

Byron on Deeside

by Graham Watt

In 1803 Lord Byron climbed Lochnagar. He was 15 and visiting a school friend at Invercauld. Both were on holiday from Harrow School, although a tutor accompanied them.

In the Records of Invercauld, the gillie who guided him on his ascent of Lochnagar is quoted as saying follows,

We set out from Invercauld early in the forenoon, crossed the Dee by the old bridge and then up the Garawalt. His Lordship rested often and looked at the scenery. He was very quiet and did not often speak to me. When we began to climb the crags of Loch-an-uan I thought he would not be able to scramble up, for he was rather lame, and I offered to assist him, but he would not have any help from me. When we got to the top he sat a long time on the edge of the rocks, looking about him, but seldom asked me any question; and we returned the same way as we went up.



Lord George Gordon Byron in his twenties

From Invercauld Lord Byron went on a visit to Mar Lodge (the former building and not the current one which was re-built in 1895 after a fire), where he remained some days as the guest of the Earl of Fife. Accompanied by his tutor he went one day to see the Linn of Dee.

"Impetuous in nature he rushed to the edge of the precipice and would have fallen into the abysmal depths beneath had not his tutor seized him by the arm and thus saved his life".

His Harrow school friend Charles David Gordon was the eldest son of David Gordon, the fourteenth laird of Abergeldie. Byron wrote to him,

Believe me, my dearest Charles, no letter from you can ever be unentertaining or dull, at least to me. On the contrary they will always be productive of the highest pleasure as often as you think proper to gratify me by your correspondence. I recollect some years ago passing near Abergeldie on an excursion through the Highlands ; it was at that time a most lovely place. I suppose you will soon have a view of the eternal snows that summit the top of Lachin-y-gair, which towers so magnificently above the rest of our Northern Alps. I still remember with pleasure the admiration which filled my mind when I first beheld it, and further on, the dark frowning mountains, which rise near Invercauld, together with the romantic rocks that over shadow Mar Lodge, a seat of Lord Fife's and the Cataract of the Dee, which dashes down the declivity with impetuous violence in the grounds adjoining the house.

In 1807 while a student at Trinity College Cambridge (where as a Lord he did not have to sit exams), Byron recalled his climb of Lochnagar in a poem, the fifth verse of which is well known and all of which is often recorded as a song (with over 20 versions available on i-tunes).

DARK LOCHNAGAR

*Away, ye gay landscapes, ye gardens of roses !
In you let the minions of luxury rove,
Restore me the rocks where the snow-flake reposes,
Though still they are sacred to freedom and love.
Yet Caledonia, beloved are thy mountains,
Round their white summits though elements war,
Though cataracts foam 'stead of smooth-flowing fountains,
I sigh for the valley of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Ah ! there my young footsteps in infancy wander'd,
My cap was the bonnet, my cloak was the plaid.
On chieftains long perish'd my memory ponder'd
As daily I strode through the pine-cover'd glade.*

*I sought not my home til the day's dying glory
Gave place to the rays of the bright polar star,
For fancy was cheer'd by traditional story
Disclos'd by the natives of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Shaerds of the dead! Have I not heard your voices
Rise on the night-rolling breath of the gale ?
Surely the soul of the hero rejoices
And rides on the wind o'er his own Highland vale.
Round Loch na Garr while the stormy mist gathers,
Winter presides in his cold icy car.
Clouds there encircle the forms of my fathers;
They dwell in the tempests of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Ill-starr'd, through brave, did no visions foreboding
Tell you that fate had forsaken your cause ?
Ah ! were you destined to die at Culloden,
Victory crown'd not your fall with applause:
Still you were happy in death's earthly slumber.
You rest with your clan in the caves of Braemar;
The pibroch resounds, to the piper's loud number,
Your deeds on the echoes of dark Loch na Garr.*

*Years have rolled on, Lochnagar, since I left you,
Years must elapse ere I tread you again;
Nature of verdure and flowers has bereft you,
Yet still are you dearer than Albion's plain.
England ! They beauties are tame and domestic
To one who has roved o'er the mountains afar:
Oh for the crags that are wild and majestic !
The steep frowning glories of dark Lochnagar !*

By 1803 Byron had already been a Lord for 5 years, but before that he had spent almost all of his first ten years in Aberdeen, the only son of his impoverished single mother, living in Queen Street and then Broad Street while attending the Aberdeen Grammar School.

To begin with Byron did not have fond memories of his time in Aberdeen. In the short time that his father was around, his parents argued furiously. His mother was emotionally unstable. He was sexually molested by a female family servant. The school favoured Latin and Calvinist doctrine, neither of which he liked.

Then and now, attending a mainstream school with a disability is tough (Byron had a congenital clubfoot), and often a prescription for social isolation, ridicule and even cruelty from peers. Byron found solace and company in reading. He read voraciously in his Aberdeen years, laying foundations for his later writing.

