



# SPEAK TO THE HILLS

*EDITED BY HAMISH BROWN  
AND MARTYN BERRY*

*AN ANTHOLOGY OF TWENTIETH  
CENTURY BRITISH AND IRISH  
MOUNTAIN POETRY*

# SPEAK TO THE HILLS

An anthology of  
twentieth century British and  
Irish mountain poetry

Edited by  
HAMISH BROWN  
and  
MARTYN BERRY

Foreword by  
NORMAN NICHOLSON

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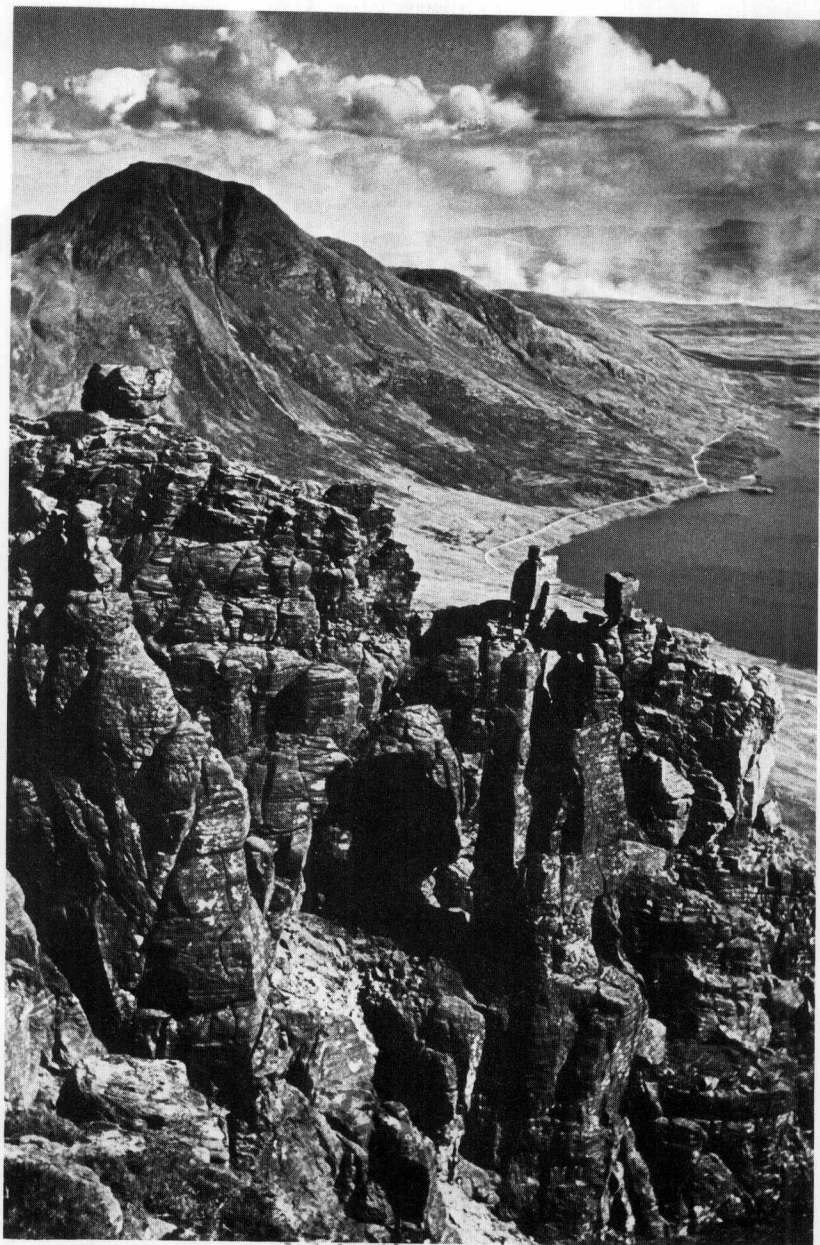
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**SPEAK  
TO THE  
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W A POUCHER

