

THE CLUB ON BRAERIACH.

BY HARRY JOHNSTONE.

BEFORE describing the actual events of the day of the midsummer excursion of the Club, which took place last year to Braeriach, it may not be inopportune to give a short account of one of the most interesting of the Cairngorms, one which, in the eyes of many competent judges, stands second to none in point of general attraction, both to the occasional tripper and to the practised mountaineer.

Braeriach forms one of the Western Cairngorms, being separated from the central group by that stupendous rift, the Larig Ghru, and is very well known on account both of its vast expanse of flat top and of the tremendous corries with which its sides are scarred. Briefly, its position is as follows:—The Larig bounds it on the east, Carn Elrick and Glenmore on the north, Glen Eunach and Loch Eunach on the west, and An Garbh Choire and the tableland sloping towards Glen Feshie on the south. On all sides except the last the boundary is clear and distinct, but between Braeriach and Cairn Toul it is hardly possible to lay down a dividing line, and say on one side, "Here Braeriach", and on the other, "There Cairn Toul". In fact, as one walks round the top of An Garbh Choire, one is off Braeriach and on to Cairn Toul without being conscious of the fact, much in the same way as one may proceed from Ben Muich Dhui to Cairngorm, and almost fancy he was still on the same hill. As already noted, Braeriach is remarkable for its large extent of plateau on the summit. Indeed, it may be stated that no such vast extent of tableland exists on any other British mountain. Though covered here and there with boulders, as are most of the higher Cairngorms, there are great expanses of pure gravelly surface, with, however, only mosses and other hardy Alpine plants growing. What gives Braeriach its main characteristics is the steep descent of its sides from the tableland on all the sides except the south-west, a

descent which every now and then resolves itself in the numerous corries into precipices of heights varying from 1000 to 2000 feet. On the north side are Coire an Lochain and Coire Ruadh, whose dividing ridge forms an easy ascent to the summit from the Aviemore side; another Coire Ruadh slopes down to the Pools of Dee, not to be confounded with the "Wells" on the plateau. But the corrie par excellence of them all is An Garbh Choire, which, forming an enormous rift between Braeriach and Cairn Toul, is really the geographical head of Glen Dee. It is the beetling crags and precipitous walls of this great gap that give Braeriach its powerfully attractive appearance, especially when viewed from Cairn Toul or the slopes of Ben Muich Dhui in the neighbourhood of Cairn a' Mhaim. This corrie forms a never-failing object of interest whether it be covered with deep snow and the infant Dee frozen, or whether, as when we saw it, there be just a touch of snow at Fuar Garbh Choire, where the Dee takes its first wild plunge.

Braeriach cannot be said to be actually difficult of ascent, as there are numerous easy climbs by which the summit can be reached; the main difficulty is the long approach, whether it is tackled from Speyside or from Deeside. The former route is usually chosen, as one can drive by way of Rothiemurchus Forest and Glen Eunach to the very foot of the hill, whereas in going from the Braemar side the driving road stops at Derry Lodge, and a good long tramp has to be faced before commencing the actual climb of the mountain. Climbing from Aviemore, the best route is to stop at the Lower Bothy in Glen Eunach, and make for the ridge separating Coire an Lochain from Coire Ruadh, and follow it right up to the summit. Alternative routes are by keeping to the southwest side of Allt Coire an Lochain, or up the east side of Loch Eunach and up Coire Dhondail, which derives its name from an Ossianic giant. From Deeside the best routes are up Glen Geuschan, and over the shoulder of Cairn Toul to the edge of An Garbh Choire, or else through the Larig till the lowermost of the Pools of Dee is reached,

and then up the track which leads to the summit by the Larig Coire Ruadh.

