

THE ELEVATION OF THE PRINCIPAL MOUNTAINS IN THE DIVISION OF MAR*

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THOUGH these are among the highest in Great Britain, their height had never been ascertained. One of the bounding mountains, viz. Mont-Battock (on the top of which the counties of Aberdeen, Kincardine and Forfar meet), had been measured by Mr William Garden, and was stated by him to be 1,155 yards or 3,465 feet above the level of the sea. As I knew that Mont-Battock was far inferior to those mountains, which were 40 miles farther west, and nearly in the middle between the Atlantic Ocean and German Sea, I presumed that the highest land in the kingdom was in this county.

Before I set out on my first survey I got a mountain-barometer, made by that excellent artist Mr Thomas Jones, formerly of Mount Street, now of Kenton Street, London. . . . And what was of the utmost consequence, Mr Professor Copland, of Marischal College, had, in the most friendly manner, given me his best advice for carrying on my operations on the mountains, and had very kindly undertaken to mark the heights of the barometer at his house at Fountainhall, by Aberdeen, which is 160 feet above the level of the sea, at half-flood. . . .

July 10, 1810.—Called on Mrs Farquharson of Finzean and obtained a guide to Petershill, which I reached by 4 o'clock p.m. I found the elevation of its summit, above the said level, to be 1,930 feet. . . .

July 11.—In consequence of a great fall of rain, the rivulets were so much swelled, that Mont-Battock was inaccessible. . . .

July 12.—Set out for Mont-Battock; verified my former measure of Petershill—laid my spirit level on its summit, and found that the highest part of Clochnaben, except the rock, was exactly on a level with the point on which I stood.—Therefore as the rock is not above 70 feet, Clochnaben cannot be above 2,000 feet, though said to be 2,370. Walked forward to Mont-Battock . . . and stayed an hour on top of it. Quite disappointed in finding it only 2,600 feet. I can account for so great an error [by Mr Garden] no other way than by supposing that he had either mistaken or put a wrong figure in his

* Extracts from the Appendix to *A General View of the Agriculture of Aberdeenshire*, published in 1811.

field book for the angle which marked the elevation of the Grampians above the first land, called the How of the Mearns.

July 13.—Found the elevation of the Dee, at the intended bridge at Belwade, 310 feet. . . . Found the elevation of the Dee below the Bridge of Ballater, 780 feet (*sic*). The House of Ballater, 720 feet. The top of the Craigs of Ballater, a romantic hill, close by the house, 1,340 feet . . . to the Manse of Crathie, where we arrived at a late hour, and were kindly received by Mr and Mrs McHardy.

July 14.—Breakfasted at 7 o'clock and set out with Mess. Farquharson [of Monaltry] and McHardy. On our way we were joined by Mr Alexander Warren, a very ingenious man, who had measured the estate of Invercauld, consisting of nearly 100,000 Scotch acres, and to whom I was much indebted in my subsequent operations. Three guides took care of our horses, and conducted us in safety to the mountain top, which on the medium of three measures taken on this, and another visit on the 20th, was found to be elevated above the sea almost exactly 3,800 feet. Laid my spirit level on the Ca Cuirn, or highest top [of Lochnagar] in order to compare its elevation with the mountains near the source of the Dee. Found, that after making allowance for the curvature, they were considerably higher. Dined, and staid three hours on this interesting mountain, from whence the German Sea, from the Firth of Forth to the Murray Firth, and a great extent of country, was distinctly seen for about two hours; and where the varied scenery of woods, lakes, rivers and mountains, and the height of the rocks of this mountain, varying from 950 to 1,300 feet, and extending nearly two miles, would have detained us much longer, had not a thick fog, and every appearance of a great fall of rain, obliged us to descend as quickly as possible. Our descent was accompanied with a number of awkward tumbles, and one of the gentlemen was rolled nearly 100 feet; but no accident happened to any of us, except the loss of my spirit level. . . .

July 15.—Preached at Crathie for my friend Mr McHardy, but felt a considerable inflammation in the pleura from the great rains, and exertion of yesterday. Dr Stuart took from me about eight ounces of blood, which gave me relief.

July 16.—Rose at 5 o'clock. Rode along with Mr Warren to Mr Stuart's, at Allanquoch, who is factor, or land-steward for Earl Fife. Here we breakfasted, and our hospitable landlord accompanied us to the mountains of Ben-a-bour and Benavon. The former, viz. Ben-a-bour or Benavoured (a Gaelic name, which signifies the table

hill), is an immense mass, without beauty or fertility, extending about three miles in length, and almost flat on the top; and was found to be elevated above the sea 3,940 feet.

