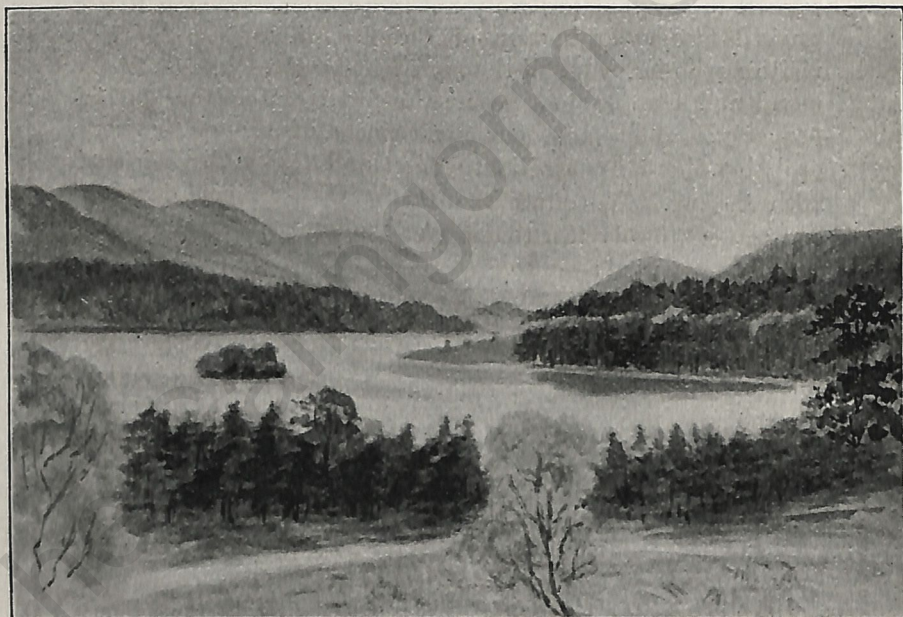


LOCH AN EILEIN AND ITS CASTLE.*

BY ALEX. INKSON M'CONNOCHIE.

THE writers of "The Statistical Account of Scotland" were not generally given to concerning themselves with descriptions of scenery, or directing attention to particular points of beauty in their respective parishes. It is, therefore, re-



LOCH AN EILEIN.

freshing to find the gentleman entrusted with the account of Rothiemurchus thus referring, in 1792, to the Lochs in his parish:—"There are two (*sic*) small lakes abounding with char. Lochnellan, one of them, exhibits a scene most

* Illustrated (plan excepted) by Mrs. A. I. M'Connochie from photographs by Mr. W. E. Carnegie Dickson, B.Sc.

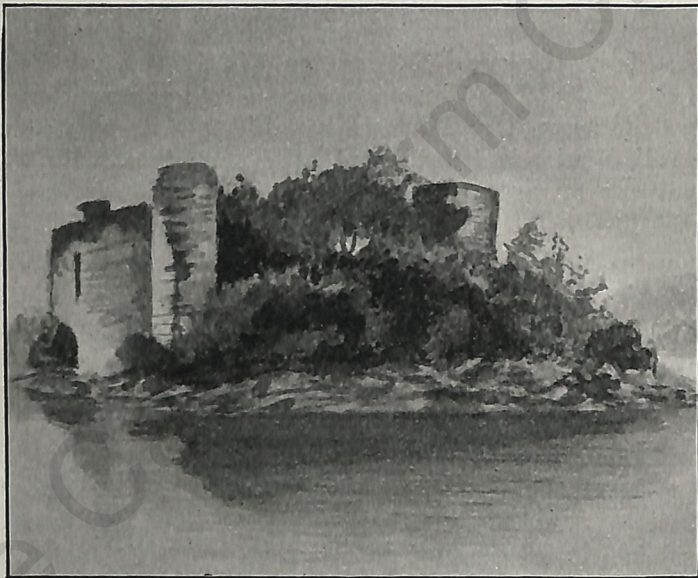
picturesque and romantic, and by the situation of the surrounding hills are formed five very remarkable echoes. Upon a small island in Lochnellan is a Castle built time immemorial, the walls of which are still entire". Later writers have not failed to recognise its peculiar beauties.

