

—Slieve Bearnagh.

—Lough Shannagh.

—Slieve Commedagh.

—Slieve Donard.

—Rocky Mountain.

—Slieve Bignian.



Photo by

PANORAMIC VIEW FROM SLIEVE MUCK.

James Gray Kyd.

THE MOUNTAINS OF MOURNE.

BY JAMES GRAY KYD.

When we've got all we want we're as quiet as can be
Where the Mountains o' Mourne sweep down to the sea.

—*Irish Song.*

THE sea-girt Mountains of Mourne have attracted me for many years. Before ever I had seen Ireland I had heard of their charm; and passing glimpses of their graceful outlines, which later I had had when travelling between Dublin and Belfast, deepened my desire to visit them. One clear sunny day last August, when lying among the heather and the gorse on the rocky headland of Howth—which forms the northern arm of Dublin Bay—I saw in the distant horizon their wavy outlines rolling down to the sea. I determined then that I must visit Mourne, and that right early.

It was therefore with a joyful heart that, with a congenial companion, I set out from Dublin in mid-September, bound for the ancient kingdom of Mourne. We had arranged to spend a few days at Greenore, on the southern extremity of Carlingford Lough, and the first near view of the mountains which we got that September evening was one that shall live long in our memory. We had left the city in bright sunshine, but as our train steamed northward, the sun was blotted out by haze, and as we tapered our way to the point of Greenore, the countryside was shrouded in mist. Across the waters of the lough the dark forms of the Mourne Mountains showed dim and hazy in the distance, their glens sombre in the failing light, and their summits lost in the clouds. It was not difficult to picture the fierce feuds and bloody battles which once on a time were waged in this wild region. Across the waters stand the ruins of Greencastle—the southern

fortress of the kingdom—which formed the stronghold and the grave of many a warrior in years that are gone.

The few days which we spent at Greenore before crossing to County Down to explore the Mourne afforded us many wonderful sights of the changing beauty of the dark, silent mountains. The intervening strip of water, with its ever-changing colour, makes a fine foreground for the mountains beyond. The sight of mountains rising steeply from the sea is not one that is common to those whose climbing is mainly done in eastern Scotland, and it is a special delight to us to find the mountainous parts of Ireland mainly on the coast. Unlike Scotland, the Emerald Isle has a flat central plain with a girdle of mountains around the sea shores, both east and west, and the charm of sea-scapes seen from the mountains is new to one whose principal mountain exploits have been among the Cairngorms. A view of a winding coast is a pleasant change from a landscape of billowy hills; and a sea studded with islets—such as one views from the mountains of Connemara or from the peaks of Skye—with the broad Atlantic rolling towards the sunset, may perhaps hold a charm less alloyed than does a depopulated Highland glen.

The Mourne Mountains are a cluster rather than a range, although there is a distinct succession of peaks starting among the stately oaks of Rostrevor in the south-west, which trends in a north-easterly direction to Newcastle, culminating in Slieve Donard, and then bends in sickle-shape south-eastward toward the sea at Kilkeel. Our intention was to follow this outer rim of the group, leaving to a future date the exploration of the wedges of mountains which penetrate into the centre of this great outer chain.*

* Mourne Mountains in Down.—The ancient name was Beanna Boirche, the peaks of the shepherd Boirche, who herded on these mountains the cattle of Ross, King of Ulster in the third century. About the middle of the twelfth century a tribe of the MacMahons from Cremorne, in Monaghan, settled in the south of the present county of Down, and gave their tribe name of Mughdhorna (Mourna) to the barony of Mourne and to the Mourne Mountains.—Joyce's "Irish Local Names Explained."

After a few days at Greenore, we journeyed to Warrenpoint, at the head of Carlingford Lough, by the London and North-Western Railway Company's paddle steamer which plies around the fjord. The day was dull and the outlines of the mountains were only faintly visible, but the mist added a weird wonder to the dark glens which cut deeply into the centre of Mourne. From Warrenpoint the motor omnibus took us to the sylvan village of Rostrevor, where we left the lough behind and wended our way up the steep street towards the Hilltown road. About half a mile from Rostrevor the road forks, the right hand branch crossing the Kilbroney River. This was the road we took. It winds pleasantly through meadowland, with a well-wooded hillside on our right. A linen mill is passed, about two miles from Rostrevor, with its sloping bleaching greens, which make their presence known to more than one of the senses. We are in the linen country, and these mills have brought wealth and fame to Ulster from the farthest corners of the world.

