

The Life of William McGillivray

by Ken Thomson

William MacGillivray FRSE (25 January 1796 – 4 September 1852) was a Scottish naturalist and ornithologist, born in Old Aberdeen but brought up on Harris. He returned to King's College Aberdeen where he graduated MA in 1815, and then studied Medicine. Each summer vacation he would walk from Aberdeen to the west coast (at least once over Braeriach, sleeping in the Garbh Choire) to catch a boat to his home on Harris. To further his knowledge of natural history, he visited the British Museum in London, making the return journey from Aberdeen on foot, "with ten pounds in his pocket, a drinking glass, and a trowel". He then worked in Edinburgh on anatomy and natural history before moving in 1841 to become Professor of Natural History at Marischal College, Aberdeen. In that post, he introduced the hitherto unheard-of idea of taking students out on field trips.

MacGillivray was a friend of the American bird expert J. J. Audubon, and wrote a large part of Audubon's *Ornithological Biographies* from 1830 to 1839. Audubon named MacGillivray's warbler for him.

Amongst other books, he was the author of the magisterial *The Natural History of Dee Side and Braemar*, in which he describes his walks up and down the whole of Deeside and its upper tributaries, observing the rocks and landscape, and listing several hundred species of (mainly) plants. Unpublished at the time of his death, the manuscript was purchased by Queen Victoria, who had a limited edition printed in 1855.



As may be gathered, MacGillivray was a prodigious walker. Chapter X (pp. 85-94) in *Natural History* describes his ascent of "the great mountains at the sources of the Dee" (editor's comments in [square brackets]):

"At five of the morning of the 12th of August [of 1850] we joined the Messrs. Backhouse [of a famous naturalist family] at the inn [in Braemar], and in about half-an-hour commenced our journey. To save time and unnecessary labour we were conveyed to the Linn of Dee, a distance of seven miles. Traversing the Pine woods for about two miles, we came to an open grassy strath nearly three miles in length; and on passing it, observed a gamekeeper's house on the edge of a wood [location unclear; a "hunting lodge" was built on the Derry Lodge site in the early nineteenth century]. At this, the only human habitation in Glen Lui, we obtained some milk and information, both useful for our further progress. ... At the distance of about two miles from the cottage, we entered Glen Dee ... Passing the Guisachan, we proceed toward the base of Cairntoul, and, fording the stream, beside which we find abundance of *Arabis petraea* [Northern rock-cress], and *Alchemilla alpina* [Alpine lady's mantle], in the bed of the Dee, we forthwith ascend the steep acclivity, keeping as near as we can to the brook which comes gliding and rushing down from a corry high on the mountain. Many interesting plants are met with, especially *Hieracia* [hawkweeds], and the largest "blue-bells" I have ever seen, displayed their cerulean charms on the banks of the stream.

The ascent was difficult; but at length we reached a space entirely covered with great blocks of granite, passing over which with comparative ease, we entered a spacious corry, of a semicircular form, with fissured crags, and steep stony slopes. ... Emerging, as it were, into open space, and inhaling the cool air with delight, we now found ourselves on the back of the mountain, across which we proceeded toward a ridge that overlooked the Glen of the Garrachory ... and ... descended by a steep slope of detritus into a corry immediately below ... This ... is separated from the Glen of the Garrachory by a high rocky bank, along which we descended with great difficulty and some danger [and] moved downwards toward Ben-na-muic-dhui.

[Then follows a long discussion on glaciers and moraines in the area, but "some Midges (species of *Tipulae*) made a desperate attack upon us"!]

We ascended slowly by a very steep hollow, down which came a necessarily very rapid stream, and found ourselves on a stony shoulder of the mountain. ... After a walk of about half-a-mile over

sand and granite slabs, gravel and rough stones, we arrived at the centre of the broad top, and seating ourselves on the base of the pyramidal cairn of the Trigonometers, made our evening meal. It was eight o'clock: a thick mist suddenly covered the mountains, and enveloped us in its aerial mantle.

Not at all dismayed, we found by our compasses the direction in which we ought to proceed [and] directed our course eastward, descended over a long tract of very stony ground, passed some melting snow wreaths, disturbed a large flock of Ptarmigans, and passing round the head of Glen Lui Beg, crossed a stony place to a hollow between two hills, expecting to find an easy descent into the valley of the Derry. But by this time it was so dark that we could not have guided ourselves with safety among the rocks and stones of the very steep declivity down which we gazed. Turning away from it, therefore, we ascended a hill [presumably Creagan a' Choire Etchachan] entirely covered with large stones, passed on westward, and found a gradual slope leading to the valley. All this long slope, however, was covered either with stones or long heath, interspersed with splashy spots and intersected by streams. ... Heather is detestable in darkness; you never know where to place your foot, but push on at random; and often when you suppose your next step is to be nearly on the level of the last, you come down into a hole two feet deep, or usually less, with a jerk that shakes your whole system, or you knock against a bush, or projecting piece of turf, and in the next instant are prostrate. ... It would be tedious to describe, and more so to read, an account of our most fatiguing descent into the Derry. It seemed as if it would never terminate; but down we did get at last; and then we plunged into the stream, and on the other side searched for a path, but found none. We did not reach Castleton [of Braemar] till three o'clock in the morning."

