John Stuart to Thomas Pennant: remarks on Breadalbane and Rannoch

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Killin Ap$^{l.}$

Dear Sir

I was favoured with your obliging Letter of 11th March just as I was leaving home this day fortnight in order to attend another meeting of the Presbytery of Dumbarton and have not till now had any opportunity of writing you in return to it ———

It gives me no small uneasiness to find that none of the letters I wrote you relative to your voyage after leaving the island of Rum [illegible] have come to your hands in due time, especially as I thought they contained many of the most material remarks which I had to communicate. In the course of corresponding with you upon that subject, I certainly met with many necessary avocations which I could not have foreseen; and you are accordingly so good as to forgive me, but I can hardly altogether forgive myself. My principal error was in not informing myself better as to the precise time of your publication. I cannot account however for the unexpected delay you mention with regard to the letters you received relative to Sky &c, as from the moment I came to understand that your Printers went on with such rapidity I did not omit a single opportunity of writing you till all the observations which I had to send you upon the voyage were exhausted. Were I not from one of your letters led to imagine that you proposed to conclude the whole of your last *Scotch Tour, and not only the first volume* of it, at Ardmaddy, I would have likewise proceeded to send you Remarks relative to this country, at greater length than my time will now permit me ———

Glenurchay

The river which runs in this valley and from which it derives it's name is called Urchay — Plenty of trout and some salmon are caught upon it. —

Clachan-dysart is the name of the parish in this country, of which M$^{r.}$ M^{c}Intyre is Minister. —

Dalmaly is the name of the inn where you lodged. In order to accomodate the Publick Lord Breadalbane has been at the expence of building a good convenient house here, at Tyndrom, Killin and Kenmore to each of which he has annexed a farm at any easy Rent —

The same customs and manners prevail nearly here as upon the W. coast ———

Upon leaving Glenurchay, which is the last of what are properly called Cattle-countries that you had occasion to pass through, you have a good opportunity afforded you of adding any general observations or reflections upon the management of black Cattle or the rural œconomy of the N. Highlanders. Any hints of that nature that occurred to me I have already communicated to you in one or other of the last letters I wrote you ———

Breadalbane

You entered into the district of Breadalbane[* 1] a little West from Tyndrom[† 2] where the waters divide and run both into the W. and E. sea — The lead mines near Tyndrom succeed at present pretty well. The richest part of the vein has always been found to be near the top of the hill. The ore is now smelted in the country and some silver has been extracted from it —

The valley which you entered into after leaving Tyndrom is called Strath-fillan, from S$^{t.}$ Fillan who spent the latter part of his days here, and whose memory the inhabitants still greatly revere. You saw the holy pool in the river which is thought to derive all it's virtue from his benediction, and to which, upon particular days numbers of persons repair from distant countries every summer, and particularly lunaticks and mad-people, in hopes of being cured of their diseases by being plunged thrice in the pool, and afterwards lyed down all night in the Chapel or preaching-house on the cold floor. The cure administred in this way has in some instances been such as to put a speedy period to the sorrows of this life. ———

Strath-fillan is part of the parish of Killin, which is one of the most extensive and populous in this part of the Highlands. Since you passed through this country Lady Glenurchay with that laudable zeal for advancing the interests of religion so uncommon among persons of her fortune and rank in this age of luxury and refinement, has determined to mortify a considerable sum for supporting a Minister or Preacher who is after this constantly to reside here, [illegible] has already built a good house for him, to which Lord Breadalbane has been so good as to add a glebe ———

This part of the country is now almost entirely under south-country sheep which have hitherto answered very well, and turn out to much greater advantage than black Cattle.

The only Proprietors here are Lord Breadalbane, M$^{r.}$ Campbell of Lochdochart whose House you would have seen upon the North side of the river and the King, who has here but one farm being a part of the forfeited estate of Perth. — Inclosures, planting and other improvements being to be carried on with greater spirit even in this higher part of Breadalbane than in most places upon the W. coast ———

Lochdochart is the name of the lake which you passed by at the foot of Ben-more,[x 3] the loftiest mountain in Breadalbane —

[illegible] english miles East from Tyndrom, near the publick road, and opposite to Achessan a farm belonging to MacNab of that ilk, and now likewise under South-country sheep, you saw a small lake remarkable for having the only really floating island in it I ever saw.[1] I have seen it in the space of a few days driven by the winds to quite different end of the lake, so that there can be no doubt of it's actually floating — The lake itself is about 200 feet long and 60 feet broad. The is 51 feet long, and 2y broad. At the edge it is about 25 inches in thickness. The it consists of is mostly mossy. It is covered with coarse grasses and willows. A young birch-tree, about three feet and a half high, likewise grows upon it ———

