HUGH GILBERT WRITES ABOUT THE ART OF ROBERT ADAM

SCOTLAND'S PHOTOGRAPHER

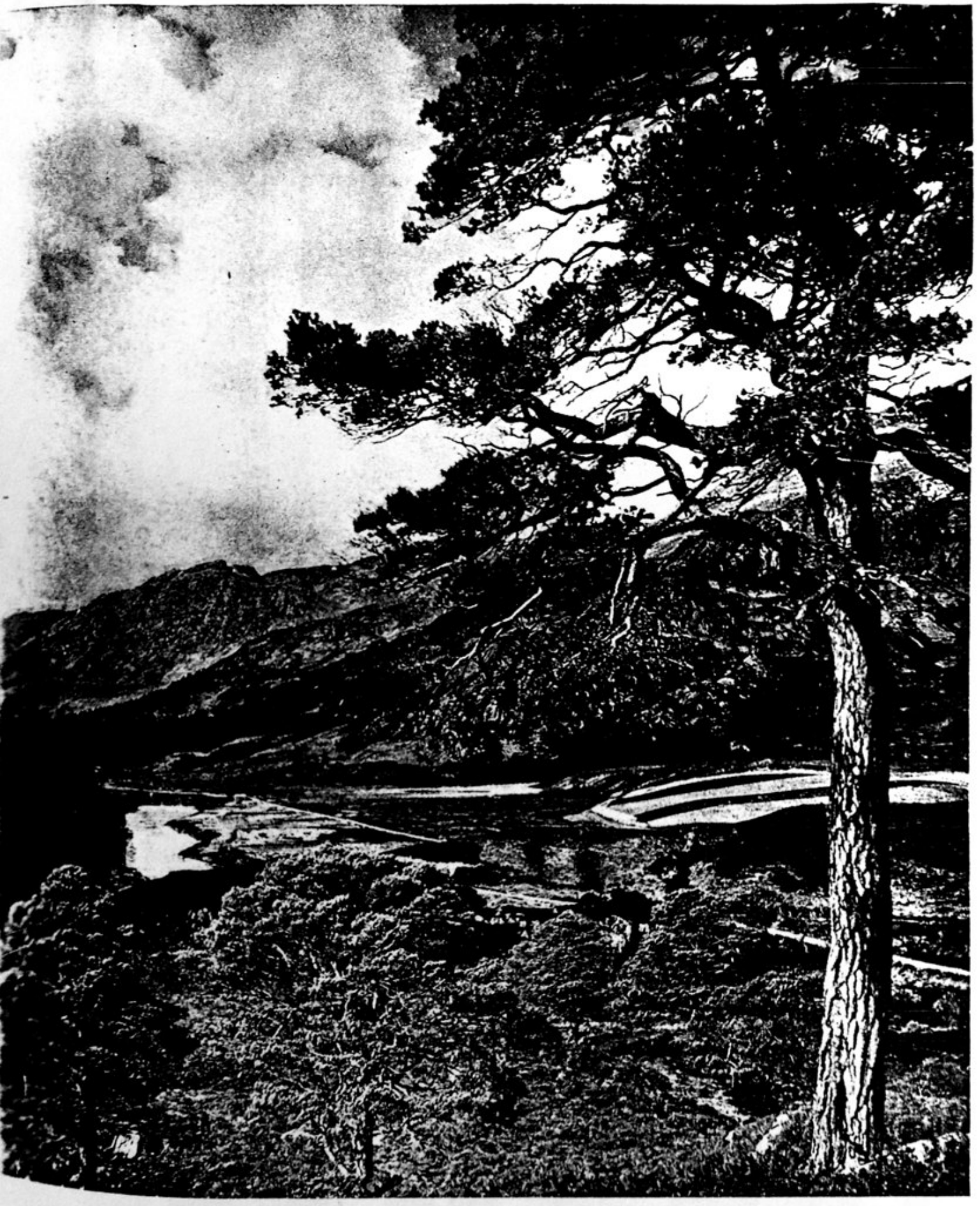
WHEN Robert Adam, a fourteen-year-old schoolboy, took his first photograph—of a fallen tree—nearly forty-eight years ago, his interest was not in the quarter-plate camera which he was learning to use, but in the tree, for he had already decided that his professional career was to be in the realm of natural history. The negative did not satisfy him, because it was not sharp. That marked the beginning of improvement in his technique. It was also the first step in a photographic career the success of which has been almost an embarrassment to its creator.

