high ground and get down gradually by way of Red Pike, or shoot down the near vertical scree run on the left to shorten the circuit and get out of the wind. The instant exit leaves you slipping and swearing down a half-mile chute until it drops you on the rocky grassland of Mosedale, where the sheepfolds wait, refuge incarnate.

Every October, a Shepherd's Meet is held in Wasdale. For more than a thousand years, sheep have sculpted this landscape. At the Meet, gimmers and rams bulge between makeshift hurdles, their fleeces dressed with reddle. As more and more sheep pass through their hands, the shepherds become covered in it too, trousers and jackets gathering the same red-brown ochre tints as the fleeces. The best Herdwick

sheep are brought to the show. So are the best fell hounds, to race an extraordinary ten-mile circuit round the fells of Wasdale: up Mosedale, round Yewbarrow, back by Lingmell and Burnthwaite. The dogs are probably the ugliest you will ever see, like rangy foxhounds with narrow heads and tails, big feet and intelligent eyes.

Hounds are slipped in one of the small walled fields, close to the church. The owners crouch in a jumble, the dogs straining between their legs, held back by the folds of loose skin at their necks. As the starter's handkerchief goes down, the hounds streak away down the field, following a trail laid beforehand by a fell runner dragging a scent-soaked bundle of rags. The hounds jump six-foot stone walls like steeplechasers before disappearing in the bracken of the fell.

For the next tense half hour you will only catch glimpses of them, way up on the hills, streaming in a line along the scent, hurtling across streams, flying over boulders, indistinguishable to the naked eye. But when they come into view over the last mile, the hounds' owners race to the finishing line blowing whistles, screaming their dogs' names, waving big handkerchiefs in the air, banging feed dishes. The hounds clear the final wall amid a wild cacophony of cheering and banging and whistling and hurl themselves, molten bundles of off-white and brown, into the arms of their owners. A spectacle as intense and moving as this could only be set in the wild, tough landscape of the Cumbrian Fells.