

THE KNOCK OF BRAEMORAY.

BY REV. GEORGE C. WATT, B.D.

IN a Geography of Moray and Nairn, which at one time at least was in use in the local schools, it is stated, if I remember rightly, that the Knock is the highest mountain in Morayshire. This it assuredly is not, for while it is hardly 1500 feet high—1493, to be exact—several of the summits of the neighbouring Tulchan range are over 1700 feet in height, and the Hills of Cromdale, along the ridge of which the county boundary runs, attain in many places a height of about 2000 feet, and at several points very considerably beyond this. But although the Knock is not the highest hill in Moray, and is not indeed a very high hill at all, it is a conspicuous object from many points of view, and, standing by itself and having a fine and graceful contour, it forms a striking feature of the landscape. Some thirteen or fourteen miles from the sea in a direct line, but rising well above all the intervening country, it commands a fine view of much of the beautiful and fertile "Laich of Moray". The Knock is a fairly long hill, three miles or more from north to south, and having its main slope from south to north. It is not generally a rocky or even a very stony hill, but is heath-clad to its rounded summit. It lay, doubtless, in the path of some of the subsidiary glaciers of the ice age, and had all its rougher and sterner features smoothed away.

The Knock is quite accessible, lying close to the high-road between Forres and Grantown-on-Spey. The most convenient station for the ascent is Dunphail, $8\frac{1}{2}$ miles southward from Forres. But as the climbing of the mountain is no great task for any one sound of wind and limb, it is an excellent plan to cycle out from Forres to the foot of the Knock. The road is not a level one certainly, but it is singularly beautiful, passing as it does through rich woodlands. At Sluie Lodge, between four and five miles

out from Forres, one might diverge a little to get a glimpse of the fine scenery of the Findhorn, than which there is nothing more romantically beautiful in Scotland. This, however, is only to be recommended to those who are pressed for time. The banks of the Findhorn should have at least a day to themselves. But whether one comes by road or rail, one gets, in the neighbourhood of Dunphail station, a singularly fine view of the Knock and its surrounding hills, with its beautiful foreground of fields and woods. The finest view, I think, of the hill itself is to be got from a point about $8\frac{1}{2}$ miles (by road) from Forres. There the road slopes rapidly down, and, in consequence, only the upper portion of the hill is seen rising from a screen of pines. The trees are not really very near the hill, but they seem to clothe its sides. Coming down the steep "brae" and turning at its foot to the right, one passes, on the left, the manse and the ancient and beautifully situated church of Edinkillie, crosses by the Glen-erney Bridge the picturesque and rock-strewn Divie, and begins to ascend once more. About half-a-mile beyond the tenth milestone the road passes between the farms of Tomdow and Tombain. Tombain is on the left, and is just at the foot of the Knock. Here one may begin the ascent, passing through a belt of self-sown trees, pines and larches, which are practically the only ones on the hill. Among these trees, and still more beyond them there lie many low cairns. What they are no one seems to know. There is a collection of similar cairns on an elevated moorland a few miles off in the parish. They are not the remains, I feel pretty sure, of old shielings, they do not seem to be glacial, and they can hardly be the results of some old time clearings. Some people think them burial cairns, but, so far as I know, not on any definite ground. After one has passed the cairns the way is up the heathery slope of the hill, the ground perhaps a little mossy and wet here and there, but presenting no real difficulty. An alternative ascent is to keep on the highway to a point between the eleventh and twelfth milestones, where the hill assumes a somewhat rocky character, and then begin

climbing. This point is easily found, one's attention being drawn by the few low crags and what appears to be a perched boulder. On ascending, one finds that this latter is really a large piece of the native rock, actually *in situ*, and that the crumbling away of the layers beneath it has given it its singular appearance. It is locally known as the "bonnet stone". This stone and the low crags beside it are of the prevailing gneiss of the district, and all around them the hard fern (*Blechnum spicant*) grows abundantly. After these crags have been passed, a slight depression is crossed, and the ascent continued through the heather. If one wants a fairly steep ascent the climb should be made from Lochenoun, on the east side, or from about a mile to the north of Dava station on the south side of the hill.

