

TWO DONSIDE HILLS :
COILLEBHARR AND LORD ARTHUR'S CAIRN.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

AN Aberdeen newspaper, in its report of the last Lonach Gathering, described Strathdon as a "mountainous country". Possibly the reporter had in view a poetical description of that annual event :

"Lonach's a mountain in Strathdon
Whaur mony a Highland ploy gaes on
At tossin' caber, puttin' stone,
And hammer flingin',
And dancin' to the pipe and drone,
Whilst Don rins singin'".

But poets are not always to be trusted for accurate description; and to designate Strathdon mountainous is to take liberties with the language, if not with the district. The precise application of the term "mountainous" is perhaps a little arbitrary; and with dictionaries defining a mountain as an elevated mass higher than a hill, and a hill as a natural elevation of less size than a mountain, it is a little difficult to know where to draw the line. But where the elevations seldom exceed 2000 feet, are generally wooded, even on the summits, and are totally devoid of rock faces, it seems preferable, on the whole, to assign them a rank lower than that of mountains and to call them hills; and so to the category of hills must be relegated the Donside eminences.

"Upon the whole, the mountains of this parish are much inferior in picturesque effect and rugged outline to the sister district of the head of the Dee". So wrote the minister of Strathdon in the "New Statistical Account"; and the comparison holds good for the whole of Donside, from Alford to Corgarff. I may perhaps be pardoned for here reproduc-

ing what I have elsewhere said* on the contrast between the scenery of Deeside and that of Donside :

“In the matter of scenery, Donside stands to Deeside very much in the relation depicted in the familiar simile—‘As moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine’. The scenery of Donside, speaking in general terms, is of a paler cast than that of Deeside ; it is mild, almost gentle, in comparison. There are Donside Highlands, it is true, but they lack the altitude and the bulk of the Deeside Highlands. The essential difference between the natural features of the two river valleys may be broadly defined by saying that, while the Dee is enclosed by mountains, the Don is surrounded by hills. While the Dee (limiting the comparison to the main pedestrian route, the stretch between Ballater and Braemar and the Linn) is dominated by Lochnagar on the one side, and a succession of Bens, from Beinn a’ Bhuid up to Ben Muich Dhui, on the other side, the valley of the Don (say from Alford to Colquhony or Corgarff) is conspicuously marked only by The Buck of the Cabrach on the one hand and Morven on the other. In other words, you lack on Donside the grandeur of the mountain masses that so prominently confront you on Deeside”.

The lesser altitudes of Donside, however, are attractive— if not for their height, at least for the view obtainable from their summits. They are, indeed, favourably situated in this respect, lying, as they do, on the outer edge of the hilly and mountainous region of Aberdeenshire. The long line of Bennachie is the frontier barrier, the plain of the Garioch and the level lands of Buchan stretching away to north and north-east, summit rising on summit to west and south ; and the Donside hills are adjacent to this barrier, and present much the same landscape features from their summits, particularly that picturesque contrast between arable plains on the one side and mountain and valley on the other. This, at any rate, holds good of Coillebharr (pronounced—and, indeed, commonly written—Callievar) and Lord Arthur’s Cairn, the two hills at the western extremity of the Vale of Alford—a district famous agriculturally for the excellence of its farming and the rearing of choice herds of polled cattle,

* “Some Donside Hills” in the *Daily Free Press*, 30th May, 1896.

but noteworthy also for its natural features, the valley being entirely enclosed by hills—the Braes of Forbes and Bennachie on the north; Cairn William, the hill of Tillyfourie, and the Corrennie hills on the east; the heights that bound Cushnie on the south; and, as has just been mentioned, Coillebharr and Lord Arthur's Cairn on the west.

