

'From Whence Doth Come Mine Aid...?'

By David McVey

Mountains are my business.

Mountains: they point the way to the sky and loom protectively – some would say *menacingly* – over the homes of men and women. They never move, nor can they *be* moved. They are the embodiment of strength and security and permanence.

No number of humans can *move* a mountain, but they can exert their influence upon them, as they have influenced the whole of Creation. My job is, if you like, to monitor the situation. I move backwards and forwards through time, from mountain range to mountain range, observing mankind and its dealings with mountain landscapes. How familiar I am with loss and spoiling and cruelty.

You will most clearly understand me through hearing some of my experiences. I may as well begin with the occasion when I find myself, in human form, following a man-made ice cave with walls and ceiling polished with the passing of bodies and an uneven, dirty, slushy floor. At one point a large hole in the ice opens on to the world outside. A huddle of humans gathers there, in a haze of milky-white breath, wearing military uniforms puffed out by layers of warm clothing. They greet me in Italian and motion me to look out of the opening.

Even after an eternity of experience among the hills, this is a giddy prospect. Below us, a steep snow slope ends in broken chaos above a deep valley through which crashes a wild mountain river. Opposite, peaks of rock, ice and snow glow pink in early sunlight. A fresh day of pure light and space has recently been born among these hills. I look more closely at my immediate surroundings: on the slushy snow-sill of the opening sit some rifles.

One of the soldiers tells me, 'The Austrians usually lob some shells over at this time of day.'

We stand for a while in the silence of the hills. Then there is a loud report, like a sharp clap of thunder, which echoes and reverberates round the valleys for several seconds. On a high peak to our left a flower of flame and smoke and melted snow blossoms. Then silence, briefly, returns.

A slow, sickening rumble, felt rather than heard, seems to issue from deep in the heart of the hills. We watch in mute, powerless horror as the entire slope where the shell had landed seems to shiver and then begin to slide and move. Thousands of tons of rock shear from the slope and tumble down, several hundred feet into the snow of a high col. Some of the lumps of rock break off and fall further, tracing lines in the steep snow and ice right down to the river.

The other men are stunned. 'We had men on that col,' says one. Of course, it is only natural for humans to be moved by the misfortunes of their own kind, but they are not my concern. I remain with my gaze fixed on the upper slopes of the mountain that the shell has disfigured. The source of the rockfall looks raw, sore, bare, a gaping wound that will never repair or heal.

What happens next you will find puzzling, but it is important in showing you what my existence – my job – is like. The freezing trench, the hills, the rocks, the snow and the icy river all fade and vanish like a dream as you wake. And as I wake, I find that I am standing on another hillside, gentler, windblown, black with winter heather. I am one of a small group of men wearing rough tweeds or plaids, watching a herd of newly-released sheep plodding doubtfully across the slope.

'His Lordship had them taken by ship to Inverness last week,' says one of the men, 'Hardy beasts. All weather is the same to them, and they will eat anything.'

'I have heard it said that they poison the land,' says another man. 'Some of the glens that introduced them years ago are just one plaid of grass without heather or trees or flowers.'

'Och, havers,' says the first, 'Poison the land? No – they make it *pay*.'

In the middle distance is a huddle of rough cottages. Their hearths must be cold because no smoke rises through the heather thatch. The second man points to them and asks, 'Do the people still live there?'

'No,' replies the first, 'All gone with the rest of the people. The sheep only need a few shepherds and labourers and those we have brought in from the Borders. Reliable men, not afraid of hard work. These cottages,' he waves a hand vaguely at the small settlement, 'we will pull down. The stone can be re-used for fanks and dykes.'

The other man seems to think about these words, what they mean, what they conceal, then replies, 'These rooftrees have sheltered many a generation. Now they'll just rot or be thrown on the fire.'

'Oh, do not waste your pity on these people. They will have to learn to make themselves useful in the towns or in Glasgow – or in the colonies.'

I do not speak but it seems, in any case, that I am not expected to say anything. I just stare at the abandoned hovels and try to look beyond them. The life of the native people must have been miserable enough, but at least it had certainty, familiarity, continuity. But now the chain is broken.

It is not the people who chiefly concern me, however. It may sound harsh, but they are not my responsibility. Instead, I study the hills: I picture their fecund summer greenness and plenty and variety. With the all-devouring flocks of sheep the result will be an empty, stifled uniformity. A sadness seems to enclose the hills and I feel powerless and weak and despairing. My feelings rise up, overwhelm me and I no longer attend to my surroundings. When I concentrate again, when I look, smell, taste, hear, all has changed once more.

I am scarcely able to move. I am now wearing several layers of thick, constricting clothing with a kind of thick nylon boiler suit on top. Goggles protect my eyes and a thick balaclava covers the rest of my head. The straps of a large rucksack tug at my shoulders and suggest a burden of unimaginable weight. I am fighting my way up a steep ice slope, clutching a sliding device attached to a fixed rope, scrabbling my cramponed boots on a worn, much trod-upon surface.

I am just one of a line of similarly-burdened figures. Ice crystals, lumps of snow and Sherpa expletives sweep down on me from the figure ahead of me. After an hour of effort and sweat and pain, the gradient eases and we plod up a gently-angled slope of deep, soft snow which leads to a broad, bouldery col. Our destination comes into sight – a small area of dome-shaped tents and piles of equipment on a flat, stony, wind-scoured part of the col.

We flop to the ground, drop our burdens and seem to float a foot above the ground. For a while, everyone just lies where they land, but gradually they rise and begin to busy themselves. I go over to a stand on a little rocky eminence.

This could only be the Himalaya. This high col soars above dizzying drops on two sides to distant valleys where glaciers meet and collide and form crazy patterns of shifting ice. On the two remaining sides, jagged teeth of rock and ice rise steeply and are lost in wind-torn cloud. I spend my being among the mountains and often see them at their finest, yet the sheer drama of this place prompts me to worship something, someone.

And then I look more closely. Down in the floor of the valley from which my party has come there are little scatterings of things that don't belong among the dazzling whiteness of snow and ice:

more groups of tents, like coloured fly-droppings, and lines of tiny figures, parties ascending and descending the valley. I turn and see more figures incrementally creeping their way up the steep slopes above the col.

The col itself proves not to be the wild world of frozen rock and snow that it had seemed. Many relics of previous expeditions lie scattered around, trapped in the ice's grip; empty cans, plastic bags, food containers, tent poles, shreds of canvas and discarded oxygen cylinders. And I notice that I am standing among some hard-frozen human faeces.

A voice sounds close by – addressing itself to me, it seems. I turn and see a climber looking at me. His face is mostly obscured by goggles and a cagoule hood, but I can see that he is not happy.

'Get back here and unload your equipment,' he barks in English, pointing to the rucksack I have abandoned, 'Sherpa no work, Sherpa no get paid. Get it, sonny?'

I follow the man back to the scene of slow, methodical, oxygen-starved activity.

Often I am aware of my powerlessness, my onlooker status. It seems as if I am, after all, not here to observe and monitor what man has done to the hills, but, rather, to *weep* for it.

I am soon gone from the Himalaya. I find myself back in Scotland, on a high plateau among lowland hills. It is a bright, spring morning, hymned by skylarks and curlews and pipits. Above me, eerie and menacing, sweep the blades of gigantic wind turbines.