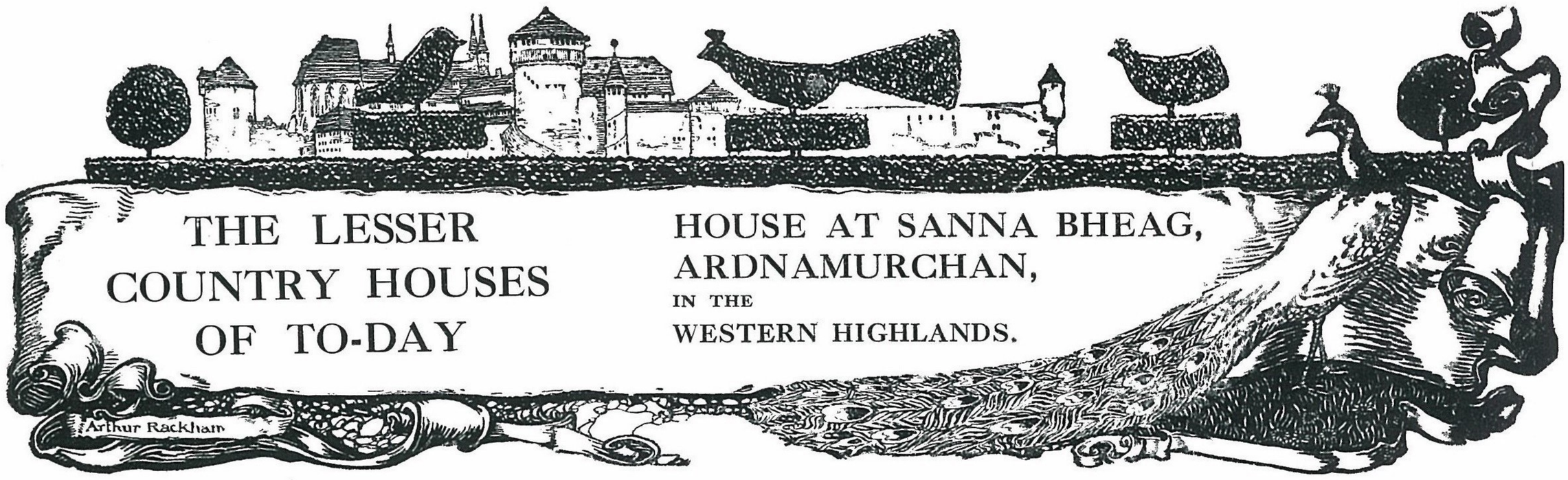


FOR years past, at every opportunity, and especially in my books, I have not ceased to deplore the ever-increasing examples of bad manners in building that are disfiguring the length and breadth of the Highlands. Red-tiled villas of red brick, which would look entirely in harmony with many an English countryside, shriek at the passengers on the boats sailing through the Kyles of Bute. By these and the abominations in equally alien material, crowned too often by corrugated iron, which are now so common in once picturesque crofting townships, the glories of the Highlands are steadily being dimmed. These new houses, moreover, have not any compensating merit in their interior arrangement, for they have no sort of sanitation, much less water laid on, and everyone admits that they are not nearly so cosy and warm as the old cottages of drystone and thatch.

When, therefore, I became able to undertake building a house for myself in my own country, I determined to put my preaching into practice, thereby to show what could be done by reverting to native methods of building in native materials.

I was attracted to a township ideally situated on the northern coast of the wild and beautiful peninsula of Ardnamurchan in Argyll, and there I obtained a feu through the acquiescence of the crofters, without whose unanimous consent the Scottish Land Court would not have granted me the site. Now, my object was to prove that "every modern convenience" (many of which, however, are constant nuisances) could be combined with the picturesque appearance and construction of the old houses, using the stone from the hillside behind and heather for thatching from an adjacent glen.

I was more than fortunate in securing the co-operation of a young Highland builder from Tobermory, who was attracted by the novel idea of reverting to the old native building methods. Without his skill, enterprise and unfailing resource, the work would never have been carried through successfully, for at every step of the proceedings difficulties arose that would have completely baffled a Lowlander.

