

James Stewart

Gordon Castle August 12th 1728

Upon sight hereof you will go
to the Sheriff & bail a Dsr & immediately carry the same
to Culnachie for Colonel Kerke, for doing whereof this
shall be your warrant
For James Stewart Forester
of Glenmore

Gordon

FAC-SIMILE LETTER FROM DUKE OF GORDON TO JAMES STEWART, FORESTER, GLENMORE, 1728.

“IN THE SHADOW OF CAIRNGORM”.*

By ROBERT ANDERSON.

It may be hazardous, perhaps, to push the theory of environment so far as to say that within even the shadow of Cairngorm one is influenced by some of the qualities of the mountain-top—such qualities, for instance, as elevated atmosphere, broad outlook, clear perception; and to maintain that literary work executed within the range of the shadow must be similarly influenced. But it is a remarkable thing, at any rate, that two books dealing respectively with the two Strathspey parishes adjoining—and, in point of fact, embracing—Cairngorm possess almost identical merits, each being animated by a healthy vitality, a breezy vivaciousness, and a wide and generous apprehension. Natural and unaffected in style, and genial and sympathetic in tone, these books, stored with information and replete with interest, are exceedingly attractive—so attractive, indeed, as well-nigh to disarm criticism. Dr. Forsyth has done for the united parishes of Abernethy and Kincardine, though in a very different manner, what Mrs. Smith of Baltiboys did for the neighbouring parish of Rothiemurchus (See “Rothiemurchus in the Early Years of the Century”, *C.G.J.*, II., 280). As contrasted with the picture of Highland life so brilliantly depicted by Mrs. Smith (who was one of the Grants of Rothiemurchus), he has given us but a series of what may be termed “snapshots” illustrative of various phases of that life. His book has not the piquant charm of the “Memoirs of a Highland Lady”; it lacks the interest pertaining to an animated

* IN THE SHADOW OF CAIRNGORM. Chronicles of the United Parishes of Abernethy and Kincardine. By the Rev. W. Forsyth, M.A., D.D., minister of Abernethy and Kincardine. Inverness: The Northern Counties Publishing Company, Ltd. 1900.

The three illustrations accompanying this article are from blocks kindly supplied by the Publishers.

personal narrative, the narrator of which, moreover, is a person of marked individuality, with great powers of observation, much shrewdness, and an abundant supply of common-sense. But what it lacks in natural observation and personal comment, it gains in its mass of collected information. The Abernethy volume is—much more than the Rothiemurchus one was—a detailed history of the united parishes and the people, gathered during Dr. Forsyth's thirty-six years' ministry, and into it have been swept all kinds of information—legends and folk-lore, speculation as to place-names, the history of landed estates and their owners, the changes that have come over the region and its inhabitants, the transformation of the district into a preserve for grouse and deer.

Despite the title of the book, there is but one chapter on Cairngorm itself, "A Day on Cairngorm", and much of the contents of that chapter has already appeared in the articles on "Outlying Nooks of Cairngorm" contributed by Dr. Forsyth to this *Journal*. It is rather noticeable that, in the chapter on place-names, Dr. Forsyth attempts no definition of Cairngorm, contenting himself with remarking that the old name was "Monadh-ruadh", red or ruddy, in contradistinction to the "Monadh-liath", grey, on the north side of the Spey. A similar shirking of a definition, curiously enough, is to be detected in the "Place Names of West Aberdeenshire" by the late James Macdonald—a useful book of reference, by the way, for the meaning of Gaelic names of mountains, hills, and burns—where, for the meaning of "Cairn Gorm of Derry", you are referred to "Derry Cairngorm", only to find an interpretation of "Derry", and no suggestion whatever as to "Cairngorm". The mountain figures in the weather signs of the district:—

"With us the coming of summer is noted by a sign, not from the heavens but the earth, the state of the great snow wreath on Cairngorm, called the *Cuidhe Crom*, 'The bent or crooked wreath'. It is said, 'The *Cuidh-Crom* begins to break'. The break commences at the middle, extending upwards, and to each side, till the whole wears gradually

away. It is counted a late season if the *Cuidh-Crom* does not break in May, and if the whole wreath has not disappeared by the middle or end of June”.

