

ACCOUNT
OF
THE GREAT FLOODS
IN
THE PROVINCE OF MORAY
IN AUGUST, 1829.

PRELIMINARY CHAPTER.

THE heat in the province of Moray, during the months of May, June, and July, 1829, was unusually great; and, in the earlier part of that period, the drought was so excessive as to kill many of the recently planted shrubs and trees. As the season advanced, the fluctuations of the barometer became very remarkable. But the usual alternations of weather did not always follow these oscillations: it often happened that the results were precisely the reverse of its prognostications, and observers of the instrument began to lose all confidence in it. That these apparent derangements arose from certain electrical changes in the atmosphere, there can be little doubt. The aurora borealis appeared with uncommon brilliancy about the beginning of July, and was frequently seen afterwards, being generally accompanied by windy and unsteady weather, the continued drought having been already interrupted during the previous month by sudden falls of rain, partaking of the character of waterspouts.

A very remarkable instance of one of these occurred on Sunday the 12th of July, at Kean-loch-luichart, a little Highland hamlet, at the head of the lake of that name, in the parish of Contin, in Ross-shire. The innkeeper of Auchanault, having taken shelter under an arch, suddenly beheld a moving mountain of soil, stones, and trees, coming slowly but steadily down the deep, worn course of the little stream. He fled in terror.

It reached the bridge, where its progress was for a moment arrested; when, bursting the feeble barrier that opposed it, on it rushed in dreadful devastation over the plain that bordered the lake below. It was church time. The children left at home were amusing themselves out of doors, and were miraculously preserved by escaping to a hillock ere the ruin reached the spot. An insignificant rivulet, running to the west of the village, was so suddenly swollen, that the people coming from church found great difficulty in passing it. But, as they were on their way towards the larger stream, 300 yards to the eastward, they were alarmed by the fall of the bridge at some distance above the village. In an instant they found themselves between two impassable torrents, and they had barely time to save their lives by crowding to an elevated spot, where they remained till the waters subsided. The whole fury of the flood rushed directly against their devoted houses, and these, and everything they contained, were at once annihilated, as well as their crops, together with the very soil they grew on; and, after the debacle had passed away, the course of the burn ran through the ruined hearths of this so recently happy a community. This waterspout did not extend beyond two miles on each side of the village, a circumstance that led these simple people to consider their calamity as a visitation of Providence for their landlord's vote in Parliament in favour of Catholic emancipation.

The deluge of rain that produced the flood of the 3d and 4th of August, fell chiefly on the Monadh-leadh mountains, rising between the south-eastern part of Loch Ness, and Kin-gussie in Badenoch, and on that part of the Grampian range forming the somewhat independent group of the Cairngorums. The westerly winds, which prevailed for some time previously, seem to have produced a gradual accumulation of vapour, somewhere north of our island; and the column being suddenly impelled by a strong north-easterly blast, it was driven towards the south-west, its right flank almost sweeping the Caithness and Sutherland coasts, until rushing up and across the Moray Firth, it was attracted by the lofty mountains I have mentioned, and discharged in torrents perfectly unexampled. The facts which have come to my knowledge amply bear out this hypothesis.

At Kirkwall, in Orkney, there was a violent storm of wind and rain on Monday the 3d of August. A similar deluge was experienced at Wick, and much damage was done in the parishes of Watten, Halkirk, and Latham. A few miles above the bridge of Wick, a boy was whirled off by the torrent, on a rick of hay,

and carried down with great velocity, and was ultimately rescued with much difficulty. In Sutherland and Ross-shire, both lying to the westward of the line I have described, as well as in the country to the north of Loch Ness, little or no injury was sustained. But the river Foyers, deriving its source from the very mountains that first received the column of drifted vapour, was so highly flooded as to destroy Whitebridge, which it did in a very singular manner, the outside walls and parapets being left entire, while the roadway, arch, and all within, totally disappeared.

