

## THE POLLAGACH ROCKING STONE.

BY HENRY ALEXANDER.

IN the Ordnance Survey map of Deeside there is marked a Rocking Stone on the east side of the Pollagach Burn, the stream which joins the Dee at Ballaterach, opposite Cambus O' May. The name had often provoked my curiosity and last June, when staying at Dinnet, my wife and I set out upon what proved a rather interesting and, in some respects, amusing quest for the Stone. In the result we found three stones that rock, but which of them is the correct stone, or whether any of them is the correct stone, I will not venture to say. Truth to tell, none of the stones is a very large or very wonderful object, but the hunt for them afforded two enjoyable excursions, which opened up a new and pleasant piece of country to us. Many readers will be familiar with the south Deeside road from Dinnet to Ballater and will remember the pretty row of cottages at Ballaterach running along the bank of the Pollagach Burn. Others may know the dreary and distinctly boggy head of the burn where the path from Ballater to Mount Keen crosses it under the shadow of Cairn Leuchan. Between these two points is a stretch of some three miles into which the Rocking Stone attracted me with all the alluring sense of discovery. Anyone wishing an easy day's ramble might do worse than explore the Pollagach Burn.

The Rocking Stone was not the main objective of our first outing, though it became so before the day was

done. We had set out to make the round of the hills on the Pollagach valley, Black Craig, Cairn Nairvie and Knockie Branar on the east side, Cairn Leuchan at the head and Craig Vallich and the Pannanich Hill on the west. Below Cairn Nairvie we came upon Mr. Duncan of Deecastle cutting peats and I asked him if he knew anything about the Rocking Stone which, according to the map, lay less than a mile away, across the Black Moss. Neither he nor his companions could throw any light upon it. If anybody, they said, was likely to know about a Rocking Stone it was the Ballaterach shepherd and he had just gone over the hill half-an-hour ago. "It was a pity I had missed him." So we went on, and by a lucky chance came upon the shepherd near the fence which keeps the Ballaterach sheep from wandering into Glentamar forest. When we mentioned Rocking Stone to him he smiled. He had heard about it and heard about people asking where it was, but in all the years he had walked the Ballaterach hills he had never seen a stone that rocked, and he evidently did not believe that there was such a thing. When I produced the map and showed the Black Moss and the Rocking Stone beside it, he agreed that there was a big stone on the hillside above the burn but it assuredly did not rock. It was as firm as a house. The shepherd's verdict seemed conclusive, and it looked as if we must give up the Rocking Stone and regard it as a pleasant myth of the Ordnance Survey.

We pursued our way over Knockie Branar, a hill with a shapely profile as seen from Deeside, and trudged across the weary bogland to Cairn Leuchan in a driving rain from the north west. I can well imagine travellers missing their way at the head of the Pollagach for the path is lost in the grass and moss and there is no obvious route down to the Tanar. Happily for us the rain ceased after we left Cairn Leuchan, and the homeward walk along the ridge of Craig Vallich and the Pannanich Hill, though made in the teeth of a nor'wester, was rendered inspiring by the splendid views on either side



THE CLIFF ABOVE HEADINCH, PANNANICH.



THE ROCKING STONE, HEADINCH, PANNANICH.

and by the grand spectacle of rainstorm and sunshine fighting for the mastery on Lochnagar and Beinn a' Bhuid, or chasing each other across the softer landscape of Cromar.

