

A WEST COAST ITINERARY.

BY JAMES MACHARDY.

THE trip started on August 5, 1934, the party comprising Slessor, Miss Janet Patterson (Junior Section), Hamish, a veteran of thirteen summers, and the writer. The journey from Aberdeen via Deeside and the Larig to Aviemore is so familiar to readers that I need not linger over the description. We were rather amused, however, when, about half a mile from the Pools of Dee, we met a party of young men from the Midlands of England hauling their gear over the summit of the Larig—on wheelbarrows! Our destination, the admirably situated Youths' Hostel at Aviemore, was reached at 6.30 P.M.; the Scottish Youths' Hostel at Aviemore, with its fine sun parlour and spacious windows opening to a pine-scented hill-side, is superior to any I have seen elsewhere.

Our objective on Monday was Auchterawe via the Corrie-yairack Pass; the first stage was by bus and train to Laggan-bridge, leaving a farther distance of 28 miles, a walk comfortably within our powers. A young man, rich in the anecdote of the countryside, kept us interested in his tales as far as Glenshirra Lodge. Garvamore, General Wade's old barracks, grim and scarred, recalled the Highland antagonism to "the new road." The path zigzags up the hill-side in a series of hairpin bends, there being twelve traverses of some 80 yards at the foot and narrowing gradually as they near the summit. The stone buttresses at the corners, though now overgrown, are still visible and in a wonderful state of preservation. Heavy rain obscured the gorgeous panorama from the summit of the pass. But if mist spoiled the view it perhaps helped us to feel the romance and glamour of the road which General Wade and his Sassenach soldiers drove through a hostile country, and over which Prince Charlie, ironically enough, was to lead

the clans ten years later *en route* for Prestonpans. Descending to Glen Tarff, difficulty was experienced in finding the path as the ground is now marshy. It was discovered that the path does not here follow the stream but is to be found on the hill-side. The Hostel at Auchterawe was comfortable if not as compact as that at Aviemore.

Next morning it was still raining, and we decided that an easy day was due; of the alternative ways of reaching Buntait in Glen Urquhart, by bus or by boat, the latter, with the chance of seeing the "monster," appealed to us most. Loch Ness was not at its best, with a blustering wind blowing and the white horses running in Urquhart Bay. There I was jolted out of a day-dream by shouts of "The Monster," and a rush of passengers to the side of the ship. About a mile astern an indistinct shape, like an inverted boat, was making across the loch—no doubt the "creature" itself. The short bus journey to Buntait was enlivened by Gaelic songs and numerous deviations along by-roads to deliver parcels. The 7 miles' journey took two hours! The hostel here is small but comfortable, with a splendid view of the hills of Glen Affric and Glen Cannich.

Wednesday dawned bright and dry, and we were early away, with Alltbeath in Glen Affric as our objective. The road climbs steeply to over 700 feet, with extensive views of the mountains of Kintail ever ahead. That over the valley to Invercannich has always appealed to me as the perfect example of the peaceful Highland glen. To-day a pair of eagles were sailing overhead, mere specks in the blue, now swooping downwards, now soaring to continue their tireless wheeling. A halt at Comar House, where Prince Charlie spent a night after Culloden; I stayed there some years ago and remember that carved on the fireplace of my room were the initials and date, 17—R.C.—40. Roderick Chisholm, I learned, was out in the '45. But it is a name becoming exceedingly rare in the glen. We now climbed steadily for some 3 miles to the narrow passage of the Chisholm's Pass and so down to the pleasantly wooded country of Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin and Loch Affric. The hills now began to close in on us and the sky became

overcast, but Alltbeath was reached before the rain fell. We were awakened early next morning by a child's soft Highland voice calling, "Your porridge is ready." The morning lived up to the promise of the previous evening, the hills being hardly discernible in the mist. West of Alltbeath the track is broken and boggy, and although the more southern Glen Lichd is the easier way, we passed into Kintail by the Bealach na Sgairne, a narrow rocky defile precipitous on both sides. This was at one time the main pass between Kintail and Inverness. The path now drops precipitately to Glen Choinneachain, and the scene is one of magnificent desolation. At Dorusduain we saw a tame stag feeding among cattle on the river bank. All was now plain sailing, round the head of Loch Duich to Ratagan, 1 mile from Shiel Bridge. At high tide only a narrow strip of road separates Ratagan Hostel from the water, and as the men's dormitory has several unglazed windows extending almost the whole length of the building, I felt that it could, on occasion, be just on the airy side!

