

A HIGHLAND TOUR IN 1800.*

DR. JOHN LEYDEN, a poet and litterateur of some celebrity in the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, left Scotland in 1803 for India, "there to acquire, by the power of his wonderful genius, a foremost place in Oriental learning", and died at Batavia in 1811. He was the author of various works, but a "Tour in the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland in 1800" written by him is only now published. The manuscript of this work was purchased at Messrs. Sotheby's Rooms, London, about four or five years ago, and came into Mr. Sinton's hands two years since. The tour described was begun on July 14, and continued till October 1, 1800, Leyden accompanying two young foreigners who had studied at Edinburgh in the preceding winter. The manuscript consists of 152 closely-written pages, commences in the form of a journal, and is continued in the character of letters addressed to literary friends in Edinburgh, among them being Sir Walter (then plain Mr.) Scott. Dr. Leyden collected a great deal of valuable information regarding the literary antiquities and traditions of the Highlands, and in his "Journal" "many curious observations appear on the Ossian controversy, which still exercised the literati of the time". More than half the book is occupied with accounts of travel in the Western Highlands and Hebrides, but, as Dr. Leyden came through Inverness-shire from Ben Nevis and travelled south through Aberdeenshire, portions of his "Journal" have an interest for members of the Cairngorm Club.

In 1800, there was, of course, no "Observatory" road

* JOURNAL OF A TOUR IN THE HIGHLANDS AND WESTERN ISLANDS OF SCOTLAND IN 1800. By John Leyden. Edited, with a Bibliography, by James Sinton. William Blackwood & Sons. 1903.

to the summit of Ben Nevis, and apparently no track. Here is Leyden's account of his ascent—

The next morning after our arrival at Fort William (August 31), having provided a guide, we began to ascend Ben Nevis by a route which seemed winding and circuitous. Soon after we entered Glen Nevis we began to ascend gradually, winding along the foot of the mountain till we reached a gully of considerable depth, after passing a slender wood of birch. Ascending the gully, we began to climb a steep heathy declivity, shaping our course in a zigzag direction. The heath became more and more stunted as we proceeded, and at last we found nothing but yellow moss and gray stones, which occupied the whole side of the mountain and rendered it exceedingly difficult to advance. The day, which was at first remarkably fine, became now dull and leaden; and when we reached the top we found the view not only very circumscribed, but almost entirely divested of magnificence and grandeur. On the north side, Ben Nevis is steep but not precipitous; on the south, it is a vast, ragged, and uneven precipice, the height of which in some places is represented to be 500 yards. This precipice consists entirely of granite, which in numerous places has the appearance of regular strata, and is divided into blocks and slabs, generally of a rhombic form. The top of the hill is entirely covered with loose slabs and masses of the same substance, which, from the exterior, one would take to be slag. A few masses of vitrified slag, small and loose likewise, presented themselves, as well as various pieces of plum-puddingstone. The enormous precipice on the south side seems to have been formed in the same manner as the east side of the Skiddaw, by rending obliquely from the hill those enormous mountainous ridges on the south which are connected with the principal eminence, and little inferior to it in height. On the top of the hill, as well as in the chasms of the precipice, the snow lies unmelted through the whole summer, and this singularity very soon produced a match of snowballs. The top of the mountain is of considerable extent, and entirely covered with loose stones, chiefly granitine. The view from the mountain is extremely extensive, but by no means so grand as that from Cruchan Ben, as the subjacent country lies not in such wild and terrific disorder. From the one you see nothing but sharp ridges and peaks and narrow valleys; from the other you overlook,

indeed, numerous mountains, and see ridge rising behind ridge, but they are more distant, and the adjacent flat country is more extensive.

After examining the Parallel Roads of Glen Roy, spending a night at "a miserable inn" where there was not a particle of bread, and fasting twenty-nine hours, Leyden and his party crossed the Pass of Corryarrick—

Having procured three horses—for we were still fourteen miles from Fort Augustus—we proceeded towards the steep, bleak, rocky pass of Corryarrick, and ascended the zigzag, which I cannot think above a mile in length. The side of the mountain is indeed steep, bleak, and dismal, but neither great nor sublime. The soil over which the road passes along the declivity is wet and plashy, abounding in springs and void of canals or drains, which ought to have been formed in constructing the road. Near the top of the mountain it is not entirely covered with heath, but many spaces appear of a bare whitish surface, watery and full of loose stones. The day was extremely fine, but the view from Corryarrick was neither great, beautiful, nor picturesque. On the south it looked into the wild black region of Badenoch, surmounting the heathy hills which separate it from the similar district of Lochaber; on the west and north it extended from Ben Nevis over the hills of Lochaber, Glenelg, and Kintail to the gray heathy mountains on the confines of Ross; but the scene was neither diversified by variety nor striking from its native grandeur.

