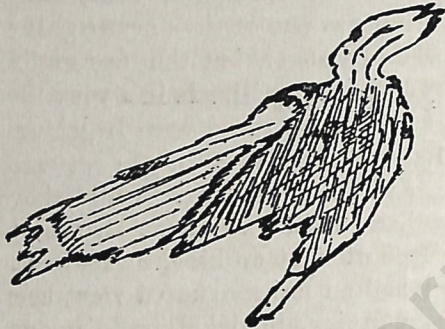


THE ROTHIEMURCHUS FOREST FIRE.

By C. G. CASH, F.R.S.G.S.



IN August, 1899, the beautiful neighbourhood of Loch an Eilein was visited by the most serious scourge that can attack a forest region. It was some years since a forest fire had occurred in this district, and visitors

had become so accustomed to the quiet picturesqueness of the scenery that the thought of the possible devastation of it by fire caused much alarm and consternation, and rumour magnified the actual fact into a disaster of terrific magnitude.

As it seems desirable to place on record a fairly accurate account of the fire, and as I was spending my summer holiday at Inverdrue, the Editor has asked me to make a report on the matter.

On Thursday, 24th August, I went to Aviemore Station to meet the mid-day train. The new station buildings were gayer than usual, for there was a bazaar at Grantown, and groups of brightly-dressed ladies, evidently on their way thither, made an animated picture in the sunshine. In the party from the Croft were Mr. J. P. Grant, the Laird of Rothiemurchus, and his wife, Lady Mary Grant. While taking a turn along the platform I noticed a drift of smoke away to the south, apparently arising from the low ground beyond Ord Ban. Mr. Grant saw the same thing at the same moment, and ran up on to the bridge across the line, returning in less than a minute to say that there was a fire at Loch an Eilein. I went up on to the bridge, and formed the opinion that the fire must be some distance further south

—probably in the moor beyond Loch Gamhna. This surmise proved correct.

Mr. Grant at once sent off his trap to gather the estate workmen, and hurried to get another vehicle to carry himself to the fire. I quitted the friends I had met in the train, mounted my bicycle, which fortunately I had with me, and rode as fast as I could the four miles that lay between the station and the far side of Loch an Eilein. On the way I passed one body of men hurrying to the fire, and beyond the lake overtook and joined another that was led by the grieve. This was the first body of workers to arrive at the scene of action.

Loch an Eilein occupies the triangular hollow that is enclosed on the north-east by Tullochgrue, on the north-west by Ord Ban, and on the south by Kennapol and the northern end of the Sgoran Dubh ridge, the ancient Monadh Ruadh. The prominent northern mass of this ridge is the Creag Dubh, from which runs out towards Loch an Eilein the rugged Creag Fhiaclach, which is continued at a less elevation by Creagan bun Suinn. In the hollow between Kennapol and Creag Fhiaclach lies the remoter and smaller Loch Gamhna, which sends its surplus waters into Loch an Eilein, and beyond Loch Gamhna is the Inchriach—an open moorland, draining south-west to the Feshie. The parish boundary between Duthil-Rothiemurchus and Alvie crosses this moor a little north of the watershed, and the same boundary separates the estates of Rothiemurchus and Mackintosh. These topographical details are necessary to the understanding of the progress of the fire, and they may be more clearly followed by reference to the accompanying map, which has been compiled from material supplied by the Ordnance Survey, by permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

I resume my story. We hurried round the west side and upper end of Loch Gamhna, the smoke becoming denser as we proceeded, and we first met the fire along the south bank of the more easterly of the two small streams that join about 150 yards south of the lake. The fire was here raging among long heather, but was naturally checked by the

stream and the damp ground near it. The griever at once said that we must beat it out along the line of the water, and so prevent its passing from the heather to the woodland on the north of the stream. I had a large sheath knife with me, and with its help we were soon armed with boughs of juniper, and fell to with vigour. We were only six in number, one of us an old man and one of us a boy, but in a few minutes the laird joined us, the other body of men came up, and the fire was beaten down and held in check. For the moment we thought we had gained the victory; but, alas! someone chanced to turn his head from the stinging smoke, and saw that the fire had been blown across the gap into the wood, and that large columns of smoke showed rapid extension there. Most of the men were called off to fight the enemy in this new and more dangerous attack, while a few were left on guard along the stream. I was one of this latter group, and while engaged in preventing the fire from getting any fresh crossing, I found that we had been joined by others who had come from farther south. These proved to be members of a shooting party that had been out on the Inchriach Moor. From one of them I made inquiries as to the probable origin of the fire, and was told that they had seen the fire first about twelve o'clock, while they were sitting at lunch, that it was then close to them and small, but that they did not know what to do! However, my informant had learned what to do since then, and, stripped to his shirt, was doing good service with a "scrog". Another member of this party, who shall not now be more closely indicated, but who ought to have known better, was content merely to look on and do absolutely nothing to assist in the needful work. Had the members of this shooting party "known what to do", and done it, it is probable that the fire would have been confined to a few square yards.