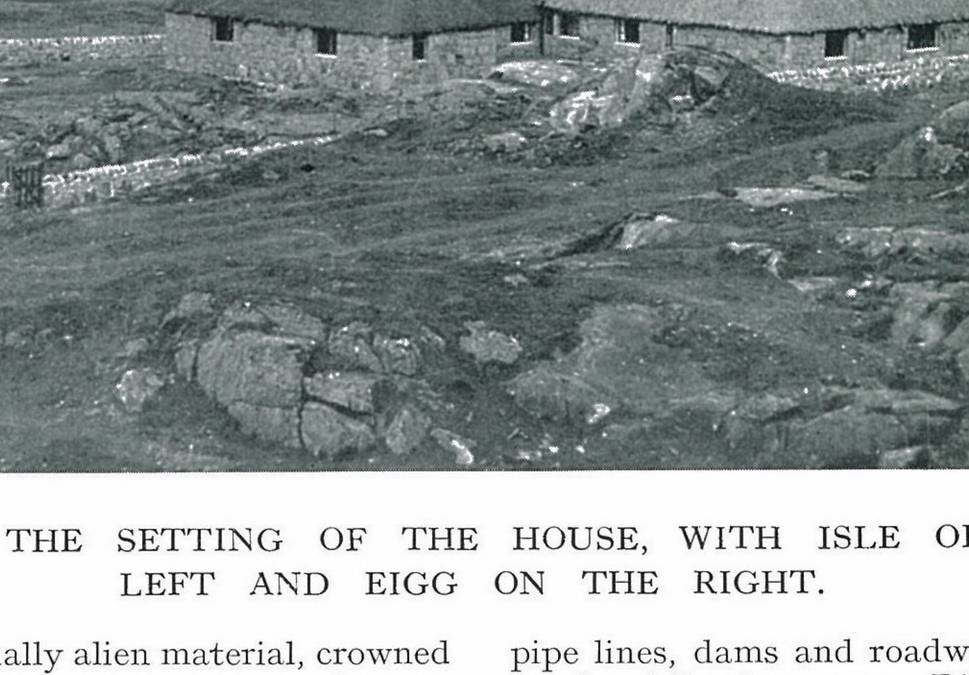
The blasting of the foundations began in mid-September, 1926, and the building and its accompaniments (power house, pipe lines, dams and roadway) were not finished till November in the following year. Difficulties of transport were among those of many encountered. The local port is seven miles distant on the south coast, and the public road stopped half a mile short of the house. Even when a way practicable for a motor lorry was made across to the house, flooding on occasion stopped all such passage. It is only possible to get a boat into this dangerous shore at suitable tides between June and September, and as the "puffer" that initially brought the bulk of the timber, pipes, etc., just missed the spring tide, there was great difficulty in landing the material. As the lighter, instead of being left stranded on the sands of the bay, was left afloat at sea, fourteen men had to wade out to her in water waist-high to unload her before the tide came in again.

All the men employed on the building were Gaelic-speaking Highlanders, mostly from Mull, and the unskilled labour was supplied by the local crofters.

The local stone turned out to be a beautiful blue granite, of a quality entirely unsuspected and not surpassed anywhere in the kingdom. This granite was blasted with gelignite, holes for the charges being made by a cold chisel, hand turned, and hammered.

In drystone masonry, of course, stones of all shapes and sizes are fitted in, any necessary dressing in the course of building being most skilfully done with

VIEW SHOWING THE SETTING OF THE HOUSE, WITH ISLE OF RUM ON THE LEFT AND EIGG ON THE RIGHT.



THE PLAN.

V. T. Hodgson, L.R.I.B.A., F.I. Scots Architects.

FRONT VIEW OF HOUSE.

the hammer. But where a stone of any particular size and shape was required—as, for instance, for lintels—the cutting was done at the hillside quarry by means of "feathers." These are what may be described as split drills, driven in a line at regular intervals into the stone, then plugged with wedges to be hammered home. As all these, as well as every other operation on the job, were done, of necessity, on the simplest lines, so, too, was the transport of material. When horses—or rather, a horse—was available, he was attached to a stout wooden sled on to which a stone was levered. More frequently, however, men with hand-barrows carried the stone down from the hillside to the building below.