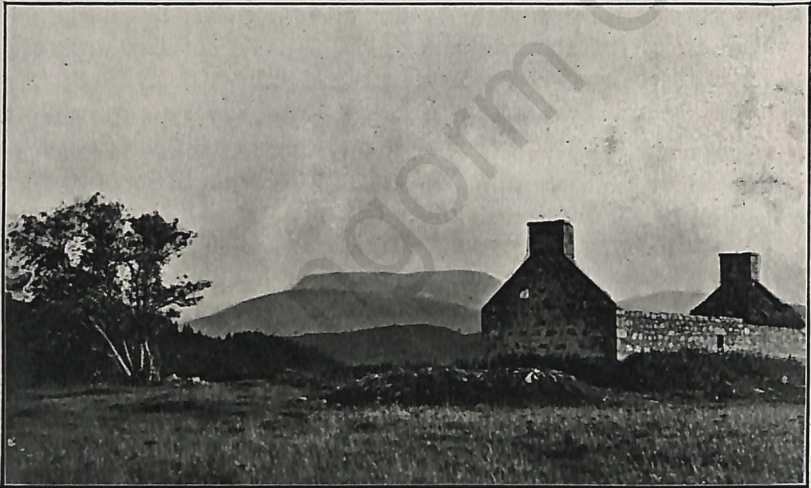
There is, it seems, a tune called “Cairngorm”, described by Dr. Forsyth as “a sweet and plaintive air, very touching and suggestive”. The following other “parish tunes” are enumerated:—“The Deserts of Tulloch”; “John Roy Stewart”, a fine Strathspey, called after the famous soldier; “The Bonnie Wife o’ Revack”, in praise of Captain Gordon’s first wife, Margaret Knight, a noted beauty; “Mrs. Forsyth of the Dell”, by the late Mr. Sweton Fraser, Achnack; and “K. K.”, by the late Major Patrick Cruickshanks. In Dr. Forsyth’s opinion, “Mhuinter mo ghaol”, the Highland “Good-Night”, might also be claimed. Another—and a very curious—incident in connection with Cairngorm may be mentioned. Abernethy and Kincardine, as might well be expected, furnished a large number of men who fought for Prince Charlie. Several Highland colours taken at Culloden were burned at the Edinburgh Cross, but “the green flag of Kincardine”—the colours of John Roy, Colonel of the Edinburgh regiment—was saved this indignity, having been brought from Culloden by its brave bearer, James M’Intyre, and cherished by him as a precious relic. “Once every year, on the anniversary of the raising of the Prince’s standard at Glenfinnan, he used to take it to the top of Cairngorm, and there unfurl it with much pride. He wished, he said, to give it fresh air”. Doesn’t it seem very odd to us moderns that the summit of Cairngorm should be utilised for this futile demonstration of expiring Jacobitism?

Dr. Forsyth naturally—and, it may be added, with good cause—eulogises the topographical features of his parish. Of these he says—

“Sir Walter Scott’s famous lines may be said fairly to depict the main features of the parish—

‘Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,
Land of the mountain and the flood’.

The 'brown heath' stretches for fifteen miles from Cromdale Hill by Connage, the Plottas, and Sliamore, to the wilds of the Caiplich. Where can be found finer specimens of the 'shaggy wood' than in the forests of Glenmore and Tulloch, and on the rugged slopes of Craigmore and Carn-chnuic? The 'flood' is well represented by the Spey and the Nethy, Loch Garten, Loch Morlich, and Loch Pytoulish. For the 'mountain', there is the ridge of hills that divides Kin-cardine, and the far grander range that encircles Abernethy, beginning with the bold peak of Sgorr-gaoidh at the east; then the Geal-charn; then Bynack rising like a gigantic



INCHTOMACH.

