Alan Garner: *The Valley of the Demon*

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This is the story of a journey; and it's something of a Wild Hunt.

In my physical youth I was an athlete, and, to pursue strength, I would take myself off to the southern Pennines, and there I would lope. On the afternoon of 19 July 1952, I was running across a moor at a height of about thirteen hundred feet. Ahead of me was a dry-stone wall. On the other side was a deep lane.

I slid down the bank. My bottom passed over something smooth and hard. When I hit the lane I turned, and parted the grass.

A memorial stone was set into the bank: "Here John Turner was cast away in a heavy snowstorm in the night in or about the year 1755."

The stone was weathered, but legible. I began to clear away the grit. I arrived at the inner corner, and felt for the rear. It should have been roughly dressed. Instead, the back had been as finely worked as the face. This was not only irrational, but would have added to the cost. It was, after all, no more than a hidden memorial in a lonely place. If it had merited such work, why was there imprecision about the date, "in or about the year 1755?" I continued, turning my arm at an ever more awkward angle.

In the late of late afternoon, my arm jammed. I couldn't move. I became aware of the time, the distance, the isolation, the silence. I tried not to hyperventilate. At last, I found a direction of give. I worked my arm and was able to start to retract it. Then my fingers met a line in the surface of the stone. They "read" the letter D. It was unweathered. It had not

been exposed. Much later, having extricated my arm, cleared a space, and wound my hand back in, I'd traced what was carved on the hidden reverse:

"The print of a woman's shoe was found by his side in the snow where he lay dead."

The hills took on a starker force. Though it was summer it was also dusk. The print of a woman's shoe. One foot set against that snow. Just the one. I've no means of checking, but I would assert that, if the distance from the stone to my bedroom could have been measured and my covering of that distance timed, the figures would still be in the record books.

That was the start. Not for four years after the epiphany at the stone did I come to see that my future lay in occupying a mediæval hovel and in writing there; in the Buttery, as it turned out.

Nor can I say that John Turner consciously played any part. Yet throughout that period I was, from time to time, hunted and haunted by the moment in the hills. The print of a woman's shoe was in the snow where he lay dead.

In 1972, my closest friend was staying with us: Professor Ralph Elliott, of the Australian National University. We'd met after a correspondence initiated by Ralph as a result of his realizing that we'd each, separately and from different directions, arrived at the identification of the Green Chapel of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. We were working with the 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey maps that include the Gawain landscape. Ralph said: "Oh, Lord. Look." He was pointing at the most desolate, remote, hemmed in by packed contours, bleakest farm of all, far from any track. By it was the word, "Thursbitch". The elements are Old English *þyrs* and *bæch*: "demon"; "valley". "Thursbitch" is first recorded in 1384, a time when names were descriptive only. This was no Romantic conceit. For the people of those hills in the fourteenth century that valley was frequented by a þyrs: a demon.

Westward of and below Thursbitch, is the valley of Saltersford. The ridges that enclose and hide Thursbitch had been the extremes of my loping land of twenty years earlier. I'd not been to the concealed valley, but now I saw where it lay in my physical and emotional geography. I'd passed by its mouth on that afternoon, and now could see the route up out of Saltersford over the moor to John Turner and the print of a woman's shoe in the snow where he lay dead, three quarters of a mile from the valley of the demon.

Here I must say, and can't explain, that in writing there are moments when things are brought, given and imposed. This was one such. It was

laid upon me that the story of John Turner must be told. But I'd no idea of what that story was or might be.

I wallow in research. The physical writing of a text is the cost of having arrived at it by wondrous paths, where so many apparently disparate ways are found to intertwine. In this case, at the heart of the labyrinth, I found the Minotaur.

To begin, I went into the land of Saltersford. And because I'm obliged to protect confidences, forgive me when I mention no names of the living.

My research led me to farmer X. I sought him at his home and was directed, in a blizzard, to find him. We met as silhouettes. Mr. X is himself a Turner through the female line, and he said that the memorial stone had been erected by just such another collateral relative in the nineteenth century, but that the date was Christmas Eve, 1735, not '55.

From talking over a period of four years with Mr. X and the people of Saltersford, a picture of John Turner emerged.

