

ACROSS CREAG MEAGHAIDH.

BY ALEX. INKSON M'CONNOCHIE.

CREAG MEAGHAIDH, as an individual summit, is popularly associated with Loch Laggan, and not without reason; but it looks down on Glen Roy as well as on the valley of the Spean. The name, however, embraces the group (or range) on the north-west shore of Loch Laggan which is drained on the opposite side by the Spey and the Roy. But the upper portions of these rivers are quite outside the beaten track, and so the excellent highway along the right bank of the loch is on the whole the most convenient base for climbing "the lofty Corryarder, the haunt of eagles and of clouds", as Creag Meaghaidh is called in Mrs. Grant's "Letters from the Mountains".

The view of the Creag Meaghaidh group from Garva Bridge on the Spey attracted attention on our westward walk from Newtonmore. Carn Liath (3298) there forms the background; the foreground is the little glen formed by Allt Choire a' Bhein, beautifully wooded in parts. Looking down Strathspey from the bridge there are only two houses, Garvamore and Garvabeg, to be seen; looking up, what a prospect!—mountains and hills with jagged contours, a few with trees on their lower slopes, but no cultivation, no houses—for the strath is there given over to sheep and grouse. Beyond Garvamore (westward) there is only one inhabited house, Meallgarbha, and it will probably soon be in the hands of the forester, for in a wooden building there—which puzzled us a long way off—fawns from Ardverikie were being reared for a new deer forest, Corrieyairack. At Meallgarbha we parted company with Wade's great road to Fort Augustus *via* the Pass of Corrieyairack, and thereafter we hugged the left bank of the Spey by an indifferent cart-track, better marked on the map than on the ground. Deserted Shesgnan was

duly passed; the shepherd had gone, but the house may find a tenant when the fawns at Meallgarbha receive their freedom. The next point of interest passed is Loch Spey, generally regarded as the source of that river; then we walked warily, for we were soon to change the watershed, to leave Strathspey for Glen Roy—but a sheep fence saved us discussion, and gave an opportunity of leaping from Badenoch into Lochaber. The nature of the ground there is indicated by the respective altitudes of Loch Spey (1142) and the col (1151); the “back-bone” of Scotland is not very apparent in this neighbourhood. In a short time we found ourselves at solitary Luibh-chonnal, near the confluence of the Allt Chonnal with the Roy, with Creag Meaghaidh facing our quarters for the night. Here the Roy as it drops at a right angle into the centre of the glen has a fall of some note, the width of which seems as great as its height. We were lulled to sleep by its musical rhythm; it sounded not unlike the Garbh Uisge as heard at night from under the Shelter Stone.

Luibh-chonnal is a paradise for the mountaineer; go in what direction one may, hills are at once encountered, and the forester, as yet, troubles not. It has, however, one drawback which we cannot avoid mentioning, so lively is our recollection of its midges. Hitherto we had laboured under the belief that for fierceness and numbers the midges of Rothiemurchus were *facile principes*; but their cousins of Glen Roy have now that distinction in our long and varied experience. Our only satisfaction was that they were quite impartial in their attacks; even our host had to give up cutting his meadow grass, as he could not stand so long as to sharpen his scythe.

We know now that the so-called parallel roads of Glen Roy mark the gradual subsidence of the water in that valley as the melting glacier at its west end set it free—peradventure the ground has not yet thoroughly dried, and so midges abound! A fragment of these “roads” may be traced even at the head of the glen; it extends in an easterly direction from the Roy Fall. These roads, although wonderfully clear when viewed

from a distance under favourable light, are nevertheless often very obscure when we come to stand upon them. Sometimes, indeed, they seem to vanish altogether in ghost-like fashion, so shadowy and vague is the outline of what remains. The clearness of the lines at a distance seems to depend upon some subtle difference in the shade of light, or colour, due either to alteration of the angle at which the surface is presented to the light or to some change in the character of the vegetation covering it. The lines are perfectly level, strictly parallel, and run along the bare mountain-sides as neatly as if drawn with a ruler and pen. They sweep round the shoulders of the hills, wind into their side-recesses, and encircle all the upper part of the valley, everywhere preserving the same rigid parallelism and the same undeviating horizontality. They look all too mathematically regular for the work of Nature, and yet they seem on too grand a scale to have been traced by mere mortal hands. No wonder that the imaginative Highlanders ascribed them to the ancient heroes of their race, and saw in these lines the hunting-roads of Fingal and his companions, that they had made for chasing the deer. They call them "Casan", or "the footpaths"; for, on climbing up to them, they are each found to consist of a green ledge, or narrow terrace, jutting out from the face of the hill; so that they actually serve as convenient tracks for walking on. During the glacial period the ice upon the west side of Scotland seems to have been vastly thicker than it was on the east, owing, no doubt, to the snowfall having been much heavier in the former district, just as is now the case with the rainfall there. The amount of rain in the West Highlands is twice or three times what it is on the east coast. This is due not so much to the greater height of the hills as to the fact that the clouds of vapour coming from the Atlantic have most of their moisture condensed there; it is there that the wet sponge is first squeezed. In Lochaber, particularly, the volume of the streams in relation to the areas they drain is remarkable. The honour of establishing the origin of the parallel roads in Glen Roy and other Lochaber glens belongs to an