pyramid from the plain of the Larig, and culminating in the snowy corries and dark-frowning glories of Glen Avon and Cairngorm. The character of the scenery in the lower grounds varies much according to the time of the year. In early summer the browns and the greens predominate: the brown of the moors, and the green of the pine-woods and the meadows, which gives rather a sombre cast to the scene. But as summer passes into autumn there is a change; the moors glow with the bloom of the heather, and the saffron of the larch, the golden tresses of the birch, and the purple of the mountain ash, and the fields covered with yellow corn break

the monotony, and give a rich variety of colour to the landscape. Winter also, though it has generally a predominance of white, has also its infinite diversities and changes of aspect. In viewing scenery, much depends upon the standpoint. Taking the old road from the parish church to the manse, you have a magnificent view of the valley of the Spey and its 'brotherhood of ancient mountains'. Standing at a higher point, on the brow of the hill above Milton, you look out, as



FROM FRESCO, BY LANDSEER.

from a window, on the wide sweep of the forest from Craigmore to the Torr, and away south to Tomghobhainn and Carn-bheithir. Miss Gordon Cumming, the great traveller, said of this view that it was one of the finest 'sylvan scenes' she had ever seen. From the south-east face of Rhynettan, the view is different. You see before you the valley of the Nethy, with great breadths of moor on each side, gully after gully, and terrace rising above terrace, till the ancient labours of glacier and flood are mixed and lost amid the roots of the

mountains. From a still higher standpoint, as from the top of Bynack and Cairngorm, whilst the view is greatly widened, reaching to the sea and the far-off lands of Sutherland and Caithness, the aspect of the country immediately below is completely altered. The houses are few and far between, the cultivated land dwindles to strips and patches, and gloom and desolation seem to cover the vast spaces of heath and mountain”.

A chapter is devoted to “The Story of a Highland Glen”—Glenmore. The woods in this glen were cut down about the end of last century, the operation being denounced by a Gaelic bard in lines of which the following are a translation—in all likelihood, a feeble translation—

“Yonder’s the little glen, kingly and sweet, haunt of the full-grown harts,
My curse on the bands of men that have robbed it of its glory.
Now instead of the song of birds and the murmur of the deer in the
thicket,
Our ears are stunned by the crash of falling trees and the clamours of
the Sassenach”.

Possibly few readers are aware that Sir Walter Scott has a poem on Glenmore, or, at anyrate, made it the scene of his “Bard’s Incantation”—

“The Forest of Glenmore is drear,
It is all of black pine and the dark oak tree,
And the midnight wind to the mountain deer
Is whistling the forest lullaby.

“There is a voice within the wood,
The voice of the Bard in fitful mood,
His song was louder than the blast
As the Bard of Glenmore through the forest past”.

Some account is given of the York Buildings Company and its purchase of the Abernethy forest, and the further enterprise of bringing iron ore from the hills of the Lecht, in Strathdon, to be smelted on the banks of the Nethy. One of the sanguine promoters used to date his letters to his wife from the “Golden Groves of Abernethy”; but extravagance ruined the scheme, and, as Dr. Forsyth says, “A hundred years have passed, and what remains?” “Where once there were the rush of waters,

and the roaring of furnaces, the clanging of hammers, and the stress and bustle of a vast enterprise, there is now silence. The only remains of the great Company are the foundations of the mills, the empty watercourse, some beams and pillars of cast-iron at the Dell and Nethy Bridge, and the spring at Aldersyde that bears the name of John Crowley". Then came the sporting craze and the consequent formation and preservation of forests. The forest of Glenmore was formed as recently as 1859, and that of Abernethy was established ten years later. "Forest" here, however, is used in the modern sense of a domain to be let. Glenmore, for instance, was erected into a royal forest in 1685, but long before that—probably centuries before—it was a hunting-ground.