John Turner lived at Saltersford Hall, where his father was a tenant farmer. He was born in 1706 and became a packman, or jagger, with a train of four horses. His main occupation was from Chester and Northwich, carrying salt, to Derby, from where he would return with malt. His home in Saltersford was ideally placed on this prehistoric trade route.

On Christmas Eve, 1735, (that is, when John was twenty-nine), he was on his way back from Northwich. It was snowing. But packmen were used to being on the road in all weathers and at all hours. They knew the hills better than anyone. They took no risks. Jaggers were essential to their communities and yet at the same time mistrusted. Travel in eighteenth century England was not for ordinary folk. Most people didn't move more than four miles from their birthplace in their entire lives. Jaggers were looked on as boundary-striders, as Grendel is described in Beowulf, wild men, wodwose, as in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. They belonged more to the hills than to the valleys. Yet on that Christmas Eve, John Turner did not reach home. The next morning he was found dead, though his team of horses survived, covered by drifts. And by him, on the white, wind-smoothed land, was the single print of a woman's shoe in the snow.

That is the story of John Turner; and for the people of Saltersford it is a most certain history. But I was getting something else from those farmers. It was a sense that they were glad of my interest. They were, and still are, troubled in their souls by something they can't describe and only begin to articulate. And it's to do in part, but only in part, with

John Turner. It’s something compared with which the print of a woman’s shoe is, figuratively, a footnote. And none of my informants is aware of the etymology of Thursbitch.

Their concern is linked to John Turner only inasmuch as John Turner died. Why he did is what the farmers wanted me to answer. I approached the research rationally. And the anomalies, which must always be pursued, piled up as deep as the drifts that had covered the horses.

John Turner was found half a mile from home. No jagger would die then. Let’s assume that he’d been over confident when he set off up from the Plain, where the weather could have been no more than sleet. Yet he’d have known that sleet can trap, as I found during my research, when the weather closed in and I had to reverse a Land Rover for three miles in the low ratio gear box with differentials locked in order to get out of Saltersford, while in Macclesfield, five miles away, it was raining.

Even if John Turner had been overconfident, the jagger would have saved him. In order to have died at the point where he was found, two hundred yards earlier he passed through the farmyard of Buxter Stoops. The jagger would have known to stop if he and his beasts and their load were at risk. But John Turner did not. He died, and in the next century the event was marked in stone, with a message on the back that was not read until my hand did so in 1952.

Mr. X is my most sensitive, yet most elliptical, informant. A straight question never brings a straight reply. His replies are clues for me to follow; and only when I come back with an answer will he deliver another. I’ve been tested by an examiner who hopes that I’ll discover what has been lost; and I’m not at all sure that his behaviour is conscious.

You must imagine stone houses dug into the hillsides. Wallpaper follows the contours of the masonry and then is moulded over the damp and unhewn outcropping of the rock into the room. After the first meeting with Mr. X I’ve always telephoned to make an appointment. He has always agreed. The first time I arrived, his wife said he’d be back shortly. He came into the kitchen by the one door from the yard, emptying the house of any residual heat. He turned on the only tap and washed his hands in the cold water. Then he did something I’ve seen no one else do before or since. He dried his hands by wiping them, back and front, on the hotplate of the Rayburn stove next to the tap. The droplets spat and danced over the steel. He sat at the table, and his wife gave him a mug of tea.

Mr. X was welcoming, but without conversation. So, presuming that the initiative lay with me, I asked a question. Mr. X drained his mug and stood up. “Well,” he said, “I must be getting on.” He tightened his muffler, pulled his cap further down and opened the door. As he stepped into the yard, he said over his shoulder, “What’s wrong with this valley, Alan? What’s wrong?” And closed the door.

I’ve described the incident because it’s typical of the way in which Mr. X and other farmers give their knowledge. But their few words are pertinent beyond anything I could hope to get from a structured approach.

On another of my visits to the house, Mr. X opened the door to go. He paused, and said, “They never should have buried that baby in Thursbitch.” It was a quarter of a century before I realized how I misinterpreted an essential remark.

Despite Ralph’s interest in Old English, the trail was leading me to the Turners of Saltersford Hall and to Jenkin Chapel.

