



HEADING

Professor of Adventure

Tucked away on the wooded flanks of Castle Crag in Borrowdale lies a vast cavern, once home to one of the most enigmatic characters in Lake District history. Photographer Tom McNally explores more of the legend that is Millican Dalton

Picture a suited insurance clerk in his mid thirties in the city of London. Tired with the bureaucracy of the insurance industry and feeling trapped by the tedium of a nine to five job in the city, he begins to dream of a more rural existence focused on meaningful connections with nature, mindfulness, sustainable living and healthy eating. Eventually he decides to hand in his notice, fully committing to this alternative lifestyle and with aspirations of working an outdoor instructor. While this may not be an unfamiliar story, in this case it is something of a radical act; the year is 1904 and the outdoor industry as we know it does not exist.

After escaping from the drudgery of city life, Millican Dalton concentrated his efforts on becoming a mountain guide, leading many successful trips to the Lake District, Wales, Ireland, Scotland and the Alps. Unlike his contemporaries, he offered clients not just climbing and walking excursions but a variety of outdoor activities, combining ghyll scrambling, white-water rafting, night rambles, open-water swimming and mountaineering into one package. With the multi-activity holiday as his unique selling point, his services were in high demand.

Recognising the opportunities afforded by its diverse landscape and with happy memories of childhood camping trips there, The Lake District was the perfect base from which Dalton could not only introduce others to the excitement of outdoor adventure but also to his then unconventional philosophy.

Selecting the valley of Borrowdale as his home, he initially lived under canvas at High Lodore before finding more permanent residence in an enormous cave on the wooded flanks of Castle Crag – a relic of the slate working industry for which the valley is famed. It was to become his summer home for almost 50 years. During the winter months he would migrate south by pedal power to his hut in Buckinghamshire, his bike all but hidden by the mound of belongings festooned to it. His return to The Lakes each year was marked by children running through Keswick exclaiming ‘Millican Dalton’s back! Millican Dalton’s back!’

His programmes and advertising posters in the shop windows of Keswick promised not only ‘Shooting the Rapids, Dangling over the Precipice and Varied Hairbreadth Escapes’ but also ‘Sunrise Breakfasts by the Lake’, ‘Midnight Rows on Derwentwater and Lazy Days about camp’. It is obvious that these itineraries were as focused on fostering genuine connections with the landscape as they were on providing the excitement of outdoor activities. They also highlight Dalton’s then somewhat progressive views on women in the outdoors, stating rather wryly that ‘ladies are welcome in the camp... the custom being about 10,000 years old’.

Despite his choice of lodgings, Dalton’s character was anything but reclusive. A convivial host, guests and clients alike spoke warmly of the hospitality (and fiercely strong coffee)

they received at ‘The Cave Hotel’. He spoke eloquently and intelligently on a range of topics and was not afraid of voicing his opinion. A staunch pacifist, fireside conversations often tackled war, peace and social injustice. He always remained informed on current events, riding into Keswick nearly every day for a newspaper. After being told to extinguish his camp fire in 1941 by an air raid warden, he penned several strongly worded letters to Winston Churchill demanding an end to hostilities as it was impinging on his personal freedoms.

These socialist beliefs were reflected in his frugal existence and his few possessions were often objects recycled from a nearby tip at Grange. The exception to this rule was his treasured sewing machine, on which he manufactured simple, practical clothes suited to his outdoor way of life.

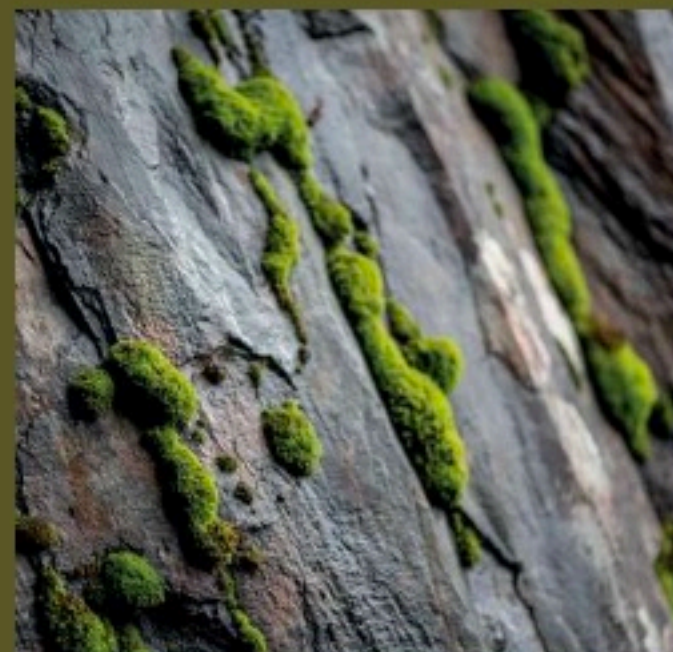
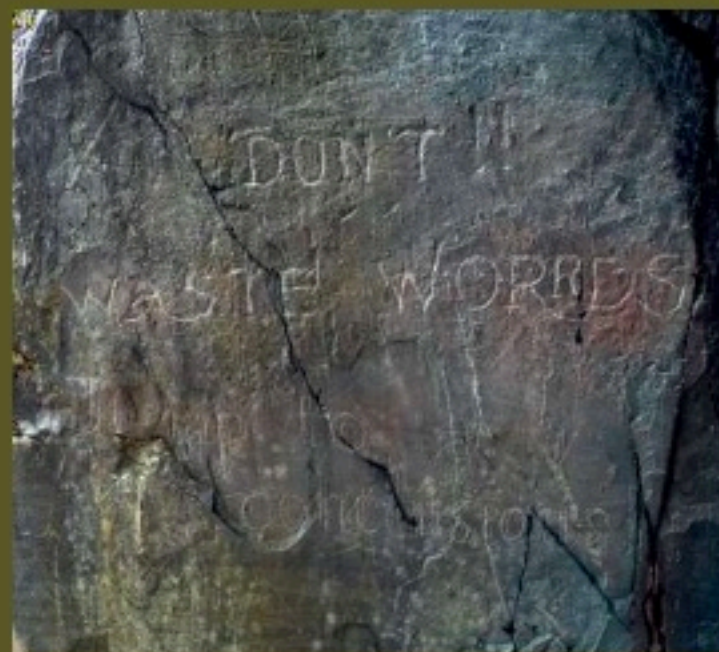
Dalton always maintained that it was in fact he who invented shorts, not Robert Baden-Powell of the British Scout movement fame. Made of corduroy and cut long (to protect the knees while climbing), these were then often rolled up and paired with brown army ‘putees’ (reputedly almost indistinguishable in colour to his tanned and weather-beaten knees). A khaki jacket and Tyrolean Alpine hat completed the look. A prolific inventor, he also applied his sewing skills to the design and manufacture of lightweight rucksacks and camping equipment, even producing a two man tent weighing in at 1.5kg (featherweight even compared with contemporary, hi-tech equivalents).

