



*Photo by*

GLENMORE FOREST—AT THE HEAD OF THE SLUGGAN GLEN.

*Peter Leslie.*



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THE CANADIAN LUMBER CAMPS IN THE  
CAIRNGORMS.

BY HENRY ALEXANDER.

THE timber-cutting by the Canadians in the Cairngorms formed one of the episodes of the Great War—a minor episode, of course, but still one of considerable local importance—and it may be of interest to give some account of a visit paid to the lumber camps in Nethy Forest and Glenmore early in October, 1918. This was within a few weeks of the Armistice. But at the time no one dreamed that the war was so near an end, and work was being pushed on in the various camps with the utmost energy, while arrangements were being made to fell other woods on Speyside. Had the war lasted much longer, it is exceedingly likely that we would have seen the Canadian Forestry Corps on Deeside. Glentana was talked of as marked down for destruction, and the Birkhall and Abergeldie woods would probably have gone also. Even Ballochbuie might not have been spared. In fact, it is said that the King offered Ballochbuie to the Government, but that it was very properly decided not to fell it except in the very last resort. And, fortunately, things did not come to that.

I write frankly as a forest lover and not as a forestry man. The silviculturist will tell you that a wood is ripe for cutting, and that it is foolish to let it stand any

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longer. I cannot look upon these forests on the Dee and the Spey in quite this hard light. To me, and I am sure to many others, they have become entwined in our memory of the Cairngorms. We cannot think of the Cairngorms apart from the dark pine woods that clothe the lower slopes and send their scattered sentinels up the mountain sides. One is loth to lose a single tree. Happily, as things are, the remoteness of some of the most beautiful of the woods is their safety, and now that the emergency of the war is past it is not likely that they will be touched. Glenmore would not have been cut by any timber merchant as a business proposition. Everything is a "proposition" with the Canadians, as with the Americans.

Even at the very high prices for timber prevailing during the war, it might not have paid a private contractor to buy the Glenmore woods and face all the cost of felling them and getting the timber to the railway. Only a Government organisation, like the Canadian Forestry Corps, operating without regard to profit, could have undertaken the work. During the war, timber had to be got, whatever it cost. The Canadian operations, therefore, were carried on as a branch of the war, and they must not be taken as typical of forestry methods that can be pursued in the same region under normal or peace conditions. They form a wholly exceptional episode.

The first military timber cutters to enter the Cairngorms were not the Canadians but German prisoners. There were two camps of these, one at Nethy Bridge and the other at Inverlaidnan near Carr-Bridge. They were engaged in cutting smaller timber for pit-props. But on this point I cannot speak definitely. All I know is that at Nethy Bridge a tramway was laid from the woods—on the north side of the Nethy, where the cutting was going on—down to the Great North of Scotland Railway. It was an interesting track, consisting of logs laid end to end, and along these rough and ready rails there were run wagons with deep and



broad-grooved wheels, the groove engaging the rail. I saw a party of the Germans being marched to their work. Beyond this, the story of the German prisoners on Speyside is unknown. For the British War Office in its wisdom made a great mystery and secret of the German prisoners. No one was supposed to know where they were or what they were doing. The idea of allowing a journalist to visit the German camps and describe them would have made the Censor in Whitehall stand aghast.

And probably if the British Censor had had his way it would have been the same with the Canadians. They would have come, worked, and gone without a word of public reference being permitted. The Canadians, however, thought differently. They have not that shrinking dread of publicity which afflicts British official departments. They were quite willing that a visitor should see their camps and give them a write-up—if a technical colloquialism may be excused. Earlier in 1918 I had visited the Canadian camp at Fetternear, and written an account of the operations there ; and, following upon this, Colonel W. H. Milne, the officer in charge of the 55th District of the Corps, with camps at Fetternear, Nethy Forest, Loch Morlich, Cortachy, Kincardine-on-Forth, and Kilkerran in Ayrshire, invited me to go with him to Nethy Forest and Loch Morlich and describe the work here as I had done that at Fetternear. It was a chance to get away from the office to the hills, and I jumped at it. And the Censor at Whitehall refrained from interfering. The articles had to be submitted to him, as a matter of form, but he evidently deemed it expedient to allow more publicity about Canadians than Germans and there were no excisions or blue pencillings.

