

Death and Life in the Mountain

by Alan Laing

The grey powder was scattered. Some settled into the bracken and the tussocks, waiting for rain to carry it downwards. Some clung camouflaged on quartzite rocks, as if drawn by the shared origin of metamorphosing heat. Puffs of breeze took some further, across and down the flanks of the mountain, now dispersed so finely that no camouflage was needed. Darkness fell. Rain fell. Ash melded into mountain.

First, just the cycles of the year were felt. The clean chill of Winters were a stronger sensation than the stuttering, half-hearted warmth of most Summers. Springs crept uncertainly, stealthy intimations of life, then a quivering impulse towards light and air. And quiet, unsettling, the closing down into death or hibernation of Autumns.

Time passed. A plaque rusted, was cleaned, rusted again. And more subtle messages made themselves known. Felt most clearly where the ash had fallen thickest; shadowy where it had separated most finely. The infinitesimal settling of gravel and pebble; the reluctant drip from thawing icicle tip; even the ghost touch of smirr.

Incrementally, like a foetus forming, a kind of identity returned. It grew stronger, until he finally comprehended an awareness of himself, a new self which had merged and fused with the mountain, yet was separate from it. Like a blind man learning Braille he became familiar with the calligraphy of his surroundings - every cleft and crevice, every fissure, fault and fracture. Now he could recognise life: the scouring of the burns in spate; the rooted tapestry of heather, bracken, pine, rowan, orchid, saxifrage. He felt death too: rotted trunks and branches; chick-skeleton leavings of carrion crow; deer put to sleep by winter. And another kind of death - he felt it pluck at what was a kind of memory, but a memory his identity sensed but could not name.

Time grew further. He was aware of something which some part of him remembered as a voice, a voice whispering. Whispering just a sound, then in something he knew as words. The words came from somewhere deep, but also all around. They spread over him and settled, as rain or snow or mist settles in hollows. He spoke the words to himself.

"Welcome. Take time. More will become clear. Listen."

Now he began to hear sounds not just of the mountain but of its inhabitants: the nesting and feeding noises of its winged community; the tread, the scratch, the breathing even of its earthbound population. Sounds that told him it was day or night, a time of growth or of hibernation. And then a different set of noises, out of place yet familiar. The crunching of gravel, the squelch and suck of mud, metallic clicks of metal on stone, rhythmic breathing or rapid panting - and voices saying words he could hear from outside himself now. Banal words, but sending echoes of familiarity.

"Come on, can't keep stopping."

"Get the map out and check."

"Why couldn't he come?"

"Is there a trig point?"

"Take a bearing - better be safe."

"Hey - pick that up!"

"This meant to be fun?"

"So, how's your first Munro then?"

"You always have this in mind for your last Munro?"

As he had learned to differentiate the sounds of birds and animals, even the tiniest of them, so he listened to the variations of this other species. He heard the chatterers, the complainers, the slow and steady, the stop and starters. He identified the loners, the pairs, the groups, the stragglers. He felt how some could work with the surfaces and angles of the mountain, moving smoothly and leaving little trace, while others seemed to fight them, starting little avalanches of scree or stumbling through heather. Once in a while he sensed a powerful despair. Mostly it came and went unchanged. Sometimes it lessened as the ascent continued. But more than once it increased until it was suddenly replaced by an unsettling nothingness and, again, that sense of something unidentified dying.

The sounds mostly headed upwards then downwards, but some seemed to follow the paths of other creatures. These sound trails stopped and started more irregularly. Instead of steady tread and open voices he heard rustling movement close to the very surface of the mountain, urgent whispers followed by silences. Instead of breath exhaled naturally, in time with movement, he heard it held, let out slowly, held again. Simultaneously he would recognise conflicting sensations: excitement and fear, frustration and relief, or exultation and the sense of death.

Time synthesized further. The mountain's past seeped into him and now he roamed not just across and through its mass but back into its life, its store of memories. Memories held not just in time but in place, linked to the mountainscape itself.

At the foot of a cleft that split a near-vertical cliff he encountered both youth and experience.

"On your long vac then?"

"Yes, sir. Came up to join the family at the lodge for a few weeks."

"Good man. Done a bit of climbing then?"

"A bit of scrambling in the Lakes. But some chaps are going to the Alps and they want me to go with them. Thought I'd get a bit of training. Try a few bigger routes."

"Damned good training too. Don't under-estimate these crags. Might not be as high as the Alps but tricky enough, especially in this weather."

"You've been in the Alps I believe, sir. I heard that you were on that first ascent of the Matterhorn, with Mr Whymper. Wasn't that marvellous, being the first ever to stand on such a top?"

