

MAY-DAY ON THE OCHILS.

BY HUGH BOYD WATT.

FROM their central position in Scotland, few hills are better known than the Ochils. Their prominence is acknowledged in their name—the early Celtic people, who first named them, being satisfied to distinguish them by the simple word *Uchel* (Welsh), meaning high, from which is derived the present name. Forming part of what Professor James Geikie calls “The Northern Heights facing the Highlands”, the other main portion of which is the Lennox Hills and the Sidlaws, they occupy a commanding position in the physical geography of the country, and, historically too, they and their neighbourhood claim memories and associations which only a district closely in contact with national life and story can hope to possess. Nor are more romantic elements awaiting; and at the present day they have their own poet, who, in melodious Scotch verse, sings their praises and delights.

Last May-day I spent in wandering on the western portion of these hills, starting from Stirling on a morning which seemed even to exceed in fineness the many fine mornings of that exceptionally fine spring, and which gave promise of a glorious day for the hills—a promise, however, which was scarcely fulfilled. The Forth being crossed, I made my way by Causewayhead, and passed behind the Abbey Craig and the Wallace Monument, and at Airthrey chose the road leading past Logie Church, thus meaning to turn the flank of the hills, and take them from the rear. Facing here is the most precipitous part of the hills, which nowhere else show the same bold front, with crags, rocks, and gullies, as at this S.E. corner. Probably it is also the best known portion, both to the casual traveller as a prominent landmark in Central Scotland, and to those who, taking advantage of its accessibility, make its closer acquaintance by visiting it. The highest point is Dunmyat (1375), which can be easily climbed by way of Menstrie Glen, or approached from the north by what is only a walk over moorland. I well

remember my own pleasure, after coming to this top in the last-named commonplace way, to find the entirely different character of its south face, and the enjoyment of a scramble on the way down in front of me. I fancy this S.E. face might furnish some amusement to rock-climbers. Going onwards I left this on my right hand, and passing through the beautiful piece of woodland behind Logie Church, soon came to the Sherriffmuir road leading north along the open hillside. Approaching Cauldhame, the elevation had become high enough to bring some white peaks in the north into view; but the day was already overcast, and before long a cold shower fell. Immediately after it had passed a cuckoo called—the first I had heard this year. At the inn, which stands near the junction of the Dunblane road—just in the locality of the so-called battlefield of Sherriffmuir—I left the road, and after having a look at Wallace's Stones (one only now in the perpendicular), proceeded upwards by Glen Tye, the old Wharry Burn being on my right hand, and soon found myself on my first top, at an elevation of about 1400 feet. From there I made over Mickle Corum (1955), and so on to Blairdenon Hill (2072), on whose eastern slopes the head-waters of the Devon rise. This river fairly divides the Ochils into two, and follows such a devious course that when debouching into the Forth it is only $5\frac{1}{4}$ miles from its source, although it has actually flowed 34. Well may Burns sing of it as the "winding Devon"! I was now above the 2000 feet line, but the easy grass slopes and rounded hill-tops made it difficult to reckon that any climbing had been done. A wild, but short, hail-shower added some variety to the proceedings, and a golden plover rising at my feet from her nest, in which lay four finely-marked eggs, was quite an incident on the way. A restricted view of the Forth to the south had also now opened out, and Strathearn lay beneath me to the north. Benbuck, on the top of which are a few loose stones, was next reached, and from there some twenty minutes' walking took me to the top of the highest point in the Ochils, Ben Cleuch (2363). It had been a very easy ascent, even to the extent of bordering on the uninterest-

ing; and, as a route, does not possess the attraction which the Alva Glen way has. By the latter route, one midwinter day, I had climbed this hill, but then everything was deep in snow, and the spot was not recognisable to my eyes in the altered conditions. To-day a shower of hail and snow does pass over me, but I see no snow lying on the hill, not even Lady Alva's Web, which is the fanciful name given to a wreath of snow, frequently seen so late as the month of June, at the bottom of a ridge of rock near the summit. Some rocks crop out round about, the first I had met during the day; and a roofless stone hut stands near by. Owing to the now overcast atmosphere, the view to the north was quite obscured; and while the Links of the Forth were well seen, only the towers of the great bridge could be faintly discerned, and nothing beyond was visible. This was something of a disappointment, for, from its position, Ben Cleuch, for its height, commands one of the many "finest views in Scotland". That old mountaineer, Rev. Thomas Grierson, ascended this hill in 1849, and gives the following account of the view in his "Autumnal Rambles among the Scottish Mountains":—

"The whole range of the Grampians, from Ben Lomond to Beinn a' Ghlo, is quite visible. . . . The more remarkable mountains within sight on this occasion were Ben Lomond, the Cobbler, Ben Ledi, Stuc a' Chroin, Ben Vorlich, Ben Cruachan, Ben Laoigh, Am Binnein, Ben More, Ben Chonzie, Ben Lawers, Schichallion, and Beinn a' Ghlo. These, with innumerable others of inferior note, were quite visible, some of them marked by streaks of snow. In a still clearer day Ben Nevis may also be seen, and I have no doubt of Ben Muich Dhui and Lochnagar being within reach of the eye, though I could not make them out on this occasion. . . . The view on all sides of this mountain is interesting, but the Highland district incomparably the most so. The whole horizon is serrated with mountain peaks from S.W. to N.E., their distances varying from 20 to 60 miles as the crow flies. The most remarkable were Ben More, Ben Vorlich, and Ben Lawers with its elegant conical top and huge bluff rocky eastern shoulder, much resembling Meal Fuarvounie on Loch Ness".

The mountaineering parson, under more favourable circumstances, would also have seen Merrick, Goat Fell, Glas Maol, Mount Battock, the Lammermuirs, Arthur's Seat, the Pentlands, Hart Fell, and Tinto. The neighbouring

points of the Law (2094) and King's Seat Hill (2111) promising no variety in the way of climbing from what I had experienced, I turned my face westwards and soon reached Craighorn (1940), a top marked by a low turf mound with a few stones in the centre. I may note that most of the tops which I visited during the day were cairnless. I was now on a rougher part of the hills, although their pastoral character still clung to them, and found that the head of Alva Glen is a deep V shape, with an abrupt descent of some 400 feet from the spot where I reached it. At the burn the aneroid gave 1200 feet as the altitude where I crossed, and the head of the glen forms quite a Border "hope". In climbing up the other side, for the first and only time in the day I had to use my hands, and thus, according to authority, crossed the line which distinguishes walking from climbing. On the west side of the glen I made Bengenzie Hill, which is surmounted by a small built cairn, and possesses some character of its own, having rock and talus slopes to the east and west. Going onwards I soon reached Colsnaur Hill (1832), also crowned by a cairn, and having a small quarry-like rock face. The evening had been growing fairer and fairer, but in spite of a strong disinclination to "quit wandering" in the placid and exhilarating atmosphere of these easy summits, time, as represented by a train at Stirling, pressed hard, and I had to descend. Steep but easy slopes took me rapidly down to the Menstrie Burn, which I crossed at a spot made lovely and fragrant by birch, rowan, and other trees, and, following a grassy track along the hillside, passed between Menstrie and the steep, broken cliffs behind it, through the finest display of whin in flower which I ever remember seeing, and so to the road at Blair Logie, from which place an hour's walking took me to Stirling. The time for the round which I have described, all done in a very leisurely fashion, was 10 hours; and from what I have seen of the Ochils, they are worth giving more hours to yet.