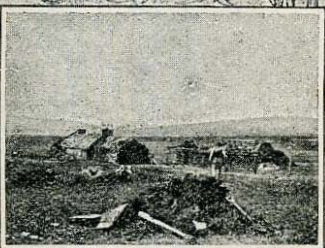
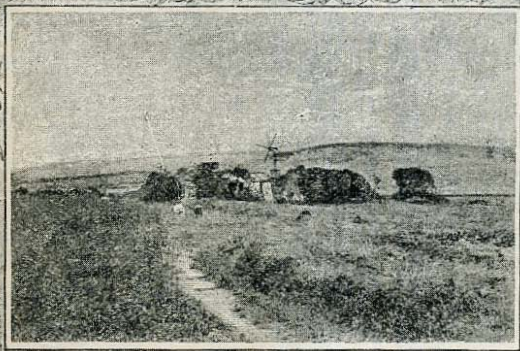
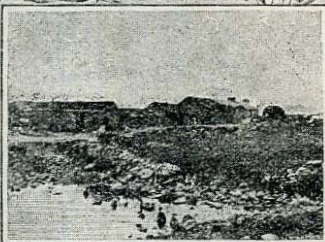
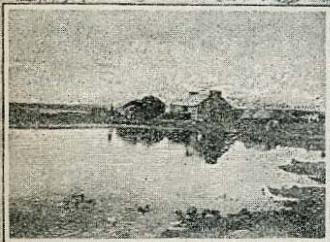


A ROAD IN ORCADY.



Northern lands—and most lands are southern to us—the road runs between fragrant hedgerows or under shady trees; but in Orcady trees and hedges are practically unknown. Yet the road lacks not its charm, for this is a world of compensations. If we never breathe the fragrance of the may or hear the whisper of the wind-stirred branches, we have, on the other hand, nothing to shut out from our eyes the wide expanse of land and sea or to hide the blue sky over us, no fallen timber after a gale to block our way and make of our progress an involuntary obstacle race, and no thorns to puncture our cycle tyres. The lover of the highway may miss here much of the bird-life that enlivens the roads of the south; but our road has a life and traffic of its own quite apart from the trickling stream of men and horses which flows fitfully along its white channel. Flowers and flies, birds and beasts, the road has something for each and all of them. Even by day they use it, but from dusk to dawn they claim it as their very own.

I do not remember that Stevenson, who so loved the road, has written anywhere of its little life—of the birds and beasts, the shy living things, that haunt



By the Roadside—"Peerie Hooses."

1. Holm. 2. Harray. 3. Birsay. 4. Tankerness. 5. Orphir.

it. In the treeless isles of Orcady, at least, the furred and feathered creatures seem to think that man makes the road for their especial delectation. For all creatures of beach and bog, hill and meadow, it has its charms; and hence it is ever beat upon by soft, soundless feet and shadowed by swiftly moving wings, and many a little comedy or tragedy is played out upon its stage. We walk upon it in spring and summer through an air fragrant with the perfume of innumerable small, sweet flowers, with the music of birds and bees about us, and ever, under and behind all song, the voice of the great sea, full of indefinable mystery as of a half-remembered dream.

The engineer who makes the road unwittingly plans it in such fashion as to be of service to the folk of moor and marsh, of shore and furrow. In Orcady every road, sooner or later, leads to the sea. In former days the sea itself was the great highway, and therefore close to its shores are found the old kirks and kirkyards. For by sea men came to worship God, and by sea they were carried to their long home. The kirks and kirkyards being beside the sea, the road comes thither to them. It comes down also to the piers, the slips, and jetties, which play so important a part in the lives of the islanders. Thus the road passes within a few yards of the haunts of all the divers, swimmers, and waders that frequent our shores.

Also in making a road the aim of the man who plans it is to avoid, so far as possible, all ascents and descents. In carrying out this aim he raises the road on embankments where it passes through low and marshy grounds, and makes cuttings through the higher lands. Where it runs through such a cutting

the roadside ditches catch and keep a little store of water in a dry season, and thither plover, snipe, redshanks, and dotterel bring their velvet-clad birdlings to drink. If the season be wet, the road raises above the marsh a comparatively dry platform, on which the birds may rest when not feeding, and the roadside dykes offer a shelter from wind and sun.