One of the most indispensable of the skilled workmen on the job, and the only other besides the foreman mason who was on it from start to finish, was the blacksmith. Not only was this young fellow always in demand for putting new edges on the blunted chisels and picks, but he would fashion most skilfully at his forge anything in iron, from hooks and staples to firegrates and bolts and other fastenings for the gates.

As the walls of the house were only 8ft. high, no scaffolding was required, but only a low staging to complete the upper courses. Planks, stretched from wall to wall, enabled the masons to build the chimneystacks, and, lacking either winch or crane of any sort, the stones were carried up sloping boards on hand-barrows to the masons.

The problem of the thatching of the roof was one upon which a great deal of thought was bestowed. In the Western Highlands the old custom was to cover the simple rafters—green tree trunks, peeled and tied to the main tree running the length of the roof—with divots of turf, cut with a heart-shaped spade and made to overlap like fish scales. On to this turf the thatching was pegged down with wooden pins. This method, however, we discarded as impracticable, for obvious reasons.

While preserving the characteristic features of the old-style roof, both within and without, we adopted certain unessential modifications—as follows: After the principals were reared, logs transversely sawn and peeled were nailed to them, presenting, of course, the natural rounded surface inside. Then on to the flat upper surfaces of the logs the sarking was nailed and, after creosoting, covered with felt. On this the thatch was laid, secured first by lines of copper wire stretched taut from end to end, and then by staples driven over the wire at regular short intervals.

Of the local materials used for thatching—heather, bracken, rushes, marram grass and straw—I had to abandon my first choice of bracken because none sufficiently long for the purpose could be found near enough. There was the same trouble regarding heather, which, for thatching, must be of a fine, straight growth and at least 2ft. long. For this we searched the countryside and only succeeded in securing enough, after great efforts, to thatch the long line of the front. The heather for thatching is pulled up by the roots: over 1,000 bundles 6ft. in circumference had to be carried distances varying from half a mile to two miles to the roadside, and thence transported in carts from three to seven miles. For the back quarters of the house, straw had to be used as a temporary thatch, and, of course, the top of the heather thatching was ridged with straw. In order to perpetuate native fashions

THATCHING IN PROGRESS, THE WRITER (THIRD FROM LEFT) ASSISTING.

throughout, we knocked the bottoms out of zinc pails for our chimney tops, and each of the four gates in the wall enclosing the feu exhibits a native type, one of very ingenious construction.

When the thatching (in which I myself took part) was finished, it was covered with wire netting and weighted down by stones on both sides, the stones being suspended from coir ropes thrown over the ridge of the roof all the way round the house.

On a hill top, 300ft. above the house, was a small loch from which the water power for our electric supply was to be derived, and between this loch and the power house 1,400ft. of 4in. piping were required. So rough and steep was the way up the broken hillside that it was impossible to employ even the solitary horse available, so all the steel pipes, as well as bags of cement and gravel for concrete, and all else required, had to be carried up by the men.

The first difficulty encountered was in finding a foundation for the building of a dam across the end of the loch. Nowhere could a 6ft. rod find any bottom. It was decided, therefore, to build the dam on a foundation of great slabs of stone that were to be seen on the floor of the loch and on its shores. Then, in order to get a sufficient depth of water for the bell mouth, a wooden frame, 6ft.

REAR VIEW OF HOUSE.
Front block thatched with heather; back block thatched with straw.

square and 3ft. deep, was driven down into the silt around it, and the silt inside dug out to the depth of 18ins.

Finally, there remained to be made a way across the pasturage practicable for a car. There is a great variety of contour and surface in the grazing ground that extends from the end of the public road to this house. Beginning with a bog, it continues in beautiful short firm turf, then little pieces of white sand intervene; next a small runnel, and, finally, a succession of hollows, rocks and rifts, always interspersed with more or less level stretches of beautiful turf. After several careful surveys of the ground, it was agreed that the most circuitous route would be the most satisfactory and involve the least outlay. So, instead of having to circumvent a very difficult rift, a bog was drained and a length of roadway made over it, while simple wooden bridges of planks were laid down where it was necessary to cross small burns. This completed all the road-making necessary, in addition to the initial hundred yards.

