

# LAKE LAND

LANDSCAPE OF IMAGINATION

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*To the Eyes of the Man of Imagination,  
Nature is Imagination itself.*

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L A K E L A N D

FIRST PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN 1992  
BY CONSTABLE AND COMPANY LIMITED  
3 THE LANCHESTERS, 162 FULHAM PALACE ROAD  
LONDON W6 9ER

THIS TEXT-ONLY EDITION FIRST PUBLISHED 2007  
BY GORDON STAINFORTH  
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ISBN 0 09 471800 8

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## INTRODUCTION

## A LANDSCAPE OF THE IMAGINATION

## TAKING A FRESH LOOK

The Lake District is a landscape of contrasts – of tranquil lakes and gentle hills interspersed with savage crags and gills, of pastoral valleys flanked by desolate mountain sides. It could be said to be like a symphony, with both masculine and feminine subjects, and with the seasons providing the ‘movements’, and the weather, the tempi. L.J. Oppenheimer, one of the pioneer rock climbers at the end of the last century, said that it contains ‘as many different types of beauty as it has valleys, and each type ever varying in mood. Time may perhaps, through the ruthless hand of man, wither certain charms; but, as was said about Cleopatra of old, custom can never stale its infinite variety.’ There is no one, quintessential Lakeland ‘scene’; it is ever changing and never quite how we expected it.

A cliché one hears about the Lake District with monotonous regularity is that it has been ‘tamed’, but this is invariably put about by those who have only explored it from the road, and then only very superficially. The truth (that I hope this book will bear witness to) is that there are large areas, not so far from the road, which are still very much in their natural, unspoiled state. Of course, it is true that large paths do ‘tame’ the mountains to a certain extent, but it should be pointed out that there have been paths through these mountains since the age of the dinosaurs – and that, anyway, there are still considerable expanses without any such paths. Further, one could ask what is meant by saying that a path ‘tames’ the mountainside. Does it do so any more than a dry stone wall, for example? A path is nothing more than a line of wear, which may or may not have been ‘repaired’ or strengthened. What it does do is *spoil* the mountainside – aesthetically, and even structurally, if the damage is allowed to get out of control. But the wild, raw elements – the basic topography and the weather – remain unchanged. *In the only sense that matters*, then, I would argue that the Lakeland mountains are as wild as they have ever been. Indeed –

bearing in mind the long history of mining here, from prehistoric times right into the present century – they are in some ways actually wilder .

More than any other comparable beauty spot in the world, it is this corner of England that has captured the imagination of creative thinkers, writers and artists – many, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, de Quincey, and Ruskin being literary figures of great importance. And, for all its familiarity, the Lakeland landscape still has enormous potential to capture our imagination today. Unfortunately, however, many come here – to use a very apt old Cumbrian expression – as true ‘Off-comers’, with no apparent wish to interact imaginatively or creatively with the landscape.

#### A PLACE OF STORYTELLING

My concern, then, is to get back to the unspoiled landscape, back to the hills, and to draw on some of the mystery that has been forgotten. First and foremost, we should consider the great enigma of its geological composition – an enormously slow process spread over hundreds of millions of years, that is many times more complex than we could imagine in our wildest dreams.

First, the whole area was submerged under an ocean which had many of the characteristics of the primal ‘watery abyss’ of mythology, containing among other things a stagnant black mud out of which the first forms of life developed. But the two opposing continental shore lines were closing fast – at the rate of two or three centimetres a year – and, when they collided, a vast mountain chain was thrown up. After another hundred million years these Himalayan-scale ‘Caledonian Mountains’ had been completely eroded away, and were covered by the sea once more. All the while, the whole land mass of the ‘Eur-American continent’ was drifting northwards through the climatic zones so that tropical seas gave way to equatorial swamps and, eventually, desert conditions, similar to those on the Arabian peninsula today. However, as it continued northwards, the land mass started to break up and the old

Caledonian mountains reasserted themselves to stand high once more above the surrounding lowlands. Meanwhile, they had entered the Arctic zone...

It is a fantastic story and hard to even *imagine*. There is little we can see with our eyes to suggest it, and because there is no way we can visualise the process through geological time, we are much more likely to regard it as something completed, as a sort of finished work of art that was always intended to look like this from the outset. That it was, in other words, created for *us*.

