

CAIRN TOUL AND ITS CORRIES.

BY ALEXANDER COPLAND.

OUR Secretary entertains feelings of veneration, respect, and admiration for Cairn Toul and its corries. He recommends Coire an t-Saighdeir to the stalwarts of the Club in these words, Vol. II., page 49, of the *Journal* of the Club:—"But for a rough, steep, climb through a wilderness of boulders, try the ascent of Cairn Toul from the Larig, passing through Coire an t-Saighdeir (the Soldier's Corrie) with its fissured crags". If the disembodied soul of the hero rejoices as it "rides on the wind o'er its own Highland vale", a scramble up Cairn Toul through the Sodjer's Corrie, though less easily accomplished when that soul is in the flesh, must nevertheless have an exhilarating and enlivening effect, and no youthful Cairngormer within cycling or tramping distance of Glen Dee is entitled to evade the invitation to make the ascent in proper season.

Although hardly entitled to claim adolescence, we were badly bitten by the Secretary's recommendation, and once—yea, twice—did we exercise our limbs, and more than our limbs, in visiting Coire Odhar and Coire an t-Saighdeir last summer. We had several other inducements, however, than the advice above-mentioned for doing so. One was the expectation of finding a blue bonnet-full of brilliant gems—the finds of a famous hunter or quarrier of Cairngorms—which for some unexplained reason he *cached* under a boulder in Coire an t-Saighdeir. Having suddenly taken ill, on his return to civilisation, the said hunter on his death-bed endeavoured to give directions to his sorrowing and interested relatives where to find the hidden treasure; but, alas! up to this time they and everyone else have been unable to locate it. Another reason was the expectation—not by any means very sanguine—that we might light upon a small mariner's compass which a

good many years ago went amissing from the albert of a friend while descending by the "fissured crags" of the western end of this corrie, and still remains among the detritus, unnecessarily supplying to the snow buntings and the ptarmigan who nest there the true polar direction (magnetic). A further reason and more hopeful expectation was that among the Alpine rareties, sparingly strewn by Flora in this sublime retreat, we might, peradventure, light upon a tuft of the White Dryas or Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), the name of which flower was adopted as a *nom de plume* by a mountain climber of our acquaintance, who had what the French call a *penchant* for vagabondising among the hills long before the Cairngorm Club made it fashionable to do so.

Well, on a bright morning in July last we had the good fortune to overhaul in Glen Lui Beg a gentleman connected with the Ordnance Survey going in the same direction as we were bound, namely, to Glen Dee and Cairn Toul. He was engaged in sketching into the six-inch maps of the survey the prominent features of the Cairngorms—the crags, rocks, &c., of conspicuous outline and feature which will greatly improve these maps when republished. This was a fortunate encounter for more reasons than one. For, as Major Galbraith of Garsehattachin said or sung, "company is aye the best when comin' through the heather". We found it so on this occasion—albeit our Ordnance Survey friend had neither the choleric fiery face and temper of the Major nor did he wear a cocked hat and regimentals.

Crossing the Lui Beg Burn by the picturesque wooden foot-bridge at the mouth of the glen, whose northern extremity is stopped by Ben Muich Dhui, and ascending the stiff bit of peaty brae of Carn a' Mhaim, we speedily got upon the pony path leading to Glen Dee. While walking along this path and looking at the sky-line of the rocky fiacaill of Carn a' Mhaim, there gradually appeared a huge hobgoblin head and ear of Pan-like form glowering, as it were, over the fiacaill into Glen Lui Beg—the Bodan-diaouil of MacGillivray, the Bodindeweill of Sir James

Balfour, and the Devil's Point of modern times. How the vast conical protuberant mass of granite which forms the south-eastern flank of Cairn Toul was so named we have often wondered and inquired. But explanation, history, or legend regarding it we have never obtained. We offer the above solution of the mystery—the appearance in the sky of the hobgoblin head at this point—and if anyone upon personal observation questions it, let him supply a better. Fairly into Glen Dee, a tramp of about a mile and a quarter enabled us to pass the Devil's Point, and arrive opposite that marvel in the wilderness, the Corrour Bothy. This hospitable shelter, like the Hospice of St. Bernard, has on occasion saved valuable lives, but is not always attainable. For, if the river is in flood, or Friar Tuck not in residence, the wayfarer has no chance of a venison pasty or salmon steak for supper, with unlimited punch thereafter, and must trudge on by the Larig to Aviemore, or by Glen Lui Beg and Glen Lui to Braemar. It is true the pasty and the salmon steak are imaginary so far as the writer's experience goes; yet true it is and of verity that he has vivid recollections of a wonderful tomato and maccaroni soup served in the finest condition in this neighbourhood, with salmon from the Fraser River, beef *roti*, stewed prunes, and tea, coffee, and punch *ad libitum*. So profuse was the hospitality that in recrossing the river, wonderful to relate, he saw a double row of big stepping-stones where only a single row existed before meridian. Yet he reached the eastern bank in safety: for Providence is said to be kind to bairns and people in genial condition.

