

# The Cairngorm Club Journal.

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## UPPER DEESIDE FIFTY YEARS AGO.

By the late HUGH WELSH, H. M. Inspector of Schools.

*[The following, hitherto unpublished, paper was written in 1881 by the late Mr. Hugh Welsh, H.M. Inspector of Schools. It is of special interest as giving some sidelights on tramping on the hills at that time—nearly a decade before the foundation of our Club. Though not a member of the Cairngorm Club, Mr. Welsh was a keen climber and a lover of the open. His son, the late Mr. William C. Welsh, was a member of the Club, as also is his son, Mr. Hugh D. Welsh, who is joint author of an article in the present number. Mr. Welsh was a great friend of the late Dr. Lippe, one of the founders of the Club, and had some tramps with him.]*

WE left Aberdeen on Friday afternoon by the Deeside train leaving at 5 o'clock and, after an uneventful journey, arrived at Ballater a few hours later. Bent upon doing our outing as cheaply and yet as comfortably as possible, we did not go to an hotel, but sought for and obtained private rooms which satisfied our moderate wants. After a refreshing night's slumber and an early breakfast, we got under weigh about 6 a.m., in capital order for a stiff day's walk. Braemar was our destination, not so very far by road, but as we meant to go *via* Lochnagar, the distance and the difficulties were both considerably increased. To combat these difficulties, however, we had a long day, the promise of a fine day, and fairly satisfactory bodily powers. We were in the best of spirits and we swung along swiftly and cheerily.

On leaving Ballater, we crossed the Dee and walked a short distance westward until we came to the Muick, a brawling tributary of the Dee. On reaching this, we struck off to the left, keeping the east side of the stream until we



came to Birkhall, the property of the Prince of Wales. Shortly after we entered this glen and until we crossed to the west side of the stream, we had, to right and left nothing but woods of the beautiful, graceful birch. We had, through the foliage, occasional glimpses of the chapel and massive granite mansion of Mr. MacKenzie of Glenmuick. Immediately before crossing the Muick we had a peep, almost a bird's eye view, of Birkhall House, lying peaceful and quiet at the foot of the opposite brae. After crossing, young forests of fir surrounded us through whose thick undergrowth the writer has still a vivid recollection of forcing his way two years ago. In the fine bracing morning air we made rapid headway, and we soon called a halt at the picturesque Falls of the Muick. Here we spent fully a quarter of an hour admiring the view and taking a slight breathing space. After this our path passed through bleaker tracts, and judging from the neighbouring hills, we began to have an idea of what sort of climbing we might expect to have. As we wished our real climbing to take place before the sun was very high in the heavens we kept up a good pace until we came to Alt-na-ghuissac, the Prince of Wales's Lochnagar shooting lodge. Here we left the main road and here we began our ascent of the mountain. In passing the lodge, a barking cur revealed the presence of strangers, and the keeper—highland, of course—came forth to measure, I suppose, the respectability of the intruders. A few remarks as to the weather, the absorption of a few drops of the real mountain dew, and a passing glance of Loch Muick, sparkling at hand in the morning sun, delayed us for only a minute or two, and off we set again.

As there is a good track on this side quite to the top of the mountain, we had no difficulty in piloting our way. On our arrival at the first good spring we discarded our knapsacks for a little and had lunch. Partly for medicinal reasons, and partly, if not chiefly, because we liked it, a little whisky was mingled with the ice-cold water. We ventured to think it improved it and possibly made it safer. The stiffest part of the ascent had yet to be overcome, and we were anxious to be at the summit before noon. So we



started again. A glimpse of a herd of deer was obtained just before we began the steep ascent, but it was only for a few moments. Away they went scouring down the mountainside, and were soon lost to view. The weight of our knapsacks now began to tell on our strength, and our limbs, inexperienced with mountain climbing, began to feel the strain, and we were repeatedly fain to throw ourselves down on the slope or on a big boulder. The day now began to threaten to be unpleasant and heavy showers swept the face of the mountain, wrapping all in a grey mantle and penetrating our light summer clothing. The wind increased in power, and, as it was against us, we had considerable difficulty in forcing our way up the height. Suddenly we came in front of one of the frightful precipices of "dark Lochnagar." At its base was a little, dark loch whose waters were lashed into waves by the high wind, and we could just hear the *whish* of the waves as they broke on the shore. Above were the great frowning crags, rifted and rent, and fearful in their gloomy solitude. Round these crags we carefully edged our way, occasionally peering over into the abyss below, and picturing to ourselves the sensation of falling from the giddy height whirling over and over, and at last crashing a lifeless mass on the huge fallen rocks. We exercised great caution in all our movements, as a sudden gust of the strong wind then blowing might have given us a sad enough experience of what we had already pictured in the imagination. We again sought the track, and in a short time had the pleasure of surmounting all the difficulties of the ascent.

