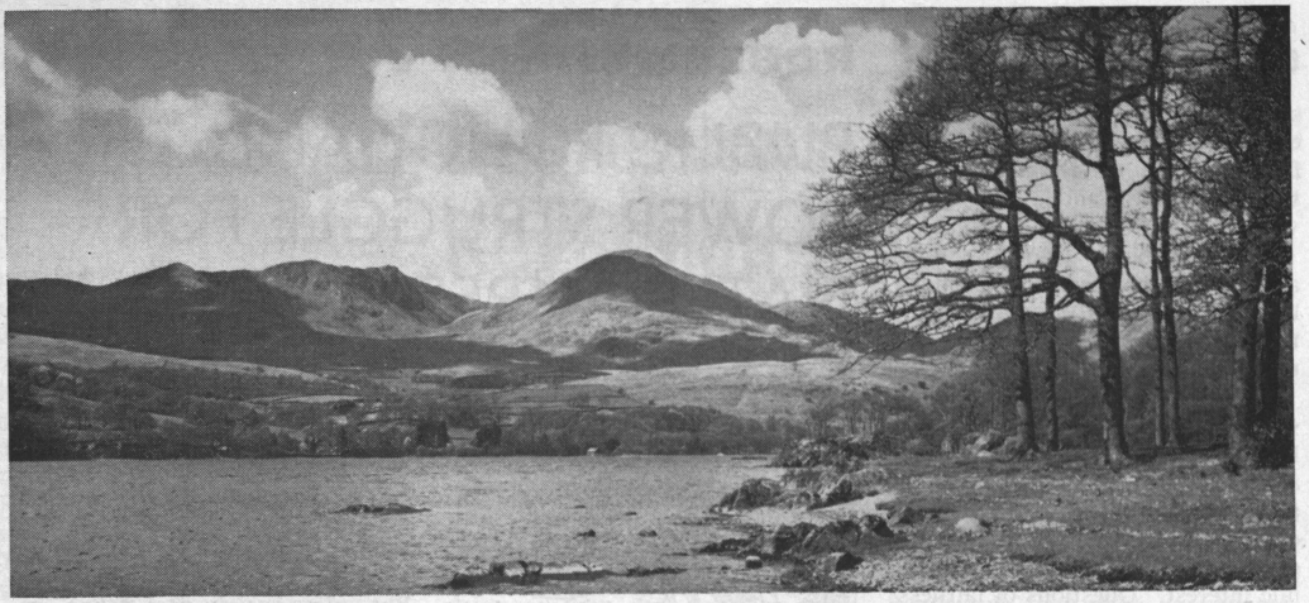

***Have you the unchallengeable right to go on your local common? No! There is no right of access to over one million acres; they are called "common", but they are not common to you. The view in the picture is of the Torver Commons across Coniston Water in the Lake District.**

WILL THE HOUSE ACT TO PROTECT OUR COMMONS?

THE MAJORITY of common land in Britain—1.1m. acres— is not open to the public as of right. The common law does not permit the public to secure a right of access through long usage.

A campaign to save the 1.5m. acres of common land in England and Wales has now been launched by the London-based Commons Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, in an attempt to secure legal access.

Parliament has been very slow to respond to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Common Land, which declared in 1958 that "as the last reserve of uncommitted land in England and Wales, common land ought to be preserved in the public interest," and that "all common land should be open to the public as of right," subject only to reasonable bye-laws.

"Nearly two decades later—and despite the passing of the Commons Registration Act in 1965—these reasonable goals remain very distant," says Carol Johnson, the society's chairman. "Few of the millions who walk, ride, picnic and play on our commons realise that on most commons there is no right of public access."

A common is land over which certain people (the commoners) have—or have had—rights, such as to graze animals; the land, however, belongs to a single owner.

Commons include the open glades of the New Forest, urban lungs such as Hampstead Heath, the uplands of the Lake District, the Welsh mountains and Dartmoor. Also counted as commons for the purposes of legal registration are hundreds of town and village greens.

Less than a third of all commons (about 400,000 acres) are subject to a legal right of public access. These are town commons, those managed by local authorities, a few rural commons and those owned by the National Trust.

Mr. Johnson explains: "Of the Royal Commission's three principal recommendations only one—the registration of common land—has been enacted. Their other proposals for management agreements safeguarding all interested parties, and the right of public access, still await legislation."

Registration—the pre-requisite for adequate protection and legal access—is proceeding at a snail's pace. Says Mr. Johnson: "There are only three commons commissioners to hear the 26,400 disputed registrations which remain. At the present rate of progress it will be at least 1990—perhaps well into the next century—before the process is finished.

"The Commons Registration Act was a measure approved by both main parties. But its operation is being grossly impaired by the slow rate of hearing disputed cases. Witnesses to the true status of commons die or move away and the case for the commons they knew is lost by default for all time. Land which ought to be preserved as common is enclosed or cultivated.

"We call upon the Government to appoint more commissioners now. 2,300 square miles of land—an area as big as Berkshire, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire combined—representing our countryside in all its variety and desperately important for the enjoyment and refreshment of a crowded urban nation are at risk. The cost of safeguarding the commons is small, the stake great."