

## THE CLUB AT BENCLEUCH.

By the Rev. GEORGE WILLIAMS, F.S.A.Scot.

“What hills are like the Ochil hills ?  
There's nane sae green, tho' grander ;  
What rills are like the Ochil rills ?  
Nane, nane on earth that wander”.

MONDAY, the 2nd of May, was like a piece of nice, warm, and tender meat sandwiched between two slices of soaky bread. It was preceded and succeeded by sad, bad weather for mountaineering ; but, being itself favourable, the reader will want no further assurance that the excursion to Bencleuch was an enjoyable one. The writer, who was honoured with an invitation as the Club's guest, was frequently at his barometer, both on Saturday and Sunday, and was much delighted to find that Monday was fine.

After breakfast at the Golden Lion Hotel, Stirling, we drove to Alva, passing within a few yards of that most conspicuous of all our Scottish monuments, which was erected on the Abbey Craig some thirty years ago in honour of Wallace. The tower is between two and three hundred feet high. We had the town of Bridge of Allan, locally called “the Bridge”, or “the Brig”, on our left. Bridge of Allan is associated with health and mellow breezes, although the extent of its churchyards and cemetery is somewhat suggestive of the contrary.

We got a fine view of the sloping hills of Cleish and Saline in the distance. Passing Airthrey Castle, we thought of the two Haldanes, who sold their possessions and gave the money and themselves to the cause of evangelical religion in last century, and to whom we owe not a little of our religious liberty.

The Cairngorm and other northern mountains are all so old that their comparative ages are seldom thought of and seldom taken any account of ; but it is otherwise in this



neighbourhood. On the south side of the Forth basin, the Campsie Fells with outliers extend from near Loch Lomond to Stirling. It might appear that this range was connected with that of the Ochils, the connecting links being Craigforth, Stirling Castle Rock, and the Abbey Craig. They are, however, of very different ages. Craigforth, standing grand in green, is an extension into the Forth basin—an outlier—of the South-western range. These hills are made up of porphyritic lava-formed rocks; so also is Craigforth. Stirling Castle Rock, 420 feet above sea level, and Abbey Craig, not quite so high, are dolerite of the calciferous sandstone period, and have been revealed to us by denudation. The Ochils are lavas, tuffs, and agglomerates, set up, or, rather, laid down on the Old Red Sandstone Lake. The South-western range of hills, rendered respectable by such peaks as the Meikle Bin and King's Seat, are vastly younger, although not a whit prettier, than the venerable Ochils, which, again, are very much younger than the great mountains towering up in the west and north.

Stirling Castle Rock furnishes a good example of the "crag and tail" feature. The "crag" faces the west, whence the ice came, while the "tail" slopes towards the east, the direction taken by the departing ice. As we were descending the path in Tillicoultry glen, a large boulder of the conglomerate or plum-pudding kind, carried from the Braes of Doune by the ice-sheet, was seen and examined by several of the company.

The fifty feet sea beach, a prominent feature of the Forth valley, was pointed out as indicating a former level of the sea. The remains of several of the large Greenland whale have been exhumed from the carse clay, and canoes and weapons of war have been found embedded in it, giving evidence that *terra firma* has attained its present level in comparatively recent times.

We come to Menstrie, once the property of the Earl of Stirling, a statesman and poet of the time of James VI.—

"There's Alva, and Dollar, and Tillicoultry;  
But the bonny braes o' Menstrie bear awa' the gree".

"That's Tullibody", said one of the company, and we



spoke of Sir Ralph Abereromby, and of that other worthy connected with the district, over whom the devil, or some other malignant spirit, exulted:—

“Deedle, linkum, dodie !

I’ve gotten druncken Davie’s wife,  
The Smith o’ Tullibody”.

Alva is reached at last. It is a seat of the spinning industry, and, to all appearance, seems to be a thriving town. Mineral veins were discovered here last century, and two of them were worked with some success for cobalt and silver. It is said that the Communion cups of Alva Church were made of the native silver. But the silver industry of Alva did not prove a profitable one, and has long ago been given up. Was it Alva or the Leadhills to which the story of the “two holes” applies? Probably to both. “Do you see that hole”? asked the laird; “well, out of that hole I took £10,000”. Coming to another such hole, the laird dryly remarked, “an’ I put £10,000, sir, into that hole”.