It is to be hoped that readers of COUNTRY LIFE, looking upon the photographs of the finished house here reproduced, will find it as interesting as those who were associated in this pioneering building adventure in the Western Highlands.

M. E. M. DONALDSON.

NORTH-WESTWARD HO!

YACHTING ON THE CLYDE AND THE WEST COAST OF SCOTLAND.

FRESH—and fresh is the word—from a cruise along the west coast of Scotland, one with whom I had, in other days, sailed many sea leagues came to see me the other day. His voice emerged with difficulty from tremendous lungs; his features were tanned almost to blackness; his hands were, oh, so enviably chipped and chafed, and huge. And while he stood booming replies to my questions the room seemed to become stiflingly confined.

He was never an eloquent talker, and he was now less articulate than usual. But then, how is anybody going to approach, in a chat or a short article, this epic theme. "What did you think of the Alps?" is a fearful sort of question to ask of anyone. At any rate, just by standing talking in my room in a voice that seemed likely to crack its walls, he brought me a breath of those hills and the sea.

The call of the western hills and the western sea is irresistible, and whoso has voyaged there, if only but once, is for ever hankering to return. There must be some magic about them; although it is not difficult otherwise to account for this constant pull to the north-west of the island felt by southern yachtsmen. Surely nowhere else in the world is there such an ocean playground.

The famous festival of the Clyde Fortnight occurs earlier in the year than Cowes Week, and there is little doubt that it is better so. August is a trifle late in the sailing season, for the days that remain before the melancholy time of "laying up" shorten too soon and hurry by. On the Clyde the season starts as early or earlier than in the south, but the holding of the Fortnight in late June or early July seems to serve as midway rallying point, so that, after the interval packed with racing, there is time left for the leisurely business of cruising.

The Fortnight has its own peculiar glory. The deep, mountain and cloud shadowed waters of the Firth of Clyde are a continuously lovely setting for the racing fleet. Each day the waters are flecked with innumerable sails, but at night they become remote and lonely again, and the crowded anchor lights off some harbour beneath the massive hills are the only reminders of the pageantry of the day.

The yachtsman feels that in the Clyde he is in the nursery of the sport. Along its banks are the yards of the builders of famous reputations. Yachting is not an ancient pastime—for, until about a century ago, the peace of the sea was not sufficiently assured to encourage the taste for private cruising. At any rate, the first Clyde yacht of which there is any record was a 40-tonner built by Scotts of Greenock for Colonel Campbell, an Argyllshire soldier.

