

THE MOOR OF RANNOCH.

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Serene the sky o'er Rannoch's wide-spread moor—
Would that its glorious stretch were never dour !
Purple its heath, its lochs like silver shone,
And lily pools were fair to gaze upon.
Behold that flock of sheep with joyful lambs
That romp and leap and play as feed their dams !
An eagle hunting for his hungry young —
One moment, soaring, in the air he hung,
Then swooped unerring on a hapless lamb,
Straying some distance from its resting dam.
High in the air the robber bears his prey
And to the distant eyry wings his way.
Bewildered ewes unceasing outcry make,
Their lambs, not silent, follow in their wake.

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Nature benign allows few griefs to last,
Forgetfulness in mercy rules the past.

THIS moor, in the counties of Argyll and Perth, is a great national asset, the largest "lungs" of the Highlands, having an area of about four hundred square miles. It has never been cultivated and never will be ; it does not admit of cultivation. It is such a "waste and solitary place" as longed for by the poet who sought solitude in "a lonely moor without a beaten way." There are certainly both paths and roads of sorts, but none of them continuous ; indeed most of the former are apt to lead the stranger astray.

True, there is now one great road through it, but it is a railway with no station in the moor. Indeed, of old the Moor of Rannoch was considered "the wilderness of all Scotland," but modern generations appreciate it to the full. It is good for both the flockmaster and the sportsman; the angler delights to visit its numerous lochs and lochans; the naturalist has long realised its charms; and the mountaineer seeks its bounding heights. The following advertisement will be found in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* of July 15, 1786: "Preservation of Game. The Earl of Breadalbane being desirous to preserve the game upon his estates in Perthshire and Argyllshire, hopes that no gentleman will shoot there without liberty. Poachers and unqualified persons will be prosecuted." The county boundary is purely arbitrary, having no reference to any outstanding features. I discussed the subject with the Marquis of Breadalbane, but he was quite unable to throw any light on it.

Roughly, the western boundary is the High Tops of the Black Mount, the eastern Loch Rannoch; its altitude above sea level may be put at about a thousand feet—here and there the surface is broken by slight eminences. The principal lochs are Tulla, Ba, Laidon (Lydoch) and Rannoch; on the north-western shore of the first is Forest Lodge, the principal shooting-box of Black Mount deer forest. Lilies are a great feature of the lochans; poets have contrasted the beauty and purity of the cloud-berry with the blackness of its peaty bed—so one may compare the equally beautiful water-lily with the muddy lochans where it flourishes. The moor may be said to be the birthplace of three considerable streams—the Ba, which ultimately emerges from Loch Rannoch as the river Tummel; the Etive, which reaches the Atlantic by Loch Etive; and the Orchy, which, starting as the Water of Tulla, ends as the river Awe in Loch Etive after flowing for a short distance through Loch Awe. Thus the Argyll portion of the moor is drained by two streams flowing in a

westerly direction, and another between them running easterly.

Both colour and life are in abundance in this most picturesque of moors ; an old writer said of the highway on the Black Mount side : " no road in Britain probably passes through more magnificent scenery." Vegetation is luxuriant, and grasses in their varying hues add to the splendour of the general colouring. Above all there is the heather, which in bloom surpasses anything else in richness of colour ; the perfume of the sun-kissed bog myrtle is almost overpowering. There are numerous evidences of the former densely wooded appearance of the moor—tree roots uniformly spread over the surface, even at an altitude of 1,700 feet. Indeed in times not so very far back the surrounding districts were supplied with " fir candles " from the moor for lighting purposes. Remains of the ancient Caledonian Forest are frequently to be found, but none more plainly than in the Moor of Rannoch, particularly in Crannach Wood in the valley of the Tulla. Macullach forgets these tree roots when he recounts the obstacles he had to contend with when he tackled the moor over a century ago on horseback : " A ride this was not, by any figure of speech ; I cannot even call it a walk, for half the space was traversed by jumping over bogs, and holes, and ditches, and pits, which were generally as wide as to demand much serious attention. I may fairly say that I jumped half the way to Loch Rannoch." Stevenson sent a troop of cavalry through the moor, but evidently he wrote, on this occasion, without knowledge.

