

ST. MARY'S LOCH RE-VISITED.

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THIRTY-SIX years ago the present writer contributed an article to *Temple Bar*—a magazine then popular, now extinct—describing a visit to St. Mary's Loch. Lately I had an opportunity of going over the same ground again, doing the whole journey, as before, from Moffat to Selkirk. It was naturally of great interest to me to compare my fresh impressions with the older ones, and it has occurred to me that some of these impressions might be not without interest to readers of this magazine, especially in view of the memories evoked last year by the Scott centenary. The earlier article speaks of locomotion by coach and on foot, by coach from Moffat to St. Mary's Loch, and on foot onward, with a night spent at the "Gordon Arms," by the Yarrow side to Selkirk. The recent excursion was by motor-bus, which took us easily from Moffat to Selkirk and back in a morning. The years between have marked a change here from the horse vehicle, picturesque but slow by comparison, to the mechanically propelled conveyance, rapid but not too rapid for the enjoyment of scenery.

Abusus non tollit usum. Everywhere now we are harassed by noise on the roads, in the congested city, and in out-of-the-way and even desert places. On the same tour the traveller found himself at Crianlarich, a place which, with its bare, wild grandeur, has a fascination of its own for the jaded town-worker. But, a short rest there, in breaking a railway journey, was irritatingly spoilt by the shrieking tumult and the rushing to and fro of a double procession of motor-cars, making it dangerous to life to stray for a few yards on the main road.

Now, even in these days, there are few motor-cars to be met with on the road between Moffat and Selkirk. No doubt ordinary travellers from England, with limited time at their disposal, prefer to go straight to the Highlands. Even H. V. Morton, when he was "In Search of Scotland," did not discover the Yarrow. The consequence is that it is a quite exceptionally pleasant run by motor-bus from Moffat to Selkirk, and the mode of conveyance is especially welcome to one whose pedestrian powers have been lessened by time. The relative paucity of private cars has secured that here the roads are not disfigured, as elsewhere, by gaudy petrol stations; and the lapse of thirty-six years has made no change for the worse in the general appearance of the country.

In Moffat-dale the hills are craggy and overhang the road, but after passing the watershed of Birkhill the prospect widens and becomes sylvan. Soon we catch sight of the Loch of the Lowes, and come once again to Tibbie Shiel's cottage, now enlarged, the famed resort of Sir Walter and his cronies. As we pass the isthmus, St. Mary's Loch itself opens out before us.

Our remark on first descrying the loch on the former visit was,—
 “There is no sun, and the light wind prevents that transparency of the surface which Scott, in his Introduction to the second canto of *Marmion*, and Wordsworth, in his Yarrow poems, had led us to expect.” We had seen the swan on our way upward (to St. Mary's Kirkyard, which overlooks the loch), but it was not “floating double, swan and shadow”; and of the loch itself it could not be said that “not a feature of the hills was in the mirror slighted.” The water was of a dull leaden colour, though the clouds were not low enough to obscure the bare green hills that embraced it. We noticed that the place had undergone some change since Sir Walter wrote—

“Nor tree, nor bush, nor brake is there,
 Save where, of land, yon slender line
 Bears thwart the lake the scatter'd pine.”

There is now a long fringe of wood along the northern side of the loch, in the midst of which there rises a modern hotel. This is the “Rodono,” attractive-looking, as we pass it, and, we feel moved to say, pronounced to be “most comfortable” by those who have stayed in it.

The wood which surrounds the hotel gives point to what we have been reading recently in Dr. Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. From the Tweed to St. Andrews, he tells us, he had not seen a single tree which had not “grown up far within the present century.”

“At St. Andrews Mr. Boswell found only one, and recommended it to my notice; I told him it was rough and low, or I looked as if I thought so. ‘This,’ said he, ‘is nothing to another a few miles off.’ I was still less delighted to hear that another tree was not to be seen nearer. ‘Nay,’ said a gentleman that stood by, ‘I know but of this and that tree in the county.’”

We remind ourselves here of the “large English oak-stick” with which Johnson provided himself in preparing for the Northern journey, which journey, notwithstanding his gibes at things Scottish, was the happiest episode of his life. The stick disappeared, and “so caused an ill-humour in Johnson.” When Boswell would lead him to hope that it would turn up later, “No, no, my friend,” said Johnson, “it is not to be expected that any man in Mull who has got it will part with it. Consider, sir, the value of such a *piece of timber here!*” His general remark was, “The Lowlands of Scotland had once undoubtedly an equal portion of woods with other countries. Forests are everywhere gradually diminished, as architecture and cultivation prevail by the increase of people and the introduction of arts. But I believe few regions have been denuded like this, where many centuries must have passed in waste without the least thought of future supply.”

