

THE MOUNTAINS IN LITERATURE—I.

BY JOHN CLARKE.

FEW things are more remarkable in the development of thought and feeling than the change—transformation, it might better be called—of attitude toward the objects and aspects of the external world. What is known as “the feeling for nature” is of comparatively recent growth.

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth and every common sight

attracted small notice, evoked little feeling, were contemptuously passed by, or at best employed to point a simile or a moral, possibly were condemned as a snare and a delusion. For us the study of nature as a source of beauty, instruction, and refined enjoyment, apart from the purposes of science, has become a passion and a cult. Mountain and river, tree and flower, bird and beast, cloud and sunshine, hail, snow and vapour, the storm, the fire, and the music of the universal frame in some subtle way reflect man's mind and mirror his thoughts. In literature, sacred and profane, images of the kind stand recorded for our instruction. It is to books we must go to learn what each age has felt and spoken. Mountains are but a part of the wider realm which embraces all creation, animate and inanimate. While forming our special topic for the moment, they are at the same time illustrative of sentiments that extend far beyond them and ramify into every corner of nature's domain.

THE SENTIMENTS OF THE 18TH CENTURY.

Two characteristic views from the centuries preceding our own will serve as examples of what men used to think and were not ashamed to say. No longer ago

than 1773, Dr. Johnson, the embodiment of all that was authoritative in the world of letters, was able to write of the mountains west of Inverness:—

They exhibit very little variety; being almost wholly covered with black heath, and even that seems to be checked in its growth. What is not heath is nakedness, a little diversified by now and then a stream rushing down the steep. An eye accustomed to flowery pastures and waving harvests is astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility. The appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by nature from her care and disinherited of her favours, left in its original elemental state, or quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation.

Another Englishman, Rev. William Gilpin, Prebendary of Salisbury, travelled in Scotland in 1776. He came furnished with a ready-made theory of the picturesque, and whenever he found erring lines in nature, he had, he confessed, a great propensity to bring them into conformity with his own scheme of things. Blemishes, he thinks, are particularly conspicuous in a mountain, which “rearing its opakeness against the sky, shows every fault both in its delineation and combination with great exactness.” He was good enough to approve of some of the southern hills; but

As in history-painting figures without drapery and other appendages make but an indifferent group, so in scenery naked mountains form poor composition. They require the drapery of a little wood to break the simplicity of their shapes, to produce contrasts, to connect one part with another, and to give that richness in landscape which is one of its greatest ornaments.

Arthur's Seat appears still as odd, mis-shapen and uncouth as when we first saw it. It gave us the idea of a cap of maintenance in heraldry; and a view with such a glaring feature in it can no more be picturesque than a face with a bulbous nose can be beautiful.

A dozen years earlier the great iconoclast, J. J. Rousseau, had begun his demolition of the mediæval idols. Had our worthy countrymen but known it, the seeds had already been sown of that romantic movements whose ideals have done so much to dictate the sentiment of our own day. Even in the eighteenth century Nature was at last coming into her own.

THE 19TH CENTURY.

For the reverse of the picture we turn to the fourth volume of "Modern Painters," written in 1856; the subtitle is "Of Mountain Beauty."

To myself [says Ruskin] mountains are the beginning and end of all natural scenery; in them and in the forms of inferior [*i.e.*, less elevated] landscape that lead to them, my affections are wholly bound up; . . . if scenery be resolutely level . . . as in Holland, or Lincolnshire, or Central Lombardy, it appears to me like a prison, and I cannot long endure it. . . . There is not a wave of the Seine but is associated in my mind with the first rise of the sandstones and forest pines of Fontainebleau; and with the hope of the Alps. . . . If there be *no* hope or association of this kind, and if I cannot deceive myself into fancying that perhaps at the next rise of the road there may be seen the film of a blue hill in the gleam of sky at the horizon, the landscape, however beautiful, produces in me a kind of sickness and pain.

