

MEMORANDA OF AN EXCURSION TO THE
GRAMPIANS AND STRATHSPEY
IN JULY, 1863.

BY THE LATE PETER ANDERSON

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I TOOK the opportunity of the inspection of the portion of the Inverness and Perth Junction Railway from Forres to Aviemore by Captain Rich, R.E., on Thursday, 30th July, 1863, to make out an ascent I had from sometime previously projected of Braeriach, the next highest of the Grampians to Ben MacDhui, being within 31 feet of it, and to visit Loch an Eilan and Loch Enich and the Rothiemurchus forest. Mr. William P. Grant of Rothiemurchus, having learnt my purpose, and that I intended to put up, according to arrangements with the innkeeper, Mr. Thomas Cumming, at the Boat-house of Rothiemurchus, very kindly invited me to take up my quarters at The Doune, better than a mile from the former, which is at the mouth of Loch-an-Eilan burn.

The bottom of the valley of the Spey at Rothiemurchus is a level plain, and the river has a shingly beach. The Doune, a comfortable and substantial mansion, lies near the river, which keeps the south side of Tor Alvie, and just a little below that eminence, in the midst of a level grass lawn of some 200 acres, with hardwood interspersed, in front of the Ord Bain, a rocky hill some 600 or 700 feet high, pretty well covered with birch, and lying in advance of the mountains which line the strath upwards. The Ord Bain, with adjoining eminences round Loch an Eilan and Loch Gamhna, contract Strathspey on the south as Craigel-

* The Club has to thank Mr. P. J. Anderson, the only son of the writer, for the use of these Notes. Names, heights, &c., are reproduced as in the original MS.—ED.

lachie does on the north, and Tor Alvie blocks up the centre. These are all richly mantled with birch. Immediately behind the house is a flat-topped alluvial eminence (whence the name) on which anciently, no doubt, stood a stronghold, but which was last century occupied by a commodious wooden residence, the rooms of which were handsomely panelled and well furnished.

Provided next morning with a stout serviceable pony, and attended by a guide, James M'Gregor—the best in that locality,—and a boy, James Grant, to ride the pony from Loch Enich round to meet me in the evening at the entrance to the Larig—the pass through the Grampians to Braemar—we set out at 8.30 A.M.

The road to Loch an Eilan and Loch Enich leads between the garden and the *quoad sacra* manse. The former loch lies on the south side of the Ord Bain about one and a half miles from The Doune, and is encompassed on other two sides by Cadha Mor, the terminal mountain of the lofty range which lines Glen Enich on the north—the slopes of which and the shores of the loch on that side are covered with large pines, and the small rocky eminence of Creag Carn Poul (head of the pool) is covered with birch. The east side of the loch, wooded with young fir, is bordered by the lower slopes of a great plateau which advances from the base of the grand distinctive group which the Grampians here form. The loch, which widens in the centre on the west side into a circular form, may be about a mile and a half in length, and has a fine waving shore-line. Near the north centre shore, and in front of a cultivated space, lies the little islet, with the most picturesque tree-filled shell of its old castle, the walls tenanted by a couple of water eagles, which to a day every year—1st to 3rd April—return to hatch their brood in their insular eyrie. I accordingly saw a fledgling keep a dignified state on the ruined wall.

A wide undulating fir wood—where we observed a number of the young natural-grown trees of two to four feet in height, as well as heather in large patches quite scorched by the severe and very unusual frost of the 15th

July, on which occasion snow lay for four or five days on the top of the mountains, and there was ice one-quarter of an inch thick on the margin of the Spey—leads to the opening of Glen Enich, which is filled up with a well-grown pine forest.