But it was now late on Thursday afternoon, and the fire was rapidly extending in the wood. The wind was brisk from the south-west, and so the fire was carried along the hollow through which runs the old Rathad nam Meirleach, the Thieves' Road, along the east side of Loch Gamhna. This hollow contained an extremely luxuriant growth of

heather and juniper, and certainly juniper supplies astonishingly good fuel. It is startling to see the almost explosive rapidity with which fire leaps all over a large bush of juniper. It became evident ere long that the fire bade fair to push its way on past Loch an Eilein, and spread into the wider Rothiemurchus and Glen More forests beyond. If this had occurred, the result would have been of the most serious character. But Mr. Grant, the tenant-farmer of the Dell, saw this danger, and directed the men to beat out the lower front edge of the fire, and so compel it to burn upwards on the Creagan bun Suinn. This was done, as much as the intolerable heat and choking smoke would allow, with the result that by night the whole of the west face of the crag presented not a little of the aspect of a very active volcano, and the top of it was strongly marked out by a line of flames, but the fire had not passed beyond its northern end.

The scene as viewed from the opposite shore of Loch Gamhna, where I rested awhile a little before midnight, was very impressive. The usual stillness and peacefulness of that remote spot were invaded by the hoarse roaring and hissing of the fire, pierced now and again with surprising distinctness by the high-pitched voices of the workers. I quite clearly recognised the voice of the laird himself, and could hear every word of his orders, though he was at the least the third of a mile away. And silhouetted against the glow of the flames could be seen the figures of the men, and the steady rise and fall of their "scrogs".

Of course, men could not work at the high pressure that was absolutely necessary unless they were well supplied with food, and this matter had been at once most efficiently attended to by Lady Mary Grant. She loaded her trap with suitable food and drink, and herself continually brought up the supplies as near to the workers as it was possible for her to get. The human mind is curiously prone to levity even in serious circumstances, and I was not a little amused to find myself humming—

" When a man's afraid a beautiful maid
Is a cheering sight to see"—

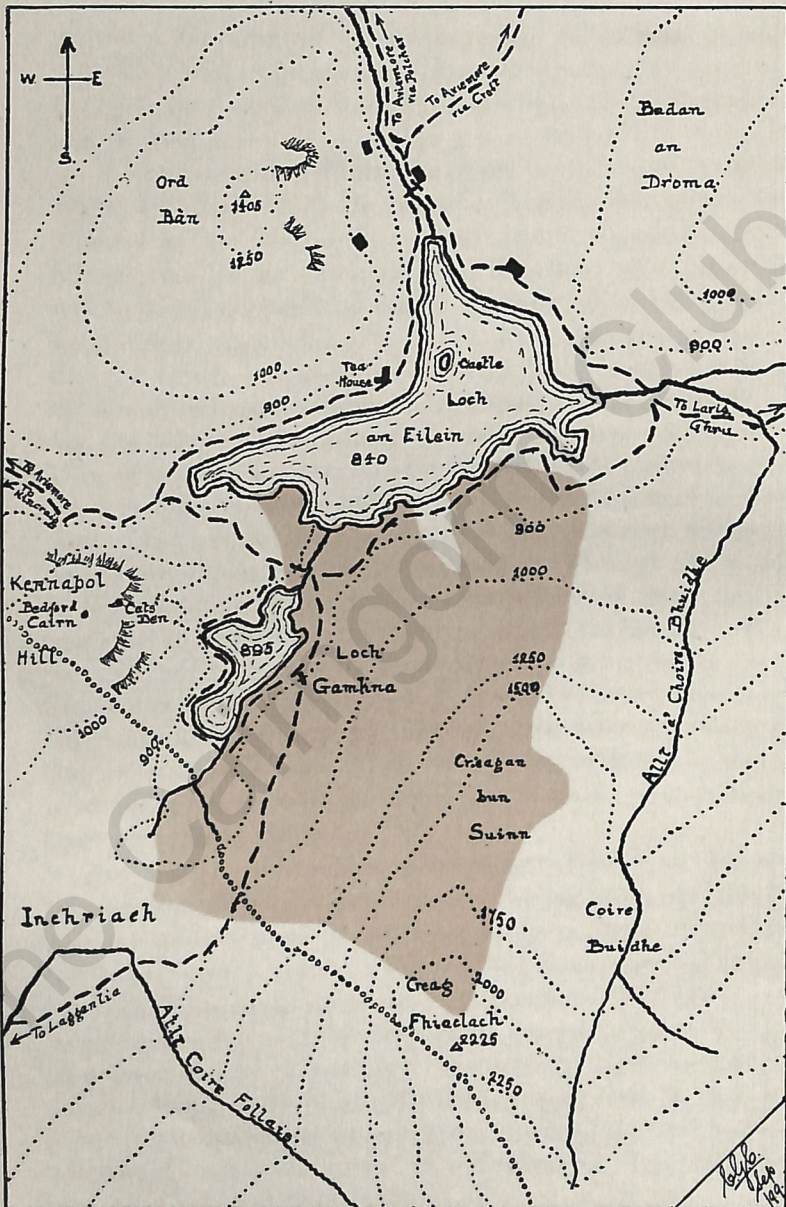
not that any man, or boy either, was afraid, but that it was

