

## 'TWIXT LOCH NEVIS AND LOCH HOURN.

BY ALEX. INKSON MCCONNOCHIE.

THE long peninsula known as Knoydart, between Loch Nevis on the south and Loch Hourn on the north, has few rivals in the Highlands for picturesque scenery of the sternly grand style. MacCulloch declared it to be "indeed one of the loftiest as well as wildest tracks in Scotland." Even among modern mountaineers Knoydart has the reputation of being "the wildest and the grandest," "the most inaccessible," and "among the roughest" of the districts which they so much love to traverse. Before Mallaig became a railway terminus and a seaport, Knoydart was practically shut out except from the east, and then had generally to be entered on foot. I had planned a nice long walk from Achnacarry, but as my visit was made last January, my host would not hear of such an attempt in winter, and strongly recommended Mallaig as the best approach.

Mallaig is a marvel of modern business development, yet visitors would prefer that station, village, and harbour were less commingled. The steam drifter reigned supreme, and herring gutters blocked access to other steamers. The tiny mail boat "Enterprise" took us on board, and after a six-mile voyage safely landed us at the Inverie pier of Knoydart. We found the beauties of Loch Nevis, with rocky hills on both shores, to be of no mean order; but Loch Hourn, with which we had previously made acquaintance, is acclaimed by artists as the finest sea loch in Scotland. Both lochs have the added charm of woods in parts. The great mass of Ladhar Bheinn (3,343 feet) dominates Knoydart; it and the clean-cut, shapely cone of Sgor na Ciche (3,410 feet), on the march with Glen Kingie, which is Lochiel ground, are alone sufficient attractions to induce a desire for a closer acquaintance with the

most westerly of the erstwhile possessions of the Macdonnells of Glengarry.

Knoydart now forms part of the huge parish of Glenelg, but of old it was an independent parish, Kilchoan by name, having been dedicated to St. Coan. Two west-flowing rivers, the Aoidh and the Gueseran, are the principal streams; the former enters Loch Nevis at Inverie—hence that name, it is said. The old chapel at Kilchoan and two burial grounds were on the left bank of the Aoidh, near Inverie Bay, where the ancient name is still in use. On the other side of the Aoidh is Inverie House, the mansion of the estate and shooting-box of the deer forest, close to which is the site of the castle of the Macdonnells, with the Gallows Hill in front. There are several ancient sculptured stones in the burial grounds which well deserve particular attention; one represents a deer-hunting scene. Concerning this and one or two other stones, Bishop Nicolson thus wrote in 1700 to a correspondent in Rome—"The tradition of these carved stones having been brought from Iona, I have found still to exist in three of the above-mentioned places, whilst one ingenious suggestion has been made to the effect that stones such as these were carved in great numbers in Iona, where, to use a modern phrase, they were kept in stock, and provided on demand to the different applicants. There is certainly a great similarity of design, especially in the hunting scene."

A day was devoted, during my visit, to stalking on Sgurr Coire na Coinnich (2,612 feet). This rather prominent mountain, eclipsing Ladhar Bheinn when one is in the neighbourhood of Inverie Bay, stands between the Aoidh and the southern head-stream of the Gueseran. Beinn a' Ghlo is said to have forty corries; this Sgurr must have at least a hundred, many of them small, no doubt, but all more or less rough, while the peak is rather distinctive. Across Loch Nevis the shepherds were already burning heather; presently we felt the pungent smell miles away. An unseen raven croaked, and so I ventured to prophesy that it would have a gralloch that

day, and I was not contradicted. A mountain eagle soared above us, but evidently had no expectations from us, for it steadily held northward for the far side of Loch Hourn. Below us the swish of the river sounded musical, and the barking of the kennel dogs was as distinctly heard as though they had been within call. For me the outstanding feature of the day was the persistence with which a hind kept company with a wounded friend to the very last. I have seen several instances of such 'sympathy in the forest,' but never one more evident. It may be mentioned that the wild cat is still to be found on Sgurr Coire na Coinnich.

The burial grounds of Kilchoan have not a few old, plain, uninscribed slabs, which have been quarried on the Sgurr, and the curious may see several such slabs on the hill slope still waiting removal.

The following day was spent on Ladhar Bheinn, a convenient route to which is by the rough road alongside Allt Mhuilinn of Inverie, the Mill Burn of to-day, though its mill has long disappeared. Some little distance up that stream are the ruins of an old Roman Catholic chapel and the remains of a poind fold; the former had a certain notoriety when sheep took the place of black cattle, and the latter is known to have been used with merciless severity. The ground there was at one time held by the Grants of Glenmoriston, and as Glengarry had no love for such neighbours, and, indeed, coveted their patrimony, he made matters so uncomfortable for them that they were glad to part with it. It is still sheep ground, but on the other side of the burn deer are in possession.