## FOREWORD

Today, for many people, the hills are an escape, a place to 'get away from it all'. The reason for this is obvious yet, for me, it is at most a half-truth. I live within three miles of Black Combe — not the highest but the most conspicuous of all the Lake District hills, the most clearly visible and recognisable from as far away as Scotland or Wales. Yet I have not climbed Black Combe since 1930 when I was sixteen years old. From then onwards a slope with a vertical rise of a hundred feet has been as much as I can manage and two miles on the level is the fullest extent of a walk. From the point of view of most of the contributors to this anthology I just don't know what I'm talking about.

Yet, with the aid of buses or a car and much patience and some gumption, I have been able to visit many of the loneliest places in Britain, from Unst to Dartmoor, from the South Downs to Harris. I have sat for hours on the slopes of Black Combe, among bilberries and butterwort and Grass of Parnassus, in uninterrupted solitude, on days when the main roads of the Lake District were as busy as Oxford Circus. Until quite recently I could claim I was among the hills, two or three days a week, in almost any month of the year.

For all this, I have never felt that the hills were an 'escape'. They were the normal background to my everyday life, always on the close horizon. Even less familiar hills (Suilven, Ben Loyal, Cader Idris or the Malverns) were, as it were, a widening of that horizon but still, in essentials, the same kind of horizon. Though I was born and have lived all my life in Cumberland it was not in rural Cumberland. As a boy I did not think of myself as living in the country. Millom, in those days, had its iron-ore mines and its blast furnaces and, though its population was only ten thousand, it still seemed to me to be in all respects a town. The country was where the farmers lived; Millom and London were towns.

Strange as it may seem, many townspeople, perhaps even the majority, in Great Britain, live not far from and often in sight of the hills. London and the West Midlands are the exceptions and the attitudes of Londoners have been accepted as the norm for the English. The people of Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle can all look out to the hills from their taller buildings. Practically the whole of industrial Yorkshire and Lancashire is

huddled round the foothills or tucked into the clefts of the Pennines. The Iron-and-Steel Age of the Twentieth Century had its beginnings, two hundred years ago, beside the becks of Southern Lakeland; the factory system evolved in the moorland valleys of East Lancashire.

The hills in fact remind us of what we come from. They are not, of course, nature entirely untouched by man. The Cumbrian fells are very different today from what they were before man arrived there. Tree-felling, the clearance of scrub, sheep farming, the silting up of tarns, the draining of mosses, the building of walls and, more recently, the planting of coniferous forests, all these have made great changes in the landscape. But only on the surface. The underlying shapes are still the same, there is still the feeling that this is rock-bottom nature, this what we have got to live on and with. This is the basic stuff of our world and, here, the elemental forces of sun, wind, rain, frost and ice are still at work. The slow process of geological change, the grinding down and building up of the landscape, is still going relentlessly on as it did millions of years before we came, and will continue after we have gone.

In the city and the suburb, in the farming factories of Lowland England, we can easily imagine that we now have nature well under control, that we can manipulate it in whatever way we may wish. It could be our fatal mistake. Muck about with the earth and we get denudation, sterility, famine; muck about with the atom, and we may be done for. If the hills are an escape at all, they are surely an escape back to reality.

*Norman Nicholson*

## INTRODUCTION

Most anthologies of poetry range widely in time, space and mood. This collection is confined to the interactions of men and women with our own home mountains and wild countryside. It is limited to twentieth century writing without being restricted by any date-line. In keeping to the present century we think there is a gain. Wordsworth and the Romantics have been anthologised enough, and our harsher world has moved so far and fast that a sparser verse is now more satisfying. There are plenty of poems included which are written in standard forms with 'good old-fashioned' rhyme and rhythm — but without the *thees* and *thous* that so marked the century gone.