The valley you now entered into is called Glendochart, and the river which runs in it that of Dochart. This river a few years ago answered better for pearl-fishing than perhaps any other in the Highlands. Some of the largest and best were found in it, and sold mostly to merchants in Perth. It is computed that in the space of two or three years this commodity brought at least 300 £ Sterl. of money to the country —

Glendochart is in general to bare of wood both for ornament and shelter. This defect you would observe, M$^{r.}$ Campbell of Achlyne has endeavoured to remedy in the neighbourhood of his own house by considerable young plantations of fir on each side of the river. With an uncommon degree of publick spirit he had shewen a good example to others by extensive inclosures (the first capital step in the improvement of any country) both upon his estate in the country, and at the W. end of Lochern, where he has likewise at no small expence built a commodious Inn, for the refreshment of Strangers just before they ascend the hill of Larig-iele, in their way to Breadalbane ———

You'll remember that the river Dochart where you crossed it along two bridges just as you entered into Killin[x 4] divides into two branches, and forms two small islands planted with first, the eastmost of which is called Inish-buy,[† 5] and is exceedingly romantick and picturesque, especially when the river is high, and forms one continued broken Cascade on each side —

Finlarig, Achmore, and Kinell it will be needless to describe to you. — Near the last of these there is the most entire Druidical Circle which remains in this part of the Highlands. It consists of six large stones fixed at equal distances from each other — You may remember to have seen another Druidical circle at Lawers on the N. Side of Loch-tay, but it is not nearly so entire as this ———

If you thing it proper to give any account of the round towers found in this country and Glenlyon, you have a better opportunity of bringing it in when passing through this Country than you could have had anywhere else. I wrote you fully already with regard to these in my Letter relative to Glenelg———

The other river which passes by Killin and Finlarig, and joins the Dochart before they both discharge themselves into Loch-tay, is called Lochy ———

Lord B. has planted firs very extensively on different spots properly dispersed all along the N. side of Loch-Tay. He likewise gives the greatest encouragement for inclosing the several farms by advancing money upon interest for that purpose. Contrary to the accounts which you had by some mistake in the publick papers, his tenants, though many of them have but small possessions and are poor, yet by the good management under which the affairs of the country are, are the object of envy of many of their neighbours ———

This country is perhaps the most populous of the same extent in the Highlands of Scotland — Upon the North side of Loch-tay, from Finlarig to the point of Lyon there are about 1700 souls ———

Oats, bear, pease ^lint and potatoes are the only Crops commonly sown in Breadalbane. The greatest return of oats is from four to six grains for each grain sown, at an average but three or three and a half. The greatest produce of bear is from eight to ten, at an average six. — When premiums were given a few years ago for the greatest crops of lint, Achalader informs me that there were sown in Breadalbane from 70 to 120 hogsheads of Lintseed, each peck of which would at an average yield two stone of drest flax; and when the linnen yarn, which is the great staple commodity of this country, sold highest, there was no less than to the value of 2000 £ of it exported in one year out of the Country. One of the greatest losses therefore that the inhabitants at present sustain is the low price of that commodity; the manufacture of which is so universally carried on that there is commonly more flax imported every year than what grows in the country.

— There are great crops of potatoes reared by every person, the seed of which has been often changed with advantage. The kind which is at present cultivated most, and to best advantage is the London-Lady, which upon some farms yields at average about ten bolls for each that is planted. The usual produce however among the common tenants is not above seven or eight fold — One or two families have fallen upon the art of extracting from the root a very strong and agreeable spirit, which turns out to be much cheaper than what is distilled from any kind of grain. Very good starch is likewise made of it, which not only serves very well for dressing linnen, but it also found to answer in the oven in some instances as well as wheat-flower ———

For two years past very considerable quantities of the Lichen omphalodes, called in the Galic lang. Corcar, have been exported from this and all the neighbouring countries for the purposes of dying, and sold from a shilling to sixteen pence p$^{r.}$ stone ———

Great quantities of wool are now likewise exported —

The best ^fat weathers reared in the country and exported from it, sell at about eleven shillings each; but small sheep of the old breed sell only at about 6 shillings each ———

The best parcels of black Cattle reared by some of the Gentlemen in Breadalbane have been sold at five guineas each but the black Cattle commonly reared in the country, sell at an average only at 2 £ 5 shillings each, when four years of age———

