

## LONGMUIR'S "SPEYSIDE."

HAVING in the last number disinterred Macgillivray's "Deeside" from the shelf of forgotten works, we may now perform a similar service for a corresponding book on the Spey valley—"Speyside: Its Picturesque Scenery and Antiquities: With occasional notices of its Geology and Botany," by [the Rev.] John Longmuir, A.M., LL.D., published in 1860 by Messrs. Lewis and James Smith, Aberdeen. Between the two books, however, there is in reality more of contrast than of correspondence. Dr. Macgillivray's work, as we saw, was the outcome of direct personal investigation, and abounded in felicitous descriptions of natural scenery, which graphically portrayed the immediate impressions of an acute observer. It is a book instinct with individuality. Dr. Longmuir's work, on the other hand, is little else than a compilation—a painstaking, fairly erudite, and thoroughly creditable compilation, it is true, but almost wholly destitute of personality. It is less a description of Speyside than an account of Strathspey—of its castles and mansions and the historical incidents associated with the region, interspersed with many legendary and antiquarian details. As much as this, indeed, may be gathered almost from the verse which does duty as a herald of the contents—probably Dr. Longmuir's own composition, he having been something of a poet:—

Tradition's lore and Celtic lay  
May well beguile the longest day,  
While we pursue our Highland way;  
Or, sad delight,  
Recall the straths of rapid Spey,  
When far from sight.

How far Dr. Longmuir—who was for well-nigh forty years a well-known clergyman in Aberdeen, minister of the Mariners' Church (Free Church) in Commerce Street—was qualified to write a book on Speyside, we

are not able to say. He was not a native of Strathspey, nor at any time a resident in it, and we are not aware that he was familiar with it by frequent visits. But he possessed fair literary talent, which he exercised in various directions, and he acquired a considerable reputation as a geologist, and also as a lexicographer, editing several new issues of standard dictionaries, including that of Dr. Jamieson on the Scottish language. He was the author of a popular guide to Dunnottar Castle, which has run through many editions and is still in demand; and this may have suggested to Mr. Lewis Smith his selection for the preparation of a book on Speyside, which was probably more an enterprise of the publisher than of the writer. Be that as it may, Dr. Longmuir, in a preface to the book, so far justified his participation in the undertaking by stating that he had resided for several years in the province of Moray, and in that way had obtained a more accurate knowledge of its localities and traditions than he could otherwise have done. "In order still further to qualify himself for the composition of this manual," the preface continues, "he recently traversed the banks of the Spey from its mouth to its source; and he has, besides, availed himself of every work that could contribute to his materials, but more especially of Shaw's 'Province of Moray,' the 'Statistical Account,' and the works of the late Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, Bart., Dr. MacCulloch, and General Stewart."

The result was a closely-printed book of 216 pages, full of information about the Strathspey district, instructive and interesting in a high degree, but suffering from the inevitable defect of a compilation of the kind—that anything like a general view of the region and its characteristic features is lost in the accumulation and elaboration of details. In one particular, indeed, this defect is exceedingly conspicuous. Dr. Longmuir apparently was less concerned about the scenic beauties of the Spey than about the historic incidents that had occurred on its banks; not that he

was regardless of the scenery or insensible to its fascination, but that—judging at least from his mode of treatment—he deemed the history of the more importance. It is curious to note, for instance, that all the descriptions of scenery he furnishes consist of quotations from other writers; his own personal interest in the work would seem to have been centred on other features. A striking example of this rather remarkable attitude occurs in the opening pages. Dr. Longmuir quotes the following general sketch of the river by the author of "The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland," whom he terms "the fastidious MacCulloch":—