This description practically coincides with the impressions formed by the present writer, who crossed Corryarrick a dozen years ago, and who wrote at the time—

The road, once used for wheeled vehicles, has long since been abandoned, and has fallen into considerable decay; but it remains a very favourite route for pedestrians. It must be the length of the walk or the desire to get from the great Glen to Strathspey that makes it this, for the route has certainly no other attraction. It has been described to me as the most desolate and dreary walk in Scotland, and though it did not strike me as particularly desolate or dreary, I am free to confess that it is not decidedly attractive.

From Fort Augustus, our travellers proceeded to Inverness, and, visiting Nairn, Forres, and Elgin, proceeded to Fochabers over a district well wooded but discriminated by no characteristic scenery, and soon perceived the red, broken, and lofty banks of the Spey. The Spey descends with prodigious violence from the high inland district of Badenoch, but we did not see it in its magnificence. In its ordinary state it is not superior to the Tweed. The lower part of Strathspey is very fertile, and the greater part of the district is well sheltered with wood. The insipid bleak country by which it is surrounded causes it to be considered as beautiful.

It must be borne in mind, of course, that, a century ago, the "country side" in the North-East of Scotland must have had a totally different aspect from that which it has to-day; and this explains much of what must appear to present-day readers as curious, not to say extraordinary, description. For instance, Dr. Leyden gives this account of the view from Tap o' Noth—

The view from Noth is wild and desolate rather than picturesque. The nearest districts are covered with a brown uninterrupted heath, variegated with meadows and corn-fields, with few trees except in the immediate vicinity of great houses. It is bordered on the south side by the Dee's mountains, and northwards expands as far as the Paps of Caithness. The long hill of Benachie is one of the most picturesque objects, and there is a beautiful view of Huntly, in the vale of Strathbogie, towards the south-east.

Similarly,

The view from an eminence above Kildrummie is exceedingly wild, but it is extremely difficult to analyse it. It is not picturesque. It appears to be a desert, though intersected by numerous corn-fields, and containing many villages, cottages, and elegant houses. The heath, the natural covering of the country, is dun—short and uniform—uninterrupted by rocks or precipices. . . .

Ascending the hills above Kildrummie, the beautiful strath of the Don expands before the eye, variegated with green and yellow corn-fields, intermixed with long strips of heath, as the

natural character of the country seems to be similar to that of the Garioch and Strathbogie.

Again,

The view from Dunedeir is rather extensive than various. It commands a view of the Garioch, a flat fertile district when compared with the rest of the east coast we have passed. The horizon is skirted with brown, unbroken, heathy hills.

Finally, Aberdeen is reached, "its beauty enhanced by the flat insipid country we had left".

A visit is paid to Deeside, but the travellers did not go beyond Mar Lodge—had no time even to proceed to the Linn of Dee. At Kincardine O'Neil, "the scenery becomes truly picturesque and romantic, though it hardly aspires at the grand or sublime". The Pass of Ballater attracts attention, and the travellers "followed the windings of the Dee into Braemar, where the scenery becomes more bold and grand, though it remains equally romantic. Lofty ridges and spires of dun hills, steep declivities, narrow passes, and overhanging rocks present themselves more frequently, while the trees—especially the firs—become more huge and tall". The chief thing noted about Braemar, curiously enough, is that the Gaelic of the place is "deemed extremely barbarous"! From Braemar, Dr. Leyden and his companions travelled to Glenshee, proceeding up "Glen Beg"—"a bleak dismal unfertile valley"—to a pass, the name of which is omitted in Leyden's manuscript, but is said to "resemble considerably the pass of Corryarick". Doubtless the Cairnwell is meant.

Arrived at Perth, Dr. Leyden writes—"I may now congratulate myself on a safe escape from the Indians of Scotland, as our friend Ramsay denominates the Highlanders". Elsewhere he is equally uncomplimentary, for, writing on one occasion from Oban, he says—

Here am I in great spirits, listening to the sound of a bag-pipe and the dunning of some very alert Highlanders dancing the Highland fling with great glee. Though I have acquired a few Gaelic words and phrases, I am really in considerable danger of mistaking the house where I write for the tower of

Babel, for such a jargon of sound as that produced by a riotous company bawling Gaelic songs and chattering something very like Billingsgate, blending with English oaths and the humstrum of a Highland bagpipe, seldom assails any ears but those of the damned.

The attitude of the tourist and traveller to both Highland scenery and Highland people has changed very considerably since Leyden's day.