

## MOUNT BATTOCK AND CLOCHNABEN.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

THERE is a variety of routes to Mount Battock, most of them involving a long preliminary walk before the mountain is reached, and, not only that, but the ascent—and the descent also—of some enclosing ridge; you cannot creep on to Mount Battock by means of a convenient shoulder. The mountain itself is situated just beyond one of the extreme southerly corners of Aberdeenshire, the outmost point of the parish of Birse. The “New Statistical Account of Scotland” (1843) says, indeed, that the counties of Aberdeen, Kincardine, and Forfar meet on its summit, but this is not borne out by the O.S. map, which makes Loch Tennet, the source of the Aven—a little to the north-west of Mount Battock—the meeting-point of the three counties. Mount Battock is apparently divided between Kincardineshire and Forfarshire, between the parishes of Strachan and Lochlee; the protest of the writer of the account of the parish of Birse in the “Old Statistical Account” (1793) that the north side of it at least was claimed as belonging to Birse has evidently been disallowed. Probably the easiest way of reaching Mount Battock from Aberdeen would be by taking the first train in the morning to Brechin, then travelling by the Glen Esk coach to Millden, and then walking up the burn of Turret. The hill, I understand, is most frequently ascended from the Glen Esk side. Unfortunately, however, the coach runs in a few months of summer only. A more common way of getting to Mount Battock is to walk (or drive) from Banchory along the Feughside road to the Bucket Mill of Birse—(this point can also be reached from Dess or Aboyne, by way of Marywell and Finzean)—and then cross over Peter Hill.\* Another way is by the Forest of Birse, which

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\* The Club made an excursion to Mount Battock and Clochnaben on 26th September, 1892, and one party of the excursionists, following an “unauthorised programme” of their own, ascended Mount Battock by this

can be reached from Aboyne by two alternative routes. One is by the parish church of Birse and Balfour, across the Brown Hill to Glencat, and then over hilly ground again to the Forest. This is a fairly good road—of a thoroughly “switchback railway” order, however, Glencat lying in a deep valley surrounded by hills that have to be scaled whether you are coming from Balfour or going to the Forest. A friend and I followed this road last year.\* The other route (which I took by myself on the Saturday preceding this year’s Spring Holiday) starts through the glen known as the “Fungle”. The “Fungle” road strikes off the south Deeside road a few yards west of the suspension bridge at Aboyne, and skirts the Auld-dinnie Burn. It ascends rapidly through a dense plantation of firs, and a good walker will soon come to a “Rest and Be Thankful”—a little plateau so marked, on the left-hand side of the road, with a border of flat stones all round it. From this plateau, through an opening in the plantation, a fine view of Aboyne and the Deeside valley is obtainable; one can instantly recognise in the selection and marking of the spot the hand that has placed so many tablets up and down Glen Tanner. Emerging from the glen and the wood beside a keeper’s house, a board will be observed intimating that the road for a certain distance is private, but that permission is accorded to walk along it; and then you follow the road across a long and wide expanse of moorland. Two difficulties beset

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route. The route was described as follows in an article on “The Cairngorm Club at Mount Battock and Clochnaben”, in the *Aberdeen Journal* of 28th September, furnished by “A Correspondent” (Mr. W. J. Jamieson):—“After crossing the Feugh by a footbridge, the party had the advantage of a very serviceable peat road, leading to a moss on the southern shoulder of Peter Hill, by which the first mile or two’s walk was materially facilitated. When this road or track came to an end, the route lay through mossy ground and heather to the watershed between the Feugh and the Aven, whence a rather precipitous descent to the bed of the stream, followed by a short steep climb, brought the party to the commencement of the long and rather gradual slope which forms the north-west side of Mount Battock”.

