

BEN AIGAN.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

WHERE is Ben Aigan? was a question commonly asked when this hill was selected for the spring outing of the Club. The query was pardonable; and probably the severely correct reply—by those able to give it—that Ben Aigan is situated in the parish of Boharm, only incited the further query, But where is Boharm? Topographically, Boharm would have to be defined as a parish in the west of Banffshire, bounded on the north by Bellie, on the east by Keith and Botriphnie, on the south by Mortlach, on the south-west by Aberlour, and on the west by Rothes. A better idea of its location may be conveyed, however, by saying that it extends along the right bank of the Spey from the railway bridge (Great North) at Craigellachie (though the Fiddich is really the boundary), to some distance beyond the railway bridge (Highland) at Boat of Bridge. It thus embraces one of the most picturesque sections of the river, that between Arndilly and Aikenway, while it is faced on the Morayshire side by the haughs of Dandaleith and Dundurcas, included in the familiar couplet—

“ Dipple, Dundurcas, Dandaleith, and Dalvey
Are the four bonniest haughs on the run of the Spey ”.*

What has just been given as the location of Boharm is really the site of Ben Aigan, which stands between the two bridges, the Spey flowing along its western base and washing a portion of its northern slopes. The remainder of the parish extends northward and eastward: hence its name, it is said—Bucharm or Boharm signifying in Gaelic “ The bow round the hill ”. This derivation, however, has

* This is the most common form of the couplet, but there are variants. Dr. Longmuir, in his “ Speyside ”, gives the second line as—“ Are the four fairest farms on the banks of the Spey ”.

not passed unchallenged, and the word Boharm is credited with quite another meaning. Ben Aigan itself is said to mean "The hill of the clefts or notches"; and this is a good description of it from most points of view. It is not by any means a distinctive hill—a hill, that is, possessing special and individual features. In height, it is comparatively insignificant—it is only 1544 feet high; and, moreover, it is dominated and dwarfed by the proximity of Ben Rinnes, which is not only much higher, but much more picturesque. Like many another hill, Ben Aigan is characterised more by bulk than height. This is most noticeable from the neighbourhood of Orton station, on the Highland Railway, the formation of the hill being more observable there, perhaps, than elsewhere; from the Craigellachie side, the bulkiness of the hill is disguised by the woods that cover the slopes that ascend from Arndilly. It is plainly revealed, however, whenever—and from whatever point—the ascent is made, for the summit consists of a succession of broad, heathery plateaux, culminating in a small rounded top that is conspicuous in much of the country round owing to the distinctness of the track that leads up to it. For the following further description of Ben Aigan, I am indebted to Rev. Stephen Ree, minister of Boharm, who writes me—

"Ben Aigan has bulk enough to make a distinguished hill, but it has remained commonplace. In fact, it wants character. From whatever point of view it is seen, it has no impressiveness, nothing to arrest the attention, nothing to impress the memory. Its attempts at precipices or steep sides are failures, and, as a result, it is a rounded, characterless mass. So far as I am aware the hill has no history. No battle has been fought on its slopes, and no poet (beyond the most ephemeral local ones, everywhere born to blush unseen) has celebrated its praises. Only in the weather lore of the Spey valley is the hill noted.

'A mist on Benrinnes may wear awa';
A mist on Ben Aigan's sure to hae a fa'.

Or again—

'If Ben Aigan hae a cap,
Be sure you'll get a drap'.

It does not require any profound knowledge of scientific meteor-

ology to recognise that the results of the first saying depend upon the relative height of the hills, and that in these parts mist so near the earth's surface as the top of Ben Aigan generally portends rain".

But, if Ben Aigan be comparatively unimportant in itself, it at least commands from its summit a most extensive and varied view—charming and picturesque, too, comprising a long stretch of the Spey, the wide plain of the Laigh o' Moray, and the broad sweep of the Moray Firth. I have previously essayed to pourtray this view in some detail in an article* descriptive of an ascent of the hill on Saturday, 10th April, 1897: and I may here reproduce what I then wrote:—

"The day was fairly clear, and we had an extensive view, which embraced some of the Ross-shire hills, looming grandly out of the haze in the distance, their crests and ridges finely picked out in snow-lines; mayhap our view included Sutherlandshire and Caithness hills as well, but the intervening scene was too obscured to permit of certainty on that point. Near at hand, of course, is the valley of the Spey, well observable all the way down to Garmouth and Kingston, where the noble river, broken up by sandbanks and shoals, runs unpicturesquely into the sea. I never look on that inglorious termination of the 'thundering Spey' but I am reminded of Matthew Arnold's description of the Oxus—

'For many a league

The shorn and parcell'd Oxus strains along
Through beds of sand and matted rushy isles—
Oxus, forgetting the bright speed he had
In his high mountain-cradle in Pamere,
A foil'd circuitous wanderer—till at last
The long'd-for dash of waves is heard, and wide
His luminous home of waters opens, bright
And tranquil, from whose floor the new-bathed stars
Emerge, and shine upon the Aral Sea.'

