

MACGILLIVRAY'S "DEESIDE."

THE activities of the Club having been suspended during the war—there are no "Proceedings" to chronicle in the present issue—attention may be profitably directed to a book dealing with the region over which those activities ordinarily range—an almost forgotten book, we suspect, and one certainly not so well known as it ought to be. We refer to "The Natural History of Dee Side and Braemar," by William MacGillivray, LL.D., who was Professor of Natural History at Marischal College from 1841 to 1852.

Macgillivray, who was born in 1796, was a native of Old Aberdeen, the son of a soldier who fell at Corunna in 1809. His childhood was spent in Harris, on a farm occupied by two uncles. At the age of eleven he was sent to Aberdeen to school, and afterwards attended King's College, where he graduated M.A. in 1815. While a student he spent his long summer holidays with his relatives in Harris, and always walked from Aberdeen to the west coast, whence a boat took him to the island. He thus early became inured to long "tramps," and he remained a vigorous and indefatigable pedestrian all his life. One who was a student under him has described him as "tireless" when "pedestrianising with his class among the hills and heather of Deeside," adding—"He could walk the most active of them into limp helplessness, and remain as fresh as at the outset of the march." As a sample of his walking powers, it may be mentioned that, when a youth of three-and-twenty, he walked from Aberdeen to London, for the sheer purpose of "seeing the country," a visit to the British Museum being also an objective. Deeside became familiar to him, partly by his youthful journeys to and from the west coast, which were made in something like a direct line right across the hills; and subsequently by more specific excursions for scientific investigations. The

“Deeside” book, however, was more especially the outcome of an elaborate tour of what Macgillivray termed “the Central Highlands of Braemar,” which extended over about a month in the autumn of 1850, and in which he was accompanied by his eldest daughter and his son Paul, then a lad, but who afterwards distinguished himself as a naturalist in Victoria. It is believed that, although he felt at the time that he had benefited in health by the excursion, the fatigue to which he had subjected himself had been detrimental to him; and, owing more or less to its effects, Professor Macgillivray died in September, 1852. The manuscript of the work was completed by him just before his death, but his family not wishing to publish the work, the manuscript was purchased by Queen Victoria, and, by Her Majesty’s command, it was printed in 1855. The work, which was edited by Professor Edwin Lankester, was published for private circulation only. Presentation copies, however, have found their way into public libraries and private collections; there is a copy, for instance, in the Aberdeen Public Library.

Professor Macgillivray modestly described the account of his tour as that of “the simple journey of a pedestrian naturalist through a very peaceful tract of Scotland,” mentioning that he had in view principally an examination of the geological structure of Braemar, its alpine vegetation, and, to a certain extent, its zoology. His book, accordingly, is, in the main, a scientific one, devoted largely to the geology and botany of the Dee Valley. Its survey of those and other natural features of the district is, for one thing, exceedingly comprehensive. Not only did Professor Macgillivray follow up the Dee from its debouchure at Aberdeen to its sources on the gravelly plateau on the summit of Braeriach, but he seems to have traversed most of the mountains and hills comprised within its basin, and to have explored with equal assiduity the numerous glens by which these mountains and hills are intersected. The extent of his wanderings, as demonstrated by the

details of configuration he furnishes and the numerous references to places visited, is little short of astounding; and men of to-day who fancy they "know" Deeside may well feel abashed when they compare their comparatively limited peregrinations with the wide range of the wanderings of this patient and ever-enthusiastic investigator. Professor Macgillivray was a distinguished scientist—he has been described as "an all-round naturalist," keenly interested in many branches of nature study, on all of which he wrote with authority and in a fascinating style. He was the author of several important works, and his "Deeside" unquestionably occupies a high position among the books which deal with the natural features of the district. The geological features in particular receive much attention, though it has been suggested that some of the views expressed are now, in view of later investigations and conclusions, susceptible of considerable modification; an entire section is devoted to natural history proper, the flora and fauna; and there are charming disquisitions on forests and moors and lochs as well.