\* An account of our walk, under the title, “Mount Battock”, was contributed by me to the *Daily Free Press* of 6th May, 1893.

the stranger in this wild and desolate region, but they are easily solvable—by topographical instinct, if by nothing else. The path suddenly forks—you take the left fork and forsake the burn (still the Auld-dinnie). Then, further on, your track forward apparently ceases; you have a path to the right and one to the left, but you distrust them equally. Your instinct is right. You must eschew them both and make for a wooden building (in reality a stable) on the brae-face in front of you. You will pick up your track again there—there must be some way of circumventing the slightly boggy land I had to cross, though I failed to perceive it—and you cannot lose it again, for a brisk walk will soon bring you to the Forest of Birse.\*

The Forest of Birse is a misnomer—now at all events. Trees, it is well understood, did once grow here, but tradition hath it that the woods were destroyed by fire many a long day ago; and now the forest, excepting some young plantations at its eastern end, is a long, narrow, treeless glen, wedged in between high and bare moorland slopes. There is, however, a touch of wild grandeur about this remote glen with its amphitheatre of hills. Though, in a sense, “at the back o’ the warl’”, it is by no means desolate. The plain is cultivated, a few farm-houses are dotted about the valley, civilisation demonstrates its presence by a church and a schoolhouse, there remains a link with the far-off past in the ruins of a castle—the gaunt walls of what was probably an old hunting lodge (said to have been built by a Gordon of Cluny), showing yet some traces of a corbelled turret.† Still, the hills constitute the dominant feature of the landscape, and, rising high above the glen, lend an air of solitariness and wildness—one might almost

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\* Still another route will bring you to this point—by continuing along the Feughside road from the Bucket Mill. See an article “Feugh, Mount Battock, and Glen Dye” (by Mr. Howard Gray) in the *Northern Evening News*, 7th October, 1892.

† Set fire to, about 1640, by the people in the Forest, who turned the land that Gordon had cultivated into a common. See “Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff” (Spalding Club), and Jervise’s “Epitaphs and Inscriptions”, vol. II., p. 48; see also Robert Dinnie’s “Account of the Parish of Birse”.

say weirdness—to the scene. Wild enough the scenery is, in all certainty, but it just stops short of being strikingly grand or impressive; and one appreciates the judicious reserve of the writer of the description of the parish in the "New Statistical Account", when he frankly says "The scenery in the parish is not sufficiently bold to be romantic, but may be called wild".

But, though apparently walled in to north, west, and south, the Forest of Birse is not inaccessible on these sides. The "Fungle" road reaches it from the north; a road leads westward, and then southward, across the Mudlee Bracks (2259) into Glen Esk; and Mount Battock is "fetched" by a route that is slightly south-easterly. Looking in this direction from the old castle, one can discern a footpath on the hillside in front, and, crossing the Feugh by a bridge, this footpath is soon gained, and can be followed with ease till the base of Mount Battock is reached. It winds over and down the White Hill (1840). Last year, judging from the map, and also from the apparent situation of Mount Battock as seen from the White Hill, that the Cock Hill (1960) had to be surmounted, my friend and I diverged from the path, and crossed the Cock Hill. It was a waste of energy—a tremendous waste of energy, as the Cock Hill is intersected by the moss-haggs which infest this region. So this year I resolved to follow the footpath at all hazards, with the happy result of finding that it wound round the Cock Hill, and brought me to the base of Mount Battock all the same, and not so very far off from last year's point. The footpath, it should be stated, gradually dwindles into a desultory and somewhat indefinable track, then becomes transformed into a dry water-course, and eventually vanishes. But you cannot fail getting down into the valley or "dip" that separates you from Mount Battock. You cross the Water of Aven—a considerable burn here, notwithstanding its nearness to its source—and then you begin the ascent of Mount Battock. The first stage of the ascent is not propitious, for the lower base of the mountain is riddled with moss-haggs and patches of bog; only it is fair to say that the former are absolutely

insignificant in comparison with the similar obstacles that cumber the path between Mount Battock and Clochnaben, and that the latter are (or at least were when I crossed them) by no means very troublesome. These nuisances past, the ascent of the hill is very easy. Time:—From the Forest to the Aven,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours; ascent of Mount Battock, 1 hour. This—very easy walking, I may say—brought me to the summit of Mount Battock at 2:30 p.m.; I had left Aboyne at 9:30 a.m. Singularly enough, the distances mentioned were accomplished by my friend and me last year in precisely the same time—indeed, as regards time, and therefore distance, there seems to me little to choose between the two routes.

