

Levenach

The Story of the Working Peoples of the Vale of Leven.

Fast-flowing,
she has coiled
a living, ever-changing
yet constant course
from Lomond
to the Clyde.
Always she has been
a confluence
of two worlds,
two peoples,
two mythologies.

Loch Lomond –
glacier-gouged fiord,
born of the melting ice.
A holy place
of saints and sanctuaries.
Keledei –
Kessog, Kentigerna...
with sacred islands
and the Celtic Christianity
of a Gaelic-speaking people
whose Irish ancestors
brought Scotland
her very name.

The Clyde –
Clotta
and her brooding rock
- Dun Breatann,
oldest fortress in all Britain.
That stern volcanic nut
which even the glaciers
could not crack.
Northernmost knuckle
of the Welsh-speaking
Strathclyde Britons.

Tribal, farming peoples
with ploughs – and swords
of iron.

Looking for a place
to shed their gore.

It was in our valley
that they joined together
in proud butchery.

Some say
King Arthur led his Britons
on this field.

We do not know,
but the marsh ran that day
with the blood
of dragon and boar.

Later
and for long,
our peasant folk
dwelt with their beasts
in rude shelters
of stone and turf.
Eyes, smoke-reddened,
they worked a grudging soil,
subservient
to warrior Earls of Lennox
who were at least
of their race.

Generations
of these Levenach
enjoyed and endured
this hard
and little-changing life.
While beyond their valley
Scotland writhed and thrashed
through that long,
twisted, bitter and appalling
tragedy
which is her history.
Greed, jealousy, treachery
and murder
matched loyalty, vision

and determined heroism.
Interwoven
these brought the victory
which was defeat.

In the very year
that Mary's son, the Wisest Fool,
sold our crown to England,
men from this Vale
were led in arms
by sheriff and by miser lairds
against Clan Gregor's
Children of the Mist –
Two peoples,
Highlander and Lowlander –
Two tongues,
Gaelic and Scots.
An old way and a new way.
There was fear, hatred,
contempt, pride and intolerance,
and there was more blood
in another river.

The bell tolled in a tree
by the Levenside,
calling the community
of the Parish of Bonyle
to observe their reformed
Protestant Faith.
Morbid ministers thundered
the uncompromising dictates
of a Loving God.
Rasp-tongued dominies
hammered knowledge, of a sort,
into young minds,
and Scotland's parliament
went the same way as her crown.

Loyal, in their way,
to the latest weak link
in a sorry chain
of divine Stewarts,
Jacobites
led by Gregor Ghlun Dhubh,
Rob Roy's black-kneed nephew,
sailed down the Leven
as far as Bonyle's little kirk,
shook basket-hilted fists
at Dumbarton and the Union
and retreated with their cause.
In that same year this valley changed
never to be the same again.

The beginning was Dalquhurn.

On flat, wide fields,
by fresh, rolling water,
pure and plenty,
between hedges of beech,
stretched flaxen fabric
weathered white
to the fine Hollan' cloth.
After the bleachfield
that which had been rural
was to become industrial.
The Levenach,
for so long bound to the land,
were soon to be
yoked to the machine.

To the north
the Gael was broken.
swordless, voiceless
and without leadership.
In the honeymoon
of a shotgun union
their chieftains debauched themselves
in London vice,
gambling away the land

- Mother Earth -
of their race.
The toss of dice dictating
the “improvement”
of glens into deserts
and people
into starved destitution,
exile and death.
Cleared like sheep – for sheep.

Driven southward
in search of survival
some of these Highland dispossessed
bent to the labour
of the bleachfields,
the print and dyeworks
of Cordale, Levenfield
and Croftengea,
remaining
to become themselves
Levenach.

Outwith the valley
and beyond Scotland
the growing powers of Europe
squabbled for the world.
From Quebec to Bengal
Frenchmen and Britons,
in their tunics, scarlet and blue,
fell like toy soldiers
for the merchants’ prize
of Empire,
and everywhere in every way
the lesser nations,
the backward tribes,
the simple people,
were forced to dance
to Europe’s tune.

