

FORT WILLIAM TO SKYE.

II.—ARISAIG, MALLAIG, AND BLAVEN.

BY JAMES B. NICOL.

NEXT morning I awoke with the sound of rain dashing on the window-panes, and, on pulling up the blind, I found the High Street swept with fierce gusts of wind and driving rain. My programme, so far as Fort William was concerned, was completed, and with this sudden change for the worse in the weather, I at first felt at a loss whether to wait for an improvement, which might mean several days, or to take the first train homeward. On consulting mine host of the inn, however, he suggested a trip by train to Arisaig, on the west coast, to fill in time: if the rain ceased, as he thought it might, I could proceed—if not, I could but return at night. Collecting my chattels hurriedly, I made for the railway station, and within half-an-hour of making my decision, I was steaming out of Fort William for the west coast. Passing Inverlochy Castle and crossing Corpach Moss at the top of Loch Linnhe, the line turns westward along the northern shore of Loch Eil; then, gradually rising, it passes at a considerable height the north end of Loch Shiel, on the shore of which could be seen dimly through the mist and drizzling rain the monument erected to commemorate the landing of Prince Charlie in 1745. Thereafter, Loch Eilt, Loch Ailort, and Loch nan Uamh were passed in quick succession, until, about 11.30, Arisaig was reached. The mist, which had hung about us at the higher levels, lifted, and as the rain had nearly ceased, I decided to alight and walk to Mallaig, a distance of 10 miles. My route now lay close to the sea-shore; at times—the tide being low—I made short cuts across sandy bays, where the sand was composed largely of comminuted shells of a beautiful colour. At other places the road passed over narrow rocky pro-

montories, to descend again before long to the sea-shore. In places, too, the green turf came down close to the high-water mark, while the rocky foreshore was covered with a gorgeous mass of golden-coloured seaweed. After a short detour inland, the road approaches the sea again near Loch Morar. The sea loch or bay is most picturesque, but, unless one happens to be aware of it, the inland loch might be passed unwittingly, as it is invisible from the road.

On reaching the bridge over the Morar river, your attention is arrested immediately by the Falls of Morar, which are situated a few yards above the bridge. Although these falls are of very moderate dimensions—some 20 or 30 feet in height—the mass of bright green water which pours over the ledge of hard rock and breaks up into a foaming cataract below forms a very beautiful feature. Then, ascending the road past the falls and climbing a low mound—apparently a moraine hillock—the inland loch bursts on your view in all its glory. It is about a dozen miles in length and is surrounded on all sides except the west by high hills—the hills of North and South Morar. To the west a number of islands, covered with clumps of Scotch fir, dot the surface, their bare rocky sides polished and rounded, as when the ice-sheet melted and left them exposed. Apart from the great beauty of the loch with its surrounding hills, Loch Morar is remarkable as affording an instance of a loch lying in a true rock basin—*i.e.*, a basin which has been scooped out by intense glacial action. It is further remarkable for its extraordinary depth, amounting in places to no less than 1,050 feet, which, according to Sir Archibald Geikie, is “the deepest known hollow on any part of the European plateau except the submarine valley which skirts the southern part of Scandinavia.”*

From Morar onward the road partakes largely of a switch-back character and seems to revel in gradients

* See “The Scenery of Scotland” by Sir Archibald Geikie (2nd ed.), p. 240.

until, as Mallaig is approached, one experiences the feeling of dropping down on the village. Mallaig is a curious medley of incongruous elements, old and new, rich and poor. Railway station, harbour, and fish-curing yards jostle each other in a veritable jumble. The village church—one of those “neat Gothic structures,” built in the latest improved re-inforced concrete manner—meets one at the entrance, but is quite dwarfed in appearance by the Station Hotel—a huge, aggressive building of red stone and pink harling, which dominates the whole place. In front of the hotel is a double block of tenements for railway servants—buildings unobjectionable in themselves but wholly out of place in such a situation, and apparently erected there to obstruct the view seaward from the lower windows of the hotel. The harbour is a busy place during the fishing season and boasts of a new concrete pier, wooden wharves, and all the latest appliances for dealing expeditiously with the fish traffic.