The view from the summit of Mount Battock (2555) is remarkable for its wide range. The parish recorder in the "New Statistical Account" (Strachan) says—"A very extensive prospect presents itself to the eye, embracing a great extent of the eastern coast from Aberdeen to Peterhead on the one hand, and to Montrose and the coasts of Fife and Haddington on the other, and stretching towards the south as far as Edinburgh and the Pentland Hills". My view was considerably restricted, owing to a haze on the horizon obscuring the more distant points. It was a fine walking day, and, stretched at full length on the "lythe" side of the cairn at the summit, sheltered from the strong southerly wind that was blowing, one felt a freshness, and even a balminess, in the air, perfectly delicious after the bitterly cold and blustering weather of the day before in Aberdeen. But it was by no means a clear day, and the view southwards was almost wholly lost. Loch Lee and Glen Esk were distinct enough; far away south a rounded top loomed out of the haze, not unlike one of the Lomonds of Fife; but the coast line was indistinguishable. Eastwards, northwards, and westwards also to some degree, the view was much more extensive, though with a sad lack of sharp definiteness about it. Mormond, Bennachie, Tap o' Noth, Knock Hill (or was it the Bin of Cullen?), the Buck of the Cabrach, Ben Rinnes, Morven, Keen, Lochnagar, Beinn a' Bhuirid, and Ben Avon (the three last covered with snow)

stood out prominently—like giant sentinels posted round the wide sweep of landscape, a landscape crowded with inferior hills and ridges, with here and there pleasant glimpses of the valley of the Dee, and of the river itself. Immediately in the foreground were the conspicuous points of the Lower Grampian range—Peter Hill,\* Clochnaben, Kerloch, and Cairn-mon-earn. I cannot recollect ever having before so well seen or been so struck by the huge mass of the Hill of Fare; and another exceptional feature of the view, I think, is the great extent of level country disclosed lying in the gap between the Hill of Fare and Bennachie. Such were my own hurried observations; but as Mount Battock was a “great instrument” station in the Ordnance Survey, the reader will find detailed “observations” from it in the great triangulation in another article in this Number.

Clochnaben is situated to the north-east of Mount Battock, there being a distance of about four miles between the two hills, which, in fact, are the two extremities of a range of hills lying between the Water of Aven on the north-west and Glen Dye on the south-east (Glen Dye, by the way, is a deer forest, the property of Sir John R. Gladstone, nephew of the ex-Premier; and I rather think that Mount Battock, which was formerly used for sheep pasture, has recently been added to the forest). The range of hills just alluded to, when viewed from the White Hill on the way to Mount Battock, presents the appearance of a continuous ridge, but on closer acquaintance this appearance is discovered to be quite illusory. A hill of considerable proportions and altitude stands between Mount Battock and Clochnaben, and one has, in proceeding from Mount Battock,

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\* Peter Hill (2023) is on the estate of Finzean, and was the hill referred to by Dr. Farquharson, M.P. (a member of the Club, by the way), in a somewhat celebrated speech on an “Access to Mountains” resolution in the House of Commons, 4th March, 1892, in which he declared that “he had the honour to be the proprietor of a mountain”. “From this mountain”, he added, “no one had ever been excluded. It was a grouse moor, and he did not believe that any incursion of tourists and picnic parties would be in the least degree likely to do any harm to grouse shooting”. The declaration was humorously hit off in next week’s *Punch* (“Essence of Parliament”).

to descend into an intervening valley and then ascend the hill ; in fact, this hill being 44 feet higher than Clochnaben, one soon loses sight of the conspicuous feature of the latter—the huge stone on its summit—and does not regain sight of it till he is close upon it. This, however, is a trifle compared with the nature of the ground that has to be traversed. The hill is cut up into a succession of moss-haggs or peat-furrows, of all shapes and sizes, and generally possessing a sinuosity of outline that is well-nigh bewildering. Walking over this ground is reduced to a slow and toilsome progression. The ditches are too wide to be cleared by a jump, and one has to drag himself as best he can over the soft, greasy, black peat-mould. Fortunately, I found this peat-mould comparatively dry, and of a consistency to afford foothold—of a kind ; with care you could pick your way across it without sinking too far. At times, however, I am told, the mould gets so dry and brown as to be easily stirred by the wind, and then the pedestrian has the additional trouble to encounter of having it blown into his eyes and ears. In times of wet—well, one can fancy what it would be like ! A fellow-member of the Club declares that the worst turn he could do his worst enemy would be to make him cross from Mount Battock to Clochnaben on a wet day ! There is no possibility of “ dodging ” this really awful ground ; and the tiresome thing about it is that it seems endless—in reality it continues to bother you till you are far up Clochnaben. I thought last year that I had made a mistake in descending from Mount Battock by the steep sides of the Aven, but, rough as was that walk, it was decidedly preferable to “ plyterin’ ” through these abominable moss-haggs. I had calculated on reaching Clochnaben from Mount Battock in an hour and a half—it actually took me two hours ; and when I did reach the summit of Clochnaben I mentally registered a vow that it would require a very strong inducement to make me repeat the journey.\*