A note of explanation may be given about the Canadian Forestry Corps. It was not a body consisting entirely of expert timbermen. In its earlier stages it was this, when one or two companies of real "lumber-jacks" were enlisted in Canada and brought over to France and this country to fell timber ; but as the war proceeded, its



character changed, and it simply became a branch of the Canadian Forces, into which men were drafted who were not fit for service on the field or who had been in France in the fighting units and been disabled. The officers, however, were, in most cases, men who knew something of the lumber business in Canada. It would have been quite impossible to raise a similar number of men in this country with the same experience of timber-felling and sawmilling, and though the home timber people were very scornful of the Canadians, and said they were slap-dash and wasteful in their methods, it has to be recollected that they were working against time and that they had to get the timber for the armies in France, and that they got it. There was no slacking at the timber camps which I visited. I have seen saw-mills in Canada and been struck, as I suppose every other visitor is, by the way in which things are speeded up and by the pace that is set for the workmen. It was the same at the Canadian camps on Speyside. The saw-mills went at top speed. They devoured the logs. The whole plan of the "operation"—to use a timber term—was devised to keeping the mill going. The mill must not stand idle. The officer commanding had to arrange the work and allot his men to felling and hauling so as to keep up a steady supply of logs for the mill. The mill set the pace, and it was a hard pace. To talk of the men in the Canadian Forestry Corps as unfit was an irony.

The day I spent at Loch Morlich brought this home to me most vividly. The first storm of the winter had come. Cairngorm itself was white with snow, and a gale of wind and wet was blowing up the glen. The whole place was sopping. Heather and moss are wetting enough in rain at the best of times, but where logs were being hauled the surface vegetation was churned up with the peat below into a perfect slough, and horses and men were sinking in it and staggering and slithering about, as they dragged the trees down the slopes to the little railways. It had been a wet summer, and I do not blame these Canadians for being rather



contemptuous of Scottish scenery. They had a pretty hard time of it at these timber camps, some of them remote from even a village or any place of entertainment, and, though, of course, it was better than the hardships and dangers of the front, and not to be compared for an instant with fighting, the experience was far more rigorous than anything that our overpaid and O.B.E'd munitioneers underwent. Loch Morlich is magnificent on a fine day : it is magnificent even in a storm, once in a way as a novelty ; but to spend week after week there, in wet weather, working in the woods, is another matter. I fancy that one of the problems of forest development in the Highlands will be to get men to face the discomforts and isolation which will necessarily attach to a good deal of the work. Wages will have to be high. It is the problem of rural labour in an exaggerated form.

The first cutting by the Canadians in the district was in the Sluggan. This is the deep cleft which runs through the hills from Kincardine Church almost to Loch Morlich. It is a picturesque little glen, and, though all the slopes on the east side of it are now bare, enough trees remain on the west side to still give charm to the scene. The Canadians—to be exact, No. 110 Company of the Canadian Forestry Corps—arrived here in November, 1916, under Major H. A. Calder. They were housed in Glenmore Lodge while they built a camp at the south or Loch Morlich end of the Sluggan. Here huts for 200 men or so were erected, with storehouses, stables, and so on, and a sawmill of the Canadian type. In these mills the log, instead of being fed along rollers on the saw bench against the saw, is clamped on a travelling carriage which is carried forward and backward on rails. Two men, standing on the carriage, jerk the log forward each time as a slab is cut off. To give a full description of this very interesting mill would take too long. It is much faster than the Scotch mill.

The Sluggan camp was in full operation by May, 1917. A railway, two miles and a half long, was laid from the mill along the bed of the Sluggan glen, supported in



many places on trestles built above or along the bed of the stream, and down this the logs were brought on little trucks to the mill, the haulage in the steepest part being by a wire rope and fixed engine. In all, some 50,000 trees, all fir, were felled in the Sluggan and cut into timber of different sizes at the mill. The hill sides on the narrower part of the Sluggan are very steep, and the fellers and haulers often worked in very difficult places. After the trees were hauled out, the branches and small stuff were gathered into heaps or "windrows." These are burned and the place is then ready for re-planting. The same procedure was followed in all the camps. Wherever I was, I saw the brushwood being collected and the place tidied up. The Sluggan "cut" was completed by the autumn of 1917, and in October of that year Major Calder and his Company moved to Nethy Forest to begin operations there.

For the purpose of carrying the sawn timber from the Sluggan mill to the Highland Railway at Aviemore, a light railway was built, five miles in length, from the camp to Aviemore station. So boggy was the route at one point that the line had to be "floated" as it were on slabs and brushwood ballast, and over the Druie a trestle bridge, 60 feet long, had to be built. For the crossing of the Spey the public bridge was used and the rails laid over it.