Loch an Eilein is one of nature's gems, the setting of which is absolutely perfect, while the "composition" of the scene has been described by artists as faultless. Situated at the base of the Cairngorm mountains, in the Forest of Rothiemurchus, it is impossible to conceive a spot more favoured by nature, and which, while within a couple of miles of the Highland Railway and the Great North Road, is so sequestered that its appearance is quite unexpected by the stranger. The Loch is insignificant in size, being scarcely a mile in length, and little more than a third in breadth; yet we have no hesitation in describing the view as the finest of its class we have seen in our travels. We are by no means unmindful of the beauties of Loch Lomond or Loch Katrine, but neither of these famous Lochs presents such attractions as those of the Rothiemurchus lake. Briefly, its principal charms are the mountains which encircle it and the pines which fringe its banks. There are also two minor beauties, if one dare so term them: the shore is delightfully irregular, forming numerous little bays, thus dispensing with the straight line so obnoxious to nature; and, as the name implies ("the loch of the island"), it rejoices in the poet's desideratum—

"But every lake without its isle
Is Beauty's cheek without its smile".

Let us take our stand at Boat Bay, near the outlet of the loch, and note the salient points of the landscape. Looking across the water we see no fewer than four parallel ridges, off-shoots of the Cairngorms, formed respectively by Sgoran Dubh, Braeriach, Ben Muich Dhui, and Cairngorm, the summit of the latter being also in full view. Cadha Mor, the northern termination of the Sgoran Dubh range, bounds the loch on the south side; on the north-west Ord Ban, a fine hill bristling with pines and birches, stands between it and the Spey; on the south-west—the upper end—the bold

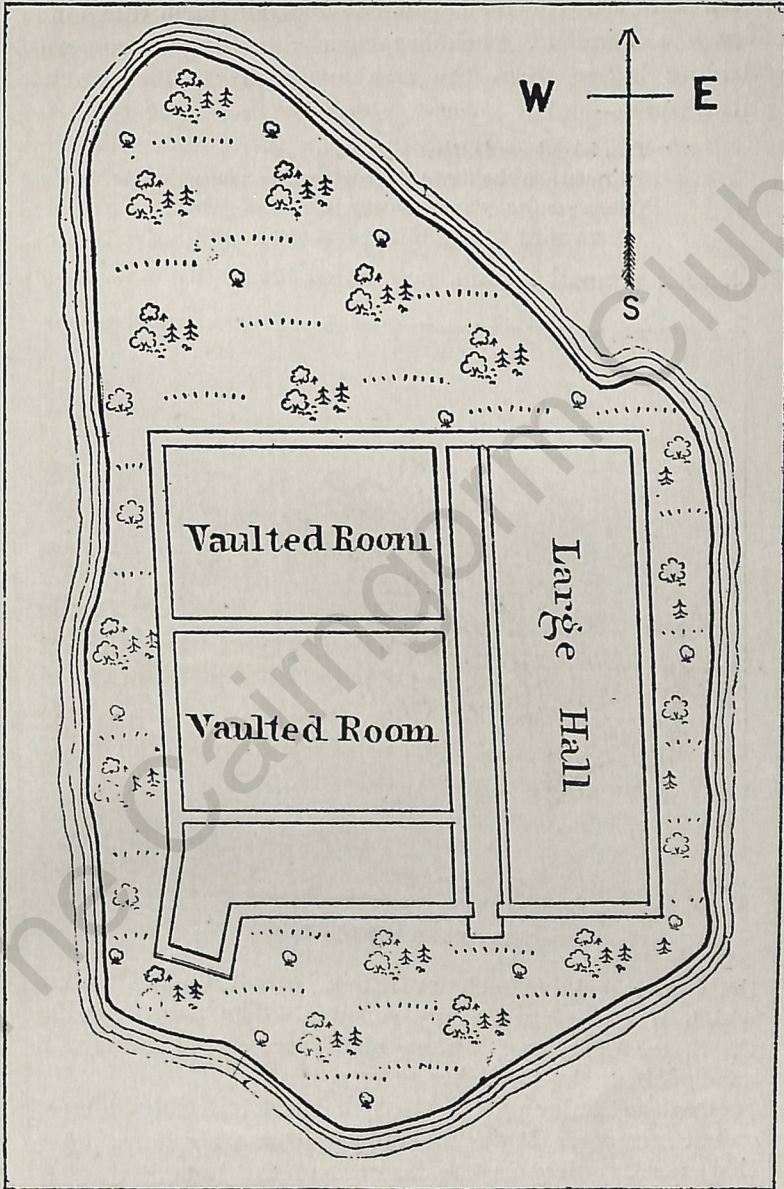
Kennapol Hill frowns on the lake below. The north-eastern shore is unconfined by mountain or crag, though even there high ground overlooks the scene. As befits a portion of the ancient Caledonian Forest, there is no lack of trees on the hill-slopes, which descend almost to the water's edge. A sluice may be observed at the outlet; it was in use during timber-felling times to dam up water for floating trees to the Spey, and which at one time also drove a meal mill in the vicinity. The char, for which the loch was once noted,



