

A CAIRNGORM CLASSIC.

BY GEORGE DUNCAN.

THE name of John Hill Burton is a familiar one to Scotsmen who take an interest in the history of their country. By Aberdonians his name should be especially remembered as that of perhaps the most distinguished member of the Aberdeen group of historical scholars, of which other hardly less notable members were Joseph Robertson and George Grub. His "History" and such volumes as "The Book Hunter" and "The Scot Abroad" are, of course, Hill Burton's best-known works, but there is another work of his, not so well known, not a volume of learning and research, but the fruit of his favourite recreation, mountaineering, which is in its way as much of a masterpiece as any of his historical works. This is his monograph, "The Cairngorm Mountains", a little green volume, not very often met with nowadays, the comparative scarcity of which may possibly be a sufficient excuse for the following pages.

"The Cairngorm Mountains" was published by Messrs. Blackwood in 1864. To a large extent it consists of a retouched article contributed by the author to *Maga*, in 1847, and it may be said to be the earliest approach to something of the nature of a guide book to the Cairngorms. It is somewhat unfair, however, so to describe it. The mention of a mountaineering guide book nowadays suggests the notion of a formidable classification of routes and an exact measurement of distances and heights—the notion, in short, of something which, while it may be scientific, is certainly not literature; and he who expects detailed information on such matters will not go to Hill Burton's work for it. His work is something altogether different from and higher than a mere guide book: it is a bit of fine literature, a book that may be read and re-read with pleasure for its literary form alone.

Hill Burton is, indeed, somewhat impatient of guides,

whether in book or human form, and his work opens with an amusing story of a dream, of which a guide was the efficient cause. He had walked one day up the valley of Lauterbrunnen, and had then climbed the Wengern Alp. Next day he was on the Grindelwald glacier. Surely there was nothing in all this, he says, to call up the dreariest recollections of bygone days. Yet so it was—his dreams were crowded with reminiscences of petty persecutions of his school life, “endured under a hard, irritable pedagogue, who made his own life and the lives of all who came about him miserable”. This curious phenomenon had its cause. He had on this occasion, “for the first time in a life of many rambles, put himself, along with two hapless companions, under the jurisdiction of a *guide*”. The suffering of spirit then endured from “the bondage of guide-hood” made him vow that some day, when he had leisure, he would lift his testimony against the extension of the system of voluntary slavery to guides that is rooted “among the hapless class of persons denominated Tourists”, and he offers his work as an inducement to the rambler to shake himself free of guidance, to “take his feet in his hands”, and step forth independently on his wanderings. It is interesting to compare this early plea for freedom with the modern aspirations for guide-less climbing on the part of such writers as Mr. Mummery.

Comparison may be odious, but it is a valuable medium of explanation, and our author therefore proceeds to “set off” the merits of the Cairngorms by comparing them with Ben Nevis. He gives a description of an ascent of that mountain from Fort-William, in the course of which he descants on hill-walking generally and gives several useful hints to climbers. At the top he had an interesting meeting with a number of the staff of the Ordnance Survey, “with red coats, dark grey trousers, and fatigue caps”, engaged in the survey of the mountain. It was then undetermined whether Ben Nevis or Ben Muich Dhui was entitled to the premier place among the Scottish mountains, and it was this survey that settled the question and awarded the palm to the western Ben.

Burton pronounces Ben Nevis to be "in all respects a highly meritorious hill", but he finds stronger charms in Ben Muich Dhui. In a fine passage, he describes that mountain as standing apart from the everyday world in mysterious grandeur. The depth and remoteness of the solitude, he says, the huge mural precipices, the deep chasms between the rocks, the waterfalls of unknown height, the hoary remains of the primeval forest, the fields of eternal snow, and the deep black lakes at the foot of the precipices, are full of such associations of awe and grandeur and mystery as no other scenery in Britain is capable of arousing.

This enthusiastic admiration of the scenery of the Cairngorms, which will be readily sympathised with by all who have climbed these grand mountains and explored their wild and lonely recesses, forms the key-note of Hill Burton's volume. He proceeds to give some account of various excursions he has had among them, expressing, by the way, the opinion, now generally held, that the scenery of the range is most easily hit from the valley of the Spey, and he starts by describing the general view of the Cairngorms from the top of the lower hills between the Dee and Glen Lui. Into that long grassy glen, where everything is peace and softness, he then descends. Here, he says, "banks, lofty, but round and smooth, intervene to hide the summits of the mountains. The stream is not stagnant, but it flows on with a gentle current, sometimes through sedge or between grassy banks; elsewhere, edged by a beach of the finest yellow sand. The water is beautifully transparent, and even where it is deepest you may count the shining pebbles below. A few weeping birches, here and there, hang their graceful, disconsolate ringlets almost into the stream; the grass is as smooth as a shaven lawn". The meeting of Glen Lui Beg and Glen Derry is next reached, and the route to Ben Muich Dhui by the former of these glens is described. Loch Etchachan he compares with the lake near the Hospice of the Grimsel. Both scenes are alike "hard, leafless, and frozen-like", but, while the Alpine pass is one of the highways of

Europe, "few are the travellers that pass the edge of Loch Etchachan".

