

SKETCHES OF BRITAIN

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Sketches of Britain by James Howie

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JAMES HOWIE

**SKETCHES
OF BRITAIN**

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OF

BRITAIN.

BY

JAMES HOWIE, M.D.,

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SKETCHES OF BRITAIN.

BOOK I.

BRITAIN, my country ! all thy varied scenes—
Thy northern mountains, and thy southern plains,
In smiling sunshine seen, or gloomy shade,
I sing, advent'rous; changing oft my theme,
And mingling with it still my tears or joy.
How often, breathless and bedewed with sweat,
Have I, Ben-nevis, scaled thy frowning cliffs,
And from thy summit, looking far abroad,
Beheld in prospect grand, a vast array
Of mountains and of hills, of every form
And every height, lowly or tall, or round,
Fantastic, or sublime, piercing the blue
Of heaven's vast canopy, or sleeping calm
Beneath the shadow of the sunny clouds;
More stately far, and not less numerous,
Than the assemblage vast of buildings seen
By him who from St Paul's, on summer's morn,
Looks down on London: for, as cities, spires,

Domes, pinnacles, and steeples, rise sublime
Above the abodes of men; so do the grand
And rocky mountains of the north, ascend
Above the lesser hills, that round about
Encircle them in thousands! Who can tell
Their number, or their height, as on this bright
And sunny day they stand, in order dread,
Around me and below me! Yet a few,
A very few, of Scotia's hills are there.
Go northward, climb Ben-wyvis, look abroad—
Another group, far as the eye can reach,
Dazzles our vision. Yet again descend,
And, journeying southward, climb Benlomond's top—
Another crowd display their noble forms
In endless prospect. Caledonia!
These are thy martial battlements!—by these
Guarded, thy hardy sons in days of old
Laughed at the shaking of the Roman spear,
And mocked the Dane and Saxon! Grampian heights!
Bare, rugged, grey, who shall attempt to paint
The changes ye exhibit, as the day
Revolves, or weather shifts? At sunrise bright,
The curling mists, in which the sombre night
Had shrouded you, roll off in massy wreaths,
Spangled with gold; seen from the lofty height
On which I take my stand, it seems a sea
Swoln to convulsive size by recent storm,
And tossing still between the peaceful calm;
And ye seem monstrous tenants of the deep,
Whose heads terrific, shoulders broad, and backs

Shaggy and rough, the yawning waves disclose.
But as the sun advances, the strange scene,
So wild and visionary, changes quick;
The wreaths of mist, fantastic, melting, soon
Descend in dewy showers; the spiry cliffs
And tall black rocks are now distinctly seen,
Glitt'ring in sunlight; soon the crimson heath,
Spangled with gems, emerges on the eye;
And long ere noon ye shew again your shapes,
Diversified, huge, and magnificent.
At brilliant sunset, too, I've cast an eye
Of rapture o'er you, as your giant forms
Enlarged upon my sight; for in the light,
Gorgeous and dazzling, ye assume a mien
Of higher majesty, until, the sun
Sinking in glory, night again her robe
Of soft grey mist flings o'er you, shrouding all;
And from this height, rebellowing far below,
I've heard the echoing thunder, seen the flash
Of forked lightnings, as they spend their flight
Terrific, o'er the massy pond'rous clouds
That hid you from my vision. And when off
The thunder storm had rattled, I've looked down
And marked a hundred foaming torrents leap
O'er your rough sides impetuous—grander far
Than Foyers, Cara, or the fierce Stonebyres;
Downward they rush in thunder; while beneath
In the low valley, shaking with their din,
The peasants gather, and, with wond'ring eyes,
Gaze upwards. I have frequent too beheld.

From this high peak, the savage storm come down
Upon you in his fury, grasping hard
The rocky soil ; I've prostrate lain and eyed,
Far down, the sweeping hurricane ; rent rocks
In clatt'ring fragments leapt adown, and rolled
In masses to the plains—it seemed as if
Doomsday were come!—but ye outlived the blast
That tore up oak trees by the roots, and laid
Whole forests waste. Now let us down descend,
And seek the margin of some beauteous lake,
That sleeps among these mountains ; let us walk
Where overhanging birch-trees shadow us,
Fragrant and cool. On either side a range
Of lofty mountains rise ; look up, and lo
You see their barren summits capped with clouds,
Silv'ry and white, or stretching tall and vast,
Far up amidst the blue ; while birches sweet,
Alders, and wild briers, clothe the enormous base,
And fringe the lake with verdure : high above
I hear the eagle and the falcon scream,
While linnets, blackbirds, gentle thrushes, sing
Their love-songs all around me. Beautiful
Thy highland lake-scenes, Scotia! chiefly when
The summer sun emerges from the east
On early morn ; or paints, on dewy eve,
The fleecy clouds with crimson. Ask ye where
The highland warrior gained the dauntless form,
The iron muscle, and th' elastic bound,
That terrified in battle? look above,
And see how fearlessly yon band of youths

Are climbing heights enormous, scaling rocks
And precipices, where the wild goats scarce
Can venture or find footing; from their birth
Danger was reckoned pastime, toil delight—
Storms, thunders, lightnings, were their chosen
friends;—

On battle-plain why should the flash of steel
Dazzle those eyes, accustomed to the gleam
Of heaven's own meteors? or th' artillery's roar
Shake their firm nerve, who, from the topmost cliff
Of the high mountain, love to hear prolonged
Among the shaggy rocks, the awful voice
Of dread Jehovah, when he speaks to men
In thunder? Men of gentler mould, born, reared,
Nurtured on Britain's southern plains, are brave,
And face the foe undaunted;—but they need
Training, ere yet with head and front erect,
Fearless, they learn to close in deadly strife;
Not so the mountaineer: danger he scents,
And it allures him;—you require to check
Rather than cheer him on—the dire array
Of battle never daunts him; o'er his head
He waves his dread claymore; and, shouting loud
“A Gordon!” or “a Græme!” he flings himself
With all his heart and soul into the fight,
And conquers then or falls! Or do ye ask
What fans the flame of love and soft desire
In the young highland bosom? 'tis such scenes
As those I now survey: these beauteous scenes
Softens, on summer eve, the dreary soul