

One

Mallerstang

Eventually, all things merge into one and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the World's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time.

Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

In the south-eastern corner of Cumbria, two springs of crystal-clear water called Red Gill and Slate Gutter ooze out of Black Fell Moss, a remote bog high up on the eastern side of the spectacular Mallerstang valley. Liberated from the saturated, clinging peat, they scamper over the brow of the hill and converge to form Hell Gill Beck, the boisterous adolescent stream that runs south-west down into the valley bottom and swings abruptly north to become the River Eden.

For many years, as the curlews returned to greet the arrival of spring with their plaintive, bubbling cry, I have visited the source of the River Eden; a personal annual pilgrimage after the long, cold paralysis of winter to celebrate both the awakening of the new year and the embryonic rise of the river. On one late-March visit, it didn't feel at all like spring up there; lines of thick snow lay across the moor, and grey sheets of ice glazed the pools of water skulking inside its dark peat hollows. The bleak fell was still chillingly comatose under a leaden sky, frozen in the tenacious grip of winter's malevolent spell. There was no sound of the curlew that had earlier greeted my arrival in the valley below, and I listened in vain for skylarks or meadow pipits or the distant

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fluting of golden plovers. The morose moor was unrelentingly silent, and a screen of smoke rising on the horizon, where game-keepers were burning the heather, partially concealed the stark outline of Ingleborough, lending emphasis to the melancholy of a lost wilderness.

I didn't stay long. My pilgrimage on that occasion was also the start of a journey along the entire length of the River Eden, which had to begin at the top of the hill known as Hugh Seat. There, at a height of 689 metres above the valley bottom, I could attain a real sense of the watershed where, as old documents describe it, 'Heaven water deals' and 'Heaven water divides'. With Mallerstang Edge to the east and Wild Boar Fell to the west, virtually identical heights of just over 700 metres, Mallerstang belongs, geologically, to the limestone country of the Yorkshire Dales. Dominated by horizontal layers of carboniferous limestone, capped with gritstone escarpments, it represents more than 350 million years of geological history. Derived from sediment deposited and compressed by shallow tropical seas and primeval rivers, lifted by tumultuous upheavals in the Earth's crust, they were cut into shape by the interminable passage of Ice Age glaciers and the melting, manic water in their wake.

Surrounded by that vast ancient landscape, I always feel acutely aware of the fleeting and minuscule time span of human history; a mere two million years. A very small stone cairn on top of Hugh Seat, inscribed faintly with the initials AP and the date 1664, puts this neatly into perspective. The cairn is Lady's Pillar, erected at the request of an extraordinary seventeenth-century landowner called Lady Anne Clifford, the Countess of Pembroke, who owned vast tracts of old Westmorland stretching between Mallerstang and Penrith. It marks the source of the river and commemorates her notorious predecessor, the Norman knight

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Sir Hugh de Morville, who owned the same estates five hundred years earlier and was one of the four knights who murdered Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

My plan was to travel the route in stages, short sections at a time, sometimes walking, sometimes by car, over the course of the proceeding seasons. I descended from Hugh Seat feeling disappointed that there were no stirrings of spring at the source of the river. But I still had the warmer embrace of the green valley below to look forward to, with its promise of skydiving lapwing, their sharp *pee-wit* call complementing the curlews' lugubrious refrain, and perhaps the sight of a few early spring flowers on sheltered grassy banks.

As I stumbled down the hill a pair of grouse hurtled out of the drab, brittle heather in front of me, whirring and gliding, a feather's breadth from the ground, on stubborn, stubby wings and seemingly mocking my retreat from the moor with their call to *go bak, bak, bak, bak*. At that moment one of the frozen pools erupted in a turmoil of spluttering, spouting silver bubbles, like a cauldron of boiling water. For a split second I thought I'd encountered a geyser of hot spring water bursting through the peat from the subterranean depths below Black Fell Moss. Drawing closer, I realised it was frogs; a tumultuous tangle of copulating frogs rising to the surface in a frenzied orgy of vernal ecstasy. Perhaps the grouse were right and I'd been too hastily dismissive of the desolate moor. In being so preoccupied with watching and listening for manifestations of spring in the air I'd been ignoring the ground beneath my feet.

