

ROTHIEMURCHUS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE CENTURY.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

ROTHIEMURCHUS lies so close to the Cairngorms that no apology need be made for calling attention to a most interesting account of it and of the adjoining districts furnished in a recently-published work—"Memoirs of a Highland Lady", the autobiography of a Miss Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus, afterwards Mrs. Smith of Baltiboy, in Ireland. This lady was the eldest child of Sir John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchus, who was M.P. for Great Grimsby and Tavistock, and afterwards a judge in Bombay. She was born in 1797. Her recollections of Rothiemurchus dated from childhood. She was partly brought up and educated there, and her connection with Speyside continued of the most intimate character, despite occasional residence elsewhere, till the time she left for India with her parents. Her attachment to the place was unbounded. "Our beloved Duchus", she writes—(Duchus, she explains, is a Gaelic word having much the same significance as domain; the crest of the family is an armed hand holding a broadsword, with the motto, "For my Duchus")—"Our beloved Duchus, through all the changes of our lives, has remained the spot on earth dearest to every one of us. . . . No other spot ever replaced it, no other scenery ever surpassed it, no other young happiness ever seemed to approach within a comprehensible distance of our childhood at Rothiemurchus". And there is quite a pathetic picture of her last walk in the Duchus with her youngest sister—"When we heard that green gate clasp behind us, we gave way, dropped down on the two mushroom seats and cried bitterly. Even now I seem to hear the clasp of that gate; I shall hear it till I die; it seemed to end the poetry of our existence". (Mrs. Smith, it may be perhaps well to mention, died in 1885).

The natural characteristics of Rothiemurchus were the same in the early years of the century as they are to-day, and Mrs. Smith's first description of them in the "Memoirs" corresponds in the main with any description that might be essayed now. "The 'wide plain of the fir trees', which lies in the bosom of the Grampians, cut off by the rapid Spey from every neighbour, has its beautiful variety of mountain scenery, its heights, its dells, and glens, its lakes and plains and haughs, and it had then its miles and miles of dark pine forest through which there were little clearings by the side of rapid burnies, and here and there a sawmill". But there was evidently more forest, and at the same time there were fewer clearings—more nature and less cultivation; Mrs. Smith states that the forest measured in extent nearly twenty square miles. Here is a picture of the region as it was in 1813:—

"Rothiemurchus at this period contained four large farms—the Doune, where we lived ourselves, to which my father was constantly adding such adjoining scraps as circumstances enabled him now and then to get possession of; Inverdrue, where lived his great-uncle, Captain Lewis Grant, the last survivor of the old race; the Croft, where now was settled his cousin James Cameron; and the Dell, occupied by Duncan Macintosh, the forester, who had permission to take in as many acres of the adjacent moors as suited his husbandry. Quantities of smaller farms, from a mere patch to a decent steading, were scattered here and there among the beautiful birch woods, near swiftly-running streams, or farther away among the gloom of the fir forest, wherever an opening afforded light enough for a strip of verdure to brighten the general carpet of cranberries and heather. The carpenter, the smith, the fox-hunter, the saw-millers, the wheel-wright, the few Chelsea pensioners, each had his little field, while comparatively large holdings belonged to a sort of yeomanry coeval with our own possession, or even some of them found there by our ancestor the Laird of Muckerach, the second son of our Chief, who displaced the Shaws, for my father was but the ninth laird of Rothiemurchus; the Shaws reigned over this beautiful property before the Grants seized it, and they had succeeded the Comyns, lords not only of Badenoch but of half our part of the north besides. The forest was at this time so extensive there was

little room for tillage through the wide plain it covered. It was very pretty here and there to come upon a little cultivated spot, a tiny field by the burn-side, with a horse or a cow upon it, a cottage often built of the black peat mould, its chimney, however, smoking comfortably, a churn at the door, a girl bleaching linen, or a guid-wife in her high white cap waiting to welcome us, miles away from any other spot so tenanted. Here and there upon some stream a picturesque sawmill was situated, gathering its little hamlet round; for one or two held double saws, necessitating two millers, two assistants, two homes with all their adjuncts, and a larger wood-yard, to hold, first the logs, and then all they were cut up into. The wood manufacture was our staple, on it depended our prosperity. It was at its height during the war, when there was a high duty on foreign timber; while it flourished so did we, and all the many depending on us; when it fell, the Laird had only to go back to black cattle again 'like those that were before him'. It was a false stimulus, said the political economists. If so, we paid for it".

