

DELECTABLE DAYS ON DEESIDE.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

THOSE dreadful scientists will have it that there was nothing abnormal in the weather conditions which prevailed in the region of the Deeside valley last summer. The temperature, they assure us, was by no means excessively high, the amount of sunshine was below the average, and it was only the diminished rainfall that made people think the weather was warmer than it really was. If, however, those of us who spent a holiday on Deeside in either July or August last year deluded ourselves by believing that we were enjoying an exceptionally fine summer, the delusion, besides being a pleasing one to hug, was thoroughly excusable. In spite of tell-tale statistics of rainfall and sunshine, it is difficult to convince us that the summer was not really a phenomenal one. Seldom, at any rate, has there been in this district such a long spell of absolutely dry weather, and holiday-makers familiar with our capricious climate had good reason to rejoice that for once they were able to rely on a continuance of settled conditions, and arrange for excursions with a light heart, feeling assured that the chances were all in favour of their being duly carried out. The prevailing drought had its disadvantages, of course—quite apart from its effects on vegetation—for the dust on the main roads was excessive, and woe betide the luckless pedestrian who was passed by a motor car driven at high speed. The volume of the streams was also very sensibly diminished. The parent Dee looked almost as if visibly shrinking, day after day; and with the reduction of the volume, both of it and of its tributaries, there was a concurrent lessening of the pleasing music that arises from the ripple of water flowing over a stony bed. On the other hand, however, the bogs on hillsides were comparatively

dry, and could be crossed with much more ease and comfort than is ordinarily the case. With the absence of the rain there was, on the whole, an abundance of sunshine. Many days were sunless, no doubt, but when the sun shone it shone gloriously, not infrequently out of a perfectly blue sky, and with an intensity rare in these parts.

Deeside was seen at its best under the conditions just indicated. The perfection of the weather heightened the charm of the scenery. In the glowing sunlight the landscape became more vivid; its natural beauties were intensified, and excited greater admiration. Sunshine, indeed, is essential to the fullest realisation of the qualities that render Upper Deeside so attractive. Gloom may contribute to the grandeur of mountains, mist and cloud may produce impressive effects, but the aspect of the hills under sullen and rain-laden skies can never approach that which is yielded when they stand out clear and distinct in a luminous atmosphere. It is then that mountains become really majestic, their height and bulk imposing; and it is then that the contemplation of them is most pleasurable. Contrast, for example, the different impressions conveyed by the scene that meets the eye looking up the Dee when one reaches the height of the road at Collecrichech, as viewed on a day of brilliant sunshine and on a day of rain or of dark, lowering skies. In the one case, we are enchanted by the lovely prospect—the winding river, the wooded hills on each side, the mass of mountains in the background; and no less by the gradation of colours, the bright green of the trees backed by the brown of the moors shading softly into the blue of the distant mountains. In the other case, all these features of the scene are eliminated; the charm has vanished, the colour is gone, the prospect is drear and uninviting. It is because the bright days were so many and the dull days so few that last summer on Deeside proved so enjoyable, affording, as it did, such exceptional opportunities for appreciating the beauties of the region. On these beauties there is no need to

descant. They are multifarious. The hills and mountains must undoubtedly be reckoned the main contributaries of Deeside scenery, but there are other, if minor, landscape features. There is the effective combination of wood and water, for instance—so common, indeed, as almost to have become negligible, yet constantly productive of exquisite and fascinating results. The main valley of the Dee yields scenic pictures of this kind in abundance, but they are also to be found plentifully in the glens, and the glens themselves have their individual attractiveness, so picturesque are they in their windings and in their gradual transition from tree-clad slopes to bleak and wild moorland. And last summer there was added to the charms of Deeside a new constituent—an extraordinary bloom of bell heather, and so rich a purple as to make the moors and hillsides resplendent in colour.

While thus recording the exceptional conditions which favoured holidaying on Deeside last summer, some account may also be given of how such a holiday was actually spent by a party of friends who were located at Ballater in July. Walking was our principal exercise, but it was conducted on a modest scale, and generally on the plan of allowing the weaker brethren (or sisters, as the case might be), to make the pace, though on occasions the stalwarts of the party would go off by themselves on longer walks more rapidly executed. As a rule, though, we were content in the main with what may be termed the minor joys of pedestrianism—the pleasures derivable from traversing the plain and scaling the lesser heights. In this quiet and humble fashion we managed to enjoy many delectable days; and if our performances were in no way remarkable—and presumably they are not calculated to interest those who go in for mountaineering on the grand scale—the record of them may prove useful or suggestive to beginners or to those satisfied, like us, with small things.