The main interest of the book to the general body of mountaineers, however, lies in the felicitous descriptions of the scenery of Deeside and the Deeside Highlands in which it abounds. Macgillivray was much more than a scientist—he had a keen sense of the beauties of Nature, a distinct feeling for the picturesque. The faculty of appreciation is not always accompanied by that of expression, but Macgillivray possessed the latter in addition to his many other attainments. With a depreciation of his own qualities that appears almost to have been characteristic, he declared that "A single-minded man may by a right use of his eyes, anywhere that the sun shines and the winds blow and the rains fall, find abundant matter for observation and instruction." The statement is incontestable, to be sure—incidentally, it indicates the alertness of Macgillivray's perceptions and the readiness to utilise them; but to the seeing eye must be added, for those less favoured, effective powers of

description. Macgillivray was singularly well-equipped in this respect. He had the enviable faculty of so portraying a scene in words as to make the reader instantaneously realise its features and character. Nothing came amiss to him. The Dee at old Invercauld bridge, sunset on Glen Gairn, a wind storm in the Ballochbuie forest, thunder in the corries—they are all depicted with naturalness, but yet in such a way as to be intensely vivid and impressive. Macgillivray's superb qualities as an artistic master of language were well set forth in the eulogy delivered by the late Mr. John F. White, LL.D. (one of his old pupils), at the unveiling of the mural tablet to the memory of the great naturalist placed in the Natural History class-room at Marischal College—"The 'Natural History of Deeside' shows him to have been a profound lover of Nature in its largest sense. In clear, nervous prose it reveals a fine poetic vein. He uses his word-palette like a landscape painter. There are passages in this book which for splendid yet sober description will compare not unfavourably with some of the finest passages in 'Modern Painters.'"

SNOW AND RAIN IN THE CAIRNGORMS.

As a sample of Macgillivray's descriptive powers, we may quote a passage descriptive of snow and rain in the Cairngorms as witnessed from an eminence about the entrance to Glen Ey on an August morning:—

In the north-west is a scene, the magnificence of which might well repay a journey of a hundred miles—at least to a person of some taste, a little superfluous money, and plenty of spare time. Directly opposite is a long hill range, having its broad flank covered with a forest of pine and birch, its shoulders and rounded head purpled with flowering heather. Its outline descends gently into Glen Lui, on the other side of which, to the westwards, rises a lower brown hill of similar aspect. Beyond this western hill, and at the head of the wooded glen, rise, ridge behind ridge, the mountains of the Mona-rua [Monadh Ruadh, or Cairngorm range], presenting various forms, most of them massy and rounded. Behind these, the far distant summits of Ben Vrotan, Cairntoul, and Ben Muich Dhui rise in beautiful magnificence, clothed in snow—not in small and isolated patches, the remains of their winter clothing, but in continuous sheathing, the result of yesterday's storm. It would be difficult for a person not looking upon these mountains to imagine the beauty which they have so suddenly received. But two days ago and they were simply prominences of

from three to four thousand feet, or a little more, above the sea level, much less, of course, above the general elevation of the district ;—now they seem a superb range of lofty mountains, having their summits clad in perennial snow ; and they thus represent the great ridges of the earth, the Pyrenees, the Alps, and the Andes. You may fancy them any height—fifteen thousand feet, if you please—their actual aspect will accord with the supposition. Instead of from twelve to fifteen miles, let them be supposed thirty miles distant—or you may contemplate them in their actual and unexaggerated condition ;—the highest of our Scottish mountains, on which the white mantle of winter gleams among the sober tints of autumn. How beautifully their white summits contrast with the blue sky above, and the purple hue of the lower hills, or the dark green of the solemn pine-forests !

As I gaze, a dense mist creeps over one and the next summit, glides along, obscuring another and a fourth. They seem abolished, obliterated, swallowed up. The nearer hills are now involved. Fifteen minutes has sufficed for this envelopment. We watch the progress of the rain-cloud, and in fifteen more the whole valley of the Dee from Ben Vrotan to Craig Cornach [Choinnich] is overhung with a sheet of grey vapour. Rain falls in flakes, driven by the wind into wavy streaks.

Dimly gloom through the rain the massy forms of the nearer hills ; then, behind them, ridge after ridge, the whole presenting a rather melancholy, though still beautiful scene, which one would scarcely wish to continue. Presently, the conical peak of the Cairngorm [Derry Cairngorm], white with snow, shoots up clear from amidst the vapour ; beyond it, Ben Muich Dhui discloses its massy form, its summit still involved in clouds ; the other mountains appear successively ; the rain-clouds have passed down the valley of the Dee, and are watering the pines of the Ballochbuie and the birch woods of Balmoral and Abergeldie. Glimpses of sunshine gleam upon the hills. But in the far west another vast mass of vapour rolls its wreaths along, enveloping hill after hill, and advancing towards us.

STUMBLING ON THE WELLS OF DEE.