The summit of the hill was reached. And what a reward for all our exertions! On every hand huge mountains, mighty bens, with awful precipices, mostly bearing a snowy frontlet.

Crags, knolls and mounds confusedly hurled  
The fragments of an earlier world.

Beneath our feet a faded mossy carpet, and there, seemingly within gunshot, the soft green vale of the Dee with its streak of silver, sparkling streams and wooded knolls. Away to the south-east were visible the precipitous braes surround-



ing Loch Muick ; further over in the same direction lay a wilderness of mossy pools ; and furthest of all one had a glimpse of the North Sea. As sitting still on such a height, in such a high wind and in such bitterly cold weather, was out of the question, we kept up our temperature by means of exercise in various forms. We prowled about the mountain top on the outlook for something new, and we had the pleasure of startling a number of ptarmigan, and of securing a few of their feathers. We scrambled down a steep face of the hill in order to reach a patch of snow, and be able to say that we had snow-balled each other in August. The patch turned out not to be so small as we imagined ; and it was almost as hard as a stone.

Scrambling up the height again, and securing a few fronds of ferns on our way, we resolved to put off no more time, but trudge onwards to Braemar. This was by far the most tedious part of our day's outing. The track for a great part of the way is not very well defined, and in a mist one who is not familiar with the route would most certainly lose his way. Our experience of Lochnagar climbing would lead us to advise tourists to go by Glenmuick, for though the way is perhaps steeper, it is much shorter and has a very well-defined track. Nothing noteworthy marked our descent, except that now and again we had different and varied views of the surrounding country from the many angles of our path. Here and there the shoulder of a hill coming into sight ; here and there numerous tarns with deep shadows over them ; all around rocky gorges ; and at last Loch Callater, a pretty sheet of water, giving birth to a stream which flows through a fine glen, both bearing the name of the Loch. A solitary gamekeeper's house at the southern extremity of the Loch gave rise to a vision of milk and scones and caused us to quicken our steps. We arrived there at last, after having traversed the south-western slopes of Lochnagar and the Cairns Taggart, a distance of seven miles—not a great distance certainly, but a tiresome and uncertain one for at least part of the way. A kindly welcome was extended to us by the inmates of the Loch Callater Lodge, and, after refreshing ourselves and



resting a little, we started on our way down the glen. We were almost immediately joined by a shepherd, a true highland specimen, an old man of fully 70 years of age. We entered into conversation with him, and he made five miles of our journey rather interesting and enjoyable. The twinkle of his eye should have been seen when we asked him if it was true that the natives of the glen were teetotallers. His answer was such as drew forth our flask on the instant, and I should say that, from the way in which a fair quantity of a fairly potent blend disappeared, he was not unaccustomed to quench his thirst with other than "the rills of his own native hills." He became now very communicative and was eloquent on the differences of *now* and his young days. *Then* the deer and the grouse were bigger, far bigger and more plentiful than *now*. *Then* he would meet 20 poachers on a hillside "*in a nicht*," and he had "a gless of whusky" from each and no complaints of the scarcity of birds. *Now* there were no birds, no poachers, and therefore no "whusky." Ah! the good old times! If he calculated the size of the grouse in the same way that he now calculates the number of poachers that he met and the number of "glesses of whusky" that he asserts he drank in a night, I fear he will get few to credit his statement. Be that as it may, he imparted a deal of information about the habits of the deer and pointed out the spots on the hillside where we would be sure to descry some of them at that particular part of the evening. By the aid of his telescope we made them clearly out, and we could notice that they were interesting themselves in us. They were too far away however to feel much afraid of us, and so they nibbled quietly on. During the rest of the time that our aged friend was with us he inveighed strongly against English lady visitors. They came to these glens evidently with the belief that Highlanders were untutored savages, asked them "Who made the hills?" leading them from nature to Nature's God, as it were. Instead of offering a flask and so getting into the innermost souls of the Gael, they offer a religious tract; and great is the wrath of the offended Highlander. Our friend gloried in having overcome one of these lady



tract distributors by his answer to her query, "Do you know who made all these beautiful hills?" "Ahl that I know iss, that it wassna me an' it wassna you," and off he bounded in high dudgeon. After narrating this and chuckling over the narration, our hardy companion left us bidding us a kindly good-bye. Thereafter we soon arrived at Castleton of Braemar, rather tired. Great was our dismay to find that it would be a difficult business to get sleeping accommodation. The two fine hotels were fully occupied, and so far as we could at first discover, every cottage had its complement of tourists. We tried the Police Office, but as we were law-abiding travellers, admission was denied. At last we secured a place to sleep in, and after washing and having supper, we tumbled into bed and very soon forgot our exertions of the day.