Now—talking of salmon—seeing that Dee salmon, even the female (*Salmo salar*) come the length of Corrour in an interesting condition, it is right and proper that their seclusion should be respected, unless the operations of Nature are to be kindly assisted by that experienced accoucheur, the Inspector of the River Dee Fisheries. In his very interesting and useful operations, spawning is elevated to the position of one of the fine arts. A stream such as the Dee, the Geldie, or the Bynac is selected, where gravid fish resort. A pock-net is stretched across the

stream. Half-a-dozen men with a sweep net go some distance up the water, stretch it across to either bank, where by ropes two men lead the net downwards, four other men following behind with staves, who gently indicate to the salmonidae that they should "move on". They do so, of course, like law-abiding creatures obeying primeval law, and enter the pock-net. From its capacious pouch the head accoucheur carefully lifts a lady fish ready to spawn, and, by gentle stroking pressure of the hand along the sides and belly, out flow the ova in most satisfactory fashion into a suitable receptacle in position to receive them. Then *Salmo salar* of the masculine gender is selected and similarly treated; the milt and roe are brought into contact by gentle agitation of the water into which they have been placed—and there you are! In due time the infant fry will emerge at the Drum Hatchery. The parent fish, after manipulation, are returned to the mountain stream safe and sound, and no doubt delighted with their unexpected experience. Curious people—you will meet with curious, inquisitive people—have asked—Are the sexes equal, or are there more females than males among salmon? Well, it is sometimes the one way, sometimes the other, in different seasons. Of 15 fish in a pock-net 12 have been found females—3 males only being found among them, in strict accordance with the connubial allowance of the Koran. But it may happen the other way. The arrangements of Nature in the fish world are mysterious; but be assured the purpose of Nature is accomplished.

We hope this digression will be pardoned and accepted by the critical reader. So, crossing the Dee on big stepping-stones by a hop, step, and jump, we gain the western bank, and pick our way as carefully as possible through the peaty bog lying between it and the Corrour Bothy, and affording an unlimited supply of fuel to the Hospice. There are several big and deep pools in this mossy bog, none of which we would care to fathom by our legs in the dark. One of these we are just now passing contains a plentiful growth of the beautiful Buck or Bog-bean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*). The leaves, as the name

indicates, are 3-foliolate; the flowers racemose, conspicuous, and white or blushing pink. It grows in marshes and spongy bogs, and is distributed over Europe (Arctic), Siberia, Dahuria, N.W. India, and N. America. It is bitter, and is reputed tonic and febrifuge; and is used to add bitterness to beer (void of arsenic); and the rootstock is said to be full of starch—and hence is eaten. We have never eaten it, as our capacity for starch is fully supplied from long kidney potatoes. Another pool nearer the Bothy contained a curious rush-like plant, with long ensiform leaves and globular flowers of a bright greenish lemon colour, floating on the surface of the water.

The corrie rising behind the Bothy is called Coire Odhar, and down it a stream named after the corrie, rising about 3032 feet on Cairn Toul, falls, entering the Dee at 1806 feet, after a run of about seven furlongs. This burn cuts deep into its channel about a hundred feet above the Bothy, and on the north bank, near a considerable waterfall, which is not shown on the Ordnance Maps, though it should be, a rare *Hieracium* (one of the Hawkweeds) is sparsely distributed. We have been informed that a celebrated English botanist, on the hunt for plants here, along with his lady, when he lighted upon this rarity, fell on his knees before the plant, shouting loudly to his companion to share his felicity. The forester who accompanied them told us that the botanist exulted on his find as much as, nay more than, many a sportsman on grassing his first stag, though that is a feat that makes the blood tingle. On enquiring what appearance the Hawkweed bore, we were told it was like a horse-gowan! This Coire Odhar, or Corrou, is a famous resort of deer. In the ample bosom of the huge Corrou hollow, which rests at an elevation of about 200 to 300 feet above the river, there is abundant pasture. For ages the rich vegetable soil has been soaked with the dews of heaven, and the granite which forms the body of the mountain being near the surface, in July the place seems a paradise for frogs. Ascending Cairn Toul by this corrie on one occasion, we startled a small herd of deer which went leisurely off in the direction of the zig-zag