This ancient, primitive belief in an ‘eternal’ landscape which was created suddenly and cataclysmically ‘in the beginning’ is given further support when we learn that, despite the long and complicated history just outlined, the major land-forms of the Lake District are primarily the result of two rather short-lived, freak events in its geological history: first, a massive set of volcanic eruptions about 460 million years ago, and then, much later, a major ice age, finishing a ‘mere’ ten thousand years ago. If we were to put this whole history on a 24-hour clock, it would be a bit like a series of multiple explosions about 19 hours ago sending up molten lava from the depths, followed by many hours of gentle abrasion and buckling and silting over, and then about two and a half minutes ago, a demented sculptor coming and attacking it from above with an ice-pick, before being overcome by overheating.

It is from this strange geological history that all the other extraordinary qualities of the Lake District emanate. It is a truly fabulous landscape, a place of storytelling that captures the child’s imagination in us. Once we have seen it, dream-like images remain lodged for ever in our minds and play on our imagination; we become haunted, like Wordsworth, by ‘huge and mighty forms, that do not live like living men’, moving slowly through the mind.

#### THE POWER OF LANDSCAPE

It was this haunting, emotive quality that John Ruskin, the great art critic and landscape theorist who lived in the Lake District in the latter half of the last

century, was referring to when he wrote of ‘the *imagination* of the hills, colouring, with their far-away memories, every lowland stone and herb.’ He specifically addressed himself to ‘the essential connection’ between human emotion and what he called ‘the power of landscape’ – by which he meant a ‘mysterious sense of *unaccountable* life’ in material nature itself, such as ‘no mere reasoning can either induce or controvert.’ Although he was the first to criticise those who spoke of nature as if it were alive in a human sense – especially if all the writer was doing was transferring his own emotions on to the landscape (the ‘Pathetic Fallacy’) – Ruskin insisted that even a quite barren, mountainous landscape such as the Lake District had ‘an animation and pathos of *its own*, wholly irrespective of human presence or passion.’ More than that, the entire surface of the earth was a ‘living hieroglyph ... a thing with an inner language’, all the manifestations of which having ‘reference to the human intelligence that perceives them.’ So striking was this quality of hills and mountains that Ruskin described them as ‘centres of imaginative energy’. But it should be said that, for him, this imaginative energy was a two-way affair – that, without the human imagination being brought to bear on it, the landscape was dead: ‘True desertness is not want of leaves, but of life. Where humanity is not, the best natural beauty is more than vain.’

When Ruskin speaks of the power of landscape, he is referring to an inner quality that is not in any sense related to its scale. ‘To the rightly perceiving mind,’ he says, ‘there is the same infinity, the same majesty, the same power, the same unity, and the same perfection manifest in the casting of the clay as in the scattering of the cloud, in the mouldering of the dust as in the kindling of the day-star.’ In the same way that William Blake could see the world in a grain of sand, Ruskin was concerned with ‘the deep infinity of the thing itself.’

The Lake District is a prime example of a landscape whose ‘power’ is more to do with intricacy than with size. Though it is certainly laid out on a grand scale, one never feels overwhelmed by it. It is at once vast and intimate, so that, even when one is completely alone in it, it always has a remarkably ‘homely’ feel.

‘In simple earnest,’ the great Lakes poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in 1803, ‘I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks and hills, ... but my spirit courses, drives and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn: a wild activity, of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me...’ And, in a crucial later note, he said that certain aspects of the external world seemed to exist already in his imagination:

In looking at the objects of Nature while I am thinking ... I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking* for, a symbolic language for something within me that already and for ever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim awaking of a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature.

## CRYSTAL GHOSTS

Some have claimed that the apparent close link between the external world and the imagination is the result of our all being part of One Mind, or Will – that the whole of nature is a vast work of the imagination of which we are just a small part. But such a grand, all-encompassing theory is so broad in its scope as to be virtually meaningless, and we may be inclined to ask why such a Supermind never *behaves* like One Mind, but is forever squabbling with itself.