A journey to Rothiemurchus was a serious business in the years before Waterloo. Made—as the Grant family generally made it—from England in a barouche, with long rests at the inns, the horses doing but few stages in a day, it must have taken weeks—it took three days alone to reach Rothiemurchus from Perth. The Highland portion of the journey, from Tayside to Speyside, embracing the wilds of Drumochter and the high hill-pass to Dalwhinnie, was desolate and dreary in the extreme, as indeed it is yet, even by railway; and the last stage, too, was far from pleasant. "A mile on from Pitmain were the indications of a village—the present town of Kingussie—a few very untidy-looking slated stone houses each side of a road, the bare heather on each side of the Spey, the bare mountains on each side of the heather, a few white-walled houses here and there, a good many black turf huts, frightful without, though warm and comfortable within". There was then a lack of roads, and the journey had to be prolonged two or three miles past the burn at Lynwilg, towards Aviemore, the Spey being crossed at a ford at Inverdrue, there being a ferry and a carriage-boat a little higher up the stream for use when the river was in flood. Thus difficult of access, Rothiemurchus

was far removed from communication with the outer world: "the south of England was far away, letters were long on the road". The post, it seems, used to go round by Aberdeen to Inverness and on to Grantown by a runner, where another runner received the Rothiemurchus bag and brought it three times a week to the Doune. It is curious in this connection to note the "great improvement" recorded in 1813—a stage-coach was then started to run three days a week between Perth and Inverness. "Our bag was made up at Perth and dropped at Lynwilg at Robbie Cumming's, whose little shop soon became a receiving-house for more bags than ours. It was quite an event; we used to listen for the horn; on still days, and when the wind set that way, we could hear it distinctly as we walked on the flow-dyke round the farm. At one or two breaks in the wooding we could see the coach, a novel sight that made us clap our hands". The residents at Rothiemurchus were so remote from markets, too, that they had to depend very much on their own produce for most of the necessaries of life. From cattle and sheep were obtained, not only the chief part of their food, but fleeces to be woven into clothing, blanketing, and carpets, horn for spoons, leather to be dressed at home for various purposes, hair for the masons, etc. "We brewed our own beer, made our bread, made our candles; nothing was brought from afar but wine, groceries, and flour, wheat not ripening well so high above the sea". Whisky-drinking was common in the district—in quantities that would now be reckoned excessive. In the pantry at the Doune, a bottle was the allowance per day for such messengers or visitors whose errands sent them in that direction. All the men engaged in the wood manufacture drank whisky "in goblets" three times a day. "A dram all round" marked anything extra. "That dram was the Highland prayer, it began, accompanied, and ended all things".

The "Memoirs" deal chiefly with life at the Doune—the reconstruction of which is duly chronicled—and at Kinrara, then occupied by the Duchess of Gordon; and they contain many vivid descriptions of the social gatherings of

the time, harvest-homes, "floaters' balls", and the like, and one particularly good account of the congregation that assembled in the old church of Rothiemurchus and of the manner in which the service was conducted. The book, indeed, is more a picture of the mode of life and the social relations existing in "the old days, the days that are no more" than anything else. One notices, with some surprise, very little allusion to the mountain scenery that surrounds Rothiemurchus—no mention, for instance, is made of a mountain ascent; and deer-stalking or deer-shooting never flits across these pages, although there is an occasional reference to the "Twelfth" and to shooting-parties. Devotion to sport was apparently not a characteristic of the Whig laird of Rothiemurchus, and mountain climbing in his day had not become either a pursuit or a pastime. Yet one lady at least, prior to the date of our author's reminiscences, had made the ascent of Cairngorm, and from the Doune, too, and in company also with this Mr. Grant of Rothiemurchus. (See *C.C.J.*, Vol. I., p. 375). Lacking accounts of mountain ascents, we must, perforce, be content with such glimpses of the mountains—and they are but glimpses—as are afforded in Mrs. Smith's entertaining pages:—