footpath which lands you on the brow of the corrie, all except one stag, which to our surprise attempted, ostrich-like, to hide where he lay. Our party consisted of four, and we spread out to encompass him and ascertain the reason. The poor beast kept low, but upon the nearest of the party getting within a few yards of his lair, up he rose, and went off like De Wet, following the little troop which were by this time out of sight on the mountain above. There was evidently some ailment troubling him, if not a fit of laziness, or he counted on the peaceable and benevolent appearance of our party not to disturb him.

When you have reached the 2500 feet contour line on Coire Odhar, you can easily by a walk of about half-a-mile north-westwards reach the lip of Coire an t-Saighdeir. Over the lip of protruding granite the scenery becomes distinctly Arctic. You find yourself in a hollow inclining upwards in a north-westerly direction, containing small pools of water surrounded by stunted herbage and Alpine flowers thinly distributed, and looking as if a large snow-wreath had only recently disappeared. Marsh marigolds, violets, and *Pinguicula* of diminutive proportions occupy the damp ground. Looking narrowly among these, you perceive the minute bi-ternate root leaves and the drooping raceme of purplish flowers of the Alpine meadow rue (*Thalictrum alpinum*), which is common enough among the Cairngorms, but grows also over northern and Arctic Europe, N. and W. Asia to Himalaya, and in North America. On the drier slope leading into the corrie, and plenteously covered with stones and short heather, you notice large dark green masses of the beautiful Arctic plant *Azalea procumbens*—our only Azalea. The flowers are pink of various shades. It is widely distributed over Arctic and Alpine Europe, Asia, and America, especially among the Rocky Mountains. Fairly over the lip a slight descent lands you in what the late Dr. MacGillivray justly termed a magnificent excavation, altogether covered with blocks and stones. The corrie is semicircular in shape, with fissured crags and steep stony slopes. Its diameter is fully half-a-mile, and, while the

Allt Coire an t-Saighdeir gushes out from the breast of the mountain at 2800 feet, the encircling rocky wall of this corrie runs up from 3878 feet at the southern end of the bow to 4087 feet at its northern extremity. There are two small pools or wells of crystal clear water in the centre of the hollow, fed from the rills and springs on the sides of the corrie; but, as the lip of the corrie rises mound-like some height above these pools, the water from them, forming the source of the Allt Coire an t-Saighdeir, has perforce to flow a considerable distance underground before it again bursts forth to the light at the 2800-foot level. Anxious to find the *Dryas octopetala*, we climbed along the southern side of the corrie, carefully searching the fissured crags. Again and again the white flowers of *Cerastium latifolium*, *Stellaria cerastoides*, *Cochlearia Danica*, and *Arabis petræa* in the distance promised success, and lured us on. But it was not to be. Splendid specimens of *Saxifraga stellaris* we found in plenty, and the yellow Globe flower *Trollius europæus*, *Erigeron alpinus*, *Oxyria reniformis*, *Sedum Rhodiola*, &c., &c., but not a solitary specimen of the *Dryas*, although we risked life and limb in searching for it. As afternoon wore on, the rolling mist-clouds curling over the edge of the encircling precipice came lower and lower. No sound but the sigh of the wind broke the silence. The spirit of desolation brooded over a lifeless shattered scene. Once only in Coire an t-Saighdeir have we seen a mammiferous quadruped, and it was a weasel—a blood-thirsty marauder, seemingly in fairly good condition, battering doubtless on snow-flecks and young ptarmigan.