It was when we had passed Craig Vallich and reached the long ridge of the Pannanich Hill, that our interest in the Rocking Stone began to revive. Strewn along the ridge are dozens, one might almost say, hundreds of boulders, some surrounded by short heather, others resting upon the bare rock. The boulders, like the underlying rock, are of coarse red granite. None of them is very large. The largest we saw would be about three feet high and as much across. As to their origin they are probably boulders left by the ice on the summit and ridge of the hill, but this explanation may not be correct and it is possible that in some cases these blocks are the last remains of tors, such as occur on the summits and ridges of granite hills. In any case and whatever their source, the boulders are there in great numbers. Here we thought must be the Rocking Stone and, as we descended the ridge, we began examining the boulders more closely, pulling and pushing the more likely ones to see if they rocked, and every time as one block proved immovable, espying another farther on that looked sure to move, only to be again disappointed. We passed the summit of the hill, which looks steeply down the Coire of Corn Arn to the Pollagach, and hurried on for a mile or more along the ridge, which descends very gradually to the north. The further we went, the hotter the search for the Rocking Stone became. Surely here, if anywhere, we were going to run the Ordnance Survey mystery to earth. At last we were rewarded. A shout from my wife brought me over to a stone that literally did rock. So nicely was it poised upon the bare rock underneath that with the pressure of the hand it could be made to roll a few inches to either side, and if one stood upon it, the boulder moved like a see-saw. If not *the* Rocking Stone, it is certainly *a* Rocking Stone. As to its exact site, it is difficult to

define it but I should say that it lies on the ridge about a mile north of the highest point of the Pannanich Hill ridge. Satisfied with our discovery we dropped down to the mill at Bellamore and so home, passing on the way our friend the shepherd and telling him that we had found the Rocking Stone.

This was destined to prove only the first chapter in the quest. Upon our return to Dinnet we were told that the man we should have asked about the Rocking Stone was Mr. Forsyth, the keeper at Headinch, who knew every foot of the ground. Accordingly a week or two later I went back to the Pollagach and called on Mr. Forsyth whose cottage lies just below the Pannanich ridge, near the farm of Headinch and the mill of Bellamore. He knew about the stone and pointed to the skyline of the ridge just above the cottage. Three stones are visible on it, lying close together, and fifty yards behind them, said Mr. Forsyth, I would come upon the Rocking Stone. This was a point on the ridge further north than the first Rocking Stone we had discovered, so it was evident that there must be another claimant for the honour. Like the first stone, however, this second stone is in the wrong place if the map be correct. The Pannanich ridge is on the west side of the Pollagach burn and the map shows the stone on the east side. I asked Mr. Forsyth about the stone near the Black Moss, mentioned by the shepherd, as agreeing with the map. You can see it, he said, pointing up the valley, and with his stalking telescope I examined a big block lying on the top of a steep slope above the burn, about a mile-and-a-half away. This block, according to Mr. Forsyth, could not be the Rocking Stone because it did not move. Of that, he assured me, there was no doubt. The Rocking Stone was on the Pannanich ridge fifty yards behind the three stones. He was emphatic on the point, but how to reconcile this second stone with the map any more than the first one, I could not see.

The Pannanich ridge above Headinch is marked by a line of crags. They are not very high but they lend

a picturesque feature to an otherwise smooth hillside, and at one particular point the cliff is pierced by a deep cleft or crack which is visible from the north Deeside road and also from the railway. To this I shall return later. In the meantime I shall pursue the elusive Rocking Stone. A few minutes' walk and scramble took me from the keeper's cottage to the skyline with the three perched blocks, and just beyond them, as I had been told, was the Rocking Stone or at any rate a stone that rocks. It will be seen in the photograph, and beside it is a rucksack which will give some idea of the size. Roughly the block is three feet high and about as long and broad. It rests upon the bare rock, is flat on the top and, like Rocking Stone No. 1, it can be moved with the hand or, still better, made to oscillate like a see-saw by standing upon it. Regarded as a Rocking Stone it is a little better than its rival further south along the ridge, being more nicely balanced, but, so far as authenticity by the map is concerned, it is equally a pretender. The distance between the two stones is not great.

The day being a delightful one in July and having time on my hands, I decided to cross the burn to the spot marked Rocking Stone on the map, and examine the big block on the hillside which I had seen from the keeper's cottage. But before dropping down from the ridge I explored the curious cleft in the line of cliff, already referred to. This escarpment along the face of the Pannanich ridge may at one time have been continuous and extensive, but it has now largely disappeared except at two points where rocks some 20 or 30 feet high remain. It is at one of these points that a great mass of rock has, as it were, broken away from the cliff leaving a gap two or three feet wide and fifteen feet or more deep. One can step from the top of the cliff over to the top of the separated block. I pushed in at the north end of the gap and found an isolated flake of rock, sloping gradually higher to the south end of the cleft. Standing on this flake one could almost reach the top of