Ballater, be it said at the outset, is a capital centre for walking excursions of a moderate character—moderate

both as regards distance and time employed. Even hill-climbing—of a very mild kind—may be indulged in, and anyone who ascends to the summit of Craigen-darroch or of Craig Coillach will, apart from the exercise, be rewarded with a spacious view, which extends to the mighty Bens beyond Braemar. Among the distinct amenities of the village is the footpath that has been formed on the abandoned track of the projected railway westward, which was partially constructed as far as Bridge of Gairn. Skirting the base of Craigen-darroch and in close proximity to the Dee, it constitutes a charming walk at all times of the day, morning, noon or night; while it is so sheltered as to be a desirable refuge in sweltering heat, suiting admirably the disposition of persons with the simple longing for a book in a shady nook. There is one remarkably fine view on this footpath—at a point where a gap in the wooded bank discloses a sudden bend in the river and opens up a wide prospect beyond. The view is strongly reminiscent of Joseph Farquharson's picture, "My heart's in the Highlands," and as that picture was originally named "Deeside," it is just possible that the scene depicted in it may have been based on the one here presented. The walk along the footpath may be continued to the old church and churchyard of Glengairn, and from that may be extended to the Suspension Bridge at Polquhollick (or Polhollick), half a mile or so farther on. The bridge enables us to make a circular tour and return to Ballater by the south side of the river, and that by one or other of two routes, either by turning to the left or by turning to the right when the bridge is crossed. The left-hand road is the shorter, but by taking the right-hand road we have the advantage of a delightful walk alongside the Birkhall woods. A still more preferable, though rougher, route will be found by diverging from the left-hand road and following a track through the wood just beyond the first gate that has to be passed; the track leads by the river side for a considerable distance, and then winds through the wood in the rambling but charming method of most woodland paths.

There is another circular walk on the east side of Ballater, rendered feasible by a suspension bridge at Cambus o' May, provided, like the one at Polquhollick, by the munificence of the late Mr. Alexander Gordon, a London brewer who hailed from somewhere about Ballater, and whose regard for his native district was otherwise shown by the Albert Hall and Gordon Institute which he erected in the village. Crossing Ballater bridge, the south road is followed to Pannanich; and from the hotel there, and also from a Victoria Jubilee Well farther along—the road rising to a considerable height—superb views are obtained of Craigendarroch and the Pass of Ballater in one direction and the Valley of the Dee downwards in another. The Jubilee Well, if not erected by the late Sir W. Cunliffe Brooks, must have been built under his supervision, for on each side of the long trough is inscribed one of those rhyming moralities with which the worthy baronet was wont to adorn most of his wayside structures. The proximity to the extensive estate of Glentanar thereby inferred is speedily confirmed by estate notice-boards; and it is near one of these boards and at a dip in the road that we turn on to a path through the birch wood on our left which leads to the Cambus o' May bridge and the railway station adjoining. The exquisite beauty of Cambus o' May, with its lovely birches fringing the waterside, has been sung by Mr. William Carnie in verses that are fairly well-known—verses beautiful in themselves, and by no means unduly extravagant in their laudation of this very fine bit of Deeside scenery. A grassy path along the river bank tempts the pedestrian, but it comes to an end all too soon, and has to be speedily abandoned for the hard and dusty road, and that, too, by a somewhat undignified scramble over a railway fence. The walk thence to Ballater, on an excessively warm day, the road being open and exposed, wholly unscreened by trees, and comparatively unattractive, forms the only unpleasant recollection of our holiday. It is not much to complain of, however; and the momentarily unfavourable impression of the road was

partially dissipated later on by a walk in the cool of the evening to the old church of Tullich, to inspect the three ancient sculptured stones that are preserved in the churchyard there—one of them regarded by some authorities as pre-Christian, the other two supposed to belong to the early period of the Celtic Church. The circular walk just described may be extended easily by continuing along the south road to Dinnet instead of turning off to Cambus o' May. It is rather a fine walk, with some good views as Dinnet House (on the opposite side of the river, though) is reached and passed, but it is somewhat long. The river is crossed by a bridge at Dinnet, and possibly the pedestrian of moderate powers will only be too glad to take the train to Ballater at Dinnet instead of walking back by the north road. The railway—let us avow it candidly—is sometimes a convenience, and enables excursions to be carried out that might not otherwise be undertaken. We recall, for example, a delightful day spent in visiting the Burn of the Vat and walking round the greater part of Loch Kinnord, this being materially aided by our taking the train to Cambus o' May and returning by train from Dinnet.

