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The Long Way Home: The Bent Imagination

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The Bent Imagination

FOR A FEW YEARS, A DIRTY, CURLED, NINETEENTH-CENTURY ILLUSTRATION rested on a shelf in my downstairs bathroom. My husband, Nat, had found it somewhere. It's a print of an etching, *The Bent Cliff*, a crazily pointy cliff rising above the sea. A few times a day I shook my head at its absurd angles and three sharp spires. Forbidding mist hovered around the cliff. Raptors rode the updrafts. The whole thing resembled a castle in the air, like something out of a nineteenth-century fairy tale.

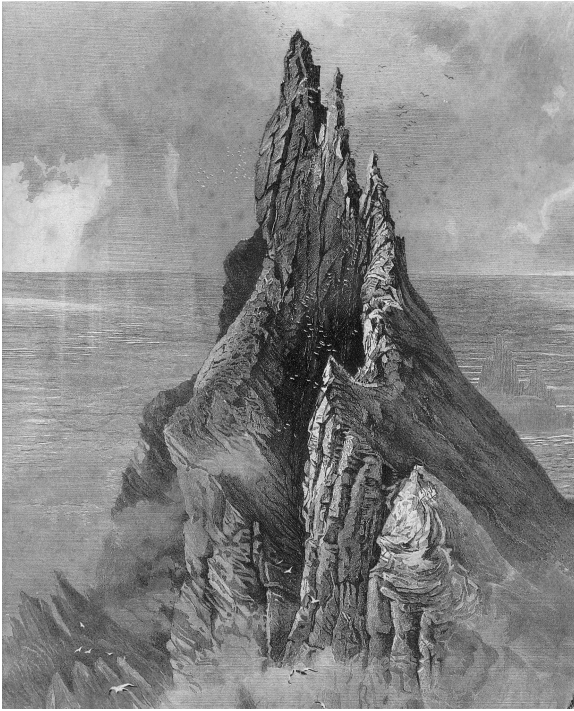
Who would scramble up this thing? Probably it didn't exist; the artist had imagined it. Wouldn't you have to cling and wrap limbs around those teethlike rocks, even if you could get to them? How would you even get to the base? Stroke through lashing waves? I'd look at it, wonder if it could be climbed, laugh, and then keep looking.

I suppose I had put it in the bathroom so I wouldn't take my fascination with it too seriously. Our friend Bill hung his doctoral degree in his bathroom, and I had done the same with my college diploma, despite that paper's major role in the landscape of my life.

The Bent Cliff took my breath away, and yet I still laughed at the inaccessibility of it. It remained a backdrop.

Last winter, that changed. An artist friend had offered to frame an item of my choice. I took him *The Bent Cliff*. He cleaned it up, put it behind glass, and returned it in such lovely shape that I hung it in my office. Soon I began researching where and what this is. I've never rock-climbed, although a few years ago I got two names of climbing guides and thought they might teach me to crawl up Whitehorse Ledge in North Conway. But I didn't call. My feet remained in contact with the earth. And now, I searched for the cliff online and found footage and photos and a mention of it in century-old books. I would climb it in some unreal metaphor of a real scramble.

The engraver, Robert Hinshelwood, captured it from a drawing by Harry Fenn, the English illustrator who made a career out of rendering natural sites in America and Europe. In the picture, the Bent Cliff looks giant, as if it



Harry Fenn's fairy-tale-like rendering is no dream. This cliff exists, on the west coast of Ireland. COURTESY OF CHRISTINE WOODSIDE

makes up a whole mountain. I imagined tiny human forms inching up the knife edges, ants climbing the spires.

The real Bent Cliff rises 2,461 feet above the North Atlantic in County Donegal, on the northwest coast of Ireland. No easy route to the top exists. The cliff today is called the Sturrall Headland (also spelled Sturrell) and it rises from one end of Slievetooley, a long ridge. None of the climbers in this area call it the Bent Cliff, even though I do. The first climb of it from the south (landward) side was in “about 1890,” according to climber Iain Miller, who led two clients on a stunning ascent from the ocean side, in 2012. The trio had first crept down the headland to the water then paddled small boats around to the north end of the ridge, starting their technical climb there. One gulps at the dizzy lurches of the camera. They inch up the unstable rock and finally tiptoe onto the few square yards of grass on the top.

I learned from watching this and other YouTube videos of Bent Cliff that the cliff is not as big as Fenn made it appear. Fenn omitted most of Slievetooley. He must have sketched the Bent Cliff from a perch on that ridge, sitting not on it but so close that its unreality must have hit him. (He wouldn't have

placed a climber in his drawing, I figure, because he probably thought no one ever could crawl up there.)

Back then, he wouldn't have ventured farther. "The tottering wall of rotten rock gives the impression that the whole connection may slither down," Walter Perry Haskett Smith, the first ascender, wrote with H. C. Hart in the 1895 book *Climbing in the British Isles: Wales and Ireland, Volume 2* (Longmans, Green). They added that they didn't recommend the climb. And that it was exhilarating.

From its bathroom-shelf perch, the Bent Cliff had tottered through my imagination. As long as it stayed there, I knew I would never look deeply at the thrill it ignited in me. I could say I'm getting older. Instead, I slowed down that clock the day I handed the print over for framing, and then I brought the cliff out into reality. I hung it on a nail above my desk. Now it had joined me.

Miller, who led that 2012 climb and has since taken others, had always thought the cliff stunning and one of Ireland's longest rock climbs. He told me, "A fact worth noting is there is no way off the ridge once you start to climb it." Meaning that they had to keep going up. They could not retreat to the bouncy sea. The rock was all "poor" (loose). In a classic understatement, he summed up the climb, "It was emotional."

Could Fenn or Hart have imagined that climbers would eventually inch up the Bent Cliff from the sea into the sky, stepping gingerly over the thinnest knife-edge onto a postage stamp of turf?

Beautiful. And scary. Potentially fatal. I can't stop looking at it.

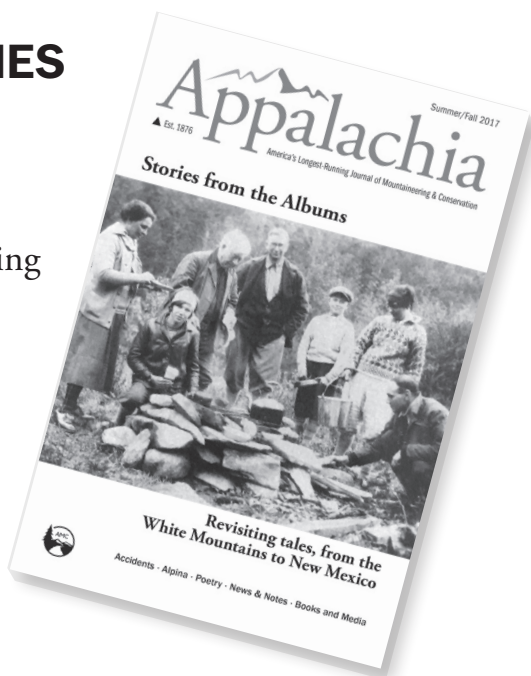
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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