From Ratagan we visited the Falls of Glomach, which have a sheer drop of 370 feet. Cautiously descending the rough track on the west side of the gorge we gained a point where, by lying stretched out with our heads overhanging the wall of the gorge, we were able to get a view of the entire fall.

Next day we visited Glen Lichd, and were here allowed to watch through a telescope a deer-stalking party on the opposite hill-side. I remarked at the time on this unusual behaviour in a keeper, and it only occurred to me later that he had been deliberately keeping us with him until the hunting party had got to where we were unlikely to disturb them. At Alltbeath we turned south and joined the Glen Moriston road about a mile east of Cluanie Inn. Twelve miles of metalled road to Shiel Bridge still stretched ahead of us—an exceptionally full day. We had tramped fully 39 miles through scenery unsurpassed in Great Britain and country brimful of historical interest, and had satisfied ourselves physically and æsthetically.

Next morning we were going to Strome Ferry, but

decided to climb the Glenelg road first to see what is considered, by some competent judges, to be the finest view in Britain. The road climbs in sharp bends up the shoulder of Mam Ratagan, the last bend, which forms an ideal viewpoint, being reached in about half an hour. Looking back, the lofty, dignified mountains known as the Five Sisters of Kintail seemed to rise sheer from the placid waters of the loch. They form a group, the left guarded by Beinn Fhada, with the mighty Sgùrr Fhuaran on the right. Thin mists capped each peak, and a brilliant rainbow stretched from lovely Strath Croe clear across to Glen Shiel. In the foreground two yachts, gleaming white, swung easily at anchor, and far to the left Eilean Donan Castle rose stark from the tide. Reluctantly we descended the hill to Ratagan. Our way still led west along the shore of the loch to Totaig; where we had to wait some time for the ferry. Heavy rain fell for the remaining 8 miles of our journey—the dreariest miles we had yet encountered. An amusing situation arose at Strome; we found that none of us could blow the trumpet provided to summon the ferry from North Strome! Each in his turn blew his hardest; each tried blowing gently. Not a sound was produced, and we stood in the drenching rain looking helplessly at the boat across the loch. Finally a motorist was ferried across and we were soon drying in the hostel at North Strome.

After Kintail, Loch Carron was disappointing. The hills are of no great height, and we could discover nothing of historic interest. The following day we set off for Applecross in showery weather. The map shows a path leaving the road about a mile east of Strome and going north-west over the hills to Kishorn. This would have shortened our walk by some miles, but we were unable to locate it. We were determined to get off the main road, however, and went over the shoulder of Bad a' Chreamha, which, on the other side, dropped precipitously in a series of narrow shelves which had to be negotiated with care. Rejoining the road at Auchintraid, we saved a mile or two by wading the estuary of the Kishorn River. Crossing the seaweed was slippery work, and the river channel proved deeper and

muddier than we had anticipated. We had a few exciting moments before reaching the other bank. The road now climbs over low but interesting hills to Applecross; at times it is hemmed in by black precipices, which, with the mist, cheated us of the fine views of Skye on our left and of the wide brown moors of Applecross on the right. Soaked by the cold Atlantic mist, it was a rather bedraggled quartette that marched up to the door of the small hotel at Applecross. The inn was full to the door; rather hopelessly we turned away to knock at every likely door. Disappointed as the younger members must have been, not a murmur escaped them. After half a dozen refusals, most of which amounted to no more than a silent shake of the head, we espied a postman and appealed to him. His wife proved most hospitable. There we found two fellow-guests, an Edinburgh couple, whom we had already met at Ratagan. We compared receptions, and found that ours had been tropical—they had arrived on the Sabbath. Before they found a haven at the MacDonald's their appeals had been met with a stony silence and the door slowly but firmly closed in their faces.