Railways and roads end at Mallaig. A rough footpath leads out of it northward for a short distance, but, with this exception, there is no means of exit unless by sea or by retracing one's footsteps. I had now reached a dead-end, and my next problem was how to get out and where to go. My inclinations pointed to Skye, but communication with the island is at present restricted, as since the beginning of the war the usual passenger steamer from Mallaig has been withdrawn. I was fortunate, however, in securing, as a special favour, a passage in a boat to Loch Alsh—though “that is another story,” to use the Kipling phrase; a story not to be recounted here. I shall say nothing, therefore, of the voyage through the Sound of Sleat, or of my experiences in being ferried across from Kyle of Loch Alsh to Kyleakin in Skye. Arrived at Kyleakin, I set out at once for Broadford, eight miles distant. Barely two hours of daylight remained, and already the evening mists were gathering on the hill-tops as we crossed Loch Alsh. A good view of Raasay and the

Quiraing was obtained as the sun was setting, but before long these and all other features of the landscape were blotted out completely in the gathering gloom. The road—not a very good one, I may say—was lonely and unfrequented, except at the clachans of Breakish, where the villagers were collecting cattle and driving them homeward preparatory to closing up for the night. Scarce a traveller was met on the whole road, while, as darkness fell, a fine drizzling rain came down, which, besides damping the clothes, depressed the spirit. Keeping up a steady pace, I pressed forward, and at last, at 9 p.m., on turning a corner had the satisfaction of reaching the inn. Here, in marked contrast to the districts farther east, little or no restrictions appeared to be put on lighting at night. An acetylene gas installation was in full blast, and illuminated not only the interior but a good part of the exterior of the building.

GLEN SUARDAL AND LOCH SLAPIN.

Although I had frequently considered the possibility of crossing Scotland from Aberdeen, I had on this occasion made no preparations beforehand for a visit to Skye, and in consequence my notions of the geography of this district were somewhat vague. It must also be borne in mind that, owing to the mist and the darkness on the night of my arrival, the features of the country were completely hidden, and I had little conception of my whereabouts. My surprise may be imagined, therefore, when, on going out next morning before breakfast, I found immediately to the south of the inn, and at a comparatively short distance, three large conical hills of a decidedly red colour, and which, on investigation, I discovered to be the Red Hills of Skye. After a hurried breakfast, I set out for Loch Slapin, which lies about six miles south-west of Broadford. My road led me through Glen Suardal, a wide grassy valley, bounded on the east by a range of low hills crowned with rocky escarpments and on the west by the Red Hills. At first its direction is about due south, but

gradually it trends more towards the west until it assumes the form of a quadrant encircling the Red Hills and gives one a very comprehensive view of these striking eminences. On the northern face of each a large corrie has been scooped out, and this seems to terminate near the base of the hill in a flat basin, over the edge of which a small stream falls, eventually reaching the sea at Broadford. In the bright morning sun the red colour of the hills was most noticeable: not a particle of vegetation was apparent; and their steep, sloping sides seemed to be composed of loose broken stones. Unlike the Coolin Hills, these three cones are of granitic formation and differ from the Coolins as much in appearance as they do in structure.

Before proceeding more than a mile or so, the road surmounts the shoulder of a hill, and here another surprise awaited me, for, on reaching this point, a more striking hill suddenly made its appearance—this time of a dark blue, almost purple, colour. At first it occurred to me that here at last were the Coolin Hills, but, on referring to my map, I discovered it to be Blaven (the blue hill), belonging to the same formation (gabbro), but lying to the east of the Coolins. In striking contrast with the regular cones of the Red Hills, Blaven has the appearance of a long high ridge, the knife-like edge of which has become split and serrated, resembling a gigantic saw. At my first view of it, little of its form could be made out except its jagged outline, but on a closer view from the high ground above Loch Slapin, it, too, was seen to have a large corrie scooped out in its northern face. About half-way down Glen Suardal are the workings and deserted worksheds of a marble quarry. A tramway connected the works with a landing-stage in Broadford Bay, and a considerable amount of money has been spent in buildings, but apparently the venture was unsuccessful and the work is now abandoned.

