

**THE HISTORY AND
TRADITIONS
OF RAVENSTONEDALE,
WESTMORLAND**

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The history and traditions of Ravenstonedale, Westmorland by W. Nicholls

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W. NICHOLLS

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BY THE
REV. W. NICHOLLS.

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P R E F A C E .

I HAD intended to publish my researches into the various features of the traditions and history of Ravenstonedale, rearranged, and composed in a written rather than a spoken style ; but, after mature consideration, I have determined, for several reasons, to present my lectures to the public in the style in which they were delivered, except that they have undergone careful revision, and several additions have been made to them which could not be introduced when they were delivered for want of time. I gladly avail myself of this opportunity of expressing my obligations to the Rev. R. Robinson, of Mallerstang ; Mr. John Robinson, of Ash Fell, who is in possession of some of the most important MSS. ; but most of all to Mr. A. Metcalfe, of Park House, who was my chairman each evening, and through whose invariable kindness and courtesy I have been able to obtain much of the information contained in the following lectures. To my critics I may say that I am responsible for the blunders, and that my rushing into print has not arisen from the *cacoethes scribendi* of which one has so often heard, and the disease from which one would wish to be free, but from the desire to comply with the unanimous request of a crowded audience to which the last lecture was delivered, and to preserve, if possible, in a permanent form, facts and traditions which might otherwise be lost to the finest drag-net of any chronicler who might come at all remotely after me. The following record is a contribution to English history, although an atom, still an atom, and so a part of the mass, and thus furnishing the reader with an insight into the self-contained and independent rule in some of the more highly favoured dales, such as Ravenstonedale was.

In the Appendix the reader will find some notes containing valuable information. My aim has been to notice the facts connected with the parish which have been hitherto unrecorded.

W. N.

The Manse, Sept. 14th, 1877.

CONTENTS.

	Page
Lecture I	7
Lecture II.....	40
Lecture III.	78
Appendix	103
List of Subscribers	123



LECTURE I.

IN presenting you with the history of Ravenstonedale I shall first attempt the etymology of its name by noticing the different derivations which have been suggested, and then furnishing you with the one which I accept, together with my reasons for accepting it.

The derivation given by Burns and Nicholson, in their "History of Westmorland," is that our Dale takes its name from a brook flowing through it, called the Raven; but, after careful inquiry and the examination of the oldest MSS. of the parish, I cannot learn that there is, or ever has been, a beck in the dale called by that name. Then another attempted etymology is that there is a dark grey stone in our dale called the Ravenstone, and for this etymology I have the influential authority of the Rev. R. Robinson, of Mallerstang; but concerning this, too, I have made inquiry, and cannot find that in Scandale Gill, where it is said to be, there is any such stone. These are the only two etymologies, I believe, which have appeared in print, and neither of them is satisfactory. But some of you with whom I have conversed have asked, "Does it not refer to a raven on a stone?" and, though I was at first sceptical of such an etymology and was disposed to look for an explanation less manifestly on

the surface, I am now inclined to think that the easiest and most apparent etymology is the true one. I was not aware until informed of it by Mr. William Metcalfe, in a note written to his father on this subject, that the word "Ravenstone" is used by Lord Byron, but I find it is in the following passage :—

"Do not think
I'll honour you so much as save your throat
From the Ravenstone by choking you myself."

And in a note, explanatory of Ravenstone, Lord Byron says that "The Ravenstone (Rabenstein) is the stone gibbet of Germany, and so called from the ravens perching on it."

To this day we have Gallows Hill as a feature in our dale, where, up to comparatively modern times, capital punishment was inflicted, and possibly in very early days, of which we have no historical record, executions were frequent here; and the essential stone was often occupied by the raven, which is a carrion bird. Hence the distinguishing name of our dale came to be Ravenstonedale.

Since delivering the preceding, I have received a communication from Mr. Cornelius Nicholson, who is an authority on such questions. He says, "Rafen-stan-dale (for that is the true spelling) is one of many names left in the northern counties of England by the Danes. The *f* and *v* are interchangeable. The raven was, perhaps still is, the national symbol of Denmark. It figured, still figures, I believe, on the national standard, until the standard itself is called the Rafen. The bird was esteemed to be sacred in Scandinavia, in pre-Christian times, as the dove was among the Slavs. In England the raven was held to be a bird of ill omen, and this arose, I believe, from the terror with which the Danish standard filled the minds of Picts,