In point of magnitude, I believe it [the Spey] must follow the Tay—and in beauty it may be allowed to follow the Earn; preceding alike the Tweed, and the Clyde, and the Don, but being still inferior to many of our larger rivers in the important particular of not being navigable, and in being therefore nearly useless. The small lake, or rather pool, whence it originates, is its most unquestionable head; since, unlike the Tay, none of its subsidiary streams, not even the Truim, can pretend to compete with this primary one. It is one decided Spey from its very spring, receiving numerous accessions, but no rival. Its course is almost everywhere rapid; nor does it show any still water till near the very sea. It is also the wildest and most capricious of our large rivers; its alternations of emptiness and flood being more complete and more sudden than those of any of the streams which I have named. The causes of this are obvious, in considering the origin and courses of its tributary waters; while the elevation of its source, amounting to more than 1,200 feet, accounts for the rapidity of its flow. . . . From the spring its course displays little beauty till it reaches Clunie and Speybridge. Hence it increases in interest as it approaches Kinrara: whence, for a few miles it is attended by a series of landscapes alike various, singular and magnificent. If, after this, there are some efforts at beauty, these are rare, and offer little that is new or striking; while, near its exit from the mountainous country, it loses all character, and continues from Fochabers to the sea a wide, insipid sheet of water.\*

And then he gives his own idea of what Speyside represents:—

What throbbing emotions, what imperishable associations are awakened in thousands of bosoms by the bare announcement of the

\* MacCulloch's statements and opinions are not unimpeachable. See "Strathspey," by Alex. Inkson McConnochie (Aberdeen, 1902).

simple word "Strathspey!" It embodies the distinctions of the clans, with their tartans, emblems and slogans—their music, now arousing the martial spirit by its pibrochs, exciting to the lively dance by the reels that derive from it their specific name, or moving to pity by its wailings in the coronach over the dead. Then, who but a Highlander can appreciate the highly figurative strains of its poetry, or recount with such a glow of enthusiasm the honours of his chieftain, or the contests of his followers with rival clans! Not a turn of the river, not a pass in the mountains, or the name of an estate, that does not recall some wild legend of the olden, or some thrilling event of more recent times; not a plain that is not associated with some battle; not a castle that has not stood its siege or been enveloped in flames; not a dark pool or gloomy loch that has not its tale, either of guilt or superstition; not a manse that has not been inhabited by some minister that eminently served his Master, or a town that has not been the birthplace of some who have shone either in the literature, the commerce, or the arms of their country. Or, turning from the castle to the cairn, from the kirk to the cromlech, what a field is opened up to the investigator of the manners of the past!—The inhabitants of these straths drawing around the cruel rites of the Druidical circle where human sacrifices were offered up; the struggle between light and darkness, ere Christianity diffused its peace and good-will; the social progress of the district, from the times when civil discord destroyed the happiness of the family circle, retarding agriculture and commerce; and the conviction that forces itself upon the mind that we are under the deepest obligation to maintain our civil and religious privileges at home, and to extend them to all for the promotion of their happiness and the glory of the "Father of lights," who has graciously bestowed upon us these invaluable blessings! Or, if we wander through the solemn forests, or traverse the long stretches of brown heath, where the silence is only broken by the hum of the bee among its purple hills, new ideas are suggested and emotions awakened. Or if we ascend the rugged summits of the hills, whence the works of men are scarcely discernible, and a boundless prospect opens on every side, what heart does not feel the insignificance of human grandeur, or can resist the impression of the wisdom, power and goodness of Him "who weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance," or fail to long for the time when "the mountains and hills shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands!"

Here we have the keynote to the book—it is to deal with the region rather than with the river, with historical and personal associations instead of physical features; and the book responds to the note thus struck. Cairn-

gorm, so conspicuous over such a large stretch of the Spey valley, is dismissed in 28 lines, all but ten of them devoted to the crystals known as cairngorms. Glenmore, at the foot of the mountain, receives more attention than the mountain itself, mainly, however, by the introduction of a quotation, the authorship of which is not acknowledged—it is from Christopher North we rather think. Braeriach, Sgoran Dubh, and the Láirig Pass are not so much as mentioned. Kinrara, perhaps the most beautiful spot on the Spey, is not absolutely overlooked, but here again a quotation—this time from MacCulloch and duly acknowledged—is made to do the principal duty of description. An exquisite view of the Spey, embracing two lovely bends of the river, is obtained from the bridge at Grantown; but it is wholly disregarded, and in its place we have this sample of the dreadful manner in which it was customary to write guide-books half a century ago:—

To those who desire to penetrate the Highlands a little farther than Rothes, we would recommend Grantown, not only on account of its being a neat and cleanly town, where all the comforts of life may be readily obtained, but on account of the numerous points of interest spread all around it, at such convenient distances as would afford many pleasing excursions that would both interest the mind and invigorate the body.