The Laigh o' Moray extends westward from the Spey valley, and beyond is the coast of the Moray Firth, Lossiemouth and the Covesea Lighthouse distinctly observable. Of towns and villages visible—not all from the summit, but certainly from one point or

* "Ben Aigan", in the *Daily Free Press*, 29th April, 1897.

other at or near the top—may be mentioned Fochabers, Rothes, Huntly, Duftown, Craigellachie, Aberlour, and Archiestown; while the hills include such familiar Aberdeenshire friends as Ben-nachie, the Tap o' Noth, and the Buck of the Cabrach. Fronting us to the south is Ben Rinnes; always picturesque, owing to its pleasing contour and its crowns of 'Scurrans', it was doubly picturesque on this occasion, being completely shrouded in snow. Beyond it snow-covered ridges rose in profusion; and, beginning with the Cromdale Hills, we descended in succession Ben Avon, Cairngorm, and—unless we were very much mistaken—Ben Muich Dhui. Half an hour was pleasantly employed in noting these topographical features, in observing the windings of the Spey, and in admiring the beautiful setting of wooded slopes and fertile valleys through which the river here runs”.

The description could be amplified, of course. I have been severely taken to task, for instance, for not descanting on the romantic gorge of the Fiddich, the picturesque windings of which are distinctly traceable from Ben Aigan—from the side rather than the top, however; and I have also been reminded that I made no mention of Kininvie, Buchrumb, Balvenie Castle, and the Convals, on the one side; of Gordon Castle, Innes House, and other places on the other side. I can only attribute these and other omissions and shortcomings to my attempting a generalisation rather than a particularisation, to my selecting leading features and not descending to details.*

The ascent of Ben Aigan can be made from various points and in different directions. I have, myself, gone up from Balnacoul, on the Craigellachie side (on the day after Christmas, by the way, but a delightful day for all that, though a slight snowstorm was encountered on the top), and from Sheriffhaugh, on the Orton side. By either route, the ascent is very easy, and can be accomplished within an hour without the slightest difficulty; moreover, it does not much matter though you lose or stray from the track on either side—indeed, so many tracks present them-

* See, for some particulars of the view and the hill itself, article on "Craigellachie" [by Mr. George Watt] in *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 15th August, 1895.

selves at Balnacoul that the chances are all in favour of your taking a wrong one. Supposing the start to be made from Orton station, a mile has to be traversed to reach Boat of Bridge, or "Boat o' Brig" as it is locally called. The curious conjunction in this name of two modes of crossing a stream is supposed to be due to the fact that an ancient bridge across the Spey at this spot having fallen into decay, it was replaced by a ferry-boat, which came to be designated "the boat of the bridge". The bridge—referred to in old charters as the "Pons de Spe"—is said to have been the first, and for many years—"many ages", one writer hath it—the only bridge that spanned the Spey; its original erection, indeed, has been ascribed to the Romans in their progress under Severus, though no trace of its existence is really found till the beginning of the thirteenth century. Adjacent to the bridge, and on the Boharm side of the river, there was a religious establishment called the Hospital of St. Nicholas at the Bridge of Spey. It was founded in the beginning of the thirteenth century by Muriel de Polloc, heiress of Rothes, who mortified the lands of Inverorkel (the Orkel is now known as the Burn of Mulben) "to God, and the Blessed Mary, and St. Nicholas", "in pure alms, for the maintenance of a house for the reception of poor passengers" (or pilgrims), and it was further endowed by the influence of the famous Bishop Andrew of Moray. The endowments for the maintenance of both Bridge and Hospital were all alienated before 1530 to cadets of the family of Leslie of Rothes; and the Hospital was soon thereafter allowed to fall into ruins, the Bridge also being neglected till finally swept away by some of the floods so characteristic of the Spey. The present suspension bridge was erected soon after the floods of 1829, and in making the approach to it the ruins of the Hospital buildings—a considerable extent of which still remained—were cleared away.*

* See the Old and New Statistical Accounts, Shaw's "History of the Province of Moray", Leslie's "Survey of Moray", and a paper by Rev. Mr. Ree recently read to the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society.

