

FISH AND FISHING AT LOCHLEVEN.

It cannot be denied that the great attraction of Lochleven is for anglers. There are the regular frequenters, and there is the occasional visitor; but between them they must now include thousands of persons scattered far and wide over the country to whom the subject of angling on the Kinross-shire lake, from their personal knowledge of it, can be of little interest. They can answer all the inquiries which in her curiosity on the subject Queen Mary put to Roland Græme, "inquiries into the place where the fish can be taken, their size, their peculiarities, the times when they are in season, and a comparison between the Lochleven trouts and those which are found in other lakes and rivers of Scotland." Yet, though the charm of novelty is already lost, the interest is quite of modern growth. The generation still possesses the country that first began to find fly-casting on Lochleven waters a profitable pastime. It is so recently as 1850—so we are credibly informed—that the discovery was made that Lochleven trout will rise to the fly. If this be so, then the honour of having predicted the discovery by some score years would seem to belong to Sir Walter Scott. *The Abbot* appeared in 1831, and in a certain chapter in that delightful novel incidental reference seems to be made

to fly-fishing on Lochleven. It is a kind of double anachronism, for the reference—made by the writer nineteen years before the practice was known—applies to a scene descriptive of the usages of the sixteenth century. The reference, it must be confessed, is a little vague, and is not unexposed to a charge of inconsistency. George Douglas, we read, “sate in the stern of the little skiff trimming his fishing-tackle, and from time to time indicating by signs to Græme, who pulled the oars, which way he should row. . . . ‘Row,’ said Douglas, ‘towards St Serf’s Island; there is a breeze from the west, and we shall have sport, keeping to windward of the isle where the ripple is strongest. We will speak more of what you have mentioned when we have had an hour’s sport.’ Their fishing was successful, though never did two anglers pursue even that silent and unsocial pleasure with less of verbal intercourse.” In this passage there are several points of interest—such as Scott’s general opinion of angling as a pursuit, and his apparently intimate knowledge of a good fishing station to the east of St Serf’s; but the chief point to notice at present is his probable reference to fly-fishing. A little further on, however, in the same chapter, an expression is used which strikes the reader as being inconsistent with this interpretation. “‘Go to,’ said the seneschal, ‘thou art a foolish boy, unfit to deal with any matter more serious than the casting of a net or the flying of a hawk.’” If only Scott had made the Douglas say “the casting of a line,” the description, one feels, would have hung together better, and the interpretation would be complete.

The trout of Lochleven, remarkable as everybody knows for their high flavour and beautiful red colour, gave its distinction to the lake long before they gave pastime to the angler. They were taken in nets, and the captures that were made may well fill the mind of modern fishers with astonishment and envy. Twenty-four dozen at a single haul was a common catch. The most productive places, or setts as they were locally called, included the Prap, and Powmill, and Jummock's Deep. At the last-named station, situated near the old manse of Orwell on the north shore, a haul of thirty dozen stands on record. Pike, of sharklike dimensions, and eels by the barrelful, not to mention the prolific and pachydermatous perch, were also, and still are, to be reckoned among the more or less valuable and various produce of the lake. But the trout have so monopolised the interest of Lochleven that these are seldom taken into account; and it may be news to many that char, and even the flounder, at one time gave variety to the happy family of Lochleven fishes. Whether the reduction of the lake had to do with the disappearance of char is matter of uncertain debate. It was probably a factor without being the prime cause. The reduction was made in the winter-time of 1830-31, and was on a scale of sufficient magnitude to affect the loch in almost every aspect of it. It altered the shore line so as to give a new contour to the shape of the lake-basin, it increased the area of the old islands and created new ones, it destroyed or restricted the feeding and breeding beds of the fish, probably to a greater extent than is believed. Its gains to the land

and the millowners on the Leven outlet are obvious enough ; but its losses to the lake included at least a square mile and a quarter of water area, and from four and a half to eight feet of depth. The old Castle island, which Queen Mary knew, comprised only two acres, and the old Inch—strangely neglected, but by far the most classical spot within the bounds of Lochleven—was metamorphosed in shape and altered in area from thirty-five acres to treble its natural size.

To the epicure the disappearance of char, not only from Lochleven, but from almost all the British lakes, may be a cause of grief, for the fish is dainty eating ; but to the true angler, whose stomach is not for fish but fishing, the matter is hardly worth a moment's concern, for the creature is comparatively non-sportive. It refuses to leap to the fly, and contemns the blandishments of the playful minnow. It is one of those seriously-minded fish that, when sinners entice them, withhold their consent. Yet it has not found salvation in abstention. The trout, on the other hand, which flies at every bait and coquets with every allurements, seems to thrive through it all. There lurks a moral here, which the intelligent reader may point for himself. In Lochleven to whose waters the char has been a stranger for now nearly sixty years, it used to be known as the "gally-fish," or "gelly-troch," a local name given it by the fishermen, who found that its principal food was the "gelly"—a species of black leech pretty plentiful in the lake. Pennant, without seeing a specimen, was probably the first to identify the gelly-troch with the char, although the Lochleven

fishermen seem to have rather astonished him by their accounts of its size and weight and abundance. It was, if they were to be believed, five, or even six times larger, and as many times heavier, than the English and Welsh pigmy char with which he had acquaintance, and it was so rife that Lethangie and Lathro poacher-ploughmen bagged it in half-boll sacks, and split, salted, and dried it for winter provision. It came sailing up the North Queich to their bothy door, in a feeble effort to find safe spawning-ground. The distance was not more than a mile from the loch. It might have fared better if it had gone farther. Thus it happens, that though the char is a fish so fortified—presumably by precept or intuition (for experience it has none)—as to refuse a look at the hook, it is exposed to other dangers from which the adventurous fin is comparatively free. Over-caution is a sad hindrance to enterprise, and is apt to induce a timid disposition and a phlegmatic habit. It would appear to be so in the case of the gelly-troch. So long as that fish kept to the deep water of “the hems” it found food and safety; but the spawning season came in its regular round, and the gravid fish, obedient to the “prick of nature,” was driven forth to the lake shallows and the feeder streams and burns from the Ochils. The nearest shallows, those of the lake for the most part, contented it; and there, through the mother fish’s timidity, the spawn was left passive to the mercy of innumerable enemies from which it would have been safe in the more distant shallows of the spawning streams—to which the adventurous trout more securely makes

periodic resort. In this way, perhaps largely by this very means, the gelly-troch became a diminishing quantity in the lake, and at length about the year 1837, the last of the race had the range of Lochleven. It seems to have grown weary of its solitude, for it repeatedly suffered itself to be taken in the nets that year. The fishermen—worthy surely of the notice of a Theocritus—saw the pathos of the situation, and piously put it back. But the last capture was tragic: the bribe of a reverend collector (not reverend on this account, but for the ordinary reason) spiced the conscience of an unprincipled fisherman; and char is now as much a tradition of Lochleven as the shade of St Serf or the ghost of Queen Mary.