Wordsworth was careful to avoid any such simple conflation of World and Mind, being content to say merely that they are ‘exquisitely fitted’ to one another:

How exquisitely the individual Mind  
 ... to the external World  
 Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too –  
 Theme this but little heard of among men –  
 The external World is fitted to the Mind

Coleridge went a step further. While he agreed that the World and man are not One *Mind*, he insisted that we are all nonetheless part of one organism: ‘Every Thing has a Life of its own, & we are all *one Life*,’ he wrote. One hundred and

eighty years before his time, Coleridge was subscribing to the ‘Gaia theory’ (named after the Greek goddess of the earth) which regards the whole planet as a single living organism.

Ruskin later took up the same theme with enthusiasm. In answer to the extraordinary question ‘Are mountains alive?’ – in a bizarre dialogue called *The Ethics of the Dust* – he retorted: ‘Things not either wholly alive, or wholly dead. They are less or more alive.’ And, in keeping with his strongly held belief that everything in nature ‘bears evidence of having been produced by the power of the same spirit as our own’, he said that this life force was present ‘wherever the dust of the earth begins to assume any orderly and lovely state.’

Crystals, for example, he described as having power, and ‘breathing’ – and, in short, as being subject to exactly the same creative and destructive forces as ourselves. In his eccentric way, Ruskin saw the ‘life of crystals’ and human life as having much in common:

... you see the broad shadow and deadly force of inevitable fate ... you see the multitudes of crystals whose time has come; not a set time, as with us, but yet a time, sooner or later, when they all must give up their crystal ghosts; – when the strength by which they grew, and the strength given them to breathe, pass away from them; and they fail, and are consumed, and vanish away: and another generation is brought to life, framed out of their ashes.

As so often in Ruskin’s writing, the metaphor has become more important than the thing he is describing. He is clearly here at least as interested in human life, and *the way it is analogous to the life of crystals*, as he is in the life of crystals themselves.

You may look at them, once understanding their fate, with endless interest. You will see crowds of unfortunate little crystals, who have been forced to constitute themselves in a hurry; you will see them doing their best, bright and numberless, but tiny. And you will see deceitful crystals, that look as soft as velvet, and are deadly to all near them. And sometimes you will see fat crystals eating up thin ones, like great capitalists and little labourers; and politico-economic crystals teaching the stupid ones how to eat each other, and cheat each



other; and foolish crystals getting in the way of wise ones; and impatient crystals spoiling the plans of patient ones, irreparably; just as things go on in the world.

### ‘A SON OF THE EARTH’

Where Coleridge differed from Ruskin was in not being content with keeping this theoretical link between the landscape and man simply at a theoretical level; for him, the Oneness was something that had to be experienced. He had to put ‘the power of landscape’ to the test by going off into the wilds.

So it was that, on 1st August 1802, Coleridge set out with just a stick and a knapsack (made from an old piece of ‘natty green oilskin’) on what he called a ‘circumcursion’ of the central fells. ‘In spite of Mrs. C and Mary, who both raised their voices against it, ...off I sallied.’

Once he was in the mountains, Coleridge was in his element, for he had long regarded himself as ‘a detached individual, a *Terrae Filius*’ (a ‘son of the Earth’):

The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, and the common birds of the woods, and fields, the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life. Life seems to me then a universal spirit, that neither has, nor can have, an opposite....

The 5th August saw Coleridge making an ascent of Scafell. At the summit, he was astounded by the new world that opened up before him:

O my God! what enormous Mountains these are close by me, and yet below the Hill I stand on – Great Gavel, Kirk Fell, Green Crag, and behind the Pillar, then the Steeple, then the Haycock.... But O! what a look down just under my Feet! The frightfullest Cove that might ever be seen, huge perpendicular Precipices, and one Sheep upon it’s only Ledge, that surely must be crag! ... I must now drop down, how I may into Eskdale....

And this was where his problems began, especially as, on his own admission, he was always ‘too confident and too indolent to look round about and wind about ’till I find a track or other symptom of safety.’ It was a ‘sort of Gambling’, he said, to which he was addicted: ‘I wander on, and where it is first *possible* to descend, there I

go – relying upon fortune for how far down this possibility will continue.’ And so it was that he found himself making the first recorded descent of Broad Stand, which is quite justifiably still given the rock-climbing grade of Difficult. After a hair-raising time negotiating a series of vertical steps, and believing himself to be past the main difficulties (he wasn’t!), he calmed down a bit. He found himself quite suddenly ‘in a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight’, and he ‘blessed God aloud, for the powers of Reason & the Will, which remaining, no Danger can overpower us! O God, I exclaimed aloud – how calm, how blessed am I now: I know not how to proceed, how to return; but I am calm & fearless & confident.’