The scene at the summit of Ben Muich Dhui is picturesquely described in all its aspects—the startling proximity of the neighbouring mountains, the huge precipices of Braeriach, and the apparently endless expanse of hill-tops in the distance—and the climber is then taken to Loch Avon, by way of the Feith Bhuidhe burn, that "rumbling, irregular, unmeasured cataract" which tumbles down from Ben Muich Dhui to the loch. The mention of Loch Avon reminds Hill Burton of his old friend, the Ettrick Shepherd, with whom he had a standing feud about its extent. The Shepherd would have it that Loch Avon was twenty miles in length! His views on the subject were, however, by no means fixed. They formed, indeed, "a sort of guage of the Shepherd's spirits. In his sombre moments he appeared to doubt if he were quite correct in insisting that the length was twenty miles; when he was in high spirits he would not abate an inch of thirty". Loch Avon, Burton says, is like a fragment of the Alps imported and set down in Scotland. For his own part, he prefers the Pools of Dee and the Larig as a more peculiar and original piece of scenery, but he admits that to tourists in general Loch Avon may appear the finest feature in the Cairngorms. An Alpine devotee, he says, might realise, if he went there in winter, all the dangers, excitements, and phenomena of any of the great Alpine feats!

One or two experiences of climbs on Ben Muich Dhui are recounted by the author with great humour—one, in particular, when, losing his way, he was benighted on the hill-side, and ultimately found shelter for the night somewhere in Glen Avon, in a bothy built of the bent roots of pine trees and covered with turf. The sole article of furniture in the bothy was a trough, in which a drover, whom he had fallen in with, presented him with a supper of oatmeal and water. After supper, he fell asleep, only to be shortly afterwards wakened up by the entrance of ten other men of mysterious and surly aspect, talking Gaelic,

mingled with considerable swearing in the Scottish vernacular. They seemed to be either smugglers or poachers. All got to sleep somehow under the turf shelter, and there our author left them "in full snore" at sunrise!

An excursion to the Larig Ghru forms an interesting section of the book. In contradiction to what is now the accepted doctrine, Hill Burton adopts the Larig burn and not the Garchory stream as the main head-water of the Dee. He admits that authority is against him, but pleads that the Larig contains a greater volume of water, is more in the line of the glen, and does not join the Garchory in these great leaps which, "however surprising and worthy of admiration they may be in themselves, are not quite consistent with the calm dignity of a river destined to pass close to a university town".

For the scenery of the Larig, Hill Burton has unmeasured admiration. The scenery is entirely unlike any other part of Scotland, or any place one can see elsewhere. He compares it with Glencoe, but, grand and impressive as Glencoe is, it has no defiles so narrow as the Larig, and no precipices so grand as the wall of Braeriach.

The great water-runs that score the sides of the Larig—"trenches some forty or fifty feet deep, appearing as if they were made with a gigantic ploughshare"—recall the floods of 1829, and the awful experiences which the inhabitants of Upper Deeside had on the night of the 3rd of August in that year, when the old bridge at Ballater was swept away, and unspeakable damage was done along the whole course of the river. The author quotes the well-known passage in "The Deeside Guide", by James Brown—the *nom de plume* of his friend Joseph Robertson—in which the calamities of Ballater are vividly described, and he gives a number of interesting incidents of the floods which fell within his own knowledge.

In the concluding portion of his little volume, Hill Burton again takes up his parable, not only against guides and their "auxiliaries and accomplices", but also against other cognate systems of slavery. We are in all things, he says, too dutiful and laborious. "Perhaps it

is part of the great compensatory principle of the world's government that, along with our political freedom, we should be infested with a multitude of conventional slaveries of our own making and maintaining, from which countries where there is less political liberty are free". Mountain guides and guidedom are, however, his special abomination, and, as illustrating the domination of the idea that one must always have a guide to strange places, he tells with great glee a story of a Chancery barrister of high standing—a man "steeped in all acquired and conventional accomplishments"—who, on one occasion, while on a visit to Edinburgh, asked him for a recommendation to "a steady guide to Arthur Seat".

There are many excellent stories in the book, full of that humour which might be expected from the author of "The Book Hunter", but further quotation would only spoil the readers' enjoyment of the volume as a whole. Those whom these pages may induce to peruse it for the first time will find it to be a classic—one of those works that are to be read not once, but often.

BY LOCH AN EILEIN.

Here is the feast of beauty—take your fill ;
Not yet the blinding mists may wander down,
Nor the grave heights put on their snowy crown,
The dread, white symbol of their royal will.

Yet swift the purple glow on every hill
Fades amid bronze and russet-gold to brown,
And Loch an Eilein meets the royal frown
With the clear gaze of childhood, blue and still.

Come feast while yet undimmed the glory shines,
Come while earth revels with her festive throng,
Where wind and water join in silver song,
Where all unstinted flow the nectar-wines—
Cool air of mountains, breath of fragrant pines—
Drink deep, for joy is in the cup, drink long !

G. M. FAULDING.

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