
THE SAVOUR OF SALT

A Henry Salt Anthology

"... I felt flattered by the remark of a hostile journalist that I was 'a compendium of the cranks', by which he apparently meant that I advocated not this or that humane reform, but all of them. That is just what I desire to do."
Henry Salt, *The Creed of Kinship*

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maxim of "the greatest good of the greatest number," only we must be sure that what we seek is, in reality, the greatest good.

When it was proposed to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs, the opposition to the scheme was doubtless denounced as selfish and narrow-minded; yet the "opening up" of the goose was found in the end to have been a disaster. In like manner would the destruction of the natural and primitive condition of many hills and valleys be disastrous, for the simple reason that the very quality which now gives them a peculiar charm would then have disappeared. There is no selfishness in pointing out this fact; but, on the contrary, there is fatal folly in ignoring it.

Our Vanishing Wildflowers

It is in man's dealings with the mountains, where, owing to the untameable wildness of the scenery, any injury is certain to be irreparable, that the marks of the modern Vandal are most clearly seen.

Seventy Years Among Savages

Slag-Heap or Sanctuary?

1908

Mountains have in all ages given asylum to free races. Has the time come when a free race must give asylum to its mountains? If we are to have any voice in the answer, the question is one which, in this country at least, cannot much longer be set aside; for though the encroachments of "civilization" on wild Nature have been more or less discussed since the famous "Tours" of Thomas Pennant created the modern tourist, and sent him roaming through the hills, the problem of how to preserve our mountain scenery — if we wish to preserve it — has become much more pressing with the great industrial development of the past hundred years, and it is no exaggeration to say that if it is not solved within the next hundred years there may be no mountain scenery to preserve.

It is not to be doubted that, as civilization advances, mountain districts, like all other wild districts, must be gradually

"opened out," and made to minister more fully to human wants; but, then, what *are* those wants, and how can they best be gratified? The man who owned the goose that laid the golden eggs wanted golden eggs, but his too hasty method of opening out the goose defeated the purpose he had in view. In like manner, if we want to make our mountains more serviceable to the people, we must think whether the methods which we are at present adopting will conduce to that end. Look at the working of these methods among the Cambrian and Cumbrian hills.

Snowdonia has long been a sufferer from foreign and native aggression. It is said that Edward I, to celebrate his conquest of Wales, held "a triumphal fair" on Snowdon, in open defiance of the national sentiment by which this peak was held as holy as was Parnassus by the Greeks. What is more surprising is that the Welsh themselves have in later times so fully acquiesced in the defilement of their sacred mountain, and that the present plight of Snowdon would seem to be a pride rather than a shame to them; for all earlier outrages sink into nothingness when compared with the work of the past twenty years. The copper-mines in Cwm Dylli, which have been worked, and neglected, and worked again, have greatly defaced the mountain, have poisoned the waters, and submerged the islands of Llyn Llydaw, once the haunt of the sea-gull; but it was not until the railway was built from Llanberis, and an hotel placed on the summit, that irreparable harm was done by deforming the natural shape of Y Wyddfa, the topmost peak, into a dull, blunted cone.

What is worse, the summit railway is to be followed by a network of electric railways round the base of the mountain, and the power for working these lines is to be procured by desecrating the very heart of Snowdon itself. Immense "works" have been erected at the foot of the waterfall (one of the finest in Wales) which descends from Llyn Llydaw into Nant Gwynant, and the lake is to be further enlarged in order that a greater force may be available. In a word, the most wild and beautiful mountain recess in Wales is being hopelessly ruined and vulgarized.

Then the railway will be constructed, and the larger valleys that lie round the skirts of Snowdon will be vulgarized also; indeed, the Pass of Aberglaslyn is already spoiled beyond redress. And for what object? Simply that private gain may be made out of public loss.

It is a curious fact, too, that this greed for exploiting the natural scenery of Wales goes hand in hand with a complete neglect of such legitimate and really useful means of utilizing the tourist season as the erection of signposts, and the maintenance of bridle-paths and mountain-tracks, which, without disfiguring the scenery, are of great service to walkers. There has been no attempt, apparently, for the past quarter of a century to keep these roads in repair, and even the path made in recent years by Sir Edward Watkin to the top of Snowdon, through Cwm Llan, is already blocked in several places by large boulders that have slipped on it.