He considers the feeling to be, to some extent, an idiosyncrasy, but we fancy it expresses, not at all inaccurately, the sentiment of many a Scot who in the plains of England or of Flanders hungers for the mountain shapes and shades, and lifts up his eyes in vain.

But literature does not begin with Ruskin or with Rousseau. We must hark back many centuries ere we reach its sources and discover with what eyes the earlier ages regarded the mountains, and nature in general. The full treatment of the subject would demand encyclopædic knowledge, nothing less than familiarity with world literature, and a volume or more in which to set it forth. With limited space and still more limited knowledge, the aim must be a good deal less ambitious. The design of this brief review will be rather to suggest than to exhaust. The most that can be attempted is to recall a few of the scattered fragments of literature and to extract from them some lessons that may enable us more easily to pursue the further study for ourselves. If we can point to veins of rich ore, it may safely be left to mountain-lovers voluntarily to work them for their own profit. Our illustrations will be drawn from three main sources—the Bible, the classics and modern literature. Taken together, these cover a wide range of place and time; and they are of perennial interest.

Mountains stand for so many things in fact and in symbol that it becomes extremely difficult to devise a scale of relative importance among them. Even historical continuity is hardly to be found, though with the nineteenth century it becomes a little more evident.

As geographical features, mountains dominate every other characteristic. They constitute the "build" of a country, determine its rivers and their partings, its fertility, its divisions, its cities, its industries, its boundaries, its means of communication, and a hundred other details affecting the life of its inhabitants. Metaphorically no less than physically, they stand for the highest endowment of nature—in a very special sense, they *are* nature, for everything else depends on, and follows from them. Their significance was of old but faintly perceived. Even at the present day geographical knowledge, in any comprehensive sense, whether of mountains or other determining features of the world and its parts, remains embryonic. What then can be expected of the pre-scientific ages? Thus it is that the imaginative, or more frequently the fanciful, is found to have usurped the place of the real and actual. All sorts of imaginative and symbolic ideas became attached to mountains, their content being derived from experience, from national character, or from intellectual and spiritual insight. Such ideas are of varying value: some uplift and inspire, others depress and terrify. Only within a century or little more have scientific knowledge and the growth of artistic appreciation combined to interpret nature more adequately and to determine more fully her place and function. The mountains have especially gained thereby. They have fallen into their position in the general scheme of things, and have obtained a place and function more fitting to their rank and dignity.

THE BIBLE.

In the Bible references to mountains and hills are to be numbered by scores, if not by hundreds. The Promised Land, as compared with the sandy plains of Egypt and

the desert, was a land of hills and valleys drinking in the rain from heaven—the mountain of the Lord's inheritance. Jerusalem, the centre of national worship and reverence, was a city set on an hill, to which the tribes went *up*. The early associations of the giving of the Law were with the mount that could be touched and that burned with fire, and as the place of manifestation of the Divine Presence it extended into the deepest spiritual experience of the great men of the nation, Moses, Elijah, and the prophets. Another mountain was consecrated as the scene of the Transfiguration, and it was on "the mount called Olivet" that the closing scene of the Divine ministry was enacted.

To the Hebrew the mountains were an enduring proof of the omnipotence of God in creation, and of His power to alter and destroy. At the same time they symbolised stability and eternity. But above and beyond mere physical permanence was the mercy of the Lord—"the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed." With merciful protection is combined righteousness "like the great mountains." But desecrated and profaned, the hill became a high place, the abode of idols, the scene of the worship of false gods: to eat, to sacrifice, upon the mountains is, in the eyes of the prophets, comparable in heinousness to a breach of the moral law. The promises of deliverance are ushered in by the messengers upon the mountains and the establishment of the mountain of the Lord's house upon the tops of the mountains. The prevalent association is with help, safety, protection, more rarely with danger as from the unknown or from the wild beasts of the forest. Once or twice the far-off echo of the romantic note can be caught, the mountains and the hills break forth into singing and the trees of the field clap their hands. The exquisite nature picture of the 65th Psalm is painted on a background of mountains set fast by God's strength.

