

## INTRODUCTION

# Time and the Hills

### *Altered uses, shifting meanings*

It was like waking up from a half sleep with the senses cleared, the self released.

– Dorothy Pilley, *Climbing Days* (1935), on venturing for the first time into the hills of North Wales

I've lived most of my life in cities. But I've spent much of that life dreaming of hills – remembering them, imagining them, walking and climbing among them whenever I could. Hills gift a freedom to both flesh and spirit, taking us far from the sedentary routine of school or college or office, the ordered grids of urban streets. The hills present an unbounded world, a world of possibility, a world of questions, a space in which to pause and wonder.

Lockdown after lockdown forced many of us to dig deep to preserve some semblance of sanity. I was fortunate in having rich veins of mountain experience to mine, shelves of books to browse, an open internet to plunder. If I could not walk and climb among the hills, I could look back on them, reimagine them, interrogate them. Like an archaeologist of the mind, I set out to burrow down through layers of memory into my own past, and to probe

the cultural and social stratigraphy of the uplands I'd travelled through. What had happened long ago on those hills I'd loved? Who had worked there, suffered there, died there, wandered in awe among them? And how did that past inform my present, inform all of our futures? Sometimes the connections operated through the iron chain of geological or economic determination, sometimes through image and dream – resonances as ungraspable, as irresistible as the wind.

It is all too easy to think of hills simply as settings for recreation, on a par with playing fields or the local leisure centre. Politicians are prone to emphasize the amenity value of hills, monetizing this value in terms of benefits to both physical and mental health, which, if kept in good order, maintain productivity, boost the economy, reduce the costs of medical care. Schemes are drawn up to introduce children and young people to the hills, while teachers and instructors acquire qualifications to perform this role, then tick boxes to quantify the results. There is nothing wrong with this; hills do indeed bestow great benefits to society, benefits that are all too often limited by those who, on paper, possess them – those 'landowners' who, as a presumed right, restrict access to the rest of us and exploit wild places for commercial gain.

But hills possess more than utility; they are not just instruments to deliver wealth, health and happiness. Just as we humans have our ways of being, so do hills and mountains. But theirs is a very different way of being, one spread over eons of time, seemingly changeless and inert, but in fact active, ever becoming: building upward as the plates of the Earth's crust shift, diminishing as wind and water and ice break them down again. We may sometimes see human or animal features in their shapes – limbed, sinewed, veined; breasted, backed, shouldered, shinned – anatomical elements reflected in many Gaelic, English and Welsh names for individual hills, from Cioch na h-Òighe (breast of the maiden)

on the Isle of Arran to Pen y Fan (head of the peak) in the Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons) to Saddleback (Blencathra) in the Lake District. This anthropomorphism recognizes that hills exist in the present not as eternal fixed forms but as mutable entities, as mortal as humans, albeit existing over vast expanses of time. What we see are single film-frames of imperceptibly slow geological processes, processes that interconnect with the much quicker living world that cloaks them – mosses, grasses, fungi, flowers and trees; butterflies, moths and birds; lizards and frogs, voles and hares and deer and humans – all growing, dying, decaying, regenerating – flickering in the blink of a mountain's eye.

Plants and non-human animals all have their ways of being, though we can do little to know them beyond describing them in our own terms, deploying the terse, precise metaphors of science. The exception is the human – our own – way of being, but even that, in its many manifestations, takes leaps of imagination to approximate, especially if one is looking back into the past. And those leaps of imagination will only ever reveal hazy, uncertain glimmers of the past, of all those generations that have preceded us.

In pondering this book, I had a sense that walking or climbing over the hills, as I had done all my life, might provide a physical frame for my imagination to work within, perhaps releasing some fraction of the essence – or at least a whiff – of the lives lived in these places long ago. Placing my feet, swinging my legs, taking a breath, lifting an arm, grasping a handhold, as many had done in the past – such efforts might present an almost physical link with those who had been there before.

The relationship of people with the hills through time has been complex, rich and varied – from awe and wonder, to fear and loathing, to spiritual longing or peaceful acceptance. Hills have been sites of worship, spaces of elemental hostility, places where people have found ways to live amid harshness, their beings

shaped by the shapes of the hills, the wind and the rain, a passing glimpse of sunshine on a summer's day.