One of the most interesting narratives in the book is that in which Macgillivray describes how, as a youth of twenty-three, he stumbled by mere chance, and all unknowing, on the sources of the Dee :—

In September 1819, a poor student of King's College, Aberdeen, ascended to the sources of the Dee, on his way to Kingussie and Fort William. From his journal I make the following extract :—"About three or four miles above the Linn, the Dee is joined by a river equal in size, named the Geaully [Geldie], the source of which I had explored in 1816, when I came across the mountains from Blair Atholl. Hitherto I had travelled in a westerly direction, but now proceeded northwards, following the river. There are no houses beyond the junction mentioned. About a mile above it, I came in sight of a most magnificent rock, with a mountain peak behind it, of greater elevation. When I reached this rock I learned by the light-scarlet colour of the clouds on the ridge, that the sun was setting. Passing the rock, I entered a valley bounded on both sides by very lofty and

rugged mountains, and terminating in a vast mass, towering above the whole. Before I reached the upper end of this magnificent, though wild and desolate valley, night fell. About this time I saw a deer not far from me. Near the upper end of the valley, the stream which I had followed separated into two. It was with great difficulty that I clambered to this part, to see which was the largest, that I might follow it. Having ascertained that the largest stream came from a valley which branched off at a right angle from the extremity of the main one, I entered this valley, and proceeded about three quarters of a mile. It was by this time completely dark, and I determined to rest myself."

The narrative goes on to state that the night was passed here, in a sheltered place, but with little sleep, some shivering, and many melancholy thoughts:—

"About midnight I looked up and saw the moon, with some stars. They were at times obscured by masses of vapour, which rolled along the summits of the mountains. I had now a better view of my situation. I was near the upper end of a high valley, completely surrounded by enormous masses of rock. Behind me, my face being towards the mouth of the valley, there rose at its upper end a high mountain involved in clouds; on the right hand was another, in the form of a pyramidal rock, and contiguous with it, a peak of less elevation; on the left hand, a high ridge running from the mountain in the north-west, and terminating at the mouth of the valley in a dark conical mass; and straight before me, in the south-east, at the distance of nearly a mile, another vast mountain. The summits of all were at times enveloped in clouds. The wind, which blew from the west was not keen, and the night was such as in comfortable circumstances might be called warm. Yet on awakening from my slumber, I felt chilly, and soon after began to shiver. I then rose and gathered a few large stones, and a good deal of grass and short heath, with which I formed a somewhat snug sort of couch. Unloosing my pack, I took a night-cap and a pair of stockings from it, which I applied to their proper use, for my feet had been wetted in crossing a brook, and my hat alone did not keep my head warm after the perspiration it had undergone. Then, eating a little of my scanty store of barley bread, and drinking two or three cupfuls of water from a neighbouring rill, I lay down, put heather and my knapsack over my feet, placed myself in an easy posture, and fell asleep.

"I awoke fresh, but weak, about sunrise. The stream which I had followed here divided into two, and I chose the largest. It led me to a magnificent corry, in the form of a deep hollow scooped out of the great ridge, on the left of the glen, as described, but now on my right hand in ascending it. The sides of this corry were formed of sloping rocks of vast height. The rivulet came tumbling down the centre in the form of a cataract. Here the rocks were most abrupt; but I had determined to proceed—at least to attempt the ascent. Before I reached the base of the rocks, I felt very weak, and was obliged to halt every now and then. However, I proceeded, and at length, being well accustomed to rock-climbing, found myself on the very summit of this vast mass of rock. It was covered with mist, which rolled rapidly along the ridges. The sun now and then appeared through it. The view down the corry which I had

just ascended was delightful—dreadful it might have been to some;—the whole glen, the deep cory just beneath, with its fearful rocks, the opposite mountains, with an alpine lake before me. The scene was truly sublime, and I contemplated it with great delight. . . .

"I had now reached the rounded summit of the ridge, and proceeding along the streamlet, which was the principal object of my research, I traced it to two fountains, and several smaller springs. I took a glassful from each of the larger, and drank it to the health of my friends. Near these fountains, which were among coarse granite sand, I saw a covey of ptarmigans, and a small bird which I took for *Alauda pratensis* [meadow pipit]. The only phænogamous plants which grew on the summit of the mountain were *Silene acaulis* [moss campion], and *Salix herbacca* [least willow], both in abundance, the former still in flower. . . ."

Not knowing by name a single one of the localities mentioned in the above narrative, I had not been aware of my having passed up Glen Dee to the base of Ben Muich Dhui and slept in the Glen of the Garrachory. . . . I had visited the so-called sources of the Dee on the ridge of Braeriach.

Extracts could be multiplied; but those we have given will suffice to show the interest that attaches to Professor Macgillivray's work on "Deeside," and the pleasure, let alone the instruction, that may be derived from its perusal. The book, we venture to think, even at this distance of time from the date of its publication, is still deserving of a word of commendation in the pages of the *Cairngorm Club Journal*.