Coleridge was in fact experiencing something that all climbers and explorers have experienced in difficult situations – an extraordinary dual state in which wild excitement is balanced by calm reason, in which one is super-alert yet relaxed at the same time.

#### OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

In the Lake District today, solo climbing or bivouacking high in the mountains is about the only means still open to us of experiencing the wild landscape on this one-to-one basis. Only in this way can we confront the raw elements and have a sight, in Wordsworth’s words, of ‘that immortal sea Which brought us hither’. Life is reduced to its bare essentials, and any fanciful ‘armchair’ notions of wilderness are replaced by hard realities that are stripped of any wrappings. We have put ourselves in the state that was simply and eloquently summed up by the Chinese mystic Lao Tzu, in the fifth century B.C.:

Blank as a piece of uncarved wood;  
Yet receptive as a hollow in the hills.

The walker who enters the mountain landscape in this spirit is quiet and receptive, appreciative of all the signs of nature and of being a part of nature. In a sense, the

object is to *disappear* into the landscape, to become one with it; one has no wish to draw attention to oneself, or to leave signs of one's being there.

This whole approach to living and walking in the hills is completely opposed to the modern mania for following named and beaten paths – of thoughtlessly, ritualistically, fervently, wearing and deepening existing grooves. Of course, where there is serious damage, and the route is a popular one, there is no other solution but to repair the path and encourage walkers to stick to it. Fortunately, in the Lake District, this essential repair work, which is carried out by the National Trust, is based on a sound philosophy of minimising the impact on the landscape. To this end, all footpath repair now uses an ancient technique known as 'pitching' in which giant cobblestones of native rock are embedded deep into the hill side, rather like a dry stone wall tipped on its side and sunk into the ground. This method, which was used for many centuries, at least since Roman times, but was not re-discovered until the mid-1980s, has been found to be far more durable than any modern technique, as well as being aesthetically pleasing and requiring virtually no maintenance.

Often, where the path is very severely damaged, it has to be re-directed, and here a great deal of thought has to be put into the route it takes to ensure that it blends as much as possible with the surroundings, twisting and turning in harmony with the natural features. The path builders are purists: all the work is done by hand, and only indigenous materials are used. And they are real enthusiasts: only those with a genuine empathy for the wild landscape (generally climbers and walkers) are allowed to work on the teams.

For the most frequented routes in the mountains this new, 'purist' technique is obviously a very encouraging development. But it can never address the whole problem, for a lot of the damage is, I believe, totally unnecessary. There is a type of walker who will apparently stick to any path, come what may, even when it has not been repaired and is in a very severely eroded condition. A worn and broken path such as that beside Hell Gill in Langdale, for example, seems to act like a magnet to a certain type of 'achievement-hungry', 'experience-consuming' tourist. Because

others – many others – have gone that way they feel compelled to do so as well, irrespective of the damage it might cause.

This type of massive scar is to me a painful lesion, and for walkers to follow it blindly, contributing to its already hopelessly torn surface, is like the wilful scratching of an open wound. And the irony is that very often, just next to these hideous, loose paths, there are superb, easy scrambling routes on perfect rock. (The most popular routes up Bowfell and Wetherlam are good examples: both of these can be avoided by scrambling routes just to one side which go virtually the whole way to the summit without touching either grass or detritus.)

Where a path is damaged it is probably better to ignore it completely and take a completely different route where there is no damage and where one is in no danger of doing any. Indeed, more and more it is my strategy not to follow conventional footpaths at all, but to make my own way. More and more, I am inclined to say, with Coleridge: ‘Every man his own path-maker’.