THE CASTLE FROM THE S.W.

have long disappeared, as they have in other parts of the parish—thanks to the greedy oyster-catcher.

A change in our standpoint by crossing the outlet and viewing the loch from the lower end, as shown in the first illustration, dispels the peculiar effect of the four mountain ridges, but adds fresh beauties to the prospect. The hills which more immediately grasp Loch an Eilein in their embrace are here in full view, and the lake, with its tiny island, is seen to the best advantage. We trace the line of the road known by the suggestive name of Rathad na Meir-

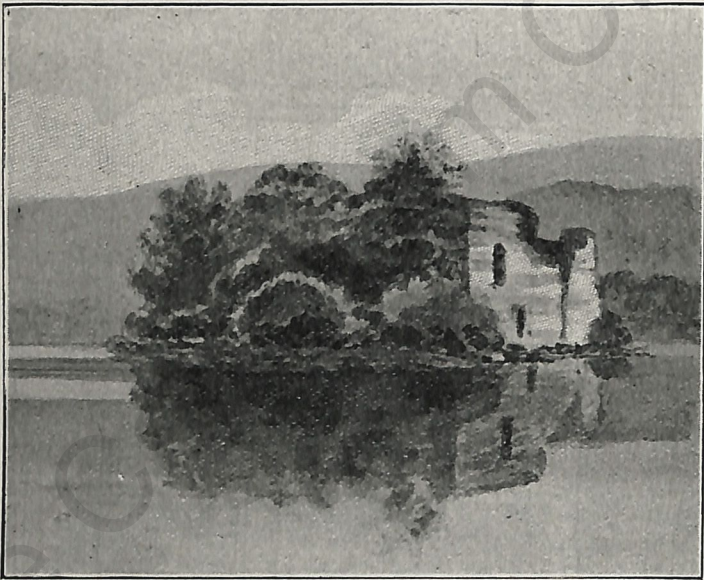


Rough Ground Plan of Castle and Island.

lich, "the thieves' road", and it does not seem difficult to fancy a band of Lochaber men returning homewards, driving before them the rich spoils of the more fertile Strathspey—

"This island castle, that with ruin hoar
Frowns on the forest, through whose silent glade
Winds yonder secret pathway, which, of yore,
Marauding clans with frequent booty made".

There is a small lochlet, now noted for its water-lilies, at

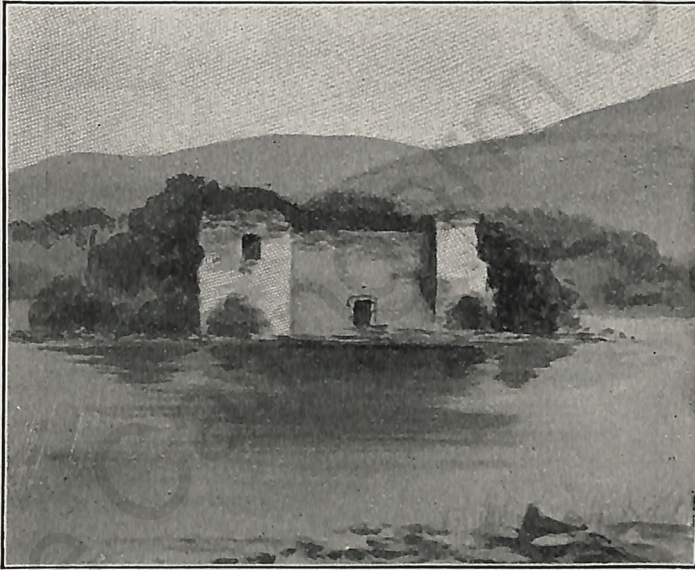


THE CASTLE FROM THE N.W.

