

I.

JAMES ROBERTSON'S TOUR THROUGH SOME OF THE WESTERN ISLANDS, ETC., OF SCOTLAND IN 1768. BY SIR ARTHUR MITCHELL, K.C.B., M.D., LL.D., FOREIGN SECRETARY.

In 1788 Sir James Foulis, Bart., of Colinton, communicated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland a paper entitled "Remarks made in a Tour through several of the Western Isles and West Coast of Scotland. By Mr James Robertson."

The reading of this paper was spread over six meetings of the Society in that year—on the 12th of June, the 1st, 15th, and 29th of July, the 4th of November, and the 16th of December. It was not printed in the *Archæologia Scotica*, but the paper itself has been preserved, and it is regarded as of sufficient interest to justify the preparation—exactly one hundred years after the paper was read—of a short notice, with extracts, for insertion in the *Proceedings*.

As I have stated, the account of the tour was communicated to the Society in 1788, but the tour itself was made twenty years earlier, namely, in 1768, and it occupied the period between the 10th of May and the 17th of October.

I have not been able to discover who Mr James Robertson was, but the opening sentence of the narrative discloses two things: (1) that he made the tour under "directions," and (2) that he was regarded as competent to "examine the marine plants" of the west coast of Scotland. His first sentence is as follows:—"Edinburgh, May 10th, 1768. In compliance with the directions I had received to make all convenient haste to the western coast, there to examine the marine plants, I set out to Irvine by Hamilton, Loudenhouse, and Kilmarnock."

For a week or two at the commencement of the tour the narrative is full of references to the plants he found; but further on, such references become fewer, and there is then but little to show that the tourist had a botanical mission. All through the narrative, no doubt, there is evidence that Mr Robertson had a knowledge of plants of all sorts, and was much interested in them, but his observations took many directions

as he journeyed. The record, indeed, is largely made up of an account of the customs, mode of living, superstitions, diseases, and surroundings of the people among whom he travelled, and a part of what he says about these things deserves to be made accessible by appearing in the *Proceedings* of the Society.

For instance, his description of the basket-houses and basket-barns in Arasaik and Conton may be regarded as an addition to knowledge. So far, at least, as I am aware, no such precise description is elsewhere to be found. I have never myself seen houses so constructed, but I have more than once seen the form of wattling, which he tells us was employed in the erection of barns, used to form partitions in houses; the only difference being that there were two faces of wattling a few inches apart, with the space between filled with dry moss.

The beds made of heath I have often seen, and I know that tired men think them comfortable. Thatching with barley straw plucked up by the root continued, I believe, long after Mr Robertson's day, but it is of value to have this definite account.

Mr Robertson describes the graddaning of corn with much fulness, but I confess that I am not quite able to understand all the steps of the process. Indeed, he seems sometimes to have been conscious of an inability to describe clearly what he saw, and he acknowledges this when he gives the account of the "rude and disagreeable" way of making butter, which he witnessed.

It is not easy to see what is gained by the mode of preparing whey for food, which he describes. The way of preserving yeast and getting fresh barm is interesting, but here, again, there is a difficulty in fully understanding the details of what is done. The same difficulty, to a small extent, is felt when he writes about the wauking of cloth. Few men find it easy to describe with fulness and lucidity such processes as I have been referring to, but, notwithstanding this, there may be something that is new and instructive in the description they give, and it may help to a better understanding of descriptions given by other travellers.

At the time of Robertson's visit in 1768, the Highland dress was worn in Skye and Mull, that is, "the bonnet, short coat, kilt, hose, and

brogs." But in both islands, he says that the plaid had gone out of fashion.

He writes at some length of the diseases which prevailed among the inhabitants of Mull, Skye, Arran, and Bute. There appears to have been an epidemic of small-pox every sixth or seventh year in these islands, and the disease must have attacked the people very widely, if we accept this as a correct inference from its being stated as remarkable that there were "several old people" then living in Arran "who never had the small-pox." Inoculation was practised, but not extensively, and Robertson writes of it to some extent as one would now write of the islands if vaccination were neglected in them.

In three of the islands the "eight days' sickness" appears to have been fatal to children at the time of Robertson's visit, though it is said to have been disappearing from Skye. It is a disease unknown at the present time in these islands. It was attributed to the "unskillfulness of the midwives"; and one of their practices, which is described, he calls "barbarous and inhuman." He tells us, without any allusion to the criminality of their conduct, that "girls, when they happen to prove with child, unmarried, are said to use a decoction of the *Lycopodium selago* in order to effect an abortion." The plant is elsewhere in the narrative said to be a very strong purge.

