

## IN THE BEGINNING

### *Drennan Watson*

*“Before taking our several ways, we spontaneously and unanimously agree to form ourselves into the Cairngorm Club, the name being naturally suggested by the monarch mountain so full in view in the foreground, and calmly looking down on our meeting.”*

As members will know, it is the Reverent Robert Lippe, writing in the Club’s first journal in 1893, who records how, after meeting five friends and spending an uncomfortable night under the Shelter Stone, he parted from them at “Maghan no Banaraich” to go his separate way home, but not before they all made the above declaration. But what were the Cairngorms they saw like in those days of the Club’s founding? What were the people, the landscape and the wildlife they encountered like, and what had shaped that scene? A detailed description would require an entire book, but some of the key features of change at that time and leading up to it give us a sense of how we came to where we are now.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century were a convulsive times in rural Scotland as major historical trends surged through it. As Mark Shucksmith summarises it in his chapter on Land Use in the Cairngorms within *The Ecology, Landuse and Conservation of the Cairngorms*, “*Following the union of Scotland and England in 1707, however, the Highland economy was transformed from feudalism to capitalism, hastened by the dismantling of the clan system after the Jacobite rebellions and the vesting of property rights in the clan chieftains.*” From this flowed many, but not all, of the changes that early club members were still witnessing in their Cairngorm outings and which are still exerting their influence. A separate important historical trend was the Romantic movement, with its focus on nature. It gathered strength in Scotland in the late 18th century, but a key event for hillwalkers and climbers was certainly Sir Walter Scott’s publication, in 1810, of his poem *The Lady of The Lake*, centred on Loch Katrine. It had massive national and international impact, selling 26,000 copies in its first year. Scott’s work through this and later publications like *Rob Roy*, forged an enduring link in

the Scottish mind between wild scenery and national pride. It was a major influence in transforming how we regarded mountains. That transformation was why the Reverent Lippe and his friends were there that day and formed the Cairngorm Club.

Other changes swept over the land in the early years of the 19th century and moulded the landscape and communities which early Club members encountered. In the great Irish famines of 1847-49, caused by the destruction of the potato crop by the newly arrived fungal pathogen *Phytophthora infestans*, two million people “disappeared”, one million dying of starvation and one million emigrating. The disease swept on to the Scottish Highlands where also large populations depended on potatoes, causing epidemics up to 1855. Famine had been a major problem in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Cairngorms, killing many people. However, in this case, a massive voluntary effort by the people of Scotland prevented such mass death, but huge numbers of people emigrated from the Highlands.

The Eastern Highlands were less affected by this last disaster and lost fewer people, but they did not escape another major influence – the Lowland Clearances! Scotland, till then, had no village tradition. Rural families lived mainly in small groups called townships, sharing common grazings and working the land jointly. Through the agricultural improving movement, common grazings were abolished, tenants removed, and enclosed fields of the kind we now see surrounding individual farms with steadings created, each with an individual tenant farmer. Increased agricultural productivity was to pay for the increased rents. Large numbers of people were ejected from their only living, especially the numerous cottars. Where it started in the southwest as in Galloway, it was done with such reckless cruelty and disregard for peoples’ welfare it provoked open rebellion. “Drystone dykes”, now an accepted part of the hill scenery, marched over the hills, forming the bounds of sheep lets. The “levellers” groups of now landless people gathered at night and tumbled down long lengths of them and the army had to be called in to control the situation.

Coming late to northeast Scotland, the changes were done with more humanity and regard to the law. Nonetheless, many people were displaced from their land. Enter the “planned villages” of



Scotland, created by landowners to accommodate many of the displaced. They included places such as Huntly, Tomintoul and Grantown. Aitchison and Cassell, in their book *The Lowland Clearances* state the villages were "*holding centres for agricultural labour force in the countryside created by the lairds*" and were meant to be better places to live, with a more secure economic and social framework. They had other forms of industry like weaving and linen. It was held they would improve the character of the local people; that is keep them virtuous and respectful of authority. By 1850 it was all over. The whole movement antagonised rural people. Large numbers left the Church of Scotland in silent protest, and replaced the former almost cringing respect for lairds with animosity. One major impact of the the arrival of new agriculture and its production of cattle, and of the emergence of alternative ways of transporting them, was the decline of cattle droving to the markets of the south and the gradual abandonment of the drove roads over the hills.