As I began to retrace my own walks and climbs over the decades, I became more and more aware that I had been following in the footsteps of the dead – Neolithic axe-makers high on the Langdale Pikes, legionaries marching the Roman road along the ridge of High Street in the Eastern Fells, Mercian warriors guarding Offa's Dyke down the spine of the Welsh Marches. Later came the miners and quarrymen, the shepherds and the drovers, the poets and painters, the geologists and botanists, seeking profit or inspiration or enlightenment. More recently, people came to the hills simply to refresh their bodies and their minds by testing their muscles and their nerves in high places, places that raised them above the gloom and graft of their daily lives. For the hills are beyond all else places that unleash the spirit, sharpen our sense of beauty and potential, even as we pant up their flanks, struggle through sleet and storm, gaze through space as ridge recedes behind ridge into an ever-enticing, unfocused far horizon.

For the most part, our higher hills have not been places to live, or make a living. Scores of dead generations dwelling in the lowlands saw hills and mountains as distant, dangerous, unproductive places, inspiring nothing but dread. A few defied the hostile upland environment, with its thin soils, its treacherous crags and frequent storms. Farmers scraped a livelihood from hardy breeds of sheep and cattle that could survive on the scant hill grazing. Desperate to provide for themselves and their families, miners braved the dangers of flood and rockfall to hack at veins of metals such as copper and lead that ran through the rocks, while quarrymen drilled and blasted mountainsides for slate and limestone.

Thousands of years ago, a small band risked their lives to venture up to the rugged heights in search of one of the most sought-after materials of their time. This material may have derived much of its value from the perilous place it came from, a peak poised between heaven and earth, a conical summit high above Langdale in the Lake District, where on summer nights lightning might strike and briefly light up the darkness. Pike o' Stickle was the location of one of Britain's earliest industrial sites, busy turning out product more than 5,000 years ago. The product of this factory was *the* key tool of the Neolithic, a tool that helped to clear the forests for agriculture: the stone axe-head. The axe-heads from Pike o' Stickle were made of greenstone – what geologists describe as 'epidotized tuff': volcanic ash that has been compressed into a dark rock as hard as flint. These greenstone axe-heads were so valued that they were traded across Britain, from Scotland to the south coast of England. Many were never used, but preserved in their pristine, polished state as symbols of status and prestige.

When, on an inclement autumn day, I set off to find this early industrial site, I found myself just below the rocky cone of Pike o' Stickle, peering down a gully that steepened as it descended so I could not see its foot. The gully was hedged in on either side by broken crags. Far below, Mickleden Beck wandered lazily through the level meadows of Langdale's valley floor. Down there it was a place of pastoral peace. Up here, with the wind whipping my face, it was a savager, more provisional world; a place to visit but not to settle.

Tentatively I began to descend the gully, my boots kicking up rushes of dust and gravel. On either side of the pale, worn line down the middle of the gully there were piles of larger, darker stones, mingled with smaller, sharper shards. I cautiously stepped among them, my eyes scanning the confusion of countless

chaotic shapes. Amid the entropy of a disintegrating hillside, I was looking for a tell-tale sign of intent, of human handiwork. I knew I was surrounded by the remains of a prehistoric axe factory, and with that knowledge I could just make out the stepped terraces made by the Neolithic miners as they quarried blocks of greenstone from the steep crags and toppled them onto the screes below. Here they were broken up, and likely pieces roughly hewn into the shape of an axe-head. The air would have been thick with the thud and crash of collapsing rocks, the sparks and sulphurous smell of stone falling on stone, the clack and tinkle as craftsmen knapped and chipped.

Langdale greenstone is no more effective than flint as a material for axe-heads. So why did it acquire its enhanced status? Perhaps it was its place of origin that gave it such prestige. This was a rock carved out of mountains that reached up into the sky, mountains of no use to people who sustained themselves by farming, mountains rent by cliffs and battered by storms, where humans only ventured at their peril. Was there some sense that up there, on those savage heights still touched by the sun when the lowlands were plunged into darkness, that up there the human world of daily struggle and seasonal routine somehow interpenetrated and drew strength from an otherworld, a timeless space inhabited by ancestral spirits and unknown powers?

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A hilltop could be a place where you might encounter a bolt of lightning or a god, witness a celestial conjunction, bury your dead. From a high vantage point, you will be the first to see the sun rise, the last to see it set. The sun gives life; the dark brings cold and the threat of predators.

The top of a hill is a place to spot game on the plains below, or an approaching enemy. It can become a place to take refuge,

where you can defend yourself and your kin with ramparts and ditches and the one-way pull of gravity. Once you are surer of your power, it is a place from which to command and control the surrounding lands, sending out your warriors to coerce and destroy. There is always a downside, though. On a summit you will be more exposed to the elements, to rain and wind and storm.