The rivers Nairn, Findhorn, and Lossie, were all more or less affected by the flood, exactly in proportion as they were more or less connected with the mountains in question. That part of the Spey which is above the line I have marked, was hardly swollen at all; whilst below Kingussie it and its tributaries were elevated to an unexampled height; and the Deveron, the Don, the Dee, and the two Esks, were each of them operated upon in a similar ratio.

Many imagined that the fall of rain was not so great as to account for so tremendous a flood; but this was a mistake, arising from the undefined form the rain assumed. For although, at certain times, it fell in heavy drops, yet it was, for the most part, broken by the blast into extremely minute particles. But these came down so thick, that the very air itself seemed to be descending in one mass of water upon the earth. Nothing could withstand it. The best finished windows were ineffectual against it, and every room exposed to the north-east was deluged. The lesser animals, the birds, and especially game of all kinds, were destroyed in great numbers by the rain alone; and the mother partridge, with her progeny and her mate, were found chilled to death amidst the drenching wet. But the question as to the quantity of rain is settled by the accurate observations of Mr. Murdoch, gardener to His Grace the Duke of Gordon, at Huntly Lodge, who informs me that $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches of rain fell between five o'clock of the morning of the 3d, and five o'clock of the morning of the 4th of August; *that is to say, that, taking the average of the years from 1821 to 1828 inclusive, about one-sixth part of our annual allowance of rain fell within these twenty-four hours*; and if such was the fall at so great a distance from the mountains, the deluge that descended on them must have been so enormous, as to lead us rather to wonder that a flood, even yet more tremendous in its magnitude and consequences, did not result from it.

That of the 27th of August, which may be called an appendix flood, was also preceded by westerly wind; but, when it

changed into the north, it still kept its hold of the west, and consequently the vapour was dispersed over the country to the north of Inverness. It affected the Nairn more than the first flood did, but the other rivers to the south were less raised by it. Its chief influence was on the rivers to the north of the Monadh-leadh group. The Blackwater flooded the whole valley of the Garve, inundated the inn to the depth of four feet, and compelled the shooting party of Messrs. Dilkes and Woomwald to fasten safety ropes for 200 yards to a hill in front, the intervening space being covered with six feet of water. The River Alness did great damage to the estate of Teaninich, and the Beaully flooded the whole of Strathglass. The burn of Moniack worked terrible ruin in the beautiful place of that name, carried away a bridge, and very much alarmed Mr. Fraser's family by paying a most unwelcome visit to the house, and even intruding itself into the chamber of a gentleman who was lying sick of the scarlet fever. The damage at Moniack was valued at above £500, and the burn was equally injurious to Mr. Fraser of Auchnagairn. The River Ness was, in some degree, affected on this occasion. Loch Micky, in Glen-Urquhart, was considerably raised; and the Mona, that runs into it, presented a grand spectacle where it throws itself over a fall of 100 feet, as it then filled the whole chasm 60 feet wide. The Enrick, which comes from the lake, damaged several cottages, injured a bleach-field and fulling-mill, destroyed a bridge, and it and the Devah, another stream of the same valley, committed great havoc among the crops. The Morriston, and the other rivers on the north side of Loch Ness, were all equally mischievous.

On the south side of Loch Ness, the River Farrigaig was never known to be so high. It inundated Mr. Fraser of Lovat's property to a great extent. It broke through the bulwarks of the mill-stream of Torness, surrounded the house, and entered it by the door and windows, and the miller and his family were heard during the night crying for help, which no one could yield them, till next morning, when they were extricated with very considerable risk. At the summer grazing of Killin, the herdsmen's huts were so instantaneously surrounded, that the inmates were compelled to flee to the best shelter they could find on the cold face of the neighbouring hill, where they remained all night. But they were happy in comparison with one family, who, being too late in attempting to get away, were compelled to sit, man, wife, and children, on two old doors, propped up under the roof, in terror and darkness, till relieved next day. But the most wonderful escape in this district was that of a poor woman, who, in attempting to cross the Calder-

burn on two narrow planks, below the house of Croachy, was carried off, bridge and all, and hurried down the stream about half a-mile. Luckily she was kept floating by the buoyancy of her garments, until she was fortunately rescued by an accidental passenger.

