

ART. III.—*Pearl-gathering in the Lake District.* By  
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THE little river Irt, which issuing from the foot of Wastwater carries away the superfluous water of our deepest English lake, to mingle finally with the sea amid the sandflats of Drigg and Ravenglass, has a course of a length of about eight miles. This stream and its principal tributary, the Bleng, run through valleys rich in delightful scenery and interesting as having been the cradles of such ancient villages as Strands, Irton and Drigg, places which have played a not inconsiderable part in our local history. Along the course of the Irt, moreover, are traces of the former existence of more than one bygone local industry. Cinderdale, for instance, down which runs a small tributary of the Irt, probably derives its name from the still existing slag-heap of an ancient bloomery or forge where iron was smelted with charcoal. A more questionable form of industry—it is to be hoped of a temporary nature only—was brought to light in 1865, when, near Starholme, were discovered two moulds, made of pure plumbago, for coining false money. These moulds, used for counterfeiting the groat and half-groat of either Edward IV or Richard III and the silver penny of Henry VII, were possibly the work of one of the monks of Furness Abbey; it will be remembered that that religious house had its sheep-runs on the fells near the head of the valley (see *Trans.* o.s. iii, 27).

Perhaps, however, the most interesting industry associated with the valley of the Irt, though such an industry can never have been one of any considerable magnitude or importance, was that of pearl-gathering.

This manner of earning a livelihood, practised by dwellers in the Irt valley, did not escape the notice of that keen observer, the antiquary, William Camden, when he visited Cumberland at the close of the 16th century and wrote:—

“ Higher up ” (he has been describing Ravenglass and Walls Castle), “ the little brook *Irt* runs into the Sea, wherein the Shell-fish, gaping and eagerly sucking in its dewy streams conceive and bring forth Pearls, or (to use the Poet’s name) *Shell-berries*. These the Inhabitants gather up at low-water; and the Jewellers buy them of the poor people for a trifle, but sell them at a good price. Of these and such like, *Marbodæus* seems to speak in that verse of his: *Gignit et insignes antiqua Britannia baccas*. And Britain’s ancient shores great Pearls produce.”

This local industry had probably been carried on from a period long anterior to Camden’s memorable visit to our district. Like many other streams in the British Isles, on the continent of Europe and in North America, the Irt produced, and still produces, though probably in smaller quantities than of yore, the *Unio* or pearl-producing fresh-water mussel, a shell-fish which sometimes attains the size of six inches in length. Owing, it is held, to the irritation caused by the presence of some parasite, these mussels frequently form a deposit within their shells around the source of irritation, and this deposit constitutes the pearl.

Such pearls, collected by local fishermen, would obtain a ready market in the vicus attached to the neighbouring Roman fort and port of Clanoventa or Ravenglass. It must be remembered that the Romans first made British pearls known to the outer world, indeed it has sometimes been stated, though on no authority, that one of the reasons which induced Julius Caesar to undertake the invasion of Britain was his desire to gain possession of her coveted supply of pearls. Though this statement is, of course, nonsensical, it is certain that he held British pearls in high esteem, and Pliny tells us that he had an

inscription engraved to testify that the breastplate which he dedicated to Venus Genetrix in her temple at Rome was made of such pearls. Pliny, however, writes disparagingly of these British gems as "small and badly coloured," and Caius Julius Solanus repeats his information, practically in the same words. Tacitus, in his *Agricola*, wrote:—"Britain bears gold, silver and other metals as the reward of victory; the ocean also produces pearls, but dull coloured and dirty brown."

Aelian is rather kinder in his mention of British pearls. After stating that the best pearls are the Indian and those from the Red Sea, he describes the pearl of what he designates as the "Brettanic island in the Western Ocean" as "in a measure rather golden-coloured, having rays somewhat dull and dusky," and adds that it was superior to that found near the Bosphorus. Origen attributes the second place in value to the British pearl, but on the other hand, Bede, writing at the close of the 7th century, expresses a high opinion of the pearls of his native land. Describing the pearl mussels, he adds that in them, "they often find enclosed pearls of all the best colours—that is both red and purple, jacynth and green, but principally white" (*Hist. Ecc.* I, Cap. I).