The sun was struggling hard to gain a mastery over the clouds, but by the time we reached the Yellow Water bridge—one hour after leaving Rostrevor—the day looked very bad. We were not deterred, however, and started up the banks of the Yellow Water, which is appropriately named on account of the several mineral springs that discolour the main stream. There is a turf-cutters' track which mounts the hillside steeply on the right bank of the stream, and should any Club member ever follow our route, we recommend the track rather than the bank of the stream, as there the bracken is shoulder high, and higher up the rocks and heather afford very bad going. At about 1,000 feet level we got into the clouds. We hugged the right bank of the stream till it lost itself in a bog on the plateau to the south of the cone of Shanlieve. Here we struck northward up the steep shoulder of the mountain, and found the summit with difficulty, as the mist was very dense. Our original intention was to

walk along the range of Eagle Mountain, through Windy Gap on to Pigeon Rock Mountain, and thence on to Hilltown *via* Cock Mountain and Hen Mountain, but with only two and a half hours more of daylight, and the mist as thick as ever I have seen it, we made a north-westerly direction to endeavour to pick up the turf-cutters' road which joins the Hilltown road at the Leitrim fork.

These turf-cutters' tracks are a feature of the mountains of Ireland, leading from the country by-ways up to the great turf-bogs, or peat-bogs, as they would be called in Scotland. The turf industry is much developed, and these bogs are hives of industry in the summer and autumn months. The turf is carted to the banks of the canals, which link up the whole of Ireland, and is conveyed on long flat barges to the cities, where it is put to its many uses. The burning of turf in city homes is much more common in Ireland than in Scotland. The canal banks along the outskirts of Dublin are busy depôts for the distribution of the fuel throughout the city, and walking in the suburbs on a calm evening, one is reminded of the scents of a clachan in the Highlands.

After descending some 700 feet we came to an impassable bog which forms the feeding source of the Rocky Water. We tried various routes round it, but deemed it better to strike south-west and get back to the Yellow Water again. The descent was made in thick mist, the whole countryside being blotted out. We reached the Hilltown road at 5.15, and started tramping northward to Hilltown, where we arrived about 7 o'clock, glad to receive the very kindly welcome afforded to us at the inn.

We have heard few wilder nights than the night which followed our first day in Mourne. The wind reached hurricane force, and the rain came down in sheets. We were rather despondent as we sat at breakfast next morning, and till about half-past ten the day looked hopeless. But the cheery postman shed



Photo by

James Gray Kyd.

SLIEVE BEARNAGH, FROM THE SOUTH-WEST.



Photo by

James Gray Kyd.

LOOKING SOUTH FROM SLIEVE BEARNAGH.

hope into our doubting hearts by assuring us that it was to clear, and, sure enough, he was right, so by half-past eleven we started on our journey. We took the main Newcastle road until the fork about a mile and a half from Hilltown; here, we took the right-hand road under the well-named Hen Mountain, which certainly bears a most striking resemblance to a brooding hen. We wound our way up the steep road by the Kinnahalla plantation of fir and birch. The river Bann on our right was a wonderful sight after the heavy rain, as it plunged over the rocky ledges—which form a striking feature almost right up to the watershed—hurrying on to rest a while in the ample bosom of Lough Neagh before losing itself in the waters of the North Atlantic.

As we climbed, the broad cultivated plain of County Down opened up behind us, with the prosperous little towns dotted here and there, and that view gave us hopes of a fine prospect when we reached the summit of the road at 1,225 feet.

When nearing the last few feet of a climb over a col, we always have a strong inclination to hurry on to catch the earliest glimpse of the country beyond. The rain of the night had cleared the air as well as filled the rivers, and seldom have we seen a more delightful prospect than met our eyes as we reached the summit of the pass on the lonely Deer's Meadow, as the flat summit plateau is appropriately named.