#### UNIQUE AND UNTRACEABLE

But there is one overriding principle which must be constantly borne in mind when going ‘off-route’, and that is that we should leave everything exactly as we found it. Let it become the norm, the rule, of all hill-walking that we never leave any trace of our passing, whether it be in the form of litter or footprints; and let us regard any mark we leave as a mark of failure. To put it even more strongly, I would say that any such mark removes our right to be there. This may sound like an unrealistic ideal, but I can honestly say that, in the four months I spent in the Lake District for the main shoot of this book, once I was away from the valley floor I rarely touched a path and scarcely left a single footprint. Moving across the terrain in this way is an absorbing exercise that adds considerably to the enjoyment of a walk, transforming it, as it does, from a trudge into a craft.

I have two other ‘rules’, both of a much less serious nature (– rules to be broken!). The first is, generally to avoid repeating a route, even if it is one of my

own invention. A great mountain day is not something that can be repeated anyway; or rather, its repeatability is inversely proportional to its greatness. Better not to attempt it, better by far to set out on new adventures. At the simplest level, this means: every time a new route. Let every route, every excursion, be unique and of the moment; not another person's, not a repeat of one's own.

My second preference, amounting almost to a rule, is to walk in the mountains only in very small parties or on my own. Large parties are contrary to my whole way of thinking. They contribute most of all to worn paths; they inhibit individual spontaneity and the scope for adventure; and they limit the participants' ability to appreciate their surroundings. A large party dilutes the experience both for its own members and for others in the vicinity: it encroaches on other people's space. Generally, the interests which a large party has in the hills are totally different from that of a solo walker. The landscape is no longer of central importance to the day.

#### 'SAUNTERING'

'Sallying forth' into the mountains is a very personal experience, and only by doing so alone can one experience the world (and oneself), as Coleridge did, directly and truly – without any protective masks, or social posturing of any kind. The interaction of people has no bearing whatever on a mountain landscape. Hill walking in its purest form is about individual poetry, not group drama or self-promotion in a group.

Exploring the landscape imaginatively means, above all, having a 'passion', like Wordsworth, for wandering, and a dislike for following straight paths which reduce mountain days to a mere routine of going from A to B and back again (for the climber, this is typically: A for Automobile, B for the final Belay at the top of the climb, and C – less frequently – the ritual walk to the summit Cairn). The kind of route I am advocating is circular: it goes from A to X (which is preferably somewhere *other* than the obvious B) and back to A again, without going over any of the same ground twice.

The creative spirit is one that prefers arcs and circles to straight lines, for they are the way to unforeseen possibilities. This is the spirit of the great Lakeland conservationist of the 1930's, the Reverend H.H.Symonds, who hankered for 'old-fashioned, skimble-skamble, bandy-legged divergences which took us as the spirit moved or the slope invited.'

Such spontaneity always implies a certain lunacy, boldness, and even a touch of incompetence. It is epitomised by J Menlove Edwards' first 'free' (unaided), on-sight lead of the Great Flake on the Central Buttress of Scafell in 1931. The second man in the party described the scene:

In my haste to catch up with the others, I had left my rubbers behind and was climbing in stockinged feet. At the foot of the Flake, Menlove quickly arranged some slings and brought me up to him. Our whole performance was hair-raisingly chaotic. For some reason I was still carrying the spare line. I gripped hold of Menlove's shoulders and we both swung out from the rock. He seemed to be only very loosely tied in. My strength was by then running out. I seized hold of a spare rope which Menlove had secured to the chockstone and lowered myself until I could jam my body into the crack and take a rest. Menlove meanwhile was making fresh arrangements with the rope. Suddenly he called out: 'I'm going to have a go!' Next moment he was laybacking steadily up the crack, unbelayed, and was soon at the top.

Of course, although it *looks* very chaotic, this kind of adventurous spontaneity is based on a shrewd assessment of all the factors involved – for only a very fine sense of judgement can turn a crazy hunch into a reality, as Edwards so brilliantly did here.

In considering the whole process of creative divergences from the beaten track, I am reminded of the great nineteenth century American writer, Henry David Thoreau, and his concept of 'sauntering'. This is a kind of imaginative wandering that has an underlying sense of purpose to it, albeit at times an unconscious one. The saunterer is never a mere idler or vagabond. 'The saunterer, in the good sense,' says Thoreau, 'is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea.' He is not a Knight, but a 'Walker,

Errant'. Sauntering is always *deliberate* – deliberate in its initial intention and deliberate in the way it is pursued (a continual weighing-up, poised in balance on a knife-edge, as it were, between the known and the unknown) – but the line of the route is never totally predictable. Nevertheless, Thoreau had an unshakeable belief in 'a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright'.