The view from the top is magnificent, and very amply repays the comparatively light exertion required in reaching it. Many counties, eight if not nine, are to be seen from the summit. In the immediate foreground, as we look toward the north, are the lower grounds of Moray and Nairn, fertile and beautiful, with many an undulation, with wood-covered heights and fine stretches of grass and corn-land, and, contrasting strangely with the rest of the landscape, the great sandhills of Culbin. Near us, beautifully situated on the banks of the Divie, is Dunphail House; further away, the Cluny Hill of Forres, with its Nelson's Tower and its handsome Hydropathic. We see quaint Findhorn rising, as it were, out of its broad estuary, and Burghead, with its bold, wave-washed, rocky headland. Nairn, too, with its conspicuous church towers and spires, is distinctly visible to the north-west, and nearer than it stretches the great Forest of Darnaway. Beyond all these the blue Firth of Moray spreads out its noble expanse of waters, and beyond the Firth rise conspicuous the mountains of the northmost part of the Scottish mainland—prominent among them, not so much for its height as for its fine and shapely form, the Caithness Morven. Ranging more to the westward, the eye rests for a time on the Sutors of Cromarty, on the huge and towering mass of Ben Wyvis, and on many a steep height of Ross-shire and Inverness-

shire. Then one turns to the nearer hills; west and south-west to the mountains of Strathdearn, in the heart of which the Findhorn rushes grandly along his rocky bed; and to the Hill of Aitnoch (1351) and Craig Tiribeg (1586), which lie near Lochindorb, and at no great distance from the Knock itself.

Lochindorb, which is mainly in Inverallan, but partly also in Edinkillie, and which Ardlach touches at one point, is about three miles to S.S.W. of the Knock. It is the largest, indeed the only large, loch in Morayshire. Its surroundings are rather bare, almost dreary, one might be tempted to say, for the only trees on its shores are at the south end around Lochindorb Lodge. But it is really a fine sheet of water, and it has one island with the ruins of a very ancient and famous castle, the Castle of Lochindorb, once the stronghold of the Comyns, and later that of the terrible "Wolf of Badenoch". The view of Lochindorb from the Knock is by far the finest of it; indeed, seen from the hill, the loch, with its ruin-crowned island and wooded southern shore, looks very noble.

Looking from the Knock along the line of the loch, one sees a strange cleft in the rugged hills beyond it. This is the famous Beum a' Chlaidheimh (literally, "Bite of the sword") through which the road from Nairn to Carr Bridge passes. There are two traditions about this almost semi-circular cleft. One is that it was made by the Arch-enemy; another, and, I think, a very beautiful one, is that Satan was trying to crush some good men against the mountain-side to force them to abjure their faith, when they, trusting in Divine Providence, were enabled to cut for themselves, with their swords only, a way of deliverance. Beyond the Beum a' Chlaidheimh pass one sees the somewhat lofty hills southward of Carr Bridge closing in the fine view.

The most magnificent prospect from the Knock is, however, that which is obtained as one looks round the horizon from east to south. Four or five miles away, to the east and south-east, stretches the range of the Tulchan hills. These mountains are not rocky, yet they swell finely from

the moorland, and in autumn, when their sides are purple with the bloom of the heather, they possess a rare fascination. Beyond the Tulchans and a little to the south of east towers up stately and conspicuous Ben Rinnes, one of the noblest, though not one of the loftiest, of our Scottish mountains; and to the south-west of Ben Rinnes the Hills of Cromdale, also a fine range, show themselves well as a second imposing line of heights. And the background of all, though well to the south, is formed by the grand masses of the Cairngorms. Ben Avon is visible and Ben Bynac is well in view, and Cairngorm itself, though nearly thirty miles away, looks as if it were towering close at hand. Braeriach, of course, is well seen, and the top of Ben Muich Dhui, I think, comes into sight. But often as I have climbed the Knock, I have never been able to individualise the various peaks of the Cairngorms. I can only stand and admire. Whether the mountains are, as I have so often seen them, wreathed in white from summit to base, or half-hidden by mist and cloud, or bathed in glorious summer sunshine, they are ever to me a marvel and a glory. The Knock of Braemoray is worth ascending for the noble views to be had in every direction, but were it only to see the Cairngorms as they may be seen from it no one would climb the hill in vain.