

Cairns

PATRICK W. SCOTT

The Scots are a nation of cairn builders. Conical piles of stones, loosely thrown together, are to be found in profusion throughout our country. Nearly every hill in Scotland from Brimmond to Ben Nevis has a cairn on its summit. No climber worthy of the name is satisfied until he has reached and indeed touched the cairn. Most of these cairns are of fairly modern origin as are those which have been erected in order to indicate a path whose exact position might otherwise tend to become obscure. A great line of cairns now guides the intrepid climber from the top of the Ski-Lift to the summit of Cairngorm.

There are, however, very ancient cairns which the walker may come across. Their positions on maps are usually indicated in Gothic lettering. There are many places in the North-East where ancient cairns are situated, so let me give a few examples. Cairns are located on Brimmond Hill near Aberdeen, on Craiglich Hill between Tarland and Lumphanan, on the Correen Hills, on Craig Dhubh near Braeroddach Loch about a mile north of the Dinnet-Aboyne road, on Abbey Hill and Hill of Rowan in Glen Esk, and on Noth Hill near Rhynie.

In many cases, when these cairns have been opened, they have been found to contain sepulchral urns. The Celtic peoples seem to have favoured this form of burial and such urns have been discovered wherever the Celts have settled. The earliest cemeteries or urnfields of the Celts have been found in Austria and Bohemia. These urnfields often yield examples of Celtic ornaments, weaponry and household articles, many embellished with the distinctive abstract designs for which the Celts are famous.

From their earliest homeland in Central Europe, the Celts migrated to Western Europe and eventually to the British Isles. Some authorities believe that they first reached our shores as early as 1800 B.C. They naturally brought with them many traditions including that of raising a cairn over a grave.

Cairn-building is referred to in ancient Gaelic manuscripts. The 'Duan Eireanach', an Irish poem, gives a description of the erection of a family cairn while the 'Senchus Mòr', a collection of laws, prescribes a fine of three cows for 'not building the cairn of thy chief'.

The tribes of ancient Gaeldom would gather at a cairn to settle matters of importance. A new king or 'righ' was inaugurated at the cairn of one of his predecessors. Here, the righ was given a ritual drink by the druids of the tribe. This act signified the union of the righ with the mother-spirit of his domain. A rod of authority was handed to him while the bards extolled his worthiness in specially composed poems. The professional historian of the tribe, the seanchaidh, recited his exalted genealogy. A famous illustrated manuscript, now in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, shows a seanchaidh reciting the descent of the boy-king Alexander III at his coronation at Scone in 1249. The druids would also present the righ with several 'gessa' or taboos which, if broken, would not only bring shame upon the king but also disaster to the tribe. From the day of his cairn-inauguration, the righ was regarded as a sacred personage, hide-bound by traditions. He settled disputes, led his people in battle and represented them at inter-tribal meetings. His character had to be above reproach and his body remain unblemished by any form of disfigurement during his kingship, otherwise he would forfeit his position among his people.

The Gaelic for cairn is 'càrn' and the Highlanders have the interesting phrase 'fear air charn' which means literally 'a man on a cairn' but is used to mean an outlaw. In certain parts of the Highlands it used to be the custom to erect a cairn over the place where an outlaw was buried.

In mediaeval times, cairns are often referred to as boundary marks though they were not originally built for this purpose. In 1221 A.D., King Alexander II, granting the lands of Burgyn to the monks of Kinross, describes the boundary as passing 'from the great oak of Malevin as far as "Rune Pictorum"', which is explained as meaning the 'Carne of the Pecht's fieldis', the cairn of the Pict's fields.

The habit of erecting a cairn as a memorial to the dead is a custom still common. Many of our war-memorials are built in the form of cairns. A great cairn marks the site of the Battle of Culloden and of the graves of the Highlanders. Queen Victoria had a cairn erected at Balmoral in memory of her husband Albert.

To be buried in a grave without the shriving benefits of a priest would have filled the Highlanders with abhorrence. The soul of such a person suffered hideous torment in the hottest part of purgatory, a tradition common throughout Christendom. And so, the custom arose for the passer-by to add a stone to the cairn erected above the grave of the unshriven deceased and at the same time to pray for his soul's

release from torment. We have the well-known phrase 'Cuiridh mi clach 'nad charn' (I'll put a stone on your cairn) by which we mean that a person's memory will be kept alive.