the upper end of Loch an Eilein, called Loch Gamhna, which is also picturesquely situated. The name signifies the Steers Loch, and it has probably some connection with an exploit of the Lochaber reivers.

One particular visit to the loch seems indelibly stamped on our memory. It was in January, after a big storm, when the snow lay deep in the forest, and the branches of the pines drooped with the weight of their burden. As we struggled through the snow in our walk round the loch, it did not require much effort of the imagination to fancy

ourselves in the backwoods of America. The fanciful resemblance was increased when we met a horse harnessed to a forked fir tree denuded of its branches, with the carcass of a deer lashed to the trunk. Behind, with axe on shoulder, plodded a noble specimen of a Highland gillie. The poetry of the scene was not marred when the forester explained the incident. Several days previously he had shot a hind in a rather inaccessible position in the Cat's Den, and was now taking this primitive method, on the abatement of the



THE CASTLE FROM THE W.

storm, of conveying home the quarry; at the same time the pine would be useful for fuel.

The island, which very considerably enhances the beauty of this charming sheet of water, is stated to be artificial. Be that as it may, all evidences of art have long disappeared, and nature alone seems entitled to the credit. It is almost completely covered with the ruins of a Castle, "built time immemorial"; tradition even is silent as to the date of its erection. We only know that it was a ruin nearly three hundred years ago, and that *Asplenium ruta*

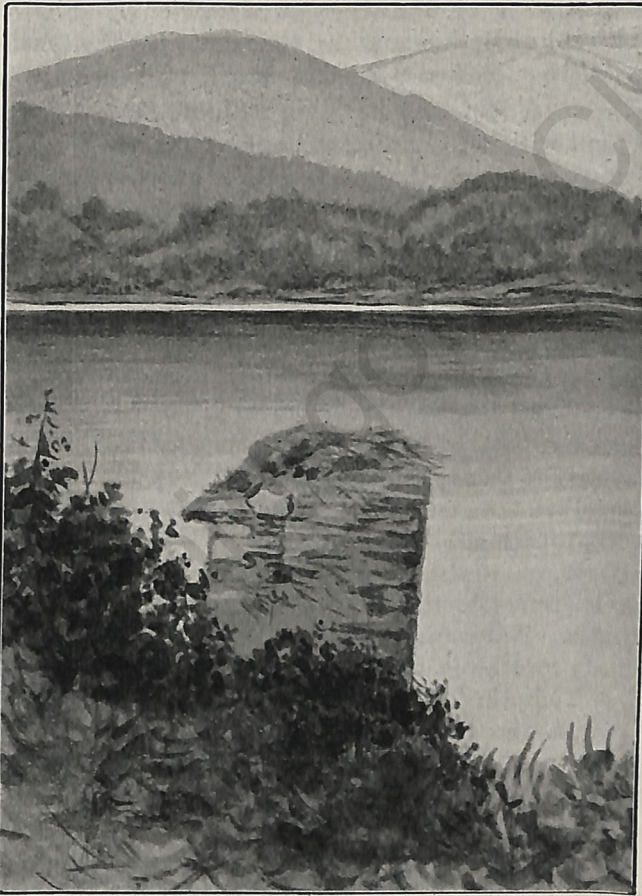
muraria (Wall Rue) has long found a home on it. Shaw, in his "History of the Province of Moray", writing in 1775, is exceedingly meagre in his description, devoting only a single sentence to this historical spot:—"The principal seat was a fort in a loch, called Loch-an-elan, the walls



THE CASTLE ENTRANCE (INTERIOR).