Glen Enich runs up for some 8 or 9 miles into the heart of the Grampians between Braeriach and a lofty, unbroken range which walls it on the north-west, the highest point of which is Scorguie, and it terminates at a high connecting mountain screen about half the height of Scorguie, forming a great corrie, the upper end of which is occupied by the waters of Loch Enich. The glen is of considerable width, but is in a great measure filled up by prodigious deposits of gravel and sand running with an occasional break along the centre on both sides of the Bennie, and displaying, particularly on the north side, very steep, smooth faces and rounded or tabular summits arrayed in mingled heath and pasture. These deposits, however, cease before we come to the lake. The pines arrange themselves in masses, more especially on the risings of the undulating ground, which is covered with heather and blaeberreries and cranberries. For a space the road runs along the face of the alluvial deposit throughout the pine wood, here overhanging the mountain torrent and its bed of large stones. Here there are some magnificent pines—some of them what are called Roy—back-growing trees, red in the heart, in all stages of decay, to the bleached and barkless skeleton. Looking back, the eye commands a long reach of forest—Mealvonachie?—shelving downwards along the course of the Bennie, the Kincardine forests ascending far beyond—all on the Rothiemurchus property—on the outskirts of Glenmore, which lies at the foot of Cairngorm. Creag na Leacainn presents itself on the further side, and Elrick, diverse from the contiguous mountains in its somewhat conical form, on the near side of the Larig Ghrymach, and in front of that prolongation of Braeriach which flanks the Larig. Up the glen, Braeriach, a large and very grand mass, faces obliquely. Alongst this face runs a long deep hollow,

Corrie Bennie, from which the Bennie Beg flows, and, nearer at hand, towards the top of this limb of the mountain, Corrie Lochan. On the right side of the glen, in front, Scorguie shows a flattened peak surmounting the jagged flank outline of its long range. The forest soon ceases, and the rest of the way is between the unadorned smooth-surfaced deposits, backed by the sterile mountain masses.

Loch Enich, to the foot of which there is a good but private carriage road—and which, the guide and boy taking three hours to reach, I infer to be ten good miles from The Doune—is about one and a half miles long by one-half mile wide. Lofty, continuous, and in most parts inaccessible precipices environ its waters. The face of Scorguie for about a couple of miles consists—for two-thirds or three-fourths at top of an elevation of say 2000 feet above the level of the lake, which must be fully 1000 feet above the sea-level, The Doune being 700—of ragged, broken, perpendicular precipices, sinking into less but very steep acclivities, all much furrowed with watercourses. The highest point is at the lower end of the lake, and on either side of the summit the range rises into a spiry peak. The ridge at the upper end of the lake subsides into about half the height of Scorguie, while on the south side Braeriach rises here considerably higher than Scorguie—not so perpendicularly—much strewed on the lower acclivities with detritus, with green rocky corries above. The lower summit of Braeriach behind seems some 600 or 700 feet higher than Scorguie, while the highest, which lies to the east and towards the Larig, is some 400 or 500 more. Loch Enich must be much of the character of Loch Aan, but on a considerably less grand scale. I would expect that the high elevation of the surrounding precipices at Loch Aan must be unbroken, and probably greater at the head than at the sides of the lake. There are large-sized char in Loch Enich.

We began the ascent a little back from the lake by a slanting track formed by Lord Stamford, who rents Rothiemurchus, Kinrara, and Glenmore shootings. It took us

two hours to reach the first summit. The top of the mountain presents a great tabular expanse of grit and stones, from which two rounded summits gradually rise, one considerably higher than the other. The day was exceedingly hot, and a hot mist obscured the distant view, the most remote point beyond Ben Vrockan, which lies behind the mountains flanking the southern part of the Larig—and the mountains lining Glen Geusachan, being Ben y Gloe. To the west we overlooked the upper portions of the range on this further side of Glen Feshie.