In July, 1917, another company of the Canadians, No. 121, under Major M. C. Rousseau, arrived at Glenmore, to cut the timber on the shores of Loch Morlich. This was a bigger "operation" than the Sluggan one. The number of trees to be cut was 76,000. They were not compact but were scattered over a wide area, extending from the western end of Loch Morlich right up the glen almost to the Green Loch, on the way through to Rebhoan and the Nethy. The camp was built at the upper end of the loch, just across from Glenmore Lodge, not far, in fact, from the stalkers' path which leads from the Lodge up Cairngorm. The officers' quarters—a picturesque Swiss chalet or Lake of the Woods-looking



hut—was placed on the top of a knoll, and below it, in a hollow, was the camp, with the sawmill on one side of a square, the office and stores on another, the huts and Y.M.C.A. on a third, and the “Finns’” quarters on the fourth. Every Canadian camp had its Y.M.C.A., with a lounge and library and piano and “dry” canteen—all under a sergeant, generally a divinity student. Without some place of this kind existence would hardly have been tolerable to the men in these isolated timber camps.

The “Finns” deserve explanation. They were a strange up-throw of war conditions. Here, at the top of Loch Morlich, there were dumped down not only 170 Canadians, gathered from all parts of the Dominion and including Americans who had enlisted among the Canadians, but a weird assortment of half-a-hundred foreigners, Russians, Norwegians, Greeks and what not. They were men from foreignships stranded in British ports or rescued at sea, and, as they could not be sent back to their own homes, they had been formed into labour companies and sent to the Canadian Camps as volunteer labourers. There seems to have been some Finns amongst them to begin with: in any case, they had got the name and it stuck to them.

On the whole, they were peaceable and hard-working, but sometimes they ran amok. The day before I was at Loch Morlich, a Greek had slashed another fellow with a knife because he had called him a German, no doubt with an adjective prefixed, and the victim was in the hands of the C.A.M.C. orderly. Perhaps the future historian, when he reads of Finns at Loch Morlich, will think it has something to do with the ancient Gaels, and that he has come on traces of the sons of Fingal. He will be rather out.

A water supply had been laid down for the camp from the hillside. There was electric light everywhere, driven from the steam boiler at the sawmill. In a rough enclosure was a drove of pigs to eat up the waste food. Everything went with clock-work precision. Officers and men were in khaki uniform, though naturally very



little of "uniform" survived the rough work of the woods. Still, it was a military camp with all the rules and conventions of the army, down even to what, I believe, is called a "clink" for offenders, a shanty of wood like everything else. All day there rose the sing or drone of the sawmill as the saw tore its way down the log, and at night, when the mill was silent, you heard the chuff-chuff of the electric dynamo. And at ten o'clock, it, too, stopped, and you came out for a moment from the hut and saw the dark pines standing guard over the camp, and away up in the sky a star rising over Cairngorm, and you thought of this strange company of men, gathered from the Seven Seas by the fate of war, and slumbering there.

Captain G. H. Flewwelling, a New Brunswicker, had succeeded Major Rousseau in command of the Loch Morlich camp, and was in charge at the time of my visit. Of the 76,000 trees marked for felling, 55,000 had been cut, and great piles of sawn timber had accumulated in the yard at the head of the loch. The light railway from Aviemore to the Sluggan, to which I referred previously, had been extended up to the Loch Morlich camp, and last year, 1919, the timber was shipped out by this line. I am told that visitors to Aviemore last summer were allowed to travel up on the empty wagons to the Loch and come down on the top of the loads, but soon the line will be taken up, I suppose, and perhaps it is already removed. In order to bring the trees to the sawmill little railways were laid in various directions—one for instance, along the south side of the Loch, and another up the glen towards the Green Loch. Altogether, there were about ten miles of such lines laid for the Loch Morlich cut, and this was apart from the light railway down to Aviemore.

When I heard that the Canadians were cutting Glenmore, I was afraid that the place was going to be stripped bare and spoiled for our life-time. Happily, the Duke of Richmond and Gordon stipulated that it should not be a clean cut, but that a scattering of trees



should be left to secure natural regeneration of the forest and—what perhaps concerns some of us more—preserve the beauty of the scene. The desolation, therefore, is not so complete or so serious as I had expected. Loch Morlich is not ruined.

I was interested to hear some of the Canadians say that, instead of locating the mill at the head of Loch Morlich, the logs might have been dumped in the loch and floated down the stream to Aviemore and the mill put there. This would have been a revival of the methods employed when Glenmore was cut a hundred years ago. The old dam and sluice gates still exist at the foot of Loch Morlich, by which an artificial spate was produced in the river to float the logs. There is a similar dam in the stream above Loch Morlich, and there is one in Nethy Forest also. This device of an artificial spate is used in Canada at the present day, and the Canadians, therefore, are quite familiar with it. It would have been strange if they had revived the old practice and we had once more seen timber floating on the Spey.