'Sauntering' is a kind of *unravelling*, a journey that links with our inner, imaginative landscape and so becomes, in a very real sense, a journey into our true selves. In Thoreau's words, what we are trying to do is 'take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolic of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world ...'

#### 'A SPIRITUAL MAP WITH OUR TRACKS'

Sauntering in Thoreau's sense is a very creative use of the landscape: by following our hunches, we 'home' in on something deep in ourselves. The barrier between the external landscape we perceive and the internal landscape of our imagination starts to break down. The former always involves the latter to some extent anyway, whether we care to admit it or not. The choice of what parts of it we inhabit or explore, and our understanding of what we choose to notice in it, is the very framework of the landscape for us. This framework *is* our landscape.

Likewise, in the photography for this book, I have certainly been highly selective, and have undoubtedly to some extent created or recreated the Lake District as I imagine it. What I have done in a minor way, is what imaginative minds like Beatrix Potter and Arthur Ransome have done in a much more extreme way, when the real Lakeland landscape has been completely reconstructed into a 'lakeland of the imagination'. In Arthur Ransome, for example, Lake Windermere and Coniston Water become one – it is just 'the lake', a total amalgam of childhood fantasy and reality. The landscape is no longer neutral, or 'innocent', but highly personal; it contains part of the artist's 'life story'.

In a superbly rich and suggestive metaphor, the Lakes poet Thomas de Quincey compares the human brain with a *palimpsest* – an ancient manuscript on which successive layers have been erased to make way for later pieces of writing. The hidden layers correspond to the recoverable deposits of memory lying below the surface of consciousness:

What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? ... Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished. ... The fleeting accidents of a man's life, and its external shows, may indeed be irrelate and incongruous; but the organising principles which fuse into harmony, and gather about fixed predetermined centres, whatever heterogeneous elements life may have accumulated from without, will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated ...

I would now like to borrow this idea from De Quincey and use it in a slightly different way by suggesting that the personal landscape 'map', or picture of the real landscape which we build up and store in our mind, is just such a palimpsest: it is a dynamic, imaginative creation in which a complex series of wandering 'excursions' and adventures is inscribed successively onto a 'vast' inner map, to form a matrix of successive layers, a patchwork of intertwining journey-lines, a web of criss-crossing memory beads that are interconnected only by our intuition and imagination. In the words of Coleridge, it is a 'spiritual map, with our tracks'.

The operation of the imagination in this way is not a 'mode of behaviour' that we can drop in and out of, like a hobby or pastime, but an ongoing process that is central to life. 'The imagination is not a State,' William Blake once said: 'it is the Human existence itself.'

This indeed was one of my first and clearest realisations about mountain walking and climbing, right from the day I first discovered it – that, as an activity, it was not peripheral, but was somehow central to life, and would always remain so. That it was, as it were, a condition of life, *for* life. 'There arises a consciousness of momentum,' the Victorian mountaineer, Sir Martin Conway, said. 'On and on one must go. It is like life.' And, like a palimpsest, each stage in the journey somehow



*grows out of* and contains all that has gone before – even if much of it has apparently been forgotten. Dorothy Pilley, a great woman climber of the 1920s, said it goes right down into the ‘very form and fabric’ of oneself.

Although the ‘map’ is never finished, there are nevertheless days when a whole ‘leg’ of the journey seems to have been completed – a ‘day of days’ which is somehow a culmination of all the previous days in that landscape. After which we can only move on in a completely different direction.

#### OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

In a sense, a mountain skyline, like the horizon, represents a boundary between the intellect and the imagination, for it is impossible to say without prior knowledge what lies on the other side. When we head into the hills, it is not just a fascination for the topography (topophilia), and the intellectual and physical puzzle of how it fits together, that draws us on. We want to see what lies *beyond*, what new world opens up. We want to walk right up to, and across, the boundaries of our dreams. ‘Over the hills’ there is a world where fantasy and reality merge.