He gives "sibbens" as one of the diseases to which the people of Arran were subject; and he says that in Bute, twenty years before his visit, this disease was very prevalent, but that when he was there it was "seldom to be met with."

The word "perhaps" saves his remark about the great rarity of bodily defects in Skye and the early ability of the children there to walk, from being an illustration of a traveller's readiness to state things as true which could not be within the knowledge either of an informant or of himself.

The libation to "Brownny" is an interesting Highland superstition well worth recording. The story of the opposition to using Brownny's stone in building a dyke derives value from its circumstantiality.

Mr Robertson says that the arrow-heads which had been found in the island of Arran are, upon comparison, found to be made of an

uncommon kind of rock, which occurs about half a mile to the north-east side of Kilbride. He probably refers to pitchstone, but, if so, I think he must be wrong in the opinion that the arrow-heads found in the island were made of that material, and not of flint.

It is interesting and instructive to find Mr Robertson, without any hesitation, giving to the brass or bronze implements discovered by Mr Gershom Stewart the designation of "instruments for sacrifice" used by the Druids, and naming one of these implements a "flesh fork." It may be safely asserted that there was nothing known to Robertson which justified his assigning such uses and giving such names to these objects, and it is difficult to understand how a man with scientific training could have done so. But he does not stand alone among early travellers in committing this sort of mischievous mistake. Unfortunately the same thing frequently occurs in accounts of recent travel, and does harm to the position of archæology among the sciences.

In the following extracts from Mr Robertson's tour, I have retained, to a large extent, his spelling and punctuation.

Arasaik.—Basket Houses. "The inhabitants live miserable lives, both with respect to their food and habitations. The houses in which they live they call basket houses. The method of building them is this:—They first mark out both breadth and length of the house, then drive stakes of wood at 9 inches or a foot distance from each other, leaving 4 or 5 feet of them above ground, then wattle them up with heath and small branches of wood, upon the outside of which they pin on very thin turf, much in the same manner that slates are laid. Alongst the top of these stakes runs a beam, which supports the couples, and what they call cabers, and this either covered with turf, heath, or straw." (p. 22.)

Conton.—"Their barns and houses are built in the same manner as hath been described (when speaking of the basket houses at Arasaik), only the former have no turf fastened on their outer side from the ground up to the eaving, so that the wind blows through all parts of the barn with freedom, and dries their corn." (p. 47.)

Skye.—Dwellings. "The dwellings of the common people are for the most mean. They generally lie in blankets upon beds of heath or straw, which are laid either upon the floor or upon benches. Their beds made after their way with the tops of the heath uppermost are almost as soft as a feather bed, and in the morning when you rise it returns like a spring to its former state when the pressure is removed." (p. 36.)

Skye.—Thatching—Barley plucked up by the root, and ears cut off to get suitable straw. "Through the most of Skye they do not cut their barley, but pluck it up by the roots. Is not this custom very hurtful to the ground? The only reason

they assign for this is that they have no other kind of thatch for their houses, and if they were to cut it, it would be rendered a good deal shorter, and they would likewise lose the strongest part of the straw; and what they intend for this purpose they only cut away the ears, and do not thrash it, so the straw is not broken, which must make it more serviceable. But both their method and thatchers are bad. They only spread the straw loosely and of no great thickness. Indeed they have excellent ropes of heath, which they run from one side of the house across to the other, and these about a foot distance, and generally they fasten a stone to each end, which always keeps the ropes at full stretch." (p. 40.)