Ballater had a rather distinct origin. Here, Alexander Farquaharson of Monaltrie, returning in 1776 from exile in Herefordshire, enforced by his support for the 1745 rebellion, began to develop the Pannanach Wells as a spa. People needed accommodation beyond that offered by the hotel and this stimulated development. Ballater as such hardly really existed before 1790 and most of its growth is held to have taken place in the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as both Victoria and the railway arrived. However, in our copy of *A New History of Aberdeenshire*, published 1850, Ballater is already described as "*a neat clean village*", with well laid out streets with granite houses and slated roofs, a central square, a parish church, good water supply, sewage services and gas supplied to the houses. The agricultural improvements observed by Farquaharson during his exile in Herefordshire however, strongly influenced his reorganisation of his estate.

Hence, the landscape 19<sup>th</sup> century Club members travelled through in the straths was broadly similar to today's, but not ancient – quite newly created. Already fewer people lived in the glens than when these first club members were born. Gaelic was still heard, but probably already under pressure. John Hill Burton, in his idiosyncratic book *The Cairngorm Mountain*, published in 1864,

recalls losing his way in his younger years when he mistook Loch Avon from above as “*the little Tarn of Etichan*” and ending up going towards Speyside instead of Deeside. He encountered a drover searching for lost black cattle. He spoke little English but led Burton to a low-roofed, turf thatched bothy made of bent pine roots. Here, he was joined by ten “*rough and surly individuals*” who, he contended, avoided communication by pretending only to speak Gaelic while, “*in the midst of their Celtic communications with each other, they swore profusely in the Scottish vernacular.*”

Despite the large population losses due to historical processes, our early members would still have seen much more populated glens than today. MacGillivray, for example, in *The Natural History of Dee Side and Braemar*, published in 1855, describes two small villages encountered after passing Mar Lodge on his journey from Braemar, stating that between them and the Dee, “*is a level tract of land, well cultivated, and bearing crops of oats, barley, potatoes and turnips.*”

What else was dramatically changing the landscape, societies and wildlife? Great forests of the Highlands had lain largely intact until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when felling increased dramatically. By 1850, most were gone, with drastic impacts on wildlife, but large-scale fellings continued until about 1850 and as late as 1870 in Glen Feshie. Much of Rothiemurchus Forest was felled to provide timbers for the Highland railway.

Getting this timber to market provided the next issue. The only feasible way was to float the timber on the rivers, often by building dams to store up water released to create a flood. But that collided with fishing interests. Salmon, in these days a useful source of food and income, were caught by individuals using thrown spears, and by owners of fishing rights by traps called “*cruives*”, set in rivers. Floating logs destroyed these. Basil Dunlop, in his 1994 research paper, *The Native Woodlands of Strathspey*, describes the endless 18<sup>th</sup> century legal disputes between loggers and fishing right owners and fights between ghillies and loggers that occasionally led to deaths. When Telford started building river bridges in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, logging was a menace to his efforts, as Haldane describes in his book *New Ways Through the Glens*. The bridge at Ballater narrowly escaped destruction in 1809 but the bridge at Potarch was



not so fortunate. In 1813, Farquharson of Monaltrie sold pine to an Aberdeen merchant who floated the logs down just before the bridge was complete, the logs removing supporting scaffolding and leading to its destruction. An Act of Parliament that year forbidding logfloating when a bridge was being constructed downstream resolved this issue. But log floating was also colliding with the emerging sport of salmon fishing with rods, with characters like Mr Bass the Brewer claiming it "*injured his fishing.*" Dunlop concludes that legal actions threatened by such as those and the development of better roads and better methods of transport, notably the traction engine, probably led to the cessation of log-floating by about 1900, so early club members would have witnessed it.

