

EARLY "GUIDES" TO THE CAIRNGORMS.

THE earliest work of the nature of a guide-book to the Cairngorm Mountains—from the Aberdeenshire side at least—is "A Guide to the Highlands of Deeside," professedly by "James Brown," published in 1831—a very small book, consisting of 32 pages only. The author contemplated a second edition, for which he solicited from his readers "any additional information which may be useful." No second edition ever was published, but shortly after the publication of the book there appeared another small work (77 pp.)—"The New Deeside Guide. By James Brown, author of 'The Guide to the Deeside Highlands.'" It is undated, but there is very good reason to believe that its actual date of publication was 1832. "The New Deeside Guide," however, can hardly be regarded as a second edition of Brown's original "Guide to the Highlands of Deeside," for it is an entirely different work, but presumably it supplanted its predecessor. It held the field at any rate, and continued to do so for many years, numerous editions being printed. It was expanded gradually, the edition of 1859, for instance, extending to 117 pages; and the work remained very much in the form then given to it until 1885, when it was superseded to some extent by the publication by Messrs. Lewis Smith & Son, the owners of the copyright, of "The Deeside Guide: Descriptive and Traditionary." Ten years later, "The Deeside Guide" itself disappeared, being incorporated in the second edition of "Deeside," by Alex. Inkson McConnochie, the first edition of which was published in 1893. (A third edition of Mr. McConnochie's work appeared in 1900).

The real author of "The New Deeside Guide" was Dr. Joseph Robertson, the well-known antiquarian of a past generation. James Brown, to whom the authorship was nominally assigned, was by no means a mythical

person, however. He was a driver of one of the Deeside coaches in the old stage-coaching days, and from him Dr. Robertson, who frequently visited Deeside and made pedestrian excursions to the mountains, gleaned a great deal of information in the course of his many journeyings up and down the valley. Brown was something of a "character," a man of shrewd observation and pawky speech; and Robertson, in compiling his "Guide," resorted to the ingenious expedient of adapting the phraseology employed to that of his informant, "whose colloquial peculiarities," as was pointed out by the writer of a biographical sketch of Robertson, "he humorously and successfully imitated in much racier style than the original." The better to maintain the illusion, the authorship of the "Guide" was credited to Brown, and latterly a preface was introduced, in which he was made to describe himself as "a plain, rude writer," seeking nothing more than "to set down what I have to say in a good homely style."* The book accordingly is rather quaintly written, and is attractive not only for the excellent matter furnished, but also for the naive manner in which that information is set forth. It is, in its way, a little masterpiece, so skilfully are the character of the professed narrator and his "homely style" maintained. He is made to embellish his story with not a little caustic comment and humorous reflection, and to constantly indulge in quizzical "asides." For example, he remarks of Aberdeen that "there is no town in Scotland more pleasant and agreeable, its inhabitants being allowed on all hands to be much more long-headed, discerning, and witty, than the inhabitants of any other town in Scotland"; while here is a rebuke not wholly undeserved—

The [mistaken] name of Rob Roy's Cave was given to the Burn of Vat by some idle readers of novels, romances, and other suchlike unprofitable books, who, after having crazed themselves with read-

* The history of the "Guide" and of its authorship is given in some detail by Mr. Robert Anderson, in *Scottish Notes and Queries*, VII. (2nd Series), 187-9 (June, 1906).

ing these books night and day, to the great misspending of their time and grievous hurt both of body and mind, come up here to the Highlands, and fancy that every cave, rock, or other curiosity, is Rob Roy's, or Roderick Dhu's, or Prince Charlie's.

The book, however, is more a guide to Deeside than to the Deeside Highlands, the information regarding these and the manner of reaching them being of the scantiest. Practically, this information is confined to the following two passages:—

Nearly opposite to Inverey, on the north side of the Dee, is the water of the Lui, and Glen Lui, a little up which there are several fine waterfalls. There is a foot-track which goes up Glen Lui, and joins the foot-track in Glen Derry, going to Speyside. Ben Muick Dhui and Cairngorm may also be visited by going up Glen Lui for about five miles, when the Glen branches into two; the eastmost being Glen Derry and the westmost Glen Luibeg; up which last Glen you must go till you come to its head, which is at the foot of Ben Muick Dhui. But this is the steepest side of Ben Muick Dhui, and therefore the most difficult to climb.