The track descends to Glen Gueseran, an easterly branch, however, leading in the direction of Ladhar Bheinn. Just below the confluence of the several hill burns which united form the Gueseran there is a rocky gorge, Easan Buidhe, which never fails to attract notice in this desolate region. The river runs deep below, almost concealed by the rock; indeed, in one part the water has tunnelled through the solid rock and so left a

natural bridge over which one can cross. In floods the scene is completely changed, for the river rushes *over* the top of the rock so continuously that numerous pot holes have been formed. At the upper end of Easan Buidhe is one of the best salmon pools in the river. A short distance below is an outstanding boulder on the left bank, on the inaccessible top of which the merlin regularly nests. Looking now to the north side of Sgurr Coire na Coinnich a big stone may be observed, Clachrechitan—so named on an estate map dated 1812—said to be the stone of watching. Here, in the days when cattle-lifting prevailed, the inhabitants of Inverie had a man stationed to give them warning of the first appearance of any reivers. Lower down the glen two prominent mounds are said to have been the scene of a bloody conflict between the adherents of two brothers regarding the right to about two acres of land—such land as is now going a-begging at a guinea the acre! Another Knoydart “watch stone” may be seen in Glen Meadail, by the side of one of the head streams of the Aoidh.

Keeping by the pony path, which now holds by Amhainn Bheag, another rocky gorge, but of a different character, is passed. Here there is a considerable waterfall, the sides adorned with ivy, holly, and other vegetation, and, strangest of all, a kestrel's nest close to the path. Ladhar Bheinn is now seen to be a massive mountain, in parts very steep, with long, broad slopes to the north and south. The western buttress has a characteristic Gaelic name, Mas Garbh, “the rough hip;” and well it deserves that designation. It makes an interesting ascent, but was barred to us and our dogs owing to the ice which abounded in certain of its little rocky gullies. It was accordingly judiciously kept to the left, and thus the penultimate stage of the climb, An Diollaid, “the saddle,” was easily reached, the altitude there being about 2,100 feet. The name An Diollaid is also descriptive, while the corrie there, on the north side, is steep, deep, and well-defined. It unites

with the larger Coir' an Eich, "the horse's corrie," a huge hollow at the north foot of Ladhar Bheinn, "the mare's mountain." Ben Sgriol (3,196 feet), so prominent on the north side of Loch Hourn, here attracts attention, for it is the monarch of all the nearer heights. The long snow cornice on the north side of Ladhar Bheinn was a veritable thing of beauty; it was of no great depth, but its further disintegration had been arrested by severe frosts, and so a peculiarly jagged outline had been left. Evidently the north wind is king in these parts, for the south had left no snow on its own side of the mountain. Yet the south wind which blew that day was severe enough to warrant the description of one of our party—"a south wind which has lost its way." At all events, it nearly blew us into Coir' an Eich, and when the summit was reached the thermometer stood at 27 degrees. Ptarmigan were the only birds seen on the heights, deer the only mammals—the hills could scarcely have been more lifeless. A hare's tracks were crossed but "puss" herself was invisible; as were both eagles and ravens, though they claim several place-names in Knoydart. Goats, too, and wild boars also seem to have been numerous in the district.

The cairn of Ladhar Bheinn (Larven) is reached by a very narrow arête, and is rather a poor structure for such an important height. The distant view is one to linger over in genial weather; it includes mountain tops literally by the hundred, but one's attention is mainly directed to Ross-shire and Inverness-shire, especially the Hebrides. Nevertheless, the sight alone of Loch Hourn at one's feet, and Coire Dhorrcail to the east, the burn of which enters Barrisdale Bay of that loch, amply suffices for any trouble in tackling the summit of Ladhar Bheinn. A big boulder in this corrie has within recent times twice moved forward some distance, the motive power having been avalanches.

The day's round may be completed in favourable conditions by descending to the head of Glen Dulochan and so reaching Inverie from the east; we returned as we

came, as ponies were to be in waiting between the two rocky gorges of which mention has been made. The gillie's signal in the dark, a heather blaze, was welcomed and returned as we crept slowly down to the foot of Mas Garbh.

I had been very lucky in the weather ; Knoydart has an abnormal rainfall. When I left by the open-decked "Enterprise" a storm was rapidly brewing ; had it been a little stronger, she could not have left her moorings. Several steam drifters were racing into Mallaig ; well-built boats, and with powerful engines, they seemed to ignore the wind and the heavy sea. That was the beginning of a rain storm which lasted without a break for several days. Though the water fell in sheets the herring gutters went on with their work, and the railway porters moved about in oilskins. The only waiting-room in the station was kept carefully locked and the village children were allowed the unrestricted use of the saloon carriages. How it rained ! and in Rannoch it snowed. Between Ardlui and Tarbert the noise of numberless swollen mountain torrents rushing to Loch Lomond was weird in the darkness.