

SHADOWS OF MENTEITH

CHAPTER I

DESCRIPTIVE

With a general idea of the configuration of the district of Menteith; also a digression as to whether religious belief may not modify the human countenance; and other matters connected with other things.

MENTEITH has always seemed to me a shadowy district. On the one side the shadows of the Grampians stretch towards the Campsies; the shadows of the Campsies at times stretch to the Grampians. On a summer evening often only a little belt of tawny heather or bright green moss is left in the sunlight; all the intervening space is bathed in shadow. The Flanders Moss has been a sea, tradition says, and those sworn enemies, the science of the study and the science of outdoor observation, seem to corroborate one another in confirming the tradition. The sea, it is said, once washed round the rocks at the foot of Stirling

Castle, and extended to the "Clach nan Lunn" (the Stone of the Wave), on the Easter Hill of Gartmore; so, at least, the iron ring in the aforementioned stone was accounted for. The Clach nan Lunn is gone, broken up by an otherwise unenterprising farmer. The sea is gone, and in its place the low flat moss remains; but still the shadow of the sea seems to hang over it, and the sea-gulls hover screaming about it, as if the moss might change to waves once more. Reminiscences of a mysterious and stormy past still cling to the district. Nearly every hill and strath has had its battles between the Grahams and the McGregors. Highlander and Lowlander fought in the lonely glens or on the stony hills, or drank together in the aqua-vitæ houses in the times of their precarious peace.

Monk the Restorer led his more or less merry men through the Pass of Aberfoyle. He addressed a letter to the Earl of Airth desiring him to order the cutting down of the woods of Miltown and Glessart in Aberfoyle, "whiche are grete shelters to the rebelles and mossers."* Said letter dated from Cardross House.

In the same Pass of Aberfoyle the Earl of Glencairn and Graham of Duchray defeated a party of my Lord Protector's soldiers. Graham of Duchray, no doubt, fought all the better because

* Paper in Gartmore Charter-chest.

the Cromwellians had burnt his house the night before the action, in order to show him that it was unwise to attach too much importance to mere houses built with hands.

Robert the Bruce visited the Priory of Inchcolme in 1310, in one of the brief intervals of rest in the battle of his life, though he had visited the island twice before, once as an adventurer, and once on his way from Rathlin Island to the North. In this third visit he granted a charter to the monks of Aberbrothock, dated "apud Insulam Sancti Colmoci." Montrose must have known the district from end to end, and probably acquired his knowledge of the Highlanders in his youth, as boys on the frontiers of America learn the habits of the Indians.

Knox, as far as history informs us, never deaved the inhabitants of the stewartry with any of his clavers, though Claverhouse now and then deaved them to some extent by reason of his knocks.

The latter worthy corresponded much with the Earl of Menteith, and on one occasion compliments him thus: "I rejoice to hear you have now taken my trade of my hande, that you are becom a terror to the godly."* This was on the occasion of the Earl having exerted himself against the Covenanters.

* Letter from Claverhouse quoted in "Red Book of Menteith."

He also tells him that he knows "that feue have toyld so muche for honour as I have don, though it has been my misfortune to atteene but a small shear." * Of glory certainly he did "atteene his shear," but honour, if it means money—and I think that is the way we estimate the commodity at the present time—like most of the name of Graham, he never succeeded in "atteening" much.

Rob Roy himself was a sort of unofficial local Chancellor of the Exchequer, and did his work so thoroughly that not a single case exists of conscience money ever having been paid into the treasury at Craig Royston.

His blessed Majesty Charles, first of the name, was pleased to stop at Milling Farm, on the Lake of Menteith, and take his "poor dejeuner"; also to borrow certain moneys from the Earl of Menteith—said moneys still unpaid, though his pious son, the ever-blessed Rowley, at Portend Farm (close to Milling), was pleased to "heerby promise on the word off ane prince to sie it faithfullie payed whenever we fynde occasiune." † Occasiune has not arisen as yet, but hope springs eternal in the human breast.

* Letter from Claverhouse quoted in "Red Book of Menteith."

† Warrant by Charles II. in favour of William Earl of Airth.

On the island of the wood-locked lake Augustine monks dwelt for centuries. Their memories still cling to the ruined church and monastery. One whole year of the troubled life of Mary Queen of Scots was passed as a child on the same islet. She, too, has left memories which hang about her little garden, girt with box-trees, as the scent of rose-leaves kept in a china bowl still lingers though the leaves have mouldered into dust.

In the mountain fastnesses near Aberfoyle many of those who fled from Culloden found refuge, thus bringing the Middle Ages, so to speak, almost to yesterday.

So it is, to me at least, that the district seems a "shadowy one," for memories are the shadows of men's lives.