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\* Mr. Jamieson, in the article already alluded to, has given such an accurate and excellent description of this “ devious path ” that I am constrained to quote it in full :—“ . . . A bit of country which may be

The name Clochnaben—Clachnaben or Clochnabane—signifies, so it is said, “the stone on the hill”; and as already mentioned, the conspicuous feature of the mountain is the stone on its summit—“an immense protruding mass of weathered granite”.\* This stone, which from most points of view looks to be overhanging, does not stand exactly on the summit (1900), but a little eastward, on the edge of the mountain, which descends steeply round the exposed side of it. The dimensions of this huge mass may be conceived when it is mentioned that it is 95 feet high, and that 270 paces have to be taken in walking round it. The stone renders Clochnaben the most conspicuous and best known mountain in the region, and also constitutes it a landmark at sea. The rhyme

“Clochnaben an’ Bennachie,  
Twa lan’ marks o’ the sea”,

is familiar to everybody. It was only to be expected that, in former times, the stone and its peculiar position should have been attributed to the work “of demons and infernal power”, and this superstitious legend was worked into a poem descriptive of Deeside scenery, contributed to the *Scots*

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described as almost unique in its way. The long undulating plateau is composed of soft peaty soil, which is seamed and scarred in every direction by the joint action of driving rainstorms and melting snows. In some places the way is barred as by a succession of regular trenches, from four to six or eight feet deep, some with water in them, some without. Where the bottom of these natural ditches or drains is dry, it is occasionally policy to follow them, despite their windings, as far as they will go; but they never go far in the desired direction. At other points considerable stretches of ground are covered by the disintegrated peaty soil, lying loose and sticky to the depth of several inches, of the consistency of rich, newly-stirred garden mould or fresh mole-heaps. The mode of progression was described by one of those who enjoyed the experience as being ‘not walking at all, but a series of acrobatic performances’. Wonderful to relate, one of the ladies was among those who safely crossed this perilous plateau, though how she managed it, hampered by clinging skirts and draperies, your correspondent frankly owns himself at a loss to imagine. She did it, nevertheless, and came up smiling and fresh at the finish”.

\* See an article on “The Cairn o’ Mount and Clochnaben” (the fourth of a series), by “D.O.” (Mr. Alexander Copland), in the *Aberdeen Journal*, 12th September, 1892.



*Magazine* by Rev. George Knowles, minister of Birse, 1778-89. According to this poem, the stone formerly lay "low in a plain", but, used in a contest between "The D-v-l and his Dame", the last stanza thus accounts for its present position :—

"Have at you now, you Beldame', roar'd the fiend,  
And hurl'd the rock through the resounding skies ;  
Dreadful it fell, and crush'd his breathless friend,  
And there entombed Her Hellish Highness lies" !\*

There is another, but very diminutive, "wart" of stone to the westward of the rock just described, and porphyry will be observed in the neighbourhood. The view from the summit of Clochnaben, it may be briefly said, is substantially the same as that from the top of Mount Battock, with a few minor differences, due to the variation in location ; the chief of these differences to the credit of Clochnaben are fine views of Glen Dye, Cairn o' Mount, and Kerloch. North-eastwards from Clochnaben, at the distance of about a mile, is Mount Shade (1662), the deep narrow gorge—visible from considerable distances—between the two hills being locally known as the "Devil's Bite".

From Clochnaben, I made my way rapidly to Feughside Inn, striking the peat road that leads from the burn of Greendams on to the Aven side—a road, by the way, that takes fully an hour to traverse at a good pace. Then after some rest and refreshment at the Inn, I walked on to Torphins by the Bridge of Potarch, arriving at my night's destination at 9:30 p.m., exactly twelve hours from my start at Aboyne. The total distance of the "round" may be set down at any figure between 25 and 30 miles.

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\* See Walker's "Bards of Bon-Accord".