

## THE CLUB AT BEN ALDER.

BY JOHN CLARKE, M.A.

MANY a time and oft, standing on the Cairngorms or the western summits of the Mounth, have we longingly gazed at the great mountain mass in Badenoch, which, crushing Loch Ericht in its embrace, forms the back-bone of Scotland where two great counties meet. There Ben Alder reigns supreme—though little more than first among his equals—and with an apparently careless impartiality sends his waters on the one hand to the Atlantic, on the other to the North Sea. The Minister of Elgin, writing in the Appendix to “Pennant’s Tour in Scotland”, “imagined” from this fact that Ben Alder was the highest mountain in the country! But in those days a few hundred feet more or less on a highland hill were of little account; our forefathers probably as little foresaw the formation of mountaineering clubs as the invention of the telephone.

The Loch Ericht Hotel, Dalwhinnie, was the headquarters of the Club on 9th, 10th, and 11th July last. All the party reached Dalwhinnie on the 9th, some *via* Craighellachie, others *via* Stanley. The afternoon and evening of the day were spent very pleasantly, if not quite according to the official programme. The rain had come down—well, copiously, as it generally does in the Highlands, and, much to the regret of eager hearts, Meall na Cuaich and Carn na Caim had to be abandoned, and even as we stood by the loch on the morning of the 10th the outlook was none of the brightest. A pall of mist, uniform if not dense, shrouded the hills, broken occasionally by a gleam of light affording for the moment a ray of hope, but soon again condensed into rain, which brought discomfort to body and discouragement to mind.

Loch Ericht, of which a glimpse may be had from the train a little south of Dalwhinnie Station, is a noble loch surrounded by mountains of no less grandeur. It is 1153 feet above sea level, some 15 miles in length, and from half-

a-mile to a mile in breadth. It is almost straight, but still with so much of curve as to prevent anything like monotony, the general trend being north-north-east to south-south-west, or, roughly speaking, north and south. The west side is covered for some miles at the upper end with young fir woods, the lower end being steep and barren, and indeed occupied by the mass of Ben Alder and its outliers. The east side consists of steep slopes and screes varied with stretches of rough pasturage, and clothed at parts all along its course with wood which looks of natural growth, mostly birch. The loch itself is famous for its fishing, and in particular is a noted haunt of the *salmo ferox*. A fine specimen of this variety, scaling 10 lbs., had been caught by one of the hotel boatmen on the afternoon of the Club's arrival. The fish, which had been captured by trolling with the natural minnow, afforded splendid sport, requiring three-quarters of an hour to land him. In the course of his "play" he had twice leapt six feet out of the water. There is ample testimony that he formed an excellent dish.

But it is time to arrange for the start, for it was necessary "to make history". By natural selection one of the boats at disposal was appropriated by the smokers and the other by the non-smokers, each party having the assistance of a professional boatman. The row down the loch is no joke for men who are not in training for this sort of work. The programme was to row to Alder Bay, a distance of about 12 miles, and to make the ascent of Ben Alder from the south side, starting at Benalder Cottage. The smokers being supposed to be the weaker brethren were despatched first, having all the advantages of the heavier crew and the longer oars, as well as the larger boat! They gave an admirable lead to their comrades, and kept their distance fully until Alder Bay was reached at 11.55 a.m. The most notable sights on the voyage were Lochericht Lodge, beautifully situated at the extremity of the pine wood referred to, and Coire na h-Iolaire, a very rugged and imposing gap on the side of Beinn Bheoil (3333), the summit of Ben Alder lying immediately over the loch.

A halt of a few minutes was made at Benalder Cottage, where the non-smokers were submitted to a good deal of chaff on the result of the row down. More serious objects were to partake of the keeper's kindly hospitality and to examine the slab, reputed to be an ancient tombstone, found some years ago in a moss in the vicinity. The inscription, of which there was no opportunity of getting a *fac-simile*, seems to have been originally a rude representation of MEMENTO MORI (REMEMBER DEATH), ANNO DOMINI, 515. If it ever read 1515, the first figure has now been obliterated. Whether the stone is ancient and the inscription genuine must be left to experts to decide.

By 12:20 we were fairly *en route* by Allt a' Bhealaich Bhreabaich, due north until the watershed is reached, where a turn to the left (west) is made at right angles, and thence almost straight to the top. A short distance up the burn is "Prince Charlie's Cave", where, after Culloden, the Pretender is said to have found refuge for a fortnight prior to his escape to France. It is an exceedingly rude shelter, consisting of several large boulders tilted up at various angles, and affording the most scanty accommodation. It is divided into an upper and a lower shelter, which have been fancifully designated kitchen and bedroom. In some respects, the identification of it as the ill-starred Prince's hiding place seems very probable. It affords an excellent outlook, is inaccessible, and is one of the most unlikely places in the kingdom for prince or peasant to abide in.