Dr. Johnson could not be got to believe that the most disturbed districts of the Highlands were those which bordered on the Lowlands. Still, it is very easy for any one who stands on the Loch Katrine road from Aberfoyle, and looks back over the district of Menteith, to see why this was the case. The Grampians, running down at this point into a rich and fertile district, formed a secure retreat for the Highlanders, both to make their sallies from and to return to, with their booty.

The interior of a savage country is always quieter than its frontier, for in the interior the

peculiar social constitution of the people is always in more perfect order, and few countries ever live in a state of constant warfare. The Highlands, though, were not a savage country, but, on the contrary, an old civilised country, of a peculiar kind of civilisation.

Much the same state of things must have existed there two centuries ago as exist to-day in Tripoli and Morocco and in Afghanistan—a regular polity, of an antiquated sort, and not a society like that of some of the frontiers of America, which may be compared to a sort of kaleidoscope of human atoms looked at through the hind sights of a Winchester rifle. Perhaps no district of the Highland frontier was so typically a borderland as the district of Menteith; perhaps at no one point in all Scotland is the dividing line between Celt and Saxon more distinct in the nomenclature, language, and configuration of the two countries. Till a short time ago—for sixty or seventy years is a short time in the history of a country—the habits of the people were as distinct as they are to-day in Spain and Portugal on their respective sides of the Minho. At Tuy, in Galicia, though a portentous international iron bridge spans the river, the separation between those peoples is as complete as in the days when a clumsy boat, rowed by five Portuguese women, took the traveller over the stream, as when the writer first crossed on his way from Santiago

de Compostela to Oporto, or as in the Middle Ages. The Spaniards still talk of the villainy of those Portuguese, and whilst cheating the stranger with the utmost imperturbability themselves, warn him, philanthropically, to beware of the dishonesty of the Portuguese in Valença. A similar sharp demarcation is to be observed at Salvatierra and Monzon, which look at one another across the same river with as charitable feelings as those with which the Free Church minister gazes at the manse of the Establishment in a modern Scottish village.

If this is the case amongst people who are identical in origin with the Galicians and the Portuguese, how much more must it have been between the Saxon Lowlander and the Highlander in the days when it was a practical saying that "the Forth bridles the wild Highlandman." Even to-day, though convention has lent a thin varnish of hypocrisy to manners, the old feeling of antagonism is not dead, and occasionally is very noticeable at ploughing matches, Highland games, and other public festivities. In Menteith, which the American traveller whirls through in the railway without time to realize that he is passing into as different a country in a few minutes as it takes hours to do in going from one State to another of the American Union, the long antagonism of race has left its results in many ways. On the

lowland side of the Forth the countryman is a "bodach," a heavy and excellent being, but uninteresting unless seen through the spectacles of a patriotic novelist. You cannot find a decent shepherd amongst them; they know too much ever to remember their sheep.

Education is a splendid thing for engineers, county councillors, and waiters; it makes them fit to bear their crosses and to impose others on the general public, but it spoils a shepherd. A shepherd is born, rarely made, and the native Highlander has generally a genius for the business.

In the flat district of Menteith the countryman is too anxious to raise and improve himself. Who ever heard either of a shepherd or a poet anxious to do either the one or the other? Throughout Menteith, though poets are as scarce as in most other parts of the world, you can find many valuable shepherds. This, no doubt, arises from the proximity of the Highlands and the mixture of blood. The good (Highland) shepherd does not give his life for his sheep, or for anything else, with the possible exception of whisky; but he fulfils at least as useful a function in the State as the minor poet, and in this respect, therefore, Menteith is at least on an equality with Grub Street. The people (that is, those of the old stock) seem to me to have preserved more of

the characteristics of a fighting race than those of almost any other district of Scotland.

Not that they are quarrelsome more than good citizens should be, but a rooted dislike to any continuous occupation is very noticeable amongst them. This is said to be the case with all those races descended from ancestors who have been constantly engaged in war.

The climate of the western portion of Menteith is mild and humid; the snow rarely lies long in winter, nor does the sun shine overmuch in summer; and much of the country is not far above the sea-level. Whether on account of the constant rain, or from the virulence of the religious beliefs of the natives, it is uncertain, but travellers have remarked that in few parts of Scotland are the faces of the people so much lined and scarred. "A wet cloak ill laid up," or "the new map together with the augmentation of the Indies," are apt descriptions of many of their countenances. Ethnologists have not remarked if the features of the inhabitants of Strathglass in Inverness-shire, or those districts of Aberdeenshire which have remained Catholic, are as repellent as those of the inhabitants of the more essentially Protestant cantons of Scotland; and the testimony of theologians on such a matter would be doubtful. If Buckle is correct in his theory that the minds and even the bodies of men are moulded by the aspect of the

country in which they live, the inhabitants of Menteith might well be rough, for most of the land they live in is a mass of hillocks and hummocks, broken up by little pools intersected with rushing streams, hirsute with heather, the fields stony as those of Palestine, the whole country bounded by mountains to the north and huge flat mosses to the south.