Coillebharr (Caillevar or Callievar; "the hill of wood"—Coille or Caille, a wood, and Var, a hill) is 1747 feet high. It is situated on the south side of the Don, and may be ascended with ease from Bithnie, a farm at its foot, the road to which, running off the public road from Alford to Mossat, crosses a wooden bridge over the Don near one of the entrances to Littlewood Park. Traversing a field abutting on the farm steading, the hill is at once tackled. More than one track through the grass and bracken may readily be discovered, and the ascent presents no difficulty. The ridge reached, the grass and bracken give place to heather; and a long detour has to be made to attain the summit—partly through and partly alongside a plantation of firs—but a regular footpath clearly indicates the route. I have heard the ascent called steep, but, walking very leisurely and without any great exertion one Saturday afternoon, I accomplished it in 45 minutes; and I am convinced that it could be done in much less time than that. The following description of the view from the summit of Coillebharr is given in a foot-note to the account of Alford published in the "New Statistical Account":

"A magnificent and exceedingly varied view is obtained from the summit of Callievar. Immediately under the eye of the spectator there is seen the richly cultivated and ornamented Vale of Alford on the east, traversed by the clear river Don, and bounded at the opposite end by the rocky-summited Benochie. On the west, close at hand, are the contiguous cultivated valleys of Kildrummy and Towie with the remains of their two ancient castles celebrated in history and song. On the south, the eye, obtaining many peeps into cultivated valleys near at hand, commands in the remote distance a splendid range of sixty miles of the loftiest Grampians, extending westward from the shore of the Mearns, and including Mount Bettach, Mount Keen, Lochnagar,

Benmuckduie, Benavon, and Cairngorm. On the north, it commands much of the varied surface of Aberdeenshire in that direction, with views of the Moray Firth and German Ocean beyond”.

It is only necessary to add to this excellent description an enumeration of the principal mountain-tops observable from the summit. Included in the view are—Bennachie and the hills enclosing the Vale of Alford already specified, Cairn-mon-earn, Kerloch, Clochnaben, Mount Battock, Mount Keen, Morven, Lochnagar, Ben Avon, Ben Muich Dhui, Cairngorm, Ben Newe, The Buck of the Cabrach, Tap o’ Noth, the Knock Hill, the Binn Hill of Cullen, Tillymorgan, Brimmond, and the Hill of Fare. The village of Alford is distinctly seen; as are also Castle Forbes and Clova House.

Coillebharr, as its name implies, was at one time completely wooded, but most of the wood was cut down a number of years ago by the present Lord Forbes, who has, indeed, denuded the Braes of Forbes and other large portions of the “Vale” of the plantations that formerly covered them, to the serious deterioration of the landscape. Lord Forbes, however, is owner of part only of Coillebharr, the other portion being on the estate of Brux, the property of his brother, the Hon. Atholl Monson Forbes. A “dry dyke” on the northern face of the hill constitutes the boundary march. It is said to have been built by a former laird of Brux, of whom this story is told:

“He was ‘out’ in 1745, and to disguise himself, after his return, became a builder of stone dykes, as the traveller may see from specimens he built, and from the inscription on his grave-stone. It is related that one day, when occupied building his dykes, the soldiers in search of him came up and inquired ‘If he could tell them whether the Laird of Brux was at home’. Without any appearance of alarm, he quietly answered—‘He was at home when I was at my breakfast’. The soldiers, thinking he would probably still be there, went to the house, and as soon as they were out of sight he gathered up his tools, and concealed himself, probably in a large cave, still shown, and known as Jonathan’s Cave”.*

* “A Guide to Donside”.

One of the largest of many bonfires in Aberdeenshire commemorative of the Queen's Jubilee was that which was lighted on the top of Coillebharr; and on that occasion between 60 and 70 others were visible from the summit. The old church and churchyard of Forbes, it may be mentioned, are to be seen, close to the Don, on the north side of the river, just before reaching Bithnie.*

Lord Arthur's Cairn (1699 feet) is the highest summit of the Correen Hills, a range of low, moorland hills on the north side of the Don, extending from the river to Clatt and Knockespoek. It may be ascended from various points. I have myself ascended it by the three following routes:—“Straight up” from Littlewood Park—the speediest way, but perhaps the steepest (done quite easily, though, in an hour from Bithnie bridge); from the farm of Logie, west of Littlewood Park—probably the easiest way; and from the farm of Edinbanchory, still further west—which is certainly the longest way, but suited a companion and myself, as we happened to be walking down Strathdon to Alford, and at once “took” the hill on crossing the bridge of Mossat.† The ascent by any of these routes, however, is not very formidable. The stiffest bit of the Littlewood Park route is the ascent of a groove in the hill side that was probably made for and used as a timber “shoot”; and, going by this route, you have to find a gate through a fence of wire-netting, or—(tell not the

