

GRIERSON'S "RAMBLES AMONG THE  
SCOTTISH MOUNTAINS."

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

PERSONAL accounts of mountaineering in Scotland are not very numerous until a comparatively recent date. Mountaineering itself and the love of nature which underlies it are essentially modern things; it is quite within modern times that mountaineering has become popular, and that the appreciation of nature has attained its present vogue, literary and otherwise.\* It is not surprising, therefore, to find the literature of mountaineering exceedingly limited. Of early works on the Scottish side of the subject belonging to the nineteenth century one of the most prominent, as it is also one of the best, is a little volume of 232 pages—"Autumnal Rambles Among the Scottish Mountains: or Pedestrian Tourist's Friend," by the Rev. Thomas Grierson, A.M., Minister of Kirkbean, in Kirkcudbrightshire.

It was originally published in 1850, but a second edition—a copy of which is before us—was published in the following year. This second edition was announced to be "greatly enlarged," the enlargement consisting of the addition to the matter in the first edition of a section dealing with "Moffat and its Mountains, etc." and a much larger section descriptive of "A Fortnight on Deeside." The Deeside section, of course, imparts a special interest to the volume to those who are more particularly associated with that district of the country; but, quite apart from that incidental feature, Mr. Grierson's "Rambles" are well worth perusal. The style in which they are

\* See "The Mountains in Literature," by John Clarke, *C. C. J.*, ix., 121.

written is somewhat old-fashioned perhaps, but its very quaintness gives piquancy to what Mr. Grierson calls his "unpretending lucubrations." The definition, inspired doubtless by modesty, is nevertheless substantially accurate. Mr. Grierson's accounts of his "Rambles" are exceedingly plain and direct, almost severely so; and albeit he was a clergyman, they are singularly unemotional, and wholly devoid of florid description. But his frankness and downrightness are attractive, and he commands attention by the thoroughness of his zeal for walking. The book, be it borne in mind, is a record of mountaineering experiences at a time when walking and mountain-climbing were not so common as they are to-day—a time, indeed, when devotion to them was quite exceptional, and was regarded as eccentric. So the appeal of the book is in a sense quite modern, and in all probability the work, did it make its appearance to-day, would meet with much more acceptance even than it did apparently when it was originally published.

Mr. Grierson evidently had been a great walker, from his youth upward; and in the preface to the first edition of his book (reproduced in the second edition) he gives us some details of his accomplishments in this respect. While he was a boy, he says, roaming alone among the hills of Nithsdale was one of his chief gratifications, and this taste had continued to increase ever since. "Even now," he adds naively, "when many may allege that a Pisgah-view of another and a better land should engross my attention, there is to me nothing more exhilarating than the mountain air and the view of distant peaks on which I have already stood, or which I still hope to surmount." (He was then sixty years of age—and died four years later—in 1854). He was ordained minister of Kirkbean in 1824, when he was thirty-four, and for many years he was able to devote several weeks in autumn to walking. He never enjoyed himself more, he declared, than when, "entirely alone, or sometimes with a favourite terrier, I have jogged on from dawn till dusk, occasionally spending an hour or two angling in burn,

river, or loch ; for a staff-rod and fishing-basket, in which I carried my scanty wardrobe, constituted the whole of my travelling apparatus."

He gives a detailed list of the mountains and hills on whose summits he had stood—a very comprehensive list, indeed, ranging from Ben Wyvis to Criffel, from North Berwick Law to the Storr and Quiraing in Skye. He follows up his general summary by details of some of his rambles, "to prove what may be done by patience and perseverance, for I never was a quick walker." He must have been a pretty steady one anyhow, judging from this sample :—

In the autumn of 1811, the year of the great comet, I left Glasgow early, breakfasted at Dumbarton, went up Loch Lomond side, crossed at Rowardennan, went over the shoulder of Ben Lomond to Blairhulichan, and stayed all night at Ledard, on the north side of Loch Ard. Next morning, started at four, crossed the mountains to Loch Katrine, where I was boated over by a shepherd ; over the mountains again, through the Forest of Glen Finglas and its deep bogs to Balquhidder ; over the mountains again to Glen Dochart and Killin ; over the mountains again to Glen Lyon ; and once more across the mountains to Loch Rannoch side, which I reached before twelve o'clock at night—a severe a mountain fag as perhaps ever was performed in one day.

Unfortunately, scepticism prevails as to this single day's "mountain fag." Mr. Walter A. Smith, in an early volume of the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, described it as "a 'cross country' route which certainly requires an effort of the imagination to believe in," it being nearly forty miles as the crow flies, and more likely to have proved nearer sixty miles if the walk had been actually made. This instance of exaggeration, however, may be allowed to pass in consideration of Mr. Grierson's very obvious merits as a pedestrian. Undeterred by distance, undaunted by rain, and undismayed by lack of food or shelter, he jogged along contentedly, noting and observing all the while.