From Boat of Bridge, another mile has to be walked till the base of the hill is reached at the farm of Sheriffhaugh, pleasantly situated on the edge of the ravine down which flows the Allt Daley. The hill can, as already mentioned, be readily ascended from this point; but to those geologically inclined a more attractive ascent will be found by a cleft or gorge further westward—a fissure very distinctly observable from Boat of Bridge. Of the geological features of this gorge, Mr. James Lawrence, Keith, has furnished me with the following account:—

“The road is rather rough, but most interesting. The work of denudation is continually going on here, aided by frosts, snows, freshets, and storms. This work of Nature is more perceptible in winter than in summer. When a thaw comes on after a long and severe snowstorm, there is a mighty rush of water from the water-shed on the higher parts of the hill, and this, with the snow melting and the frost loosening its hold on the rock and debris on the west side of the ravine, brings down tons of broken fragments of rock. In summer, the way through this cleft is tolerably dry, and the toilsomeness of the journey may be considerably lightened by breaking and picking up fragments of rock on which will be found imprinted most beautiful branching, moss-like appearances. These markings were long mistaken for fossil vegetation, but are now recognised as strictly inorganic and of chemical origin, and are known, in geological terms, as ‘dendritic markings’. How these beautiful tree and moss-like branchings are produced in the laboratory of Nature may not be correctly understood, but some geologists are of opinion that, under certain chemical conditions, the markings are developed by intense frost, just as various floral designs are developed on window-panes by frost, with this difference—that, owing to chemical ingredients and other conditions, they become permanent when developed on stone in the fissures of the rock. Be this as it may, the markings are things of natural beauty well worth picking up and placing in a case of natural curiosities. Indeed, a number of flowered fragments of rock from this cleft of Ben Aigan put together with cement makes what may be termed a beautiful geological bouquet that is deserving of preservation”.

There is not much more to be said about Ben Aigan. A number of years ago, a band of hematite was discovered on

one of its slopes, but the proprietor refused to allow it to be worked—on the ground, so the story goes, that an iron mine would be destructive of the neighbouring amenities; much more probably, however, because the hematite was not of a very superior quality, or could not be worked at a profit. At any rate—and let us be thankful for it—something has here been done, accidentally or otherwise, for the preservation of natural scenery. Ben Aigan has been saved from having its sides scarred and desecrated by incongruous and unsightly “workings”; the solitude of its moorland plateaux and the charm of the view from its summit are disturbed only by the occasional screech of a pee-wit, or the guttural burr of a grouse—sounds that but harmonise with the scene. At the southern base of the hill, near a hamlet rejoicing in the rather comical name of Maggie-knockater, are the ruins of Galwal or Gauldwell Castle—the ancient Castle of Bucharm, the seat of a branch of the family of De Moravia, the ancestors of the Morays of Abercairney and the Dukes of Atholl. One must perhaps be cautious in the matter of recommendations or suggestions, for the right-of-way over Ben Aigan is at present in dispute,* but there is an exceedingly beautiful walk from Balnacoul round the base of the hill by Tommanachty to Craiggellachie—a walk on which the Secretary of the Club and I lighted more by luck than good management on a preliminary investigation of the route to be followed on the Club’s excursion.

In taking leave of Ben Aigan and Boharm, it may be mentioned that Archibald Forbes, the celebrated war correspondent, hails from the district, his father having been the parish minister—the author, indeed, of the account of the parish furnished to the New Statistical Account,

* Interdict against trespassing on the hill was granted on 4th March, 1897, in an action in the Banff Sheriff Court at the instance of Captain Spicer, the shooting tenant of Arndilly, against James Grant, carpenter, Craiggellachie. Proceedings in this case (which presented several features of exceptional interest) will be found reported in the *Banffshire Journal*, 22nd December, 1896, and the *Daily Free Press*, 11th January, 1897, and in other issues of these newspapers while the lawsuit was going on.

which has been largely drawn upon in the preparation of this article. The parish is abundantly referred to in "The Folks o' Carglen" and other sketches by Alexander Gordon—also a native of the parish—Ben Aigan being thinly disguised as "Ben Ulen".* Other sons of the parish have earned distinction in the world, and reference may be made in particular to the family of Mr. John Benton, the tenant of Sheriffhaugh, a farm that lies at the foot of the ascent of Ben Aigan by one of the routes described. All Mr. Benton's sons have had ability. The eldest was first bursar at King's College, Aberdeen, in 1856, and entered the Indian Civil Service, from which he recently retired. Another son distinguished himself at Cooper's Hill College, and is now in the Royal Engineers in India. A third is an extensive sheep farmer in Texas. A few more families of this calibre on the slopes or in the nooks of Ben Aigan would probably have brought the hill itself into more public notice.

* See "The Folks o' Carglen, or Life in the North", by Alexander Gordon (Fisher Unwin, 1891); "Northward Ho! Stories of Carglen", by Alexander Gordon (1894); and "A Light o' Carglen", by Alexander Gordon, in *Macmillan's Magazine*, June, 1892. In this last, Archibald Forbes is alluded to as "A former minister's son, he who had made 'siccan a name up in Lunnon as a newspaper chiel'. . . . A real carl of geniwis, but whether limb o' Sahtan or freak o' nature, God kens".