When the headmaster of Aberdeen Grammar School invited the young George Gordon into his study for cake and wine, it was clear that something momentous had happened. After a sequence of family deaths, young George was catapulted into English society as a Lord. Even by today's low standards of ennoblement that was social mobility on a gigantic, exhilarating scale.

His views about Scotland softened with age and distance. In his own words he was "*born half a Scot but bred a whole one*". Throughout his life he spoke with a "slight Scottish accent", betraying his Aberdonian origins.

When a boy, Byron lived for a time at Balletrich, a few miles east of Ballater on Deeside, where he was sent to recover from an illness. "Dark Lochnagar" was not the only effort of his muse upon Deeside. Another ode begins

*When I roved, a young Highlander, o'er the dark heath,
And climbed thy steep summit, oh, Morven of snow !*

Also, in his poem, "The Adieu,"

*Adieu, ye mountains of the clime
Where grew my youthful years :
Where Loch-na-garr is snows sublime
His giant summits rear.
Why did my childhood wander forth
From you, ye regions of the North,
With sons of pride to roam ?
Why did I quit my Highland cave,
Marr's dusty heath, and Dee's clear wave,.
To seek a Southern home ?*

And again in "Don Juan"

*As Auld Lang Syne brings Scotland one and all,
Scotch plaids, Scotch snoods, the blue hills and clear streams,*

*The Dee, the Don, Balgownie's brig's black wall,
Of what I then dreamt, clothed in their own pall,
Like Banquo's offspring – floating past me seems
My childhood in this childishness of mine :
I care not – if a glimpse of "Auld Lang Syne".*

The poet dated his love of mountainous countries to the time he first visited Deeside, and remembered Lochnagar while overlooking the plains of Troy years later. As he wrote to Sir Walter Scott from Italy in 1822, 'My *"heart warms to the Tartan or to anything of Scotland which reminds me of Aberdeen and other parts not so far from the Highlands as that town."*

Byron liked swimming, an exercise in which he was not disabled, and swam not only at the Brig of Balgownie, but later, and famously, down the Grand Canal in Venice and across the Hellespont between Europe and Asia. But his climbing of Lochnagar must have taken much longer than the one hour and 40 minutes he took to swim the Hellespont and was, perhaps, his most prodigious feat of physical exercise.

A Cairngorm Club Connection

On the 14th of September 1923, a statue of Lord Byron was unveiled outside the Aberdeen Grammar School.

Designed by the King's Sculptor, James Pittendrigh-Macgillivray, the bronze statue stands on a pedestal of granite from the Inver quarry, halfway between Crathie and Braemar.

On behalf of the school a wreath was laid by pupil George Theodore Robertson Watt. He was ten years old, the eldest son of Theodore Watt, and nephew of Edward Watt, who was to become Editor of the Cairngorm Club Journal and later Lord Provost of Aberdeen.





George Watt in a 1923 class photo, standing in the centre of the back row

A year later on 13th July 1924, George Watt climbed Lochnagar with 4 family members and over a hundred others for the unveiling of the Cairngorm Club indicator. As a medical student at Aberdeen University he was a member of the Cairngorm Club and attended its annual dinners.

George graduated in 1936 and moved to work as an assistant in general practice at Inch in Aberdeenshire. After a house job at the Aberdeen Maternity Hospital under Professor Sir Dugald Baird, he moved to hospital jobs in London and Sheffield to pursue a career in obstetrics and gynaecology.

When war broke out, George joined the navy and was posted as a Surgeon-Lieutenant serving on HMS Wryneck, a destroyer operating out of Alexandria in Egypt, with many voyages transferring troops across the Eastern Mediterranean.

On 27th April 1941, HMS Wryneck was attacked and sunk by German bombers, while evacuating British troops from mainland Greece. Survivors on rafts were strafed by machine guns. An eye-witness told George's parents that he had died instantly in the ship's medical station. His resting

place is a war grave in the Aegean Sea, midway between Greece and Crete. He was 28.

George was one of 194 Aberdeen Grammar School former pupils who died in active service in World War 2. Their average age was 27. Ninety-two were aged under 25. Most were single men. There were nine sets of brothers. In the School's Roll of Honour, they are not just names or statistics but individuals with photographs and pen portraits of lives cut short.

50 members of the Cairngorm Club served in the British Armed Forces during World War 2. George was one of six who died.

On 14th September 2023, George Watt's great niece Nuala Watt, one of Scotland's leading young poets, laid a wreath and photograph at the foot of the Byron statue.



Nuala Watt and Graham Watt, great niece and nephew of George Watt, at the foot of the Byron Statue, September 2023

Both Byron and George Watt died fighting for freedom in Greece. The statue is a reminder, therefore, not only of Byron's fame as a poet but also

the sacrifice made by him and by others. The inscription with the wreath read,

*"In memory of those who gave their lives fighting the cause of freedom
in countries other than their own".*

Following the laying of the wreath, Nuala Watt (like Byron, "a disabled poet obsessed with books in her school years") read a short poem:

So, we'll go no more a roving

So, we'll go no more a roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a roving
By the light of the moon.

(Lord George Gordon Byron 1788-1824)