

Eildon Hill — The Tara of Scotland?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

DURING this year's Edinburgh Festival when Coinneach MacÌomhair brought his radio programme to Edinburgh I was asked to come in to the studio to talk about *an gleann sa bheil mi beò*, which in my case happens to be the valley of the Tweed, 23 miles south of the city. I was delighted, of course, because I have never regretted coming to live here. A pleasanter place to live, other than in the Highlands and Islands, one could not possibly ask. Green hills, swift-flowing rivers, ancient forests, brisk little towns nestling in the valleys, friendly people . . .

I was going to say here also that living in the Borders rather than in the Highlands and Islands, one does not have to suffer living amongst the ghosts of the past. After all, on the whole, I am not forced to gaze upon ruined homes, nor listen to a beloved language in decline. But there *are* ghosts of the past, all right, and it must have been very obvious to the listeners to Coinneach's programme that, after eleven years here, they are getting to me. Because although as I walked into the studio I was meaning to talk generally about the stretch of the Tweed from Peebles down to Melrose, what actually happened is that I got straight to the Eildon Hills and stayed there.

Yes, the Eildons have become an obsession of mine, just as they were an obsession to Sir Walter Scott. He had a favourite view of the Eildon Hills, looking across a bend in the Tweed where the Gaelic missionary St Boisil built the cell which became the first Abbey of Melrose. They say that when the horse drawing Sir Walter's coffin got to Scott's View, it stopped, because every time his master had ever ridden that way when he was alive, he had stopped to gaze upon the Eildons.

And the problem with the Eildons is precisely that the Borders are not the Highlands and Islands. The Gaelic language is long dead here, and so of course is the Welsh, British or Cumbric language that preceded it, and the result is that ninety-nine per cent of all the history and tradition that they bore have gone without leaving anything in writing. We are left, in other words, with only the ghosts of a Celtic past — stones, landscape, names, medieval romances, Border Scots ballads. But what a Celtic past!

What I hope to do, in what I suspect may turn out to be three or four articles, is, first, lay out some basic facts that seem to me to be relevant to these mysterious hills; second, summarise what Lowland and Border tradition tells us of the district's most famous son, the prophet Thomas the Rhymer; third, summarise what Gaelic tradition tells us of Thomas the Rhymer, because yes, his impact on Gaelic consciousness appears to have been greater than Malcolm Canmore, Wallace, Bruce, or any other medieval figure from south of the Highland Line; and fourth, see where (if anywhere) it has all led us.

Let me start, then, by laying out some statements.

There are three Eildon Hills. They rise very prominently out of a plain in the middle of the Central Borders, dominating the landscape from all around. The Tweed flows along their northern base of Eildon Hill North. The name is probably Cumbric *Alddin*, which in Gaelic would be *Ail-Dhùn*, 'Rock Fort'.

When the Romans arrived they found a tribe here whose name they recorded as the Selgovae. They would have been Cumbric-speaking Celts, but the name is transparent to a Gaelic speaker — they were *Sealgairan*, Hunters. In the flat land between the foot of Eildon Hill North and the Tweed the Romans built their largest camp in southern Scotland. They called it Trimontium, 'Three Hills'. The site has been fully excavated, and yielded abundant evidence not only for the Romans inside the camp but for the Celtic artisans and traders who clustered around its gates. All this evidence is beautifully laid out in an exhibition housed in a building in Melrose's Market Square.

It is also possible to identify the Romans' amphitheatre on the bank of the Tweed, and long stretches of the road called Dere Street which led south from Cramond on the Forth via Trimontium, along the eastern slope of the Eildons and south towards Deira in England from which it is named. Part of it is now the A68 in Northumberland, and driving along it at night, as I did the other week, is like taking a trip in the big dipper. A real Roman road, it makes no concessions to the lie of the land at all. Time and again your headlights point up into the sky and then you go over the edge.

If you climb Eildon Hill North from Melrose Golf Course, as I have done several times now with a professional archaeologist, you first come to a huddle of rocks bearing a strange name first recorded in the eighteenth century, the Bourjo. This may, repeat may, be a Celticised form of Latin *porta*, a gate.

