

## HEATHER.

BY REV. GEORGE WILLIAMS, F.S.A. (SCOT.).

“Moors red-brown wi’ heather-bells”.

“Its royal tints croon oor auld hills—  
The heather dings them a’”.

“On the wild hill  
Let the wild heath-bell flourish still”.

NOR more seductive to the curler is the call, “The ice is haudin’; look alive, man”, or to the lover the striking of the trysting hour, than the blaze of beauty, lighted up by the bloom of the heather, is to the mountaineer. When moor and mountain have clothed themselves in their garments of beauty, a strong impulse seizes all that delight “to brush the heathy fells” to be afield. With all such it will not be amiss to have a word or two about the three plants known as heather.

They are *Calluna vulgaris*, or Common Ling (ling is not a common term among us), *Erica cinerea*, or fine-leaved Heath, and *Erica tetralix*, Cross-leaved Heath, or Bell Heath. The word “heather”, like heathen, means a dweller on the heath or waste moorland. Heath and heather are both common in combination with other words. Not a few of the names of our moorland birds contain these terms as a sort of first name—*e.g.*, heath- or heather-bill, heath- or heather-cock, heather-lintie, -pipit, -peeper. We have heather-ale, -beer, -bred, -besom, -cove, -faced, -plants, -moor, -soil, -reenge, -rope, with the plant names, carlin-heather, heath- or heather-bell, heath-berry, -grass, -pea, -whin, &c. An almost unknown bard of Galloway, David Davidson, whose “Thoughts on the Seasons” was published in London, in 1789, speaks of his great contemporary, Burns, shortly before passed away, as “heather-headed”—

“Sic sangs as thae, the heather-headed bard  
Of Scotland ranted as he trode the glebe,  
And Caledonia’s taste thought it nae shame  
To croon the o’erword”.

Our speech is adorned with other expressive metaphors taken from the plant—"Heather and dub", meaning rough and ready; "to set the heather on fire", to cause a commotion. In our topography we have such names as Heatherbrig (on Bennachie), Heathcot (near Aberdeen), Hedderwick (1696), in Keith-Hall, Heatheryfield (in Cairnie), Heatherygall (in Glass), Heatheryhillock (in Gartly), Heathercliff, Heathfields (several). Drumnaheath (Kintore) has a different origin.

The Gaelic fraoch (heather), or the adjective, gives us Freuchie, Freugh, Frew. There is a Fifeshire Fruix, which, like the Perthshire Frews, seems to be an English plural termination added to the Gaelic word—the lands broken up into parts are in this way described collectively. There is hardly a heather-cowe growing in all the Frews at the present time; but it is hard to say what the district may have been like when the plant was known as fraoch. Near Loch Freuchie is the hill "Carn Bad an Fhraoich", as well as a place called Auchnafree. Rules of Gaelic aspiration account for the termination "ree" in place-names, as Baile an fhraeigh (Balanree), the town of the heather; see for illustration the more probable alternative meaning of Tyrie, in the recent edition of Pratt's "Buchan", "the heather-house".

A friend of ours once desired an itinerant musician to play his favourite air, "Craigellachie Bridge". The performance was brought to a premature finish by the loud and angry protest of the listener, "Stop it, I say, this instant, and do not for ever destroy my favourite tune". For a similar reason I leave this subject of roots and place-names, lest, peradventure, the reader be tempted to think the less of heather itself thereby.

*Calluna vulgaris* (*C. erica*, according to some floras) is pre-eminently the plant of our hillsides. When minutely examined, the leaves are found to be somewhat downy, to be arranged in four rows on opposite sides of the stem, and furnished with a pair of spurs each. The flower is very small, shortly stalked, drooping, and of a purplish pink colour. It has received its generic name, *Calluna* (καλλύνω sweep), from the fact that besoms were made of it.