The only plant on this summit, excepting what might be *Lichen nivalis*, was *Silene acaulis* in small patches—its small purplish disk, where fully expanded, studding the short herbage, exceedingly pretty. In the lower ascent *Alchemilla alpina* was in great abundance, and by the mossy springs *Saxifraga stellaris*, also very pleasing, almost like London Pride in its minute spotted petals. I also found *Cerastium alpinum* and *Epilobium alpinum*, and a good deal of *Rubus chamaemorus*. I renewed my acquaintance with these Alpine beauties with much pleasure. But the flora of the Grampians is very scanty. I was disappointed at not finding *Azalea procumbens*. But on and near the highest summit there was a good deal of *Arbutus alpina*. Amidst the miles of blaeberry and cranberry throughout the day not a single berry was to be seen—the effect of the frost. But as we neared the first summit we were greeted by a very interesting sight—a troop of deer—all finely-antlered bucks, walking slowly past in single file within a couple of hundred yards of us till they disappeared behind a swelling of the hill-side.

My guide took me to what he called the true Well of Dee, a little east by north of the first summit, where we lunched, cooling our whisky and water from a patch of snow. I heartily endorse his opinion. The rivulet runs a long way, fully half-a-mile, along the wide topmost plain before being precipitated, and is a good-sized burn of limpid water with a shingly bed, requiring something more than a wide step to cross even in the then dry weather, and to appearance considerably longer, as we averred, in its

course than the stream we afterwards found descending the mountain face opposite, and which finds its way into what are called the Wells of Dee near the watershed of the Larig.

As we ascended towards the highest summit, 4265 feet, we picked up some tolerable specimens—one very good—of Cairngorm. These are distinguished by their black colour, amidst the grey grit and stones. The highest summit is an extraordinary agglomeration of huge rounded and flattened fragments of stones wedged together. Near the top of the ascent we came suddenly on Garachor Dee, a vast corrie, in the angle between the highest portion of Braeriach and the flank of the mountain or plateau which spreads itself towards Cairntoul. At the angle the stream precipitates itself. The precipices here are of truly tremendous depth, and their elevation is indicated by the great sheets of snow lying in the crevices. The eye is at once arrested by two great precipitous walls of perpendicular rock, one in advance of the other, which Cairntoul on the same side of the Larig presents across a great amphitheatric recess, into which the streams from the Garachor Dee and the Garachor Four at the opposite corner discharge themselves before descending to the bottom of the Larig. At the foot of the eastmost and highest of the precipices of Cairntoul lies an elevated tarn or pool of water. Cairntoul looks exactly as high as Braeriach, and is in fact just 20 feet lower, or 4245 feet. From the very topmost point of Braeriach another tremendous corrie cut out chimney-like in the perpendicular mountain face, Garachor Vrochan, lined by jagged walls of rock, sinks perpendicularly to a great plateau of broken rocks, corresponding to the tarn on the face of Cairntoul. Here, at 3.15 P.M., we sat down and lighted our pipes under the lee of a rocky fragment on the very edge of Garachor Vrochan. I cannot affirm that I felt free of all sense of insecurity, and I certainly could not divine how we were to reach the level of the Larig so immediately beneath without the risk of more precipitation than was compatible with whole bones. On the further side of the

Larig the mountains rise at once from the watercourse, very steep in appearance, but not in reality inaccessible acclivities, rising nearly opposite, but rather more to the south, into the gradually rounded summit of Ben Mac Dhui. All the acclivities, however, rapidly pass into a range of perpendicular precipices towards the entrance of the Larig. The opposite mountains form one continuous rampart, of which the portion south of Ben Mac Dhui and the furthest in sight on that side of the Larig is Carn a' Mhaim. Beyond Ben Mac Dhui the upper portions of Ben na Mheadoin, and, between the two, of Ben Aan (3967 feet), on the further side of Loch Aan, show themselves. To the right the eye scans mountainous ranges in Braemar. To the left the topmost peak of Cairngorm (4095 feet) rises from the wide ridge common to it, Ben Mac Dhui and Creag na Leacainn at the north-east corner of the Larig; south-west of Cairntoul are Ben y Vrockan and Carn Geusachan and the mountains of Glen Geusachan, which joins the Larig on the further side of Cairntoul.