Crannach Wood is cut in two by the railway, the more important section being that between the line and the Water of Tulla. Recently an expert examined one of its ancient firs on which he counted two hundred and fifty rings, by no means a solitary specimen of its age. It is to be feared that in a generation or two this wood may be completely laid low, and that only birches will flourish. It has to contend with hurricans,

lightning and railway fires, not to mention time itself ; the passing locomotives have an evil reputation locally. Some of the birches have an interest all their own, the older bearing a certain resemblance to ancient olive trees. Many of the firs have very short trunks, being almost all branches. Seedlings can never come to anything ; deer and sheep, the wood being quite open, are mainly responsible for the veterans having no worthy successors. The mountain eagle is no stranger in the vicinity of the wood ; the hoodie nests on the trees ; the oyster-catcher breeds along the burn. The green-plover, the goosander, the owl and sparrowhawk are also to be seen ; the most numerous birds, however, apart from crows, are blackgame. Red deer also may frequently be observed. Now and again peeps may be had of the towering mountains close by ; the High Tops lose nothing in altitude. It has been suggested, I know not on what grounds, that the Argyll portion of the Moor of Rannoch was of old known as Crannach Moor. *Dulce est desipere in loco* ; give me a sunny afternoon and Crannach Wood.

Loch Ba is seen to the best advantage from the road northwards from the Bridge of Orchy. It is studded with islets, the largest of which is Eilean Molach, where there is a small heronry ; on my last visit one of the birds was so alarmed that it disgorged a fairly large trout. Near by is an islet where of old eagles had an eyry ; they still nest at no great distance, as does the peregrine falcon. No moor loch is better known to naturalists and anglers than Loch Ba. One day I was there dragon flies seemed to be holding holiday, and ducks made excursions from loch to loch. Cormorants were fishing, hares hurrying off, curlews and ravens not silent—there was room for all, “limitless the mountain plain.” I have been assured that the eggs of the cormorant are very fine eating, indeed a *bonne bouche* ; in eating them one does a public service, for salmon fishery proprietors put a price on their heads. In a swan’s nest there was an addled egg ; in a duck’s

the clutch called for particular attention—one duckling had gained its freedom, others were forcing their way into the open, two eggs were intact. There was life all around, but of mankind only my stalker-guide and myself. A glorious day of brilliant sunshine ; the view of Ben Doran, rendered famous by that great Gaelic poet, Duncan Ban Macintyre, was one to be remembered. Mist was playing in its corries ; there were patches of snow in Coireach Ba (the ancient name of the Black Mount forest) and Loch Laidon shone like burnished silver. Coireach Ba is the sanctuary of the forest ; later I was fortunate in being allowed two opportunities of a close acquaintance with it. At its head are the highest mountains of the Black Mount, familiarly known as the High Tops ; the prospect towards and beyond Glen Etive is remarkable, while in the opposite direction is the best view of the great expanse of the Moor of Rannoch.

How delighted one is to come on the nest of a curlew, with its pointed eggs of varying sizes and markings ! The wariness of this bird is indicated by several Gaelic proverbs : “ he is a good hunter who kills a curlew ” ; another is, “ to kill seven curlews the work of a life-time ”. I happened on a young curlew which lay low in a small water-course and allowed itself to be handled, but when released it made its long legs its friends. Its wings appeared to be useless, yet from the size of the bird one would have expected it to be able to fly a little. A timid little thing is the water-hen, which was the next bird that came into view. As it scuttled away and disappeared in a ditch I was glad to have even a momentary interview with it.

Another glorious day I spent in revisiting some of the lily-covered lochans and at Gortan. I lingered enraptured by their prodigal display ; rarely indeed does one see such profusion. I did not know which to admire more, the delicate beauty of the flowers or the wonderful gracefulness of the leaves. A dozen or more of such halts told on time ; I had reluctantly to

pass by many an inviting scene, more or less content with a mere glance. I recalled, not to their advantage, the formal lily ponds in Hampton Court Palace gardens. The abundance too of moss-crop (cotton-grass) was very striking, as did the unusually numerous tufts on the stalks ; little wonder that stags resort there in their trying time. Gortan is a shepherd's cottage where the vile cart road from Bridge of Orchy ends. The shepherd was engaged at his peats and welcomed me with the remark, " You've been having a walk, sir ". " Yes, a bit ". " Ah, there's no place like the Moor o' Rannoch ; lots o' room there for walking." The conversation was continued in his spacious porch, where a table and chair with scones and milk were served by the good-wife. I had observed numerous fleeces in my stroll, all that was left of sheep which had succumbed from various causes.