A Few horses are reared ———

These animals are in this and in many other parts of the Highlands seized with a very extraordinary kind of distemper, when they happen to feed upon the tops of the higher hills in the months of July and Aug^{t}, which if no remedy is applyed proves fatal to them in less than 24 hours. The common opinion of the natives is that it is owing to an animal like a weesel, which some pretend to have seen, and which they imagine pours it's venom in great quantities upon the grass. It is a more probable conjecture however that the quality of the pasture must be the cause of it. Pontoppidan speaks of a similar disease, if I remember well in *his account of Norway*, which he ascribes to the effects of a certain plant: — In the event however that this distemper proceeds from feeding on one of the ^Alpine plants which grow upon the tops of our higher hills, it is remarkable that no other species of animals are hurt by that pasture but horses, and even they only in a certain season of the year, and more commonly ^then after a fall of rain, or before dew rises from the grass in the morning —

A universal swelling over the body is the great symptom of this disorder and, when taken in time, a cure seldom fails to be effected by exercise, chaffing or any means for promoting the discharge of sweat and urine, if persisted in for some hours — The animal which is believed to do all this hurt is called by different names in different parts of the Highlands, & is probably the same with the Lavellan of *Sibbald*. The accounts at least we have of both are, I dare say, fabulous———

Though this country is as much a grain or a Cattle country, yet it is so populous that there is commonly every year some meal imported — none exported ———

Goats are banished for the sake of the woods —

Breadalbane

The principal ^native woods in this country are of Oak, Ash, Birch, and Hazel. There were once likewise some natural woods of the Pinus sylvestris, which are now almost extinct. Different species of planted trees thrive here extremely well, particularly in Finlarig —

Salmon are found clean and fresh in Loch-tay on every day of the year, if search is made for them — The only other fishes known to be in this lake are Pike, trout, Red Charre, Perch, Lamprey, Eel, Bull-trout, parr, and minnow.

— In some of the small lakes in the hills there are likewise plenty of excellent trouts, and in one of them some pikes are found —

The wild quadrupeds of Breadalbane are 1. Red Deer. The only forest in this country where this animal now remains belongs to Lord B., and lies at the W. end of Glenlochy. It is called that of Mam-Lorn, and by the common inhabitants Corry-cheïch i.e. the bason of mist. When the females are in season, the males are frequently observed to fight bitterly; running against one another with a race, as rams do. At every other time they seem to have an aversion to the Does and their young, and keep always by themselves.

Eagles and foxes are very destructive to their young, but dare not approach when the dam is in sight. They arrive at their full size and growth at five years of age. After that period their horns become every year smaller and rougher, but continue to the same length. They cast them as they do their hair regularly once a year. They go always against the wind, so that by it's direction their Keeper knows exactly where at any time to find them. They have the senses of smelling and seeing, and hearing excessively acute. The male however is not so very quick-sighted as the female, on account of the grossness of it's horns. They have an aversion at feeding with sheep and black Cattle, but not so much with horses and goats, which in some forests are permitted to pasture along with them.

The severity of winter and spring often proves fatal to them. ———

2. Roe. This animal is now very rare in this country, but abounds at present in the neighbouring valley of Glenlyon, as for some years past M^r. Menzies of Culdars has paid great attention to it's preservation ———

3. Alpine hare. 4. Common hare. 5 Fox. 6. Badger. 7. Polecat. 8. Wild-Cat. 9. Weesel. 10. Ermin. 11. Martin. This animal is exceedingly rare in this country. One of them was killed some years ago upon Ben-more, but I cannot learn with certainty whether it was the white or yellow-breasted Martin. I have lately got the stuft skin of one that was killed in one of the old birch-woods of Rannoch, which was the yellow-breasted, and I suppose the only species in that country. — 12. The Rat. none of the great Norway rats have as yet penetrated into this country. 13. The Mouse. 14. The short-tailed field-mouse. I have found this animal high up in one of the hills of Glen-creran and of this country. It feeds in harvest upon the ripe seeds of some of the coarse grasses, as appeared upon opening the stomach of one which was killed in that season. 14. The Shrew-mouse. 15. Water Shrew-mouse. 16. The Mole. 17. The Hedge-hog. 18. The Otter. An opinion prevails in the Highlands that this species of animals have a King or Leader, which is rarely to be met with, and is always attended with a number of common otters.

They describe it as of a greater size than the common, and sometimes variegated with white spots. They believe that it is never killed without the sudden death of a man or some other animal at the same time, and ascribe the most extraordinary virtues to it's Skin. The least portion of it they think would render the warrior almost invulnerable, preserve the house in which it is lodged from the infection of diseases, and insure his vessel to the mariner amidst the severest storms.