I don't recollect being ever more impressed with a sense of wild, rugged grandeur. The elevations and the prodigious mass of mountain land on all hands, the depth of the perpendicular walls of the succession of corries encircling the great hollow immediately below, and the very striking evidences of the power of the elemental warfare which had torn so many rocky masses from the mountain sides—the immense mountain plains and mountain tops covered with nothing but grit and broken stones, a feature which the deep cleaving ravine of the Larig revealed as characteristic of the mountain-sides to fully two-thirds of their upper elevation, formed a scene of magnificent desolation unrelieved save by the scanty heathy verdure seen to gather round the foundations of the mountains and amongst the infant Dee in the course of its descent—such as I never did witness before. The disappointment of the obscurity of the distant view was perhaps fully compensated by the singular sense of helpless desolation in the world of sight being circumscribed so completely to these gigantic forms and this desolate wilderness of verdureless

stone and grit, with which we were thus left to hold an all but companionless communion—for the distant forms of certain Sappers and Miners, descried pursuing their vocation towards the top of Ben Mac Dhui, did not serve to dispel the feeling of remote loneliness. At a rough guess I should take the bottom of the Larig at the base of Ben Mac Dhui and Cairntoul to be about 500 to 600 feet above the level of the Spey at The Doune of Rothiemurchus. This would take 1200 to 1300 off its full elevation, leaving quite 3000 feet (perpendicular) of an almost unbroken acclivity from top to bottom here, and so of the other mountain masses. The water shear of the Larig, which at the top of the pass runs rapidly, will be a couple of hundred feet or so of higher level, and lies north of the highest portion of Ben Mac Dhui.

The easiest ascent of Ben Mac Dhui from the Spey is by Cairngorm. Both summits can readily be attained, or the descent to Loch Aan can be made out returning over the shoulder of Cairngorm—or the tourist can reach Castleton of Braemar. But either is a hard day's work, the fag of which may, however, be lessened by riding or driving to Loch Morlich. Indeed, instances were mentioned of individual tourists having made out Cairngorm and Ben Mac Dhui, Loch Aan from the latter, which must be a very steep descent, and returning by Cairngorm to the Boat-house, all in one day. But such an effort demands no ordinary walking powers, and is more than I should like to have to face. Perhaps by driving to and from Loch Morlich it might not be so much out of the way. It seems no uncommon thing in parties bivouacking for the night under the shelter stone at Loch Aan.

Arbutus alpina, very stunted—with, as I presume, *Lichen nivalis*—is the characteristic flora of the summit. Descending gradually from the summit, we suddenly turned off—on the side of the mountain opposite to the end of Corrie Bennie, where the southern face fronting Cairntoul begins to round off to the course of the Larig. The descent along an abrupt alluvial stripe was about as steep towards the top as I have come down, and must make

the ascent on this side sufficiently fagging and scrambling, for which reason I had, by the guide's advice, followed the route I did instead of the reverse, as I had intended.

We reached the bottom a little below the Wells of Dee. The time occupied in the descent, but for several stoppages to press plants—for which I had a couple of boards of pasteboard with leaves of blotting-paper—a better arrangement than carrying a vasculum—would have been just an hour. The highest part of the bottom of the Larig is a downright avalanche of broken stones, “the fragments of an earlier world”—or rather a succession of avalanches at intervals have formed a series of great embankments of broken stone from side to side, with deep hollows betwixt. In these, on the Mar side, the Dee—*i.e.*, this fork of the infant Dee—spreads out into a series of lochans. The lowest and largest—the first we came to—I judged to be about 50 feet long by 30 broad, of remarkably clear water, with a green bottom. In this and the next—a much smaller piece of water, with a short descent and less rugged than the barrier below the other, which may be from 30 to 40 feet high—trouts of a good size were darting about the sides. The third, which is a mere pool, is some hundred yards from the second, and intermediate there are two of those high banks of stone, between which probably at times there may be a gathering of water. A rivulet coming down the face of Corriemore—the boundary between Rothiemurchus and Braemar—feeds the pools, but the stream has a subterranean passage underneath the banks of stone and elsewhere in its progress.

