

THREE GATEWAYS TO THE WEST.

BY C. MACLENNAN.

As a boy in Inverness the view that fascinated me most was that obtained from any high point in the town itself, looking up the valley of the Ness, to the cleft in the western horizon of hills, a cleft which seemed at once a window and a gateway to a country to me unknown and highly romanticised, the West Coast. When I did visit the West, however, I did not go that way, but by Glen Affric.

Those who are, like myself, incurable ponderers over large-scale maps of Scotland will have noticed that if one wishes to travel on wheels from Inverness to the West, one has either to turn north to Garve or south-west to Glen Moriston. Between these two highways lie a hundred square miles of hills—not yet traversed by the road-maker. They are, however, crossed from east to west by three distinct and separate bridle paths, which follow the three roughly parallel valleys, Glen Affric, Glen Cannich, and Glen Strathfarrar. They are all of interest as walkers' routes.

Glen Affric is well known, and has already been described in the *Journal*. My own walk through it stands out in my memory because it was done on my first walking tour, because I was making for the West Coast that I had never seen, and because I was going to emerge at Kintail, the ancestral home of my rather obscure forefathers, shared by them with the more numerous and definitely wilder Macraes. So on the evening of our third day out from Inverness, as we approached the bealach between Beinn Fhada and A'Ghlas-bheinn, we were urged on by a hope and a necessity, the hope of getting a glimpse of the Atlantic before the light failed, and the necessity of reaching a shop on the shores of Loch Duich before closing time, for it was Saturday night. There followed a moment to remember as we rattled down the goat path on the other side and saw the upper end of Loch

Duich lit up by the setting sun. A couple of stout but hungry Cortezes—we did not pause but made with all speed for a camping spot at Croe Bridge.

The walks through Glen Cannich and Glen Strathfarrar are more fresh in the memory and were the outward and homeward sections of the same tour. I should say at this point that, since having neither the energy nor the inclination to combine climbing with walking, as E. A. Baker does (*vide* "With Rope and Rucksack") on such tours, I have so far omitted to mention the mountains which one becomes familiar with on these cross-Scotland walks. Màm Sodhail and Càrn Eige may be climbed from Glen Affric or Glen Cannich. Glen Cannich gives access to Sgùrr na Làpaich and An Riabhachan, Glen Strathfarrar to a close-knit chain of six Munros, the most prominent Sgùrr a' Choire Ghlais.

Glen Cannich was taken on the westward journey. It is longer than the Glen Affric route but lower, and has no five-barred gate in the shape of a steep bealach at its far end. One may think of it as the pass for cattle or pack horses, and of Glen Affric as the speedier way for those travelling light and in a hurry. Not far from Glen Affric Hotel, where one leaves the Strath Glass main road, one begins to appreciate both the similarity and the difference that this glen has in comparison with Affric. Here, as in Affric, the river meanders in wide pools, uncertain whether to be loch or river, and the road passes through glades of birch and conifer, but the glen is ampler and more leisurely. Instead of crossing the stream with the road; the traveller on foot may keep the south bank, for it is good walking for two or three miles, and re-cross where the path begins to lose itself in deep heather. Our walk from Glen Affric to the vicinity of Killilan was done in a leisurely three days, but those who do it in two should try to camp at the eastern end of Loch Lungard, as we did, where the road proper ends. Remote, treeless, and impressively named, Lungard has the severe beauty of Wastwater in Cumberland. Beyond the far end of the loch, the roadside ruin of a substantial house, not a *larach*, suggests to the willing imagination a half-way rest house for horses and men, a theory which the name

Gobhaltan (the smith's burn) tends to confirm. A mile past this point we had to do a little path finding. We left the track where it turned south up Gleann Sithidh and crossed the valley on our right to pick up another which took us on our westward way.

There is no thrilling finale to this walk, for the descent to sea-level is made long before one comes within sight of the sea. We made camp at the pleasant township of Camusluinie before dropping across a nick in the hills to Dornie. Our immediate destination was Skye.