certainly encouraging to see the Lady of Rothiemurchus cheerfully and energetically taking her womanly share of the work, and smiling bravely on the edge of the threatening disaster.

When I retired on Thursday night, as the wind had died down there seemed reason to hope that the fire might be confined to the Creagan bun Suinn, and it was satisfactory to find on Friday morning that this was so. But the southerly wind freshened again during the forenoon, and the fire regained much strength, and for a time it was feared that the efforts of the workers would be in vain, and that the fire would escape from their control. But about mid-day the wind suddenly veered, and blew from the north. This, of course, checked the advance of the fire towards the great woodlands, but re-awakened it on the moorland at the head of Loch Gamhna. Here only a few of us were keeping guard, preventing the fire from spreading through the moss to the west side of the valley, where it could more easily reach the parts of Rothiemurchus in which are houses. We worked hard here, and were on the whole being fairly successful, when we were startled by the news that the fire had crossed to the west between the two lakes, and had attacked the woods on Ord Ban. This was getting within our guard in an alarming manner, and we hastened to the place of new and very serious danger.

But when I reached the nearest part of Loch an Eilein I found that the report greatly exceeded the facts, and that, for the time at all events, the danger was averted. But the fire had crossed to the west side of the stream flowing from Loch Gamhna to Loch an Eilein—a place that had apparently been left unguarded—and a space of about a dozen acres was burnt. Thanks to the prompt and energetic action of some visitors, notably some ladies, who happened to be on the spot at the time, and who beat at the fire themselves and summoned assistance, the progress of the fire at this place was completely stayed.

The northerly wind was now freshening, the progress of the fire towards the great woods was checked, but the danger in the opposite direction was thereby increased, and more



THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF LOCH AN EILEIN.

Contours Roads ----- Parish and Estate Boundary

The burnt area is coloured Red. SCALE: 3 in. = 1 mile.

men hurried to the march, where the fire was making rapid progress through the long heather on the east side of the hollow. While keeping guard at one dangerous point where the fire threatened to get across to the west side, I was greatly relieved to find that the promise of a falling barometer was likely to be fulfilled. The sky to the south-west rapidly darkened, the rumble of thunder was heard from the direction of Kingussie, and soon we were on the edge of a thunder-storm. I mounted my bicycle and fled away, leaving the welcome rain to do efficiently what human power had been striving to accomplish.

That night there was a great thunder-storm, the rain fell abundantly, and any serious extension of the fire became improbable. But still around the edge of the burnt area much smouldering went on, and flames broke out when the wind freshened, while huge columns of smoke arose from the whole of it for several days. But the heavy rains that fell on the following Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday served to wet the ground sufficiently to secure us against any renewal of the general conflagration.