"The birch woods began to show a little after this, but deserted the banks about that frightful Kincaig, where began the long moor over which we were glad to look across the Spey to Invereshie, from whence all the Rothiemurchus side of the river was a succession of lovely scenery. On we went over the weary moor of Alvie to the loch of the same name with its kirk and manse, so singularly built on a long promontory, running far out into the water; Tor Alvie on the right, Craigellachie before us, and our own most beautiful 'plain of the fir trees' opening out as we advanced, the house of the Doune appearing for a moment as we passed on by Lynwilg. We had as usual to go on to the big boat at Inverdrue, feasting our eyes all the way on the fine range of the Cairngorm, the pass of the Larig between Cairngorm and Braeriach, the hill of Kincairn standing forward to the north to enclose the forest which spread all along by the banks of the Spey, the foreground relieved by hillocks clothed with birch, fields, streams, and the smoke from the numerous cottages. Our beloved Ord Bain rose

right in front with its bald head and birch-covered sides, and we could point out our favourite spots to one another as we passed along, some coming into sight as others receded, till the clamour of our young voices, at first amusing, had to be hushed. We were so happy!

“The small farms in Rothiemurchus lay all about in various directions, most of them beautifully situated; the extent of the old forest was said to be sixteen square miles, and it was reckoned that about ten more were growing up, either of natural fir, or my father’s planted larch. The whole lay in the bosom of the Grampians in a bend of a bow, as it were, formed by the mountains, the river Spey being the string and our boundary. The mountains are bare, not very picturesquely shaped, yet imposing from their size. Many glens run up them, all richly carpeted with sweet grass peculiarly suited to the fattening of cattle, one or two of these ending in a lake dropped at the bottom of a screen of precipices. One pass, that of Larig, leads to Braemar, Lord Fife’s country, with whose lands and the Duke of Gordon’s ours march in that direction. Several rapid streams run through the forest, the smaller burnies rattling along the rocky beds to join the larger, which in their turn flow on to be lost in the Spey. The Luineag and the Bennie are quite rivers, the one rises north from Loch Morlich in Glen More, the other south from Loch Eunach in Glen Eunach; they join above the bridge of Coylum and form the Druiè, an unmanageable run of water that divides, subdivides, and sometimes changes its principal channel and keeps a fine plain of many acres in a state of stony wilderness. The vagaries of the Druiè were not alone watched by the crofters on its banks with anxiety. There was a tradition that it had broken from its old precincts on the transference of the property to the Grants from the Shaws, that the Grants would thrive while the Druiè was tranquil, but when it wearied of its new channel and returned to its former course, the fortune of the new family would fail. The change happened in 1829, at the time of the great Lammas floods so well described by Sir Thomas Dick Lauder. We used to laugh at the prediction!

“Besides the streams, innumerable lochs lay hid among the pine-trees of that endless forest. On one of these [Loch an Eilein] was the small island completely occupied by the ruins of the Comyn fortress, a low long building with one square tower, a flank wall with a door in it, and one or two small windows high up, and a sort

of a house with a gable end attached, part of which stood on piles. The people said there was a zig-zag causeway beneath the water, from the door of the old castle to the shore, the secret of which was always known to three persons only. We often tried to hit upon this causeway, but we never succeeded.

“A great number of paths crossed the forest, and one or two cart-roads; the robbers’ road at the back of Loch an Eilein was made by Rob Roy for his own convenience when out upon his cattle raids, and a decayed fir-tree was often pointed out as the spot where Laird James, the Spreckled Laird, occasionally tied a bullock or two when he heard of such visitors in the country; they were, of course, driven away and never seen again, but the Laird’s own herds were not touched. It has been the fashion to father all moss-trooping throughout the Highlands on Rob Roy, but there was a Macpherson nearer to us, and a Mackintosh equally clever at the gathering of gear—Mackintosh of Borlam”.