the crack and so climb out, but the holds were not very good and I did not make the attempt. Owing to the slope of the hillside it was not possible to take a photograph showing the cleft at the north or deeper end, and I had to be content with a photograph of the south or shallower end. The cleft, as I have said, is visible from the Deeside railway, and the traveller who, from the train window, keeps his eye fixed steadily on the sky line, after leaving Cambus o' May station, will see daylight appear for an instant on the hillside. Lying on the hillside under the cliff are some huge blocks, which have broken off in earlier times, and in the hollows and recesses are groups of ferns—altogether a delightful tangle of wild ground, unrealised from below, and least of all by the motorists who in their hundreds career along the Deeside road.

This slight diversion over, I resumed my hunt for the Rocking Stone, crossed the hollow and little stream coming out of Coire of Corn Arn and entered the pretty little ravine or canyon through which the Pollagach burn escapes from the dreary bogland above. The succession of pools and little cascades was so attractive that I wandered up the burn, leaping from stone to stone, until I was out once more on the open moorland, whence I had to come back along the hillside to the big perched block—the Ordnance map Rocking Stone—which had been quite visible on the eastern slope above me as I ascended. This rock is, I think, schist, and beneath it and not far away are a number of smaller fragments, half buried in moss and berries. At first sight the rock seems insecurely poised, and one fancies one could topple it down the hillside, but it is quite immovable, and though very much undercut, it cannot by any stretch of imagination be considered a rocking stone. The shepherd and the keeper were right. The stone was as firm as a house. Possibly at some former time the block may have been differently placed, so that it actually was movable, and one is inclined to this view from the present appearance of the mass, which certainly looks

as if it had slipped down the hillside a few feet, the result being that the height on the upper side is only four or five feet, while on the lower side it is considerably more. The Ordnance Survey "sappers" may have heard some tale of the stone having once rocked, or they may have applied the term "Rocking Stone" in a metaphorical rather than strictly scientific spirit. Be that as it may, this is the stone that accords with the spot marked on the map and, whatever may have been its history in the past, the stone certainly does not rock to-day. So ended another stage in my search.

I had left my cycle near the keeper's cottage at Headinch and the shortest way back to it was along the ridge from the Ordnance Survey Rocking Stone that does not rock, to Creag Mullach and thence down to the mill at Bellamore. Creag Mullach, seen from below, stands out as a little rock-capped hill but it is really not a separate eminence but only the termination of the ridge which forms the east side of the Pollagach burn, and which rises gradually to, and gives out finally upon, the Black Moss. It was a pleasant walk down this ridge, and as I neared the end of it, the point marked Creag Mullach on the map, I came upon a number of boulders. Once more my interest was quickened. I made for the first block and shook it and shoved it. No result. And so on with several others. They all refused to move. And then, when I had almost exhausted the group, came the Rocking Stone, or, at any rate, *a* Rocking Stone. It was a block a little larger than either of those on the Pannanich Ridge, and rising to a sharp upper edge, so that you cannot stand upon it and see-saw it as you can them. But with a strong push, applied at just one special angle, you can get quite a satisfactory roll into the block, which rests upon the bare rock. This boulder is two-thirds of a mile north of the spot marked Rocking Stone on the map and, if proximity to the Ordnance Survey point be the test, it has a better claim to the title than either of its rivals on the opposite ridge. But for prac-



tical purposes as a stone that rocks, it is inferior to them. As my camera spool was exhausted, I could not photograph it.

So has ended my search for the Rocking Stone, at any rate for the present. Whether any other members of the Cairngorm Club have hunted for it I do not know. There may be some stone that escaped my notice, better deserving of attention as a Rocking Stone than the three claimants described here, but I doubt it, for I searched diligently. The Rocking Stone may be a myth and a great illusion, and readers may say I have spun out a big story about very little. I plead guilty and can only urge that the words in antique lettering on the map intrigued me—and incidentally led me to a delightful bit of hill wandering. And what more can anyone desire?