The top of a hill is not necessarily a climax, a dead-end. It may be the way to somewhere else. In the days when the low ground was either impenetrable forest or impassable marsh, a ridge of well-drained hills provided a means of travelling long distances, without becoming tangled in undergrowth or mired in mud. Upland ridges were a key component in the network of ways by which communities made contact with each other, both for trade and for cultural and social exchange. In southern England, such prehistoric routes as the Ridgeway, or the ancient tracks along the South Downs, are lined with sites that may be expressions of spirituality or power or both, from stone circles and burial mounds to giant figures of men or horses carved out of the chalk. Such monuments suggest that journeys were made for reasons other than mere commerce.

The people who followed these ways and built these monuments were not just passive dwellers in the landscape. These people helped to shape the terrain, both physically and in the collective imagination. Hills and hollows, streams and rivers, woods and wetlands, lakes and shores, all held meanings that we can now only guess at. For our predecessors, these forms and features became the ground of their being, wired into their minds, woven into their lives. Without this shaping, the land would have remained untamed, other, hostile, dangerous, without meaning, frighteningly limitless.

One such shaping is found a few miles northeast of the site of the Langdale axe factory. Castlerigg Stone Circle was constructed

about 5,000 years ago, on a low plateau of glacial till surrounded by mountains, near the present-day town of Keswick. Castlerigg acts as an amplifier and a lens, its large stone uprights both echoing and focusing the great peaks that ring it – Grasmoor and Grisedale Pike, Skiddaw and Lonscale Fell, Blencathra, High Seat and Helvellyn. Here we are, the stones seem to say, in the heart of the mountains, a circle in the centre of a circle of hills, themselves surrounded by the great circle of the sky. Walk around us as you look, look around you as you walk. The stones form a frame, directing you towards the quiet power of nature: the rocky musculature, the solidity and permanence of the fells. Castlerigg, at the junction of several valleys, may have marked the intersection of trade routes, but it must have been more than just a marketplace. Our modern financial centres, from Manhattan to Singapore to Canary Wharf, might be as showy, relatively speaking (in relation to the wealth available), but their material function outweighs their show, display being a by-product of buying and selling. At Castlerigg and other such megalithic sites it is difficult to see why our predecessors would have gone to the enormous effort of erecting arrays of such massive stones merely to mark the location of the equivalent of a shopping mall or a trading floor. Such sites must have possessed a greater significance. They would have been places where different groups met and intermingled, perhaps a neutral ground where people could celebrate what they shared, whether it be a range of beliefs or myths or stories, or a sense of time past, present and future, or a feeling for spaces beyond the human – the depths of lakes or the heights of mountains, or even the dreamscapes of stars. And as the Earth turned through the light of the sun, the shadows of the stones, like the shadows of the mountains, would rotate together, all pointing in the same direction, shortening and lengthening in unison. Perhaps in such constructed landscapes people could tread out the pattern

of their place in the cosmos. We are here, their footsteps said, marking time, and while we are here, we are at the centre. And even if this generation ages, dies and returns to dust, we leave our monuments to tell of the permanence of our presence, our claim to this space. To this, the mountains around bear witness. A circle – whether of stones or fells, or the sun's disc or the pupil of an eye – has no beginning and no end. Neither has time.

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Time did run out, however, for the megalith builders. Some 4,000 years ago, people stopped dragging huge lumps of rock about the landscape and pitching them upright or heaving them on top of two pillars to form a lintel. The great collective efforts that had built such monuments as Castlerigg and Stonehenge faded into memory, and memory into mist. The new technologies of bronze, then iron, produced societies in which small elites held power, and led to more conflict as territories were claimed and fought over with the new metal weapons now available.

Humans were no longer part of a landscape, enhancers of the natural shape of things. They were now cogs in a hierarchy, in which the greatest goods were not wonder and collective effort, but power, martial prowess and the display of portable wealth. The land itself was appropriated as the possession of particular individuals. As people gained more in material terms, so they had more to lose. And so they went on the defensive. As the Iron Age rolled on, the landscape of Britain became dotted with hillforts.

The hillforts of the Ancient Britons proved ineffective against the Roman legions, who arrived in force in 43 CE. Over the decades that followed, the Romans pushed their power northward. The hills did not stop them. Their engineers simply drove their military roads in straight lines up and down every slope they encountered. Just as their roads forced a way through unruly

landscapes with geometrical determination, so the Romans built their forts and camps – not in broadly circular shapes that followed the contours of the land, as the Britons had built their hillforts, but as squares or rectangles, paying little heed to the dictates of the local topography. Thus they imposed their will on their newly conquered province.