Such is the latter state of this old Welsh mountain, of which it used to be said that "whoever slept upon Snowdon would wake inspired." The inspiration which to-day awaits those who wake upon Y Wyddfa is the sight of a rubbish-heap surmounted by a pot-house, with the usual appurtenances of civilization — post-office, railway-station, refreshment-rooms, cigar-ends, urinals, hordes of trippers, to whom the mountain means no more than the pier at Margate or the terrace at Windsor — almost everything that is civilized except a police-station, and who knows but even that may come? If there is still any "beauty born of murmuring sound" among the dwellers on Snowdon, it must be born of the slow-panting locomotive, or of the gurgling of whiskies in the hotel. And the view? In clear weather, we are told, it embraces the coast of Ireland. I have seen it embrace a line of "washing" hung out to dry on the edge of the Glaslyn precipice. This is what the Welsh "nonconformist conscience" has made of its holy hill.

In Cumberland, thanks to the efforts of a few faithful defenders and the powerful sentiment aroused by the Lake poets, there has been much less desecration, and the recent attempts of vandalism on these remaining strongholds of Nature have been mostly repulsed; indeed, it might be thought that the immediate danger in this quarter comes less from enemies than from overzealous friends, and that it is time a limit were put to the well-meant but mischievous practice of building memorial tablets in record either of personal associations or of fatal accidents. That the guide-books should tell us how Scott's "pilgrim of Nature" lost his life on Helvellyn, and how Matthew Arnold took a meditative walk there, is well enough; but to erect stones in memory of these events, and marble crosses on the various spots where rash

cragsmen have fallen, seems rather indiscreet; for it is not fitting that a wild mountain should be plastered, like a lecture-hall or a cemetery, with epitaphs and inscriptions.

But it must not be supposed that Lakeland has not suffered even as Wales has done, though in a less degree, from the ravages of commercialism. Conistone is a sad proof of the contrary, where that once beautiful mountain, the Old Man, has been so ruined by the copper-mines that, as has been said of the gold-fields of Colorado, "the hills have been flayed of all their grass and scalped of all their timber; they are scarred and gashed and ulcerated all over from past mining operations — so ferociously does little man scratch at the breasts of his great calm mother when he thinks that jewels are there hidden."¹ I was told by Ruskin, whose windows at Brantwood looked westward across Conistone Water to the Old Man, that he thought the very sky above the mountain-top was poisoned and clouded by the mines.

Take the case of Thirlmere, too, that once wild and winding tarn, so narrow at the middle that it was spanned by a rustic bridge, but now enlarged into a Manchester water-tank. It is true that in this case — unlike the majority — a useful purpose was attained; but are we to believe that the *general* interests of the country are promoted by such feats of engineering? Some thirty years back I happened to be in Cumberland when a score or so of the city fathers of Manchester were prospecting for their water-supply, and it struck me that, though, municipally regarded, they were doubtless worthy of all praise, their personal appearance in that narrow valley, where, both on account of their mission and their portly figures, they bulked somewhat largely in the dalesmen's eyes, was decidedly incongruous; they reminded me, in fact, in their solid proportions, of what geologists call "erratic blocks," yet they did not fit quite so harmoniously into the upland scene. Such were the worthies who, as it was expressed, "improved" Thirlmere into what we now see it — a formless sheet of water, with a large dam at its lower end, some ornamental water-works on its banks, and a few submerged homesteads below its waves. No wonder that the coachmen who ply between Keswick and Grasmere are never weary of pointing out to the passengers these triumphs of human skill.

The desecration of our mountains is but part of the widespread

¹James Thomson; letter from Central City, Colorado.

contempt for Nature and natural scenery which may be seen from end to end of the land; but it is among mountains, where Nature is at her wildest, that it strikes us the most. From what filthy-mindedness, we wonder, comes the strange conviction that a clear, swift stream is the right and proper receptacle for the rubbish of human homes? I know a Welsh village — the type, alas! of many villages in Wales and elsewhere — in which from the houses built on the steep bank of a pure mountain torrent there dribbles down into the river a tributary river of filth — dust, broken bottles, paper, old boots, decaying vegetables, and all kinds of refuse; and when the useful rats, attracted by the odour, try to act as scavengers, the authors of the nuisance post themselves behind the parapet of a neighbouring bridge to shoot the "vermin" with a gun!