It was perfect. Water was going to be my regular companion as I travelled along the length of the river, and here was an entirely unexpected aquatic affirmation of renewal that lifted my spirits, filling me with an almost delirious surge of anticipation at the commencement of my journey. The now confident stream

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was gathering momentum, channelling its way along the bottom of the steep-sided gully it had gouged out over thousands of years. Its eroded banks are jagged with crumbling landslips and strewn with big broken slabs of stone that are testament to the water's more aggressive progress and continuing excavations after heavy rain. Scrambling down the slope into the gill, shut off from the wider landscape, I felt a profound sense of intimacy with the river. Then, as I walked along its cloistered banks, the sound of rushing water filled the air like a chorus of voices chanting a mesmeric mantra from, in Norman Maclean's words, the "basement of time".

I arrived in Cumbria in 1982 to work as an area warden for the Yorkshire Dales National Park in its north-west region and lived for the first twenty-five years in a sixteenth-century cottage at Fell End, on the other side of Wild Boar Fell. I lived there for eight years before I became properly acquainted with the River Eden, because my life, at that time, was being entirely shaped by the work I was doing in the upper catchment areas of both the River Ure in Wensleydale and the River Lune in Garsdale, Dentdale and the area around Sedbergh.

It wasn't until I moved jobs in 1991 and went to work for East Cumbria Countryside Project (ECCP) that I switched catchments and discovered the Eden Valley with its river and tributaries. It was a revelation in more ways than one. I had become disenchanted with my job in the National Park. At first it seemed like a dream come true; for years I'd seen the national park concept as a 'green-print' of an ecologically sustainable future for the countryside as a whole – a partnership between local government and local residents, particularly the farming community, all working together to manage a productive rural economy in harmony with maintaining a beautiful landscape and a rich diversity of wildlife.

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Or so I thought! Instead there was conflict and resentment at every turn. The farmers hated the National Park, and the National Park Authority maintained an aloof and condescending attitude to the farmers. Local residents, generally, grappled with inconsistent and intransigent planning restrictions. Visitor management was outmoded and still based on the American model of a national park, which, in my view, was entirely inappropriate and endlessly confusing to the public. In the UK they are not parks, nor are they nationally owned as they are in the USA. The vast majority of the farms are privately owned or tenanted by farmers who feel that they are themselves an integral part of the land they farm. They are inherently territorial, and I came to feel sympathetic to their point of view. A senior member of staff told me, in no uncertain terms, that I was becoming “too friendly with the farmers”, and yet I truly believed that the essence of my role was to win the trust of the farmers and recruit their support in a grand vision that would benefit everyone. As he saw it, however, I was consorting with the enemy.

Thankfully most of the national park authorities have changed considerably since those early days and adopted a much more enlightened and sensitive attitude toward the farming community. Their planning procedures too are now substantially more conciliatory, creative and facilitating. But they are still called national parks.

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And so I slithered and climbed down Hell Gill's dim, glistening insides, through a succession of cold baths, in one long primal scream.

Roger Deakin, *Waterlog*

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Hell Gill divides Cumbria from Yorkshire and was the northern boundary of the Yorkshire Dales National Park until 2015 when the park was extended further north to include an extra 417 square kilometres in Cumbria, now called the Westmorland Dales. The River Ure starts its journey in the opposite direction just a short distance from here on the Yorkshire side.

The nascent River Eden snakes its way across level ground before plunging into the narrow, hidden cavity of Hell Gill, the limestone gorge that gives the beck its name. More than a thousand years ago Mallerstang was occupied by Viking farmers, so Hell Gill may well have been Hel's Gill, an entrance to the Viking underworld of the dead, which in Norse mythology was called Hel and ruled over by a goddess who was also named Hel. The Viking Hel was a more benign place than the Christian version of Hell, but, even so, it must have been a depressing prospect for the local Vikings to have its entrance on their patch, not to mention a soul-destroying job for their goddess.

Hell Gill is 30 metres deep and 365 metres long, yet, in places, little more than a metre wide. Most of the time it tumbles gently in a series of hidden waterfalls and pools. Braver people than me venture down there in the drier summer months, coming in from the top end, sliding and slipping from pool to pool in the half light and emerging at the bottom to dry themselves on exposed rocky ledges in the brightness and warmth of the sun. In spite the beck fills the ravine with a raging, plunging, crashing torrent. In his book *Waterlog*, the late Roger Deakin describes how he attempted to scramble down the Gill in more running water than was reasonably safe and halfway down found himself beneath an overhanging rock, staring into a terrifying "gothic emptiness". Sensibly, he retreated and climbed back to the top, despite the full strength of the water being against him. I was happy to give the experience a miss and,

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skirting to one side, came down onto the wide green track still known as Lady Anne's Highway.