Skye.—Graddaning Corn. "Here they still use the ancient way of dressing corn which is called graddaning. If they have any large quantity to dress they chuse a flat piece of ground, where the wind blows fair, to which they bring the sheaves; then two or more women are employed in the operation, and first they lay down some of the shealings of corn on their right hand, in order to prevent the fire from going out. A woman sitting down takes a handful of the corn, holding it by the straw, sets fire to the ears, which presently take flame, observing carefully when all the chaff of the ears is burnt, and having another already kindled, she all at once extinguishes the first lighted against the ground, and throws the remainder of the straw over her shoulder, and so on. Opposite to this woman stands or sits another with a stick, with which she spreads the detached ears until they are properly burnt, then she rakes them out from the flames in a heap towards the left hand, and so on until they have graddaned all they intend. As it has layen all this time in one heap since it was taken out of the flames, it is now properly dried, they put it in a large tub, and tread it with their feet, and rub it with their hands, and winnow it four or five times, by which means they separate all the chaff, and leave nothing except the mere cuticle, and now they have no more to do but to carry it to the mill or grind it in their querns. The meal of corn dressed in the above manner is not so fair as that dried in the kiln, but the bread is pleasant to the taste, is light on the stomach, and is easy of digestion. If the weather is favourable a woman is said to make a boll ready for the mill in a day, for which she receives one peck of the grain for her wages. This barbarous custom is much laid aside since the number of their mills increased, and if it is known that they graddan any it makes a break in their tacks. *Nota.*—If it be fair weather, not over calm nor over windy, they can work, but contrary they cannot." (p. 33.)

Skye.—Preparation of Whey. "In summer they feed much on milk and fish, especially whey, which is prepared thus:—The whey is put on the fire till it is near boiling, then it is taken off and set down on the floor; the cook then takes an instrument similar to the churn staff, which has some horse-hair railed around the outside of the rim, and so plunging and whirling it about between her hands, she raises a thick scum on the top of the whey. They frequently feed upon this without anything else. This mess they call froth." (p. 35.)

Skye.—Preserving Yeast. "The natives preserve their yeast in the following manner:—They cut a rod of oak four or five inches in circumference, twist it round like a wythe, and steep it in fresh yeast for some hours, then hang it up and dry it. And whenever they need yeast they take down the twisted rod, and put it into a covered vessel amongst two or three pints of luke-warm wort, so in two hours thereafter they have fresh barm fit for immediate use." (p. 43.)

Skye.—Butter-making. "I could not help observing the rude and disagree-

able way by which they procured butter. They commonly put the milk into a kit, which serves for a churn, and over the mouth of this they tie a piece of a sheep or goat's skin. Then two women sit down on the floor opposite to each other, and take the churn between them; the woman to whom the mouth of the churn is opposite has a quantity of straw, and a mattress of the same materials spread over her lap, in order to soften the shock, then the one takes hold of the upper edge of the mouth, and the other of the bottom, and then they raise it up more than half from the floor on its bottom edge, and let it down with a very sudden shock in a manner not easily expressed. This throws the milk into a violent agitation, and by breaking against the sides of the vessel, it is at length broken into butter, to obtain which it frequently happens that they are obliged to continue this laborious process for nine or ten hours." (p. 39.)

Skye.—Wauking Cloth. "They use the following methods to wauk their cloth. There is a long piece of basket-work made of wattling, which is laid on the floor, upon which they place the cloth, and on each side sits a row of women, opposite to one another, who very regularly pull the cloth to and fro, and at the same time rub it very hard against the basket-work, and when it is nearly finished, they lean back and violently push it against each other. During all the operation they continue to sing." (p. 42.)

Skye.—Dye Stuffs. "They dye yellow with the tops of the *Erica vulgaris* or common heath, and *Alear* nut with *Lichen calcarius* or dyer's liverwort (in the Gaelic *corkir*), and the *Lichen saxatilis* or stone liverwort of Lin. (in the Gaelic *crothal*), and the *Gallium verum* or lady's bedstraw (in the Gaelic *Muc*) is said to make a better colour than the *Rubia tinctorium* or madder." (p. 43.)

Skye.—Tanning. "The natives tan their leather with the roots of the *Tormentilla erecta*, and prefer those which grow in uncultivated places to the contrary, and alleged that it will take three times the quantity of the latter to equal the former." (p. 38.)

Skye.—Halters, Bags, etc. "They pluck up by the roots the *Aira cærulea*, *i.e.*, the purple Aira, and after beating and drying it, they make it into halters, *etc.*, and bags for holding their meal, *etc.*" (p. 40.)

Skye.—Purging Calves. "In the spring the dairymaids give to their calves an infusion of the *Ligusticum scoticum* and the *Rhodiola rosea* to purge them. They call both these the *Lus nan Laogh*, *i.e.*, the calf herb." (p. 38.)

Mull.—Dress. "They wear the Highland dress, such as the bonnet, short coat, kilt, hose, and brogs. The plaids are now mostly out of fashion." (p. 20.)