In Beatrix Potter’s *Tale of Pigling Bland*, the concept of going ‘over the hills’ is closely linked to that of ‘finding one’s way home’ – ‘over the hills and far away’ from the ‘grown-up’ world of commerce and dull-witted regulations, finding one’s way ‘home’ ... to one’s real self. It is all about making crucial choices about where and how one is going to live. Where one is going to live, metaphorically.

I may be accused of reading too much into it, but it seems to me that, like many of Beatrix Potter’s ‘little books’, this tale contains worlds of meaning. Major universal themes are hinted at in the most subtle way. (They are never more than hinted at.) There is always a sense of a larger story concerning the natural order of things – a harsh world that is full of contradictions and unfathomable mysteries. There is also an acute awareness of the *paradoxes* of nature – that it has a dark as well as a light side. And, as in any great fairy tale or myth, the basic elements are set out with beautiful economy and clarity. ‘Home’ is represented by Westmorland;

commerce and the market place, by Lancashire; the boundary between them, by the River Brathay, and the means of crossing it, Colwith Bridge.

The Market is established from the outset as being something very serious that overshadows the whole of life – for all practical purposes, Fate itself, the fate of being this particular animal (the fate of pigs being to lead ‘prosperous, uneventful lives’, i.e. get fat! but – as Pig-wig herself remarks, ‘cheerfully’ – to end up as ‘Bacon, hams’.)

Yet free will can still be exercised.

‘Why on earth don’t you run away?’ exclaimed the horrified Pigling.

‘I shall after supper,’ said Pig-wig decidedly.

However, it is not as simple as that; it is not so easy to escape the food chain! Escape is only possible with vision and imagination. It is not just a simple choice between stark polarities: there is often a third way, which involves lateral thinking and cunning. It is symbolised in the tale by the important image of the three-way signpost. Straight ahead (the way Pigling has been told to go) leads ‘To Market Town’, while to one side, and far less obviously, is the way ‘Over the hills’. Only once Pigling has become hopelessly lost in a dark wood does the opportunity present itself for him to escape ‘Over the hills’. From then on, it is largely a matter of being quick-witted, sharp-eyed, and deceptive.

Pigling and Pig-wig’s final escape over the bridge, to dance ‘over the hills and far away’, represents the rather wistful ideal of the triumph of the spirit of childhood innocence over the insensitive boorishness of the ‘adult’ world – a world of authority and ‘pig licenses’, and the total, unquestioning acceptance of the law of the ‘market’. It is idealistic because it rules out the possibility of compromise, of living with one foot in each world. Beatrix Potter, who actually writes herself into the beginning of the story, warns the characters directly: ‘Remember, if you once cross the county boundary you cannot come back’.

Everyone is faced with a crossroads, and a dark wood; the question is, have we the imagination and initiative to cross the bridge? Or, are we stuck in our own very worn groove.

## THE FLATLAND

Beatrix Potter's 'Westmorland', standing as it does for the 'freedom of the hills' in contrast with the all-pervading 'law' of the Market in Lancashire, could be said to have something in common with Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, of which Joseph Campbell has written:

The call to adventure is to a land of no return that is absolutely removed from every law and notion of the 'flatland' (as Mann calls it): the business-land, the newspaper-and-ledger-land, of the hero's native city ... On the flatland life is reaction, whereas on the timeless mountaintop ... there can be fermentation, spontaneity, action as opposed to reaction.

Today the gap between the flatland and the hills is as wide as ever, seeing that we are out of touch with the natural world to a more serious, *less excusable*, extent than ever before in our history. We appear to be caught up in an ever deepening vortex of growth economics and mass entertainment in which wild places run the risk of being turned into theme parks, and the flatland approximates more and more the dim, vicarious world of 'virtual reality'.

'Whither is fled the visionary gleam?' Wordsworth demanded in 1804: 'Where is it now, the glory and the dream?' He saw the problem very much in terms of the adult losing the fresh receptivity of the child and, in effect, falling asleep. In some of his most famous lines he wrote:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
 ... Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
 Upon the growing boy,

and he concluded that we act as if our 'whole vocation were endless imitation'.