Of the legends recorded by Dr. Forsyth, the most interesting is that relating to "Holy Mary of Lurg", denominated occasionally "The Miracle of the Spey". In Abernethy the invariable tradition is that the heroine of the legend was called Mary, that she was a Macintosh of Kylachy, and that she was married to John Grant of Lurg; but one of the versions of the tradition would have it that she was married to Patrick Grant of Lurg, one of the eighteen sons of Patrick Grant of Tullochgorum, and grandson of the first laird of Grant. The identity of "Holy Mary", in fact, becomes lost in the variety of the forms of the legend, for, according to Sir Arthur Mitchell, who investigated the matter carefully—

"Other versions say she belonged to the Macintoshes only by marriage, her first husband being the Fear-Kyllachie, and her second the Fear-na-Luirgan. She appears, indeed, sometimes as a spinster; sometimes as once a wife, sometimes as twice; sometimes as a Strathdearn, and sometimes as a Duthill, woman; now as having lived in the thirteenth, then in the fourteenth, then in the sixteenth, then in the seventeenth century—most frequently, I think, in the sixteenth or seventeenth; sometimes as a Macintosh; sometimes as a Cumin; sometimes as a Macdonald; occasionally as a Grant; but generally as *a certain woman*, without a name. In short, the tradition has no fixed form, and the measure of its variations is exceeding great".

But to the legend itself. This is it, as chronicled by the *Inverness Courier*, April, 1865—

“After many years of domestic happiness Grant died, and was interred in the churchyard of Duthil, and soon after his lady followed him to the grave. The latter, on her death-bed, expressed a wish to be buried in the same tomb with her husband. Her friends represented the impossibility of complying with her desire, as the river Spey could not be forded. ‘Go you’, she said, ‘to the water-side, and if you proceed to a certain spot’ (which she indicated—a spot opposite the famous Tom Bitlac, the residence of the once famous Bitlac Cumming) ‘a passage will be speedily effected’. On arriving at the river side, at the place pointed out, the waters were instantly divided, and the procession walked over on dry ground! The story goes on to say that the people, on observing an immense shoal of fish leaping and dancing in the dry bed of the stream, were tempted to try and capture some of the salmon which thus found themselves so suddenly out of their natural element; but the angry waters refused to countenance the unmerciful onslaught, and returned once more to their channel. That the men thus engaged should have escaped with their lives was considered almost as great a miracle as the former one, and a ‘Te Deum’ was sung by the entire multitude for their miraculous deliverance from the perils of the waters”.

There is a latter-day sequel to this legend—fully as strange and nearly as unbelievable as the legend itself were it not that it is much better authenticated. William Grant, Slock, Duthil, one of the strictest of the sect called “The Men”, venerated for his piety and believed by many to be gifted with the spirit of prophecy, was desirous to have the miracle of the passage of the Spey duly commemorated. As he was dying, he charged his friends to take a stone he had chosen, have a suitable inscription cut upon it, and erect it at the spot on the banks of the Spey where the miracle had taken place—a spot, I infer from the context, opposite the farm of Gartenbeg, about mid-way between Broomhill and Boat of Garten railway stations. He is also said to have predicted that two broom bushes would spring up beside the stone and spread out till they

had covered it over, and that it would be a time of trouble for Scotland when this happened. The dying man's injunctions were duly carried out, and the stone—bearing an inscription to the effect that it was erected “for a memorial of a signal manifestation of the divine power in dividing this water and causing a passage whereby the remains of a certain woman were carried over on dry ground”—was set up on 9th March, 1865, with something in the nature of a solemn consecration ceremony. The superstition to which such a memorial testified provoked an antagonistic feeling on Speyside, and on the night of 19th February, 1867, the stone was broken up and the fragments thrown into the Spey. “The secret”, adds Dr. Forsyth, “has been well kept. To this day the names of the perpetrators are not known”.

But space is exhausted, and it remains only to heartily commend a book which is an admirable specimen of local history. The alliteration employed in the headings of several of the chapters—“Forest Fairlies”, “Lochs and Legends”, and “The Wells and Their Witcheries”—is apt to provoke a smile, but the defect is readily pardoned on a perusal of the matter covered by these samples of the dubious “art” of the up-to-date journalist. Some of the stories are by no means new (those on p. 353 for example); but, little blemishes of this kind apart, “*In the Shadow of Cairngorm*” is an excellent volume, and is deserving of the attention of all interested in the region with which it deals.