Across wide seas, then,
to the markets
of far-off Africa and India
were shipped the calicos

- bright-dyed on Levenside.
root madder,
ground and casked,
alizarine and garancine,
these coloured
the singed
and mordant-treated cloth
to famous Turkey Red.
Textiles printed
at first by blocks of wood
and later
by rolls
of diamond-engraved copper,
were now the valley's harvest.

Even then
peatsmoke and plaid
tarried at the Grocery,
by our old oak tree.
The Levenach,
their hundreds now thousands,
were hard as ever worked,
robber barons
having given way
to landed merchant princes.

Over the water
another corrupt aristocracy
hoarded and sold abroad
the very meat and grain
which should have nourished
the million souls
which perished
through starvation and disease
during five vile years
of Ireland's potato famine.
One million more,
driven overseas,
found refuge
mostly in the New World.

Yet some
sought a living by the Leven.

Considered an alien race,
and bringing with them
their Roman Faith,
as elsewhere they suffered
prejudice, intolerance
and repression.
Employers,
devoid of scruple,
manipulated
the desperation of their plight,
benefiting from division –
Scots against Irish,
worker against worker,
the more securely to exploit.

Yet together
they were the community of the Vale –
these two peoples.

With an explosion
of industry and trade
owners prospered,
factories growing
with their ambitions.
From Dalquhurn to Levenbank
workhouses stretched
dense-packed and clinging tightly
to the twisting river,
smoke belching
from their bristling chimneys,
an awesome iron jungle
of machinery clamoured,
the entire raging hive
sustained
by the steady toil
of an ever-growing workforce.

During forty hard
Victorian years,
harnessed gratefully
to an expanding technology,
the people of the Vale
developed their craft
and multiplied thirty-fold
the measure
of their textile produce.

Growing with them
Were their villages –
Renton, Jamestown,
Alexandria
and old Bonhill,
a class structure
mirrored in their form.
Low tenements
for the cheap labour.
Cottage villas
for management and professional.
Fine mansioned estates
for the owners.

Old methods – and symbols
were replaced.
Once-packed and chain-hauled ferries
were overshadowed
by fine suspension bridges,
spanning the river
at Bonhill then at Balloch.
The carts
no longer trundled, laden,
with the valley's parcelled merchandise
to Glasgow's Broomielaw,
for the railways had been built.
Steam locomotives ran
between Bowling and the Loch.

And the Fountain stood
where the Oak had fallen.

Community anatomy evolved
with new institutions.

The owners
nurturing their wider interests
in London's parliament,
maintained a firm "paternal" hand,
steering county and parish councils
as the parochial boards before them.

The Public Mind
was given direction
in the schools and varied churches
which flourished
under their patronage,
ensuring literacy
and a morality which was obedience
in the knowledge
of one's "station".

Law was enforced
by a new County Constabulary.

Yet there was recreation –
Bands, brass and silver.
Societies, literary and dramatic.
Sports, athletic and aquatic.
Oarsmen earned renown
racing on the fickle waters
of Loch Lomond,
while in football
Valemen were giants
and Renton –
Champions of the World.

The Twentieth Century
fast approaching,
possession of the major works
- the valley's substantial wealth,
was the tight preserve
of a few families.
Seemingly secure
astride the Leven
these industrial dynasties
with pedigrees

of land ownership
and mercantile prosperity,
combined their interests
in formation
of the United Turkey Red,
remaining printworks
mopped up
by English conglomeration.

The shadow of decline
began to fall.
Cotton and yarn, once home-produced,
now came from Lancashire,
transport charges aggravating overproduction,
while in Manchester
the centralist spider's web mentality
of printworks' management
severed healthy Scottish branches
drawing assets from the "periphery"
to the greater good of the South.
These inflictions
undermining the foundations
of local vitality –
a creeping rot setting in.

Wider horizons darkening,
the works had initiated
a military "volunteer movement"
with a chain of command
which sharply reflected
the social structure of the day –
owners taking personal overall charge,
senior management filling commissions
and foremen
drilling the ordinary hands.
Men with a simple loyalty,
seeing Britain's interests
as their own
and marching
with the First Dunbartonshire
Volunteer Rifle Corps.

A terrible price
remained to be paid
for the greedy rivalries
of Europe's expanding imperial powers.
Territorial jealousies,
mutual fears and suspicions
with growing arms production,
broke down all diplomacy
unleashing hideous military excesses
in the obscene nightmare
of "The Great War".