On the drier and sunnier spots of the hill-face may be observed here and there ruddy crimson patches covered with the fine-leaved heath (*Erica cinerea*). Its drooping purple bells are clustered together on the top of a slender stem, "a dense whorled raceme". Its minute leaves are arranged in whorls of three, and are keeled. The *Erica tetralix*, or cross-leaved heath, delights in damper soil than its sister. Its leaves are narrow and downy and arranged in fours; hence its name, *tetralix*, or cross-leaved. The flowers are in terminal umbels or clusters, and the flower-stalks are of a whitish colour, caused by the down that covers them. This is one of our most delicate and pretty plants, and its rose-tinted flowers, almost white at the base, never fail to delight the hillside Rambler.

Dried heather retains its colour for several months, and serves in the vase to project pleasant August into dismal December. What turnips and grass are to the cattle rearer, heather is to the sportsman. Its tops and seeds constitute the main food of the grouse and black-cock. As it is a perennial herb, with a lifetime of about a dozen years, the scrogs in favourable situations may attain a length of nearly three feet, and, near the hills, play an important part in the economy of the household as fuel and as thatch "to keep out the drap" on rainy days.

A not unimportant service in domestic economy rendered by heather is expressed by the finer quality and the higher price of the distinctive honey known as heather honey. Bee-keepers in August frequently convey their "skeps" many miles that the workers may be nearer the needful material for turning out the superior article and in larger quantities.

According to Dickie, heather may be found from sea-level to a height of 3300 feet, showing that altitude has little effect on its distribution. Heavy fines were inflicted on moor-burners. According to Scottish law, "no man make muir-burn after the first of March till all the corns be shorn, under the pain of fourty shillings to the lord of the land of the burner, or fourty days' imprisonment".—James I., Parliament I., cap. 20.

In the days of yore a woman was fined so many marks by the Kirk Session of her parish for some misdemeanour she had been convicted of. A long-headed elder did not agree with the sentence, but spoke out, "The jade 'll never pay ye; she's nae guilty o' payin' ony ane; gar her pu' a feow birns o' fine swack heather to make the kirk water-ticht". This alternative was more pleasing to the delinquent—"Thank ye, Mains; I'se dee that, weel-a-wat. Lat me ken fan I'm to hae 't ready. Ye'll be inten'in' ca'in't". And the woman went her way rejoicing.

One of the unpleasant experiences of the hill-climber arises from the presence of peat-haggs. If the weather be in anywise damp he may have to paddle and puddle through a soft crust of peat. If the black stuff be too porridgy to support his weight, he may at any moment find himself "tuavin'" like a fly among jelly. Though dry as dust, this disagreeable material greatly impedes locomotion, and will draw from the pedestrian, as he looks at himself in the mirror, the remark of The Wee Wiffukie, "This is nae me". Everyone that has dug peat or has seen the digging of it in the moss knows that the surface is useless for fuel, and has to be removed to get at the good article beneath. This surface is a coating of decaying and decayed heather, which has not gained solidity enough for fuel or for one to walk over comfortably, and is a form of heather the climber will steer clear of as much as possible.

It is strange that heather, the carpet of the elves frequenting the hillside, plays almost no part in the superstition or folklore of our country. It is not mentioned in "The Folklore of the North-East of Scotland". Neil Munro's story, "The Secret of the Heather-Ale"—"the ale, the fine ale, the cream of rich heather-ale"—can scarcely be regarded as belonging to the category of superstition. The writer's grandfather pulled a birn of heather off the summit of Elfhillock, which he carried to the house as an offering to the women then engaged baking cakes. His present was not an acceptable one. Having mentioned where he got the heather, "Tak' it back,

laddie", they exclaimed, "tak' it back at aince"; and he did so, laying the coves carefully down as he got them, lest the fairies, incensed at the act, should interfere with the happiness of the inmates. But, in this instance, it was the place whence the heather was taken that involved the superstitious ideas, and not the plant itself.