Aberdeenshire geologist, Dr. T. F. Jamieson, to whose papers in the *Journal* of the Geological Society the present writer expresses his indebtedness. Dr. Jamieson's "Recapitulation" may be fittingly added: That the parallel roads are the beaches of freshwater lakes; that these lakes seem to have arisen from glaciers damming the mouths of the valleys, and reversing their drainage; that the date of these lakes is posterior to the great land-glaciation of Scotland; that neither the sea nor any diluvial catastrophe has, since the time of the lakes, approached the 850-foot line—therefore the chief submergence of the glacial period must have preceded the formation of the roads, or else not have been so extensive as to reach them.

It was at Luibh-chonnal that, about forty years ago, Dr. Jamieson first studied the mystery of the parallel roads. His explanation of the matter was accepted by such giants in the scientific world as Murchison, Lyell, and Darwin, as may be seen from the following letters (three of them to Dr. Jamieson) in possession of the writer:—

BATH,
Dec. 11, 1861.

MY DEAR SIR,

I have too long delayed to thank you for your *most interesting* account of your foray in Lochaber.

I have long been of opinion that we have as yet had nothing satisfactory as to the origin of the Parallel roads, and I rejoice to see that you have now got into what seems to me in all probability to be the *right road*.

With your experience in the phenomena of our Highland glens and their sources, I confidently hope that you will win the spurs in this long-contested tournament. . . .

Yours sincerely,

ROD. MURCHISON.

DOWN, BROMLEY, KENT,
Oct. 14, 1862.

MY DEAR LYELL,

I return Jamieson's letter. I have no comments, except to say that he has removed all my difficulties, and that now and for evermore I give up and abominate Glen Roy

and all its belongings. It certainly is a splendid case, and wonderful monument of the old ice period. You ought to give a wood-cut. How many have blundered over these horrid shelves!

. . . . I do believe every word in my Glen Roy paper is false.

Ever yours,

C. DARWIN.

Jan 27th

Down,
Bromley,
Kent, S.E.

My dear Sir

I am much obliged for your note which has been forwarded to Sir C. Lyell. - The fact seems very important; and I trust, I, for one, for ever and ever give up the marine theory; but I do it with a groan. -

My dear Sir

Yours sincerely

C. Darwin

DOWN, BROMLEY, KENT, S.E.,
Jan. 24th, [1863.]

MY DEAR SIR,

I have just received your Glen Roy paper in MS., and it seems to me not only conclusive but admirably done and most interesting. I heartily congratulate you on having solved a problem which has puzzled so many and which now

throws so much light on the grand old glacial period. As for myself, you let me down so easily that, by Heavens, it is as pleasant as being thrown down on a soft hay-cock on a fine summer's day. There are other men who would have had no satisfaction without hurling us all on the hard ground and then trampling on us. You cannot do the trampling at all well—you cannot even give a single kick to a fallen enemy!

My seeing your MS. shows that I am referee, which ought to be a secret; but, as there can be no doubt about my report, there can be no wrong in my want of secrecy.

With the most sincere admiration, pray believe me,

Yours sincerely,

CH. DARWIN.

Luibh-chonnal, it may be mentioned, boasts of a mineral well, the smell of which was enough for us, though a Clubman declared that it was "in no way inferior" to Strathpeffer or even the Wine Well of Peterhead! The "language question" is in a topsyturvy state in these parts. In Upper Badenoch we started a conversation with a venerable lady at her own door, but no response seemed forthcoming. The mystery was quickly solved by a young lady who came to the rescue with the remark, "Oh! grandma doesn't know a word of English". The rising generation at the head of Glen Roy is precisely in the same condition—a circumstance which is remarkable, and the only one of its kind we have experienced in our Highland wanderings.

We started from Luibh-chonnal at 7.15 a.m., with the cairn of Creag Meaghaidh appearing and disappearing as the restless mist permitted. It had rained heavily during the early morning, and had not quite ceased as we parted with our kindly host and his colliers at the Fall. We kept by the banks of the Roy all the way to Loch Roy—no easy matter, for its tributary and almost parallel streams are bewildering. Moreover bogs and hags keep one on the *qui vive*. Loch Roy is enclosed in a magnificent corrie—both corrie and loch reminded us somewhat of Lochnagar, only the crags of the Roy corrie are not so high, and grass is not wanting. The loch attracted attention at a distance

from the apparent greenness of its waters, but sedges were found to be the cause of its peculiar colour; yet it has sandy banks, and its chief feeder toppled over the crags in a headlong descent. Fallen debris is responsible for the loch, two huge "arms" almost embracing the mountain tarn. We lingered half-an-hour here, then scrambled up the steep slope on the west side, landing on a wide shelf with the famous "Window" and two cairns in front of us.