Half a mile from the Hall is a meeting of seven tracks. It’s first recorded in 1364, which is twenty years before Thursbitch, as Jankyncros, later Jenkin Cross: that is “The cross of little John”. A fair used to be held on 24 June, the Feast Day of St. John the Baptist. And, until the eighteenth century, a monolith stood on the site. In about 1732, for unrecorded reasons, a cabal of Saltersford farmers, led by Richard Turner, built a structure on the other side of the lane from the stone. It’s rational to think that the iconoclastic act committed against the monolith dates from this time.

They built their Jenkin Chapel. At first, it lacked both bell tower and chancel. The men knew how to build farms, not churches. There’s even a domestic fireplace. But whom, or what, did they worship? The date stone is clear: St. John the Baptist June 24th. 1733. Where the uncanny creeps is that the Bishops of Chester, for sixty-one years, refused to consecrate, and then, eventually, only on condition that the dedication be changed to that of St. John the Evangelist, whose Feast Day is on 27 December, half the year away.

St. John the Baptist frequently accumulates folkloric and mythic and pre-Christian baggage. He’s often mixed up with spirits of the wild, the man of the wood, the wodwo, and, in Southern Europe, even aspects of Dionysos. Is this why Chester refused to consecrate?

Walter Smith, a local historian, records in 1932: “We do not know . . . what use the chapel was put to . . . we do not know whether any services were held there or not.” Even today, Jenkin Chapel is called “the place where they marry the odd.”

Something else that was and is “odd” is that, of all the Turners, John is the only one for whom there’s no record other than the memorial stone. In the eighteenth century, and in the huge and empty parishes of east Cheshire, negative evidence proves little. However, in one respect, John Turner was different. He was a jagger. And all packmen had to be licensed. So the Church may have been slack in keeping its registers, but the Exchequer would not have been. Yet in the Public Record Office at Kew there’s no licence issued to any John Turner. The most important son of Saltersford, whom many claim as kin, is the least tangible, though his spirit informs the land. Enigmas on every side. A chapel dedicated to a headless John. The insistence that John Turner, who died when reason precluded it, died on Christmas Eve, the same turn of the year when, eight miles away, Gawain delivered his head to the mercy of the Green Knight, a wodwo.

I met Mr. X by chance and stopped to greet him. He said, “Well, Alan, what do you know?” (A conventional exchange.) I replied, “John Turner was not going home.” “No, he wasn’t,” said Mr. X. “He was going to Thursbitch,” I said. Mr. X smiled. “Yes. He would be.” And he waved and passed by.

The modern map shows John Turner to have been on the modern approach to Saltersford. But the estate maps of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show something other. If John Turner had been on his way home to Saltersford Hall, he would have taken a left fork, now footpath, but a road then, that drops straight to the Hall. He would not have diverged through the farmyard of Buxter Stoops, which would have led him either south into Macclesfield Forest, or up over Red Moor into Thursbitch. By the end of 1976, all roads, physical and emotional, were leading there

Here is my wife, Griselda. The photograph, which is recent, was taken in summer. She’s turning to the entrance of Thursbitch, at a height of precisely one thousand two hundred and twelve feet, because that is what the Ordnance Survey records its benchmark to be on the fallen and broken stone. The anomaly of the size of the stone was not noticed on the first venture into Thursbitch.

Because of my apprehension, I didn’t trust to my senses alone. I took a camera. Here are some of the results.

What I didn’t see at the time was the bump on the horizon.

By the middle of 1977 I couldn’t face Thursbitch. What I was finding through research was more interlinked and unsafe than anything I could structure as a novelist. I wasn’t up to the job. Not until 1996, with the experience of having written *Strandloper* as support, did I feel less

inadequate. I opened the files again for one last try. Griselda and I set off.

Before 1742, Thursbitch was waste. Then the high moors of two thousand feet were enclosed. The line to the ruined farm follows the remains of the walls, passing through now empty gateways, of which only the posts tend to remain.

“That’s no post,” said Griselda. “Yes, it is.” “Don’t be stupid”, she said. “That’s a post.”

It was. The gateposts of the southern Pennines are of a characteristic shape and size. I looked at the other. It was not a post. It was a monolith.