It was still raining when we left on Tuesday morning, bound for Inver Alligin on Loch Torridon. A rough track on the right bank of the River Applecross leads to the head of Loch Shildaig. At the junction of the river with the Allt Coire Attadale the path divides into three branches. Instead of following the centre one, we, by some unaccountable lapse, turned up the Attadale burn, and only discovered our mistake on seeing the two lochans glimmering greenly through the mists of Coire Attadale. At the foot of Croicbheinn the path again divides, the right branch being a short cut which entails crossing the Amhuinn Dubh. In rainy weather this river is deep and dangerous, and we preferred the longer route. At Shildaig we hired a boatman to take us across the loch, and shortly our good craft was scraping the limpets off the rocks at Inver Alligin. It is difficult to decide whether the Ratagan or Inver Alligin Hostel has the better setting. Although the stately symmetry of the Five Sisters is lacking, the steep terraced forma-



A SNOW CLIMB ON LOCHNAGAR

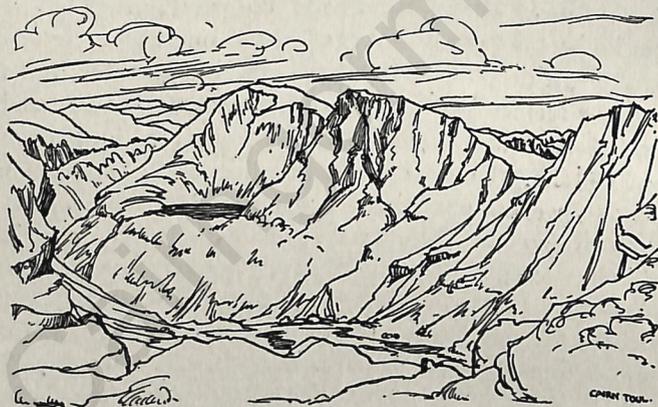
H. C. Dugan

tion of the Torridon Hills rivals anything on Loch Duich. During the night a tremendous thunderstorm roused the hostel, and there was a regular pyjama parade as people packed the windows and door to watch the spectacle.

On Wednesday we set out to climb Liathach, but we had not gone far when two of the party decided that it was a day for lying by the water-side. The summit was misty, but below the mist line we had a magnificent view of the Hebrides; words are inadequate to describe this, the most wonderful sight since we had set out. Next day the weather was again broken, and in thin drizzling rain we set out for Loch Maree via the Coire Mhic Nobuil Glen and the Bealach a' Chomhla, where even the foul weather could not minimise the grandeur of our surroundings. Torrential rain sent us off our course a little, the map peeling in strips from its backing despite every effort to keep it dry. Squelching through deep heather and crossing innumerable burns—the place seemed positively laced with them—we eventually found shelter and a short respite from the downpour at Poca Buidhe. Here, like the Israelites at the Feast of the Passover, we ate our frugal lunch standing. We were too wet to sit down! There were signs of the weather clearing, and before long the mists were streaming from the splintered pinnacles of Liathach. Instead of following the path to the Gairloch road we turned off to Lochan a' Chleirich, from which a short walk took us to the Slattadale woods. We walked into the hostel at Slattadale quite dry. This hostel, like so many others, is a cottage rented from the Forestry Commissioners, and is pleasantly situated on the shore of Loch Maree, which deserves all the flattering things that have been said about it.

Friday was our last hiking day—to Carn Dearg on the Gairloch—and sadness, inseparable, I suppose, from the last days of freedom, was noticeable in the demeanour of our young companions. From the shoulder of Creag Mhor Thollie, the view of the loch held us spellbound. The morning sun had transformed it into a huge plate of burnished silver on which some giant had scattered a handful of emeralds, and over it all a blue reflected light, reminiscent

of a scene in "Dear Brutus" with its "light that never was on sea or land," and the sudden apparition of "Old Lob" capering in the bracken would just have completed the picture! From here the path descends rapidly and joins the Gairloch—Poolewe road east of Loch Tollie. A little refreshment at the village of Poolewe set us off along the shore of Loch Ewe to Naust, from which a path crosses the moors to Strath on the Gairloch. This route is rather featureless, and the path at first is difficult to find. The hostel at Gairloch, Càrn Dearg House, was gifted by its former owner, and commands the finest view of the loch. Here our holiday ended, for early next morning the bus took us to Achnasheen and the railway.



CAIRN TOUL.