Both in his preface and in his concluding chapter Mr. Grierson gives some hints to pedestrians as to clothing,

boots, avoidance of whisky, and so on. They are perfectly sensible, but are now so generally adopted that they need not be recapitulated. Mr. Grierson, as we have seen, was a moderate walker: the pace, he says, "should not exceed three and a half miles in the hour; or three, stoppages included." But his chief recommendation is a rather unusual one and is a revelation of an exceedingly strong personality:—

As the very best advice I can give pedestrians, I would recommend early rising and always turning over a good long stage before breakfast. This I never failed to do when a young man; and even now I like walking before breakfast best when on a journey. Fifteen to twenty miles before nine o'clock was my ordinary arrangement. This made the remainder of my journey comparatively easy; and, after being fairly on the road, I generally enjoyed this part of my work most. Breakfast in such circumstances is doubly welcome, and is seldom much of a remuneration to the provider. Upon the strength of it, I always finished my day's work before partaking of a second meal, which was all I required or cared for in the twenty-four hours. These terms, combined with my long journeys, prevented others from being anxious to accompany me in my Highland expeditions.

The bulk of the first edition of Mr. Grierson's work consisted of accounts of rambles in Arran, in the Highlands of Galloway, in the West Highlands (from Oban to Inverness by the Caledonian Canal), in the Ochils, and in Skye—all between 1840 and 1849. In Arran he ascended Goatfell, in Galloway Merrick, and in the course of the West Highlands journey Ben Wyvis, which he describes as "an ugly, savage-looking concern"—the ascent was made amid rain, and snow and mist, however—adding that "being far removed from any inhabited district, none should attempt its ascent who have not an entire day at their disposal." The return journey southward brought Mr. Grierson to Aberdeen, which he reached apparently a day or two after Queen Victoria's first visit and landing in 1848, and "just one hour too late for seeing the interior of the *Victoria and Albert*, which was open to respectable

parties, not exceeding twelve, every day from eleven till four." Mr. Grierson's impression of Aberdeen is exceedingly flattering but at the same time not lacking in candour:—

Aberdeen, in many respects, is one of the most remarkable cities in the kingdom. Its streets, bridges, and harbour are on a scale which might well become the capital of Scotland. The new College, new North Church, County Buildings, Banking-houses, Markets, etc., are well worthy of the attention of all travellers. They impress one, indeed, with the idea of their being too fine—much grander than there is any occasion for; and lead one to infer that, in these respects, the pride of the inhabitants has outrun their prudence. The suspension-bridge over the Dee is a truly splendid structure, and the viaduct for the intended railway is the most magnificent thing of the kind in Scotland; but the nearness of these edifices to each other and their awkward relative position create a confusion which is somewhat offensive to the spectator. . . . The viaduct terminates at the New Markets in Union Street, one of the most spacious, elegant, and substantial anywhere to be seen, being throughout constructed of polished granite [!], of which there are many quarries all around the city, and which is exported to London and other places as an article of traffic.

The most elaborate of the accounts is that descriptive of "A Week in Skye," which best exhibits Mr. Grierson's qualities as an observer and narrator. He landed at Broadford, visited the Spar Cave at Loch Slapin, and then sailed in to Loch Scavaig and Loch Coruisk. "Upon entering Loch Scavaig," he says, "the Alps of Skye appeared in front of us in all their glory; and certainly I never saw any mountains so grisly, wild, and sublime as the Cuchullins, or Coolins as they are generally termed." Loch Coruisk he describes as, without exception, the most terrific scene he ever witnessed; he and a friend made for Sligachan by "an abrupt ascent" over a spur of the Coolins, and, he adds, "let any man visit that scene if he be really anxious to witness the sternest and most impressive that Scotland can boast." One of the main objects of his visiting Skye was to climb Sgurr-nan-Gillean, which he had

fully satisfied himself was quite practicable—this was in 1849 when the Coolins were not so well known to climbers as they are to-day—but during breakfast on the day selected “the clouds caught hold of the highest points of the Coolins, and gradually crept down their ravines, attended by rain, till we saw that our purpose was altogether hopeless.” Mr Grierson sensibly adds—“To ascend almost any high mountain in mist, even though well known, is perplexing; but in such circumstances to have attempted Sgurr-nan-Gillean would have been absolute folly and madness.” So, “with much chagrin,” he set off for Portree and contented himself with visiting the Storr and Quiraing. He thus summarises his general impressions of Skye:—