On the instant, the enclosures of 1742 were stripped from my eyes, and I saw the valley as John Turner knew it. The monoliths were coming in towards the ruin, which is by a ford. But when we got there, the house was irrelevant. Across the ford was the valley’s heart: another monolith

Its obvious phallic resemblance had been enhanced. The detail of the top leaves little to the imagination.

But most importantly, and verified by a stonemason from photographs, the detail has not been worked with metal. It has been pecked: that is, made with stone. It could be Neolithic.

We were now involved in something much older, of which John Turner may have been a part but was not the cause.

The field by the lane where the memorial stone was set is called “Osbaldestane Croft”. Osbaldestane is pure Old English, and means “The Stone of the Bright God”. We found it inside the field.

It had been respected by the 1742 builders, who had taken the wall around rather than incorporate it.

We began to use maps more intelligently. Beyond the ford in Thursbitch something catches the eye at once. The 1742 wall runs up to the watershed at the top of the valley in a straight line. It’s a steep climb, and benchmarks occur with a precision of spacing that’s unusual. And the Ordnance Survey doesn’t place its benchmarks on objects that are easily moved. This regularity could be significant. So we crossed the ford and trudged along what was left of the wall.

There was a monolith at every point that the map indicated as a benchmark. Why were they aligned? I took compass readings. The stone row is currently eleven degrees thirty minutes East of North. I asked the computer, and it told me that in the Late Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age, the stone row would have pointed to the Pole Star of

the time, Alpha Draconis, the Snake, who, in Dionysian Greece was called “the father to the Bull”, as was the Bull “the father to the Snake”.

We seem to be a long way from the print of a woman’s shoe in the snow where he lay dead; but we are not. It’s all a part of the labyrinthine way of a novel, which gives the words on the page a depth for the novelist that the reader cannot, and should not, know. But, by some mysterious process, the charge is conveyed.

On the way down from the stone row, about a hundred and fifty yards from the farmhouse ruin, we came across a small, semi-circular marsh that ate into the hill from the brook, and at its inmost edge there was an arch of collapsed masonry.

Steps going down were just visible, and stone walls, but the whole was obscured and made dangerous by the broken roof slab. Nevertheless, with a torch, it’s possible to glimpse a channel cut into rock, and clear running water. Why, then, with a well of fresh water so close, should the farmhouse have had an open flagstone tank to collect the brown run-off from the peat?

At high noon in high summer, Thursbitch is visually different from the first visit, when I didn’t notice the bump on the horizon. Now I did. In the two-mile stretch of the valley, this outcrop is the only interruption of the peat ridge. We went to look.

It’s an extraordinary feature, entirely geological: a natural recess, shelter and cave, above a confluence of waters at a ford.

The combination of a natural cave above a confluence of waters at a ford made sense. In my background reading I’d discovered that such a place was the one most favoured by a þyrs.

Writers that draw primarily on the imagination rather than on observation have to be careful. A string of strange events soon becomes meaningless, unconvincing and of no interest, however brilliant the individual beads on the string may be. The paradox is that the imaginative writer is more strictly confined than is the social observer. I call it the “What-if Corral”. I’m allowed to construct the corral out of any materials I see to be relevant; but, once they’re chosen, I’m penned within the corral by the logic of the corral, which must not be broken.

By 1997 I’d enough ideas to produce a “What-if”. It came to me as I was looking into the fire. A Russian proverb asks as a question: “What is lighter than silk, more lasting than salt? A story.” John Turner earned his living mainly from carrying salt, and the women of Saltersford earned theirs mainly by preparing silk thread to be spun in

Macclesfield. The image of the Silk Road, the greatest trade route of all, appeared in the embers.

Of course, the Silk Road never reached Macclesfield. The Silk Road was not so much a motorway as a series of campfires along an East/West line across Asia and Europe. And every fire could be visited from the North and the South. Over the centuries, not only objects could be exchanged but ideas, stories, beliefs. And these ideas, stories and beliefs would have been in the mouths of traders, not philosophers and priests: a melting pot of the mind.

My “What-if” was that fragments could have reached the southern Pennines and converged with that more than residual numen of the land, which held on to traditions that were not Christian and survived into the nineteenth century in that part of England. What if Saltersford were such a community? What if John Turner brought to it from his journeys complementary materials? What if his influence were still at work now? What if that were the reason for his modern but no longer understood importance to the valley and to the continued energies of the northern þyrs?

