

## THE CLUB AT MOUNT BLAIR.

BY THOMAS KYD.

THE usual good fortune of the Club in its excursions received a check during the past year; on the two first rain and mist prevailed, and even on the third, though there was a decided improvement, there were showers to spare. Nevertheless the climbs were all duly and successfully made, and on each occasion the day was thoroughly enjoyed. The official programme for 9th July was thus described by the Secretary:—

“The Club’s excursion to Mount Blair marks a new departure in its mid-summer fixture. It was deemed judicious that an attempt should be made to arrange the outing so that for once the party, if so disposed, could complete the excursion and return to town the same day. But after Mount Blair had been selected doubts arose as to the possibility of its being negotiated in a day excursion, and accordingly the writer was directed by the chairman to put the matter to the test of experience, and make the necessary arrangements. The result may be stated at once—this mountain, which enjoys such a reputation in Forfarshire, as well as in many other parts of Scotland, is worthy of the Club’s patronage, and its ascent can with ease be made in a single day’s programme.

“Kirriemuir is, on the whole, the most convenient railway station for the occasion. After breakfast at the Ogilvy Arms Hotel there, the party will have a drive of fifteen miles—‘A delightful admixture of moor, mountain, loch, and stream, woodland, strath, and glen, lends a charm to this drive that is simply unequalled in the district. Variety—that is its strong feature. At every turn a change of scene greets the eye, and the whole forms a glorious panorama which slowly unfolds, to the delight of the beholder, a series of natural pictures, ever fresh and ever new’.



“Our companion rather flippantly described the road as ‘switchbacky’; that is accounted for by so many watersheds having to be crossed before Glen Isla can be entered. The road leads through Kirkton of Kingoldrum, past the Loch of Lintrathen (the water supply of Dundee), and through Kirkton of Glenisla to Alrick on the right bank of the River Isla. On the occasion of our experimental excursion we were fortunate in finding an encampment of Ordnance Surveyors at Wester Doldy in Glen Isla, and thus ascertaining beyond dispute the best route to the summit.

“Mount Blair, which has an altitude of 2441 feet, is situated between two glens, Shee and Isla, and as it is not blocked by high hills on the south, commands an extensive prospect, which, owing to the vexatious heat-haze, we had to take on trust. The ascent from Alrick (900 feet) is a very simple matter; when, after a walk over heather, an altitude of about 1600 feet has been reached, a sheep-fence leads the way to the cairn. The hill is pastured by sheep, and appeared from the lively ‘cheepers’ we saw also to form an excellent grouse moor, but the noisiest inhabitants were curlews, who never ceased to express their objections to our presence. We could just distinguish through the haze a long wreath of snow far up Glen Isla.

“‘Mount Blair commands a very beautiful view—Strathmore and the Sidlaws, with Dundee Law and one huge chimney appearing through the gap by Auchterhouse, the Lomonds in Fife, and the low line of the East Lothian hills; then to the east the sea by Montrose, the tall spire of which can be distinctly seen; to the north, the fine corries at the head of Glen Isla, with Lochnagar, Glas Maol, and, farther away, the Cairngorms. The most prominent feature in the view, however, is the fine outline of the Beinn a’ Ghlo group, with Beinn Iutharn and Glas Thulachan to the north, and Beinn Vuroch and Beinn Bhrackie to the south. Between the latter and Schichallion, Buchaille Etive and the Glencoe hills are seen, while a little to the north of west, in the extreme distance, a hill is visible which is said to be Ben Nevis, but which may be Ben Alder. South of Schichallion, Ben Lawers shows to great advantage, then the twin peaks of Ben More and Am Binnein; while to the south of them again, Ben Chonzie, above Crieff, is the most prominent hill; and



across the strath the Ochils can be seen stretching away down to Stirling'.

"The ruined Castle of Forter is about two miles up the Glen from Alrick. The burning of it by the Campbells in 1640 is commemorated in the ballad of 'The Burning o' the Bonnie Hoose o' Airlie'.

"Conveyances will be in waiting at Forter Castle on the descent for the Glenisla Hotel, where a halt will be made for dinner. This hotel is delightfully situated at Kirkton, and the arrangement to dine there will doubtless be found most satisfactory.

