

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL

Containing some reflections on ancient history in general; also some account of Gilchrist, the first Earl of Menteith, and of how certain English adventurers, for the bettering of their private fortunes, intermarried with certain Scottish ladies; and of other things which may be profitable to the student in local history.

HISTORY of any kind is generally written for one of two objects: either to falsify some set of political events or to show the writer's erudition. As regards the first of these objects, the present writer believes that to endeavour to falsify political events is a work of supererogation. In regard to the second, this little sketch is abundant proof of his complete innocence.

Ancient Highland families often kept a "Leabhar dearg" (*Anglice*, Red Book), in which they set down what seemed remarkable to them. The unfortunate thing is, that what seemed remarkable to them is generally uninteresting to the modern reader; that which the modern reader would have

been infinitely obliged to them for recording was to them commonplace. What they chiefly chronicled were the accounts of fights, of murders, of sudden deaths, marriages, and apparitions of saints and goblins. What we should have desired to hear of would have been the account of the fashions of their clothes and arms, the amount of half-raw meat, or quantity of bowls of porridge, they consumed in a day; if women had rights amongst them, and of what kind they were; and as to whether there were any other amusements at night except the somewhat monotonous pastime of sitting listening to the bards chanting the praises of Fingal and his heroes. Even the bards at times must have been somewhat flat, for in such a climate the difficulty of keeping the Clairseagh at English concert pitch must have been almost insuperable. It is, perhaps, as interesting to read in Barbour's "Bruce"* that "crackes of warre," *i.e.* cannons, were first seen at such a battle, as to learn the style and title of all the knights killed or taken prisoners at the battle in question.

From the earliest ages Menteith was one of the five great districts into which Scotland was divided. Its ancient history, down to the creation of the earldom in the twelfth century, was as shadowy and indefinite as that of most parts of Scotland at the time. For what, after all, is the

* Book XIV. line 168.

knowledge of the fact that a man's name was appended to a charter in the twelfth or thirteenth century of avail to the general public? Early history of almost any kind is as fragmentary reading as is a railway guide, and about as illusory and fallacious. In neither case does one ever seem to be able to get anywhere. The history of Menteith formed no exception, and even the few deeds of violence which relieve the eternal monotony of subscribing charters are not sufficiently authenticated to induce much repulsion towards their shadowy perpetrators.

One Gilchrist was the first Earl, but nothing is known of him except that he existed. In this respect he has a decided advantage over some historical personages. On Gilchrist, at any rate, the burden of proof does not lie, as on some other characters in history, for he is mentioned as one of the witnesses to a charter by Malcolm IV. to the Abbey of Scone, granted in the eleventh year of his reign, 1164, under the style and title of Gillecrist Comes de Menteith. It is not stated in what manner Earl Gilchrist witnessed the charter, but it seems not unlikely, belonging to the category (as he probably did) of "Knights, Lordes, and other worthy men who can litel Latin," that he placed a modest cross after his name in the usual style of the ancient Scottish nobility.

McGregor Stirling says, in his book on the

Priory of Inchmahome, that the earliest spelling of the name Menteith is found in Appendix I. to James's "Essay of the Antiquities of Scotland," and that there it is written "Meneted." In a charter dated 1234 it is spelt "Mynteth." There was a noble freedom about ancient spelling which added much to the interest of many sciences, notably to geography.

No reliable derivation of the word has ever been presented to me, but it is not unlikely a compound of the word Teith, as that river runs through the earldom. The Highlanders called the Teith the Taich, and applied the name also to the whole district, as the word Menteith is said to be unknown to them. They also called it the "warm river," on account of the high wooded ground through which lies much of its course.

From the twelfth century down to the middle of the seventeenth century, the usual monotonous course of villainy, which characterised all Scottish history both of that epoch and of later times, went on with unfailing regularity.

In the time of James III. the town of Port of Menteith was erected into a burgh or barony by a charter which bears the date of 8th February 1466.