Before the extension of our road system to the Highlands and the coming of the internal combustion engine, a funeral was often a very difficult undertaking. The churchyard might be many miles from the dead man's croft and his relations and friends would have to carry the coffin along rough tracks which wound through woods and bogs, along glens and over mountain passes. From time to time the mourners would stop to rest, and the custom arose of erecting a cairn at the place where a funeral procession had halted. Wayfarers were expected to add a stone to the cairn and pray for the deceased.

Adding a stone to a cairn is generally believed to bring good-luck, and certainly most climbers will add one to the cairn on the summit of a hill. I myself always do so with a feeling of relief and a prayer of thankfulness that another thrawn Munro has been conquered. Over forty Munros incorporate 'càrn' or 'cairn' in their names.

For example we have:

'Càrn Nan Fiaclan' (266), The Cairn of the Teeth

'Càrn An Rìgh' (98), The King's Cairn

'Càrn Balloch' (264), The Speckled Cairn.

No fewer than four Munros share the name 'Geal Charn', White Cairn.

In Aberdeenshire, 'Càrn', or 'Cairn', names occur frequently. However, in East Aberdeenshire, the Gaelic 'càrn', is very rare, being almost universally replaced by the Anglicised form 'cairn'. Here we find Cairnmore (Rathven), the Big Cairn; Cairnglass (Lonmay), the Grey Cairn and Cairncummer (Old Deer), the Cairn of the Confluence.

However, in West Aberdeenshire, especially in the upland part of the county, the 'càrn' form preponderates. Here the old language survived much longer, and indeed at the beginning of the century native Gaelic speakers were to be found in the Braemar district. 'Càrn' was commonly used to describe a rocky hill of a conical shape, and amongst the càrns of this area we have

Càrn a' Gheoidh (175), The Goose's Cairn

Càrn Bhac (217), The Cairn of Banks

Càrn Ime, Butter Cairn

and Càrn Cruimm, The Rounded Cairn.

'Càrn' appears in at least sixty place-names in West Aberdeenshire.

An interesting càrn in this area is Càrn Ghille gun Triubhas, the Hill of the Lad without Trousers. The tale is told of a Braemar lad

who, after the '45, took strong exception at being compelled by law to discontinue the wearing of the kilt. Long after more timid souls had complied with the new ruling, he was to be seen in broad day-light going about his business clad in his beloved kilt. At last the authorities decided that they would have to do something about this Civil Rights nuisance. So one afternoon, soldiers concealed themselves behind a rocky outcrop near a mountain path, and there waited for the kilted lad to make his appearance. At last he came striding past. They rushed at him, knocking him to the ground. While some held him down, others tore off his kilt and forced him into a pair of the hated trews. This done, they released him and, with a push, helped him on his way. But the lad had not gone far when he stopped, hauled off the trews, threw them contemptuously from him, and continued on his way trouserless!

One of the few instances in the Braemar district of 'cairn' replacing 'càrn' is the name 'The Cairnwell'. One might be excused for thinking that the meaning of this word is 'Cairn of the Well'. However, the name is derived from 'Càrn a' Bhailg' [pronounced Carn a Vallak] which means 'Cairn of the Sack'. 'Balg' meaning bag or sack is frequently applied to round-shaped hills. At the other end of Aberdeenshire lies the village of Cairnbulg whose name means exactly the same as Cairnwell.

Finally, let us consider another of Aberdeenshire's three-thousand foot cairns - Càrn Aosda (276). This is an example of a name invented by an over-zealous Ordnance Survey official. The local people pronounced the name of this hill Carn Nòsh and the name is more properly written Càrn Naois, the meaning of which is uncertain though Naois may refer to an ancient Celtic hero. Why was the name changed? Since the second word 'naois' is like 'aois' meaning 'age', the Ordnance Survey decided to describe the hill as 'old-aged'. So the Gaelic adjective 'aosda' [pronounced òsda] giving this meaning was used. The more correct pronunciation still survives especially among the well-informed members of the Cairngorm Club - or is it more properly the Càrn Gorm Club?

