

## BYRON, THE POET OF THE HIGH PLACES.

BY J. R. LESLIE GRAY.

My first intention was to write a paper on "Mountains in English Poetry," but I came to realize that such a title would be as empty as the famous caption, "Snakes in Iceland," for it is a fact that there are no mountains, or rather, mountains are never treated from the mountaineers' point of view in English poetry, at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century. This is not surprising. Indeed, we might have been surprised if it had been otherwise, for up to about two hundred years ago the southern and south-eastern districts of England (where there are no mountains) constituted the only nursery of poets in that kingdom. I have taken the trouble to make a list of the really distinguished English poets from Chaucer to Dryden, inclusive. They number forty-seven in all, and forty-six of them were born south of a straight line drawn from the Mersey to the Humber, while the forty-seventh (Andrew Marvell) was a native of Hull, which lies just to the north of that line. The great majority of the forty-six were educated in London or at Oxford or Cambridge, and twenty-five of them were natives of London or of the Home Counties, so, as they seldom travelled far beyond these parts, it follows that few of them ever saw a mountain, and their ideas of what mountains were like must have been gathered from books or evolved out of their own inner consciousness, and were entirely conventional. There are practically no descriptions of mountain scenery in the works of Shakespeare, and in Macbeth, his only Scottish play, the word "mountain" does not occur.

Those of the English poets who made a tour in Italy, as Milton did, and necessarily travelled among mountains on their way thither, usually regarded them only as dangerous, frosty, and forbidding obstacles; and classed them with the other dangers and discomforts of the journey, which they doubtless thought were more than sufficiently

execrable in themselves without the added horrors of such chilly and amorphous masses of rock and ice. Much the same sort of ideas prevailed in Scotland also, most of the Scottish poets being natives of the Lothians or Fife, who spent the greater part of their lives in the vicinity of Holyrood or of Falkland, and never went near the mountains if they could possibly help it.

After the commencement of the eighteenth century things went from bad to worse, and the poets of the time looked upon the mountains with greater horror and aversion than even their predecessors had felt. Their ideas of landscape were summed up in trim gardens, shaven lawns, Richmond Park, and the smooth and silvery Thames. Besides, some of them at least were admirers of the "Topiarian Art." All things are possible, but it is difficult to imagine a mountaineer gazing with rapture at a yew-tree cut into the shape of a peacock.

The "Poets of Nature" were little better than Pope and Addison themselves. Thomson was apparently more interested in rivers than in mountains; Gray shamelessly recorded his dislike to the Alps; Cowper lived in a flat district, and its scenery is reflected in his verse. It has been remarked of Burns that though he must have seen the hills of Arran on every clear day when he lived in Ayrshire, he never mentioned them in his poems. Although Wordsworth lived among mountains, and wrote some noble poetry about them, he saw them more with the eye of a poet-philosopher than of a mountaineer. The improvement begins with Scott, though it is difficult to understand why he celebrated such a tame region as the Trossachs, and such a commonplace eminence as Ben Venue. If Sir Walter had ever seen the precipices of Sgòran Dubh from Coire Dhondail he would have thought less of the Trossachs, and we might have had from him some mountain poetry worthy of his genius.

The Ettrick Shepherd was a hillman by inclination as well as by occupation, and we seem to catch the echo of the hill winds in much of his poetry. He was one of the earlier explorers of the Cairngorms, and among them is placed the scene of one of the poems in "The Queen's Wake."

It is from Byron, however, that we first get the true poetry of the mountains in full measure. He had his first experience of mountain scenery on Deeside, and his "Dark Loch-na-Garr," though not great poetry, is very good for a beginning. The following poem, written, as we are informed by Moore, only a year or two before the poet's death, shows conclusively that his love of mountains was born among the Aberdeenshire Highlands; and that the memory of that region, as well as his passion for the high places, persisted throughout his life:—

He who first met the Highlands' swelling blue  
Will love each peak that shows a kindred hue.  
Hail in each crag a friend's familiar face,  
And clasp the mountains in his mind's embrace.  
Long have I roamed through lands which are not mine,  
Adored the Alp, and loved the Apennine,  
Revered Parnassus, and beheld the steep  
Jove's Ida and Olympus crown the deep:  
But 'twas not all long ages' lore, nor all  
*Their* nature held me in their thrilling thrall;  
The infant rapture still survived the boy,  
And Loch-na-Garr with Ida looked o'er Troy,  
Mixed Celtic memories with the Phrygian mount,  
And Highland linns with Castalia's clear fount.

Much as the Scottish mountains had done for Byron, it was from the Alps that he obtained his strongest inspiration, as the following passages from the Third Canto of "Childe Harold" will show:—

He who ascends to mountain-tops, shall find  
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;  
He who surpasses or subdues mankind,  
Must look down on the hate of those below.  
Though high *above* the sun of glory glow,  
And far *beneath* the earth and ocean spread,  
*Round* him are icy rocks, and loudly blow  
Contending tempests on his naked head,  
And thus reward the toils which to these summits led,

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part  
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?  
Is not the love of these deep in my heart  
With a pure passion? . . . .  
Not vainly did the early Persian make  
His altar the high places and the peak

Of earth-o'ergazing mountains, and thus take  
A fit and unwall'd temple, there to seek  
The Spirit in whose honour shrines are weak,  
Upreared of human hands. . . .

The sky is changed !—and such a change ! Oh night,  
And storm, and darkness, ye are wondrous strong,  
Yet lovely in your strength, as is the light  
Of a dark eye in woman ! Far along,  
From peak to peak, the rattling crags among  
Leaps the live thunder ! Not from one lone cloud,  
But every mountain now hath found a tongue,  
And Jura answers, through her misty shroud,  
Back to the joyous Alps, who call to her aloud !

And this is in the night :—Most glorious night !  
Thou wert not sent for slumber ! let me be  
A sharer in thy fierce and far delight,—  
A portion of the tempest and of thee !  
How the lit lake shines, a phosphoric sea,  
And the big rain comes dancing to the earth !  
And now again 'tis black,—and now, the glee  
Of the loud hills shakes with its mountain-mirth,  
As if they did rejoice o'er a young earthquake's birth.

The following, from "Manfred," is perhaps slightly melodramatic, but it has the root of the matter in it :—

Mont Blanc is the monarch of mountains ;  
They crown'd him long ago  
On a throne of rocks, in a robe of clouds,  
With a diadem of snow.  
Around his waist are forests braced,  
The Avalanche in his hand ;  
But ere it fall, that thundering ball  
Must pause for my command.  
The Glacier's cold and restless mass  
Moves onward day by day ;  
But I am he that bids it pass,  
Or with its ice delay.  
I am the spirit of the place,  
Could make the mountain bow  
And quiver to his cavern'd base—  
And what with me wouldst *Thou* ?

I respectfully submit that I have proved my case, and that Byron is pre-eminently entitled to be called "The Poet of the High Places."