The “What-if” frame was in place. Now the question was: what could the novelist plausibly do with it?

This novelist was also partly experienced in the field of archaeology, and was already asking questions of the big standing stones.

The more Griselda and I looked, the more we found. They all approximate, whatever their shape or size, to point seven of a tonne in weight.

The Silk Museum at Macclesfield invited me to give a lecture of my own choosing. The possibility of working the evening to my advantage made me accept, and I floundered for an hour or so, bringing in mention of the John Turner memorial stone. Afterwards, there were questions, then the audience departed. I noticed that a man was hanging back. When no one else was left, he approached. He was late middle-aged, neatly dressed and groomed; indeed, without deprecation, dapper. He said he’d been relieved by what I’d said about John Turner. He revealed that, from his qualifying as a GP in 1948 until his recent retirement, his practice had been the hill country to the northeast of Macclesfield. He’d never been happy with Saltersford, and always dreaded (his word) a night call there. He said no more than that, and I didn’t pursue him, but I left Macclesfield convinced that this novel was not historical and fantastical merely. So I directed my attention to living witnesses again.

One was the Anglican vicar responsible for Jenkin Chapel. I had first, and for the only time, approached him in 1973 for permission to have access to the key for the chapel. He's now retired.

In 1999, I telephoned the vicar. Despite the twenty-six year gap, he remembered me. I told him that I now had a clearer picture of Saltersford and that there were some questions I'd like to have his opinion on. I asked him for his thoughts on Thursbitch; and I am now speaking from my notes made during the conversation. He said that he had no personal experience of the place, because he'd never been there. He said that, at his induction in 1972, his Church Wardens had told him that it would not be safe for "a man of the cloth" to enter the valley. One of them had said that he himself never went there, because it was "not a healthy part". The vicar followed the advice because he respected the men who had given it. He also said that the people of Saltersford think of it as "no good place", "not right", "not safe&vrdquo;. He explained that this attitude was spiritual, and said, "I wouldn't like to go up myself. I think the valley needs feeding."

I wanted to put the phone down, but the vicar reported another incident. The people had told him that, in 1985, Thursbitch was filled with what they termed and he did not question "a lot of electrical magic".

Now it's one thing for a novelist to be intrigued by etymology, monoliths and anomalies and to draw on folk belief; but when, quite separately, a medical practitioner and a clergyman not only support but surpass the imagination, it's time to proceed with care. I needed to get back onto the land.

From an archaeological view, the only outcrop on the two-mile ridge was potentially significant in relation to the monoliths. *It* is geological and fixed. *They* are artefacts and placed.

It's possible to show that people in prehistory deployed stones within a western European landscape, and that they could have used them to make accurate lunar, solar and stellar observations; but, being prehistoric, they've left no record of their intentions. I put in the co-ordinates of the monoliths we'd found, and asked the computer. The valley of Saltersford, and particularly of Thursbitch, could have been used for over three millennia for the observation of stellar, lunar and solar phenomena. The constellations of Taurus and of Orion appear to have been especially plotted in the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. The system works on observations of rising and setting times at the fixed outcrop when viewed from the variously placed stones. Arbitrary points produce no results.

I went to see Mr. Y, a farmer born and reared at Saltersford Hall, the home of John Turner. I needed permission to drive along the western ridge of Thursbitch. He said that he wanted me down by dusk and he wanted me to let him know that I was down. I thought that Mr. Y had no high opinion of my ability to drive a Land Rover. But he continued. "You see." Pause. "There isn't a farmer in all these hills around." Pause. "As will open his door after dark." Pause. "Not even to cross the yard." Pause. "Without he's got his gun." "Not that it would be of any use." "But it makes you feel better." "Somehow."

With that blessing, Mr. Y sent me to cross his land. He'd also given me important information. The masoned well of clear water in Thursbitch belonged to Saltersford Hall, and the occupants of the adjacent farmhouse had had no access to it, and so were obliged to drink the muddy run-off from the peat. He remembered how, as a child, he had been sent from Saltersford Hall to place butter on a shelf in the well. The well's only purpose, he said, was to act as a refrigerator. That he had been made to climb more than two hundred feet and to walk over a mile to get to the fridge seemed not to be a matter for question. Yet it is still the custom in parts of Ireland for butter to be offered to sacred wells and springs in summer; and a frequent date for the ceremony is Saint John's Eve, 23 June.