Much higher up you pass the tell-tale marks of a defensive rampart, and around the very summit of the hill you find the marks of up to three hundred house platforms. Aerial photography shows them up particularly well in snow. Was there a permanent settlement up here? It seems unlikely. There is no water, and in winter the wind howls and snow and sleet blow mercilessly around as they do on the top of any hill in Scotland. One is forced to the conclusion that occupation was seasonal. Shielings? Too many houses, too little pasture, and, as I say, no water, although there are many little wells dotted along the foot of the hill towards the Roman camp.

No, the ghosts on the wind up here whisper ritual. We know that the ancient Celts held great hill-top gatherings. Caesar tells us in 'De Bello Gallico' that the tribes of Gaul met under the patronage of the druids at a place in the territory of the Carnutes. Medieval Irish sources tell us of great inter-tribal gatherings every three years or so at particular hilltop locations — Tara, Tailtiu, Carman and Emhain Macha at Lughnasa (August), and Tara alone at Samhain (November). These were for commerce, lawmaking, judgements, political discussions, entertainments, feats of arms, horse-racing, sports, games, marriages and feasting; they

lasted a month, and their central point was a religious ceremony marking the new moon of the harvest or winter quarter respectively.

It would make a great deal of sense to see Eildon Hill North as such a ritual site, especially as it lies at the edge of the territory of the Selgovae where it marched with that of the Votadini, known in Welsh as the Gododdin. We may take it then that it was a sacred and not a secular capital, run by druids (who were tribeless) rather than Selgovae.

Can we say anything about the time of year at which the hill was occupied — that is, was it a site of ritual at Beltane, or Lughnasa, or Samhain? I think we can, but I would appeal first to the words of A R B Haldane. Writing in the 'Transactions of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society' in 1961, he said: "It is not possible to attach even an approximate date to the earliest Scottish Fairs. All we can say is that they are of great antiquity and that the Christian Saints whose names came to be associated with many Fairs in historical times may well have been only the successors of pagan gods associated with the more primitive gatherings of earlier ages."

Which leads us straight to St Boswell's Fair, held on 18 July and known to the Gael as the *Féill Boisil*, once the biggest sheep-market in the south of Scotland. In a booklet called 'Old St Boswells' Jean S Lawrie tells us that "for many years the Fair was held on Maxton Haugh below the heights where Boisil's church had stood. In 1743 the River Tweed rose rapidly on July 18th and covered the Haugh to a depth of 2 feet, flooding the Fair. After that date the Fair was transferred to the Green."

In her book 'The Festival of Lughnasa' Máire Mac Neill showed that Lughnasa gatherings were typically on hilltop sites, often difficult of access, held on a variety of dates through the second half of July and into August, and found not merely in Ireland but also in the British Isles and France. Croagh Patrick, ascended on one's knees on 'Reek Sunday' in July, is probably the best example.

Now it is in the nature of powerful symbols of paganism that christianity felt the need to stifle them. The fact, then, that the Eildon Hills have St Boisil's abbey of Melrose planted at their north end, and his church and fair at the south end, is suggestive of potent magic forces that had to be controlled. The nature of these superstitions is suggested by two things. One is the 'Bogle Burn' that flows down through the middle of the Eildons to the east. The other is the legend of Thomas the Rhymer.

Two simple facts about the Thomas legend are what matter here. One is that he met 'the Queen of the Fairies' and was brought by her under the Eildons to a place that was "not in heaven, paradise, hell, purgatory, or on middle earth [i.e. this world], but another country". In other words he was in the Celtic otherworld.

Now all our Gaelic traditions about the otherworld, and all the Irish literature about it, demonstrate that it is a place in which time does not exist. That is why Hallowe'en, the Celtic New year, when this 'middle earth' of ours mingles with the otherworld, offers a crack in time during which one can successfully peer into the future. And that, too, is why a mortal being who had lived in the otherworld was expected to have knowledge of the future, and to be a great secular prophet. Thomas's high status as a prophet was gained from his reputed visit to the otherworld; conversely, it is fair to say, he could not have gained that high status in the first place if the Eildons had not had a reputation for magic second to none, a reputation as powerful to all of Scotland perhaps as Tara was to Ireland.

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