

OUR BLACK MOUNTAIN

For the entire people of West Belfast, 'the mountain' has a special place in our hearts. No matter how far or near I travel, I know that once I see the mountain then I am home.

There are not many people in the West of the city who, at some time in their lives, haven't struggled up the length of the Mountain Loney on a scorching day and looked forward to that long, cool drink of ice cold, crystal clear water out of cupped hands at the top. The further climb to the 'hatchet field' was always easier after that.

I bet it would also be true to say that you'll not meet a man or woman who has not, or does not regularly promise to do that same walk again. It is equally true that they very rarely do. That is a pity, because they would see the destruction which now blights the landscape.

In recent years I have become increasingly dismayed and disgusted at the way this beautiful place is being destroyed. My own favourite route up the mountain is through the school at the back of Dermott Hill, and on up, along the foot of the mountain, just below the three caves. Well, actually, there's only one you could call a cave, but you know where I mean?

The clearing at the cave is in a dreadful state, littered with beer cans and blue carry-out bags. As you push on towards the Hatchet Field, you come to the ruins of what had been the wee house. The wee man brought everything up by the path alongside which runs to the top of the Loney. Almost a quarter way down the path, another cuts right off up and over the cliffs. Slightly to the right of the cliffs, above the furthest crevice, you can still see the work of ploughed furrows. The path alongside the wee house continues on across the top of the gulley, where he obviously got his water.

From the 'hatchie' you can see what we, as kids, had always called the 'bottle field' because it was shaped like a milk bottle. The bottle field is to the right of where the rock dam had been. Water ran from the dam down into the ruins of the old mill wheel, which is virtually the only reminder of what had been. Actually, I had never heard it referred to as the 'rock dam' until I came up here to live. To us kids from the Beechmount area, it was always referred to as 'the green' due to the fact that it ran down into the bleaching green. There was a bleaching green to the left, just below where the old mill wheel was situated. I'm almost sure I can remember seeing long white sheets stretched out on a meadow in the vicinity. I definitely remember a flax hole there in one of the fields. All of this was before New Barnsley was built. Highfield was on the way up and Ballymurphy wasn't finished.

The trip up to the green, for us kids, was something special. It usually started with the decision for the trip being taken by the 'big lads', usually older brothers and their mates. "No kids" was the order passed down the line from this undisputed social hierarchy. However, us kids didn't watch *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Pathfinder* or *Hawkeye* in the Broadway matinees for nothing!

The journey for us began, well behind and out of sight of the 'elders' - up through the 'plots' beside McGladdery's brickyard. When I think back on those plots which we took for granted (and often raided for carrots and rhubarb), I realise what a marvel they were for the commitment and determination of those who worked them. The trip to the green wasn't looked on as being arduous, as were trips to McCances, Colinglen or Tor na Roy. That is, no pots, pans, spuds, bacon, beans, fireman's hatchets or knives in sheaths.

Up through McGladdery's, the quarries, then up through the 'four chimneys', which was roughly on the site of Corry's timber yard and the SPD factory. (No one ever referred to it as anything else but the four chimneys). Getting from Beechmount to there was always the hardest, only because there were that many diversions en route, things to do, games to play. So, more times than enough, that was as far as we got. As I explain (boringly, they say) to my own kids, and all those over forty know this only too well, being a child in them'days was a full-time job. There was that much to do. You had the marley season, whips and pirries, chestnuts, bows and arrows, spears, hatchets (from flattening pea tins), wild horses etc. etc.

All the pictures we saw had to be acted out. It was real heavy going, after 'Ivanhoe', 'The Vikings' and 'She Wore a Yellow Ribbon', not to mention the pirate films with Errol Flynn and 'Robin Hood'.

As we came out of the four chimneys, across the road was a row of white houses at the foot of where Springfield Park is now. Up on the wall in the hall of one of these houses was a photograph of the British Queen Mother. We were always quiet and slightly intimidated by it. What is now Springfield Park was a tarmac road that led up to 'the Farm', which I think had something to do with the bleaching green. This was avoided, as there was always an excitable Alsatian on duty.