During the world wars, manufacture of vital ammunition depended on coal for smelting and this in turn depended on a supply of wooden pit props – which by that time were being imported. The U-boat campaign of the First World War, threatening timber supplies, revealed the fundamental weakness of this dependency. Hence fellings during two world wars to provide home grown timber depleted the forests further. Until recent decades, you could still meet old men who recalled felling pines north of the Lecht and in Glenshee and elsewhere, extracting logs from high hillsides by the skilful but potentially dangerous technique of "skyelining" – that is using overhead cables. The dense blueberry cover that established itself below them, and persists, can often identify land formerly covered by these pinestands. This situation led to the creation of the Forestry Commission in 1919 to expand Britain's forests. From this period stem the dense stands of conifers that now cover entire hillsides.

But what wildlife did early members find in their expeditions? Long before the advent of sporting estates, many species were heavily persecuted as pests of agriculture or forestry. The scale of destruction, much of it ill-informed and pointless, has been huge over centuries. Ritchie, in his important book *Animal Life in Scotland*, published in 1920, records that, on the Sutherland estates of Langwell and Sandside, between 1819 and 1826, 2,647 carrion crows and magpies and 1799 rooks were killed. Clive Ponting, in his book, *A Green History of the World*, records, on probably the same two estates, the destruction of 295 adult eagles and 60 young plus an

unknown number of eggs, and of 550 dippers (then called kingfishers). Between 1776 and 1786, 70 eagles were killed in the five parishes around Braemar. Similar efforts continued into recent times. The red squirrel, for example, as a forest pest, was heavily persecuted to extinction over much of Scotland, with loss of habitat also playing a part. The Highland Squirrel Club was formed in 1903 to counter claimed damage by red squirrels in forests of the Northern Highlands. In fifteen years it killed a staggering 60,450. In the Cawdor plantations, the reward of a few pence per tail, led to the elimination of 14,123 red squirrels in 15 years. The forests have survived its return and growth in numbers. How attitudes change!

Polecats, martens, wildcats, and otters were all persecuted to near extinction or in fact local extinction. To these pressures was added the Victorian collector of specimens and eggs. Even a species like the St Kilda wren was eagerly pursued. The last ospreys nested on Loch an Eilen or nearby. Between 1843 and 1849 their eggs were stolen on 15 occasions. It is not surprising that McGillivray, in his famous text on Deeside, describes the golden eagle, otter, wildcat and marten as rare or very rare by 1862, although the polecat was apparently still present. Much of the wildlife that those early members would have enjoyed seeing was nearly gone.

Perversely, some species were being successfully reintroduced. The red squirrel, even as it was persecuted, was widely reintroduced, usually from England, in various places. In 1793, the 4<sup>th</sup> Duke of Athole reintroduced it to Dunkeld, probably with Scandinavian stock. Lady Lovat introduced them at Beaufort Castle near Beaully in 1844. From such centres it rapidly spread up the more wooded valleys. In the Cairngorms, it is thought that a native stock may have survived in the Forest of Rothiemurchus and spread throughout Speyside and further from there from the 1840s onwards. Squirrels, from whatever source, reached Grantown by 1856 and were recolonising Deeside in the 1860s. So early members would have seen this attractive animal in the Cairngorms.

The Earl of Fife's attempts to reintroduce the Capercaillie at Mar Lodge in 1827 and 1829 failed, but reintroductions in Taymouth in Perthshire a decade later succeeded and it spread rapidly reaching up the Dee to Banchory by 1878 and spreading into upper Deeside. So



the red squirrel and the capercaillie were part of the scene, although rather newly returned, for early Cairngorm Club members.

