

# The Ruins And Vanished Folk Of Foudland

All the hills of Foudland have ... "a gently rounded, wind-blown summit."

By J. S. WOOD

MY leave was well timed for a ski adventure. I came home to find the entire landscape deep in snow, waiting for winged feet.

So I lost no time in "waxing up" and getting ready to realise a dream which had carried me through the grey wet November days.

In bright forenoon sunshine I set out across the fields to Foudland, a hill of curved white loveliness—a hill with no dominating peak but a gently rounded, wind-blown summit.

A Scottish Gazetteer published in 1845 pays but scant tribute to this hill, saying it rises only 300 feet above sea level. Its actual height is 1529 feet.

My path lay over the meadows, along the hare's way, over burn and dyke, by croft and farm, skirting dark little firwoods, skimming down steep ploughed fields and along bare beech hedges.

## Baps and a Tumbler of Milk

Near a picturesque little farm I stopped a baker's van and purchased a few baps. The farmer's wife came out with a tumblerful of milk. At least she called it milk. But if yon was milk I'd like to taste her cream. It was grand.

So on and away again through the clachan of Boddam where the children ran out to see the "mannie wi' the lang skates." Then over a road where men were "casting" the snow, cutting it out in blocks of the purest marble.

Though I did not cross the Jordan I passed not far from Jericho with its old distillery, to which the "caerts have lang syne stoppit ca'in the barley."

The last habitation past, I took to the hill and was soon threading my way between clumps of breem and heather knowes. The snow streamed in little frozen banners from any heather that was left uncovered.

I startled a brown hare and a covey of muircock as I climbed.

Every now and then I would pass an old slate quarry with its cairn of rubble. Some contained miniature frozen lakes. Some were deep and grotto-like with fantastic ice formations on their rugged sides. Geologists say that a vein of slate, beginning at Foudland, runs right across Scotland to the south-west, coming out somewhere about Ardnamurchan Point.

## On Summit in Virgin Snow

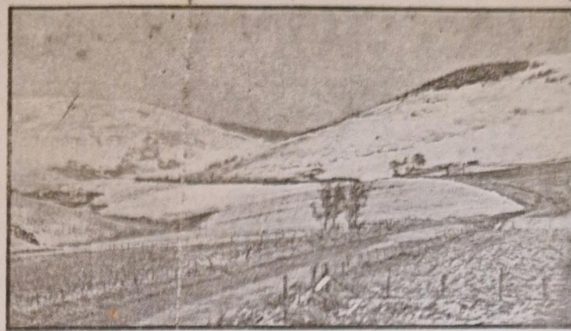
By 2.30 I judged myself to be on the summit and I stopped to enjoy the beauty of the quiet white world around me. To me nothing is lovelier than virgin snow in winter sunshine, many-faceted snow, kaleidoscopic in its everchanging beauty.

Bennachie, whose peaks I had skivisited the year before, slept peacefully beneath her white winter blanket. Ben Rinnes in the far western distance was a shining pyramid of light. To the north the rounded Knock threw back the sunshine like a great mirror.

Somewhere to the north-west I saw a field of orange light, a phenomenon I witnessed last year from the Mither Tap.

Directly beneath me at the back of the hill lay Scotland's stormiest glen, a wild and storied place and a centre of the Disruption in the North-east. In the Muckle Storm of 1838, the old stage coach was storm-stayed in the glen for six weeks, every effort to clear the road being fruitless as snow fell continuously.

At Bainshole, not far away, it is



said that more than one foul deed was committed in bygone days. Who knows but some Roman reconnaissance patrol surveyed the country from the place on which I stood! There was a Roman camp near Glenmellan.

Below me to the south lay the crofts and farms of Cairpieston and Largie and Lenchie. Here and there, nearer the hill, stood the snow-dusted ruins of cottages long since forsaken, where bairns had played and wives had baked and men had laughed and sung.

These whitened tumbled ruins set me thinking of the vanished community, the folk who worked in the slate quarries and fought for a living against the ever-encroaching heather and breem.

What did they do, I wondered, on the long winter nights on that windswept hillside? What were their pastimes? What were their names? Where had they gone and what memorial had they left?

