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Opening Extract from...

The Living Mountain

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1

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ONE

The Plateau

Summer on the high plateau can be delectable as honey; it can also be a roaring scourge. To those who love the place, both are good, since both are part of its essential nature. And it is to know its essential nature that I am seeking here. To know, that is, with the knowledge that is a process of living. This is not done easily nor in an hour. It is a tale too slow for the impatience of our age, not of immediate enough import for its desperate problems. Yet it has its own rare value. It is, for one thing, a corrective of glib assessment: one never quite knows the mountain, nor oneself in relation to it. However often I walk on them, these hills hold astonishment for me. There is no getting accustomed to them.

The Cairngorm Mountains are a mass of granite thrust up through the schists and gneiss that form the lower surrounding hills, planed down by the ice cap, and split, shattered and scooped by frost, glaciers and the strength of running water. Their physiognomy is in the geography books – so many square miles of area, so many lochs, so many summits of over 4000 feet – but this is a pallid simulacrum of their reality, which, like every reality that matters ultimately to human beings, is a reality of the mind.

The plateau is the true summit of these mountains; they must be seen as a single mountain, and the individual tops, Ben MacDhui, Braeriach and the rest, though sundered from one another by fissures and deep descents, are no more than eddies on the plateau surface. One does not look upwards to spectacular peaks but downwards from the peaks to spectacular chasms. The plateau itself is not spectacular. It is bare and very stony, and since there is nothing higher than itself (except for the tip of Ben Nevis) nearer than Norway, it is savaged by the wind. Snow covers it for half the year and sometimes, for as long as a month at a time, it is in cloud. Its growth is moss and lichen and sedge, and in June the clumps of Silence – moss campion – flower in brilliant pink. Dotterel and ptarmigan nest upon it, and springs ooze from its rock. By continental measurement its height is nothing much – around 4000 feet – but for an island it is well enough, and if the winds have unhindered range, so has the eye. It is island weather too, with no continent to steady it, and the place has as many aspects as there are gradations in the light.

Light in Scotland has a quality I have not met elsewhere. It is luminous without being fierce, penetrating to immense distances with an effortless intensity. So on a clear day one looks without any sense of strain from Morven in Caithness to the Lammermuirs, and out past Ben Nevis to Morar. At midsummer, I have had to be persuaded I was not seeing further even than that. I could have sworn I saw a shape, distinct and blue, very clear and small, further off than any hill the chart recorded. The chart was against me, my companions were against me, I never saw it again. On a day like that,

height goes to one's head. Perhaps it was the lost Atlantis focused for a moment out of time.

The streams that fall over the edges of the plateau are clear – Avon indeed has become a by-word for clarity: gazing into its depths, one loses all sense of time, like the monk in the old story who listened to the blackbird.

Water of A'n, ye rin sae clear,
'Twad beguile a man of a hundred year.

Its waters are white, of a clearness so absolute that there is no image for them. Naked birches in April, lighted after heavy rain by the sun, might suggest their brilliance. Yet this is too sensational. The whiteness of these waters is simple. They are elemental transparency. Like roundness, or silence, their quality is natural, but is found so seldom in its absolute state that when we do so find it we are astonished.

The young Dee, as it flows out of the Garbh Choire and joins the water from the Lairig Pools, has the same astounding transparency. Water so clear cannot be imagined, but must be seen. One must go back, and back again, to look at it, for in the interval memory refuses to re-create its brightness. This is one of the reasons why the high plateau where these streams begin, the streams themselves, their cataracts and rocky beds, the corries, the whole wild enchantment, like a work of art is perpetually new when one returns to it. The mind cannot carry away all that it has to give, nor does it always believe possible what it has carried away.

So back one climbs, to the sources. Here the life of the rivers begins – Dee and Avon, the Derry, the Beinnie and the

Allt Druie. In these pure and terrible streams the rain, cloud and snow of the high Cairngorms are drained away. They rise from the granite, sun themselves a little on the unsheltered plateau and drop through air to their valleys. Or they cut their way out under wreaths of snow, escaping in a tumult. Or hang in tangles of ice on the rock faces. One cannot know the rivers till one has seen them at their sources; but this journey to the sources is not to be undertaken lightly. One walks among elementals, and elementals are not governable. There are awakened also in oneself by the contact elementals that are as unpredictable as wind or snow.

This may suggest that to reach the high plateau of the Cairngorms is difficult. But no, no such thing. Given clear air, and the unending daylight of a Northern summer, there is not one of the summits but can be reached by a moderately strong walker without distress. A strong walker will take a couple of summits. Circus walkers will plant flags on all six summits in a matter of fourteen hours. This may be fun, but is sterile. To pit oneself against the mountain is necessary for every climber: to pit oneself merely against other players, and make a race of it, is to reduce to the level of a game what is essentially an experience. Yet what a race-course for these boys to choose! To know the hills, and their own bodies, well enough to dare the exploit is their real achievement.