One feels angry, if not amused, at Burt's outburst on the contemplation of our scenery (Burt's Letters):—  
"There is not much variety in it, but gloomy spaces, different rock, heath, and high and low. To cast one's eye from an eminence toward a group of mountains, they appear still one above the other, fainter and fainter, according to the aerial perspective, and the whole of a dismal, gloomy brown, drawing upon a dirty purple, and most of all disagreeable when the heath is in bloom. Those ridges of the mountains that appear next to the other—by their rugged, irregular lines, the heath and black rocks—are rendered extremely harsh to the eye by appearing close to that diaphanous body, without any medium to soften the opposition; and the clearer the day the more rude and offensive they are to the sight".

It would seem that none of our great poets has tuned the lyre to the praise of heather. Chaucer, Wordsworth, and Burns have won its secrets from the heart of the daisy, and told them. "The broom, the broom, the yellow broom, an ancient poet sang it". Elizabeth Barrett Browning gives us "Lessons from the Gorse". Tennyson lectures on the humble "Flower in the crannied wall", and which of our poets has not sung of the rose? But which of heather? Although, however, our greater writers have overlooked it, yet we possess many spirited verses from our minor bards glorifying the humble herb. John Nicholson writes on a Highland dell,

"Where purple heath and azure hare-bells grew;

Like a great chalice in the hand of God,  
That grand old glen brimm'd o'er".

Professor MacLaggan writes—

"Up amang the purple heather,  
No' a flow'r that man can gather

Frae garden fair  
Or greenhouse rare  
Can beat the bonnie bloomin' heather".

A Highlander pleads (Carrick)—

"Heather beds are soft and sweet,  
Mo laogh geal, mo laogh geal;  
Love and ling will be our meat  
Amang the Hielan' mountains.

Neither house nor ha' hae I,  
Mo laogh geal, mo laogh geal,  
But heather bed and starry sky,  
Amang the Hielan' mountains".

An unknown bard, John Ballantine, has given us some lines full of feeling on the subject—

"I cling to the braes, like the bud to the thorn,  
For 'mang their heather knowlets sae free was I born,  
An' the hame o' my youth is my lov'd hame still,  
'Neath the kindly shade o' a heather hill.  
And when nature fails, row'd in my plaid,  
I'll lay me down on a heather bed,  
And leesome I'll wait till kind Heaven wills  
To waft me awa frae my heather hills".

Emily Brontë has pictured a spirit in Heaven so discontented with the uncouth surroundings, and grumbling so incessantly at her hard lot there, that the angels lost all patience and flung her out to fall on the soft heath on the top of Wuthering Heights, among homelier sights and sounds, where she came to herself "sobbing for joy". But for aught we know the Everlasting Mountains may wear the purple tinge which makes our hills here familiar and beautiful to us!

Although heather is widely distributed ["Europe (Arctic), W. Siberia, Azores, Greenland, Newfoundland, and N. U. States (very rare)"].—Hooker's Flora], yet many of our minor writers of verse give Scotland the style, "Land of the Heather", *par excellence*—"Thy heather, thy thistle are sacred to me"; "O for the bloom of my own native heather"; "Ken ye the land o' the heather?"; "If spared to reach oor heather-land"; "Leeze me on our heather-land"; "My Heather Land" (title of a song by Thom)—

“The dew-water’d blooms  
Of Scotia’s red heather droop over their tombs”;

“Isna Scotia’s heather-bell  
The glory o’ the year?”

“Scotia’s e’e is proud to see  
Our Hielan’ hills an’ braes o’ heather”,

and so on. The above half-score of citations are from songs and poems of our minor bards, showing how closely and generally our country and heather are associated. John Imlah says—

“The broom an’ whin, by loch an’ lin,  
Are tipp’d wi’ gowd in summer weather;  
How sweet an’ fair! but meikle mair  
The purple bells o’ Hielan’ heather.  
Hey for the Hielan’ heather!  
Hey for the Hielan’ heather!  
Dear to me, an’ aye shall be,  
The bonnie braes o’ Hielan’ heather”.