Whichever route is chosen for the ascent, the view from the summit will amply repay the mountaineer, so remarkable is the extent of country that can be seen. To those who have only ascended Ben Muich Dhui, the most strongly appealing point will be the remarkable view to the west, which has no hindrance in the way, as is the case when on Ben Muich Dhui, while, owing to the situation of the hills, the view from Braeriach eastwards is hardly one whit inferior to that from Ben Muich Dhui itself. To the eastward the view is terminated by Bennachie and Coillebhar; on the west Ben Nevis marks the limit, though one of our party maintained that the Coolins of Skye could be seen; southwards the Pentlands, Ochils, Lomonds, Campsie Fells, and Ben Lomond may be seen; while northwards the hills of Caithness, Sutherland, and Ross form the sky-line. The intervening country on all sides appears as a billowy succession of hill-tops, which here and there is broken and varied by stream or loch, or by the changing colours of arable land, while ever and anon ascending smoke marks the busy haunts of men. In fact, for an excursion of mountaineers, or for a party out for a day's climbing, we maintain no more interesting mountain could possibly be chosen. Geologically also Braeriach is somewhat interesting. The main mass of the mountain consists of an igneous rock which has been called by some Cairngorm granite. At the head of Glen Eunach metamorphic rock may be found in the shape of a fine grained gneiss or mica schist. There are numerous lateral and terminal moraines on Braeriach, especially near the head of the northern corries, while the long gravel flats by the side of Loch Eunach denote the long continued action of ice as well as water, and attract the attention of every one who passes, be he geologist or not.

It used to be said that all roads led to Rome, but on the 16th and 17th July last, for members of the Cairngorm Club who were to take part in the mid-summer excursion

it could be equally truthfully said that all roads led to Aviemore. For from that beautiful spot, village and railway junction, the start was to be made on the morning of the 18th for the ascent of Braeriach and, if the Fates permitted, Sgoran Dubh, and to the rendezvous members arrived practically from the four points of the compass. Many an anxious glance was turned skywards to try to forecast the weather for the succeeding day, and the general opinion was favourable, and in this instance correct, for when morning broke a white haze along the valley of the Spey, gradually rolling up and dissipating before the strengthening rays of the rising sun, betokened a day of cloudless sunshine, coupled with intense heat, of which more anon.

And what a morning it was, and what surpassing scenery! Oh! ye dwellers in the dusty, smoky cities, could you have been there you would have never tired feasting your eyes on the surpassing beauty of the country, and filling your lungs with pure mountain ozone, and you would have been so restored, both in mind and body, that work itself would have been the veriest child's play. Right behind us lay the huge rock of Craigellachie—the real Craigellachie—towering up in massive grandeur against the sky; before us on the horizon lay the lofty masses of the Cairngorms, piled one on another, and following in succession like ocean's billows, while the middle distance was occupied by the forests of Rothiemurchus and Glen More, grand in their sombre hues, and forming an admirable setting for the picturesque valley of the Spey.

Passing Loch an Eilein in its lovely sylvan glory, our road soon landed us in the valley of the Bennie, up which, the road now rapidly rising, we pursued our way, with Carn Elrick, one of the most symmetrical of hills, on our left, and Cadha Mhor, down whose steep sides a genuine Alpine avalanche has been known to rush, on our right. Our objective was now the Lower Bothy, where it had been settled that a conference was to be held as to the *modus operandi* of attacking our day's work, and in due course we reached it, experiencing, by the way of a pre-

liminary canter, an attention which we could well have done without from the flies, that were to pester us yet more pronouncedly before the day was over. Arrived at the Bothy a halt was called, and after some slight discussion it was unanimously agreed to tackle Braeriach first, and then, if time allowed, Sgoran Dubh.

Without waste of time a start was made, the chosen direction being that which would land us at the summit by the narrow ridge separating Coire an Lochain from Coire Ruadh; and many were the injunctions laid on the long-legged members of the party—of whom there was a considerable number—that the pace must be suited to that of the man with the shortest, and equally strong the promises that they would be observed. By this time the heat was getting intense, and promised to be melting later on, and, as the labour of climbing increased, so did the desire of the climbers for the coolest mode of progression. On the principle of overdoing nothing, frequent halts were made, and indeed it could not be otherwise, for the man who could tamely climb on and never give look or thought to the ever-unfolding panorama spread out to our view would be a mere automaton, a piece of flesh, nothing more. A day there may have been as clear, but clearer, never. Not a vestige of cloud or haze obscured even the furthest horizon, and every detail on the landscape was perfectly clear. To left and right, as we looked back, appeared Cadha Mhor and Carn Elrick, looking diminutive now by reason of our greater elevation; to our right, going forward, towered Sgoran Dubh, its steep sloping sides reminding one almost unconsciously of the precipices of Cairngorm above Loch Avon, the resemblance being heightened as the corrie at the head of Loch Eunach came to be more clearly made out; as far as the eye could reach stretched hills on hills, those of Caithness, Sutherland, Ross, and the west of Inverness being clearly visible on the horizon; the huge Monadh Liadhs filled up the middle distance; while at our feet, so to speak, as far as could be seen, was spread the valley of the Spey—here close covered with the ancient forest of Rothiemurchus,