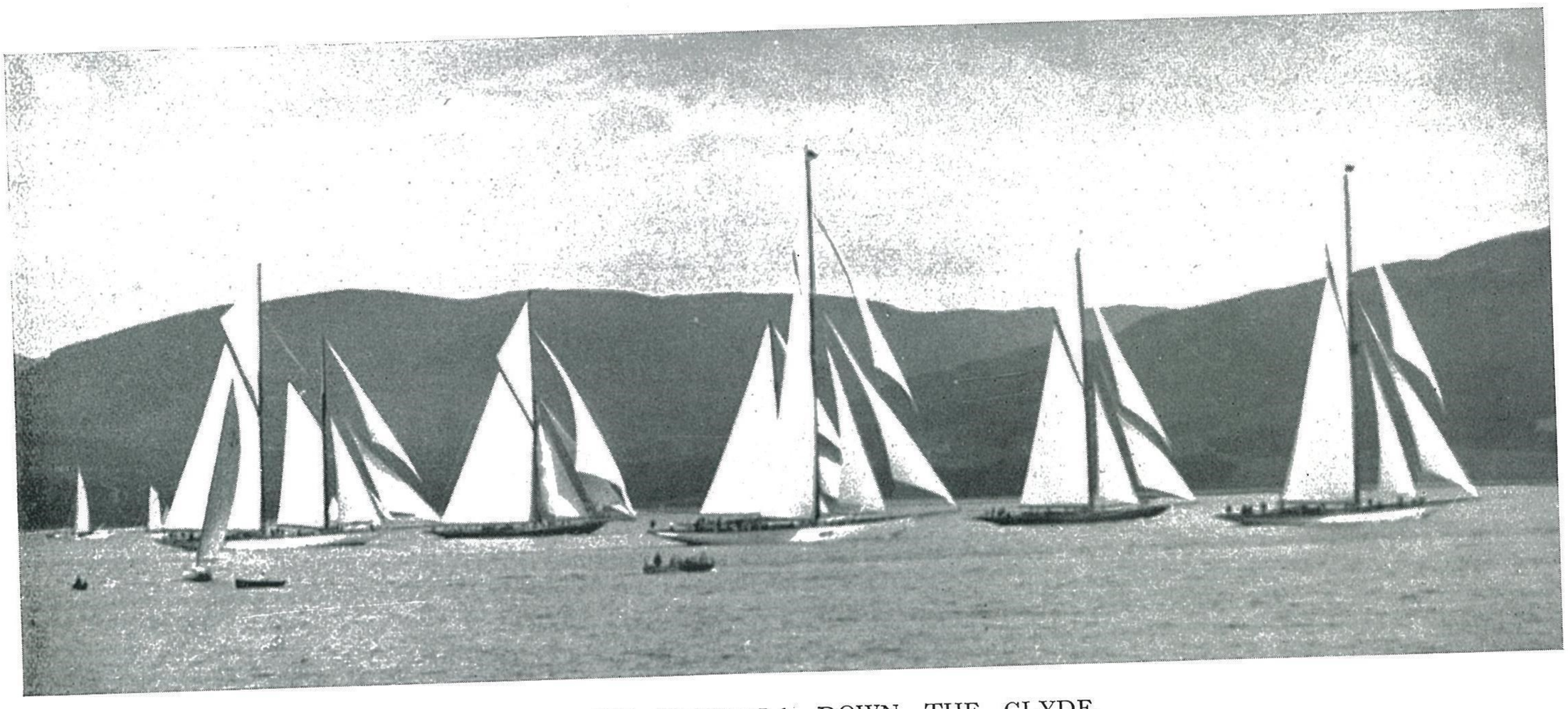
The famous Fortnight had its beginning fifty-one years ago; or, rather, it is more accurate to say that a Clyde Week was instituted then, when the Royal Northern, Royal Clyde and Mudhook Yacht Clubs resolved to combine in a festival that should rival Cowes. Later, three more great clubs added their prestige and financial support; so that a week was not long enough to contain the full programmes the united clubs were able to provide.

Among those virile bodies, the Scottish clubs, mention must be made of the Royal Scottish Motor Yacht Club, which has done so much to foster motor-yacht cruising. It is late in the day to extol the virtues of the motor yacht and the motor boat, though one may say again that, without diminishing the glamour of mast and sail, the motor is proving almost indispensable. Whether the motor is used as an auxiliary to the winds or as the sole motive power, it has made more easily accessible the incomparable delights of sea cruising. On the west coast of Scotland, particularly, there are lovely anchorages and bays which, at times, through calms or head winds, the sailer must fail to make or perforce pass by. For those whose sailing is confined to week-ends or other short spells, this is often a tragic waste. The motor extends one's "radius of action"—that is its inestimable service.

But, however short the holiday, one should not rush a west coast cruise. I dazedly recall that on a recent cruise in a motor yacht we had an example of how this insidious hurry-along spirit can fasten on an owner. We sped (when we would fain have loitered) through the Sound of Jura; passed an all too short night inside Lismore; swiftly made the passage to Skye by way of the Sound of Mull; and the scurry left us with dizzy senses and eyes that were spent but not satisfied. A west coast cruise should be a potter.

Perhaps the most precious quality about any sailing holiday is the blessed sense of freedom and remoteness from the working scene. In Scotland this relief is remarkable. No more than three railheads abut upon this amazing stretch of coast. It is the cruising man's wild, Great North-West. The blessings of civilisation are, no doubt, obtainable somewhere hereabouts. But let them wait. For a time we are among the most supremely beautiful of all sea scenery.

It is impossible to pick upon one characteristic to exalt above the rest. For such as like one sort it is here; for those that prefer the other it is here too. The whole coastline is deep-riven with long lochs that have all the character and quality of the finest Norwegian fiords. The mountains, bulking boldly, but never oppressively, rise easily behind every shoreline. Islands constantly break the line of the sea, but where there is a gap you



A YACHT FLOTILLA DOWN THE CLYDE.