The latter was more interesting, having greater variety of surface. Its highest peak was 3,920 feet, or 20 feet lower than Ben-a-bourd. But the mountain in general was 100 feet lower than the other. Several Scotch topazes and beryls are found in Lochnagar, and in both these mountains. . . .

July 17—Called at Marr Lodge . . . Took the elevation of the Dee at the Linn, which we found to be 1,190 feet. . . . Pursuing our course, we next took the elevation of the Dee at its confluence with the Geaully, a little above the Donbrach (which is the highest arable, or inhabited land in the county), and found it nearly 1,300, or more exactly 1,294 feet, above the level of the sea. We then travelled in a direction due north . . . till we arrived at the junction of the Garchary and the Guisachan. Here the Dee loses its name; and its elevation, at the point where the two mountain streams unite, is 1,640 feet.

Following the banks of the Garchary, we travelled about 4 miles further, to its confluence with the Larig, where the elevation of the united stream was found to be 1,984 feet above the sea. . . .

At 2 o'clock p.m. we set out to climb the mountain, still keeping in sight of the river. In a few minutes we came to the foot of a cataract . . . in about half an hour after, we perceived that this cataract came from a lake in the ridge of the mountain of Cairntoul, and, that the summit of the mountain was another 1,000 feet above the loch, which is called Loch-na-youn, or the blue lake. A short time after, we saw the Dee (here called the Garchary, from this rocky bed, which signifies in Gaelic, the rugged quarry) tumbling in great majesty over the mountain, down another cataract; or as we afterwards found it, a chain of natural cascades, above 1,300 feet high. It was in flood at this time, from the melting of the snow, and the late rains; and, what was most remarkable, an arch of snow covered the narrow glen from which it tumbled over the rocks. . . . A little before 4 o'clock, we got to the top of the mountain, which (by information give me, before I set out, by George Skene, Esq., of Skene) I knew to be Breriach, or the speckled mountain. Here we found the highest well, which we afterwards learned was called Well Dee. . . . We sat down, completely exhausted, at 4 o'clock p.m. and drank of the highest well which we found to be 4,060 feet above the level of the sea; and whose fountain was only 35 degrees of heat, on the 17th of July, or 3 degrees above freezing point. We mixed

some good whisky with this water, and recruited our strength. . . . After resting half an hour, we ascended to the top of Breriach, at 5 p.m. and found it to be 4,280 feet above the level of the sea. We then descended amidst a thick fog, which suddenly overwhelmed us, and attempted next to get to the top of Cairntoul, on the other side of the Garchary. We could not see an object at above 100 yards distance, and at last ascended one of the inferior peaks, but afterwards climbed up the rocks to the highest summit of Cairntoul, which we found to be only 5 feet higher than Breriach, and that apparent difference was only occasioned by the weight of the atmosphere. On this summit the rain poured out in such torrents, and the wind battered us so much, that two gentlemen, holding umbrellas over my head, could not protect me while I marked the height of the barometer in my journal. . . . Unfortunately we had no pocket compass, and afraid of falling over the high rocks of Poten Duon, which are nearly 1,600 feet high, we turned too much to the right hand and completely lost our way. It was 9 o'clock at night before we found, that a small river, whose course we happily followed, was the Guisachan, or the other source of the Dee. . . . Our horses joined us at 10 o'clock, and we mounted, retraced our steps homeward, and arrived at Allanquoich, about half past 1 next morning. . . .

July 19 (*sic*).—After breakfasting at 10 o'clock, Mr Warren and I returned to Crathie. . . . I then dressed, and rode to Abergeldie to dinner, where the kindest reception from Captain and Mrs Gordon, made me forget the fatigue of the two preceding days. The excellent birch wine appeared to me superior to the finest Champagne. . . .

July 19.—. . . My generous landlord, with the true spirit of a highland chieftain, caused his horses to be put to the carriage, and went, with his lady and niece, to Altguisach. This is a most commodious cottage belonging to Captain Gordon, in the neighbourhood of Loch Muich, and of the mountain of Lochnagar, which I wished again to examine particularly. . . .

