

A DICTIONARY OF DEESIDE.—I.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

IN the enumeration of guide-books to the Cairngorm Mountains,* mention should not be omitted of a "Dictionary of Deeside," although it is not to be classed as an "early" guide-book, and hardly as a guide-book at all, its range, moreover, being limited, as its title indicates, Deeside alone being treated, to the total exclusion of Speyside. It was published by the Aberdeen University Press in 1899, and was a rather solid volume of 279 pages, bound in yellow-coloured boards, while on the outside cover were depicted several Deeside views—the Linn of Dee, Lochnagar, and Balmoral Castle—along with the Aberdeen County and Municipal Buildings. The author was Mr. James Coutts, M.A., a native of Braemar, who had a somewhat erratic career. After being in business in the north and in Edinburgh, he took Arts classes at Glasgow University, eventually graduating M.A., and he was Registrar of the University from 1886 till 1905. He then became proprietor of the *Peterhead Sentinel* and edited it for a few years, but failed to resuscitate what before his time had become a moribund newspaper. In 1909 he brought out a History of the University of Glasgow, a large volume of very considerable merit, and now the standard work on the subject. He died in 1913 at the age of 61, being at the time of his death Clerk to the School Board and Inspector at Folda, Glenisla, near Alyth.

Mr. Coutts, being a Braemar man, was (as he stated in the introduction to his "Dictionary") familiar with Deeside and had instructed himself in its history besides, and so he was fairly well-equipped for producing a book on the district, which he says he gradually felt impelled

* See "Early 'Guides' to the Cairngorms," *C. C. J.*, VIII., 207-14.

to do. Whether there was a public demand sufficient to warrant the enterprise may be doubted. By the time Mr. Coutts's plans matured, Mr. A. I. McConnochie had occupied the field with his well-known books—"Ben Muich Dhui and His Neighbours" (published in 1885), "Lochnagar" (1891), "Deeside" (1893) (with which the "Deeside Guide" was incorporated two years later), and "The Royal Dee" (1898), this last being the best of the bunch, having less of the detailed character of a guide-book about it, and, freed of this restriction, being more animated both in matter and treatment. It came to be a question, then, whether another guide-book to Deeside was needed; but Mr. Coutts put the question to a practical test, justifying his undertaking in this wise:—

I may say that one who has lived a long time in a district can hardly fail to know some things—and these not always useless or uninteresting—in a manner in which they can scarcely be known to those who are only occasional visitors. I may also explain that I had become pretty familiar with most of the localities of the country, and had acquired an appreciable amount of historical and miscellaneous information about them, without ever intending to submit a book on Deeside to the public. The idea of doing so afterwards sprung up in my mind, and I must abide the result of the wisdom or folly of the venture. Whatever may be the fate of the book, it has been a pleasure to me to revisit the old familiar scenes and to look up those with which I was previously not so well acquainted. There are few places comprised in the work that I have not visited and inspected for myself.

It was perhaps to differentiate his work from existing guide-books that Mr. Coutts gave it the form of a dictionary or gazetteer, Deeside places being described in their alphabetical order; though he confesses to having been influenced by "precedents in the case of the Forth and Clyde." Possibly also the appearance a few years before of the Dictionaries of London and Paris by Charles Dickens, Junior, may have contributed to the adoption of a form which we can only regard as unfortunate. There is a familiar story of a man reading a dictionary straight through and declaring that he found it highly interesting, but to most of us a dictionary is repellent rather than attractive, and, as a general rule, it is used simply for

reference and not for perusal. The repugnance entertained for a dictionary attaches, more or less, to all works based on an alphabetical order of the subjects treated; the very appearance of alphabetical arrangement—as in a gazetteer, for instance—is an indication that the work is intended for reference only, or at any rate mainly. Mr. Coutts's book, we suspect, suffered from the mere fact of its being styled a Dictionary. That title did not appeal to readers wanting a narrative about Deeside, and, on the other hand, the number of readers content with a mere reference-book to Deeside—or what appeared such from its very designation—was exceedingly limited. Those in quest of the history of Deeside or of information of a guide-book character would turn to existing books for either the one or the other, probably doubtful about getting what they wanted in a Dictionary—Gazetteer would have been a happier and really a more appropriate title. Owing to the various causes just indicated, Mr. Coutts's work had a small circulation and remained comparatively unknown. So much was this the case that a leading bookseller in Aberdeen (no longer with us, so the story may be told), on being asked for a copy of the "Dictionary of Deeside" a year or two after its publication, sent a hurried message to the present writer enquiring whether there was such a book!