A poem, entitled “Scotch Heather”, is given among Robert Bird’s “Law Lyrics”, two verses of which might be quoted—

“Bright purple bloom of Scotland’s hills,  
Garb of her mountains, glens, and rills,  
At sight of thee my bosom fills  
With memories proud  
Of tartans, thistles, snuff, meal-mills,  
And mist-wet clouds.

But why should thy small purple flower  
Be dyed with blood in peaceful hour,  
On moors, where men who creep and cower  
With guns resort  
To pour on birds a leaden shower  
And call it sport?”

As Scotland has been somewhat loosely associated with heather, as if it, and not the thistle, were our national badge, so has heather got associated with our hills, as if there were none of our hills without its covering, and as if the seaside were an impossible or unlikely habitat for it. There are many hills where it is not found, and it may be seen in all its glory within a few yards of the sea-beach. White heather has a meaning for the lover and friend,

and is eagerly sought after. Plants of it, usually found at considerable heights, are often transferred to our gardens, to die there, not because the barometric conditions are against it, but because the soil is unfavourable. Given favourable soil and a little attention, good results may be expected.

Of the adjectives qualifying heather, in some of our authors, are: *purple* (Hugh Haliburton), *bonnie, braw, red, russet* (Clough), *brown*, "moors *red-brown* wi' heather-bells" (Burns), *green, halesome* (Imlah), *rank, hardy, fragrant* (from "The Gadie rins"), and Janet Hamilton has "the hinny breath o' the hether-bells glaffin' on the breeze". The late Queen wrote of hills as "beautifully heather-coloured". Robert Bird has "climbed 'mong hairsts of heather, deep and wide". John Stuart Blackie tells us that

"The braes of Mar with heather glow";

and Freeland mentions how

"In heathy wildness,  
On bed of budding heather  
In dreams a' night he lay".

Whoever has read our late Queen's "Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands" will recollect how a sprig of white heather, picked on Craig nam Ban, "the emblem of good luck", lent its aid to the bashful suitor, and so played a part in the close union between the Royal Houses of our Native Land and of the Prussian Fatherland.

F. Edward Hulme, in "Familiar Wild Flowers", states that a golden-yellow dye is made of the crushed heather shoots and stems. They are boiled in alum-water, and exposed for three or four days to the air. "Used alone", he adds, "it gives various tints of yellow and orange; with oak bark a rich brown, with cochineal tints of scarlet". He also mentions that a strong decoction of it is used in Scotland in tanning leather.

In the November number of the *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Dr. W. G. Smith has an article on "The

Origin and Development of Heather Moorland", being a review of a German work by Dr. Paul Graebner—*Die Heide Norddeutschlands*—in which he assures us that "the monograph of Dr. Graebner is one of the standard books of reference on heather vegetation, and will repay careful reading".

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THE HEATHER-FLOWER.

THE swing of the heather's beneath my feet:  
 Oh, the heather-flower so red!  
 The westerly wind is warm and sweet,  
 And far below me the waters meet  
 That rise on the mountain-head.

No grey mists mantle the steep hillside:  
 Oh, the heather-flower is red!  
 All day I will wander the moorland wide,  
 Where the blackcock calls, and at eventide  
 The heather shall be my bed.

And the rocky fells are wild and stern,  
 But the heather-flower is red;  
 The honeysuckle and maiden-fern  
 And foxglove grow by the winding burn,  
 All drenched with the dews night-shed.

Oh, bonny the hills where the ash-tree grows,  
 Where the heather-flower is red!  
 And in summer shine, or in winter snows,  
 Or in autumn fall when the drooping rose  
 Sinks down to the dank earth dead.

'Tis ever the land I love the best,  
 The land of the heather red.  
 So I'll wander now on the rolling crest  
 Of the lonely moor, till into the west  
 The feet of the day have fled.

LAWRENCE B. JUPP.

(In *Chambers's Journal*.)