In their different ways,
but mostly
with the Ninth Battalion,
Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders,
the men, and boys, of the Vale of Leven
joined in
with those others of their kind
from all over Britain,
all over Europe
and all over the world,
in the vast waves
of miserable humanity
which obediently annihilated
each the other.
The sheer enormity of the carnage,
numbers of losses, however breath-taking,
did not, and obviously do not, say enough.

Survivors returned to their valley
in a land "fit for heroes".
It was not so – the reward otherwise.
If the war was won
the overseas textile markets
were lost.
These, so crucial to Vale viability,
had been captured,
the methods of foreign competitors
newer and simpler.
Works closed
with the resulting tragedy
of human suffering and degradation.

One by one –
Ferryfield, Milton, Dillichip...
Dalmonach, Cordale, Levenbank...
The Depression.
Unemployment
and the attendant evils
of the day –
malnutrition, hunger marches, soup kitchens,
wasting bodies and minds
sharing desperate households,
overcrowded and tense,
afraid and demoralised –
for some the extremities
of madness and suicide.

The people,
employed and unemployed,
organised to survive.
After the manner
of their Chartist forebears,
in radical political bodies.
A serviceable patchwork
comprising various shades
and differing degrees
of socialist or communist commitment.
Trades and labour councils,
unions, parties
and the Unemployed Workers Movement.
In the Co-operative and Public Halls,
in the streets, resisting evictions,
these were the people's voice.

In spite
of recurring internal divides,
characteristic disloyalties,
open rivalry
and the ruthless victimisation
of communists,
they struggled effectively
minimising the aggregation
of misery,
defying where they could

the unfeeling decrees
of remote authority's
local flunkies.
In the police-guarded council chamber,
at the Fountain and the Burn,
they were the survival of the Vale.

Alleviation
dawned gradually
as work returned.
Yet ominously,
and with sinister echo,
Alexandria laboured
in the grim production
of armaments.

The "advanced nations",
with the disasters
of their ramshackle
and chaotic economic mischiefs,
were now infested
with a venomous fascism.
Through eerie atmospheric storms,
on worn and crackling
wireless sets,
the valley and the world,
strained and apprehensive,
heard the strident yelping
and the crunching strut
of the Nazi threat,
till, brainstorming through Europe,
uniformed barbarians
dragged another generation
into the horror
of World War...

When the beast had burned
among the soiled rubble
of his last concrete lair,
before clear air
and new life
could cleanse this sorry world,
"victors" emerged

damned by the possession,
and by the use,
of a destructive power
total in its potential.
Fresh hatreds smouldered
as snarling nations, drawn apart,
polarised, yet again,
into mutually hostile
power blocks,
war-hawks restrained
only by the certainty
of white-hot extinction.

In this precious, trembling peace
the recovering valley
mourned, with so much else,
the lingering death
of its long textile tradition,
and was now sustained
by the light engineering interests
of a succession
of American
and multi-national employers,
these seeking European markets
through a workforce, thankful,
and relatively cheap.

The physical, architectural form
of the townships
was transformed –
housing with the arid face
of modernity,
however adequate,
failing to replace
the bulldozed, warm red sandstone strength
in the heart of a community.
That core torn out
where weeds now flourish
in the shadow of sky-pavement follies,
habitation is flung sprawling
on awkward, distant,
hillside clutters.

The old verdict,
once pronounced in Glasgow,
later in Manchester or London,
is now reached
in the power-centres
of the United States –
closure.

Almost all
of these post-war “benefactors”
having transferred their interests
afield
in search of more convenient profit,
leave empty factories
and aimless lives.

A community,
drained, disintegrating,
devoid of purpose yet mercifully spared,
so far,
the terrible extremes
of prior hardships.

While westward, beyond the hill,
in the shadow of primeval glens,
by the depths of fathomless lochs,
do we countenance
the harbour and maintenance
of mankind’s final mischief ?

We Vale-folk,
yet of little Scotland,
now of village world,
hoping that our Leven
may retain that “constant course”
and the Levenach
with all humanity,
remain as joyous victims
of the miracle of Life.

William Scobie