Skye.—Dress. "They wear the Highland garb, such as the bonnet, short coat, kilt, hose. The plaids are now mostly out of fashion." (p. 36.)

Skye.—Wages of Servants. "The men's wages here generally is from twenty to thirty shillings sterling a year, except their principal servants who will have fifty shillings. If they hire a man for a week they give him his meat and eighteen pence. The women servants have from eight to twelve shillings per annum, the master supplying both men and women with shoes." (p. 42.)

Mull.—Diseases and Remedies. "The diseases that the natives are most subject to are coughs, sore breasts, asthmas, cancer, a dry scabby eruption of the skin, itch, scropholous tumours, fevers, and fluxes. The children are much troubled with worms, for which they use an infusion of the *Myrica gale* or Goul. The women use a decoction of the *Thalectrum minus* for obstructions of the menses, which they are frequently troubled with, also the girls, when they

happen to prove with child, unmarried, are said to use a decoction of the *Lycopodium selago* in order to effect an abortion. The small pox have been inoculated on two children here. They visit this Isle once in six or seven years in the natural way, and are frequently mortal." (p. 21.)

Skye.—Diseases. "The diseases that the inhabitants are most subject to are colds, coughs, and sore breasts in the spring, stitches, cholics, headachs, fever, grinding in their bellies, which often ends in a bloody flux; the itch and scurvy are frequent here, scropholous tumours and cancers sometimes occur, also the stone, worms, toothach, and sometimes pleuresies. They generally inoculate the small pox, which answers so well that very few die. Nothing of the venereal disease occurs here unless it be brought from other countries. Some time ago the children were seized with what they call eight-day illness, but now it very seldom occurs. They say that it proceeded from a custom that the midwives and nurses had. When they bathed them they used to put the long finger of one hand on the pallat, and their other hand to the back part of the infant's head, and so hang them up, but this barbarous and inhuman custom is altogether disused now."

"The women are frequently troubled with a suppression of the menses, to remedy which they use an infusion of the *Thalectrum minus* and the *Linum catharticum*. The *Lycopodium selago* is said to be such a strong purge that it will bring on an abortion." (p. 37.)

Arran.—Diseases. "The diseases that the islanders are most subject to is the small pox, sibbens, worms, fevers, scurvy, itch; the cancer occurs frequently; many children die of what they call the eight days sickness. The vulgar women are frequently troubled with an obstruction of the menses in the spring; both sexes are much afflicted with coughs and sore breasts. Agues seldom appear, and only when they are brought from the continent. Inoculation hath never been performed, except upon three children of Mr Stewart's, the minister of Kilbride. I was informed that there are several old people now living on the island who have never had the small pox. This they use as an argument against inoculation." (p. 8.)

Bute.—Diseases. "They have generally the small pox once in the seven years, but there are many old people in the island who never had them. Twenty years ago the sibbens were very frequent, but now they are seldom to be met with; here they have frequently fevers; the children are subject to worms, and the eight-days sickness often proves fatal to them, or hood falls as it is called here; their jaws are so firmly fixt that the point of a knife cannot be introduced betwixt the gums, and these diseases are imputed to the unskillfulness of the midwives. The common people are much subject to a dry, scaly eruption upon the skin, and itch. They are much troubled in the spring with coughs, and sore breasts and throats." (p. 14.)

Skye.—Bodily defects rare. "Perhaps there is no part of the inhabitable globe where so few bodily imperfections are to be seen, nor any children go more early." (p. 35.)

Skye.—Superstitious Libation to Brownie. "Not many years ago the milkmaids had a superstitious custom of making a libation of their milk every Saturday night to Gruagach, *i.e.* a Brownie, uttering a sort of prayer beseeching he would take under his protection for the ensuing week all their cows, milk, etc., and if any accident happened to them or to their cattle at any time, when they

omitted to perform this piece of worship, they imputed their misfortune wholly to this neglect they had been guilty of by not presenting Brownyn with his usual libation. About four or five years ago Mr Donald MacQueen's servants were raising a dyke near to which was a flat stone a little hollowed in the middle, called Clach Ghruagaich, *i.e.*, Brownyn's stone. On this stone many of the dairymaids poured forth an offering; one of the labourers of more sense and less superstition than his brethren suggested that the stone should be rolled into the dyke as a part of the materials, but his bigotted companions, strongly attached to this Tutlar Deity, opposed him, alledging that plenty of other stones might be procured, and insisted that the stone should remain where it was, because they looked upon such violence as the most atrocious impiety. During the dispute they observed Mr MacQueen coming towards them, to whom they appealed, and desired to decide the matter. Mr MacQueen, always desirous of checking any superstitious notions, ordered the stone to be raised and carried to the dyke, which was immediately done, and underneath it they found a horse load of char'd wood. This stone seems to have been one of the Druid altars, and the charcoal the fuel used by them in sacrifice." (p. 39.)

