

A DICTIONARY OF DEESIDE.—II.

BY ROBERT ANDERSON.

THE "Dictionary,"* as before remarked, is of little or no use as a guide-book—in the special sense, that is, of indicating routes or conveying hints as to how to reach the hills. The information supplied about the mountains, indeed, is very meagre and is not of much value; Ben Muich Dhui is dismissed in a page and Cairngorm in 15 lines, though this scant treatment is partly excused by references to them in the article on Braemar, which is the longest and most "thorough" article in the book. Mr. Coutts does not fail to remark that "No other district in Scotland contains so many giant mountains as Braemar, and compared with them the loftiest peaks in the other divisions of the United Kingdom must 'hide their diminished heads,'" but nowhere does he get beyond the rather commonplace generalisation that "Mountains dominate the whole scenery of Braemar, varied as it is with lonely glens, sheltering corries, frowning precipices, impetuous torrents and waterfalls, lochs in great number but not of great size, wide areas of sand and disintegrated granite on the flattened expanses above, and long reaches of 'brown heath and shaggy wood' lower down." Picturesque description, apparently, was not Mr. Coutts's forte, and when he attempted it the result was rather grotesque, as in the comparison of the rush of water at the Linn of Dee to "the rapid and resistless charge of one of the old Highland clans, enraged at being caught in ambush, and writhing and rushing onward till freedom is once more accomplished." Mr. Coutts has more to tell us—and to tell us in less extravagant fashion—of places like Ballater and Balmoral

*DICTIONARY OF DEESIDE. By James Coutts, M.A. Aberdeen, 1899.

and Invercauld, than of the mountains and of the glens. Even in these articles, however, the present-day reader will be interested—not so much in the gazetteer sort of information duly set forth, as in the occasional sidelights on old-world manners and local incidents that are rapidly passing from remembrance. Here, for instance, is preserved to us a delightful picture of the paternal regime and social amenities which prevailed on the Invercauld estate about a century ago:—

Great changes have come over the administration and “local government” of Invercauld since the days of the present laird’s grandfather, who died in 1862. The economy of the place then included a home farm at Keiloch, hardly a mile distant, with a large stock of dairy cows and other cattle, including a number of Highland cattle; a lime kiln where lime was prepared both for building purposes and for top-dressing the lands; a vegetable and flower garden, as well as a nursery for raising seedling forest trees and rearing them till fit to be planted out; a sawmill for cutting up grown timber; a flock of sheep pasturing in the meadows, and ten or a dozen Highland ponies, generally running about the parks, and stabled only for a few months in mid-winter; a slaughter-house where fattened victims from the flock and herd were prepared for the larder and the cook; a building for smoking and curing venison hams to be used outside the season when deer are fit to be killed; baking and brewing departments, where bread and ale were produced within the mansion-house; and a giraln or store for oat-meal, which was supplied by the Cromar tenants in part payment of their rent, and sold out (a shade below Braemar rates) to the servants and workers on the estate, many of whom, both men and women, might have been seen on a Saturday (the day when the giraln was open) carrying home a firlo or more of meal on their shoulders. The system was one which employed numerous servants and workers, most of whom had crofts attached to their cottages, and some who were not otherwise sufficiently provided for were allowed the use of a bit of the Keiloch home farm. The workers mostly lived at Keiloch and Felagie, but some of them at Braemar, and for the convenience of the latter as well as for general communication, several boats were provided on the Dee, and to encourage and facilitate church-going, one of the workmen was told off every Sunday to ferry all comers over the river.

Several rural festivities held from time to time were greatly enjoyed by the servants and country people, not so much the “harvest home”—though the home farm sometimes witnessed entertainments too—as some other occasions. About the time of the Braemar Gathering, the great annual holiday of the district, when usually the clan Forbes marched over from Strathdon and encamped for a day or two at Invercauld, hospitality was at its height, piping and dancing abounded, and every man of mettle was attired in all the glories of tartan and *Sporan molach*. The bringing home of the laird’s peats from Balloch Dearg moss was another great occa-

sion. When this undertaking, at which the Aberarder tenants assisted with their horses and carts, had been successfully accomplished, the "peat dinner," as it was called was provided, and old men used to vie with each other in reckoning up the number of "peat dinners" which they had attended. The table was usually spread in the open air, and the company, after regaling themselves with an ample repast, and cordially drinking the laird's health as in duty bound, enjoyed a dance on the green.

