

## THE THREE GAICKS.

BY ALEX. INKSON McCONNOCHE.

THIRTY-ONE years have passed since I first made acquaintance with Gaick by an unconventional route. We were a party of three, bent on making the most of a little holiday, so on the day we left Aberdeen for Braemar we at once drove up from Auchindryne to Derry Lodge whence we set out for the top of Cairn Toul. The ascent and descent to the Derry took us seven hours and a half, which we then thought not bad in the circumstances. Next day our labours began in earnest, Cairn Toul having been included merely with the view of filling up to advantage an afternoon and at the same time putting us in good walking form. We drove to Geldie Lodge, where we took to our feet in our journey across Scotland. The peep down Glen Feshie was a relief compared with the treeless and monotonous appearance of Glen Geldie, but our course lay up the Feshie, along the right bank, to its source. High up, the river naturally becomes attenuated and winds about in an eccentric manner, necessitating frequent crossings, but at last we traversed Perthshire at its narrowest part between east and west, on its northern border with Inverness-shire. Very soon thereafter we stepped over the faint, yet quite distinct, track of the Minigaig Pass, of which more presently. Thence we held westward over a great tableland and so down the steep face to Gaick Lodge, an interesting and easy walk of nine hours and a half from Geldie Lodge—these details being given for the benefit of younger members. Next day we walked across to Dalwhinnie (five hours) by the lower end of Loch na Cuaich.

A few years ago, when on a visit to Glenbruar Lodge, I formed a little plan to "slip across" the mountains from the head of the glen, by the Minigaig



Pass, to Gaick Lodge, but there had recently been such a fall of snow that I allowed myself to be reasoned out of the beautiful idea ; all the same, my reward came later ! On another occasion, when at Dalnacardoch, I went up the glen of the Edendon Water and along the east shore of Loch an Duin to Gaick Lodge—a very easy route, indeed, with much to recommend it. But I still hankered after the Minigaig Pass, and three years ago came an opportunity. I walked up Glenbruar from Calvine, and as there happened then to be nothing to detain me at Glenbruar Lodge I held straight forward for Gaick Lodge—a distance of only nine miles, which, however, cost me nine hours' pretty stiff work, the crossing of a head stream of Bruar Water being also troublesome. Winter conditions prevailed ; the snow, which lay both deep and soft, would have turned most men, but I succeeded, though of course arriving considerably past the hour at which I was expected. That excursion has left a most pleasant memory.

Gaick is considered the wildest portion of all Badenoch—and that well-known district is characteristically Highland ; but even in Gaick there are distinctions. As a place-name, cleft or pass, Gaick is generally now confined to the upper part of the glen of the River Tromie ; and it is thus best known as a deer forest. Minigaig Pass is an old right-of-way, which extends from the Spey to the Perthshire Garry, the route being up Glen Tromie, thence on the heights to the east of Gaick (proper) into Glen Bruar. Minigaig simply means "Smooth Gaick," whereas the third Gaick, Gharbh Ghaig, is "Rough Gaick." The last is a deep, narrow gorge, now little frequented except by deerstalkers, leading from the south-eastward, on the right bank of Amhainn Gharbh-Ghaig, to Gaick Lodge. The Gaicks, curiously enough, have ever had an evil reputation and a sinister notoriety, which early developed into a detestation to which there is no parallel in the Highlands. Nowhere in all the north of Scotland have the supernatural and the traditional held such a powerful



grip of the natives ; and probably nowhere in corrie or glen has such a long-continued series of extraordinary fatalities been experienced. Gaick is by no means scenically repulsive to modern visitors ; indeed, quite otherwise ; yet, in the words of a Gaelic poet of the eighteenth century, " Black Gaick of the wind-whistling crooked glens ever delighted in enticing her admirers to their destruction." Sinton's " Poetry of Badenoch " has not a single song of happy days spent in Gaick when the women and children went up to the shielings.