About four miles or so after you pass the Linn, the Dee, which has hitherto run almost always due east and west, makes a sudden turn to the north, and continues in this direction all the way to its source. . . . You now follow the course of the Dee northwards, and see the tops of Cairn Toul, Ben Muick Dhui, and Cairngorm right before you. Always as you go on, the glen becomes narrower, and the banks higher and more steep; of trees there are few far above the Linn, and these soon wholly disappear. At last, as you draw near the source, you find yourself in the bottom of a most immense glen, most silent, and very awful and gloomy, and the black rocks rising on all sides around you to a height almost inconceivable. The hill on the west side of the glen is Cairn Toul, and that on the east side Ben Muick Dhui, the latter of which is allowed to be the highest hill in Great Britain. From the sides of these two hills, but more particularly from Cairn Toul, various streams rush down and join the Dee. As you still advance into the bosom of this silent and awful valley, which is ever growing more gloomy, and the rocks of which appear as if they were soon to close upon you, you will observe the Dee growing less and less by degrees, till at last you perceive a huge heap of stones, stretching across the glen like an impassable and regularly built rampart. In a hollow behind this rampart is a large clear well, the source of the Dee, which rushes through below the rampart in a great stream. The easiest way of ascending Ben Muick Dhui is from this, from which you may climb to the top in about three hours.

Precise nomenclature is not a feature of "The New Deeside Guide," but then we must remember that it was written anterior to the Ordnance Survey. "The glen" just described is, of course, the pass familiar to modern mountaineers as the Làirig Dhrù, and nowadays we have learned to discriminate between the "Pools" of Dee in the Làirig and the "Wells" of Dee on the summit of Braeriach, and to regard the latter as the true source of the river. Tackling the steep climb up from the Pools of Dee is certainly not the easiest way of ascending Ben Muich Dhui, the route by Glen Derry being distinctly preferable—a route only indirectly indicated by "James Brown." And Ben Muich Dhui itself, as everybody knows, is no longer "allowed" to be the highest hill in Great Britain—that distinction has passed indisputably to Ben Nevis. But, considering the limited references to the Deeside Highlands in this Deeside Guide, there is no need for particularising their shortcomings. In a general way, the information afforded was fairly accurate, and besides, in all probability the "Guide" was not intended to be absolutely relied upon for personal direction. There occurs, at any rate, this suggestive sentence—"At Castletown of Braemar you may obtain steady men to guide you to Glentilt, the source of the Dee, Ben Muick Dhui, Cairngorm, Loch Avon, or Speyside, by applying at the inns." The class of men who thus acted as guides—and who also provided ponies, if required—has died out. Pedestrianism has come into its own, and the services of guides are now dispensed with.

What must be regarded as the first genuine guide to the Cairngorm region is a work titled "Braemar: Its Topography and Natural History: A Guide to the Deeside Highlands," by the Rev. James M. Crombie, published in Aberdeen in 1861. It consisted of three parts, describing successively the topography and the natural history of the district (including its geology, botany and zoology), and the scenery along the routes

of sundry projected excursions. The book is now very scarce. A new edition of it was issued in 1875.* The natural history section was omitted, Mr. Crombie having contemplated a larger work to which it would have been relegated along with the legendary lore of the district; but this larger work never appeared. Rev. James Morrison Crombie, by the way, was at the time in charge of the Church of Scotland Mission Station at Braemar (which was not constituted a *quoad sacra* parish till 1879). He was an Aberdonian, a brother of the late Baillie John Crombie; and he ultimately became a minister in London, and then an army chaplain. He was a botanist of some repute, a Fellow of the Linnæan Society, and the author of a work on "British Lichens."

The new edition, a work of 145 pages, was titled "Braemar and Balmoral: A Guide to the Deeside Highlands." It had a considerable vogue, and remained the principal—in fact, the only—guide to the region until the appearance, in 1885, of Mr. A. I. McConnochie's "Ben Muich Dhui and Its Neighbours," with its more comprehensive information and detailed routes. "Balmoral" was put in the title, we suspect, as a catch, for only half-a-dozen pages are devoted to it, and it does not even get the dignity of a separate section. Mr. Crombie gave a very liberal interpretation to the term "Braemar," making it include the whole district down to and even past Ballater, and furnishing a description of the village as well as of Braemar (invariably called Castleton). It is somewhat odd to read of Ballater that "the streets, if such they may be called, branch off at right angles from the main road, and contain nothing of interest except the parish church;" and of Braemar that "the houses a few years ago were, in general, but very commonplace affairs, presenting very little accommodation for strangers." The topographical

* John Hill Burton's "The Cairngorm Mountains" had appeared in the interval—in 1864; but it cannot be classified as a guide-book. An excellent appreciation of it, under the appropriate title of "A Cairngorm Classic," written by Mr. George Duncan, has appeared in the *C.C.J.* (IV., 322-7).

section also contains informative chapters on the mountains and glens, the streams and lochs, and the forests and moors.