"After dinner, the drive to Kirriemuir will be resumed. 'Thrums' will probably be reached in time to allow a visit to the the now celebrated 'Window'; also to the (so called) Hill of Kirriemuir, which is associated with 'The Little Minister'.

"Kirriemuir might also with advantage be made the starting point for a Spring or Autumn Excursion to Cat Law (2196 feet), where we should say a specially fine prospect is to be obtained. Even from the Hill of Kirriemuir (631 feet), which practically forms part of the town, a local guide-book ('Through Thrums') gives the following hills as being visible: the Sidlaws, the Ochils, Ben Ledi, Ben Chonzie, Ben Laoigh, Ben Lawers, Cat Law, Lochnagar, Dreish, St. Arnold's Seat, Catherthun, Finella Hill, the hills of Garvock, Finhaven, and Turin".

Kirriemuir was reached by the majority of the party by the morning train from Aberdeen; but others crossed the hills from Milton of Clova; a clerical member cycled from Dunkeld; and some had made a "week-end" of the excursion. Mr. George Duncan thus describes the experiences of the Clova contingent:—

"We had crossed, on the previous Saturday, from Ballater to Clova, over the Capel, in brilliant weather, and spent a restful Sunday under the hospitable roof of 'The Ogilvie Arms'. Our intention was to meet the main party of the Club on Monday at the top of Mount Blair, and we resolved to cut straight across the country from Glen Doll to Glen Isla, taking the summit of Mayar on our way. Accordingly we made an early start on Monday in most unpropitious weather.



We crossed the White Water at the bridge beyond the Doll Shooting Lodge, and ascended towards Mayar by the stalkers' path up Corrie Kilbo. It had drizzled steadily from the time we started, and, long before we reached the cairn of Mayar, we were enveloped in thick mist. The drizzle degenerated into undoubted rain—indeed, a more perfect sample of 'British hill-weather' could hardly be imagined. From Mayar we struck a course, which, crossing the head streams of the Prosen, landed us in Glen Isla, by way of the Glencally Burn. I think we must have crossed South Craig, but, owing to the exceedingly thick mist, this is mere conjecture. At all events we reached the Glen Isla road, having had quite enough of hill and bog walking for one day, and in no condition of mind or body to tackle Mount Blair. Indeed, I have rarely experienced a worse hill day”.

The cyclist was more fortunate:—

“The conditions were favourable for cycling, as the roads were good, and I had the wind on my back (a rather uncommon experience in cycling!). I left about 6.30 a.m., and, after surmounting the heavy braes about Dunkeld, settled down to a steady 12 miles an hour, and covered the 31 miles to Kirriemuir in rather less than 3 hours. Towards Kirriemuir the roads were getting rather wet, and so was I”.

The programme was duly carried out—with a variation in the case of about half the company. When the party arrived at Alrick the weather was most unpromising, but the chairman, Mr. Porter, was inexorable, and truly his followers had their reward. The view as the summit was neared was intermittent, but just such as mountaineers love—mist and sun struggling, the result in favour of the mist. A candidate for membership was admitted at the cairn, and thereafter a bee-line was made by compass for Forter Castle, to which the ladies and the less venturesome members had continued the drive from Alrick, under the leadership of Mr. Copland.

Immediately to the north of Mount Blair stretches westward the Ballach Pass, over which a carriage road connects Glen Isla and Glen Shee. Within a hundred yards of this pass, on the east side of the road leading to



Tulchan Lodge and Canlochan, the property of the Earl of Airlie, stands Forter Castle, an ancient stronghold of the Ogilvy family, now roofless and in ruins. In the sixth decade of the sixteenth century the lands of Forter were sold by the Coupar-Angus monks to Lord Ogilvy of Airlie, whose chief seat was in Airlie parish, hard by the site of the Airlie Castle of our own day, where the Melgum Water joins the Isla. But the troubles of the times drove the Ogilvies up the glen, where they built Newton Castle at Bellaty, named from the Newton Burn which there runs into the Isla, and Forter Castle four miles higher, guarding one of the roads open to invaders "by the back o' Dunkeld". In August, 1591, the same Lord Ogilvy was attacked by the seventh Earl of Argyll with 500 clansmen, who ravaged Glen Isla and caused him and his wife to flee.