In the early years of the thirteenth century the Comyns were lords of Badenoch and much else besides. About the year 1313 the lordship of Badenoch was included in the earldom of Moray ; in 1371 it was conferred on Alexander Stewart, the notorious Wolf of Badenoch, by his father, Robert II. Less than a century thereafter (in 1451) it was granted by James II. to the Earl of Huntly, remaining in the hands of the Gordons for nearly four centuries.

The forest of Gaick is bounded on the south by the Inverness-Perth march, and on the east and west respectively by the water-partings to the Feshie and the Truim ; it is included among the deer forests distinguished as existing from " time immemorial." John Taylor, after his vivid description of the celebrated Mar hunt, tells how " Wee went to the next Country called Bagenoch, belonging to the Earl of Engie, where hauing such sport and entertainment as we formerly had ; after foure or five dayes pastime, we took leave of hunting for that yeare, and tooke our iourney toward a strong house of the Earles, called Ruthuen." Evidently there had been no lack of sport in Badenoch in 1618, yet, notwithstanding, the Marquis of Huntly complained to the Privy Council that in 1617-20 certain persons came to his " proper forrestis in Badzenoch of Glenfishe, Galvik, Drumochter and Binzaldie, quhilkis forrestis were verrie weill replenist with store and plentie of all sortis of deir," with the result that they are " become barren of the saidis deir." Gaick was let as a " sheep



walk" in 1782 to Robert Stewart of Garth for nineteen years, and in 1804 for ten years to Colonel Gordon as grazing for cattle; in 1814 it was "restored" as a deer forest. It may be mentioned that the general quality of its heads is superior, while the Highland ponies there, bred by Mr. Edward Ormiston, have a great reputation.

When Gaick was pastured it was often stalked for deer. One of the sportsmen who paid it frequent visits was Captain MacPherson, tacksman of Balachroan, near Kingussie, famous in Gaelic song for his marksmanship. He was a friend of the fourth Duke of Gordon, and is the "celebrated deer-hunter" referred to in the following description of Gaick—a curious coincidence when his own fate is recalled:—"Its hills are smooth, steep, and bare, and such sheer declivities that the glen in great snow-storms is subject to terrific avalanches by which the deer sometimes suffer, and upon one occasion a herd of ten stags and hinds were suddenly overwhelmed in sight of a celebrated deer-hunter and gentleman of the strath, who was stalking them at the moment when the rolling volume of snow descended the mountain and buried them in its bosom."

Captain MacPherson went up to a little shieling, quite close to the present Gaick Lodge, in the last week of December, 1799, for a few days' hind-shooting, accompanied by four attendants. While they were all in bed an avalanche completely overwhelmed the shieling on 2nd January, 1800, and all instantaneously perished. This tragedy, the "Loss of Gaick," forms an epoch in local chronology, and has often been described in Gaelic prose and verse with curious variations in the details. Avalanches are still of no infrequent occurrence in Gaick; no fewer than fifteen deer were killed in 1884 by one in Gharbh Ghaig.\*

The shieling in which Captain MacPherson perished had no good repute, for there Muireach Mac Ian, the famous hunter, experienced the last proof of the

\* See "The Gaick Catastrophe" in *C. C. J.*, Vol. III., 192, 260, and Vol. IV., 117.



wonderful power of the Wife of Laggan's versatility in the black art. Its immediate neighbourhood was till recent years—the present writer had this “fact” verified by the late William Gordon of Inverdrue—the occasional haunt of the Washer of Gaick (see *C. C. J.*, Vol. V., 121).