Mastering new routes up the rock itself is another matter. Granite, of which the Cairngorms are built, weathers too smoothly and squarely to make the best conditions for rock-climbing. Yet there is such challenge in the grandeur of the corries that those who climb cannot leave them untasted. The Guide Book and the *Cairngorm Club Journal* give the attested

climbs, with their dates, from the end of last century onwards. Yet I wonder if young blood didn't attempt it sooner. There is a record of a shepherd, a century and a half ago, found frozen along with his sheep dog, on a ledge of one of the Braeriach cliffs. He, to be sure, wandered there, in a blizzard, but the men who brought down the body must have done a pretty job of work; and I can believe there were young hotheads among that hardy breed to whom the scaling of a precipice was nothing new. Dr George Skene Keith, in his *General View of Aberdeenshire*, records having scrambled up the bed of the Dee cataract in 1810, and Professor McGillivray, in his *Natural History of Braemar*, tells how as a student, in 1819, he walked from Aberdeen University to his western home, straight through the Cairngorm group; and lying down to sleep, just as he was, at the foot of the Braeriach precipices, continued next morning on his way straight up out of the corrie in which he had slept. On a later visit, searching out the flora of these mountains, he seems to have run up and down the crags with something of the deer's lightness. There are, however, ways up and down some of these corries that may be scrambled by any fleet-footed and level-headed climber, and it is doubtless these that the earlier adventurers had used. The fascination of the later work lies in finding ways impossible without the rope; and there are still many faces among these precipices that have not been attempted. One of my young friends lately pioneered a route out of the Garbh Choire of Braeriach, over rock not hitherto climbed. To him, one of the keenest young hillmen I know (he has been described, and recognised at a railway terminus, as 'a little black fellow, load the size of himself, with a far-away look in his eyes'), the

mere setting up of a record is of very minor importance. What he values is a task that, demanding of him all he has and is, absorbs and so releases him entirely.

It is, of course, merely stupid to suppose that the record-breakers do not love the hills. Those who do not love them don't go up, and those who do can never have enough of it. It is an appetite that grows in feeding. Like drink and passion, it intensifies life to the point of glory. In the Scots term, used for the man who is *abune himsel'* with drink, one is *raised; fey*; a little mad, in the eyes of the folk who do not climb.

Fey may be too strong a term for that joyous release of body that is engendered by climbing; yet to the sober looker-on a man may seem to walk securely over dangerous places with the gay abandon that is said to be the mark of those who are doomed to death. How much of this gay security is the result of perfectly trained and co-ordinated body and mind, only climbers themselves realise; nor is there any need to ascribe to the agency of a god either the gay security, or the death which may occasionally, but rarely, follow. The latter, if it does occur, is likely to be the result of carelessness – of failing in one's exaltation to observe a coating of ice on the stone, of trusting to one's amazing luck rather than to one's compass, perhaps merely, in the glow of complete bodily well-being, of over-estimating one's powers of endurance.

But there is a phenomenon associated with this *feyness* of which I must confess a knowledge. Often, in my bed at home, I have remembered the places I have run lightly over with no sense of fear, and have gone cold to think of them. It seems to me then that I could never go back; my fear unmans me,

horror is in my mouth. Yet when I go back, the same leap of the spirit carries me up. God or no god, I am *fey* again.

The *feyness* itself seems to me to have a physiological origin. Those who undergo it have the particular bodily make-up that functions at its most free and most live upon heights (although this, it is obvious, refers only to heights manageable to man and not at all to those for which a slow and painful acclimatisation is needful). As they ascend, the air grows rarer and more stimulating, the body feels lighter and they climb with less effort, till Dante's law of ascent on the Mount of Purgation seems to become a physical truth: 'This mountain is such, that ever at the beginning below 'tis toilsome, and the more a man ascends the less it wearies.'

At first I had thought that this lightness of body was a universal reaction to rarer air. It surprised me to discover that some people suffered malaise at altitudes that released me, but were happy in low valleys where I felt extinguished. Then I began to see that our devotions have more to do with our physiological peculiarities than we admit. I am a mountain lover because my body is at its best in the rarer air of the heights and communicates its elation to the mind. The obverse of this would seem to be exemplified in the extreme of fatigue I suffered while walking some two miles underground in the Ardennes caverns. This was plainly no case of a weary mind communicating its fatigue to the body, since I was enthralled by the strangeness and beauty of these underground cavities. Add to this eyes, the normal focus of which is for distance, and my delight in the expanse of space opened up from the mountain tops becomes also a perfect physiological adjustment. The short-sighted cannot love mountains as the

long-sighted do. The sustained rhythm of movement in a long climb has also its part in inducing the sense of physical well-being, and this cannot be captured by any mechanical mode of ascent.

This bodily lightness, then, in the rarefied air, combines with the liberation of space to give mountain *feyness* to those who are susceptible to such a malady. For it is a malady, subverting the will and superseding the judgment: but a malady of which the afflicted will never ask to be cured. For this nonsense of physiology does not really explain it at all. What! am I such a slave that unless my flesh feels buoyant I cannot be free? No, there is more in the lust for a mountain top than a perfect physiological adjustment. What more there is lies within the mountain. Something moves between me and it. Place and a mind may interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered. I cannot tell what this movement is except by recounting it.