The London and North Eastern Railway, as indicated, crosses the moor from Bridge of Orchy station to Rannoch station, with a passing place at Gortan. Some imagined that the deer would fight shy of this innovation of their resorts ; on the contrary, they even took to feeding between the railway fences, with the result that several of them have been run over. An attempt was made by the Commissioners of Forfeited Estates to improve part of the moor which belonged to Robertson of Struan where it was invitingly level. About midway between Gortan and Rannoch station the attention of passengers is arrested by prominent boards with the words, " Soldiers' Trenches ". A detachment of soldiers, stationed at Rannoch barracks after the battle of Culloden, were set digging " with the view of making arable land of the desert and covering it with corn. But it was a dismal failure ". The Commissioners relinquished their design after several seasons, there being no " fall " for the water. Notwithstanding this authoritative statement it is still asserted that " any one who studies the trenches can see that they were made for military purposes, with a square in

the centre for the commander and his baggage". There is also a lingering tradition that the trenches were dug to stop threatened attacks on the Perthshire side of the moor by cattle raiders from Argyll. Over a mile to the north-east is a so-called rocking stone. It is thirteen feet in height and looks as though the wind would blow it down.

I have spent several exciting winter days after hinds in the moor ; the adventures of one of them will suffice. That day was enlivened by the appearance of several roe ; beautiful creatures they were, but we left them alone. Hoodies were numerous as were white hares, but we were not interested in such small deer. We passed two cunningly set traps for hoodies ; in one was a dead hoodie, in the other the victim was alive. There had recently been a double tragedy there ; while the fox-hunters were out a fox was seen moving cautiously forward, the attraction being a hoodie in distress in a trap. Reynard was about to give it the *coup de grace* when he himself succumbed to a shot. Another hoodie rose from a burn ; it had been at a dead white hare brought down by the burn and stranded. We spied deer a long way off ; they were moving upwards despite the weather, and not till they had reached an altitude of over 2,000 feet did they settle down. There assuredly was a chance for us not to be lost if we were prepared to suffer some personal discomfort ; the river, which was swollen with melted snow, had to be forded, and numerous intervening knolls, with soft snow, two feet deep, had to be negotiated. In due time two shots rang out and two beasts fell within thirty yards of each other. After the gralloch, we dragged a fine pair of hinds a few hundred feet down the ben into such a situation as the ponyman could do the rest. The carcasses were so adorned that foxes and hoodies would fight shy of touching them, at least for a day. Then the stalker having taken, in the manner of his kind, the latitude and longitude of their position for the information of the ponyman, we smartly

descended about a thousand feet. As it happened the day was still comparatively young, with more than one thrill to make it memorable. We stalked a small parcel of hinds for nearly an hour ere a fair chance came for firing a shot. . . . I recall, with a certain satisfaction, the observation of a celebrated sportsman that one ought never to kill nor miss every beast that comes in the way. We had been warned to be on the outlook for a stag that had been wounded the previous season, and escaped ; so far he had eluded the brothers of mercy. By a stratagem (which I need scarcely say was not mine) we came to close quarters with him just before the light completely failed. Our plan entailed wading across the swollen Orchy, but that was regarded, in the circumstances, as no inconvenience. The poor brute had evidently had a bad time, so we rejoiced at our success, though of course the larder did not receive the carcase, nor was the head a trophy fit for a sportsman's hall.

Several of my earlier excursions were made to the moor over forty years ago when Dalwhinnie was the most convenient station. That involved of course the long walk down the west shore of Loch Ericht, but that loch is one of the grandest sights in the Highlands. One can of course drive six miles of the distance to Benalder Forest Lodge ; and there are times when boat can be taken, motor or oar, from end to end. The walk, or voyage, can be broken at Alder Bay, but now the stalker's cottage there, sublime in its solitude, has no occupant. In the time of my old friend, Joseph McCook, at the Bay, one was assured of a hospitable reception and a pleasant hour or two (sometimes, if one were fortunate) even a bedroom, none the less comfortable that its walls were papered with copies of the *Illustrated London News* ; at times, when there was a crowd, the Alder burn, just in front of the cottage, served for bath and wash-hand stand. Even trout too for breakfast, which Joseph had just lured from the loch, and a dance on the tiny lawn in the