there variegated with the different tints of cultivation, while ever and anon could be seen the various villages in their diverse settings, and now and again, like a huge shuttle, darted through the varied landscape a hurrying railway train. And so the ascent progressed—now one party leading, now another, but generally the same order was preserved, those in front, as the oldest climber phrased it, having easier work keeping there than those in the rear had in coming up, and ever, as the view which greater elevation gave increased, so did the wonder and admiration of the climbers at the prospect. There was only one fly in the ointment, or rather, I should say, there were thousands, for the fly I refer to was the flies themselves. In buzzing clouds they hung around each climber, and alighted in their hundreds whenever they got the chance. Some smoked, some anointed their heads with special preparations, other covered their heads with jackets or water-proofs, while others still did nothing but—the rest may be supposed; but one and all agreed that flies must have been one of the sorest of old Pharaoh's plagues.

As the summit was neared we began more and more to study our mountain, as well as to look around us. The ridge itself is closely covered with huge boulders, scattered here and there promiscuously, and lying evidently pretty much as they were left by the ice cap when it melted away. The penultimate stage of the ascent is much steeper than the rest, and proved a tough nut to crack, coming as it did after a long spell of trying work, and, as a result, the tailing-off process, which had now become much more pronounced, increased still more, till the party was stretched out into a long single file. Those who were up first had the advantage of longer time in which to look around, as well as to study the mountain itself. An interesting feature in this connection was that one of our candidates for initiation, Mr. George Henschel, was able to recognise with the naked eye and point out to us his lovely residence at Allt-na-Criche, near Aviemore, a fact which gave him more than ordinary pleasure, as it is left to very few to be initiated within sight of their own door.

As we thus rested and feasted our eyes, a shout from the cairn told us that the remainder of the party, having gone round the shoulder of our steepest climb, were now on the actual summit, but we considered that our temporary defeat was more than compensated by our splendid view of Strathspey and the minute study we made of Coire Ruadh. However, across we hastened, and being thoroughly rested, our sprightly movements, and especially those of Veteran Shearer, who, despite his seventy odd summers, was always in front, excited some envious remarks from our companions, who had gone the longer road, and the usual good-humoured chaff took place as to the respective excellence of our various routes.

During the wait till every one should have arrived at the summit, maps and telescopes were produced, and, though no Copland has sketched the horizon from Braeriach, yet that prince of mountaineers' maps of the "Horizon from Ben Muich Dhui" was in evidence, and proved about as serviceable from the one hill as from the other. Fortunate, indeed, we were as regards weather, for not a particle of cloud, mist, or fog could be descried, and every mountain peak and rounded hill-top stood out as clear as could be. To one viewing the enormous expanse spread out at our feet on all sides for the first time there was something so magnificent, something so grand, something so sublime, as to defy any ordinary power to describe the feelings which crowded through the brain. One could not but feel a certain awe in looking over the prospect of mountain, gully, moor, and moss, of streamlet, lochan, waterfall, and cataract, of stupendous precipices, and beetling crags, of the oldest mountains, shall I even say roots of mountains, in Europe, and wonder what must have been the state of matters when, in their original glory, studded with mighty volcanoes in unceasing eruption, these mountains formed the backbone of a mighty continent, now long thousands of years engulfed in the stormy waters of the Atlantic. But though one might feel that the proper way to get the best of the situation was to moralise in solitude, there were others to consider, and there were names of peaks to