In Britain, the Romans chose to draw their frontiers across the lowlands between major estuaries rather than along upland watersheds – just as in continental Europe, where their eastern and northern frontiers were marked by the Rhine and the Danube rather than by the Alps. Hadrian's Wall extends from the Solway Firth to the mouth of the Tyne, generally following river valleys, although at Crag Lough it dramatically follows the rocky crest of the Whin Sill, a sheet of dolerite that extends right across northern England. The rivers and hills of the northern Pennines and Southern Uplands might have made a more 'natural' frontier, and this line – from the Solway northeastward via the Esk and the Liddel Water, then along the Cheviot Hills and the Tweed to the North Sea – was broadly the border that emerged a millennium later between the kingdoms of Scotland and England.

Some years ago I set out to walk this border, and found out soon enough why the Romans preferred to cross it here and there rather than trying to maintain a fortified frontier along its length. For the most part, the border follows high-level bogs and bleak tracts of rough, heathery moorland, and much of the line, even today, is pathless. One evening, halfway along, I pitched my tent high in the Cheviot Hills looking down the shallow valley of the infant River Coquet. To the south, in the slanting evening light, I could just make out the course of Dere Street – the Roman road that extended from York to the Firth of Forth – as it descended from the featureless pass between Thirl Moor and Harden Edge. Behind my tent rose a low, tussock-covered rib, extending in a

straight line up the gentle slope as far as the eye could see towards the border half a mile above me, on Brownhart Law. This rib was the rampart of one of several vast overlapping Roman military camps that had been built here, at an altitude of almost 1,500 feet (460m).

It was a balmy July evening, and I was a long way from any habitation. As a yellow three-quarter moon rose in the east, a martin darted across a corner of the sky before disappearing in the darkness. There was no sense of a troubled, violent past, although there had been many bloody raids and battles along this disputed frontier from Roman times up to the slaughter at Flodden Field, not far to the northeast. As I settled into my sleeping bag and listened to the gentle sough of the breeze through the grasses growing from the long-deserted ramparts, I was content that whatever ghosts might once have lurked here had long faded into invisibility and silence.

After the Romans abandoned Britain early in the fifth century, hills again became barriers and defences. The mysterious Wansdyke, an impressive rampart and ditch extending for miles along the Wessex Downs, is thought to have been built not long after the legions left, probably by Romano-Britons anxious to halt the spread of pagan Saxons infiltrating up the Thames Valley. The day I chose to walk a section of the Wansdyke, in the summer of 2021, was the first day for which the Met Office had ever issued a warning of severe heat. The route I'd planned passed many other ancient alterations to the landscape: earthworks, enclosures, tumuli, cross dykes, a Neolithic camp and a long barrow called Adam's Grave. But most impressive by far was the Wansdyke itself, which I followed for some miles, mostly along the northern escarpment of the Downs looking over the Thames Valley. Up on the heights a gentle breeze sighed all day. I barely saw a soul, only clusters of newly shorn sheep under the shade of a few scattered

oaks. When I at last arrived – hot, hungry and thirsty – in the deep-Wiltshire town where I was to spend the night, a man eating next to me in the pub leant over and stated, rather than asked, ‘You’re not from these parts, are you.’ The border lines across the mental map of the English may have shifted, but still stand firm.

In time, the Anglo-Saxons felt the need to defend themselves against incursions by the linguistic descendants of the Ancient Britons – the Welsh. To this end, in the later eighth century, King Offa of Mercia built his eponymous Dyke, often following high ground and broadly marking what was to become the border between Wales and England. The Anglo-Saxons, in turn, had their day when their dominion over England was overturned by the Normans, who imposed their rule from numerous castles built on hills or manmade mounds. Placing such structures on prominent eminences was not just a defensive strategy; the visibility of such symbols of power helped to keep the population in check. A similar aim lay behind the frequent erection on hilltops of gallows and gibbets, where the bodies of the executed were displayed as a warning to others.

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The perception of hilltops as liminal places, poised between good and evil, light and dark, earth and heaven, this world and the otherworld, seems to have persisted for centuries. Cross Fell, the highest summit in the Pennines, was once known as Fiends Fell, until St Paulinus visited in the seventh century and raised a cross ‘by which he counter-charmed those hellish fiends and broke their haunts’. Perhaps those ‘hellish fiends’ reminded the Roman missionary of the squabbling, all-too-human gods that once dwelt on Mount Olympus.

Not many hills are claimed by the powers of darkness, a notable exception being the Devil’s Point, a subsidiary summit of Cairn