Nor is it only on the natives of these districts that such reproach must fall; for, unhappily, the state of some of the well-known peaks and gullies, both in Wales and Cumberland, proves that many visitors also forget their duties to the hills. I have seen the famous Needle Gully, on the south flank of the Gable, literally lined with sandwich-papers and other mementoes of climbing parties, whose members would be ashamed to treat St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey with the like disrespect; and if the skilled cragsman can be guilty of such sacrilege, can we hope that the ordinary tripper will be more reverent in his ways?

Such acts are at least indications of a barbaric mood in the public mind, which, when expressed in the form of commercial enterprise, is capable of wreaking more damage on the mountains than a waterspout or an earthquake; and the question presents itself, Will this mood pass or be abated before a fatal mischief is done? For bad as things are now, there may be worse to follow. "Thank God," said Thoreau, "they cannot cut down the clouds." But can they not? With flying machines once perfected, will not the cloud, that "mountain o'er a mountain," share the fate of the hills? No mountain, assuredly, will escape. "As to the loftiest peaks of the Andes and Himalayas," says Reclus, "too high in the regions of cold for man to go to their summits, the day will come when he shall be able to reach them. Balloons have already carried him two or three thousand yards high; other aeronauts will bear and deposit him on Gaourisankar, as far as the 'great diadem of the dazzling heaven.'"

The danger lies not so much in the accessibility of cloud or mountain as in the reckless and irreverent spirit of the man who attains them. To soar to "the great diadem" is no harm; but if we turn the great diadem into a great muck-heap, shall we be the gainers by our flight?

Nor is it only the mountains that are being ruined by man's brutishness; the extinction of the wild life of the mountains is also threatened. It has to be remembered that these remote ranges are almost the only haunt where certain rare animals can still, to some extent, hold their own. Scarcely more than a hundred years ago the eagle was breeding in Borrowdale, as it still breeds in parts of the Scottish Highlands; and whether the present century shall witness the extermination of the buzzard, the kite, the peregrine, the raven, and other rare species, must depend partly on the protection afforded them by law against the sporting naturalist or "collector," mainly on the preservation of the mountains themselves from the capitalists' greed. Destructive birds, such as the eagle, must doubtless be doomed, but the wholesale disappearance of the greater birds, such as the buzzard, and of the more interesting mammals, such as the wild goat, would be a grievous loss to the nation. We have, therefore, to choose between such loss and the putting of some curb on the enterprise of the commercialist and the mania of the collector, for the mountain and its wild animals are one. Shall we ever have the wisdom to make each such district into an asylum for bird and mountain alike? At present the lover of wild Nature, himself somewhat of a *rara avis*, must be thankful for what is spared in his time; but it is his duty to think of the future also, and to avert, if he may do so, the ruin which he clearly foresees.

We come back, therefore, to the question whether we wish to hand on these mountains to our descendants as mountains or as something else. For if we allow our company-promoters to carve and tunnel the crags, to enlarge and discolour the lakes, to poison the streams, and to drive away the wild life from the hills, are we not once more killing the goose that laid the golden eggs? These hills of ours are small as compared with the great mountains of Europe, but they are as beautiful, and they are unique, and once ruined they cannot by any ingenuity be restored. It is true that Switzerland is employed in the same manner in spoiling the Jungfrau and Mont Blanc, but it must be

remembered that Switzerland has a practically unlimited reserve of Alps, while we have but few mountains to spoil.¹ At present they are still something more than a playground for gymnasts, or a picnic-ground for tourists; they are mountains, a piece of unsophisticated wild Nature in our midst, and as such, their value, to those who know it, is beyond words. Let them still be a playground and a picnic-ground by all means, but under such conditions as will preserve their native features and their higher character. One would think that a nation which can spend hundreds of millions on a foreign war might afford to become the owner of its own mountains at home!

The pretence that there is something selfish and anti-democratic in the desire to save our mountain scenery from destruction is absurd; on the contrary, it is entirely owing to its devotion to the fetish of "property" that the public has so long allowed these places to be exploited for private gain, and has stood by in utter apathy and indifference while a handful of speculators and traders have benefited at the expense of the community. Nor do we give to our mountains even that protection which other antiquities enjoy. What would be said if a Bill were submitted and passed in Parliament to authorize some private company to pull Westminster Abbey or Stonehenge to pieces and make a profit out of the ruins? It is no exaggeration to say that the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments, familiarly known as "Anti-Scrape," would have the whole nation at its back in its resistance to such vandalism; yet a mountain such as Snowdon is a far more ancient monument than Stonehenge or the Abbey, and the vandalism which is now being successfully accomplished is of a still more insensate kind.