Dalton’s homemade attire and equipment, combined with his tall frame, magnificent facial hair and loping gait made his appearance utterly unmistakable. Keswick and Borrowdale locals soon saw him as a lovable eccentric and he became known by several alias’s – ‘Robinson Crusoe’, ‘Buffalo Bill’, ‘Peter Pan’, ‘The Wizard of the North’ and most commonly ‘The Borrowdale Hermit’.

Food, where possible, was always fresh and foraged, trout from the river with plentiful mushrooms, nuts, berries and greens from the ancient oak woodland surrounding his subterranean home. Highly skilled at catering for his groups, he did rely on the supply of some staples purchased with his guiding fees, mainly potatoes and flour, the latter of which he mixed with raisins to bake his own famed interpretation of wholemeal bread.

**“Free I am as the
buzzard mewing by
day or the owl hooting
at night, Freedom is
everything.”**

“Use is everything. We dress too much, we eat too much, almost everything we do is too much. Put a man to it and see what he can come up with.”



The other staple with which it seems Dalton could simply not do without (apart from coffee) was tobacco, purchased from the bar at The Borrowdale Hotel. A self-confessed chain smoker, all activities were accompanied by an ever-present Woodbine dangling from his mouth, although while stirring food he held it between his toes to keep ash from dropping in the pan.

“Give me wholemeal bread, porridge, coffee and cigarettes and I am quite happy”

Despite smoking like a chimney, Dalton remained fit and active for his entire life. He celebrated his 50th birthday in style by ascending Napes Needle solo, before lighting a fire to brew some coffee on the sloping, pool table sized top. A creature of habit, he repeated this impressive feat every year until at least his mid 70's. His ease on tricky routes such as this, coupled with his close involvement with the Fell and Rock Climbing Club, point to him being an accomplished rock climber, but it is his exemplary safety record and skills as a guide for which he is most remembered.

While over-wintering in Buckinghamshire during the bitterly cold conditions of 1947, Dalton's wooden hut accidentally burnt down, presumably from an untended candle or errant spark from the fire. Forced to live under canvas in extremely harsh temperatures, he was soon admitted to Amersham hospital suffering from various broncho-pulmonary conditions and died aged 79 on 5 February. On his bedside table lay an uncompleted manuscript titled: *Philosophy of Life*. These precious pages have unfortunately been lost to the mists of time, without any trace of their no doubt impassioned contents.

His passing was mourned by many, marked with glowing obituaries in several publications. It is the words of Mabel Barker, his close friend and climbing companion, in the FRCC journal that are most often quoted:

“I wonder how many owed to him their first thrills on rock and rope... his picturesque figure and lovable personality have surely become part of the heritage of Lakeland so long as the hills endure and men love them.”

Curiously, Dalton's indelible contributions to the lives of so many and the 'outdoor movement' in general are little known outside of the verdant Lake District valleys in which he practiced both his craft and philosophy. One has to wonder that if his manuscript had survived, perhaps his standing as one of the great characters of British outdoor heritage might be more significant? The path of adventure he forged not only demonstrated a profound understanding of the world around him but also greatly benefitted others. The word legend is often overused, but in the case of Millican Dalton I feel is entirely apt. 🍷

Thanks go to M.D. Entwistle for his wonderful biography: *Millican Dalton – A Search for Romance and Freedom*, from which much of the information in this piece is gleaned. Original black and white photographs used with kind permission of the FRCC. The colour re-enactment images were shot by Tom for *Extreme Lakeland*, a book collaboration with Scottish photographer Nadir Khan, due to be released in late 2021.



Words: Tom McNally

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“Today I live rent free, rate free, tax free. It's the only kind of life worth living.”