As a final coup de grâce, Mr. Y told me that I should pass close to a stone with writing on it. So primed, Griselda and I drove up. We parked as instructed, and went to find the stone. It stands on a small platform high on the side of the valley. We could see it from a distance. The lettering, of course, we could not see, at first, but when we reached the stone, its imperative, ORA, fitted our emotions.

Alas, the meaning is secular. The stone was used to mark the limit of the land taken in by Richard and Ann Oakes in the enclosure of 1742. Nevertheless, to come upon such a directive in such a place is an experience.

The many visits over the years had resulted in a change of perspective from that first þyrs-laden sight. Though always in command, the valley had shown varying moods, strong but not necessarily malign. It raised questions about the meaning of þyrs. I asked Ralph Elliott. His reply was: "I'll be back."

A month or so later, he sent his answer. Þyrs, he said, is frequently a malevolent being. But, when it is checked in its every context, this definition does not apply. He said that, if he had to give a single definition that would fit all occurrences, he would say that þyrs means "something big". It fits Thursbitch with precision.

The suggestion that was becoming a link between the anomalies, that Thursbitch evolved, millennia before the Silk Road, from at least the Neolithic, as a special place, a site taking different forms through different cultures, and the concept of þyrs as “something big”, made sense. Geologists and geographers, when they feel themselves to be among friends, will talk of the concept of a “sentient landscape”. Since I’m neither, I’ve no trouble over using the term. It describes my experience. And it showed me how I’d misinterpreted Mr. X’s remark of a quarter of a century earlier.

In the hills, it was common practice, carrying no social censure, to deal with still births, infantile mortality, or the mishaps of in breeding, by disposing of the young in remote places. When Mr. X had said, “They never should have buried that baby in Thursbitch”, his meaning had been: “It was not in Thursbitch that they should have buried that baby.” The offence was not against the child but against the place. It had been polluted. “What’s wrong with this valley, Alan? What’s wrong?” Perhaps the secularization of the monoliths.

The strongest aspect of the “What-if Corral” was the consistent appearance of the Bull, in Thursbitch and in cults and religions through the lands of the Silk Road.

The icon of the Bull is the ur-Bull of proto-Indo-European myth, from which Western bull (and many other) cults ultimately descend, carrying with them variations on the initially strange ménage of bull, snake, the Fly Agaric fungus, (of which the object in front of the bull here is a stylized representation), the hare, the moon, ivy, honey and bee: all connected.

At last, my refining through a sieve of silk produced a novel, a fiction, that accounts for, and integrates, all anomalies, including the print of a woman’s shoe. It is fiction, and I’ve saved the worst till last. It’s an unresolved piece of research from 1999; but it *is* true, although if I had not photographed the evidence, both Griselda and I should have had to doubt our experience.

At the mouth of Thursbitch I noticed a block of sandstone. In it was fixed a steel ring. It resembled a bull-baiting stone; and I photographed it. Here it’s important to note that my camera prints the time and date on every frame. We had collected the key to Jenkin Chapel from Mr. Z. When we returned the key he asked, as usual, whether we’d found anything interesting. I told him about the stone and said that it could be a rare survival, since bull baiting had been made illegal in 1835. Mr. Z laughed, and said, “Well, I suppose it must have taken a while for the news to reach these parts.”

Three weeks later, Griselda and I went back to Thursbitch.

There was no ring in the stone; nor was there any sign that one had ever existed. If it had been removed since our last visit, we should have found the remains of its seating, or at least a spalling of the surface. There was nothing. The surface was unbroken, evenly weathered. I photographed it. Without the comparison, we should have been left doubting our memories. The þyrs, if a bull, or even if John Turner, had the last laugh. But that was not it.

I told the County Archaeologist. He sent me a printout of the random finds for Saltersford. In 1985, the year of the vicar's report of "a lot of electrical magic" in Thursbitch, a gang of men was clearing out a ditch lower down the field from the stone, with or without a ring, and they uncovered a cache of bulls' and of aurochs' horns; and among them a Middle Bronze Age sword.

A novel may be finished. A journey is not.