Such defects and deficiencies as those just pointed out may appear surprising, perhaps even shocking, to readers of to-day; but the fault is not altogether Dr. Longmuir's. We have readjusted our values since his book was published. The appreciation of mountains hardly existed in the sixties of last century; the admiration of picturesque scenery was not the acknowledged and general taste that it has since become. Railway travel, moreover, had not then familiarised the public with the beauties of Speyside. Dr. Longmuir, in delineating what was very much a *terra incognita*, naturally—and quite excusably—dealt with such incidents and particulars as he fancied—and fancied rightly—would interest his readers; hence the preponderance of detailed information over picturesque description.

Beginning at Garmouth, where the river—all trace gone of the dubious character of “the thundering Spey” assigned it in one of Aytoun’s ballads—flows leisurely into the Moray Firth, Dr. Longmuir works his way up to its source in Loch Spey, on the borders of Lochaber. The course of the stream lends itself to effective treatment of the kind which the worthy doctor essayed, and which, it may be freely acknowledged, he accomplished with a large measure of success, if without any special distinction. The valley of the Spey, with its adjacent glens, is rich in romance and story. The ruins of Castle Roy and Lochindorb are reminiscent of the proud and powerful Comyns. Loch-an-Eilein recalls the ferocious Wolf of Badenoch. Highland clans are represented by the Macphersons and the Grants. A later Macpherson translated—or wrote—Ossian’s Poems, and two of the numerous families of Grants were satirised in Sir Alexander Boswell’s comic verses :—

Come the Grants of Tullochgorum,  
Wi’ their pipers gaun before ’em,  
Proud the mothers are that bore ’em,  
Feedle fa-fum.

Next the Grants of Rothiemurchus,  
Every man his sword and dirk has,  
Every man as proud’s a Turk is,  
Tweedle-da-dum.

The Gordons, also, are among the clans associated with Speyside. Gordon Castle is beside the river; the gay and witty Duchess, the celebrated Jean Maxwell, lies buried at Kinrara within sound of its waters; Tor Alvie is crowned by a column commemorative of the last Duke, and a cairn to the memory of the Gordon Highlanders who fell at Waterloo. Glenlivet was the scene of a battle between Huntly and Argyle; in the Haughs of Cromdale a Highland force was routed in an ignominious fashion, humorously hit off in a ballad once more familiar than it now is; and incidents of note in the Jacobite campaigns occurred at Ruthven and Speymouth. And in comparatively modern times, the Spey Valley once

again made history by the destructive floods that poured down the river and its affluents in the memorable spate of 1829.

These and such-like things—stone circles, clan feuds, the pranks of warlocks and witches, and curious items of family history—evidently monopolised Dr. Longmuir's interest, and so his book, as we have said, is more an account of Strathspey than a description of the Spey. Probably, for the purpose of "book-making," such a procedure was unavoidable; and it must be admitted that, within the limits either prescribed to him or adopted of his own choice, Dr. Longmuir produced a fairly meritorious and exceedingly interesting work. It is none the less regrettable, however, that in a work dealing with Speyside such scant notice should be taken of the river and of the typical Scottish region through which it flows and to which it contributes so much picturesqueness. "To me there is no music like the thundering of the Spey. Heart of me! how often in France—even fair France—have I longed to be beside it, and feel the soft peat-scented air, and see day by day the young heather spreading on the hill!" This rapturous outburst is placed by Mr. John Foster in the mouth of the heroine of his latest novel, "The Bright Eyes of Danger." It must stir emotions and resuscitate memories in all who have ever roamed over Speyside—such feelings and recollections as a re-perusal of Dr. Longmuir's work fails to awaken.