

ABERDEEN TO FORT WILLIAM THROUGH GLEN FESHIE.

By JAMES B. NICOL.

NEARLY twenty years ago, in company with several friends, I paid a number of visits to the Cairngorm Mountains and to the district about Braemar. These expeditions were undertaken usually on the spring holidays, and for a number of years they were regarded by us as annual events; but after a time other interests claimed our attention, and the excursions became interrupted and less regular, and in the end they were dropped altogether. Among the various roads which intersect this wild mountainous region, the path from Braemar to Speyside through Glen Feshie has ever seemed to me a singularly attractive one; but from some reason or other it is one of the few walks in this district which we never attempted. Happening, however, to read last year a description of the physical features of the district, and in particular of Glen Feshie, my interest in it was again aroused, and, after some consideration, I resolved to visit it at the earliest opportunity. This presented itself in August last; but as my friends of former years were unavailable, and as I did not happen to know at the time of a suitable companion to accompany me, I had to undertake it by myself. To attempt such a walk with any reasonable chance of success necessarily entails some preparation beforehand, and to this end I proposed to walk up part of Deeside before attempting Glen Feshie. If thereafter I succeeded in reaching Speyside, I might go still farther afield and prolong my tour to Fort William, but this extension would of necessity be dependent on my earlier success.

Monday, 16th August, was the date I had fixed for setting forth. Rain had fallen heavily during the previous night and in the morning the weather seemed

so unpromising that, at the last moment, I decided to go by train to Drum. Here, as the rain had ceased, I got out and commenced walking. Speed being a secondary consideration in my programme, the first part of the way was taken at a leisurely pace; halts were made at intervals to examine any interesting features of the country, and towards evening I arrived at Aboyne, 20 miles from my starting-point. The following day—Tuesday—the twelve miles between Aboyne and Ballater were covered in about three hours; but while it was my intention to devote more time to this interesting stretch of country, the threatening aspect of the weather forbade delay. I walked steadily on and about noon reached Ballater. The road to Braemar is one which, in the course of years, has become thoroughly familiar to me, and, being anxious to reach the head of Glen Dee before darkness set in, I decided to get along it as quickly as possible, and accordingly took the motor bus and reached Braemar at 3.30 p.m.

Half an hour sufficed to complete some minor arrangements, and at 4 p.m. I set out for Bynack Lodge, 12 miles distant. The route chosen at the outset was the less frequented and more agreeable path through the moor to the Car Cairn: here, since the weather had improved and the sun shone brilliantly, a glorious view of the hills was obtained, while westward, as far as the eye could reach, the river could be seen glistening in the afternoon sun. Descending again to the main road beyond Corriemulzie, I passed through Inverey, and soon reached the Linn of Dee and the end of civilization in Deeside.

In the bare moor leading westward from the Linn, few signs of life were seen. A herd of deer, startled at my approach, trotted away gracefully to the south, and a solitary curlew wailed out its melancholy note; but, apart from these evidences, the whole valley seemed to be untenanted and for the first time since I had set out a decidedly eerie feeling crept over me as the evening advanced. On turning the corner beyond the Bridge of

Dee, however, I was cheered by a glimpse of Beinn a' Ghlo, its peak crimsoned with the light from the setting sun; then I sighted the spruces surrounding Bynack, and, on reaching the Lodge received a hospitable welcome from the solitary keeper stationed there.

Next morning—Wednesday—after an early breakfast, a start was made for Glen Geldie. The two keepers—from Bynack and Geldie respectively—had arranged to shoot deer in the glen, and as their route coincided with my own, I considered myself fortunate in having company for the first part of my way. In an hour Geldie Lodge was reached, and there we separated: the keepers, disappointed in signs of deer, made off to the south, while I, continuing due west, entered the extensive moor leading to the Feshie. Here, so far as I could discover, no road exists. Various tracks I followed at the outset landed me in bogs or died out, and at last, growing weary of these false trails, I gave up the quest and made straight for a small ridge which the keepers had pointed out to guide me through the moor. This was duly reached, and seating myself behind a big boulder, I made a leisurely survey of my surroundings before proceeding farther. The most prominent features in Glen Geldie—which by this time I had passed through—are the two large imposing hills named An Sgarsoch and Carn an Fhìdhleir (Cairn Ealar) (3,300 feet and 3,276 feet respectively). These rise in long sweeping slopes to fully 1600 feet above the valley: both stand on the county boundary between Aberdeen and Perth, but Cairn Ealar has the additional distinction of being the meeting-point of the three counties of Aberdeen, Perth and Inverness. The ascent in Glen Geldie is so gradual that on arriving at the ridge I was at first doubtful if I had actually reached the watershed, but, on looking westward, my doubts were immediately settled, on observing the Geldie and the Feshie flowing away from each other in opposite directions. No ridge of any consequence separates the streams, and to all appearance little effort would even