Now why is this corrie called the Coire an t-Saighdeir (Saójjáér)—the corrie of the soldier, arrower, or hero? Diligent enquiry has been as unsuccessful in unearthing history or legend to explain the origin of the name as our search for the Mountain Avens. The Gaelic name alone remains to indicate that some courageous, gallant man did something famous here. But who he was, or what he did, is now hid from mortal ken as effectually as the blue bonnet-full of Cairngorms which Johnny Coutts too securely hid under a boulder.

And what is the meaning of the name of the mountain itself—Cairntoul or Cairn Toul? Our departed friend—honest, unsophisticated John Downie of Tomintoul, Braemar—had his theory, which in season and out of season he trotted out. John maintained that the final portion of the name (toul) was derived from the Gaelic *soul* (a barn); that the barn was the Saucer Corrie north of and above Coire an t-Saighdeir; and that it was called “soul” or “the soul” because it formed a store-house or barn for the snow which fell and lay plenteously there. But seeing that Coire an t-Saighdeir, its near neighbour, would contain in its capacious hollow a good many saucer corries stored with snow, the modern searcher after truth is inclined to doubt whether John had lighted upon the proper barn or store-house for snow. The Gaelic for the substantive barn is given as “sabhall” (sav-ull), “sobhal” (soval), and “sgiohal” (skébb-all), and although the first and second examples may sound by the letters representing the pronunciation something like “soul”, surely the third will require a vigorous twist of tongue to accomplish it. However, as this Saucer Corrie, circular, and about 1100 feet in diameter, has the culminating ridge of the mountain for its western circumference, according to John it properly earned the distinguishing title of the Cairn of the Corrie of the Soul, in the lapse of ages, for the sake of brevity, shortened to Cairn Soul; and by corruption, which affects philology as well as plums of over-ripeness, Cairn Soul became Cairntoul or Cairn Toul. We admit corruption of language—alas! who can deny it? In Aberdeen there were recently owned and managed two fine steam vessels, one named the “Garrawalt”, the other the “Glassalt”. These were no doubt intended to convey to foreign nations knowledge of the fact that there are two fine romantic streams, with waterfalls, on Her Majesty’s Highland property, in compliment to whom the steamers were so corruptly named. But, in place of “Garrawalt”, the name of the one stream is, and always in Gaelic has been, Garbh Allt (rough burn), and the name of the other Glas Allt (grey burn). Fortunately for the preservation

of the pure Erse names, one or both steamers (well insured, we hope) have disappeared.

We are not, and never have been, satisfied that a mountain so distinguished by form and altitude as Cairn Toul unquestionably is, should be called a barn! Our whole nature revolts against such an insult. Perish the thought of so ignoble a derivation. In default of assistance in this matter of supreme importance from the degenerate natives who daily see the cone of this picturesque mountain pointing heavenwards from its mantle of snow, we unearthed from the dust of 250 years Gordon's Map of Aberdonia and Banfia to ascertain by what name this mountain is therein called, and we find it is not Cairn Soul, Cairntoul, or Cairn Toul. What do you think it is? Corintrack! May confusion dog the shade of the voluminous breeched Dutchman Blaeu, to whom was entrusted the important work of engraving that map! No wonder that more in sorrow than in anger an able editor of the Spalding Club wrote in regard to Blaeu's work—"It is to be regretted that the Dutch engraver has disfigured the names and references". Our well-known land-marker, Beinn Bhrotain, he makes Bini Vroden; but mercifully, notwithstanding their Dutch disguises, Bini Bourd, Carn-gorm, and Bin Avin are still recognisable as mountains in the territories of our Club. But, after all, we prefer Corintrack to Cairntoul. There cannot be a doubt that the Dutchman's Corin stands for the Gaelic Cairn; but what of "track"? It cannot be "trek"! There's the rub. In our difficulty we resorted to that fountain of pure and simple Erse, Joyce's "Irish Local Names", where, at page 25, we found this:—"Carrantuohill, the highest mountain in Ireland. It descends on the Killarney side by a curved edge, which the spectator catches in profile, all jagged and serrated with great masses of rock projecting like teeth. Tuathail [thoohil] means left-handed, and is applied to anything reversed from its proper direction; carran is a reaping-hook; and carrantuohill is 'the reversed reaping-hook', because the teeth are on the convex instead of the