July 20.—. . . My faithful companion, Mr Warren, joined me on the top of Lochnagar, whose elevation we verified repeatedly and found to be very nearly, as before, 3,800 feet. And the Lake of Lochnagar, at the foot of the rock, 1,300 feet less, or 2,500. The other Lakes, called Loch-an-years, or bird's lakes, from 2,450 to 2,800. The second top, or border of the White Month, 3,780. . . .

July 21.—. . . Arrived at the Bridge of Ballater at 4, dismissed my guide, called at Ballater house, and requested another guide to follow me to Morven. . . . I ascended the mountain, and a little after 6

o'clock p.m. I found the elevation of its highest top to be exactly 300 feet less than Mont Keen, or 2,880 feet. . . .

July 21 (*sic*).—I preached and dined at Glenmuick. . . .

July 22.—Set out on my return . . . concluded my first expedition to the mountains of Marr, which had taken up two weeks, during which time I had travelled above 330 miles. . . .

After returning home and calculating the heights of Cairntoul, Breriach, and the other mountains of Marr, I thought it would be worth while to see whether these were the highest in the country ; and also, when measured with the same barometer, whether they were equal or superior to Ben Nevis, on the confines of Inverness and Argyllshires, and to Cairngorum, in the head of Banffshire, which were reputed to be the highest mountains in the island. The thick fog, and excessive rains on the 17th of July, when I visited Breriach and Cairntoul, and the loss of my spirit-level at Lochnagar, rendered it impossible for me to know whether Ben MacDouie was higher than either of these. . . .

On the 10th of September I left Aberdeen. . . . On the 13th I met my son with a very ingenious friend of his, Mr William Ramsay, son to the Rev. William Ramsay, minister of Cortachy. . . . On the 14th we breakfasted at Marr Lodge, at 7 o'clock, where we were joined by our guides ; and we checked our former measures of the elevation of the Dee, till we came to the summits of Cairntoul and Breriach. We found the snow was melted between the wells of Dee, and on the top of the rocks, though a considerable quantity of it remained on the north ridge of Cairntoul, where the sun never reaches. We found . . . that the peak of Cairntoul, and the top of Breriach, were exactly of the same elevation and 60 feet lower than we found them, owing to the thick fog and rains, on the former survey. . . .

Having adjusted these matters, we directed the spirit-level to Cairngorum, distant about 6 miles, and found it was considerably lower. But when we directed it across the mountain torrent, from the Larig to the top of Ben MacDouie, we found it was considerably higher ; and though not two miles distant, it was inaccessible that day ; it being now past six o'clock, and Aviemore 12 miles distant. . . .

September 15.—After breakfast at this inn, I sent off my young friends to Ben Nevis and set out for Gordon Castle; but staid that night at Aberlour, in the hospitable manse of the Rev. Mr Wilson.

September 16.—Preached at Fochabers for the Rev. John Anderson.

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[September 17-20.—Fochabers - Aberlour - Inveraven - Grantown - Aviemore-Inverdrurie-Pitmain Inn-Inverishie.]

September 21.— . . My young men on the way [to Breriach] gave me an account . . . of their having measured the elevation of Ben Nevis, which they found to be, on a medium of two observations, 4,350 feet. Well Dee was now reduced to 4,000 feet in this pure atmosphere; and the top of Breriach, to 4,220 or, at most, 4,230. At 1 o'clock we descended 2,200 feet, and after crossing the Larig, ascended 2,280 feet, to the top of Ben MacDouie. We reached this at half past 2 o'clock p.m. and found it the second mountain in the island, and inferior only to Ben Nevis, by nearly 50 feet, or 4,300 feet high, at a medium of three observations. We dined on the top of Ben MacDouie, the thermometer being 47°, and the water in the highest fountain at 40°, in one of the hottest days of this season.

After remaining there above an hour, we set out for Cairngorum, to the summit of which we mounted at 5 p.m. We found this mountain about 250 feet less than Ben MacDouie, and also inferior both to Breriach and Cairntoul, by 170 feet, its height not exceeding 4,050 feet. But we had the most extensive and delightful prospect from it, owing to the state of the atmosphere. On the west, Ben Nevis, at 70 miles distance, was seen in all its glory, and the waves of the Atlantic appeared, not blue, but of a whitish or cotton colour. Toward the north, the Ord of Caithness was distinctly visible, as well as a great part of the sea-coast, from the north-east and south-east. The south and south-west only presented us with a view of the mountains of Marr. We descended to Lord Huntly's Well, about 60 feet from the top, where we drank his Lordship's health, in a mixture of whisky and water. . . .