The "Window" of Choir Arder is a great "Eag", a long and deep cut in the mountain which is prominent from many points, particularly from Ben Muich Dhui (*C.C.J.*, II., 84). It is unquestionably *the* feature of Creag Meaghaidh, and, with its neighbouring corrie and the loch at the bottom of its perpendicular crags, renders the climb peculiarly interesting. Prince Charles Edward Stuart passed through the "Window" twice, as may be learned from Blaikie's "Itinerary", published by the Scottish History Society.

There is a great grassy plateau stretching from the top of the "Window" to the cairn, and beyond. There is an intermediate cairn at a lesser elevation (*c.* 50 feet), a huge, ungraceful and now somewhat dilapidated erection which owes its existence to an unfortunate enthusiast on Loch Laggan-side. The cairn (3700) is neatly built and still retains a part of the staff. We saw many ptarmigan on the plateau, and one solitary snow bunting at the cairn.

The weather had now settled down to a gentle rain, but the sun seemed to be continually struggling with the clouds. Some mountaineers contend, ourselves among the number, that it is under such conditions that the best views are obtained. The present occasion certainly upheld that assertion, and we positively revelled in the prospect. Peak after peak appeared and disappeared in the most entrancing manner, but it was useless to attempt identification. Has not the unknown charms? We could see that we were surrounded by mountains whose graceful outlines and irregular contours put to shame our flat-topped though higher Cairngorms. One of the charms of the prospect was that at no time could we see all round the horizon;

all would be shrouded in mist, when suddenly the curtain would be lifted for a minute in, say, a westerly direction, and a forest of tops would demand attention. Then the mist descended as unexpectedly as it had risen, and the horizon become temporarily clear towards the north—and so on till we were favoured, in instalments, with a complete view, some portions of the horizon, particularly to the south-west, appearing oftener than others. Numerous lochs and tarns were seen both from the plateau and from the cairn.

The day was still young (10.30) when we turned our backs on the cairn and made for the crags at the top of Choir Arder. These precipices, with their grand gullies, are appalling, though they abound in verdure. How quietly the lochan nestles at the bottom of the corrie, 1500 feet below! Looking to the left, in the direction of the "Window", the steepness and greenness of the left side of the gorge were particularly remarkable, and we wondered how the sheep, dotted all over, could maintain their footing. Some were contentedly feeding on little isolated plateaus from which there seemed to be no retreat. We turned away from the top of the cliffs as a descent there was by no means inviting, and in a few minutes were delighted with a new scene—the lochan to which Meall Coire Coille na Froise gives shelter. The lochan lies at the foot of precipitous rocks, rich with the vegetation which is characteristic of the range. We were lured by its charms to make it burn our guide in the descent to Loch Laggan; perhaps, however, we should have taken the Prince's route. In any case the descent is a considerable one, for the altitude of Loch Laggan is only 819 feet.

Loch Laggan is one of the most beautiful of our Highland lochs. Did not the Queen spend a month in 1847 at Ardverikie on its southern shore? The sun smiled on our descent and for the rest of the day. Her Majesty wrote of the road along the loch, it "is extremely pretty"; it is also extremely level, so much so that we easily made, despite our knapsacks, three miles in 39 minutes. But we very properly spent the surplus minutes and a few more

at the hotel at the upper end, from which we laid a course to Dalwhinnie station.

We had started on this expedition so hurriedly that we were without the O.S. map, a want which we often deplored. True, we had "Bartholomew" and a compass, yet in unguarded moments we listened to a multitude of local and somewhat contradictory instructions. And accordingly we crossed the Mashie at the wrong point, and naturally blunder followed blunder. We were promptly and well punished for our temporary aberration; how the sun broiled us as we crossed kopje after kopje without, as we learned too late, decreasing the distance to the Highland Railway! Looking back on that misadventure it now seems to us that it was only by sheer doggedness that we reached Glen Truim that evening. As we blundered along without apparently getting forward we began to lose hopes of catching our train for Aviemore; evening seemed to come before its time, but we declined to consult our watches—for the pace could not be increased, and to add to our anxieties we had left "Bartholomew" at a burn-side. At last came the welcome sound of a railway whistle, but there was still a weary trudge ere the station came in sight. We pushed on; and our train passed us as we approached the distillery! It was followed, before we entered the station, by a goods train; yet we did not despair. A coal train came along in half-an-hour and ended our troubles. Having obtained the necessary permission (for due consideration) and parted with all possible claims for damages *en route*, we set out on the last section of a two days' round—for we had started from Aviemore—and arrived at the base of Craigellachie about 9.15 p.m. in excellent condition for dinner.