I determined to learn something about these unrecorded people.

In the late afternoon light I navigated my way through the network of quarries on the western ridge and slipped away into the deep white hollow below. There, in ski-parlance, I "wrote my signature" on the hillside in winding telemarks, unpunctuated by a single full-stop!

## Something of the Old Folk

Crossing over to the Red Hill, I "slalomed" down between the breem-bushes, coming out at Brankstone Croft. And there I learned something of the hill-folk from one who had lived on the hill since 1859.

As she said, I "hadna fessen enouch o' the day wi' me" to hear a long story. But I sat and listened till the shadows lengthened, and in that croft kitchen, in the lowe o' the fire, the vanished folk came back again. And as the voice went on I shared with them their joys and sorrows, played their games, endured their hardships.

A simple life it was and a hard. But happy too. The speaker had played as a quinie in the quarries and minded fine on the men working there. At that time there were, she said, "dizzens o' crafts about the hill." A "man fae Balgaveney" and her father had trenched the croft out of the heather and built the house.

In the "boatie days," she said, the hill was a great picnicking place for the bairnies and a favourite spot in biaeberry time. The women folk made extra money by knitting for the woollen mills in Huntly. For themselves they did their own spinning.

My informant told me of an old woman who was quite illiterate but had a flair for history, and "mony a nicht," said she, "I had to gang ower by an' read Mary Queen o' Scots till 'er till I was seekk o' the sicht o' the name."

Something of a pastime was the nightly Bible reading. "Ivery nicht my father read a chapter as we a' sat roon the fireside." Then each was asked how much he remembered.

On one memorable occasion a brother said, "I mind what you read about backbiters." "Oh," said the father, "an div ye ken what backbiters is?" "Fine that," says the son, "gof' chas!" A picturesque exegesis.

That brother was afterwards in the siege of Mafeking and in his last letter

home said he would never forget how, before leaving for Africa, he had climbed the Hill o' Foudland and thought that "a' the warid was lyin' at his feet."

There was the reading of "the weekly paper, too, by rushwick or fire-candle. And on special days, special diversions like rubbing sowens at Auld Eel on the doors o' "fowk ye didna like" or "pu'in' casticks at Halloween."

I could have listened long enough but the day was wearing on and night ski-ing without a light is not much fun. So I set off at last reluctantly for home, arriving when it was quite dark.

## Conditions in the Quarries

It was shortly afterwards that I visited, again at the darkening, the man whose father had worked in the quarries. From him I learned something of the conditions under which the menfolk worked.

The Laird of Logie was the contractor and the men were paid by him. There were those who were actually in the quarries. And there were the "ri-vers" who considered themselves craftsmen, not mere "barra' men." They split and roughly dressed the big blue slabs.

They had little dugouts where they took shelter and ate their meals, bread and cheese and "tatties rossen aneth the peat ess."

The biggest quarry was the Gutter Quarry on the Bainshole side, where a number of men worked. A man named Bissett lived in the cottage highest on the hill near this quarry.

The whole world knows, of course, that Foudland "slates" were carted to Balmoral for the roofing of the Castle. But they roofed and floored many a house and kirk in the district, too. I have Foudland "flags" on my own kitchen floor.

An old resident who visited the quarries some sixty-five years ago said he saw only two men working there. And "ve daurdna say" to them that the industry was dying out. They were very sensitive on that point.

## Cottages Are Now Deserted

I believe a survey of the hill was made during the last war with a view to reopening the quarries. But the haphazard system employed by the old quarriers had rendered the project impracticable on the ground of expense.

The folk who worked on the hill in those days had names like Mackie and Bissett and Coutts and Davidson and Meldrum. A few of their descendants are still in the district. But many are in the far places of the earth.

To-day the breem is creeping down the hillside, overlooking the deserted cottages and taking back the little fields these hard-working folk fought to make fruitful.

Some there be that have no memorial, but not so the vanished hill folk of Foudland. Their quarries are silent and filled with snow. Their homes are in ruins.

But the slates they hewed from the hill-face went to the building of better homes for other men, for common folks, aye, and for kings.