But our road draws feet and wings to it in many other ways. It passes now through cultivated fields, with dry stone dykes fencing it on either side; now it runs unfenced through the open moorland, and again along the very margin of the sea. Here it is bordered by marshes and there by a long reach of black peat-bog, and everywhere it woos with varied wiles the living things of earth and air. Before the dykes have seen many seasons they begin to deck themselves with velvet mosses, and to the miniature forests of moss come insects of the lesser sorts, flying and creeping things, red and brown and blue. In pursuit of these small deer come the spiders, which lurk in crevices of the walls and spread their cunning snares across the mouths of culverts where farm roads branch off from the highway. Long-legged water-skaters dart to and fro among the floating weeds on the surface of the stagnant ditches; and over these ditches the midges weave their fantastic dances on summer evenings. The litter of passing traffic brings hurrying, busy, burnished beetles, which find harbourage in the loosely piled banks of ditch scrapings that form the boundary between highway and moorland. Where the road, with its generous grassy margin, runs like a white ribbon with green borders through the brown moors, wild flowers that are choked

or hidden in the heather spread themselves to the sunshine—primroses and daisies, clover red and white, milkwort and tormentil, hawkweed and violets, thyme and crowfoot: their very names read like a poem. The number of small wild flowers that grow in our roadside ditches and within reach of the road is amazing when one begins to reckon them. Here the steep grassy bank is gorgeous with rose-campion and with the purple and gold of the vetches, and all the air is sweet with the perfume of wild mustard, which with the pale yellow of its blossoms almost hides the green in that field of springing barley. This wet meadow, on either hand all aglow with the pink blossoms of the ragged robin, a little earlier in the year had its wide and shallow ditches glorified by the broad green leaves and exquisite feathery blooms of the bog-bean, while its drier grounds were starred with the pale cups of grass of Parnassus. In spring the vernal squills shone on yonder hillocks with a blue glory as of the sea in summer.

On this long flat stretch of peat-bog these are not untimely snowdrifts but nodding patches of cotton-grass. In autumn, when a strong wind blows from that quarter, all the road will be strewn with the silvery, silken down that makes so brave a show among the purple heather of the bog. Later still in the year the same bog will glow ruddy as with a perpetual sunset, when the long, coarse grass reddens. Passing this way on some gray afternoon the wayfarer will find it hard to believe that the "charmed sunset" has not suddenly shone out through the clouds "low adown in the red west." And the peat-moss on which the road is built has other glories—

green moss and moss as red as blood, fairy cups of silver lichen with scarlet rims, and long reaches of bog-asphodel, shining like cloth-of-gold and sweetening the winds with their faint, delicate perfume. Here, where our road runs on a firmer foundation, grow the wild willows, all low-growing and all adding a beauty to the year in their catkins. When the daisies have hardly ventured to thrust their heads into a cold world the catkins gleam in silky silver, changing as the days lengthen to yellow gold. Later on some of them are covered with an exquisite white down which floats their seeds about the land. The little burns which our road bridges ripple and chatter through miniature forests of ferns and meadow-sweet, the foxglove shakes its bells above the splendour of the gorse, and the yellow iris hides the young wild-duck that are making their way by ditch and brooklet to the sea. These are but a few of the flowers with which the road garlands and bedecks herself to welcome the little peoples who love her.

To the flowers come all day long in summer the humble-bees. These little reddish-yellow fellows, hot and angry-looking, have their byke or nest in some mossy bank or old turf dyke, to which they carry wax and honey for the fashioning of a round, irregular, dirty-looking comb. The chances are that they will be despoiled of their treasure by some errant herd-boy before July is half over. Their great cousins in black velvet striped with gold prefer to live solitary in some deserted mouse-hole; but they cannot, for all their swagger and fierce looks, save their honey from Boy the Devourer. Though there are no wasps in Orcady, the roadside blossoms have visitors other

than the bees. Here come the white and brown butterflies, and those dainty little blue creatures whose wings are painted and eyed like a peacock's tail. And at night moths, white, yellow, and gray, flit like ghosts above the sleeping flowers, or dance mysteriously in the dusk on silent wings.

Where the insects come, there follow the insect-eaters. On a June evening there are parts of the road where one may see kittiwakes and black-headed gulls hawking for moths. Wheatears and starlings, larks and pipits, and, more rarely, thrushes, blackbirds, and wrens, with an occasional stonechat, all come to prey on the insect life of the road. Swallows there are none in Orcady, but the ubiquitous sparrow is there. To his contented mind the road offers a continual feast. When the birds set up housekeeping in spring, many of them choose their nesting-places in the near neighbourhood of the road. It seems almost as if they argued that here, under the very eye of man, they run less risk of discovery than further afield, where he may expect to find their treasures. From crannies of the loosely-built walls that bound the road you may hear the hungry broods of starlings, sparrows, and wheatears chirping on every side as you pass in May. I have seen a nestful of young larks gape up with their foolish yellow throats from a tuft of grass on the very edge of a roadside ditch, and have found a grouse's nest in the heather not fifty yards from the most man-frequented part of the road. Yellow-hammers, too, and other buntings often nest in the long grass by the ditch-side. Here, in a hedge of whin or gorse which crosses the road at right angles, are the nests of the thrush, the black-