Forter Castle suffered more severely in the Covenanted struggles from 1639 to 1641. Lord Ogilvy's son and successor had been created Earl of Airlie, and had taken refuge in England rather than subscribe the Covenant. The Earl's son was by courtesy called Lord Ogilvy; his Christian name was James, and he was one of six successive chiefs of the clan of the same name, which was in even greater favour with the family three hundred years ago than the name of David afterwards became. He was left at home in his father's place, and successfully resisted an attack on Forter by the Earl of Montrose and the Earl of Kinghorn, who had been sent by the Committee of Estates, or Tables, Montrose being then on the Covenanted side. That party devolved upon the Marquis of Argyll, son of Ogilvy's assailant half-a-century before, to march by the heights of Angus, and find work to the Earl of Airlie and his friends, lest they should offer to assist Huntly. Nothing loth, Argyll marched eastwards with 5000 men. Lord Ogilvy meanwhile had gone south to be "wi' Charlie", either in ignorance of the approach of the invaders, or in the expectation that they would be ashamed to wreak their wrath on a defenceless castle. His departure, however, opened the way for the tragedy immortalised in the ballad of "The Burning o' the Bonnie Hoose o' Airlie".



The authenticated historical basis of the event is but meagre; and so, by the exercise of a little negative criticism, we might have eaten our simple luncheon in the



FORTER CASTLE.

humble farm buildings beside the castle walls, unruffled by the sad possibilities hinted in the various versions of the song. Lord Ogilvy's wife was Helen Ogilvy, daughter of



Lord Banff, and their children were Marion, Margaret, Mary, Helen, and David, the only son becoming his successor as third Earl of Airlie, and sending down the name of David to the Lord Ogilvy of the '45, and the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth Earls, the last succeeding to the title in his seventh year by his father's lamented death in South Africa on 11th June, 1900. There is little if any evidence that the Marquis of Argyll led the attack on the Castle of Forter in person. He wrote to his clansman, Dougal Campbell of Inverawe, bidding him "slay and demolish my Lord Ogilvie's hows of Forthar . . . cast off the irone yeattis and windows and tak down the roof, and if ye find it will be langsome ye shall fyre it weill so it may be destroyed". This ruthless order seems to have been carried out "when the corn grew green and yellow" about the 7th of July, 1640.

But it is in the ballad only that Forter Castle is known as "The Bonnie Hoose o' Airlie", a title which is warranted neither by its walls nor their surroundings, and which may have found a place in the verses by a confusion between it and the chief seat of the family in Airlie parish, beautiful both for architecture and for situation. The charge of murderous brutality made upon Argyll in Kinloch's version of the "Bonnie Hoose" is so obviously unfounded that it need be mentioned solely as an argument against the trustworthiness of the unsupported statements in the ballad generally. Argyll is there said to have thrown Lady Ogilvy out "oure her ain castle wa'", so that she never saw the plundering of Airlie. But after Forter lost its "riggin'", Lady Ogilvy found refuge in Kelly Castle, near Arbroath, the house of her grandmother Lady Drum. We may thus enter within the roofless walls of the plain oblong pile, with its porch, or perhaps tower, in the south-western corner; we may take note of the strength of the masonry and the hardness of the mortar, prepared in lime-kilns that still dot the glen; we may observe the scanty fireplaces, and count the small windows, and peep through the loopholes without encountering the spectre of any Lady Margaret (whose name was Helen) sacrificing the castle



by rejecting the advances of a long-discarded lover (who may not have been there at all), and offering her seven sons or more (when she had but one son) as a pledge of her loyalty to Charles the First.

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AT NETHY BRIDGE.

ANYTHING written? asks my friend of me  
In letter lighting here in far Strathspey :  
(He knew the sonnet as my somewhiles play.)  
And this my answer fortunate may be :—  
Not one poor line ; unto me spirit-free,  
Careless of fruitage, each gold flower-day  
Opening and closing in its calyx grey ;  
I write not, think not, look not, only see.  
Yet is there that's been written : on my soul  
Black mountains forest-furred, wild loch's eye-gleam,  
Red Sea of heather washing flat and knoll,  
Cot, farmhouse, corn-field silver-edged with stream,  
Are pencilled fadelessly by heaven's beam.  
Memory, well-pleased, doth the writ page up-roll.

WALTER MORISON, D.D.

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