The Highway was an important trading route for hundreds of years and once the only way through the valley. It was almost certainly frequented by highway robbers, and legend has it that during a violent storm that had destroyed the bridge across Hell Gill, the infamous highwayman Dick Turpin escaped the clutches of pursuing policemen by leaping across the gorge on his horse, Black Bess. The legend might have some basis in fact, although it is more likely to have been a local highwayman called Ned Ward, who was active in the eighteenth century, than Dick Turpin. Ned was a native of the dale who, with his accomplice Broderick, apparently confined his criminal endeavours to robbing wealthy off-comers and leaving local inhabitants well alone. This approach, perhaps an interesting example of early hill farm diversification in the absence of agricultural subsidies, gave the villains some protection from the law. Eventually, though, one stormy night, the police arrived with warrants for their arrest. Having successfully apprehended Broderick, they failed to catch Ned, who broke through the thatched roof of his cottage and galloped off on one of the constables' horses. He may or may not have jumped over the bridgeless gorge, but he did escape and, according to accounts at the time, eventually settled in the Newcastle area to become a coal miner. According to Alfred Noyes, the hero of his poem 'The Highwayman' "rode with a jewelled twinkle / His pistol butts a-twinkle." I don't suppose that was the case with Ned, but I like to think he had a twinkle in his eyes.

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From Hell Gill Bridge, or Devil's Bridge as it is sometimes known, the beck meanders through several fields and then, close to where it turns north at the bottom of the valley, pours over

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a steep cliff in a waterfall called Hell Gill Force. Depending on recent rain levels, the waterfall varies in size from a timorous trickle to a demonic deluge. I am always amazed at how quickly rivers rise after a day or two of heavy rain.

The ground along the horizon on the opposite side of the valley, known as The Nab, just left of Wild Boar Fell's pointed summit, bristles with a row of tall thin cairns that are like teeth in a crocodile's jaw. Wild Boar Fell was presumably a good place to find wild boar, once upon a time, before they became extinct in this country. Sir Richard Musgrave, a fifteenth-century knight who lived in Kirkby Stephen, reputedly killed the last one. As if to prove this, a boar's tusk was found years ago in his tomb in Kirkby Stephen's church. Perhaps the cairns were put up by him, like notches on a trophy hunter's gun, to keep a tally of all the wild boar he'd slaughtered.

Lady Anne's Highway crosses rougher ground going south to Cotter Riggs, where it joins what is now the A64 to Hawes, but I was heading north along a flat section of the track that runs parallel with the infant northbound River Eden in the valley below. The wide, straight path here has the feel of a classic green road: the grass grows in thin soil over flat slabs of limestone pavement and is kept cropped short by the incessant nibbling of Swaledale sheep.

Lady Anne Clifford travelled regularly along this route on arduous journeys between her castle at Skipton and the four castles she owned in Westmorland. It was very different in her day. Sitting precariously in a horse litter – rather like a sedan chair supported by long poles slung between two horses at the front and rear – she was always accompanied by an army of noisy companions and servants on horseback and in numerous creaking carriages with a cart, pulled by oxen, carrying her heavy bed. The road would have been much more rutted and slippery with mud,

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making progress agonisingly slow for such a bizarrely attired procession in all their pretentious cavalier splendour.

Passenger trains along the Settle to Carlisle railway, on the opposite side of the valley, now provide a more comfortable way to travel, but, when the line was being constructed from 1869 to 1875, between Dent and Kirkby Stephen, a workforce of some six thousand navvies suffered appalling hardship and deprivation. It's difficult to imagine the sprawling shanty towns built to accommodate the workers and their families and the devastating impact they had on the local farming community in what had previously been, and is now again, such a remote and tranquil valley.

The walk along this elevated track is always special, but never more so than on that particular euphoric morning. Patches of blue sky had emerged by then, and the sun was filtering through the dispersing clouds in columns of golden dust. Curlews and several pairs of lapwing, so conspicuous by their absence on the high fells, cavorted above my head, consolidating their recent arrival in the dale with amicable whoops. The very same resonant calls had greeted the Viking farmers, the Norman knight Sir Hugh de Morville, Lady Anne Clifford, the highwayman Ned Ward and the thousands of navvies building the railway at the start of all their individual springs.