— What might have at first given occasion to all this fabulous account, it is hard to say. It is a certain fact however that a few years ago an ^accidental variety of this animal, with a number of round white spots upon it's back, such as they describe, has been killed in the neighbourhood of this country. I have had a description of it from the Furrier who brought it, and from others who saw it. —

19. The Bat ———

It is extraordinary that though vipers are found in great numbers in the countries lying both north and South of Breadalbane yet here they are hardly ever seen. Frogs, and Lizards, both the nimble and brown, are common here ———

The birds of this country are 1. The Ring-tailed Eagle. 2 Sea-Eagle. 3. Osprey. —

4. Kite. 5. Common Buzzard. 6. Hen-Harrier 7. Kestrell. 8. Hobby. 9. Merlin. 10. Wite Owl. 11. Brown Owl. 12 Raven. 13. Crow. 14. Rook 15. Hooded Crow. This bird breeds in this country and never migrates out of it ———

16. Magpy. 17 Jay. 18. Jack-daw. 19. Greater Spotted woodpecker. 20. Cuckoo. 21. Nuthatch. 22. Creeper. 23. Cornish Chough. 24 Black Cock. 25 Grous. 26. Tarmachan. 27 Partridge. 28. Ringdove 29. Fieldfare. 30. Throstle. 31. Redwing. 32. Blackbird. 33. Ring-ouzel 34. Water-Ouzel. 35. Sky-Lark. 36. Tit-Lark. 37. House swallow. 38 Martin. 39 Sand Martin 40. Swift. 41 Goatsucker. 42 Red-start. 43. Red-Breast. 44 Fly-catcher. 45 Hedge sparrow. 46. Willow-wren. 47 Golden-crested wren. — 48 Wren. 49. Wheat-Ear. 50. Whin-Chat. 51 White Throat. 52. White Water Wagtail — 53. Yellow Water Wagtail. 54 Bull-Finch 55. Sparrow. 56. Green-Finch. 57. Gold-Finch. 58. Chaffinch. 59. Brambling — 60. Linnet. 61. Red-headed Linnet — 62. Lesser red-headed Linnet. 63. Mountain Linnet. 64. Bunting. 65 Yellow-Hammer. 66. Reed Sparrow. 67. Greater Brambling. I imagine our Snow-flake must be the same with this bird. I have had three or four fresh specimens of it, each of which answered to your description in the *B.Z.*, nor could I find that there was any material difference in the Hind-Claw or otherwise. 68. Great Titmouse. 69. Blue Titmouse. 70 Colemouse. 71. Long-tailed Titmouse. 72. The Heron. 73. Wood-Cock — 74. Snipe. 75. Jack Snipe. 76. Lapwing — 77. Sand-Piper. 78. Green Plover. 79. Dottrel. 80 Water-Rail. 81. Land-Rail. 82. Little Grebe. 83. Common Gull. 84 Red headed Goosander — 85 Wild Swan. 86. Scaup-Duck. 87. Golden-Eye. 88. Shield-Drake. 89. Wild Duck. 90. Teal

Besides these, of the greatest part of which I have had fresh specimens, one of the Divers, I suppose the same with that on Loch-Rannoch, has been killed some years ago in Breadalbane. The Black Guillemot and one of the Red-shanks have likewise been found ~~found~~ here. And a few others, I dare say, may have still escaped observation. ———

Upon the whole however the foregoing List, with the addition of the Green Wood-Pecker, Cross-Bill, the Wood Lark ^and a few others, may, as far as I know, be considered as comprehending the principal birds not only in this country, but in the greatest part of the inland Highlands. ———

P.S. Our seasons in Breadalbane are not nearly so moist as upon the W. Coast. Here however, as well as there, the greatest rains are carried to us by S.W. winds from the Atlantick —

Upon some of our higher mountains spots of snow often continue all summer undissolved —

Towards the end of Oct$^{r.}$ sometimes a thick heavy white mist moves slowly from the East, and covers all the vallies and lower grounds with universal darkness. It rises only to a certain height in the atmosphere; and I have once or twice had the pleasure of ascending above it to the top of some of our high hills. There the sky was perfectly serene, and the sun shone with great brightness. The prospect afforded on all hands was the most picturesque one could well imagine, a boundless Ocean of shining Mist, with the green tops of mountains rising every where out it, like so many round islands, shaped mostly like a sugar-loaf — I had at the same time the opportunity of attending to another phænomenon. When drawing at any time near the mist on the North side of the hill, my shadow fell upon it, the head, but no other part, appeared encircled with rays, forming at the same time a bright round rainbow ———

Editorial Notes

[1] The measurements given by Stuart indicate a body of water considerably smaller than the nearby Loch Dochart or Loch Iubhair, perhaps Lochan Dùn Saoraich slightly further east.

Authorial Notes

[1] * Braid-albin i.e. the higher part of Scotland.

[2] † Tigh-an-drom i.e. the house of the height.

[3] x Beinn-mhòr i.e. the great mountain —

[4] x Commonly thougt to be Cill-Fhinn i.e. the burying-place of Fingal. His supposed grave is still pointed out.

[5] † Inis-bui, i.e. the green island ———