The limitation of subject matter enables, paradoxically, a wide diversity of treatment. The approaches and styles are as varied as the hillgoers themselves. Some are frankly descriptive, others introspective to the point of near-obscurity, others take a new look at the eternal WHY, others simply look again at this natural world with clearer, fresher vision, some take sweeping views, others look at the detail, some preach, some weep, some are even prepared to laugh (we make no apology for the more frivolous penultimate section); many of the poems are Easy, some are Difficult, a few are Severe and there are the odd Extremes; but all can be enjoyed with little aid, art being greater than artificiality, as in climbing itself.

The collection is a mixture of work by 'professional' poets, who have happened to touch on mountains as a theme, and those who are essentially walkers and climbers who have simply, in irrational moments, broken into verse about their irrational pastime. We all head for the hills for enjoyment, for enrichment, whether they be there as Harrison's Rocks or Ben Nevis or spread as English Downs, Welsh Valleys, or the Macgillycuddy Reeks. We hope this collection mirrors the range of our moods and feelings on the heights as we have lived through a century of ups and downs. Within the century the emphasis is on contemporary work; thus while there are single poems by Kipling, W H Davies and John Masefield, there are more poems by Edward Thomas, Michael Roberts or Robert Graves — and a full measure from Patric Dickinson, Norman MacCaig, Ted Hughes and other writers of today. But this is, as indicated above, far more than a collection by well-known names; and one of the great joys for the editors has been the 'discovery' of many

talented poets whose work deserves an audience wider than the specialist magazines and presses.

The poems have been laid out in alternating thematic and geographical groupings though there are overlapping ideas. An occasional minor theme pops up now and then and sometimes there are surprising conjunctions of style and personality. Some poets write almost entirely of one area (Norman Nicholson or R S Thomas spring to mind) while others (Andrew Young is the supreme example) range from end to end of the countries. Climbers may be surprised to see such a succession of names as Winthrop Young, Menlove Edwards, Wilf Noyce and Ed Drummond; they have written more than new routes on time's pages. Whatever our interests in hills, or poetry, this collection should provide a guide to summits new and old.

This is a big collection but we feel the subject merits it. There were many hundreds of poems we reluctantly left out; very little of the material from *Poems of the Scottish Hills*, for instance, has been repeated. (We feel that that book is a companion volume to this one — though it draws on all periods and includes dialect poems). Simply for reasons of space and to keep an overall evenness *all* dialects and languages other than English have been avoided in this collection. Balance, contrast, geographical needs, as well as quality, influenced which poems were used. In a few cases ridiculous copyright fees meant leaving out a work — which is tough on the poet.

Some hundreds of people have been involved; well over a thousand letters have been written in working towards the final poems we have selected. We would like to thank all our contacts, the helpful editors of magazines, the patient publishers, willing librarians, the gifted team of photographers, the two artists, the two cartoonists (for new pieces) and, of course, the contributing poets: to all these enthusiasts we sincerely dedicate this book.

A special thanks we reserve for Norman Nicholson for his Foreword.

We have tried to trace all sources of poems used, but it is possible that an occasional poem may inadvertently have appeared without the permission of a copyright holder. We apologise for any such and hope their appearance will be welcome. The Acknowledgements/Index of Authors has been laid out to act almost as a bibliography — and thus a spur to further reading. Mountains are after all only one (rather esoteric) aspect of our twentieth-century world. Most of the works quoted will be found in the following specialised libraries: The

Arts Council Poetry Library, 105 Piccadilly, London, W1V 0AU, the Northern Arts Poetry Library, Central Library, The Willows, Morpeth, Northumberland, NE61 1TA, and the Scottish Poetry Library, Tweeddale Court, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE. (All publish useful catalogues.) We also made grateful use of the libraries of Trinity College, Dublin.

An author's spelling of names has normally been left unaltered. Descriptions of the subjects of the illustrations are given in the Acknowledgements/Index at the back of the book. This alphabetical list of contributors should assist in finding any person's poems and give enough bibliographical information to encourage 'further reading'.

January 1985

*Hamish Brown*

*Martyn Berry*

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