The "Dictionary of Deeside," it must be confessed, is rather a superfluous work. It does not add materially to our knowledge of the district, and it is not calculated to supplant the works that preceded it, or even in any conspicuous way to supplement the information they contain. It is less of a guide-book than some of its predecessors, it is true, devoting considerably more attention to the history of the district and its leading families, notably the Farquharsons, but such new features as are introduced are not sufficiently distinctive to give the work a special individuality. The dictionary form, as has been hinted, is a drawback, particularly on a perusal of the book straight through. Repetitions are inevitable, and they become irritating. For example,

there is more than one protest against Ben Muich Dhui and its neighbours being termed the Cairngorm Mountains instead of the Monadh Ruadh (Red Mountains), and we are informed twice at least that three of them "overtop" all other mountains in the United Kingdom except Ben Nevis. Some of the repetitions, besides, have curious results. A better account of Balfour is to be found in the article on Birse than in that on Balfour itself; and while the Colonel's Bed is referred to in both the Ey and Inverey articles, the fullest story of the "Black Colonel," after whom it is named, is given in the section of the Braemar article devoted to the Farquharsons. On the other hand, not every place receives separate specification, and so the dictionary idea is not fully carried out. To learn about Alltanour (Alltanodhar) and the Connie, we have to turn to Ey, while the Chest of Dee is not so much as mentioned—even the Dee itself is not the subject of an article; presumably it is to be regarded as included in the general sketch of Deeside which precedes the alphabetical arrangement. Exception might also be taken to the occasional (and not infrequently long) digressions on somewhat irrelevant topics, such, for instance, as the Court Book of the Barony of Leys—and yet this particular digression is rendered interesting by an allusion to the burning of pine chips on the hearth in order to supply light instead of candles or lamps, the author adding that he had seen this method of lighting in use in Braemar.

In another digression we have a curious suggestion why Crathie, so inferior to Braemar in every respect—size, population, and natural features—was given precedence in the naming of the united parish (Crathie and Braemar). "Protestanism" (says Mr. Coutts) "prevailed more and earlier in Crathie than in Braemar, where a considerable section of the population still adhere to the old Catholic religion, and as parish affairs were formerly church affairs, this seems to be the reason why Crathie came to be put first." This is mere ingenious speculation, however, as it is not even known when

the two parishes were united. Mr. Coutts was perhaps on safer ground in reminding us, somewhat cynically, that one of the ministers of the united parish "left a song behind him though all his sermons have perished," the reference being to Rev. Murdoch Maclennan, who is credited with having written the well-known satirical verses on the battle of Sheriffmuir, beginning—

There's some say that we wan,
And some say that they wan,
And some say that nane wan at a', man.

A similar touch of cynicism may be detected in the observation—"Sooth to say, few of the parish institutions have shown greater signs of growth within the last twenty years than the churchyard [of Crathie], a forest of new tombstones having arisen and an additional piece of ground having been annexed." Many of these tombstones, as mentioned by Mr. Coutts, were erected by the late Queen Victoria in memory of old servants and others.

The book abounds in "asides" like those just mentioned—clever and suggestive little remarks, terse in style and pungent in expression, sometimes a trifle ill-natured, but almost always amusing in their way, though the endeavour to appear "smart" is only too evident. Probably this straining after effect is responsible for the ridiculous statement that one may see most of the chief buildings and objects of interest in Aberdeen in half an hour's walk, while the criticism of Mar Lodge (the new structure) as "a hypertrophied shooting-lodge," which "presents altogether rather a whimsical appearance," may be attributed to the same disturbing cause. Many of Mr. Coutts's comments take a sarcastic form, and perhaps his most satiric touch—amply warranted—is when, having mentioned that "Some time ago, one of the four chiefs who appeared at a Braemar gathering was greeted with loud applause when he pointed out that the four chiefs could march on their own ground from the Forest of Birse to the Pass of Killiecrankie," he dryly remarks—"However, the author of the saying has

since made it impracticable." At times sarcasm is abandoned for treatment more frankly humorous, though occasionally the humour is rather forced, as in this passage—"Aberarder has no old castle for antiquarians to ponder or puzzle over, but there are considerable remains of private distilleries." Commenting on the steep rise of the road on each side of Coilacreach, Mr. Coutts very properly calls attention to the fact that the road might easily have been engineered to pass along the braeside in an almost level line, "but" (he must needs add) "it looks as if the engineer who planned the road could not resist the temptation of making for the public-house." Which reminds us that some twenty years ago or so the purchaser of buns or biscuits at Coilacreach would receive them in a paper bag on which was printed—"It is more difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a well-trained horse to pass Coilacreach." This sentence was professedly quoted from the "Aberdeen Free Press, 1893," though whether the quotation was really genuine or simply an audacious invention (as is more likely), we were never able to discover.