As the lantern of Maracaibo dominates the sea of the same name, Ben Lomond dominates the land—a sort of Scottish Vesuvius, never wholly without a cloud-cap. You cannot move a step that it does not tower over you. In winter, a vast white sugar-loaf; in summer, a prismatic cone of yellow and amethyst and opaline lights; in spring, a grey, gloomy, stony pile of rocks; in autumn, a weather indicator: for when the mist curls down its sides, and hangs in heavy wreaths from its double summit, “it has to rain”; as the Spaniards say of Jabalcuz, in the Vega of Granada, “ha de llover aunque Dios no quiera.” In fact, the characteristic and chief feature of the district—a very nose upon its face. Ben Ledi and Ben Venue the minor lights or heights; Ben Voil in the distance, peeping over the shoulder of Ben Lawers; Ben More, Craig Vadh, the Gualan (the Shoulder in Gaelic); the Ochils and the Campsies, with the rock of Stirling, and sometimes a faint blue line of the hills in Fife. In the far Highlands rise Ben

Nevis, Ben Voilich, Schehallion, and many another, which have done Sir Walter Scott good yeoman service. A kind of sea of moss and heath, a bristly country (Trossachs is said to mean the bristled land), shut in by hills on every side. Sometimes, indeed, so broken is the ground that one wonders if the "riders of Menteith" that history talks of were mortal riders, or a sort of Walkuren sacred to the Valhalla of the district. Menteith, like other regions of Scotland and of England, is losing fast all the remaining characteristics of the past. The old-fashioned Scotch is going rapidly, giving place to a hideous jargon between the East End of Glasgow and that of London. No doubt in times to come pure English will be spoken from St. Michael's Mount to John o' Groat's; but in the meantime, sometimes, one longs for decent Cornish or Scottish, if people will be talking. Hardly an old tradition really lives (apart from books) in the memories of the people. Scarcely a dozen real old types, even faintly approaching to those which Scott and Galt delighted in, remain, and they as few and far between as trees in hedges. Surely but steadily the thing called civilisation (see Edward Carpenter for its "Cause and Cure") has covered up most of the remaining high lights of the old world with its dark grey pall. Certain it is at present the effect is not a pleasant still less a pretty

one. A world of people each so like his brother that his wife can only differentiate him by the buttons on his ulster is not a cheering sight, but in the future, it may be, we shall get the type again, and see less of the man run like a candle out of a mould.

Gone are the Augustinian monks who built the stately island church. Out of the ruined chancel grows a plane-tree, which is almost ripe. In the branches rooks have built their nests, and make as cheerful matins as perhaps the monks themselves. The giant chestnuts, grown, as tradition says, from chestnuts brought from Rome, are all stag-headed. Ospreys used to build in them in the memory of those still living. Gone are the riders of Menteith (if they ever existed); the ruggers and the reivers are at one with those they harried. The Grahams and McGregors, the spearmen and the jackmen, the hunters and the hawkers, the livers by their spurs, the luckless Earls of Menteith and their retainers, are buried and forgotten, and the tourist cracks his biscuit and his jest over their tombs.

Gaelic is gone, or only just remembered by the elder generation, yet it gave the names to all the burns and glens and lochs; names curious and descriptive, like the names the Indians give to places in America. It may be, when all are numbered, Ben Number One, Loch Number Two, and so on, that even Gaelic will become a thing to be re-

gretted. What is most to be deplored is that the ancient Scottish courtesy of manner has gone too, and given place to the "transition manners" which make every man inferior to his neighbour. The old-time Scottish kindness is said to linger still, but where deponent sayeth not. Where stood the Highland cottage thatched with heather and roof kept on with birchen poles and stones, and gardened with house-leek and corydalis, now stand the hideous slate-roofed cottages, properly sanitized, and hideous enough to spean a bairn. From the beginning of the world children have drawn the design of the latter dwelling upon their slate. Over the Fingalian path, where once the redshank trotted on his Highland garron, the bicyclist, the incarnation of the age, looks to a sign-post and sees, "This hill is dangerous."

The Grahams and the McGregors have, it is to be hoped, dropped their long enmity in the world or worlds where they have gone to. Their names, once so numerous in the stewartry of Menteith, seem almost to have disappeared out of the land. The days are changed from the times when an Earl of Menteith entered into a league against "all but the kinge and those of the name of Grahame." Perhaps it is as well they are gone, for they were always (like Jeshurun) mighty prone to kick, though commonly not waxing very fat. It is good that all should change, for novelty is

grateful to mankind ; besides, it paves the way to the happy time when all shall sit, apparelled in one livery, at little tables, drinking some kind of not too diuretic " table water " approved by the County Council, and reading expurgated Bibles.