evening, with the bagpipes for music. Joseph and his wife have now pitched their tent at Newtonmore ; there are many of us who wish them well. Among the attractions of Alder Bay are Prince Charlie's cave ; an old iron hand-mill for grinding oats ; a fragment of a thin flat tombstone with some words in Latin, and the date 1515 ; not to mention a little mound from which in former times the sun was worshipped. My introduction there was made in 1885 ; we were a party of three, one being a Skyeman. We received a most extraordinary welcome from a young collie, so noisy and demonstrative that we could not at first understand it. The Skyeman tried it with a few words in Gaelic, and the result was even more astounding, for the animal now wept for joy and almost went into a fit. The explanation was that the dog was home-sick ; he had evidently concluded that we had come to take him " home " again. We were told he had " never asked to get away before ". In case it may be imagined that I am wandering from my subject, I have to point out that the right bank of Alder burn is in Rannoch. The last counsel of Joseph was to give a wide berth to some Highland cattle we might see as we walked down by the river Ericht. I had the misfortune to put my foot on a young chick of a grouse—the first time such an accident had ever occurred in all my hill wanderings. It reminds me of a remark made by the late Sir Arthur Grant of Monymusk, when I was with him on Cairn William, on the occasion of a Cairngorm Club excursion, when one of the members nearly put his foot on a nest with ten eggs. " Take care ", said Sir Arthur, " that's value for five guineas ". We spent the night at Cul a' Mhuilinn, near the head of Loch Rannoch, whence we set out on the long walk across the moor to Kingshouse Inn.

Our first halt was at a shepherd's cottage where we were told that at a certain season not a single person would pass for " fortnights ". The cottage was rather a wretched affair ; the open chimney freely

admitted the elements, giving as much light as the diminutive broken window (it must surely have been built in window-tax days) ; a slim door almost ready to open both ways ; and one end of the building devoted to cows and poultry. We found a perambulating teacher paying a professional visit, teaching English to children whose mother tongue was Gaelic. This teacher quickly recognised that one of us was a Celtic scholar, but as he ventured to use a too familiar Gaelic expression from an inferior to a superior he was promptly reprov'd by our host. The shepherd had overtaken us in the moor, and as he was on his way home we had the advantage of his company, as well as the guidance of one of his boys till we came in sight of the then Iron Lodge of Blackcorries forest. We left after an acceptable little lunch of scones and milk, daintily served by the daughter of the house. This cottage is now a ruin.

The following day we ascended Buchaille Etive Mor (3,345 ft.) from Kingshouse. There are two deep ravines on the side of this outstanding mountain towards the Inn which will be found very interesting, especially to botanists. One of these ravines, which narrows into a cleft, is exceedingly deep, and in the upper part is only a few feet in breadth with a stream tumbling and rushing in it, making a succession of cascades. Among the ferns observed may be mentioned beech, oak, parsley and spleenwort. The prospect from the summit, Stob Dearg, is very fine, sea-water lochs on the west coast being seen, as well as inland lochs, with a magnificent view of mountains in the Western Islands. In the evening we drove down Glen Coe on the way home.

Many years afterwards I made my way from Mamore to Glen Coe *via* Kinlochleven and the Devil's Staircase to Kingshouse, not so directly as I might have done. Pennant made the same journey in 1769, after breakfast on most "excellent minced stag, the only form I thought that animal good in". He goes on thus in

his account: "The mountains soar to a far greater height than before . . . torrents roar amidst the loose stones . . . ascend the Black Mountain on a steep road which continues about three miles, almost to the summit . . . on the other side the descent is scarce a mile, but it is very rapid down to a zig-zag way"; that short mile is the Devil's Staircase. I climbed up from Kinlochleven by the broad line of pipes to the sluices which control the water supply of the aluminium works. There was snow on the ground, and snow was also falling when I had reached the sluices; there the officer in charge almost pleaded with me to descend again to Kinlochleven, but being armed with compass, aneroid and map I determined to continue my journey. Only a peep was permitted of the lower end of the huge reservoir, some seven miles long, which stores the motive power at Kinlochleven, but I succeeded in finding the top of the celebrated Staircase, and made the descent with little difficulty. But the beautiful name of the upper part of this route, Mam Grianan, the sunny mount, was utterly belied on this occasion. As it happened, I had an introduction to a house at the Glen Coe end where I was so entertained that I was induced to remain till darkness set in. But what mattered that? I had only to follow a direct wide road to my inn. Once started however snow fell so densely that even the road was hardly visible, yet I held on with perfect confidence. But the Kingshouse seemed unduly long in appearing and I heard a considerable noise on my right which I felt must be the rush of the river Etive. I at last realised that I had unconsciously inclined to the left where the Blackcorries road leaves the main road, so rather than turn back I held on for the lodge which I knew had become rather a pretentious building, but to which, I flattered myself, I would be welcomed. I was right. Next morning I retraced my steps to Kingshouse, but had I not made myself more familiar with the Moor of Rannoch where others had spent a night without any cover? Not a few tourists

and others have been lost for hours, several even for a night in the moor. On Friday, May 19, 1848, a shepherd's girl, under four, wandered from her home and failed to return at the expected time. That evening and the following morning there were great falls of rain, but the father at once went in search. Saturday, Sunday and Monday passed without any result to an organised search. As the shepherd was moving about aimlessly on the Tuesday evening, a mile and a half from his own door, he heard a very feeble cry ; there was his child in such a weak condition that grave fears were felt for her recovery ; she died recently at the age of eighty. Her home was the "cottage, now a ruin," described in a preceding page.