On Tuesday, 29th August, the Procurator-Fiscal held an inquiry, presumably with the object of ascertaining the cause of the fire, and especially whether it was due to incendiarism. Though no report of this inquiry and its results has been published, it is generally understood that no satisfactory explanation was arrived at. The common opinion at first was that a burning match or wad was the originating cause, and, as a shooting party was on the ground, this seemed not unlikely. But the members of the shooting party strongly, not to say indignantly, deny responsibility, and those most competent to judge hold them exonerated. It is, however, certain that no other visitors were in the part of Inchriach where and when the fire began, and so the origin of the fire remains unexplained.

And now it is possible to survey the ground, and see what damage has really been done. On the accompanying map the red tint shows the burnt area. It will be seen that this lies between the east side of Loch Gamhna and the south side of Loch an Eilein on the one hand and the slopes

of Creag Fhiaclach and Creagan bun Suinn on the other. The total area affected is about 450 acres, and throughout this, with but little exception, all the undergrowth of grass, heather, and juniper is completely destroyed. The still green patches remaining in the damper hollows serve but to intensify by contrast the blackness of the surrounding desolation. The trees are variously affected. There was practically no timber of any size or value in this part of the forest, as it mostly consisted of young pine, suitable at present only for pit-props. Many of these trees are killed, and must be felled and sold as soon as possible. But still many trees retain their greenness, and may survive if their roots are not too much damaged. This is especially the case in the low ground along the shore of Loch an Eilein. It seems probable that the immediate monetary loss may not exceed £200.

From the point of view of the visitor in search of the picturesque the damage is not so serious as might be feared. For the present the crags of Fhiaclach and Creagan bun Suinn present great areas of blackness and desolation, but it is likely that next season will see these largely covered with green growth, and the fresh grass and young heather will almost certainly attract the deer in larger numbers than before. Indeed, in many places among the damper spots the heat of the conflagration has actually promoted the growth of the grass and sedge, which in a few days thrust up a vigorous crop of bright green blades, bearing aloft their shrivelled and blackened tips; and I have seen several deer in and around the burnt places.

The green oasis abutting on the middle of the south side of Loch an Eilein is a curious feature. Here a small stream trickled down from Creagan bun Suinn, and the dampness around it was sufficient to fend off the fire from its little hollow. This place was visited by deer even while its immediate surroundings were still freely smouldering.

Walking across the burnt tract with some visiting friends I got a curious memento of the fire. One of my friends exclaimed that he saw the charred body of a bird lying among the ashes. But on taking it up he found that

it was only a piece of fir-root about the size of a pigeon, and looking just like a bird that had retained much of its plumage in spite of the fire. The resemblance was very striking, and everyone who saw it at a small distance thought that it was a poor bird that had met its death among the blazing heather. A small sketch of this object appears as the initial to this article.

Of course, rumour dealt freely with the fire, and some very curious statements appeared in some newspapers, where both the magnitude of the fire and the strength of the working parties were greatly exaggerated. It may be as well to say that probably not more than fifty men in all worked at the extinction of the fire, including the few visitors who helped, and the men sent by the Duke of Richmond and Gordon to prevent the fire from passing to his property. The most curious reports of the affair were probably those in the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Chronicle* of 26th August. We quote the *Daily Mail's* report, leaving our readers to solve for themselves the topographical puzzles therein presented:—

“SCOTCH MOUNTAINS ON FIRE.

“Fire broke out in the Rothiemurchus forest on Thursday evening, and, fanned by a slight breeze, it rapidly assumed extensive proportions.

“The spot where the outbreak occurred is at Inchreach, on the Mackintosh of Mackintosh's estate. So rapid was the progress of the flames that before many hours they had reached the estate of Sir John P. Grant, and laid hold upon the woodland surrounding Lochanecklan [*sic*].

“Here the heather and fir trees blazed fiercely throughout the night, the red-glowing mountains presenting a wonderfully weird sight. The mountain known as Sanctuary Ida [*sic*] resembled a volcano, huge smoke clouds rising from its conical summit.

“As one result of the outbreak Loch Guan [*sic*], formerly one of the most picturesque spots in the Highlands, is simply a pool amid a mass of ruin and devastation [!].

“Though fully 200 [!] men were engaged in trying to stay the progress of the flames, the whole forest of Rothiemurchus, one of the largest in the country, is practically burned out [!].”