"Nearly fifty years ago that was. 1865. Bad memories though. Four fellows killed and damn lucky to get down myself. Taken me a while but one thing I've learned – don't have to get to the top to appreciate a mountain. But probably too early to give you that advice. It's summits you're thinking about. Course it is. People used to avoid the high places because they seemed wild, dangerous. Nowadays that's what seems to attract us. So you look after yourself young lad. Wonderful things mountains – but don't turn your back on them, take my meaning? Where's your father though? He's usually keen to re-capture a bit of lost youth."

"He was called back to London last night. Something about Sarajevo, wherever that is. Can't imagine it's worth dragging him away."

On a rocky outcrop below the summit he heard excitement and distaste.

"My God, it's magnificent. I've never seen anything like it. Such grandeur. These chasms, they turn one giddy. And look, Brown, how that mist steams around the summit and mingles with the clouds themselves."

"Yes indeed, very fine I suppose for you poets and your romantic dispositions, but I observe no inn or any other human habitation. You see some sort of magnificence where I look on a landscape fit only for savages. Come man, we must think of our civilised comforts. We cannot feed on these scenes."

"You are a philistine, my friend. I could find sustenance here to sate every sense. Beauty is Truth indeed, and I have rarely seen a more truthful vista. See man, the veils of cloud now open and show the mountain as if through a celestial loop-hole. And now that loop-hole widens, revealing fresh prospects both far and near !"

"A mutton pie and some ale would also be a fine prospect."

Around and inside the rectangular remnants of a shieling he listened to the sound of mother and children.

"Alasdair! Angus! Awa an howk mair peat. Yir faither hasnae left near eneuch. Gae on nou, or we'll freeze the nicht. An tak tent o the beasts. Mind they dinnae stravaig ower faur."

"Hou couldna faither bide here?"

"Ach, Alasdair, ye ken fine aw the men maun gang doon tae the glen an see tae the hairst wi the kye here oot the wey. Whaniver that's done wi we'll aw gang doon an yir faither'll tak the kye tae mercat. Atween haunds ye maun be the man up here. Jist leuk at yir sisters – workin awa tae mak cheese an butter tae tak doon. So haud yir wheesht about yir faither."

"Aye, but did ye no see Iseabail rin awa, wi you doon at the burn? Haudin haunds wi that Donald. It's no jist butter an cheese that she's makin."

Near the foot of the mountain the memory held a tale from long past, a tale distilled from fear and superstition.

"Who made the mountains? A good question, child. A high mountain like this would be the work of the Cailleach. Some believe she would stride across the land with her creels of rocks and those she dropped made the hills and mountains. Others say she built the mountains, for stepping stones. She would use hammers to shape the hills and the valleys to her purpose. But we must beware her, for she brings the cold and snow that turns the world to stone."

"But it's summer now gran, so can I go up to the bit where you can pick the cloudberryes?"

"Up there on your own? Indeed you cannot – the Daoine Shith would just love to find a wee girl like you."

"Who, gran?"

"The elfin people, my love. The "men of peace" as we call them for their silent ways. They can move with no more sound than a gust of wind, like the swish of a sword drawn through air. You

know that strangeness when there comes a sudden whirl of wind on a calm day? That's the Daoine Shith travelling together."

"Are they wicked?"

"They are not wicked, but they envy mankind and will steal wee babies if they're not baptised in time. When you were born we hammered nails into the board of the bed. That keeps them off. So no more of your wandering off alone. Down here's safe for you."

Chapter after chapter spoke its story until the store of memories faded and faded further and there was just the mountain and one silent remembrance of its own far past. Of a great crushing weight upon it, a weight that hardly seemed to move but still scraped and scoured and grated and ground, and altered the mountain forever. At the end of this last tunnel of time there was nothing, just blankness. Nowhere further to explore. And so he returned.

On the surface of the mountain he felt then heard two figures climb slowly. They stopped, looked around them. Then decided.

"This high enough for the view then? But not too high, eh?"

"Yeah, better pay attention to that sheet we got. What does it say? 'Avoid mountain tops. They tend to be acidic areas and the phosphates and calcium will over-stimulate plant growth, upsetting the natural ecology.'"

"You mean he'd be pushin' up daisies?"

"Behave. A bit of dignity here. Come on, let's give him his send off. He'll be at home here if anywhere. Then get that dram out."

He felt the grey powder as it was scattered. Time passed. Ash melded into mountain, and he whispered: "Welcome. Take time. More will become clear. Listen."