Of the glens in the neighbourhood of Ballater Glenmuick is the most inviting and the most picturesque. A walk to the Falls of Muick and back (10 miles) is easy of accomplishment, and as there is a footbridge across the Muick just below the Falls, the walk may be varied by going up one side of the glen and coming down the other. (We experienced another kind of variety, for this was one of the very few of our excursions in which we encountered rain). It is from Glenmuick, too, that one most readily reaches the Coyles of Muick, the three shapely grass-covered hills that are so conspicuous in the westward view from Ballater. The route we followed was along the road on the east side of the glen, crossing the Muick by the bridge at Mill of Sterin, and then along a farm road leading off the road on the west side of the glen. From this farm road a

path diverges to a plantation, and passing through the plantation, the principal Coyle is right ahead of us. The climb is easy, and from the summit (1956 feet high) there is an excellent view of the Cairngorms. More strenuous mountaineers would in all likelihood have ascended the three peaks in succession, but the day was very warm, and, having got to the top of one summit, we were fain to recline at the cairn and bask in the sun and enjoy the prospect.

Glengairn came to be a favourite walk with us, partly, perhaps of the round that could be accomplished, with, as the turning-point, the wooden foot-bridge (painted black) between the farms of Balno and Dalfad, about three miles up the glen. Proceeding up the road on the east side of the glen, and passing Candacraig, the site of the former Roman Catholic Church (now demolished), we leave the road by a footpath on our left leading along some fields, and descend rapidly to the level of the Gairn, following the river up for some distance till the bridge is reached. The road on the west side of the glen by which we return is at times a little trying, owing to its switchback nature, but from the height it occasionally attains we have several charming vistas along the glen. A very fine walk is to make a complete circuit of the glen by this west road, past Milton and up to Gairnshiel shooting-lodge, and then following the road by Rinloan and Braenaloin, up and over a steep incline and down to Crathie. It is a long walk (fully 10 miles), but the changing aspects of the scenery make it lightsome—the views of Morven and Ben Avon, the vast expanse of moorland away to Corndavon, and, above all, the magnificent outline of Lochnagar as you descend to the Dee valley. The day on which we did that walk was one of the most brilliant of our stay, the sun blazing in a cloudless sky of lovely blue; and we shall long retain in our memory the splendid panorama of the mountain which Byron characterised as the most sublime and picturesque of the Caledonian Alps. The day was excessively hot, and judging that there would be more

shade on the south side of the Dee than on the north, we crossed the river at Balmoral bridge and walked home by the delightfully sheltered road which skirts Abergeldie, Strathgirnock, and Birkhall.

Our mountain excursions were limited to ascents of Mount Keen and Lochnagar. The former is reached by the Pollagach (or Pollach) road, which turns off from the south Deeside road on the left-hand side of the Gordon Highlanders' Memorial at the Bridge of Muick. It gradually ascends (yielding some fine views), and eventually crosses the ridge of the hills which form the eastern wall of the valley of the Muick. The road must then be left and a bee-line made for a guide-post which, after careful inspection, will be discerned on the crest of another ridge to the right. The intervening ground is ordinarily boggy, but we found it dry, though the heather made heavy walking. From this second ridge a fairly good track leads rapidly down to the Water of Tanar, joining the driving road from Glentanar near the bothy at Coirebhruach; and here the ordinary track up Mount Keen was taken. The ascent of Lochnagar was made by the path from Alltnagiubhsaich and the Ladder, our party (eight in all) driving up Glenmuick; but the ascent by that route is too common and too well-known to be dilated upon, and no incident occurred of special note. The day was fine and the view extensive—a simple record, which was probably that of many other people last summer; we met half-a-dozen on the plateau above the precipices.

Mention has been made of the occasional convenience afforded by the railway. Similar advantage may be taken of the numerous conveyances that ply between Ballater and Braemar, especially the motor buses and char-a-bancs. They have materially lengthened the day's stay at Braemar and afforded more time for seeing the village and its environs. By their means we were able to escort some English friends on a trip to the Linn of Dee. The Linn may not be the most striking feature of Deeside scenery.—though there be those who maintain that it is

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—but it is a conspicuous feature and well worth a day's journey ; and, besides, there is plenty else to note and admire in the drive between Ballater and Braemar, and especially along that most picturesque bit of road from Braemar to the Linn. Our friends, at all events, were charmed, as they could not fail to be ; and even those of us who were familiar with the ground were hardly less delighted with the opportunity of renewing acquaintance with it. In days that we have dubbed delectable, and that were crowded with delight, the day spent at the Linn of Dee stands out fragrant with pleasant recollections.