In the foreground, the mountain road trended away southward down the boulder-strewn hillside; beyond was the richly-cultivated pasture-land which lies between the mountains and Kilkeel, and then the flat tongue of County Louth stretching out into the Irish Sea between Carlingford Lough and Dundalk Bay. Farther south, the sandy Leinster coast leads on to Lambay Island and Howth Head, and on and on, till our eyes carried us away into County Wicklow, where the Bray Head and Sugar Loaf stood out grandly against the dome of blue.

Our route lay up the steep side of Slieve Muck (2,198 feet). A well-built stone wall runs up to the summit, and good dry ground is to be found by its side: forty minutes' climb brought us to the crest, and there for the first time we looked into the heart of Mourne. Slieve Muck forms the pivot of the whole cluster, and the view around was wonderful. Rocky Slieve Bearnagh mounts guard over Lough Shannagh, and is joined to our view point by the rounded hills—Carn Mountain, Slieve Lough Shannagh, and the two Slieve Meels. Farther east from Bearnagh our eyes carry us over Slieve Commedagh to Slieve Donard—the monarch of Mourne—and round the great silent amphitheatre of brown and sullen mountains to Slieve Bignian, with its rocky torrs of granite, which have stood the weathering of ages. Away to the north-east the Mull of Galloway stretches towards us; and, farther south, in the hazy distance, the Isle of Man relieves the otherwise unbroken outlines of the Irish Sea. Away westward, the view is very different. Cultivated fields give place to barren hillsides, and smiling villages to lonely valleys. North-west, away in the dim distance, we see the waters of Lough Neagh—that great inland sea—and, beyond, the blue outlines of the Sperrin Mountains of Derry. In the northern horizon our eyes meet the Cave Hill and the other prominent points around Belfast Lough. I have seldom seen a more satisfying prospect than that which unfolded itself to us that lovely September day in the heart of the mountains of Mourne.

From Slieve Muck our route lay north-east towards Slieve Bearnagh (2,394 feet). We skirted the intervening hills and reached the dip between Slieve Meel More and Slieve Bearnagh about an hour after leaving Slieve Muck. The final ascent of Bearnagh is very steep and fatiguing, but the toil of the climb is soon forgotten on the wonderful rocky summit of this magnificent mountain. The view is similar to that from Slieve Muck, but the dignified Slieve Donard

is closer, and the two deep cuts of the Silent Valley and the Annalong River, with Slieve Bignian dividing them, is a fresh prospect. The Silent Valley winds away to the sea, flanked by dark frowning precipices.*

After spending as long as we could on Bearnagh, we struck down to the Hare's Gap—a steep dip between Bearnagh and Slievenagloagh. The sides of the Trassey Valley, which runs north-west from the Hare's Gap, are buttressed with dark precipices on either side, and we saw several chimneys and ledges which, we are sure, would give sport to those members of the Club who favour this form of hill-climbing. As we rested on the Hare's Gap, the lights of evening were deepening and the shadows lengthening. The sky overhead was deep blue; near the distant horizon it faded into a wonderful green as it met the pink-tipped clouds, which changed into a purple hue as they lost themselves in the distance of the Sperrin Mountains.

A good path runs down the valley and joins the Hilltown-Newcastle road, short of the flax mill on the Shimna River. It was moonlight when we walked down the valley towards the sea, and by the time we reached the wooded village of Byransford, the full moon was lighting up the water with its silvery beams, and throwing into dark relief the valleys of the mountains. Soon the welcome lights of Newcastle

* *Slieve* (Irish *Sliabh*)—cognate to Welsh *Llyfr*, Old High German *Sliuff*, and Anglo-Saxon *Tō slīpan*—in Irish place-names signifies sometimes a mountain, sometimes a range of mountains, and sometimes even a whole district of mountainous country. "The word in the Anglicised form of *Slieve* is applied to a great number of the principal mountains in Ireland, and it is almost always followed by a limiting form, such as an adjective or a noun in a genitive case. For example, *Slievesnaght*, the name of a mountain in Innishowen, and of several others in different parts of the country, represents the Irish *Sliabh-sneachta*, the mountain of the snow; *Slievemore*, great mountain; *Slievemuck*, pig mountain."—Joyce's "Origin and History of Irish Names of Places."