be learned from old and tried hands in the mountain climbers' work. Even as the various peaks are named one's wonder increases more and more, as it scarcely seems possible that we can actually be viewing peaks so distant. From Ben Nevis right round to the Pentland Hills the eye wanders, noting Ben Lomond, the Campsie Fells, the Lomonds, the Ochils, and the Pentlands themselves, these forming, as it were, the boundary line, while nearer and clearer stood out Beinn a' Ghlo, Schichallion, Ben Lawers, Sgarsoch, Cairn Ealer, and hundreds of more or less well-known peaks. Away to west and north stood out the Monadh Liadhs (and one individual was willing to risk his reputation that he saw the Coolins of Skye), Ben Wyvis, the Strathglass mountains, and those of Ross, Sutherland, and Caithness, stretching away in apparently interminable succession. To the eastward appeared towering in the foreground Ben Muich Dhui and Cairngorm, and in extreme distance could be discerned such old friends as Bennachie, looking very conspicuous by reason of its height about its surrounding country, Foudland, the Buck, Tap o' Noth, Ben Rinnes, and Ben Aigan; while on the south of eastward lay Lochnagar, the Coyles of Muick, Morrone, and Morven. But it is impossible to specialise in any detail—in fact, merely to name the summits visible would occupy more space than can be allowed for this article.

All being assembled on the summit, a meeting of the Club was duly constituted, the Chairman presiding. In a short, felicitous speech he bade the members welcome to Braeriach, congratulated them on the capital turnout, and the lovely weather, and hoped that the homeward journey would be as successful as the outward had been, and concluded by briefly reviewing the season's work, and announcing the most important part of the day's proceedings, viz., the initiation of five candidates for admission. All were found duly qualified for membership, and the ancient and honourable ceremony of initiation was carried out in its fullest details, which gave the liveliest satisfaction to all concerned, to the candidates

who were initiated, because they felt that they were being properly introduced into so worthy an organisation, and to the members, because they felt that they had duly performed the ceremonies which were proper to so important a function. The meeting being closed in due form, an adjournment was made for lunch to Fuar Garbh Choire, where the "Infant Dee" leaps over the precipice, and where it had been resolved we were to have lunch. As we crossed the broad gravelly plateau we saw several parties on the summit, and, most interesting to relate, the members of one were clad in the Garb of Old Gaul. When we arrived at Fuar Garbh Choire we found very little snow indeed, only one large lump, under which the current rushed to make its final plunge into space, but sufficient to allow us to make snowballs and have a gentle pitch at one another just for the sake of having thrown snowballs on one of the hottest of July days. On the banks of the rivulet all threw themselves down; sandwiches, etc., were produced, flasks opened, and general good comradeship was the order of the day. For about an hour we remained there, and talked and chatted, enjoying our well-earned rest, and in the intervals glancing over to Cairn Toul and studying its frowning aspect as it rises steeply from the Larig and from An Garbh Choire, remarking especially the desolate grandeur of Lochan Uaine in its circular bowl of rock. But time was passing, and though we could have sat there much longer, there was the homeward journey to face, which to two of us meant the Derry, and to the remainder Aviemore, while there were still the Wells of Dee to visit and examine; so a start was at once made. In the course of our journey to the Wells a vast herd of deer was noted disappearing over the skyline in the direction of Glen Feshie. We soon reached the Wells, and viewed with great interest the undoubted source of the Royal Dee, whose waters it was incumbent on all to sample at this their very fountainhead, where contamination from sewage or vegetable growth at least had no terrors, for here was the water as it bubbled up from its gravelly spring in virgin purity. Personally we prefer just a shade of "use and wont" in it, so

as to be on the safe side, but Shearer, who is something of a water expert, and who had the advantage over us of never having tasted "use and wont", and so impairing the tasting power of his palate, took it raw, as someone put it, and after mature deliberation, which occupied him some time, and necessitated several samplings, gravely pronounced that, in his opinion, the southernmost spring was best. This operation past, we made a start again, and, passing March Cairn, made tracks for Glen Eunach, down which it was resolved to make the homeward journey, the ascent of Sgoran Dubh being omitted, as we concluded that, having done so much already, and the day being well spent, we were entitled to make tracks for home without incurring greater labours. Just when the descent to Loch Eunach was seen, rough and steep, though quite safe, a halt was called, and the Chairman and the writer turned back. Before we said "Good-bye", a most hearty cheer was given for Mr. M'Gregor for his ability in the capacity of guide, philosopher, and friend to the excursion, which we in no way exaggerate when we say that it was simply invaluable.



LOCH COIRE AN LOCHAIN, BRAERIACH,

Photo by

On 17th July, 1904.

A. M. Cook.