whereof do still remain". Rothiemurchus was granted in 1226 for a forest in exchange for other lands, by Alexander II. to Andrew, Bishop of Moray. This prelate "mortified it to the Bishop of Elgin for furnishing lights and candles", the Bishop leasing it to the Shaws, who held possession of Rothiemurchus for about a century. The Shaws were, how-

ever, ousted by the Cumins, who made the Castle their chief stronghold. In the course of time the Cumins also disappeared, and the Grants came into possession. The notorious Wolf of Badenoch occasionally resided here—a circumstance which adds to the interest taken in the ancient



THE OSPREYS' TOWER.

building. Later we read that fugitives from the defeated army at the battle of Cromdale vainly sought shelter within its walls. It is an odd coincidence that the Wolf of Badenoch should have set fire to Elgin Cathedral, the "Lantern of the North", the candles for which were

originally covenanted to be supplied from a district where such an evil son of the Church had a lair. Historically there is nothing more to tell about this exceedingly interesting ruin; probably our curiosity will never be fully gratified.

Mrs. Smith of Baltiboys, a daughter of Sir John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchus, thus describes the Castle in the recently-published "Memoirs of a Highland Lady":—
". . . 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".

One tenant gives place to another; the royal wolf has been succeeded by the osprey, and so interest has increased in the ruin. It is barely twenty years since particular notice was drawn to the sea-eagles' breeding-place here, but the eyrie has been in existence for a century or more. In 1832 that enthusiastic and literary Highlander, Robert Carruthers, gave a short description of Rothiemurchus, in which he refers to the "eagle" as a regular occupant of the Castle. Naturalists have bewailed the tendency to exterminate rare birds, but they themselves are sometimes to blame. Tempting offers for eggs or birds are frequently made, with the result that ospreys have almost deserted this country. All honour, therefore, to the Grants of Rothiemurchus, who protect these noble birds, and whose services have been deservedly recognised by the presentation of a medal from the Zoological Society. The ospreys' "season" extends from April to September, and during their residence no boat is permitted on the loch. In by-past years they have suffered much from man's avaricious attentions; now, however, they make their annual sojourn without molestation, affording, as they brood and rear their young, considerable pleasure to those visiting the district. There is also a loch in the neighbouring parish where a few

years ago ospreys had an eyrie in a great pine, but they were subjected to such systematic persecution that they have quite forsaken it. In order to protect them as much as possible from thieving visitors, a sympathetic forester festooned the trunk of the fir tree where they nested with barbed wire, but, alas! this precaution was ineffectual.

The Castle is sufficiently near the western shore to permit a close watch upon the operations of the ospreys. The nest is on the southern tower—the only part of the ruin threatening an early collapse. Seen from the bank the nest appears rather imposing, but it is really an insignificant structure. It consists of a few twigs arranged without much symmetry on a little grass-covered mound on the top of the tower, and suffers between September and April from the impudent attentions of a flock of jackdaws, who would fain dispute the occupancy of the building with the nobler birds. The walls are of considerable thickness, their tops covered with rubbish, grass, and ivy; within and around mountain-ash, birch, willow, barberry, and rose trees grow so luxuriantly that there is scarcely a square foot of bare ground on the islet. A plentiful crop of nettles bears testimony to the erstwhile presence of man. The entrance is only about five and a half feet in height by three feet in breadth; inside there is a small courtyard, with, on the south, the "Ospreys' Tower", on the north two vaulted rooms. The southerly vault had contained an oratory, while over the other was the so-called "Lady's Room", with a small window, shown in one of the illustrations. The Castle had been almost square, the west wall having a frontage of about 73 feet; the other main walls are now practically fragments of fallen masonry, rendering precise measurements rather difficult. There is a central staircase, two feet wide, in a six-foot wall on the east side of the North Vaulted Room; about thirty steps, more or less perfect, still remain. The Castle is built of schistose limestone, and appears to have been erected on a platform of stones, with shallow water close to the foundations. It is difficult, however, to speak with certainty on this point owing to the ruinous condition of the building.—*Reprinted (with slight alterations) from "The Scots Pictorial".*