The Irish word *Beann*, corresponding to Scottish *Ben* and Welsh *Fen*, is used for a mountain, the gable of a house, or anything of that nature sharply defined and pointed. Thus the adjective derived from it, *beannach*, corresponds to Scott's "antlered monarch of the waste."

were seen, and we were glad to get rest and refreshment in this delightful spot.

Newcastle is probably the best starting-point for excursions among the Mourne Mountains. The giants of the group are all within easy access, and there are many attractions around this charming seaside village. The golf course is surpassed by few even in Scotland, and the ever-changing views of sea and hill are a constant delight. The surrounding countryside is rich in historic lore, and the botanist and geologist will find ample scope for their hobbies among the mountains or by the "surf-bound rocky shore." Slieve Donard dominates the village in a most imposing manner, the wooded lower slopes being crowned by heathery uplands and the rugged precipices that rise from the valley of the Glen River.

Slieve Donard takes its name from St. Domhanghart, a divine who lived in the fifth century. History relates that he built a hut and chapel on the summit of this mountain, and that he repaired thither for spiritual refreshment. This saint had followers for centuries after his earthly career was over, and even in recent times the shrine on the summit was visited by pilgrims who did penance and offered their devotions. We are afraid that in modern days we do not reverence the relics of the ancient saints, for the last remains of St. Domhanghart's shrine seem to have formed the material for building a shelter for our Ordnance surveyors during their lengthened sojourn on the summit of Slieve Donard, which formed one of the points of the main triangulation in the survey of the British Isles.

Our objective as we left Newcastle in the bright sunshine of a crisp autumn morning was this mountain. We entered the gateway of Donard Lodge, and turned immediately to the left, keeping close to the banks of the streamlet. The path was carpeted with leaves and the undergrowth luxuriant. As we got clear of the woods, we reached the quarries with the busy workmen chipping at the famous Mourne granite. What a

prospect these men have as they hew and carve the rocks! The sea trends northward in the gentle curve of Dundrum Bay, and eastward the Isle of Man is like a gem in the exquisite setting of the Irish Sea.

We kept close to the shoulder of Thomas Mountain and reached the clouds at about the 1,000 feet level. The walking is easy on the hillside carpeted with bog-myrtle and heather, and the ascent is gradual till the moraine at the valley head is reached. There the final pull up the cone to the summit is attacked. On the actual summit is a substantial cairn, built by the Belfast Water Commissioners, who are enclosing the whole basin drained by the Silent Valley river with a substantial dry-stone dyke of enormous dimensions—some eight feet high and three feet broad. There is convenient shelter in the angle between the westward and the southward walls, in which we were glad to take refuge from the unkindly wet wind.

Our route lay southward by the side of the wall to the slope of Rocky Mountain (1,718 feet), where we picked up a turf-cutters' track which took us into the valley of the Annalong River. We got on to the main Newcastle-Kilkeel road at Annalong after passing through a highly-cultivated countryside. These farmers of County Down are industrious and their steadings are substantial—much more so than those found in the south and west of Ireland—and each farm-house is surrounded by a garden, where hedges of fuchsias and bushes of hydrangeas give a pleasing touch of colour to the landscape. At Annalong the road winds pleasantly southward by the sea, past tiny villages and prosperous farms on to the thriving little town of Kilkeel, with its daring fishing fleet and its wonderful view of the mountains. The sea is a rich blessing to the folk along the coast; the fleet of Kilkeel bring in their silver harvest, which is conveyed to Greenore for dispatch to the markets of England, and the farmer manures his land with the sea-weed washed up on the rocky shore. After Kilkeel, on we went southward,

still by the sea, to Greencastle with its once powerful stronghold, through a countryside rich in agriculture and gay with its way-side flowers.

Night was falling as we reached Greencastle, and the lighthouses along the coast flashed out their message of warning and guidance to friend and foe alike. To the north the last rays of the setting sun were fading over the peaceful mountains of Mourne, where we had walked for the past few days among a kindly, industrious folk, with a good deal of Scottish canniness in their character.