Having made up our minds to come back to the east side of Scotland by Glen Strathfarrar, we settled on Attadale on Loch Carron as our starting-point. We carried four days' provisions, for we prided ourselves on being independent of possibly hostile keepers. We should record that of our carefully planned supplies a pound of sausages had to be left to roam the hillside the first evening; we omitted to mention the Kyle shopkeeper in our prayers! Our road took us across a fairly high hill ridge and down into the upland valley of Loch an Laoigh, a march accomplished almost at a trot, in spite of the heat, for the horse-flies tormented us so much as to make a halt impossible, except in an infrequent puff of wind. We camped at Loch Calavie, another "lost loch" like Lungard. This is reached just across the summit of the whole pass.

Once again path finding had to be done. We picked our way along the side of an open valley, making for the head of Loch Monar. It was very like several well-remembered crossings of Glen Feshie into upper Glen Geldie, where a path should be but none is. Loch Monar was sighted thankfully, but here we were faced with a dilemma. Should we make a wide detour round its head in order to reach a plainly visible path along the north side, or should we risk finding a way along the near side? Below us on our right were the imposing buildings of Patt Lodge, embowered in trees. There must be some road from it along the south side of the loch, for none led round the western end. We set off past the Lodge, wondering to see gardens and other evidence of frequent habitation in such an isolated spot. But no

road was found, not even a track, and it was not until we sighted a small but substantial pier that we guessed the reason. Patt Lodge was reached, and supplied, by boat only, and the building materials must have been brought by the same means.

The going was so difficult over those peat-hags that we camped in the fairy glen of a burn half-way along the loch side. The fluttering canvas of a triangular light tent far across the loch, with no human figures about it, suggested that climbers were out on the tops behind. Our difficulties were liquidated when we discovered on the map a track in a tributary glen just two miles across the hill from our camp, and in the morning we struck over to it. By the afternoon of our third day, therefore, we were walking down the made road in the broad valley of Glen Strathfarrar.

It is well known that Glen Strathfarrar is closed to motorists by a gate at its lower end, and the twelve miles from Loch Monar are, in fact, a single stretch of open grazing. We were made aware of this fact in an emphatic manner. Having admired a herd of fifty Highland cattle in the vicinity of Broulin Lodge, we pitched camp a mile farther down. After we had turned in, it happened, our admiration was further compelled, for the herd, grazing at a high rate of striking, were discovered to be only a hundred yards away, with nothing to stop their advance. The master spirit, a handsome white bull, began to wake the sleeping hills with a bellowing that was also a roaring, and we suddenly felt the guilty discomfort of the gate-crasher. Tent was struck, rucksacks roughly packed, and a rapid, though well-ordered movement was made to the high ground above the road. Here we slept well enough, till I was awakened at six o'clock by a loud, unmannerly breathing not far from the tent. A swift peep outside convinced me of the worst; the white bull, with an unfriendly look in his red-rimmed eyes, was staring over the bracken at our flimsy shelter. This time we made for the hillside bare-footed and taking only what we slept in. The white bull did not deign to toss our tent on his horns, however, nor even sniff at it, but lumbered past into the wood, plainly in search of

a lady friend who had failed to keep an appointment. One of us kept a sharp look-out while the other packed, and we were able to get away comfortably. The bull of Strathfarrar had inspired us to an early start, and may also have been the cause of the swinging pace we maintained down the remaining miles of the glen road.

Strath Glass is, of course, the natural starting-point for all these walks, for through it runs the main road to and from Beaully. This town, historically a seaport, may be legitimately regarded as on the east coast.

If we adjudicate on these routes, Strathfarrar's claims are confined to length, loneliness, and picturesque cattle! Glen Affric remains the best walk from sea to sea. In its final stage, "crossing the backbone of Scotland" is felt as a reality, and it is when we go this way that we appreciate most keenly the experience of stepping down into a new landscape and among a new people.