Immediately beyond the marble works, the road passes the old pre-Reformation church of Cill Chriosd—

a ruined edifice perched on the top of a small conical hill. Although the roof of the church is gone, the side walls and gables are in a good state of preservation. The stone used seems to be granite—possibly from the Red Hills—and the square-headed windows and doors are finished on the outside with a plain splay; elsewhere the work is quite simple. In the churchyard were many old tombstones of very simple character; but the more modern monuments, although much longer and more pretentious, felt strangely out of harmony with their surroundings. One of the later monuments commemorated a family of the name of MacKinnon, and it was interesting to read that several of the members of this old family had reached positions of distinction in far distant parts of the Empire. Encircling the church to the south and west is the Loch of Cill Chriosd, a sheet of water which seems to have been of much greater extent in former times, but is now very much reduced and overgrown round the margins with masses of tall reeds and bulrushes.

A short distance farther on, I was tempted to try a short cut over some low hills, but, as one frequently discovers, these short cuts seldom effect much saving; yet the digression this time was not altogether fruitless, as it led me amongst the sites of some old buildings, which were quite probably connected with the "Site of St. Bridget's Chapel" marked on my map. A stone circle is also said to be near this place, but of it I found no trace. From these scattered remains we may infer that the population of Glen Suardal in earlier times must have been very considerable; nowadays there are only a couple of farms, one at each end of the glen.

Crossing now over a steep hill, I suddenly came in full view of Loch Slapin and Blaven. The loch, which lies almost north and south, is about $4\frac{1}{4}$ miles in length and $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles in breadth near the sea, but at Torran it contracts to a quarter of a mile and then expands again slightly towards its northern or upper end. Looking southward from my elevated position to the opposite

side of the loch, the long peninsula of Strathaird was seen extending for a distance of 9 miles to the horizon. Directly opposite, to the west, rose the great central mass of Blaven, "the hill of bloom," its jagged ridge—now only some 3 miles distant—towering up in the centre to 3,042 feet and sloping downwards slightly towards each end. The large corrie on its eastern side could be very clearly observed: several well-marked gullies were seen grooved into the back wall from the ridge downwards; and, as noted at the Red Hills, a small white streamlet trickled over the tip of the corrie and made its way down to the sea.

One of the most remarkable features which impresses a visitor to these hills for the first time is the extraordinary diversity of colouring which may be seen within a comparatively brief space of time. Soon after my arrival, dark-coloured clouds could be seen gathering to the south and floating up Strathaird, and as they drew nearer, the colour of the water seemed to change from its usual green to that of lead; then, as the mist settled on the top of Blaven, its colour deepened from its normal purple to an intense indigo, approaching black in places, and gave the whole hill, but especially the corrie, a most gloomy and forbidding aspect. A thicker cloud now floated over the face of the hill and for a short time blotted out its features, but before long it passed: the mist lifted, the sun broke through, and the brilliant purple again made its appearance. In the foreground, the cultivated fields about a small farm on the opposite shore of the loch, supplied bright patches of green and yellow; the pasture lands along the shore contributed darker greens and browns, while away to the right the outlying peaks of the Red Hills, with their warm bright reds, gave the effect of the afterglow of an autumnal sunset. Seldom in so small a compass can such a variety of colour be observed.

In a hollow on the east side of the loch lies Torran, a small, scattered township of about a dozen houses with a school and post-office. A goodly array of children's

heads popped round sundry walls and gables as I passed, but the general appearance of the place was uninviting. The head of the loch is about two miles farther north than Torran and in order to shorten this detour, a ferry takes passengers across from Torran to the farm on the opposite shore. This road round the loch is one of the routes to Loch Coruisk, a loch I have long wished to visit, but although so near, I found it would be impossible to include it in my programme on this occasion, and I had reluctantly to defer my visit meantime. For a time I lingered on the top of a hill which is said to be the "Site of a Dun," but of such, few traces could be observed; and then, bidding farewell to Loch Slapin and Blaven I turned, and walked back leisurely to Broadford. Next morning I crossed in a cargo steamer to Kyle of Loch Alsh and from thence took train for Aberdeen. This was eventually reached, late the same evening, after several tedious delays on the Highland Railway system.