bird, and the wren. If you drive along our road in spring you shall see the male pewit, in all the glory of his wedding garments, scraping, a few yards from the roadside, the shallow, circular hollow in which his young are to be hatched; and a little later you shall see his patient spouse look up at you fearlessly from her eggs, or even, if your passing be at noonday, you may watch her slip off the nest as her mate comes up behind to relieve her in her domestic duties. For these birds have learned that man on wheels is not to be feared, though man on foot is one of their most dreaded enemies.

In Orcady there are not many four-footed wild things, but those that dwell among us are drawn to the road as surely as the birds are. In the gloaming rabbits come down to the roadside clover where the bees have gathered honey all day. Great brown hares, too, come loping leisurely along the road—moving shadows that melt into the dusk at the least alarm. Hares always like to make their forms near a road of some sort, for it affords them a swift and ready means of flight when they are pursued. They must be hard pressed indeed before they will dive like rabbits into roadside drains or culverts, but these refuges are not to be despised when greyhound or lurcher is close upon their heels. Mice, voles, and rats find shelter in the banks of road-scrapings or in the walls and drain-mouths; and the sea-otter does not despise the road when he makes a nocturnal expedition inland. It is not long since a man who was early afoot on a summer morning met a pair of otters almost on the street of our sleeping island capital. Seals, of course, cannot use the road, but where it runs by the sea-marge their shining heads

rise up from the water to watch the passers-by, and he who is abroad before dawn may find them on the beaches within a few yards of the roadway.

The deer, roe, foxes, badgers, stoats, weasels, wild-cats, and moles of Orcady are even as the snakes of Iceland. Tame cats run wild, however, we do not lack, and they take their tithe from the road as surely as do the hawks and falcons. Neither snakes, lizards, nor frogs are found in the isles, but on a damp autumn evening the road is dotted with toads of all sizes, which sit gazing into infinity or hop clumsily from before the passing wheel.

In pursuit of beetles, mice, and small birds, hawks and owls come to the road. The kestrel of all hawks loves it the most. He sits upon the humming telegraph wires or hangs poised, like Mahomet's coffin, in mid-air, ever watchful and ready to swoop down upon his prey. The same wires which give him a resting-place often furnish him with food, ready killed or disabled. When man first set up his posts along the road and threaded them with an endless wire, sad havoc was wrought among the birds. Plover—green and golden—snipe, redshanks, and grouse dashing across the road in the dusk, struck the fatal wires and fell dead or maimed by the wayside. I have seen a blackbird fly shrieking from a prowling cat, and strike the wire with such force that his head, cut clean off, dropped at my very feet. The older birds appear to have learned a lesson from the misfortunes of their fellows, but every autumn young birds, new to their wings, pay their tribute of victims to the wires. More especially is this the case with the plovers, and though the kestrel rarely touches so big a bird when it is whole and sound, he feasts upon their wounded.

The hen-harrier skims to and fro along the roadside ditches, but he is a wary and cautious fowl, and is never within gunshot of the road when a man comes down that way. The merlin, that beautiful miniature falcon, glides swift and low across the moors and meadows, flashes suddenly over the roadside dyke, and before the small birds have time to realize that their enemy is upon them, he is gone again—only a little puff of feathers floating slowly down the air showing where he struck his prey. The peregrine wheels high overhead, but is too proud and shy a bird to hunt upon man's roads. Nor has the road any charm for the raven, who goes croaking hoarsely over it on his way from shore to hill. The little short-eared owls hide all day among the heather near our road, and come flapping up in the gloaming on noiseless wings to take their share of its good things. In the treeless islands the kestrel is not the only bird that sits upon the wires. There the starling sings his weird love song, mingling with his own harsh notes the calls of every other bird that the islands know; and the buntings chant their lugubrious and monotonous ditties there.