Twice afterwards I had occasion to be at Kings-house Inn, but succeeded without making any blunder, thanks to the weather. I came direct from Alder Bay across the moor without any incident worthy of note to Glen Etive, coming to final rest at Alltachaoruinn, a small shooting-box of the Black Mount. I had been invited to see a white red stag which had been observed in that beat, so I set out the following morning with Donald as guide. We had a long day before we had the pleasure of coming on our quarry. He was not altogether white, but nevertheless was well worth my long journey. I had also the very interesting experience of the sudden appearance of a large flock of ptarmigan flying at best speed, evidently pursued by an eagle. The king of birds was not far behind, but all disappeared over a ridge. I never had seen ptarmigan in such numbers flying so fast ; it was a sight to be long remembered. On the other occasion I was in the same neighbourhood after being present at a heather-burning in the moor towards the end of which we came on a peregrine falcon's eyry with two young birds.

Our success with the location of the white stag recalls an interesting incident of the year 1622 when James VI. and I. heard of a white hind having been seen in the

Black Mount. The king determined to have her transferred to Windsor, and so despatched two men to capture her with local assistance. They looked about for months, both on moor and mountain, frequently bogged in the former with not a few falls among the rocks of the latter, but, alas, no white hind was to be seen. History thereafter is dumb on the subject of white deer till 1850 when the king of Denmark sent four white hinds to the Marquis of Breadalbane. Nine years later a sporting connection was made with Belgium when the Count of Flanders was entertained to a deer drive ; six stags fell to the royal Count's rifle.

On one occasion I took train from Tulloch to Rannoch, from which latter station I decided to go westward with Loch Laidon on my right. I wandered at will, with no fixed purpose, no time table except that the west had to be reached by nightfall. There is a subtle pleasure in zig-zaging as fancy suggests ; then " the wind on the heath, Brother " is enjoyed to the full. It was my day ; the sun shone as it were to order, varied with refreshing breezes. Hinds with their fawns were to be seen splashing through the water on their way to Crannach Wood. Ben Achallader stood forth most invitingly, at its foot is the steading of the great sheep farm of Achallader, thousands of sheep being grazed on the moor. Close by are the ruins of Achallader Castle where of old the Fletchers bore sway, adjoining is a small disused burial ground. The castle is a building of some historical interest ; in 1691 the Earl of Breadalbane conferred there with the Highland chieftains on the subject of the " pacification " of the North, a conference, alas, which had a most tragic end in the massacre of Glen Coe. My great day had reached its evening and Ben Achallader was reserved for next morning. Mist played among the High Tops ; patches of snow bore testimony to protracted winters in these parts. Over all was a light that charmed me as I made for my " lodge in that vast wilderness."

The ascent of Ben Achallader from below looks a steep, short climb, but, as is the manner of hills, it stretches out as one tackles it. At a height of about 2,200 feet I could not help admiring a burn as it burst forth from rocks ; turning round there were the High Tops in full view—a prospect of mountains and lochs not easily surpassed. Another 200 feet up the ascent became perceptibly steeper ; at about 3,000 feet it might well be described as both very steep and stoney. Near this height a fatal accident happened on March 22nd, 1925, when a member of a party of three, who had proceeded alone from about an altitude of 2,000 feet, had slipped down a snow slope and been fatally injured by projecting rocks. His body was not found till three weeks later. The top is rather flat, sloping to long Glen Lyon and the south ; haze westward and northward obscured the view. There are two cairns on the summit, the one not visible from the other. But the great Moor of Rannoch is seen from south to north and west to east resplendent with heather, its hundred lochans responsive to the sun. Concerning Ben Achallader and its neighbours it was written in 1776 that “ the country people consider them as enchanted. Before the storm begins to rage, they emit a hollow sound, which forebodes it. The shepherd knows it well, and instantly shelters his flock.”