The two following days were occupied in rambling about within easy distance of Castleton. Ballochbuie Forest, Falls of Corriemulzie, The Colonel's Bed, etc., all received a share of attention and admiration from us. In the woods in the vicinity millions of ants are to be seen on every side, and they formed an object of interest to us. We took much delight in watching what were evidently the different tradesmen of the ant community. Here a hunter was hurrying home with the spoils of the chase—a beetle or other small animal; there the ordinary labourers were tugging at their loads with all their vigour. Here one smart, stout fellow was marching along quite easily with his burden; there two or three or more were sweating over some heavier weight. Others again were hurrying past, evidently bent on accomplishing a journey before beginning work. Streams were going in one direction, streams in another, and all as busy as possible, no gossiping by the way. It was amusing and instructive to place little difficulties in the way of the busy labourers and see how they were overcome.

On Tuesday morning we had breakfast shortly after 5 o'clock, and were on the road for Blair Athole, *via* Glen Tilt, by 6 o'clock. The first six miles were taken in at a brisk pace, and on reaching the Linn of Dee the first break of the journey was made. Here we hailed two tourists evidently



bent on "doing" Glen Tilt, too, but they had taken the precaution to drive this distance from Castleton in a dog-cart. During the day we repeatedly crossed and recrossed each other's paths, but, with this exception, we may say that hardly a human being was to be seen until we had penetrated a great distance into the glen. On leaving the Linn we immediately began to traverse a great tract of bleak moorland. Close to the banks of the Dee we noticed many green patches of what had at one time been cultivated land. In connection with each green spot were the ruins of one or more houses, indicative of the "survival of the fittest." Deer now take the place of the human inhabitants, and I think a kindness has been done to the hardy, but certainly poor branch of the human family, who struggled on for perhaps centuries in this desolate region. How human beings could manage to subsist by scratching the bosom of this poor part of mother Earth is a mystery. Lots of deer now became visible on the neighbouring heights, and several times we had a beautiful view of fine looking stags on the ridge outlined against the sky. A steady look, a toss of the antlered head, and each in turn disappeared.

Until the Dee turned northward, pointing almost directly towards its fountain head, we had no difficulty; but after that we had some unpleasant experiences. These unpleasantnesses might have been avoided, but as we were entire strangers to this locality, the path most used seemed to us the best, and as the following of this necessitated repeated fordings of streams a wetting now and again had to be encountered. Later on we learned that a better path for foot passengers existed, but for us the information came too late. A more dreary, forsaken district than the one we were now traversing it would be difficult to conceive. Our path was distinct enough, but also, in all conscience, bad enough. Unless great care were exercised, your toes either came bump against a large stone, almost sending you on your nose, or you went plunge over the ankles in a glutinous, mossy mixture. Long heather beginning to impart a purple tinge to the hill, and so to relieve the bleakness a little, stretched all around us. We remarked it as very strange,



and we think so yet, that although we passed through great areas of heather-clad ground, not a grouse crossed our line of vision during the whole of our rambles.

Very soon we reached the watershed of the Dee and the Tay, and then began the grandest and most solitary part of our day's journey. Our first stream flowing Taywards was a small rivulet, but the additions it constantly received from the numerous mountain streams, some of them torrents, made it gradually assume fair proportions; and, as it plunged and dashed its way onwards, the glen became deeper and more precipitous. A false step in very many places would have set us rolling down the steep declivity, and possibly a deep pool would have been ready to receive us, stunned as we were sure to be.

On our arrival at the Tarff, great was our consternation to find that there was no bridge. On the opposite side sat our two Linn of Dee friends, sunning themselves and enjoying their lunch. From their shoutings we gathered that the only way of crossing was by wading; and as we did not care to turn after coming so far, very unwillingly we began to unbuckle. The fate of a former tourist who lost his life in crossing made us "wale" our steps "wi' judicious care," and, by utilizing occasional rocks as stepping-stones, we evaded deep pools and reached *terra firma* in safety. A break of a few minutes was again made here, after which we pursued the "even tenor of our way" until we reached the Duke of Athole's Forest Lodge. On our left Ben-y-Ghlo raised its lofty head: its sides clad in a beautiful soft green, and having thousands of sheep quietly grazing. Some parts of the mountain were deeply scarred and chasmed, looking exceedingly dangerous even at a distance, but the harshness was softened by the surrounding verdure, and by the foamy torrents "leaping their way adown," eager to join the Tilt in its more dignified flow.