Arran.—Elf Shot. "About half a mile to the north-east side of Kilbride there is an uncommon kind of rock. It is, upon comparing, the same in substance as that with which the ancient inhabitants tipped their arrows, many of which the natives even now frequently find in the island. They have an absurd and superstitious notion that they are shot by infernal spirits, and will affirm that they have stuck so fast in the shafts of their spades that it required much force to disengage them. They call this stone the Elf shot stone, supposing that it is from the cows receiving a wound by this stone that they become elf-shot." (p. 7.)

Lamlash.—St Maolisa's Well and Cave. "This Isle is very well watered—one well in particular, called St Maolisa's well, with a bathing pond, which the natives used to drink and to bath in for all lingering ailments." "It contains no mineral, but is entirely pure, gushing out of a rock. The Saint had a cave where he lived in not far from the well. In this cave there are many inscriptions of a different character to any known by the curious. Here he had a garden and a stone chair, wherein he usually sat, and near the north end there are the remains of an old chapel, built after the Gothic taste." (p. 11.)

Arran.—King's Cave with Sculptures. Large Cist. The Byrral. Druids' Instruments for Sacrifice. "On the west coast of Arran there are several large caves, but the one called the King's Cave is the largest." "There are engraven on the side of this cave the figures of deer, hounds in chase, men of extraordinary stature with bows, arrows, swords, and durks, the weapons used in those days." "In Glenshant is a tomb or large chest near 12 feet long, and on its side is a man described in armour. This was lately discovered when digging peats. It has never yet been opened." "There is still to be seen here a Byrral, which the priests consulted always in the manner the Jewish High Priest did his Urim. It is taken to be an oriental pebble. Lately were discovered by Mr Gershom Stewart, Min^r in Kilbride, the Druids' instruments for sacrifice, such as brass wedges for cleaving their wood, an axe, and a brass flesh fork." (pp. 12, 13.)

Bute.—Graves of Men apart from those of Women. "At the south end of the island are the remains of an old chapel." "It is remarkable that the men and

women were buried in different places—the former in a spot of ground raised by art, the latter in a lower piece of ground near the other.” (p. 15.)

Skye.—The Fox eats berries. “Mr Donald MacQueen, Minister of Kilmore, told me that the Fox, *Canis vulpis*, eats the berries of the *Arbutus uva ursi*.” (p. 38.)

Skye.—Seals and Otters. “Seals and otters abound round the coast of Skye. The former are valued on account of the excellent oil they yield, which the natives burn in lamps, the latter on account of their skins, which sell for five or six shillings each. The otter is said to shut his eyes when he eats, and this is a considerable disadvantage to him, for he is in danger of being shot by the huntsman, or robbed of his prey by the fowls.” (p. 44.)

Skye.—The Rock Sow. “They get sometimes a fish, which they call Muc craige, *i.e.*, the rock sow. It is one of the genus Sparus of Lin. This fish when fried in a pan with a little butter is a fine sweet delicious morsel.” (p. 28.)

Skye.—Shoals of Herring. “I was informed that many years ago there came into Loch Urn such a large shoal of herring that it wholly filled the loch, and that they drove ashore all other kind of fishes, such as flounders, lyeth, skate, etc., and large heaps of herrings were left upon the beach by the ebb of the tide.” (p. 29.)

Loch Fine.—Loupers. “This season there came into the loch a kind of fish not usually seen here, at least not in such shoals. They are named loupers by the inhabitants. They spring high out of the water; they chase, affright, and devour every other fish in the loch. This fish appears to me to be of the whale tribe. They will be from 6 to 8 feet long, nearly of the shape of salmon, black on the back and white on the belly, having two pectoral fins, and a horizontal tail.” (p. 17.)