* “There are pond burrows on the slope of Callievar, on the Bithnie side near the top; these are Pictish dwelling remains. The old Don and Deeside road passes from Bithnie Bridge over by Tibberchindy. Near the summit of the ascent above Tibberchindy, on the road side, are remains of faulds or buchts for resting cattle. I have heard that Evan Cameron, the last of the caterans in this district, resided there”. (Information supplied by Mr. A. M'Creadie, Schoolmaster, Alford.)

† The ascent by this route is described in the *Free Press* article previously referred to. Another easy ascent, I am told, is by Old Strathlunach and Manabattock.

Near Logie, and between the road and the river, lies a large flat stone called the “Boar Stone of Forbes”, marking the spot where, according to tradition, the first of the family slew a wild boar “For Bess”; hence the family name and the three boars' heads on the family coat of arms. Two versions of the legend are given in the Donside Guide.

people at Littlewood Park!)—clamber over the fence. The hill presents much the same natural features as Coillebharr—it is grassy on the lower slopes, the grass giving way to heather as you near the summit. The summit, however, is completely bare of trees, and is crowned by the ruined walls of what is said to have been a “summer-house”—it must have been a rather rude one. A few yards distant in a north-westerly direction is a slight hummock of earth, stones, and grass—a “mark” of the Ordnance Survey.

The view from the summit of Lord Arthur’s Cairn is practically identical with that from Coillebharr, with, however, some variations, the Hill of Mormond, for instance, being visible from the former and not from the latter; Ben Rinnes is also seen from Lord Arthur’s Cairn, though, curiously enough, not at the very summit. On a clear day, the view extends from Cullen to Montrose; the smoke of Aberdeen may be discerned, though not the city itself, but the Black Dog—(rather, the Hill of Tarbathie)—and the sands of Newburgh are quite distinguishable. The feature of the view, however, is the prospect of the distant Cairngorms—the long line of Ben Avon, with the succession of protuberances that mark its various tops, the upper shoulder of Ben Muich Dhui, and the crest of Cairngorm; grandly beautiful if seen on a clear summer day—perhaps more picturesque if seen with a sprinkling of snow on them, on a day in early autumn.

From the summit, Lumsden Village can be easily reached. A “bee-line” can be made for it, the general direction being to keep in line with the top of The Buck. Those desirous of following a track may be advised that there is one close by a rather curious feal dyke that runs along the hillside a little to the west of the summit. During the descent to this track, one can readily espy, on a north-eastern slope of the hill, a now disused quarry, from which an erst-while famous “Correen stone” was wont to be excavated—a species of mica slate, largely employed at one time for pavement for halls and kitchens, and possessing the peculiar characteristic of exuding moisture on the approach of wet weather. The track crosses the hill mid-way between six shooting

butts, enlarges into a cart track, but rapidly deteriorates, forming what is plainly a water-course in winter time. I once came down this track—which skirts a large plantation destroyed by an accidental fire a year or two ago, the bare trunks of the trees standing out grim and gaunt on the hill side—and found it an exceedingly rough path. It meanders through a plantation that is equally rough, being literally a jungle of whins and undergrowth; and lands you ultimately at the farm of Park of Brux, which a farmer's boy told me was a mile from Lumsden—I found it nearer two, which is a matter of course! The best plan is to swerve to the right when the track begins to get rough; by doing this and then skirting some fields, you find a path through a plantation that ultimately lands you in Lumsden Village.