It was on this final journey, across the fields up to the green, that terms and conditions of play were laid down, usually by the leader of the gang. He always had the final say. "Right, everyone in for a swim, for a start, then we'll do the Tarzan one, where him, Jane and Boy fight the oul' witch doctor and all the Germans". This was always a favourite. This was where the problems always started; the casting. There was never any problem about Tarzan, as all agreed the leader was the best swimmer, and was the only one who could do a jack-knife dive and was definitely the best doing "Ah Ah Ahhhhhh", not to mention shouting "Um ga wha". No, the problems involved the casting of Jane. No one would ever do it. It would never be lived down. Boy, Cheetah and the oul' witch doctor were no problem either, and the rest were all Germans. The Germans all had riddly guns, complete with sound effects. The guns were bits of trees. Tarzan's crowd got their spears from the mountain ash.

Although the rules were laid down that Tarzan was the only one who could "Ah ahhhhh", within ten minutes of starting, everyone was at it - even the Germans! Once you surfaced the bank, up to the actual dam, and surveyed the scene, it was fabulous. Miles better than the 'Cooler' - kids, teenagers and adults spread all around - dozens in swimming, some 'cratur' trying to fish. To us kids it was like wonderland. "Right, everybody get stripped". "Where'll we get stripped?" "Where's

the log?" - a reference to an old tree trunk that floated in the green for years and was our crocodile for the Tarzan pictures. Come to think of it, it was just about as lively as the one he fought in all those pictures. No matter, we fought it, dived on it, just the way he did in the pictures.

We usually stayed round about where the green was intersected by a thin bank, at which place there was a small weir which flowed over and ran down to where the mill wheel had been. Here was our jungle, a maze of bracken and bushes. Up and down, in and out, everyone up, having a go at the 'oul' croc. The mountain shook with "ah ahhhhs" and the sound of riddly guns.

There was always a complaint from the one who had to mind his wee brother, who usually stood up to his knees in the shallowest part, hands under his arms, shivering, while the big brother threatened and bullied him throughout.

Meanwhile, up around the bank lounged the 'big lads', girls on arm, kissing and slabbering all over each other like your man Burk Lankyshire and yer woman in 'From Here to Eternity'. When eventually boredom started to set in, we usually finished up with the most daring thing of all: a swim in the nude! Of course not everyone went along with this, just the leaders. This involved covering yourself in muck (naked), running up and down the bank, smacking one hand on your mouth, the other on your arse, and shouting "Wally Wally Woomba" and finishing off with a daring dive into the water, beside the nearest bunch of 'oul' dolls!

The day over, the way down was either one of great craic, "I done this, or did you see me doing that?", or else one of recrimination like, "Who definitely wasn't going again?". Us older ones castigated the young ones who complained of hunger, while we showed them how to 'live on' blackberries, sour leeks and 'bread and butter' (hawthorn leaves). As we used to say, "You could live on the stuff for a month", and someone always added "Aye, as long as you had water", to be finished off with the last say from the leader - "I reckon if you'd enough water, you could last for a year" - end of discussion! The way home felt twice as long with your arse down around your ankles. The 'kid', or youngest had to be carried by big brother who swore "Never again!" the whole way home. We arrived home at six or seven o'clock, starving.

Similar journeys were carried out in winter in the spirit of Scott of the Antarctic. After the struggle back in these circumstances the question always was, "How far did ye's go?". The answer, always elaborated and exaggerated was "How far did we go? We were nearly up to the wee house in the hatchet field". In my own case, those trips also finished with two weeks lying with bronchitis, the gub slapped off me, and my mother's eloquent account to my father later in the evening, of my "coming home in muck and clabber from arsehole to elbow!"

The way to cap a day on the mountain is to go over the top of the gulley when the sun dips below the mountain. The sun hung over Lough Neagh and it burnt, burnished gold, with its shimmering reflection glistening off the water, through the low lying mist which surrounds the edge of the lough.

All the hills around slope easily down, past the BBC tower into Tor na Ròy, McCance's Glen, with Colinhill completing the third side of this beautiful, natural basin. It's hard to believe that a place of such natural beauty exists so close to the city. The only blemish on this lovely setting is the huge, ugly blot of the White Mountain quarries to the left, which have now spread almost completely over the T.V. tower.

On the way back, climb through the gulley. The leaves of the hazel, bursting out all over, with the other smells blending, is an experience to be savoured. Unfortunately, here again, empty beer cans and carrier bags litter most of the way down, destroying the natural beauty of the place.

It's long past time that attention was drawn to the destruction of the mountain. The ugly dump at the top of the Mountain Loney, highlighted in last week's Andersonstown News, is an indictment of our community, while the erosion of the mountain by quarrying is scandalous. Hopefully, what I have written may start the process of prevention and reclamation.