The telegraph wires are not the only mysterious works of man which have disturbed and interfered with the feathered life so near to and yet so far apart from his. What a mystery must he be to those fellow-creatures who watch him, with his continual scratching and patching of the breast of kindly Mother Earth! Not wholly does he yield the road to them between sunset and sunrise; but when he goes abroad in the dark it is often in the guise of a rumbling dragon with great eyes of flame. Once, to the writer's

knowledge, a gannet swooped down in valiant ignorance on such a horrid creature of the night. He flashed suddenly, white out of the darkness, into the circle of light of a doctor's gig lamps. That bold bird his fellows saw no more; and one may fancy that with his disappearance a new terror was added to the fiery-eyed creatures that roam the roads by night. He died, though not without a fierce fight for his life; and his skin, cunningly filled out with wire and straw, stands under a glass case in his slayer's home even unto this day.

It is in spring and summer that the road sets forth its choicest lures for its lovers, yet even in "winter and rough weather" it has its beauties for the seeing eye. The puddles and cart-ruts shine like dull silver when the clouds are heavy and gray overhead. When the rain cloud blows over and the sky clears, these same shallow pools and channels gleam with a cold, clear blue, more exquisite than that of the heavens they reflect; and at night the stars besprinkle them with diamonds. Again,—

"Autumnal frosts enchant the pool,
And make the cart-ruts beautiful."

"When daisies go"—and of all roadside blossoms they linger latest and reappear earliest (I have seen them lifting their modest crimson-tipped heads in December and opening their yellow eyes before the coltsfoot stars begin to shine)—but even when they are gone the gray stone dykes have still a glory of green moss, of gray and golden lichens.

When all the land is soaked and sodden with heavy rains, the road, where it climbs that low brown

hill, will suddenly shine out across the intervening miles like a sword flung down among the heather.

When the winter rains have given place to the first snowfall of the year, go out early in the morning, before hoofs and wheels have blotted out the traces of the night, and you shall learn, as nothing else save long and close observation can teach you, how great is the nocturnal traffic of birds and beasts upon the road. Like fine lacework you shall find their foot-prints, to and fro, round and across, up the middle and down again. Hares and rabbits, rats and mice, gulls and plovers, thrushes and larks, water-hens and water-rails—these and many more have been busy here while you slept. And even now bright eyes are watching you, themselves unseen—those unsuspected eyes which are ever upon us as we follow the road on our daily round of duty or pleasure. Do they look on us with fear or wonder, with contempt or admiration, or with a mingling of all these feelings? That we can never know while the great barrier of silence stands between us and them. We blunder across their lives, doing them good and evil indiscriminately, but we understand them no more than they can understand us.

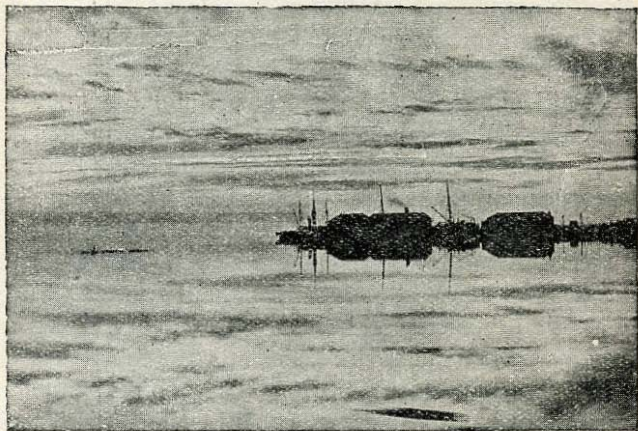
Now in winter, new birds come to our road. Great flocks of snow-buntings, circling and wheeling with marvellous precision, at one moment almost invisible—a dim, brown, moving mist—and the next flashing a thousand points of silver to the level rays of the wintry sun. Scores of greenfinches, which we never see in summer, rise from the road edges to circle a little way and settle again. The “spink spink” of the chaffinch, also unknown to us in summer, may now be heard; fieldfares spring chuckling through the air

far overhead, and red-winged thrushes hop among the stubbles. Down this shallow pass between the low hills come in the gloaming the lines of the wild swans, flying from the upland lochs to the sea. Their trumpet call rings far through the frosty air, and as we hear them there stir within us vague thoughts and dreams of the white north whence they came. As if answering the thought, the wet road shines with a new, faint, unearthly light, as flickering up the northern sky come the pale shifting streamers of the aurora borealis.

Of the human life that pulses intermittently along our road there is not space now to write. Boy and girl, youth and maiden, man and woman, day by day, year in, year out, they follow the winding line, till for each in turn the day comes when it leads them to the kirkyard or to the sea, and the roads of Orcady know them no more.

DUNCAN J. ROBERTSON.

(*"Longman's Magazine."* By permission.)



Kirkwall Pier—a midnight photograph.