CLASSICAL WRITERS.

The classical nations shew much less appreciation of what we have come to regard as the true character of mountains. The Greeks may be said to have specialised in only one or two departments of nature, the sea, in which they perceived freedom and strength; and the winds, more of which they personified than the points of the compass they could name. The shifting and uncertain character of these elements was to some extent a reflex of their own. The mountains were so far above them that they are thought of chiefly as the abodes of the gods. The poets derived their inspiration from Helicon and Parnassus, the haunts of the Muses. But beyond that the Greeks seem to have attached to mountainous regions associations chiefly of alarm or danger. Hills were difficult and dangerous of passage; under certain circumstances, however, they might prove so to an enemy and thus form a defence. From them came storm, fog, and cold, savage beasts, and more savage men. The picturesque aspect was not wholly missed. A peak whose sides were clothed with shaggy woods seems to have been the form most highly esteemed, where shape, colour, and motion were combined in endless forms that could scarcely fail to move an aesthetic nature. Motion is said to have formed an essential part of the Greek idea of beauty, and this we can readily believe. Shelley among English poets shows a similar characteristic. The Greeks exhibit no real love or comprehension of mountains. Mr. N. E. Young, in "The Mountains in Greek Poetry," points out that the Cyclops (in Theocritus) "seems to regard the mountain (*Ætna*) as an ice-box providing him with cool water."

The Roman was a much more prosaic person than the Greek. In matters of artistic import he borrowed wholesale from the latter and had scarcely a mind to call his own. Sir Archibald Geikie, in "The Love of Nature Among the Romans," confirms the prevalent impression that the Romans as a people were insensible

to the solemn majesty of the mountains. Lucretius says, he says, the only one of the poets of the golden age who appears to have climbed mountains and to have taken pleasure in their ascent. Even in his case the evidence is, we fear, not very convincing. He was interested, to be sure, in clouds, echoes, and similar manifestations, but possibly "the eager attention and curiosity of a man of science" was the ruling motive in his concern for mountain phenomena. The prevalent feelings of his countrymen toward mountains were, at any rate, dread and abhorrence. Livy has, in a well-known passage, left us a description of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps, which, if a little overdrawn, makes one almost shudder. He seems to have felt that he was getting at the great enemy of his country by magnifying the terrors and horrors which the Carthaginian had to overcome in order to reach Italy!

The whole ascent was blocked with snow, the army advanced at snail's pace, revulsion and despair showed in every face The shorter and steeper descent into Italy was still more difficult. Every path was down a precipice, narrow and slippery. Steadiness was impossible; a false step and there was no recovery—down tumbled man and beast in one indiscriminate mass. One rock took four days to blast; the sumpter cattle were almost famished, for the snow buries grass no less than men. It was long before they reached a region "worthy of" human care and tillage.

Another writer describes in verse the same passage of the Alps:—

Here everything is wrapped in eternal frost, white with snow, and held in the grip of primeval ice. . . . Deep as the Tartarean abyss of the underworld lies beneath the ground, even so far does the earth here mount into the air, shutting out with its shade the light of heaven. No Spring comes to this region, nor the charms of Summer. Mis-shapen Winter dwells alone on these dread crests, and guards them as her perpetual abode. (Geikie, *o.c.*, 283).

If these may be taken as fair samples, Sir Archibald Geikie's conclusions are inevitable: it is astonishing that the mountains of Italy "have received such scant and unappreciative treatment in Latin literature"; the brief references that are made "not unusually include some accompanying epithet of disparagement." One has a

little more sympathy with another outcome of the dread of wild mountain scenery which the Romans exhibit—to wit, the votive offerings to local deities found in some of the higher Alpine passes, to propitiate divine favour or record gratitude for dangers surmounted. For even yet a characteristic mood of the mountain is his resentment against the desecration of his private sanctuaries; and by mist, tempest, lightning, and avalanche he wreaks vengeance on the sacrilegious intruder.