now be required to divert the waters of the Feshie into—what is now generally admitted to have been—their old channel down Glen Geldie.

Crossing the county march into Inverness-shire, I now made my way over rough broken ground to the banks of the Feshie, where I struck the footpath leading down the Glen. Before I had gone far it became apparent that the general character of this glen was entirely different from that of Glen Geldie. Instead of a wide open valley with easy side slopes and an almost imperceptible gradient, I here found a comparatively narrow, steep-sided, winding glen, which fell so rapidly that in a short time it assumed a deep trench-like appearance. The side hills rose in height and became more precipitous; dykes of harder rock projected from their sides like the ribs of some mighty giant; wild gullies opened up here and there, and long talus slopes of loose stones gathered round their base. Suddenly, on coming round the bend in the middle of the glen, a great scene presented itself in the appearance of the two hills, Craig Caillich and Creag-na-Gaibhre, on either side of the gorge, which, rising almost vertically to a great height, form a most impressive natural gateway to the glen. Up to this point the floor of the valley had been encumbered with great quantities of glacial deposits, in which the river has cut a deep channel on the west side; but beyond this the valley opens out and forms a level grassy haugh, through which the stream runs at lessened speed and in a number of branches. Large Scotch fir trees of great age—a remnant, it is believed, of the ancient Caledonian forest—cover the haugh and afford a grateful shade, and the situation was so agreeable and restful that I halted here for more than an hour to have lunch and a good rest. On a high bank on the other side of the river could be seen Glen Feshie Lodge—the shooting-box of Sir George Cooper. The Lodge, which was largely rebuilt a few years ago, is well surrounded with trees and commands a fine view of the gorge which I had just descended.

Resuming my walk, I crossed the Feshie by a long trestle-bridge and followed the left bank for about three miles, until I struck the hill road leading westward to Kingussie. This road crosses a high rolling moor, from which an extensive view is obtained of the surrounding country. The tablelands of the Cairngorms, the Monadhliaths and the Gaick were all comparatively near neighbours; but through a gap in the hills to the south-west appeared another sea of hill-tops fading into the blue distance, which from their direction I concluded must be the hills of Lochaber near Glen Spean. Descending through the moorland I soon came to the river Tromie, but for a distance of nearly half a mile beyond the river I found the roadway had been cut up and destroyed in a most extraordinary manner by a severe thunderstorm and cloudburst which had occurred only a few days previously. Shortly after this the ruins of Ruthven Barracks were passed, then the Spey was crossed, and about six o'clock I reached Kingussie.

Next morning, Thursday, I entered on the first stage of my journey to Fort William. The effects of my previous day's walk of 24 miles had not yet passed off, and finding that a motor car plied daily to Laggan Inn, I availed myself of its help and by this means was carried there in an hour and a half. The scenery of Upper Strathspey and Strath Mashie, through which I passed, is so grand that at the time I regretted I had not given more time to it and walked the whole way; but, on the other hand, I consoled myself with the reflection that I had escaped a long walk of 18 miles on a hard macadamized road and would in all probability find quite sufficient scope for the exercise of my energies on the remainder of the road down Glen Spean.