Those who have seen any of Robert Adam's camera landscapes of his native Scotland—and who has not?—know how superbly he has portrayed her varying moods. Certainly, they need no introduction to readers of this magazine, for they have been an outstanding feature of its pages for many years, calling forth the warmest and most spontaneous appreciation and playing an important part in its effort to present the natural beauty and wonder of the Scottish scene. Reproductions of his pictures have gone all over the world, in periodicals and books, on calendars, Christmas cards and travel posters, and by other means. In distant lands there can be few Scottish homes which have not at some time or other had an Adam photograph on the wall. And not only Scottish homes, for these landscapes, created with chemicals, justify themselves on artistic as well as nostalgic grounds.

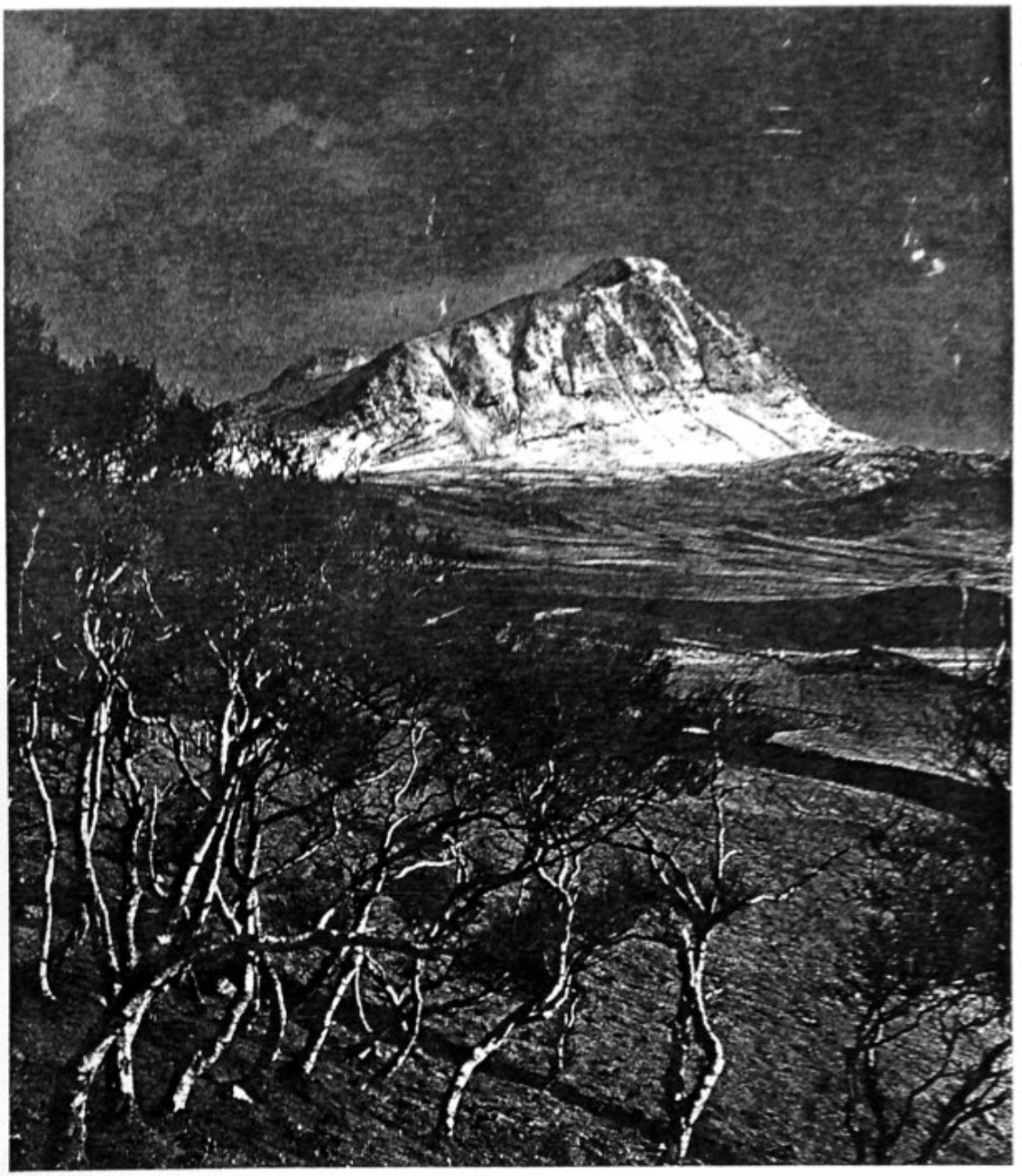
To the world Robert Adam is a distinguished photographer. Yet photography is a by-product of his true profession—he is a botanist on the staff of the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh—and his wonderful camera studies of Scotland the result of leisure hours occupied in the all-absorbing pursuit of natural history. To him the camera and its accompanying paraphernalia are instruments for accomplishing his object of securing permanent records of Scotland, but at the same time they are obviously also a means of artistic expression, that will not be denied, as another man might use the brush or the pen to set down his enthusiasms.