The price of sheep had been falling by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, making sheep farming much less profitable but, by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, hunting had become status symbols for the old aristocracy and hence also for nouveau-riche industrialists intent on aping their "betters." Landowners began to allocate hunting rights for deer and salmon and other game as their private property, although deer and salmon had been widely left open for many to take before. Traditional methods of fishing for salmon, by spearing for example, were not made illegal until 1886. Enter the Highland Sporting Estate, which is not, as often misstated, a landuse. The landuse is recreational hunting. A Sporting Estate is an imported social construct imposed on the activity, drawing much on ancient Norman feudal traditions of royal beasts, exclusive hunting rights for elites, and social hierarchies. With tartan and kilts added by Victoria and Albert, Balmorality had arrived. Now, more people were cleared to make way for deer forests. Nethersole-Thompson and Adam Watson, in their 1974 text, *The Cairngorms*, record, "*Around 1859 Karl Marx became very excited about word of new clearances for deer at Gaick, Glen Feshie and Glen Tilt ---*". Any wildlife species considered damaging to game were grimly pursued, including species harmless to grouse or fishing like owls, kites and even dippers. To some extent, it is a picture that persists. From this time stems the loss of species like the osprey, red kite, polecat, goshawk and sea eagle.

Surveys of tourists consistently show that landscape and wildlife remain the key attractions that are the foundations of the Highland tourism industry. The influence of Scott and Stevenson in the development of this attachment to wild landscapes and nature was thus fundamental in creating that industry. Victoria and Albert's fascination for highland scenery and the romance of hunting added fuel to this fire but did not create it. The growth of tourism was aided by the construction of the railways which, for the first time, made long distance travel easy and affordable. These included the Deeside line built in the 1880s and certainly used by early members in excursions.

Consequently, there was a publishing spate of tourism literature and guides of Scotland, by authors like H V Morton. Dipping into the

sizeable collection of Scottish books held by my wife and myself yields a tattered copy of Rhind's *The Scottish Tourist*, dated 1850, already in its 9<sup>th</sup> edition. His *Excursion up the Dee to Ballater* even provides details for the ascent of Ben Macdui via the Sron Riach, declaring, “--- *but the tourist, when mounted on the cairn, may truly say, that he is the highest subject in the United Kingdom, being, by the most recent measurement, 4390 feet above the level of the sea, and from ten to twenty feet higher than the summit of Bennevis.*” (but our *New History of Aberdeenshire*, published the same year, records its height as 4296 and on recent maps as 4294.6. It keeps shifting). One cannot complain about such errors. Gross errors in OS maps of the Highlands persisted into the 1960s at least, even in the Cairngorms. Published guides of the times characteristically described, not only scenery, but also flora, fauna and geology. MacGillivray's text “*The Natural History of Dee Side and Braemar*”, mentioned earlier, was a classic of this kind, describing geology, flora and fauna alongside detailed physical descriptions of the area. This was a tradition successfully restored in 1974, underpinned with much research and scholarship, by Nethersole-Thompson and Adam Watson in their publication, *The Cairngorms*. Alex Inkson MaConnachie's three substantial articles in the first two volumes of the Club's journals, describing the eastern, central and western Cairngorms in turn, are undoubtedly the first descriptions of the area in the form of a climbers guide. The first SMC guide to the Cairngorms was not published until 1928. An interesting addition was Charles Plumb's “*Walking the Grampians*” published in 1935, describing ascents of all the main summits including that of Beinn Muichdhuì (The various spellings of which he discusses regarding their merits). Muichdhuì was unusually busy that day he says and several descending parties inform him that the Cairngorm Club was erecting an indicator on top that day, “*sure enough we found them in force, with men, women, with ponies, with paraphernalia, almost with brass bands*”. He clearly did not approve of such mass intrusion in lonely areas or the erection of such indicators, which he looked on as “*a sort of desecration*” and responded curtly to the welcome received when mistaken for admirers of the project.

Victoria and Albert bought the old Balmoral House in 1842, the land in 1852 and opened the current Balmoral in 1856. The Highland



sporting estate developed apace as sundry aristocratic landowners and nouveau-riche industrialists bought sporting estates, principally to gain prestige. As Andy Wightman's recent research shows, it is the motive that persists. Many estate owners took exception to hillwalkers or others "stravaiging" over their land. The attitude of many such is captured, as late as 1948, in "With Gun to the Hill", by Stephen M Pilkington, - a man so addicted to shooting and fishing that he openly confessed he was never happy unless he was killing something. "*One day I hope I may set foot on Inchrory again*" he says, "*but I do not know the present owner and hear that he does not approve of strangers on his land - for which who can blame him - not I anyhow, in these days when half the forests in Scotland are in a fair way to be ruined by hikers. Who set the moors on fire with their supposedly burnt-out campfires and cigarette ends and litter the place with paper and empty cigarette cartridges.*" Do we recognise ourselves here?