Walking slowly up the Ben from Alva, and with downcast eye, we were in a position to pay some heed to the flora of BenCleuch, which, as far as we are concerned, may be dismissed in a single sentence. We were not sufficiently well acquainted with the rarer plants to make any noteworthy finds; besides, it was only the first week of May, and a rather cold spring, so that only three or four hill flowers were out. We noticed *Carex praecox* within 50 feet of the summit; *Viola canina*, very dwarfish, at about 1,500 feet of elevation; and what will the genial and intelligent Senior Vice-President (who did and said so much to make the excursion a success) say to us if we include in our list a *Potentilla fragariastrum*? Of course, we saw almost no heather on this hill. Had it not been for the ewes that had lately completed the big work of the season, with the result playfully skipping at their feet, the occasional loyal and royal salute of a mountain lark, and the weird scream of the plover, we observed little of animal life during our climb.

The summit has an elevation of 2,363 feet. In an article compiled from the account of the O. S. Triangulation of Scotland, and contained in the “Journal” (Vol. I., p.



165), our situation relative to other prominent mountains is sufficiently well defined. We are there authoritatively informed what we ought to have seen, if the clouds and sky had been more propitious and the blustering wind more pitiful. Our view, however, from the summit was not unimpressive:—

“A tumultuous waste of huge hill-tops”—

but one would have liked the wind to have been less wintry and watery, that one might sit down and drink it slowly in.

Most lordly among his peers stood Ben Lomond, with the Cobbler, Ben Vane, Beinn Ime, and the Arrochar Ben Vorlich at his back. Ben Ledi (a name which is persistently and poetically explained as “the hill of God”, but which is more correctly and characteristically interpreted as “the hill of slopes”, Beinn Leathadich), flanked by Ben Venue, Ben A’an, and the Hills of Balquhidder, immortalised by Scott, Tannahill, and Stevenson, and presiding over and contributing to the grandeur of Scotland’s grandest scenery, is a most “kenspeckle” feature in the landscape. Ben More and Am Binnein were readily recognised. Rugged Stuc a Chroin and Ben Vorlich (*vide* “Journal”, Vol. II., p. 11) were distinct landmarks to the spectator. We failed to see Ben Nevis, which ought to have been visible over the shoulder of Meall Ghaordie. Ben Lawers, Perthshire’s highest mountain, like everything truly great, was plain and unassuming; Ben Chonzie was more prominent, being nearer. Schichallion will always demand the mountaineer’s attention from the scientific researches aided by it; but, if we saw it at all, we were not impressed by its form. The Sidlaw Hills, “the Sidlies”, and the Fifeshire Lomonds seemed at our feet. Towards the east a fair view of Loch Leven, sacred to anglers, and in whose isle Queen Mary was kept prisoner, was obtained. The Bass Rock, Berwick Law, Calton Hill, and Arthur’s Seat were invisible. We were all struck by the “clear winding” Devon, as it slowly and laboriously pushed its way to the Forth. The numerous towns and villages on both sides of the Forth, whose bosom bore quite a fleet of sailing vessels, proved that we were looking upon one of the richest, if not one of the finest, landscapes of our native land.



The view towards the south has been given by a member of the Club, as seen on a previous visit:—"We noted Dun Rig, on the borders of Peebles and Selkirk, and Hart Fell, on the march between the former county and Dumfries; while Tinto, in Lanark, almost due south, had for more than an hour appeared spectral over the broad expanse of flat land between it and the Ochils. . . . Goat Fell, 68 miles off, was seen obtruding his shadow-like pow, faint, yet perfectly distinct". (*Vide* also "Journal", Vol. I., p. 73.)

Some Club business having been satisfactorily transacted, we bade good-bye to the summit of BenCleuch and made for Tillicoultry.

The burgh of Tillicoultry is pleasantly situated, and owes much of its prosperity to the burn by whose banks we descended. We observed several large woollen factories all driven by this stream. Freestone and coal found in the neighbourhood help to make this a thriving place. A little to the north of the town, on a rugged and steep basaltic height, we observed the ruins of a circular fort or castle, described in one of the earlier volumes of the Society of Scottish Antiquaries.

The drive from Tillicoultry to Stirling was made by the south side of the Abbey Craig, and thus we got a good view of Cambuskenneth Abbey, which, by the way, was in ancient times known as the "Church of St. Mary in Stryvelin". Stirling was entered *via* the Old Bridge, which, for its beauty, historical associations, and antiquity, was greatly admired. This bridge was the scene of the battle in which Wallace and his Scottish band defeated the English invaders in 1297. With the exception, perhaps, of a portion of the West Church, this old bridge is the most venerable and interesting erection in or near the town of Stirling.

The company dined at the Golden Lion Hotel at six o'clock, delighted with their visit to the Ochils—the most distant "one-day excursion" in which the Club, in its corporate capacity, had taken part.