For the first two hours after leaving Laggan Inn I walked along the northern shore of Loch Laggan, a noble sheet of water, some seven miles long and about half a mile in width. Two large hills, Binnein Shios and Binnein Shuas, rose directly from the waters of the loch on the south side; while on the north side the lower

portions of the massive Creag Meaghaidh and Carn Liath were seen towering up into the clouds; owing to mist, however, their summits were never exposed to view. After passing the loch the valley widens, and Glen Spean proper is entered. At first the river Spean, which drains the loch, pursues a winding course through an alluvial flat, but gradually, as it works westward, it cuts deeply into moraine hillocks which block the valley near Loch Treig, and latterly, on nearing Glen Roy, it plunges into a magnificent rock gorge which it has cut through the schists. Loch Treig itself cannot be seen from the road, but the two large hills on either side of it, Cnoc Dearg and Easain Mhor, were conspicuous features all afternoon: these form part of the range which continues as far west as Fort William and culminates there in the Ben Nevis group. On coming opposite Loch Treig, the first indications of the "parallel roads" may be observed in the long straight line which is visible for a number of miles on either side of the valley at a considerable height on the hillside. At this point, too, the railway line to Fort William enters the glen and brings some evidences of civilization into the scene: otherwise the appearance of Glen Spean is desolate in the extreme—few houses exist, and little or no traffic passes over the road, while the absence of travellers makes walking monotonous and lonely. Only at one or two points were any signs of cultivation observed, and even sheep-grazing seems to be engaged in to a very limited extent.

Next day, Friday, Glen Roy was visited in rather adverse conditions. The early morning was very wet, thick mist hung low on the hills, but, on a slight improvement taking place after breakfast, I walked up the glen for four miles to the point known as "the gap," from which an excellent view of the upper part of the glen may be had. There the three level lines or "parallel roads" are very clearly visible—indeed, much better than I had anticipated they would be seen; and for several miles ahead they could be traced, keeping their exact

relation to each other and following all the slight irregularities of the hillsides. The lines—or old beach levels, to give them their correct designation—clearly show the great extent and depth of the glacial loch which filled this and the adjacent valley, and indicate no less clearly the enormous mass of the Glen Spean glacier which blocked the lower end of Glen Roy and impounded the waters of the loch. Rain, however, prevented a farther advance up the glen. I returned to the Roy Bridge Inn at noon, and thereafter walked the remaining 13 miles to Fort William. The stretch of country between Roy Bridge and Spean Bridge is well wooded and forms a pleasant contrast to the country both east and west, and the gorges at these bridges are well worth visiting; but the remainder of the road to Fort William surpasses in dreariness and desolation the upper part of Glen Spean. Unfortunately, the weather was most unfavourable: cold rain showers frequently drove me to seek shelter wherever available, and thick mist hung far down on the hills; and it was with a certain feeling of relief that I at last reached more civilized regions and eventually arrived at my destination about 4 p.m.

The task which I had set before me at the outset was now practically accomplished. In the five days since I started I had walked over 107 miles, and in addition, had travelled by train and motor about 46 miles, and, considering my want of training, I concluded I had stood the journey well. The remainder of the afternoon and evening were spent “building castles in the air,” or, in other words, planning further excursions to use up other five days I had at my disposal. These latterly resolved themselves into:—(1) a day on Ben Nevis—principally in mist; (2) a whole day spent in Glen Nevis; (3) a train journey in rain to Arisaig, and a walk from thence to Mallaig, visiting Loch Morar on the way; (4) a sail in a patrol boat from Mallaig to Kyle of Lochalsh through the Sound of Sleat, and in the evening a walk to Broadford Inn in Skye; and (5) a visit to the Red Hills and to Blaven on Loch Slapin, returning to Broadford at

night. A full account of these five very enjoyable days would extend far beyond the limits of these notes, and I must forego further reference to them meanwhile. But on leaving Broadford, I inwardly registered a vow, that if, after these days of stress and warfare are past, I should ever chance to have ten days to spare, I should spend them in Skye. In my ten days' holiday I had walked over 180 miles, and, with the exception of a vicious blister on my instep, I felt capable of going on indefinitely. My return journey was performed in the orthodox fashion by boat to Kyle of Lochalsh and by train through Inverness to Aberdeen.

FIR NAM BEANN.

("LAND OF THE HILLS.")

Back from the fevered crowd and stifling weather,
 To the wide moorland with its soothing winds :
 Faint hum the bees among the blooming heather,
 And the red stag is calling to his hinds.

High over far-off hills the eagle yet is sailing ;
 In frothy rushing pools the leaping salmon play ;
 Loud in the glen uncanny curlew wailing,
 Iscariot-driven, their mission to betray.

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DUGALD MACINTYRE.

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