All the facts I have been able to collect, and they have not been few, have conspired to convince me that the flood of the 3d and 4th of August was considerably greater, and more destructive, than any flood that ever affected the same rivers, so far as recorded, or traditional information is capable of instructing us. I believe this remark will apply to all the rivers I am about to treat of; but as to the Findhorn and the Spey, the fact is unquestionably established. As the rise was less on former occasions, so the reign of terror was comparatively short, whereas the late flood was fearfully enduring. And where is there even a legend that tells of any of these rivers having ever before worked ruin so universal, or produced misery so extensive? Nor is this wonderful. Any given quantity of rain must now produce a much greater flood than it could have done before the country became so highly improved. Formerly the rain drops were either evaporated on the hill side, or were sucked up by an arid or a spongy soil, before so many of them could coalesce as to form a rill. But when we consider the number of open cuts made to dry hill pastures—the numerous bogs reclaimed by drainage—the ditches of enclosure recently constructed—and the long lines of roads formed with side drains, back drains, and cross conduits, we shall find that, of late years, the country has been covered with a perfect net-work of courses to catch and to concentrate the rain-drops as they fall, and to hurry them off in accumulated tribute to the next stream.

The very contemplation of the task I have undertaken is deeply distressing. Nor is it without its difficulties. The united line of the rivers I have to travel over cannot be less in extent than from 500 to 600 miles. Along the whole of this the march of ruin has been traced. Were I to follow it with minute description, I should swell this work to an infinitely greater bulk than is usually permitted to such subjects. I must therefore pass slightly over many circumstances that are too deeply traced on the minds of those who were connected with them, to be ever forgotten; whilst to others I must allow larger limits than they may at first sight appear to be entitled to, that the meagreness of narration may not prove fatal to the interest. Having visited the greater part of the flooded districts in person, I shall write about them very much from my own observation, aided, as it has been, by the ample oral and written information

I have obtained ; and, in some cases, I shall, perhaps, bring forward the witnesses to tell their own story, rather than unravel its threads to interweave them with my own, at the risk of marring the texture of both.

As I conceive the present to be a work of too popular a nature to be loaded with geological details, I shall confine my remarks on this subject chiefly to the changes produced by rivers in their channels and courses. For the same reason, I must reserve to myself a licence to notice such scraps of an historical, or traditional nature, as chance may have thrown in my way.

I shall begin with the river Nairn, and shall follow its course from the mountains to the sea, and so on with the Findhorn, and the other rivers in succession. When I come to any important tributary stream, I shall discuss it in the same order, before pursuing my way down that to which it unites itself.

The eye-sketch of the rivers has no pretensions to geographical accuracy, and is on a scale too small to admit of the insertion of all the places noticed, but enough will be found to render the narration more intelligible. It is the work of my friend, Mr. Johnson, late of the Royal Artillery, to whom also I am indebted for the sketch of the deluged country at the mouth of the Findhorn, perhaps the most important scene of action. The etchings with which the work is illustrated were reduced from my own sketches by Mr. Alexander, the Artist, who has kindly added some interesting subjects from drawings made by himself at the time.* The view of Dunphail is from a sketch by Mrs. Cumming Bruce.

* These are—Randolph's Bridge ; Relugas after the Flood ; Bridge of Findhorn ; Houses of Stripeside during the Flood ; View of do. from the South ; House of the three old women at the Burn of Moy ; Cottage of old Cumin's Family ; Houses of Broom of Moy after the Flood ; Funns and his Family in the middle of the Flood ; Tannachy House and the Flooded Plain of Forres.