The Spar Cave, Loch Coruisk, Glen Sligachan, the Storr, and Quiraing, are the main objects worthy of attention; and if I were to particularise which of all these interested us the most, I would decidedly say Loch Coruisk. It is the most sequestered and inaccessible of all the Scottish lochs. Dark, deep, and desolate, it reflects the lofty Coolins from their highest pinnacles down to the very water's edge. In this pellucid mirror “auld Nature's sturdiest bairns” may survey their dingy charms from head to foot. But in storm and tempest, when foaming cataracts dash from the precipices, when the forked lightning darts from the splintered crevices, and a thousand echoes reverberate the crash of the thunder, what imagination can conceive a more tremendous scene? The powerful pencils of Turner and Horatio McCulloch have indeed been splendidly employed in the delineation; but as they could not be actually present in the elemental strife, many features of it must have been omitted or misrepresented. In crossing over from the head of the loch to the source of the Sligachan, the tourist may safely assert that he has witnessed a scene unrivalled in her Majesty's dominions. I am familiar with the scenery of Glencoe and Arran, but greatly though I admire it, I must very decidedly give the palm to what I have been attempting to describe.

The second edition of the “Rambles,” as already mentioned, contained an account of a fortnight spent on Deeside, presumably in 1850. Mr Grierson witnessed the annual Highland Gathering at Clova, and then proceeded to walk to the Spital of Muick, hoping to

reach it by nightfall. He complains of the rugged nature of the ground, which he describes as consisting of nearly equal portions of mountain and moss, and he and a friend who accompanied him, "soon got entangled in an extensive morass, full of quagmires, a species of travelling alike fatiguing and tedious." He left his friend in order to have a distant view of Loch Dhu, and then descended to Loch Muick, but the darkness increasing, he resolved to "squat for the night," and accordingly, "after collecting some heath, and spreading it on the sheltered side of a rock, I composed myself for rest, having put on dry shoes and stockings, and made myself as comfortable as circumstances would admit"—the dry shoes, we must assume, were carried in his fishing basket. He rejoined his friend next morning and the two of them ascended Lochnagar, on the view from which Mr Grierson becomes quite rapturous. They then walked to Ballater, and on by way of Crathie to Braemar, here generally designated Castleton.

In his exposition of Deeside Mr Grierson, it must be confessed, is somewhat discursive. There is a good deal of laudation of royalty, especially in connection with a visit paid to Castleton by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, while a defence of deer forests is introduced, in palliation of the extreme strictness of the Duke of Leeds, who was then tenant of Mar Lodge and Mar Forest. Incidentally, Mr Grierson makes a very naive allusion to the Duke. He "had the luck" to see the Duke killing a fine salmon with the rod about a quarter of a mile above the Linn of Dee. "He was pretty deep in the river, with fishing boots," says our author, "and managed the matter remarkably well *for a Duke*"—the italics are Mr Grierson's. Mr Grierson ascended Ben Macdhui (as he writes the mountain's name) by the Corrie Etchachan route, accompanied by one of the Duke's foresters, but the day was unfavourable, being very tempestuous, with heavy showers of sleet, hail, and snow. Our notice of Mr Grierson's interesting book may be fittingly concluded with an

extract detailing his experiences on Ben Macdhuì, more especially as it describes a feature of the mountain-top that has long since vanished :—

Just above the loch (Loch Etchachan) we got one indistinct peep into Loch Aven; but after this the snow fell so thick that seeing beyond 50 yards was out of the question. My attendant took me a little way to the left that I might get a glimpse of the upper part of Glen Lui-Beg, through tremendous precipices, with which a sudden gust of wind had nearly made me more familiar than would have been altogether pleasant. We then steered nearly due north till we reached the remains of the Sappers' House, which had evidently been one of the most substantial of the kind, as its terribly exposed situation required. A very short way north of this stands the cairn, which was invisible till we came within 15 or 20 yards of it. For the last two hours there had been almost a constant fall of heavy snow, which in many places was more than knee deep, and near the summit the drift was quite blinding. When we reached the cairn, ten miles from our starting place, we were quite benumbed and covered with icicles, so that a tasting from the whisky-flask was right acceptable to us both.

This cairn is by far the highest of the kind I have seen. It is built in the Tower of Babel style, in four distinct storeys, the pinnacle being, I would suppose, from 20 to 25 feet in height. I was too much chilled to go to the top, and only ascended the second storey, on which I placed a large stone, handed me by my companion, whose attentions I shall not readily forget. Some say that Lord Fife caused this cairn to be more elevated than common, that it might overtop Ben Nevis, the competition being considered a neck-and-neck affair; while others jocularly allege that, as he had intimated his intention of being buried there, it might be as well he should have a fair start upwards. It is pleasing to reflect that for many years his lordship has led such a quiet and orderly life as to require no such vantage-ground.