The Scottish people have taken Dr. Johnson's chiding in good part. His book did much to correct them of their improvidence in this regard. Immediately after the publication of the book there began a busy planting of trees, and we can see the effect of it in the

fringe of wood on the northern side of St. Mary's Loch, which has put Sir Walter's description out of date.

Curiously enough one experience of ours on the earlier visit to the loch was repeated on the second visit. The day, on the outward journey, was sombre, and the loch was slaty in hue as before. We saw the swan almost at once; though this time not one only, according to Wordsworth, but two, according to the nature of those conjugally faithful birds. For the rest, so far from there being anything to disappoint in the general aspect of the scenery by comparison with the earlier view of it, its beauty impressed us more even than as we remembered it. The neighbouring hills, though low and rounded, are varied in contour, affording inviting peeps into hidden recesses, and here and there into modes of egress northward or southward from what seems an almost enclosed area. The colour on the lower ground is exceptionally vivid, the dark Scotch firs, dotted here and there in clumps, making an agreeable contrast to the rich, bright green of the turf, while the romantic river flashes out along the way, "like a baldric thrown loose on the vale."

It is the secluded quietness of the Yarrow-side that gives it much of its peculiar charm. There are no obtrusive evidences of man's presence or handiwork. Here and there are to be noticed well-built farmsteads nestling amid their own plantations, and occasional cottages by the roadside, all presenting an appearance of pastoral and agricultural well-being and of an orderly life. The people throughout this region have a passion for fresh paint. They even paint the solid external stone walls of their houses, always choosing white or a cream colour, which harmonises with the natural features of the country. It is exactly the kind of colour-scheme which Wordsworth advocated in his *Guide through the Lake District in the North of England*.

This care for the houses extends to the gardens, and it is characteristic everywhere of the Moffat and Selkirk district that there is a flower culture among the people, which is perhaps stimulated and encouraged, as was hinted to us, by the fertility of the soil, but is manifestly the outcome of a very tender regard in this region for the loveliest of God's creatures.

The Yarrow country thus gains, rather than the reverse, in so far as it is affected by man. It is something for which we have special cause to be thankful in the case of a region so hallowed by natural beauty and by romantic and literary associations. In the earlier article reference is made to the Border ballads, of which the scene is laid to a large extent in the Yarrow and Ettrick Valleys, the two best known of these ballads being "Willy drowned in Yarrow" and "The Flowers of the Forest." The whole neighbourhood teems with memories of

"Old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago,"

which give a tinge of sadness to the sweet and tranquil beauty of the scenery. Wordsworth expressed this in writing his *Yarrow Visited* :

" Oh, that some minstrel's harp were near,
 To utter notes of gladness,
 And chase this silence from the air,
 That fills my heart with sadness !

Yet, why ? A silvery current flows
 With uncontrolled meanderings ;
 Nor have these eyes by greener hills
 Been soothed in all my wanderings."

The following extract from the former article may be quoted here :

" If it be true, as Edgar Allan Poe has said, that ' a certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of beauty,' then the

Feeling of sadness and longing
 That is not akin to pain

that the Yarrow scenery inspires is but a credential of its genuine and rare loveliness.

" Certain it is that, to a unique degree, this has been a favourite and venerated resort to men whose sentiment for the beautiful has been exceptionally pure and strong. When Norman Macleod said that his highest idea of earthly happiness was to spend a long summer's day in Yarrow with a few choice friends, he was but expressing what would have been echoed heartily by men like Scott, Wordsworth, Wilson, Hogg, and not a few others of kindred mind since their day. And it is partly the consciousness that we are gazing on scenery that men we have so honoured, and whose words have so delighted us, have held exceptionally dear, that fills us with an emotion never to be forgotten when we first gaze on St. Mary's Loch and the country that surrounds it."

On re-reading this, a doubt arises in the mind whether the present generation and those to follow it will appreciate the literary associations of St. Mary's Loch as their forbears have done. Are the names in the literary world of the early and middle nineteenth century that were as household words in the youth of the elder men and women of to-day still names to conjure with ? It is hardly to be expected that they should be. New names of poets and imaginative writers have come to the fore of late, known and cared for more by the young among us than by their seniors, as must inevitably be the case. We older folk are apt to think that our early favourites that helped to form our minds and delight our leisure hours in days gone by, were of a class that has been reached scarcely, if at all, since. Certainly they were periods of peculiar inspiration when Shelley and Keats and Byron and Wordsworth and Scott and Coleridge wrote, and, later, when Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, and Ruskin were pouring out the products of their thought in continuous succession to a welcoming public. If the fame of such men is dimming and they make a less appeal to the younger minds of to-day it is in the natural course of things. Walter Bagehot spoke of this in writing of the Waverley Novels as far back as 1858.