And, like the painter or writer, he is always on the alert, mentally noting subjects for future studies, observing likely difficulties, taking into account the limitations of his medium—and patiently overcoming them. For patience and endurance are without doubt the secret of his unique results. Behind these studies of storm-swept mountains, lone corries and remote islands lies a long history of perseverance allied to tremendous physical stamina. Walking twenty-five miles a day, carrying a heavy camera and a dozen plates, represent only part of the pains he has taken in getting his lens in the right place at the right time. He has had to scale mountains, get up after most people have gone to bed, and expose himself to the wildest weather at all seasons of the year. Working always on his own, he has, at times, lived a Robinson Crusoe-like existence on an uninhabited Hebridean isle, and undergone days of discomfort and exhaustion in the far-distant Highlands, to obtain a certain picture, sometimes coming away from an expedition without exposing a single plate.

Many of his best photographs have been the result of what he describes as "cool, calculated expectation." By that he means that, having come upon a certain view at three o'clock on a summer afternoon, he judges what it will look like at the same time in January or March or some other month, and makes another journey there at that time to make the exposure. His botanical



Making a choice of Robert Adam's photographs to illustrate this article was not easy. All his photographs are masterpieces—and who will say that this is better than that? We chose this one of Strathfarrar because it is one you would pick out of a hundred as unmistakably an "Adam" photograph.



This "Adam" photograph of Ben Hope, in Sutherlandshire, appeared in the Magazine last year. We reproduce it again here because so many readers said what a wonderful picture it was.

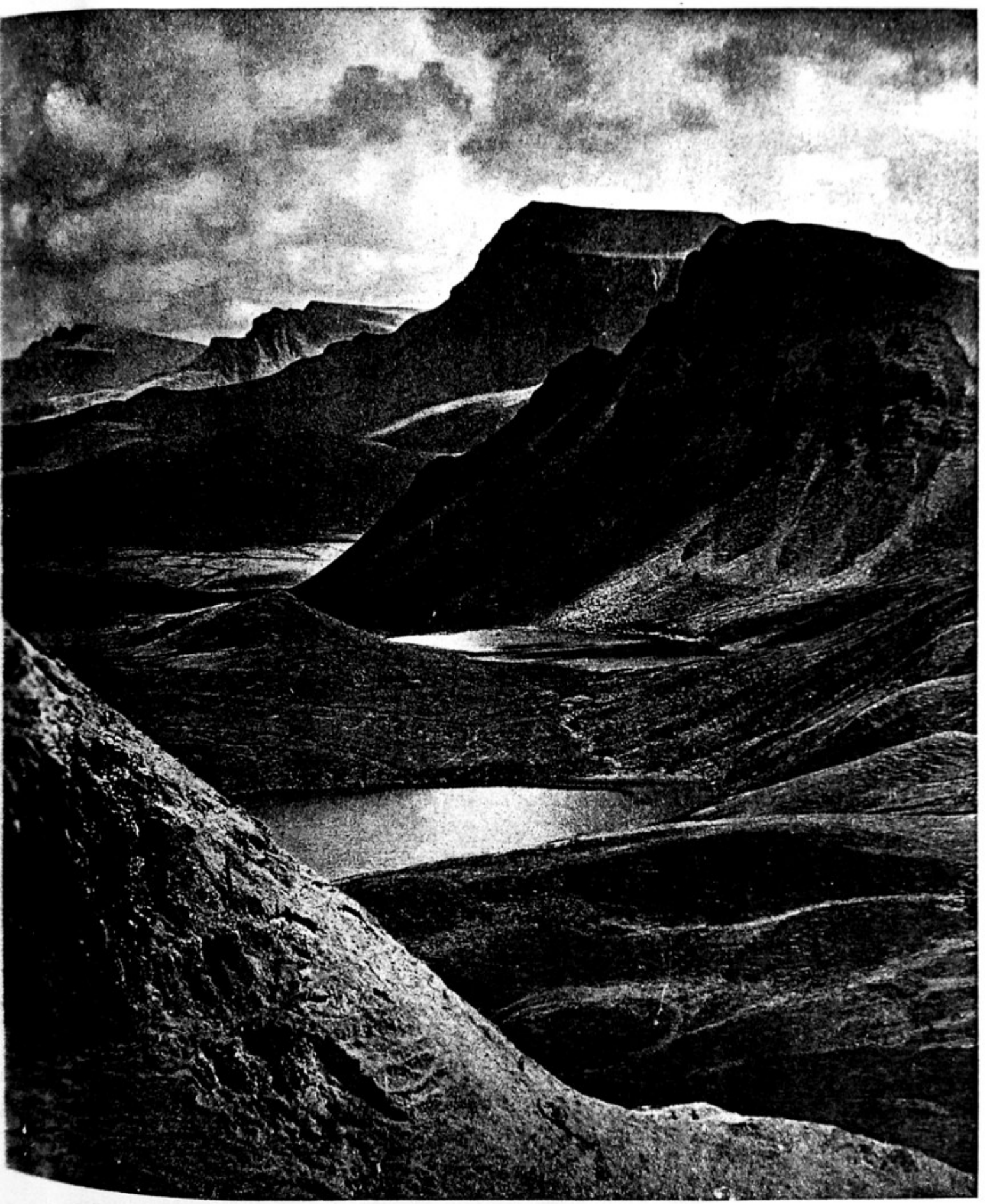
knowledge has naturally been invaluable for this method, and he has also acquired a good knowledge of weather vagaries.