The head streams of the Tromie—Amhainn Gharbh-Ghaig, from Gharbh Ghaig; and Amhainn Loch an Duin, from Loch an Duin—rise on the borders of Perthshire. The latter stream expands into Loch Bhradain, while the combined waters, after a run of about a mile, flow into the head of Loch an t-Seilich. The shooting-box of the forest is near the head of the latter loch, in a narrow gorge, with precipitous sides, the zig-zag pony paths being a wonder to dwellers in the plains. Loch an Duin, a narrow sheet of water, takes name from An Dun, a steep hill on the west side. This hill was the scene of Murdoch's most famous poaching adventure. He had got within shot of a hind, but as he took aim, lo! it was a woman; down came the gun, it was a deer once more. This went on for some time till, as the sun set he fired, and a deer fell. He was thereupon overpowered by sleep and seemed to hear a voice saying:—“Murdoch! Murdoch! you have this day slain the only maid of the Dun.” He jumped up and took to his heels, crying as he ran off:—“If I have killed her you may eat her.” Another good Gaick story is told of Murdoch. He saw a herd of deer, beyond shot, with tiny women in green, milking the hinds. One of the milkers had a hank of green worsted over her shoulder which a hind swallowed. The fairy—for, of course, it was one of the little green folk—then struck the deer with the leather band for tying its hind legs during milking, saying:—“May a dart from Murdoch's quiver pierce your side before night.” Murdoch prudently went off in an opposite direction; but in the evening he killed a hind with a hank of green worsted in its stomach.

Loch Bhradain has a story which is said to account for its name. A local hunter had acquired a litter of



dogs of a semi-supernatural character, but when the pups reached a certain age they were all, with one exception, removed by the real owner. He broke a leg of the one he left with the hunter; what Brodainn—for that was its name—could have done in the chase with the use of all its limbs can only be conjectured. The hunter set out for Ben Alder where there was a wonderful deer—a fairy, and white at that. This deer was duly roused and pursued by Brodainn as far as this Gaick loch, when in it plunged, the black dog after it—and neither has since been seen.

Loch an t-Seilich is the largest of the Gaick lochs; the name signifies the loch of the willows. In old maps, however, it appears as Lock Gaick, and even a local guide book of the middle of last century gives it as Loch-an-Gaic. Near its head is the Duke of Gordon's Well, the only place-name indicating the long connection of that family with the district.

Minigaig, in spite of its name, had a particularly bad reputation. Almost every year it claimed its victims, owing to the uncertainty of the weather on its storm-swept heights (2,700 feet); in winter it was extremely dangerous. Little wonder that the track from end to end is marked by cairns, long ago collapsed, which indicate that there some poor wayfarer succumbed, or was drowned in fording some of the streams. Mackenzie, a famous deer poacher, has left a name in these parts.

Many travellers have lost themselves on the heights of Minigaig; one party was four days in the mist, subsisting on what wild berries they could gather. The dangers of the supernatural were also to be dreaded; fairy knolls (Sitheans) are unusually numerous. The Raven's Corrie and the Sithean of the Black Dog—names of evil omen—were haunts of horrors which encouraged no lingering; yet the pass had at one time a hut where smuggled whisky was sold, which probably was indirectly responsible for more than one fatality on the ancient drove road. The name Mingaig Mountains has fallen into desuetude; it was applied to the hills on the county



march, and was a very convenient term, which unfortunately escaped the notice of the Ordnance Surveyors. The map, however, has two interesting names—Uchd a' Chlarsair, the harper's breast; and Uchd na h-Analach, the breast of the breeze.

Of the three Gaicks, Gharbh Ghaig is the one which was of old most dreaded by both natives and travellers, though it was the shortest. There are many gorges in the Highlands much more "fearsome," but none certainly with such an evil name. Yet the Comyns had their "road" through it; indeed, the only place-name they have left in Gaick is Rathad nan Cuimeinach, which indicates the Comyns' Road to Atholl. In Gharbh Ghaig there are two "dales," Dail Gharbh Ghaig and Dail a' Mhorraine, but the latter probably dates from before the appearance there of the Comyns. Their rapacity and cruelty made them hated in Badenoch, while their treachery is referred to in a well-known and unflattering Gaelic couplet. The outstanding tradition of their connection with Badenoch concerns Lord Walter, who seems from various accounts to have been the most repulsive member of a particularly odious family. Returning from Atholl by Gharbh Ghaig, he broke his neck as his horse stumbled when crossing Leum na Feinne. The riderless horse went on to Ruthven Castle, and so an alarm was raised. When the body was found two eagles were feasting on it. The mothers of two of the maidens whom he had ordered to take part, *in puris naturalibus*, in a reaping contest at Ruthven which he was on his way to witness, saw avenging angels in these birds.