" Contemporaries," he said, " bring to new books formal minds and stiffened creeds ; posterity, if it regard them at all, looks at them as old

subjects, worn-out topics, and hears a disputation of their merits with languid impartiality, like aged judges in a court of appeal. Even standard authors exercise but slender influence on the susceptible minds of a rising generation; they are become 'papa's books'; the walls of the library are adorned with their regular volumes; but no hand touches them."

Yet the Waverley Novels live, though they have not the swiftness of narrative and the predominant occupation with vicissitudes of love and sex or detective problems which many of the present generation demand in their light literature. For the reasons given by Bagehot they, or the most successful of them, must survive among the immortals. We cannot afford to lose or neglect Sir Walter. He and others of his contemporaries, like Wordsworth especially, have left us that which is a "permanent possession" of the human race, needful for the sustenance of the higher instincts of the soul; and it is a safe prediction that generations to come will venerate the places in which such men found rest and delight. There are many now, and we may be sure there will always be many, who will enter into the spirit of the lines:

"Should life be dull, and spirits low,
'Twill soothe us in our sorrow,
That earth has something yet to show,
The bonny Holms of Yarrow!"

Any misgivings expressed after the former visit had reference to the inhabitants of the vicinity of St. Mary's Loch. The recent note about them is,—“The men are stalwart and the women strong-looking and fresh-coloured—a fine peasantry.” Perhaps there is no finer peasantry, in physique and character, to be met with anywhere. One looks upon them with the greater interest in remembering that they are the modern representatives of the “Flowers of the Forest,” who fell in such large numbers at Flodden.

In the earlier article I said:

“We have been told by those who should know them well that these descendants of Border fighters and minstrels are losing their taste for poetry. The songs and ballads that delighted their fathers have but a secondary interest for them compared with the intellectual entertainment they derive from *Pearson's Weekly* and *Tit-Bits*. Their life is a more prosaic one, and their tastes have by consequence become prosaic. . . . We cannot but regret that the fervour and lightness of fancy that expressed itself in the Border Minstrelsy should survive now only in the few. Still, take them for all in all, we would not wish back again those old, rough, fierce reivers and manslayers, in the place of the orderly, law-abiding men who earn their livelihood by ministering to the wants of those from whose fathers their fathers thought it no shame to steal.

“Humanity has advanced here as elsewhere. Nevertheless we cannot but wish that what was good and admirable in the characters of the original men of the ‘Forest’ might reappear in their more peaceable and industrious, though less high-souled descendants. The courage, the dauntless endurance of hardship, the fidelity in love, the noble generosity, the heroic self-sacrifice that beautified the life of those old days, would that we might see more of it now!”

This is pessimism to the verge of libel. The answer to it is the Edinburgh War Memorial, unique as a tribute to valour and diver-

sified national service in a great cause. The figure in the memorial from America, below, with the title beneath it of "The Call," represents the soul—the indestructible soul, we may say—of the young manhood of Scotland. To look at it is to feel assured that if a similar call came again, young Scotland would rise to it in the same spirit.

We are passionately desirous now that war shall cease, but that desire cannot secure us against the possibility of armed uprisings in unexpected quarters in transgression of that brotherliness which we are trying to promote and upon which we are relying perhaps too incautiously. Anyhow, in the time to come, there will be continual calls on the more robust qualities of character in the manhood and womanhood of Britain for the purposes of an ordered social life and for the cultivation of the arts of peace; and an older man may correct the hastier impression of his younger day by strengthening himself in the conviction that—

" While a youth is lost in soaring thought,
And while a maid grows sweet and beautiful,
And while a spring-tide coming lights the earth,
And while a child, and while a flower is born,
And while one wrong cries for redress and finds
A soul to answer, still the world is young ! "

Some years ago Bishop Every of the Argentine wrote a book on his experiences during twenty-five years in South America. He has now written a sequel, *South American Memories of Thirty Years* (S.P.C.K., 7s. 6d. net). For many of us, missionary work in the South American continent has a special fascination, and we have long been interested in the achievements of pioneers like Captain Allen Gardiner, Barbrooke Grubb, and Bishop Stirling. Bishop Every has had special opportunities of viewing the life of the various countries of the continent, and his account of its characteristics will be read with great interest. He explains the amazing attitude of the people towards religion, and shows some of the recent tendencies and developments, especially in regard to the difficulties arising from the new spirit of nationalism. A chapter of special interest is devoted to the work of William Morris, whose care for the children of Buenos Aires won for him a place of special influence in the life of the country. Accounts are given of some of the chief Mission fields, and a tribute is paid to the work of the South American Missionary Society. The Bishop acknowledges that he has not always been correct in his forecasts of the future in regard to the affairs in South America, but his long experience of the country gives his observations and reflections a special value; and, in spite of the difficulties he has encountered in his long period of service, he still looks forward to the accomplishment of greater things through the spread of a purer religion than that which is dominant in the South American States.