An example of the use of this system is his fine picture of the Challich hills. Having seen them in the summer, he mentally visualised them with a sprinkling, but no more, of winter snow. Friends living at the base of the hills advised him at the appropriate time, and he set off. When he arrived the weather was so foul that the hills could not even be seen. But each day for five days he set out with his camera and waited at a spot which he thought would provide the viewpoint he wanted. He knew that if the fifth day failed him he would have to return to his duties in Edinburgh without his picture. There were only a few hours left before the departure of his train when the weather miraculously cleared. As the snow-spangled hills came into view, he found that the viewpoint he had picked "blind" was just right, and he was able to secure the photograph he wanted and catch his train.

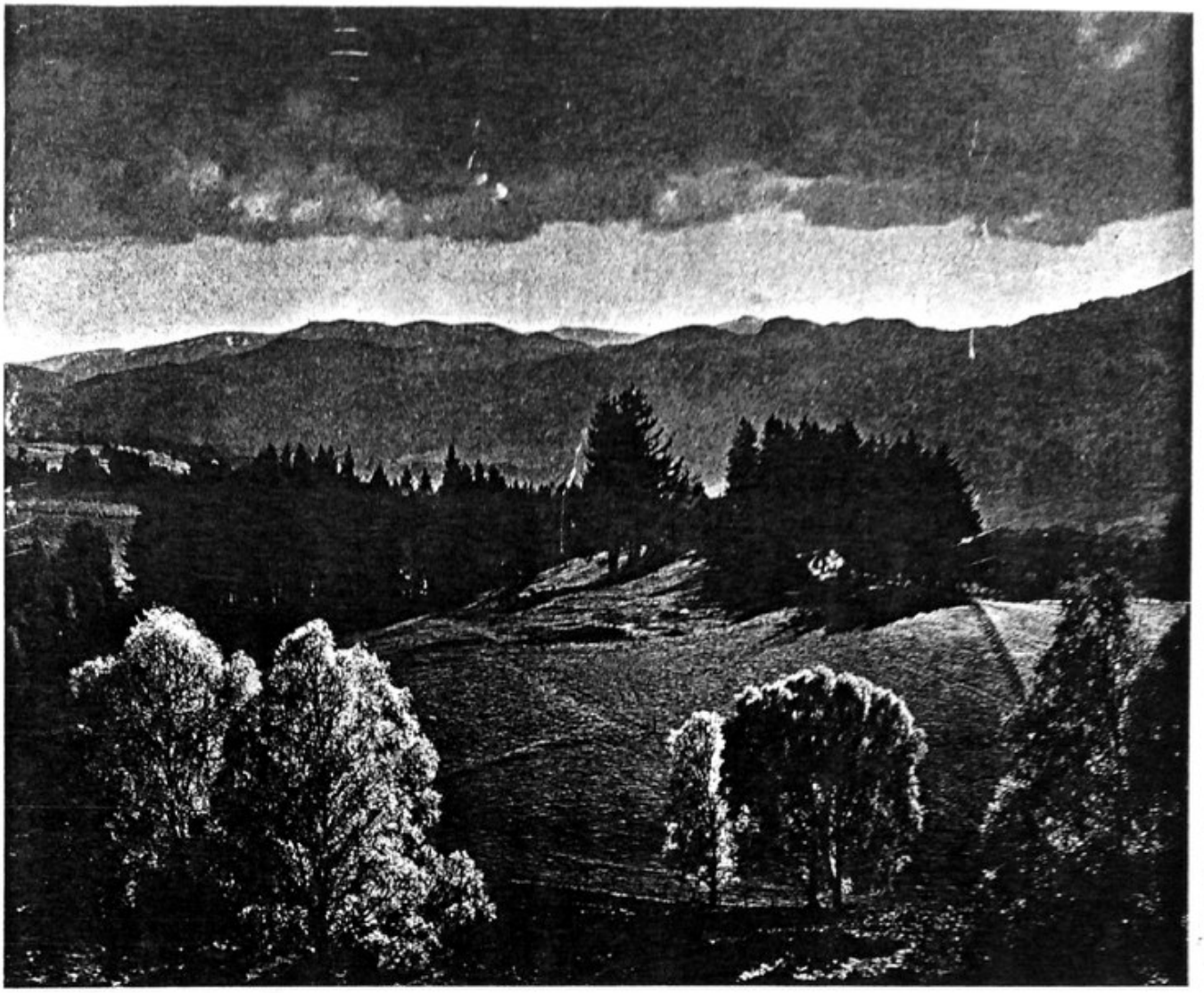
Often he has left his home in Edinburgh at three-thirty a.m., walked four miles to the station, taken a train journey to the Highlands, tramped into the hills to make a few exposures, and returned home the same night. He did that, for instance, to secure a picture of Ben Nevis with its snow-clad slopes lit by a westering sun. To get the wonderful photograph of Ben Hope, in Sutherlandshire (reproduced on this page), he had to wait, frozen to the marrow, through a blizzard until the right moment in the early evening arrived.