concave edge". Now we give that quotation for what it is worth, and we ask the unprejudiced and intelligent mountaineer, when next he visits the Ordnance Survey Cairn on Ben Muih Dhui, or traverses the Larig, to look towards the summit of the mountain in question, and see whether the features which gave to the highest mountain in Ireland the name Carrantuohill are not at once apparent in the form of the grand Sgor an Lochain Uaine or the Cairn itself. After writing the above we referred to the "Place Names of West Aberdeenshire" of the New Spalding Club, where we find our deceased friend, Mr. James Macdonald, at page 87, quotes (1) Carn an t-sabhail (toul) "barn cairn", and (2) Carn tuathal "north cairn" as explanations not quite satisfactory; and adds (3) Carrantuohill, Ireland, as having been mentioned as probably a parallel name. "This", he says, "is plausible, but as to whether it is the true meaning of Cairntoul or not, I do not venture an opinion".

Having attained the summit of Cairn Toul, and enjoyed the extensive and magnificent views therefrom, the business is to get down again; and, as the subject of this paper is Cairn Toul and its corries, we must of necessity get down a corrie somehow. We therefore select An Garbh-choire, the grandest corrie of all, with its beautiful Lochan Uaine (little green-coloured loch) in its bosom, for our descent. Carefully climbing from our perch, 4240 feet above sea-level, northwards across the lip of the Saucer Corrie, we reach a steep slope of disintegrated granite in An Garbh-choire of the mountain. Our first descent of this corrie was made 22 years ago, and, as the process of denudation during that period of the life of a mountain is not appreciable, we may repeat the description we then gave of our climb down:—

"The descent from the cairn to the lochan in the bosom of the corrie is about 1200 feet, and the walls of the corrie are exceedingly steep, with much of the disintegrated granite as difficult to walk among as scorix. Tom and I had to spread out and climb parallel to each other, as the stones set loose by our progress often went thundering

down before us, and would have been dangerous to one climbing below another. On our way down we picked up such Alpine plants as came in our way, among which were *Veronica alpina* (in fruit), *Arabis petræa*, *Thalictrum alpinum*, *Silenes acaulis*, *Cerastium latifolium*, *Stellaria cerastoides*, *Cochlearia officinalis*, *Trollius europæus*, *Sedum Rhodiola*, *Epilobium alpinum*, *Sibbaldia procumbens* (in fruit), *Oxyria reniformis*, *Saxifraga stellaris*, *aizoides*, and *rivularis*, *Salix herbacea*, *Azalea procumbens*, &c., &c. We made for the north edge of the corrie, so as to descend to Glen Garbh-choire, but found ourselves on a high precipitous ridge, with water pouring over deep shelving rocks; and, after climbing down several hundred feet, we could get no farther, and had to climb back again and seek another outlet. This was ultimately found, and we got to the glen below, not without difficulty and danger, the descent being about another 1200 feet, and exceedingly steep”.

The late Professor MacGillivray and his son, in August, 1850, accompanying the Messrs. Backhouse on a botanical expedition, descended from Lochan Uaine into Glen Garbh-choire by this same precipitous rocky bank, “with great difficulty and some danger”, and in doing so were so fortunate as to find the rare Alpine plants *Salix Myrsinites* and *Saussurea alpina*. They ascended by the steep slope of Cairn Toul at the mouth of Glen Garbh-choire, and in doing so the young MacGillivray lighted upon a single tuft of the *Dryas octopetala*, which he appropriated. There is no record, so far as we know, of the plant being found again there during the past 50 years, although the late Dr. Roy states that it is found here and there on all the Cairngorms at an elevation of 2400 to 2800 feet. On the expedition referred to, the party started at 5 a.m. from Castletown of Braemar on 14th August, 1850, and returned there at 3 a.m. the following morning! There were giants in those days.

An Garbh-choire continues its lofty, precipitous wall about a mile west of the Sgor an Lochain Uaine, otherwise the Angel’s Peak, at heights ranging from 3730 feet to

4137 feet above sea-level. We never have had an opportunity to investigate the botanical capacity of this range, and, so far as we know, it has not been minutely explored. From the edges of the precipices on either side of Glen Garbh-choire we have looked down into its recesses, and have been, like others, impressed with its grim grandeur, and have speculated on the operations which produced the state of matters which now we see.* We hold to the rivers of frozen water, and believe that King Frost, the king of quarriers, is and has been the grand scooper-out and disintegrator of the Cairngorm corries.

* See Dr. Jamieson's article in this No.—ED., *C.C.J.*