It is the second part of the book, however, that is the most interesting—the part which describes the excursion routes. The first excursion is the common one from Braemar to Balmoral and Ballater, which in those days was ordinarily made by coach—a much more agreeable way of performing the journey than by the modern motor-bus, for, though the progress was slower, the fact of being seated outside enabled one to have a much better view of the scenery. The prominent features of the route are fairly well detailed—not, of course, in the racy style of the “Deeside Guide,” but still with an adequate regard to essential and interesting particulars. Accounts of the routes from Castleton to Lochnagar, the Linn of Dee, and to Ben Muich Dhui *via* Glen Derry follow. There is no need to examine them at length; the several routes are described with sufficient precision to be easily followed, and, if the present writer remembers aright, his first ascents of Lochnagar and Ben Muich Dhui were accomplished with the aid of Mr. Crombie’s book. Mr. Crombie made the mistake—common enough in his time—of saying that, if one were alone, he could never find his way to Ben Muich Dhui, and still less manage to climb it, without a guide (a personal one, that is), but his own work contributed largely to render the services of guides unnecessary. Assuming the rôle of cicerone, Mr. Crombie expatiates volubly and eloquently on the views from the summits of the two mountains to which he conducts us—a little too volubly sometimes, and with an irrepresible tendency now to drift into rhapsodical language, and then to indulge in reflections of a hortatory nature. His literary style is markedly rhetorical, and his rhetoric occasionally runs away with him, producing results that border on the foolish and the absurd. A sample of his style may be culled from his description of the view from the summit of Lochnagar, to which, however,

there is this rather grotesque prelude—"If you wish thoroughly to appreciate it [the view], you must first get your mind into proper trim by putting your stomach into proper order; so, out with the provisions, and as we feast our appetite with sandwiches and milk, let us also feast our eyes on beauty and magnificence." Then he goes on:—

It is indeed a glorious and extensive view that we have, and one which well repays the wearisome ascent, and makes us, as we gaze upon it, forget and no longer feel our fatigue. Extending as it does over cultivated fields and barren moors, over wide plains and mountain ranges, over populous cities and villages, too, though we cannot see them, from the Firth of Forth to the Moray Firth on the one hand, and from the German Ocean almost to the Atlantic Ocean on the other, it is no wonder that, apart from the charm which Byron's burning strains had thrown around it, Lochnagar should always have been so greatly admired for its noble outline, and should have attracted the feet of so many hundred tourists for the view which it affords.

* * * * *

If you take your telescope and look steadily through it on a clear day, you may perceive the Lammermoor Hills on the south, looming like a dim low cloud in the horizon which bounds your view; the higher peaks of Argyll and Inverness upon the west, through which, if you could pierce, you might detect the Atlantic; ridges and isolated hills meeting the sky on the north as far as the Moray Firth; and the green waters of the German Ocean upon the east, which are here and there visible, with the ships upon their bosom, through the openings in the lower tracts. Between these a sea of dark mountains, of all heights and forms, lies stretched out in Perth, Forfar and Aberdeen, whose billows are aye at rest, and whose wavy surface no wind can ever ruffle. Silence, deep and unbroken, is around us; and the loud sound of the world's pulse mingles not with the throbbings of our hearts. Beneath us we see enough to remind us that we are still human beings dwelling on earth with men of like passions with ourselves. For, even with the steep frowning glories of Lochnagar, there mingle the smiling beauties of green fields and waving oats planted by human hands, and the abodes of mankind, from that of royalty itself—which, however, is concealed from view by Craig-an-Gowan—down to the hut of the humble cottar, built by human labour; and Byron, could he now stand here, would perceive, a little beyond the cloud-encircled forms of his fathers' spirits, which in a clear day like this we vainly look for, the wreaths of smoke from an establishment where another kind of spirits are manu-

factured. It is a scene upon which we could gaze and meditate for hours, and hear the great Creator speaking to us in His marvellous works.

To be quite frank, this florid style becomes wearisome and the preaching tone rather palls, but both were perhaps more acceptable forty years ago than they are to-day. They do not, however, seriously detract from the merits of the book as a trustworthy guide and as a fount of information on some matters in which the author was a specialist. The excursion to Lochnagar, for instance, includes a diversion to the little-visited Loch Kandor, with an interesting account of the rare plants observable in the adjoining corrie, which, as Mr. Crombie says, is one of the richest botanical spots in the district. Nor is Mr. Crombie neglectful of the legendary, duly reminding us of the Priest's Well beside Loch Callater, "which arose in answer to the prayers of a priest at a time when the lochs and all the streams were for a long period frozen up, and the ice lay so thick that the inhabitants of the upper part of the glen could nowhere get the least supply of water." Mr. Crombie's "Braemar and Balmoral" has been out of print these many years, and has been superseded by other and more "up-to-date" works, but it is a pleasure to recall the excellent qualities it possessed and the services it once rendered to those engaged in penetrating the recesses of the Deeside Highlands.