It is a hollow fallacy, too, to suppose that it is "democratic" to fill up and destroy the rare silences and solitary spaces that a land may still possess, on the plea that they cannot be enjoyed by all. They *can* be enjoyed by all who are fitted to enjoy them, and the benefits that result from such enjoyment are in the long-run shared by all the nation alike. To make a railway to the top of a mountain such as Snowdon, and then to argue that it is a blessing to the weakly folk who could not otherwise get there,

¹There is an English branch of the League for the Preservation of Swiss Scenery, which has the powerful support of *The Times* and other leading papers. Does not charity in this, as in other matters, begin at home?

is to overlook the fact that it is not to the cripples, but to the community, that the mountain belongs. "Whatsoever," says the communist Reclus, "may be the future of man, or the aspect of the world which he may create for himself, solitude, in that portion of Nature which is left free, will become more and more necessary to those men who wish to obtain renewed vigour of thought far from the conflict of opinions and voices. If the beautiful spots of the world should one day become a mere rendezvous for the worn and weary, they who love to live in the open air will have nothing left them but to take refuge in a bark on the midst of the waves. . . . Happily the mountain will always contain the sweetest places of retreat for him who flies from the beaten paths of fashion."

Wherein, then, lies the remedy for the dangers which I have described? Within the last few years there has been much rejoicing over the rescue of two or three estates in the Lake District, such as Catbells and Gowbarrow, from the clutch of the speculator, and all honour is certainly due to those by whom these victories were won; but it is evident that large sums of money cannot for ever be raised by private subscription to buy off the day of doom, and that while one favoured tract is being thus protected, another less fortunate one is being lost. We cannot save our mountains by these piecemeal purchases from the harpies who threaten them; such methods are too troublesome, too costly, too purely local to be successful in the main. There is only one thorough solution of the problem, and that is to *rationalize* such districts as Snowdonia, Lakeland, the Peak of Derbyshire, and other public holiday-haunts, and so to preserve them for the use and enjoyment of the people for all time. If parks, open spaces, railways, tramways, water, and other public needs can be municipalized, why not mountains? It is impossible to overestimate the value of mountains as a recreation-ground for soul and body, yet, while we are awaking to the need of maintaining public rights in other directions, we are allowing our mountains — in North Wales and elsewhere — to be sacrificed to commercial selfishness. If Snowdon, for instance, had been purchased by the public twenty years ago, the investment would have been a great deal more profitable than those in which we usually engage; but while we are willing to spend vast sums on grabbing other people's territory, we have not, of course, a penny to spare for the preservation of our own.

What we need, in short, is the appointment of mountain sanctuaries — highland parks, where the hills themselves, with the wild animals and plants whose life is of the hills, shall be preserved in their wildness as the cherished property of the people — consecrated places, where every one shall be entitled to walk, to climb, to rest, to meditate, to study Nature, to disport himself as he will, but *not* to injure or destroy. When we truly care for these hills of ours, we shall remove them from the tender mercies of the mine-owners and railway lords, who now seek profit in their disfigurement, and shall place them under a council of mountaineers and naturalists and nature lovers who understand and reverence them, with the instruction that they shall so administer their charge as to add to the present happiness and the permanent wealth of the nation. How long will it take us, hag-ridden as we are by the nightmare of private ownership, to awake to the necessity of such a change?

Pending that blessed time, I would point out to those public-spirited rich men (and we know there are such) who are ever looking for some useful outlet for their wealth, that here, in the shadow of this storm-cloud that overhangs our mountain scenery, they have a golden chance of ennobling themselves; for it is simple truth that the millionaire who should buy a Snowdon or a Scawfell, and make free gift of it to the people, would be a benefactor for all time, and would far outstrip in lasting philanthropy any donor of churches or charities, hospitals or libraries, scholarships or seats of learning. For mountains are the holiest ground that the heart of man has consecrated, and their educating influence is even more potent than that of books; they are the true authors, the standard works, printed in the most enduring type, that cheer and brace, as no written words can do, the minds of those who study them.

In what state, then, shall we hand on to those who follow us these sacred temples of Nature, which, as even so old-fashioned a writer as Wordsworth asserted, are "a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy"? The day cannot be far distant when our choice must be made, and it is between a sanctuary and a slag-heap that we must choose.

On Cambrian and Cumbrian Hills

III SALT AS MAN OF LETTERS