No appreciation of the art of Robert Adam would be complete without reference to his photographs of botanical specimens. To photograph a wild flower in its native setting with an accuracy and clarity that will convey its minutest detail to the student is no small test of knowledge and skill, and in this department Mr. Adam brings the same passion for perfection that distinguishes his majestic landscapes.

The modern photographer, with his complicated equipment and batteries of lenses and filters, can almost make a silk purse look like a sow's ear. In landscape photography there has been an increasing tendency, in striving after novel or startling effects, to



This is a photograph of one of the many lonely places to which Robert Adam carried his heavy equipment for miles and waited patiently, often for days, until the lighting conditions were ideal. It shows the heights of Trotternish, Skye.



We chose this photograph of Strath Glass because the scene is such a contrast to the starkness of the picture on the previous page—and because of the wonderful tone-values of light and shade.

falsify what the eye saw. Robert Adam set his face against these methods from the beginning, and has always maintained that position. His aim has been to register as nearly as possible, within the limits of photography, what the eye saw. All of his landscapes are straight prints from negatives which are neither retouched nor otherwise "faked." His only concession to the changed techniques which have emerged since he started photography has been the use of panchromatic plates, which register the balance of colours more accurately than the old orthochromatic emulsions. While modern photographers are ever searching for new, and usually more complicated, methods of negative development Robert Adam still pins his faith to the pyro formula he has been using for forty years.

As for apparatus, the original quarter-plate schoolboy outfit was replaced in 1908 by a half-plate stand-camera made to his own specification (he insisted particularly on rigidity) by a London firm. How many thousands of miles this bulky outfit has travelled on his back during his tramps over Scottish roads and hills he has no idea, but he has often done more than twenty miles in a day on foot.

They have tried in vain to interest Robert Adam in the modern miniature camera and its host of gadgets. He admires the skill of those who use such instruments, but remains faithful to his half-plate. He is convinced that you can compose a better picture on a ground-glass screen $6\frac{1}{2}'' \times 4\frac{1}{4}''$ than in the tiny viewfinder of a miniature.

Above all, his success illustrates the truth of one of Robert Burns's most inspiring sayings: "Wha does the best he can will whiles do mair." Animated solely by the desire to produce a faithful and honest piece of work, striving entirely without desire for or thought of financial gain, and naturally modest to a degree, Robert Adam has achieved quite unlooked-for distinction and at the same time performed a valuable service to Scotland.

And now, a final word about the artistic aspect of his work. "I never studied art," he told me when I saw him recently. "I suppose composition must be instinctive with me," he added. As I write there is a Christmas card on the desk. It was sent me by a friend who is a great admirer of Robert Adam's work. It is a typical Adam landscape—Ladhar Bheinn, taken from Druim Fada on Loch Hourn. In the foreground are the bare branches of three gnarled trees. Below, the silver line of the loch leads the eye to the magnificent snow-capped mountain with a typical Scottish sky above. The whole thing is intensely satisfying, even on the miniature scale of a Christmas card. The man who produced this picture has no need to study art : he is an artist.