Other legends of the district are preserved in Mrs. Smith’s volume. The original possession of Rothiemurchus by the Grants is itself based on a legend. In 1570 the Chief of the Clan Grant presented his second son, Patrick, with the moor of Muckerach—(on the road from Dulnain Bridge to the church of Duthil and Carr Bridge)—on which he built a tower or castle; and the Shaws having displeased the Government by repeated acts of insubordination, their lands were confiscated, and the Rothiemurchus portion presented to the Laird of Muckerach, “gin he could win it”—which (as Mrs. Smith naively puts it) “without more ado he did”. The Shaws proved troublesome for a few generations, and their last chief, killed in a fight between the two clans, was importunate even in death, for his corpse was continually raised, until the laird of Rothiemurchus buried it deep down within the kirk beneath his own seat, “and every Sunday when he went to pray he stamped his feet upon the heavy stone he had laid over the remains of his enemy”. The “great man” of the Rothiemurchus Grants was a Patrick Grant, surnamed Macalpine—a kind of despotic sovereign, who went about with “a body of four-and-twenty picked men gaily dressed”, and dispensed (and executed) speedy justice, not only over his own small patrimony, but over all the country round. He left a widow (a

second wife), who was sadly persecuted by the wife of his eldest son and heir, and who made public her grievances in this peculiar fashion:—"Once after the service in the kirk was over, she stepped up with her fan in her hand to the corner of the kirkyard where all our graves are made, and, taking off her high-heeled slipper, she tapped with it on the stone laid over her husband's grave, crying out through her tears, 'Macalpine! Macalpine! rise up for ae half-hour and see me richted'"! So much for the legendary lore in the family history: the legendary lore of the district may be illustrated by the following story regarding Glen Eunach:—"Fairy tales belong to this beautiful wilderness; the steep rock on the one hand is the dwelling of the Bodach of the Scarigour, and the castle-like row of precipitous banks on the other is the domain of the Bodach of the Corriegowanthill—titles of honour these in fairy-land, whose high condition did not, however, prevent their owners from quarrelling, for no mortal ever gained the good graces of the one without offending the other, loud laughing mockery ever filling the glen from one potentate or the other, whenever their territories were invaded after certain hours".

There is an interesting tradition given in the Notes about the Doune:—

"The Doune hill is supposed to be inhabited by one of the numerous Brownies of tradition. This one was a friendly little fellow, who used to come out nightly from his hill and work hard in the kitchen, tinkering the pots and pans, in return for 'the cream-bowl duly set'. But one unfortunate night the laird was kept awake by the hammering, and cried out peevishly to the Brownie to stop his noise and be off with him. The Brownie, in high dudgeon, retired within his hill, and has never resumed his service at the Doune, though he is supposed to account for the occasional disappearance of milk left standing in the offices. He may still be heard at work inside the hill, and there is a belief that in time his resentment will subside, and he will return to his former haunts. One of the babies of 'the family', born in 1843, was peculiar-looking as a new-born child from having marked features and unusually long dark hair; at first sight of her, one of the old women who had come for the occasion cried out, 'Eh, sirs! it's the Brownie come back again'"!

Space prevents any notice of the portions of the book dealing with the social relations of the people in the time treated of; but the details furnished are most interesting, and are recorded with much piquancy and humour, but also with great good feeling and intense appreciation of the old ways. Alas! these old ways have long since departed. The few grandees shut themselves up rigorously in their proud exclusiveness. Those who could have perpetuated a better tone are gone, their places know them no more. Our former wise occasional reunions are matters of history; each section appears now to keep apart, unnoticed by the class above, and in turn not noticing the class below". The prophecy of an aunt of Mrs. Smith has come true—"that, with the progress of knowledge, all the old feudal affections would be overwhelmed, individuality of character would cease, manners would change, the Highlands would become like the rest of the world, all that made life most charming there would fade away, little would be left of the olden time, and life there would become as uninteresting as in other little-remarkable places".