How largely the Irt contributed to the supply of these pearls during the time of the Roman occupation, it is impossible to determine, but probably after the departure of the Romans the trade in such gems declined, as neither the Angles nor Norsemen who subsequently invaded the district were lovers of pearls. In the 13th century, however, the taste for pearls revived. Our local shrines were enriched by gifts of jewellery and mentions are made of pearls in a few local wills. Thus, for instance, in her second will of 1420, Idonea Sandford, one of the Sandfords of Askham in Westmorland, after disposing of other property, including her "best bed of black, with its cover and Silesian linen," her other beds, bedding, gowns,

kerchiefs, "a piece of silver which has no cover," and other items, bequeaths to her daughter, Idonea, "omnes cistas meas et omnes petras pretiosas vocatas perles et alias petras pretiosas," special emphasis, it is to be noted, being laid upon the pearls. (See *Trans.* N.S. xxi, 204f.).

An additional stimulus was given to the industry of pearl collecting by the belief which had arisen in the medicinal properties of the pearl. Pearls ground to powder, or even swallowed whole, were recommended for various diseases, as owing to the beauty and purity of these gems they were supposed to conduce to the health of the patient. Small seed pearls such as those usually found in the Irt and other British rivers, were considered adequate for this purpose.

Extraordinary ideas were entertained as to the origin of the mussels which produced these fresh-water pearls. Perhaps the growth of barnacles on wreckage and driftwood gave rise to the theory that these mussels grew on a tree or plant, and at as late a date as 1597, Dr. John Gerarde, in his "Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes," describes such mussels as growiug at Piel Castle in Furness, and giving birth to barnacle geese. His account of the phenomenon is amusing:—

"But what our eyes have seene and hands have touched we shall declare. There is a small haude (hold or castle) in Lancashire called the Pile of Foulders (Piel of Fouldray) wherein are found the pieces of old and bruised ships, some whereof have been cast thither by shipwracke, and also the trunks or bodies with the branches of old and rotten trees, cast up there likewise, whereon is found a certain spume or froth, and it in time breedeth unto shells, in shape like those of the muskle, but sharper pointed and of a whitish colour; wherein is contained a thing in form like a lace of silk finely woven as it were together, of a whitish colour; one end whereof is fastned unto the inside of the shell, even as the fish of Oisters and Muskles are; the other end is made fast unto the belly of a rude mass or lump which in time cometh to the shape and forme of a Bird."

The writer goes on to tell us how the bird "groweth to a fowle bigger than a Mallard" after having split open its shell and hanging on only by its beak till it drops into the sea.

No doubt a few of our locally produced pearls were sold during the medieval period, but most of the British pearl fishing at this time was carried on in Scotland, Scottish pearls being referred to as early as 1355 in a statute of the goldsmiths of Paris. In 1705, John Spruel, a Scottish merchant, in a statement of account current between Scotland and England, complained that he had been dealing in pearls for the last forty years, but could never sell Scotch pearls in Scotland. His customers always preferred oriental gems, although he could furnish much harder and better Scotch specimens.

Meanwhile the pearl fishery of the Irt was not altogether neglected. The Elizabethan age was one of keen speculators, and among many other ventures, Sir John Hawkins, the famous sea captain is said to have obtained a patent for pearl-fishing in the Irt in Cumberland. Whether the old sea-dog ever worked his concession, or if he did so with what success is not recorded.

Another piece of evidence which shows that the Elizabethans were not without an eye to the profits which might possibly be made by the sale of Cumberland pearls is provided by the charter of the Company of Mines Royal, founded in 1564 by an agreement between Queen Elizabeth on the one part and Thomas Thurland, Master of the Savoy, and Daniel Hechstetter on the other part. Among the objects set forth as the legitimate sphere of activities for this company were to search, dig, try, roast and melt all manner of mines and ores of gold, silver, copper and quicksilver, the Queen to have one tenth of the gold and silver, a royalty on other metals and "the preferment in bying all Pretious stones or *pearl* to be found in the working of the mines." Of the history of this company

which had such important results upon both the political and the industrial history of Cumberland,\* it is unnecessary to write here. Its charter is mentioned merely to show that the pearl fisheries of Cumberland were not forgotten.