“Lord Arthur's Cairn”—whence the name, so strikingly suggestive of some important incident or interesting remembrance? A vague reference is made in the “Statistical Account” (1840) to “the points of Coreen at Lord Arthur's Seat and Lord Forbes's Cairn”, but no explanation of these names is volunteered. Were there two hills of these respective names, or did the writer make two names of the same hill represent two hills? There is an evident confusion on the subject; and, accepting the real name of the one hill as Lord Arthur's Cairn, there is an equal confusion as to the origin of the name. A “Souvenir of the Montgarrie Bridge Bazaar” published last July under the title of “The Vale of Alford, Past and Present: A Short Historical Narrative”, contains the following:

“There had also been a battle fought near what was then called the Glaschine Hill, on the estate of Brux, in the fourteenth century, when an English army, 3000 strong, commanded by Lord Arthur Cummin, was defeated by the Scots, 1100 strong, under the command of Sir Alexander Gordon of Huntly. Lord Arthur Cummin was slain, and his body was interred in the heath. A cairn was erected over it, and the hill now bears the name of Lord Arthur”.

But another—and really much more probable—story connects the hill with the prolonged feud between the

Forbeses and the Gordons. The Correen Hills formed the frontier between the respective territories of these two clans; and, on one occasion, the Forbeses crossed the hills in order to make an incursion into the Gordon territory. They encamped on the brae-face overlooking the glen in which Knockespoock is situated. The remains of the camp are still visible—on the old hill road from Aberdeen through the Cabrach to Huntly, &c.—and this leads to the inference that the spot had often been used as a camping-ground. While the Forbeses were in camp, a strong body of Gordons attacked them, and forced them to retreat. In the conflict that took place, Lord Arthur Forbes of Brux, who headed the Forbeses, was severely wounded, and his followers proceeded to convey him across the hills to Brux. He died on the way, however; and, from this incident, and probably in connection with some memorial erected at the spot, the hill on which he expired came to be called Lord Arthur's Cairn. But there are several versions of the tradition. The description of the parish of Forbes (written about 1725) in "Macfarlane's Geographical Collections" (MS.) refers to Lord Arthur's Cairn—"where some of the family of Forbes was slain by the Leslie's". And the following occurs in the recently-published work on "The Church and Priory of Monymusk", by Rev. W. M. Macpherson—"In 1572 the Gordons attacked and defeated the Forbeses at Druminnor, a very ancient seat of the family, when Arthur, Lord Forbes' brother, was killed".

It is just possible, though the opinion is only offered tentatively, that "Lord Arthur's Cairn" may bear some relation to an incident in the life of Arthur Forbes of Logie, a son of William, 7th Lord Forbes. Arthur's elder brother, John, 8th Lord Forbes, had married, while still Master of Forbes, Lady Margaret Gordon, daughter of George, 4th Earl of Huntly. Lord Forbes having repudiated the marriage—probably on account of religious differences—a fierce encounter took place between the rival clans of Forbes and Gordon at Tillyangus, in the parish of Clatt, in the year 1572—

"The Gordons, under the command of two of the Earl's

brothers, attacked their hereditary enemies, the Forbesees, within their rude entrenchment, on the White Hill of Tillyangus, and, after a sanguinary contest, still visibly marked by a number of graves or cairns, the Gordons carried the encampment of their opponents, slew Arthur Forbes, son of Lord Forbes, commonly called Black Arthur, from his dark complexion, and continued the pursuit to the gates of Castle Forbes (now Drumminor), the family seat of the numerous clan Forbes. This skirmish is the subject of traditionary notice by the aged chroniclers of the parish, and is recorded in a manuscript memoir of the house of Forbes, now in the possession of the Honourable Lord Forbes".*

The year 1572 is generally given as the date of this fight, but it would really appear to have taken place in 1571—

"The tent day of October, the yeir of God 1571 yeris, the fedill of Tilliangwiss was strikin be Adem Gordoune and Arthowir Forbes, bruder to my Lord Forbes, quhair the said Arthowir was slayne, with syndrie oderis of his kyn ; and on the oder syd, Johne Gordone of Buiky, and syndre hurtt on bayth the sydis".†

The 17th October, 1571, is the date given in the New Spalding Club volume on the "Records of Aboyne", edited by the Marquis of Huntly. According to Smith's "History of Aberdeenshire", there is a well on the north-west face of the White Hill of Tillyangus, which marks the place where "Black Arthur" of Forbes was slain.

* "New Statistical Account of Aberdeenshire" (Clatt).

† "The Chronicle of Aberdeen" in the "Miscellany of the Spalding Club".