

*Rennie McOwan*

## 6 *Hill of ghosts: Dumyat, Ochils*



Legend has it that when that old grey wanderer of the hills wraps his cloak of mist around the summits of the mountains, then people of the past can seem to re-appear.

In the case of my favourite childhood hill, that would mean a rich galaxy of spectral beings; the spear-carrying Picts who build a fort on a lower shoulder; the probing Roman patrols who erected a marching camp not far away; writers like Sir Walter Scott, who brought the hill into one of his epic poems, and the youthful Robert Louis Stevenson, who spent holidays nearby and whose ascent of this special peak influenced his descriptions of topography in one of his most famous books, *Treasure Island*.

Shadowy men and women accused of being warlocks and witches lived nearby, and the early tweed-clad mountaineers, including the pioneering Harold Raeburn, came to explore the big rock faces and found, alas, friable cliffs for the most part unsuitable for climbing.

This much-loved hill is called Dumyat (pronounced 'Dum-eye-at'), a name which is generally taken to mean the dun (or fort) of the Myaetae, a prominent Pictish tribe.

*Dumyat from Craigmomas  
across Menstrie Glen*





Dumyat is a frontier hill. It stands at the west end of the Ochils (pronounced 'Oh-chil,' with the 'ch' as in loch), a long, mainly grassy range which takes its name from the Celtic uchel, the high ground. The Ochils lie just north of the meandering River Forth in central Scotland. At 1376 feet (418 m) Dumyat is not particularly high, but to us wandering children, it was most certainly wild.

The steep southern escarpment of the Ochils is known to geologists as the Ochils Fault. The sea once lapped against forest-clad slopes here and the remains of whales and oyster beds have been found.

This mountain wall is the true boundary between Highlands and Lowlands and the hill names of Dumyat and the Ochils tell of a meeting place of different cultures. They derive from five languages, old and 'modern' Gaelic, Scots, Brittonic and English, and sometimes they are a mixture of several and therefore difficult to unravel.

I was brought up in a now rapidly-growing little village called Menstrie and from my bedroom window I could see a little, grassy hill called Craigomas and just behind it the jutting cliffs of Dumyat. It was our playground and once we had done our 'messages' (errands), we headed for nearby Menstrie Wood, the curving Menstrie Glen and its chuckling burns and the slopes of Dumyat.

My youthful memories were of the clean scent of water soaked moss, lichen and stones, of the heady smells of summer, of the burgeoning heather and of birch, willow and hazel in spring. The sounds were the cackling jackdaws which nested in rabbit holes, the croak of the occasional carrion crow or raven and, on the higher ground, the burbling call of the curlew, the cackle of the grouse and the musical piping of the golden plover, known in Gaelic as feadan, the (bagpipes) chanter. I was accustomed to the crying of sheep and lambs, the barking of dogs, the swish of the wind in the long grass, and at night, the eerie, shrieking cry of the vixen fox.

*From Dumyat summit  
towards the shoulder of the fort*

*Looking south-east  
from Dumyat, sunrise*

The names in the gorge sections of the glen told us of past human activity: the Washing Linn (a pool with flat rocks) and the Jeely Pot, a deep pool shaped like a jam jar. In the burn, we built turf and stone dams to deepen the small dark pools and could sometimes manage a few strokes in them and occasionally ‘guddle’ small trout by cornering them in the shallows. The pools are smaller now because the flow of the burn was reduced in recent years by the enlarging of a small reservoir further up the glen and known as the Loss Dam (from the Gaelic *lios*, a fertile place).

A ruined farmhouse called Jerah at the ‘back’ of Dumyat and Menstrie Glen possibly gets its name from the Gaelic *dearg* (pronounced ‘jerrak’) because of red scree nearby. There was a family in this house when I was a boy and further back, it was reputed to be the home of a warlock and the haunt of faeries.

The back of Dumyat rises in north-facing grass and heather slopes from Menstrie Glen burn and its small feeder burns. There was once human habitation here too, because when light snow covers the ground the faint outline of houses, pens and cultivation strips can be seen.

The steep burns of the Ochils were ideal for turning mill wheels and the hills became sheep country. Weaving communities sprang up along the southern base and at the western foot of Dumyat there stands a little conservation village called Blairlogie, which for a time became a kind of health spa to which people travelled to drink goats’ milk.

The summit of Dumyat provides one of the most spectacular vistas in Scotland. Behind flat or rolling farm and moorland stand many of the main peaks of the Highland Line – Stuc a’ Chroin, Ben Vorlich, Ben Each, Ben Ledi, Ben Venue, the Gargunnock and Touch (pronounced ‘tooch’) hills, the Campsies and the Fintry hills. Another turn gives wide views into the main green and tawny mass of the Ochils and along the fault escarpment.



Dumyat has been called the teacher's hill, because from its summit, the hill stravaiger (wanderer) can see many layers of history. Southward lies a broad, flat plain, dotted with farms, towns and villages and close by are strategic Stirling and its famous castle; the towering 19th century monument to the Braveheart patriot, William Wallace; the modern buildings of the 'new' University of Stirling, and the far-off outlines of the Cleish and Saline hills in Kinross, the fringes of the Fife Lomonds, the Pentlands near Edinburgh and the Moorfoots even further south. The lower ground around Stirling was once the cockpit of Scotland and the sites of seven battlefields can be seen.

Old, now abandoned, coal mines operated on the plain and prospectors for silver and copper left their mark on the hill. The summit is marked with an obsolete trig point, plus a brazier erected to celebrate a royal jubilee and a concrete replica of the cap badge of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the local regiment. Many lovers of Dumyat feel we could do without all three because they dilute the wilderness quality of the hill.

The Scottish writer, traveller and radical politician R B Cunninghame Graham, known as Don Roberto because of his travels in Latin America, was once on a hill in Paraguay when he met up with another horseman on the summit. He was a stranger to him, but he knew by the man's accent that he was Scottish and commended the view. The stranger replied: 'Aye, man, but it doesn't beat the view from Dumyat'.

*Clutter on the summit  
of Dumyat*