Coleridge put it in even stronger terms when he spoke of the spirit that has become ‘denaturalised’. He described such a person – he was referring to William Pitt! – as

A plant sown and reared in a hot house, for whom the very air, that surrounded him, had been regulated by the thermometer of previous purpose; to whom the light of nature had penetrated only through glasses and covers; who had had the sun without the breeze; whom no storm had shaken; on whom no rain had pattered; on whom the dews of Heaven had not fallen!

Many people who visit the Lake District today are so ‘denaturalised in spirit’ that they remain essentially *detached* from the landscape, and are crippled by what I can only describe as geomorphological blindness. For example, many who walk up Scafell Pike seem scarcely to notice the finest piece of rock architecture in England, Scafell Crag, just opposite them. The reason, it seems, is that they have not been *told* to notice it – it has not been labelled as a ‘sight’ to be seen – such as Aira Force or Friar’s Crag.

#### FOR THE FREE SPIRIT

As an unspoiled landscape, which is nothing less than a gigantic work of art, the Lake District demands an imaginative response that does not, however, mark or damage it in any way. This is the challenge that it throws out to us. It was Percy Unna who said, in his famous ‘guidelines’ of 1937 (which are still held as sacrosanct by the National Trust today), that the land must ‘be maintained in its primitive condition for all time with unrestricted access to the public’. Unna then went on to spell out very precisely what he meant by this – his two most important provisos being:

That ‘Primitive’ means not less primitive than the existing state.  
That the hills should not be made easier or safer to climb.

Unna would have unquestionably agreed with Thoreau's great dictum: 'In Wildness is the preservation of the World'.

The spirit that does not want to be tamed does not want the landscape to be tamed. If we tame, prettify, or commercialise it, we shall paradoxically turn it into a wasteland, a fossilised relic that has lost all its potential as an arena in which the imaginative spirit can flourish. That is how I see the Lake District – as a landscape for the imaginative Free Spirit which is in essential harmony with nature, and is entirely at odds with the conformism of organised routes and the march of 'market forces'. The pathway of the free spirit does not lead to the market.

Only in such an unspoiled landscape can the whole person – physical, intellectual, and imaginative – flourish. Only here will our personal 'inner maps' continue to grow and develop. In this way, our perception of the landscape will never remain static, but will be ever richer and more surprising. It may well be that we shall make the mistake one day of believing that our personal map of it is complete, and that the landscape itself thus has little more to offer – that, in common parlance, we have 'done' it. Only later shall we realize just how inadequate our appreciation of it first was, as whole new worlds open up, far greater and richer than any we had previously imagined – or had been able to imagine, so limited and undeveloped were our creative powers in our earlier days.

*Imagination having been our theme,  
So also hath that intellectual Love,  
For they are each in each, and cannot stand  
Dividually. – Here must thou be, O Man!  
Power to thyself...*

WORDSWORTH, *THE PRELUDE*, XIV

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the following for their help, which ranged all the way from useful advice to spending long days out with me on the hill:

Neil Allinson, the Upland Access Advisor of the National Trust; Julian and Linda Heaton Cooper; David Craig; Hazel Davidson of the Keswick Museum and Art Gallery for providing crystals from the museum collection for use in a photograph in my introduction; David Dunk; Norman Elliott; Fuji film for providing most of the film stock for the 1992 shoot; Terry Gifford for permission to use the poem 'Deepdale Camp' from his book 'Outcrops' and also for supplying new poetry at the drop of a hat; Tony Greenbank; David Hope; Zbigniew Kotowicz for assisting me on two high mountain camps on Scafell and for general intellectual stimulation; Miss Dymock of the Lingholm Estate for access to Derwent Bay, Derwent Water; Bob and Barbara McGovern; Tim and Liz Melling of Nab Cottage, Rydal; John Mitchell for the map; Nic Pancisi of Multiprint Laboratories, Derby, for the film processing; Guy and Val Richardson for their wonderful hospitality and general assistance, and Guy for the use of his map illustrated in the introduction; Jon and Jackie Rigby; David Rose; Anthony, Christine, and Colin Harrison of the Smallwood House Hotel, Ambleside; and Frederick Warne for permission to reproduce three illustrations from the works of Beatrix Potter.