The Nethy Forest camp—to which let us now pass—was the show camp of the Canadian Forestry Corps. When the 110th Company, under Major Calder, had completed the Sluggan cut, it moved to Nethy Forest, which is on the Seafeld estate. This was in December, 1917. A charming site was got for the camp in the middle of the woods about a mile south of Nethy Bridge station. The old Ordnance Survey map shows a building called Racoig on this spot, but the house disappeared years ago, and all that remained was a beautiful open space of green turf in the middle of the pine woods, with the Duack burn flowing past it. The saw-mill was erected at one side and the men's huts and storehouses at the other. The scene was a very pretty one as I saw it on a crisp autumn day. We motored along the woodland road from Nethy Bridge. Many of the readers of this Journal know how pretty the roads are in the Nethy Forest. Then suddenly we came upon



a complete lumber camp in the heart of the woods. Everything was built of timber, cut in the forest itself. The men's huts were lined with felt composition, but the officers' quarters and the stores and other administrative buildings were walled with "backs"—or slabs of wood with the bark still adhering to them—and this gave them a very picturesque and backwoods appearance. Neat sidewalks of wood ran from building to building, fringed with stones, painted white, and the turf in the centre formed a pleasant quadrangle or campus, on which rose a flag-staff with the Union Jack. It was all very tidy and agreeable and singularly quaint in the region of the Cairngorms.

The site, of course, was a very fortunate one. At the Sluggan and at Loch Morlich no such ready-made sites presented themselves, and the camps at these places had simply to be dumped down in rough ground and the best made of them. Major Calder in Nethy Forest found a good site and, being evidently of a neat and orderly mind, he made the most of it. When I visited Nethy Forest in October, 1918, no fewer than 52,000 trees had been felled, and there were still a number to cut. One fir which I witnessed being cut measured 28 inches diameter at the stump and was 115 years old by the rings. The most of the timber here, as at the Sluggan and Loch Morlich, was ripe for cutting.

I have spoken of the Loch Morlich "operation" as a difficult one. "It's picturesque, and that's all there is to it"—was the way one of the Canadians put it to me, and when it started blowing and sleeting, he ceased even to call it picturesque and cursed it extensively. At Loch Morlich the camp itself was seven miles from Aviemore and the nearest civilisation, and the trees to be cut were scattered over a wide extent of rough and difficult ground. Compared with this, the Nethy Forest "operation" was a simple one.

The Nethy Camp was only a mile from the village of Nethy Bridge, and though the trees to be cut were not compact or all in one area, still the ground as a whole is





*Photo by*

*Peter Leslie.*

IN THE CALEDONIAN FOREST, ABERNETHY.



fairly level and no great obstacles had to be encountered in hauling them to the mill. Here, as at Loch Morlich, tramways were laid down and the logs were carried on little trucks, pulled by horses. On the steeper ground at the Sluggan and Loch Morlich the tramways had to be operated by wire ropes and fixed engines. The sawmill at the Nethy Camp was of the usual Canadian type, and self-supporting in the sense that the boiler was stoked with green sawdust carried into it from the saws. A broad-gauge line was built from the Great North Railway up to the camp, and the sawn "timber" was loaded direct into the railway wagons at the mill.

Knockando, lower down Speyside, scarcely comes within the Cairngorms, but reference may be made to the Canadian Forestry camp there because of the remarkable cable transporter which was erected over the river. The 106th Company, under Major G. D. Blackader, was engaged at Knockando. The timber to be cut was on the east bank of the Spey on a hillside high above the river. For convenience in shipping the sawn timber, it was decided to place the sawmill at the side of the Great North Railway, which here runs on the west bank of the river. So a great wire cable, 2,300 feet in span, was swung across the valley from the hillside where the trees were being cut, to the sawmill, and over this the logs were carried as on the blondins familiar at quarries. This Knockando cable was said to be the second longest single-span logging cable in the world. Still lower down the Spey there was another Canadian Forestry camp—at Orton; while farther west and north there were camps at Forres, Nairn, Dornoch and Braemore in Ross-shire. But these do not come within the field of this article.

We are indebted to Mr. Peter Leslie, the Lecturer in Forestry at Aberdeen, for the photographs from which the illustrations accompanying this article have been made.