From Forest Lodge we had a good carriage road all the way to Blair Athole, had we had the good fortune to keep to it, but through inattention to our map, we went slightly astray. No difficulty as to our way was experienced until we passed Marble Lodge. For a time we trudged along



gaily, commenting on the fineness of the road and the trees, until we came opposite a bridge crossing the Tilt to our right. This bridge had a gate in its centre, indicating that the way was private. On making inquiry at a little girl, we learned that this bridge should not be crossed, but that we should hold right forward. We did so until we came to the parting of two ways, and now the question arose, "Which way should we take?" It was settled, after deliberation, that the most frequented one—the one showing most signs of usage—should be adopted. On we went, more and more pleased with our surroundings, and giving the Perthshire people, and the Duke especially, great credit for providing such a magnificent road for public use. We had our misgivings however, and repeatedly said it looked more like an approach or an avenue to a nobleman's residence than a public thoroughfare. Of this we were assured, when, on crossing the Tilt, a big board nailed to a tree confronted us with the information in large capitals—PRIVATE. Both were averse to turning, and although we now knew we were trespassing, we felt disinclined to retrace our steps, seeing we had come so far. At last cattle were seen on a height to our right, and the conclusion was at once drawn that a house must be near, where we might get the information necessary for putting us in the right way. But who was to scale the brae and prospect? No one volunteered until it was moved, seconded, and carried unanimously that the question be decided by lot. The lot fell to me, and I went, on a fruitless errand, however. No house was to be seen. A consultation was immediately held, and on scanning our map, we found that we were on the wrong side of the stream. We had come too far to think of going back until we again came to the parting of the ways, so a short cut was suggested in the supposed proper direction, through a young plantation. We felt that by taking this course, and going on till we came to the first road running at right angles, we were bound to be on the right tack. We also felt, however, that we had no excuse to be where we were and, had we been caught, we might have been put to some inconvenience. There was no path,



and it was clearly a case of wilful trespassing. We at last succeeded in gaining our end without mishap and, without much difficulty, except at the expense of a little extra exertion and consequent heat. In due time, after sighting Blair Castle gleaming white in the distance, we arrived at Blair Athole and easily secured apartments for the night. After refreshing ourselves by washing and eating, we made a slight tour of the immediate neighbourhood and then to bed "to sleep, perchance to dream."

We had arranged that our Wednesday's walk should merely embrace the Bruar Falls and the Pass of Killiecrankie, but

The best laid schemes o' mice and men  
Gang aft a-gley.

After breakfast we set off leisurely up Glen Garry, the morning air laden with the rich perfume of the lime, and filled with the hum of bees already at work on the treasure spread out for them by the way side. Chestnuts, hazel, rowan, plane, and ash, with their rich, ripening fruit, mingled with the blossoming lime and formed on each hand an agreeable shade from the early morning sun. Now and again a peep of the Garry was had through the foliage, and what with the singing of birds, the pleasant-looking grain-covered fields, the mountains with woods creeping up their sides, the sweet-smelling air and a bright morning, we felt that a day's real enjoyment was before us. The first stream on our right was the Bruar, and, immediately on crossing it, we began to explore its course. The entrance to the glen proper had a locked gate presided over by a female guardian angel. We obtained admission after an exchange of courtesies. A well made, well kept path led us along the banks of the stream, and here and there, from vantage points on the overhanging rocks, fine views of the foaming torrent beneath were to be had. The glen, whose sides are now clad with "lofty firs and ashes cool," and whose craggy cliffs are adorned with "fragrant birks in woodbines drest," in answer to the prayer of Bruar water, presented through Burns to the noble Duke, is exceedingly picturesque and beautiful. It so happened that during our walk we en-



countered "the loving pair" spoken of in the same humble petition of Bruar Water, meeting by "sweet endearing stealeth." So far as we know the birks also spoken of in the same piece did their duty—

And birks extend their fragrant arms  
To screen the dear embrace.

The noble owner of the glen has contrived, by the erection of rustic bowers at the points most advantageous for viewing the best parts of the falls, to minister to the comforts of the sightseer. Of these we took advantage, as did the loving pair already referred to, and I doubt not they found them to the full as satisfactory and comfortable as we did. We varied our feast of sight-seeing by an occasional hunt after a squirrel, many of which are to be seen bounding along from tree to tree. One poor unfortunate was closely pressed by us, and, as it had to take refuge in a tree remote from others, its efforts to escape were rather frantic and to us ludicrous. Of course it had nothing to fear from us so far as bodily injury was concerned. It was a variation in our day's proceedings, and was the result of high animal spirits, with a dash perhaps of the feeling seemingly inherent in man to chase or secure whatever wild animal crosses his path.

After crossing and recrossing the Bruar we retraced our steps to Blair Athole. Immediately on our return rain came down in torrents, and as it seemed likely to continue, our intended walk through Killiecrankie vanished. Nothing was left for us, as our time was limited, but to take train to Perth. We whirled through the Pass certainly, and we can say we saw it, but the enjoyment was not such as we were certain to have derived had we traversed it in the way contemplated. We consoled ourselves, however, with the thought that we were in a limited sense like Jonah "in, out of the wet." Our journey to Perth was, so far, uninteresting. Thence we returned to Aberdeen, highly delighted and much benefited by our few days' wanderings.

August 24, 1881.