The forests in Menteith were at that time one of the favourite hunting resorts of the Scottish Court. Scotland enjoyed Home Rule in those

days, and the blessing of a national parliament, with the pleasure of knowing that the taxes were wasted in Edinburgh instead of in London. It is doubtful if the forests alluded to in the old charters were really woods, or only grounds set apart for hunting. Certainly at the present day Menteith is entirely bare of natural woods, with the exception of oak and birch coppices which fringe the streams and sometimes jut out into the fields, forming peninsulas of wood, and at other times enclosing little open spaces of ground in a complete circle. In 1538, in the "Lord Treasurer's Account" (see "History of the Forest of Glenfinlas"), there is an entry for payment of a horse "whiche was slaine tursand the kinge's venisoune out of Glenfinlas, at the kinge's command and precept." How the horse was "slaine" is not set down; but as even a king would hardly (by command and precept) enjoin his foresters to pile venison on a horse till its back was broken, it seems probable that some McGregor may have shot him out of pure delight in life. The king had to provide himself for his hunting as if he had been going into the Pan Handle of Texas, for another item occurs in the treasurer's accounts, "to fee twa careage horsis, to turse the king's bed, and uther graithe to the hunting."

It seems probable that the regal taste in venerie descended sometimes to a species of battue. For

the entry: "Pro expenses per eundem Willelmum factis, tempore venationis in floresta de Glenfyn-gask, et per importatione (*sic*) bestiarum ferarum Domino Regi." "Importatione" is significant, and may have served as a precedent for the Master of the Buckhounds. How pleasant Latin, written in the above style, becomes, and how comprehensible to any one gifted with an adequate knowledge of the Scottish tongue!

One may suppose, and supposition is most lawful in history, especially in Scottish history, that the whole earldom was continually involved in broils with its Highland neighbours. Norman barons seem to have visited the district periodically, as when Sir Edward Hastings was ordered into Scotland by Edward I. in 1298. He came to assist in the conquest of Scotland, and promptly married the heiress of Menteith, Lady Isabella de Comyn, and signed himself afterwards Edward Hastings Comes de Menteith, with considerable prolixity.* Even before that, in 1273, a futile Englishman, Sir John Russell, married a widowed countess of Menteith. Her relations considered the match an ignoble one, but the countess secured the advantage of a residence in the comparatively milder climate of England, where she died and was buried. This family of Russell has subsequently been mentioned occasion-

* See Sir William Fraser's "Red Book of Menteith."

ally in English history, but since then has never again intruded into Menteith.

It is a humiliating fact to have to set down, and greatly to the discredit of democracy, that the only shred of interest in the dreary annals of treachery, arson, and murder which go to make up the history of Menteith, attaches to the Earls themselves and their adventures. Indeed, in reference to the early history of Menteith there is such a plethora of hard dry facts that little human interest can be extracted from them. It is certain, indeed, that Edward III. of England, with that cheerful disregard of justice which was one of his attributes, and unquestionably goes far to make up his greatness in the eyes of historians, executed an Earl of Menteith, who was taken prisoner with King David at Durham in 1346, on the paltry plea that he had once sworn fealty to himself, as if an oath more or less was ever a hindrance to a patriot.

This Earl of Menteith, Sir John Graham, the ninth earl, seems to have been a man of courage and sense, and had his advice been followed at the battle of Durham, to charge the English archers on their flanks, the disaster might have been averted. Wynton, occasionally a severe critic of the Scottish nobility, makes him exclaim to the king: "Gettes me but men ane hundred on hors wyth me to go, and all your archyrs skayle sall I." Quite naturally, his advice was disregarded, and

the king was taken prisoner and his army routed. When, though, have not kings, in common with deaf adders, been famous for stopping their ears to the words of wise counsel?

In the case of kings it may be that the exigencies of their position often forced them to appear more foolish than they really were, though the necessity is not often apparent.

Why an adder which was born deaf should put itself to further trouble in the matter remains a mystery. The various families of Menteith, Stewart and Grahame, who held the earldom at various times, their Murdochs, Morices, and Malises succeeding one another, produced some stout phlebotomists and now and then a mediocre statesman. But fortune never seemed to smile upon them. Unfortunate people have always been the very sheet-anchors of historians. They have furnished them with reams of "copy," with matter for infinite digression, and without digression all histories would be as lethal as that of Guicciardini's.