Another excursion, on 16 August 1850, is described as follows:

"On the 16th August, 1850, we crossed the Dee in the ferry-boat, and proceeding through the woods, entered Glen Candlic ["Glen" uncertain, but presumably nowadays Glen Slugain; Inverchandlick Cottage stands on the north bank of the Dee, opposite the confluence of Clunie Water], where we found a made path in excellent order, which we followed to opposite the nearer corry of Benabuid. ... The dying and dead Birches observed in 1819, attracted our attention to-day. The same plants were met with, and the berries of the *Vaccinium* [shrubs such as the blaeberry] were equally irresistible. ... A game-keeper's house has been built at the head of the glen. We had not proceeded far beyond it when we were overtaken by a man who informed us that at this season, visitors are prohibited from proceeding further. But after some civil talk between him and Mr. Backhouse, who gave our names to present, with our respects, to the Duke, he made no further objection, and only requested us to keep to the left, which we did. Visits like ours are certainly an annoyance to the deerstalker, who, I should think, is quite justified in preventing them, especially in the commencement of the shooting season. But, not knowing the law of the case, and assuming that a naturalist has a right to go where he chooses, unless formally prohibited, I never hesitate to visit any piece of unenclosed land, although I should always avoid disturbing the game on it.

Crossing the heath, where many fine Lichens, especially *Cetraria Islandica* (Iceland moss), *C. nivalis* [snow lichen], and numerous forms of *Scyphophorus* [snout and bark beetles] occurred, we passed at a distance from Coire-nan-clach, specimens of which, however, we met with in the form of some enormous blocks which had far outrolled their neighbours. Mr. Backhouse junior, and I, entered the second corry, that of the Dhuloch, while our friends went on to search for the Saxifrage. The plants which I noted there are: [list of 34]. ... Having met our friends near the Dhuloch, we descended the valley by its eastern side, along which the hills extend a little beyond the extremity of Benabuid. Then crossing in an easterly direction some low ground, succeeded by a rounded eminence, we came in sight of the deep cleft, somewhat rocky on both sides, which separates a large hill appended to Ben-Ann, from a lower hill [i.e. Cam Liath, presumably, with upper Glen Gairn in between] stretching about three miles south-eastward. The rocky faces

of the cleft are named the Great, or Mickle, and Little Craigandal. The bare moor which we traversed was in some places very productive of Lichens, of which many were collected. While resting on the eminence mentioned, we observed on the opposite hill of the Little Craigandal about two hundred Deer moving slowly along the declivity. Crossing the little valley which intervened, we ascended the hill, and, judging by appearances, directed our course towards the station of *Astragalus alpinus* [alpine milkvetch], which we accordingly found.

Among the grassy herbage intermixed with many common plants, it presented itself in great abundance, but not very conspicuously, although many individuals were still in flower. ... One cannot guess the reason of their preferring this spot, the hill being of little elevation, and not obviously different from those near it, which are of quartzose mica-slate. The plants observed here were: [list of 27 plants]. We had another view of the Deer, which had descended the hollow and turned into the pass. Proceeding southward by the ridge of the hill, we saw an Eagle soaring over the side of Ben-Aun, and heard a Raven croaking in the same direction." (pp. 127-130).

The final main chapter (XXXV) in *Natural History* describes MacGillivray's return to Aberdeen, starting from Kincardine O'Neill after lunch. He went by Potarch Bridge and the Bridge of Feugh (reached at six o'clock) and the South Deeside Road to Maryculter, where he at last obtained some tea and bread. He then crossed the Dee, passing "the shapeless mass of Holborn Church and the somewhat fantastic building of the Free Church College" to go down Union Street "near twelve", to his home in King Street.

Some other quotations from *Natural History*:

"But well may we be assured that the spirit who wanders unhappy amid the bowers of paradise is under a curse, and that he who feels no inspiration of love and peace on the mountain-summit, where everything around, beneath, and above, whispers of the Eternal, is as yet unfit for heaven" (p.22).

"Who could paint that distant mountain, rising in stern majesty over the peaks of yon range of green hills, its scarred front glaring dim in the sunshine that casts its fissures into deep shade! A magnificent mass, truly, is Lochnagar, as many a one has felt and said before now. It may

not be the king of the Scottish mountains, but at this moment, at least, when it presents its massive form before me, I am almost willing to accord it that pre-eminence.” (p.32).

“Some of the blocks which have fallen from the precipices [of “Ben-na-muic-dhui” above “Loch Aun”] are of enormous size. One of them, probably ten yards in diameter, has settled so as to leave a large cavity beneath, which shepherds have rudely walled up, so as to convert it into a cave capable of containing about twenty persons.” (p.110).

“There is, in truth, little of the picturesque, and nothing of the magnificent, in Glen-Gairn” (p.203).

“Of the fissures or rents by which the great precipice [of “Lochan-a-ghar”] is scarred, the largest of all, commencing not far from the eastern peak or summit, may be descended to the base of the rocks, and into the hollow of the corry. ... The crags in this place ascend almost perpendicularly to appearance, so that a person looking on them from below could hardly believe them to be accessible to human feet; and, certainly, to the uninitiated it would seem little less than madness to attempt such rifts and crags as those among which many of the best alpine plants are wont to occur. Two sedate elderly gentlemen, little apt to be sent astray by impulses of enthusiasm, clinging with their hands to the face of a precipice five hundred feet high, in a place two hundred feet from the base, — and this risk incurred for the mere chance of finding a few rare plants that few people care much about — one can hardly designate it by any other name than Phytomania”. (pp.61-63).