

# TRAVELS NOW AND THEN

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## Slieve Gallion 2004

Slieve Gallion is the easternmost summit of the Sperrin Mountains in the western part of Northern Ireland. Rising to *1730ft* and only the 398th highest mountain in Ireland, it would rank as no more than a small pimple in most landscapes. But the broad flat summit, a blanket bog of wet heather and continual rainfall, is world's away from the green rolling farmland just *1500ft* below for, at this high latitude, the weather changes rapidly with elevation. On the southwest, the water runs off into a lovely mountain lake, Lough Fea by name. The crystal clear water has sustained people for thousands of years for, on a small hill in the townland of Ballybriest just *1/4* mile away, there are the remains of several neolithic long cairn graves. The views from there are superb in all directions, northeast to the barren summit of Slieve Gallion, southwest to Lough Fea and far off to the western horizon of the Sperrins. Only important chieftains could have warranted such an immortal view.



*Slieve Gallion*



*Near-island in Lough Fea*

Growing up in the village of Magherafelt just a few miles away, Slieve Gallion and Lough Fea represented the only real wilderness within the domain of my ramblings. My father loved to explore the narrow mountain roads that snaked up into the heather and around the lake. We would often take Sunday afternoon drives to places like Carndaisy Glen, a beautiful wooded glade on the slopes of Slieve Gallion. On a warm summer Sunday, a picnic might be planned for the glen or for the shores of Lough Fea itself. We especially liked the wooded near-island that jutted out from the south shore of the lough, a mound with a symmetry that suggested some ancient human shaping. I remember one Sunday in June 1952 when my youngest brother Colin, aged six, nearly drowned and my father dived deep into Lough Fea to recover and revive him. And every few winters, as in 1955, there would be a spell of weather cold enough that Lough Fea would freeze over and we would mount an ice skating expedition.

The year of 1958 marked my last as a Boy Scout for I had found many other diversions. However, before leaving, I had striven to complete one of the more advanced "badges" or awards that scouts could earn. One of the requirements for that badge was to undertake an overnight hike in a desolate area. The obvious choice was an adventure on Slieve Gallion. Peter Burton was a class mate and a fellow member of the local scout troop and he and I formed a plan for the overnight hike. We would hike the five miles from Magherafelt along the local roads to Carndaisy Glen where we knew of some grassy camping spots by the stream that ran through the glen. On our way to Carndaisy Glen, I recall that we may have cheated a little by accepting a ride on a tractor for several miles. In any case we pitched our tent by the stream in the glen and cooked some flapjacks (made from flour, butter and water, I think) on the hot rock beside our camp fire before turning in for the night.



*Slieve Gallion*

*(Photo by Eugene Kieft)*

In the morning, after breakfast, we set off up the lovely glen as it climbed onto the slopes of Slieve Gallion. I particularly remember the patches of iridescent bluebells. Perhaps it was they that caused me in the years that followed to associate flowers with Slieve Gallion. Indeed, when I took up oil painting many years later, my first effort was entitled "Flowers on the way to Slieve Gallion". Though it is of little artistic merit, I still keep that painting tucked away in a closet.

To return to the hike, we emerged from the top of the glen and transitioned onto the heather-covered moorland that covers most of the high ground on the mountain. Here the going got tougher for there were fewer tracks to follow and the heathland was mostly soggy underfoot. As we reached the broad

summit of the mountain, it began to rain and the day became quite miserable. We slogged our way across seemingly endless moorland, the rain having penetrated all of our clothing. Peter became quite dispirited and I can recall having to urge him on. It was my first experience of wilderness loneliness, my first sense of being at the mercy of nature. Not that I felt much fear for, even then, I had great confidence in both my physical endurance and in my navigational ability. It probably only took a few hours but after three miles of off-road travel we were back on established trails and descending the other side of the mountain. Once back onto those paved lanes, I regained confidence that we could complete the last four miles of the hike without having to call for assistance. Coincidentally, the sun came out and I recall sauntering down the mountain road with satisfaction in my accomplishment while also revelling in the beauty of the drying countryside. We completed the hike by road through Desertmartin and back to Magherafelt with plenty of daylight to spare. That adventure was my first real challenge in the outdoors and one whose success stayed with me the rest of my life. It also created a special affection within me for Slieve Gallion, the mountain that would witness other moments of joy and sadness during my life.

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Corporal Albert Symonds was killed on July 15, 1944, at the fierce battle for Caen, just after the Normandy landings in France that began the end of the Second World War. He was just 26 and left behind a wife and very young daughter, Laverne, just over a year old. Laverne grew up in a small market town in the shadow of Slieve Gallion, a place called Cookstown. She was raised by her mother, Gertrude Symonds, and her grandmother who were very protective of her welfare. They lived in a terrace house on the west side of Oldtown Street in Cookstown and, when she was old enough, Laverne attended the Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt. There, in the autumn of 1958, I first became aware of this skinny girl with the sultry smile. I was infatuated by her languid sexuality and in a few months we became high school sweethearts. She was the only woman with whom I had a significant relationship before I met my wife and that was several years later, after I had left high school. Laverne and I had a mercuric relationship, sometimes on, sometimes off. It seemed to me that she no sooner had me in tow than she would become interested in another boy. But we shared many special moments whose memory could not but stay with me down through the years. I remember one spring afternoon, March 22, 1959, when we drove to Lough Fea and walked and talked along the lakeshore and among the neolithic gravestones. A year later, at Easter 1960, we visited London together where she stayed with relations in High Barnet and I roomed in the YMCA in central London. However, in the summer of that year, our two year relationship came to an end for, in July 1960, I met and fell in love with Doreen.



*Ballybriest neolithic cairn*

In 1961 Laverne entered Queens University, Belfast where she became the second woman in the history of that university to earn a Civil Engineering degree. I think the last time I saw her was in 1962 when

Doreen and I encountered her briefly while walking along University Street on the Belfast campus. After graduation she took an administrative job in a university library. In Belfast, she met and married David Haskins, a teacher, and they had a son, Michael. After Michael's birth Laverne suffered severe post-partum depression and never returned to work; David believes she never fully recovered. She and David were separated and Laverne lived the rest of her life in Lisburn with Michael while David moved to a terraced house in Belfast. Michael became a musician, a guitarist with a group called Maya.

But I knew little of what had become of her after graduation. There were many moments when I thought to make contact with her out of curiosity more than anything else. But I could never quite justify such a contact as long as there was even the remotest possibility that Doreen might be hurt. Finally, however, in the year 2004, while visiting Northern Ireland, I acquired David Haskins' telephone number and called him to enquire as to how I might get in touch with Laverne. He informed me that Laverne had died of ovarian cancer on July 11, 2004, just a month earlier. After more than 40 years, I had reached back a month too late.

Her son and her mother were with her when she died. She was cremated on July 15, the date on which her father had been killed. Several days later, in accord with her wishes, her ashes were scattered to the winds at the Ballybriest neolithic cairn overlooking Lough Fea. A month later I stood alone in the rain and placed flowers on those ancient stones. Flowers on the way to Slieve Gallion.

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