As a result of such attitudes, freedom of access became a key issue involving club members. Bob Aitken's essay "Stravaigers and Marauders" in the Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal of 1975 gives an excellent condensed history of the struggle for freedom of access. He points out that, "*The continued extension of the deer forests and the gradual decline in use of the great drove roads combined in a threat to the hill rights of way which became acute in the 1880s, especially where the proprietor or shooting tenant was an outsider.*" It was, he points out, in the Eastern Highlands that deer forests were most prominent and hence here that the acutest conflicts occurred. Consequently, "*the Cairngorm Club had its origins in a tradition altogether more radical than that of the SMC. The political background of the North-East was Liberal; the members, hillmen rather than mountaineers, were usually afoot on the Cairngorms during the stalking season;*"

The debate, note, has been essentially about legal right of access, not about disturbing shooting, though the landed interests often presented one as the other - and still do. The access struggle centred around two issues. One was the assertion of rights of way, often focused around routes of old drove roads, led by the Rights of way Society. They fought classic battles over confrontations in Glen Doll and over Jock's Road ( Cairngorm Club members were much

involved in supporting these efforts). However Bryce, first Honorary President of the Club, was addressing a wider right of access across the land in general. In contrast, the first Scottish Mountaineering Club Guide, *The Cairngorms* by Sir Henry Alexander MA, LL.D in 1928 starts with a *Proprietary Note on Sporting Rights* declaring that, "*The Scottish Mountaineering Club desires to impress upon all those who avail themselves of the information given in their Guide Books that it is essential at all times to consider and respect proprietary and sporting rights*". It goes on to tell readers they must "*obtain the consent*" of stalkers and keepers before walking on shooting lands and declares "*The sport of mountaineering ought not to be conducted so as to interfere with the sport of shooting*".

In contrast, within the Cairngorm Club Alexander Copland, Thomas Gillies and Alexander Inkson McConnochie, writing in the Aberdeen Journal in the 1880s, under the names like Dryas octopetala and Thomas Twayblade, described their expeditions in the Cairngorms in essays notable, as Aitken says, "*not only for their adventurous bivouacs and cuisine on the tops, but also for their encounters with, escapes from, and diatribes against stalkers, ghillies, and lairds.*" They were all prominent Cairngorm Club members active on the access issue. Bryce, in the final paragraph of his opening address in volume 1 of our journal in 1893, *Some Stray Thoughts on Mountain-Climbing*, wryly concludes, "*Perhaps I ought to add a further charm of Scotch mountaineering – the risk of encountering a band of hostile ghillies, or having an interdict applied for at the instance of Mr Winans. But as this source of excitement is threatened with extinction, I pass it by for the present.*" Mr Winans had very extensive long running leases on land in the Affric-Kintail area in the 1800s and 90s. and who aimed to enforce total exclusion of the public from 'his' deer forests by maintaining a large force of ghillies to deter walkers. He was responsible for the notorious Pet Lamb case in Kintail, where he took out a ludicrous interdict to prevent a pet lamb from straying on to his land.

In short, the Cairngorm Club was in the vanguard of the movement that led, ultimately, to that broader right of access we enjoy today. Nonetheless, there was perhaps in the Club something of a schism. The Reverent Lippe, in his article in Volume 1 of the Club Journal, published in 1893, quoted at the start, concludes, "*For*



*all these mountaineering enterprises, the club received the most courteous facilities from the various proprietors and lessees and dependents. In return for these favours, the Club hereby records its most grateful thanks to all these benefactors, and more particularly to Sir William Cunliffe Brooks, Bart, of Glen Tannar, Sir Algernon Borthwick, Bart, and lessee of Invercauld and Mr Findaly of Aberlour, for their truly Highland welcome and splendid hospitality”*  
 .....YUCK?