At the water shear there are two more great hollows girt by great masses of broken stones, but without pools. Then appears a stream issuing from beneath the lower rampart of stone with a northward course, running occasionally underground. This is the Ault Druie. The Druie falls into the Bennie, and the Luineag from Loch Morlich at the foot of Cairngorm joins just at Coilum Bridge, a mile or so from the Spey and about one and a half miles below the Boat-house and between four and five miles from Loch Morlich, and their conjoined waters get the name of Ault Druie.

The whole bottom of the upper portion of the pass for fully a mile is, as may be conceived, of the most rugged possible character, and it continues sufficiently broken for a mile or so more each way. For a couple of miles from the lowest lochan the passage is flanked on either hand by a very grand range of precipices—on our side Coire Odhar an Lochain Duibh, a prolongation of Braeriach between the Larig and Corrie Bennie—on the other Corriemore and Creag na Leacainn. Both rise in precipitous acclivities of broken stones wedged together, but these rapidly pass into upright walls of black rock much of a basaltic aspect, and crested at an elevation of apparently more than 1500 feet with jagged spikes of disintegrating rock.

I am not aware that there is another instance in this country of such a mountain pass as the Larig. For eight to ten miles it cleaves asunder these mighty mountains to the great depth indicated, and on either side, in near proximity, rises an abrupt and lofty mountain rampart, which for miles assumes a perfectly vertical structure. Everlasting silence and unrelieved desolation pervade this unique region. The wayfarer along the watercourses, however, loses the grand corries in the upper stages of Braeriach and Cairntoul, the details of which must be rather guessed at (though their presence is perceived) than realised from below. The summit of Braeriach is obviously the most commanding position of any for the corries, and perhaps for the outlook generally. I did not perceive—and the same remark had been made to me by another—any reason for the character assigned to this region of the notable number of cataracts on the mountain sides. Nor do I fancy that in wet weather they will be particularly more decided in number than in other similar localities.

At the lower end of the wall of Braeriach, the Larig becomes filled up on both sides with banks of broken rock and gravel, having only room for the burn—then the mountains open out, Elrick presenting its somewhat conical bulk on the left. Here we descried a herd of deer

on the crest of Elrick, and on that of the corresponding mountain in front of Creag na Leacainn, another which my guide computed to number about a hundred.

The boy and pony we found at 6.15 P.M. waiting us about a couple of miles from the water shear, and probably eight miles from The Doune. The footing over the broken moorland was such as only the known familiarity of the animal with his work could reconcile the rider to. Presently the great alluvial deposits reappear from the south side of Elrick, and a great alluvial plain is found to expand in front of the mountains stretching away towards Glenmore and the Kincardine hills. The burn—on the east side of which our course latterly lay—plunges through a deep ravine scooped out of the alluvial deposit and alongst the base of Elrick. The very lofty faces of this ravine are filled up with birch and a pine forest, where the young trees and the old wood—a remnant of the once great forest—most pleasingly intermingle their contrasted light and dark livery with that of the birch. The track runs along the edge of the ravine. A few pines are scattered over the surface of the platform, and on the hill slopes beyond are seen portions of the Kincardine and Glenmore forests. In front large tracts of varied wood are seen in Strathspey, which is bounded on the north by a great mountain range. Altogether the whole scene is very grand indeed.

Descending to the haugh ground by the waterside after it has emerged from its confinement, we crossed the stream and passed the farm-house of Auldrue—continued across the terrace on a lower level towards, and got back to, Loch an Eilan.

Reached The Doune at 8.45 P.M., the day's work having just occupied twelve and a quarter hours, of which I was, say, seven hours on foot.