Of agricultural improvement at an earlier date—and of the great difficulty then of inducing its general adoption—we have this revelation:—

The laird of Abergeldie settled down at Birkhall about 1780, and brought the adjoining farm into a high state of cultivation, with a view to show the capabilities of the soil and stimulate his Glenmuick tenants who were alleged to be taking it rather easy on their small farms. The laird proceeded energetically, trenching balks, draining marches, levelling and straightening fields, and enclosing and subdividing them by dykes; and the farm was so well worked that it yielded bere, oats, potatoes, turnips (then only beginning to be cultivated in this locality), and hay of as good quality as any in Aberdeenshire. The laird succeeded equally well with horticulture at Birkhall, producing apples, pears, plums, cherries, and gooseberries as early and well flavoured as any in the north of Scotland. But though Birkhall was producing goodly grain and plums at the era of the French Revolution, there was no revolution in the general farming arrangements of the glen. The tenants looked on listlessly, and ascribed the effects to the power of money, which they could not imitate and did not try.

In much more recent times, the promotion of agriculture in Upper Deeside has been abandoned for the cultivation of deer, and in this connection Mr. Coutts waxes particularly sarcastic. He has a contemptuous reference to deer-stalking and grouse-shooting constituting "the chief end of man" in the mansion-houses and shooting-lodges of Strathdee and its glens for a couple of months after the 12th of August, with an addendum that holiday frequenters at Ballater "who relish hill-climbing but shoot neither wild birds nor quadrupeds" will find Morven and Lochnagar the chief attractions, though "many smaller, nearer, and less noted hills afford ready means of healthful and pleasant exercise." His mordant humour finds special vent in a section of the Dictionary devoted to Shootings and Fishings. This section is full of scornful allusions to sportsmen and deer. The former are referred to as devoting themselves to deer-stalking "with as much zest and alacrity as if their whole future depended on the

result"; the poor deer are abused for conforming to their environment, and soon learning "when and where to present themselves so as to benefit by the feeding provided for them." And depreciation of the whole deer forest business culminates in this passage—

There is a theory, probably not altogether unfounded, but sometimes pushed too far, that each forest has its own deer bred and maintained within it, and the artificial feeding may attach the deer to the ground a little more, though it tends to domesticate them in some degree. It is wonderful to learn how all the finest and heaviest stags that are killed have long been familiarly known to the gamekeepers. On the other hand, the inferior stags do not belong to the ground at all. When an inferior stag is killed (say) in Braemar, the first remark of the gamekeeper is sure to be—"That's a Glona'an stag"; and it is not at all unlikely that, if an inferior stag were killed in Glenavon, the gamekeeper would say—"That's a Braemar stag."

The disuse and practical disappearance of old drove roads and the quiet absorption by landed proprietors of public rights of way are, unfortunately, features of Highland territories, and from these the Braemar region has been by no means exempt. We have an impression that some enquiry was recently made about the existence of the Bealach (or Balloch) Dearg road. Mr. Coutts comes to our aid, and we learn from his work that it was a hill path between Braemar and the upper part of Glengairn by the west side of Culardoch, continued by Loch Builg to Inchrory, along which there was a right of way. Thirty or forty years ago (reckoning, of course from 1899, the date of publication), great droves of shaggy, long-horned Highland cattle passed to Falkirk and Amulree by this route, and flocks of sheep were driven north and south at certain seasons. About 1880, however, in connection with an extension of Invercauld deer forest, a road from Aberarder to Loch Builg was made along the east side of Culardoch, and the Balloch Dearg road "has since been fenced across"—an excessively polite way of saying it has been closed. Less gingerly reference is made to the dispute which occurred in 1891 about the right of the public to access to the Lion's Face at Braemar—a "burning" question in more senses than one, as Mr. Coutts with a touch of grim

humour terms it, for, as often as the fence across the path was erected, it was pulled down and burned. In the end, the dispute was amicably adjusted, and there is no need therefore to recall the sensational incidents which for a brief period made Braemar notorious, except merely to mention that they evoked from a young Aberdeen journalist—now editor of one of the chief illustrated papers of the metropolis—a clever set of verses, a happy parody of Albert Chevalier's "Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road," which was the common asset of the whistling street-boys at the time.

Dipping into the Dictionary in the hap-hazard fashion we have been following and extracting interesting items here and there is pleasurable enough, but there is always the risk of wearying the reader, and it may be prudent therefore to abstain from further quotation. Enough has been cited at all events to indicate the diversified nature of Mr. Coutts's work and the general character of his notes and reflections, and to show also that the Dictionary is by no means a negligible quantity. It may have failed in its primary purpose of forming a guide-book to Deeside, but nevertheless it remains an instructive—and at times an entertaining—compendium of information about the region, particularly valuable for such sidelights on customs and the conditions of life as came within the author's own personal observation.