In Stuart times, there was a considerable amount of interest taken in the British pearl fisheries, and something attempted in the nature of pearl-cultivation, the pearl fishing industry receiving some attention from Parliament. The Conway river was at that time celebrated for its pearls, and it is related that Sir Richard Wynn, chamberlain to Catherine of Braganza, the queen of Charles II, presented her with a great Conway pearl which is believed to occupy a place in the British crown. This renewed demand for British pearls appears to have stimulated interest in the Irt valley fishery, for in 1692-3, a Thomas Patrickson, gent., who claimed the right of fishing in the rivers Irt and Ehen, was granted a charter incorporating the Company of Pearl Fishers in these two rivers, which, he stated, were well stocked with horse-mussels. Nicolson and Burn in their County History state that he was a Patrickson of How, but he is more likely to have been a relative of those Ennerdale Patricksons who lived in London at St. Clement Danes. (See *Trans.* n.s. xxv, 234). There is no record of the main line of the Patricksons of Ennerdale possessing fishing rights in the Irt or its tributaries.

Nicolson and Burn further inform us that £800 worth of mussel-pearls are said to have been sold by this Mr. Thomas Patrickson in London. The company was to consist of Thomas Patrickson, the governor, a deputy governor and eight London merchants. The charter was to hold good for fourteen years only, and the company

\* For further details with regard to the history of the activities of the Company of Mines Royal, see the late Mr. W. G. Collingwood's *Lake District History and Elizabethan Keswick*.

was under the obligation of electing a treasurer, besides solicitors, beadles, or other officers to reside in London and Cumberland. Altogether, with such a big pay roll, it hardly looks as if the venture was ever likely to turn out a profitable one; it evidently died a natural death.

About the same time Bishop Nicolson in his diary makes an allusion to the presence of pearl-mussels in Cumberland waters. Under the date October 21st, 1690 is the following entry:—"Zu Bank-end. E vicino Lacu conchyliia margaritifera; de quibus rectè Beda (quod margaritae nostrae omnis sunt coloris) lib. I, cap. I. Hist Ecc."\* If Bishop Nicolson is referring to the Bank-end, near Allonby, it is possible that the lake or lagoon to which he refers in the above statement was the Stank, an inland sheet of water which formerly existed in Holm Cultram, where the inhabitants of that district used to fish, when prevented by hostile Scottish raiders from fishing in the Solway (*Register of Holm Cultram*, pp. 210 and 216).

Pearl fishing is mentioned also by John Lucas, who wrote his quaint and entertaining *History of Warton* between the years 1710 and 1744. Describing the river Keer which gives its name to Carnforth, Lucas writes:—"In this river is found the *Concha longa Rondeletii*, the *Horse-Muscle*; but whether pearls have been found in any of them as in those of the neighbouring river *Wyre* and others in *England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland*, I cannot say."

Hutchinson in his *History of Cumberland*, writing in 1794, does little more than quote Nicolson and Burn with regard to the Irt pearl fishery, adding:—"There has not long since a patent been granted to some gentlemen and others for pearl fishing in this river (the Irt); but whether it will turn to any account is uncertain; for they are not very plentiful here." It is possible that he is here referring to the charter mentioned above, granted to

\* See *Trans.* N.S. i, 35.

Thomas Patrickson, but "recently" seems a curious term, if such were the case, applied to a charter granted more than a century before the publication of the writer's book. Hutchinson further tells us that "the pearls which are not bright and shining, and such indeed are most we meet with in Irt, Inn (Ehen), etc., are usually called Sand-pearl, which are as useful in physic as the finest."

It is doubtful if the Irt fishing benefited from the temporary revival of the Scottish pearl-fishing industry in 1860, when a German named Moritz Ungar visited Scotland and bought up all the pearls he could find in the hands of the peasantry, thus leading to an eager search for these gems in the following years. It is estimated that in 1865 pearls to the value of £12,000 were obtained from the Tay, Spey and other Scottish rivers. The efforts then made, however, probably more or less exhausted the supply of pearl-mussels, and only a few pearls are now obtained at irregular intervals.

As will be noticed from the few facts mentioned above, the Lake District pearl fishery appears never to have been a particularly extensive or lucrative enterprise. At the same time its story is not without interest, and it would be interesting to know of any specimens of Lake District pearls of outstanding size or quality. The present writer, not long ago, was shown a ring, which, he was told was given to a relative of its present owner by a late Lord Muncaster. In this ring is set a large pearl from the river Irt, a fine specimen though somewhat dull in colour.