Pursuing the upward track, the party in due course gained the *col* which separates the glen of the Uisge Aulder from the basin of Loch a' Bhealaich-Bheithe. At this point the edge of the mist was reached. The view up had been chiefly the retrospect toward Loch Rannoch and Rannoch Moor. The route at this point turns sharply to the left, and follows the burn, which here comes into view, past the snowfields on the east side of the mountain, and so to the top. It is at first exceedingly steep and the ground rough and stony, but the upper part consists of gentle undulations over which the walking is very easy and pleasant. The first of the snowfields is of very peculiar interest: from its

sides or corners descend two burns, one the Allt a' Bhealaich Bhreabaich, which joins the Uisge Aulder, draining into Loch Ericht, and so by the Tay into the German Ocean; the other, Allt a' Bhealaich-bheithe, descends to Loch a' Bhealaich-Bheithe, thence to Loch Pattack, thence by the Pattack, Loch Laggan, the Spean, and the Lochy to the Atlantic.

The summit of the mountain is flat and very extensive, and somewhat resembles Braeriach; the whole plateau is over 3500 feet above sea level. The east side is precipitous, and great care must be taken in mist to hold a course, sufficiently to the left, if the ascent is made, as in this case, from the south. As the party crossed the undulating ground leading to the summit, splendid views were obtained of these precipices and their rocky corries (Garbh-choire and Garbh-choire Beag), in which the snow lay to a great depth. Close to the rock the radiation of the heat had eaten it away, showing a depth of some 15 feet. As the summit was neared, the mist cleared away, and though the distant view was still obscured, there were magnificent glimpses of the masses of the nearer mountains, and of Loch a' Bhealaich-Beithe and Loch Pattack in the foreground, while away to the south-east rose the cone of Schichallion.

The cairn (3757) reached, a meeting of the Club was duly constituted, under the presidency of our genial chairman, Professor Cameron, D.D., who, in a few well-chosen remarks, congratulated the Club on the accomplishment of the projected excursion in the face of untoward circumstances. Thereafter, one of the party was duly admitted a member, and a vote of thanks passed to Sir John W. Ramsden for the facilities granted by him for the occasion.

The descent was made by Coire Gleadhrach Beag to the Bealach Dubh. Starting about 3.30, the descent to the path in the Bealach was rapidly accomplished. The views of the hills that form the Bealach Dubh, including Ben Alder itself with its great rock fissures, were very fine. The most striking is Sgor Iutharna, a ridge descending from Geal-charn (3688) on the east. This Sgor, seen from a distance, either sideways, or projected against the hills

behind, presents no unusual feature. But seen from close below, it is really a most remarkable object. It rises almost precipitously on either side from a narrow base and comes to an edge like the blade of a knife. It was dubbed "the razor edge": its ascent looks stiffish, but would certainly be an undertaking of great interest.

Following the route laid down on the O.S. map, the party found itself in due time on the margin of Loch Pattack, but on the wrong side of Allt a' Chaoil-reidhe (Culrea), and without a bridge. The stream was in spate, and from 8 to 10 feet deep at places. There was nothing for it but to ford it; which accomplished in safety, Loch-ericht Lodge was soon reached, and the boats found waiting. They had moved up in the meantime, and the row home was now only about five miles. The non-smokers got first aboard and launched, at once establishing a strong lead. The loch was beautifully calm and smooth, and Ben Alder stood out clear in the western sky, affording a delightful retrospect. Its rock-corrie'd sides, still plentifully splashed with snow on the east, north, and north-west, made an imposing picture—especially when contrasted with the comparative tameness of the ascent from Alder Bay—and indicated the north, by Leth-chas an Fharaidh, on the ridge between Bealach Dubh and Bealach Bheithe, as *the* upward route. A spurt of a mile widened the gap between the boats, and the smokers, who were evidently demoralised, failed to make any impression on the position of the leader. The landing-place was reached a few minutes before nine, the smokers being a good second, some 500 yards behind. It was now their turn to submit to the chaff, which was very abundant. Thus ended the Loch Ericht regatta, honours being easy. The feelings of the combatants for several days thereafter testified to the reality and severity of the struggle.

The slight hardships of the day were soon forgotten in the comfortable repast awaiting our return to the hotel. Everything had not turned out quite as planned, but new and unexpected sources of enjoyment had emerged as compensation. Dalwhinnie is an excellent centre for hill-

climbing, while the proximity of the Truim and Loch Ericht provides an alternative recreation should the elements prove unfavourable for mountaineering. The hotel is comfortable, and, let it be added, the charges very moderate.

Those of us who could afford the time spent the forenoon of the 11th in exploring the neighbourhood of Dalwhinnie, which is quite charming: Ben Alder in all his majesty was clear and distinct, and in other directions the views were extensive and varied. By mid-day the Club had resolved itself into its elements, each engrossed with his individual plans and interests, and the Club's summer excursion for 1894 had passed into a sweet reminiscence—perhaps a pleasure to be one day renewed.