



Legends of the Glen

MENTION is made elsewhere in this booklet of a remarkable group of stone-circles and cairns (one no less than 270 ft in circumference) on the moor to the north of Persie. It may be that a battle was fought here, and that these cairns were built over the graves of the slain. They may, on the other hand, form memorials to chieftains or leaders, or they may mark a centre of pre-Christian religious rites. The "meaning" of these megalithic survivals remains unsolved.

Traces of two cromlechs can also be seen at Broughdearg—one on the south side of the steading, the other in a small firwood—but most of the standing stones were long since used for building walls, lime-kilns, etc.

Similar rings and cairns occur again near the Blackwater, and on the southern fringe of the Forest of Alyth—fascinating in their links with the remote past and in the riddle of their significance.

In Glenshee there are, besides these, several large boulders bearing old names and traditions. One of them, near the foot of the glen, is known as Clach-na-coileach, or Cock Stane.

In the days of feudalism the proprietors held their lands from lords superior, on certain conditions of military service or of the payment of "kain" from the glensfolk. On one occasion the kain (or tax) gatherers took much more than their due in poultry from an old widow-wife living near Finnegand, and she complained bitterly to M'Comie Mor, the proprietor.

M'Comie Mor was not only a just man, but one of great physical strength, and skilled in the use of weapons.

He went in immediate pursuit of the tax-men, and when his demand for the restitution of the poultry was dismissed with insolence, he attacked the Atholl men and sent them scurrying back to their Lord Superior, the Earl of Atholl himself.

M'Comie Mor then released the fowls, and the cock flew at once to this great boulder, perched on top, and crowed lustily as if in celebration of victory. After this incident the stone was always known as the Cock Stane.

These kain-gatherers seemed to land themselves in trouble fairly frequently, and realising this themselves they always came in force and well armed. But on one particular occasion when again they had taken more than their due, they were met by an equally strong band of taxpayers, led by Stewart of Drumforkat. Stewart's men stormed into battle, and soon won the day. Then, with anger unrestrained, they cut off the heads of the slain, and threw them into a nearby burn, called afterwards The Burn of the Heads.

Another stone (between river and road, opposite Dalnaglar) is known as Clach-Void, the Stone of Justice, and no doubt it marks the spot where the clan-chief considered the problems of his clansmen and gave his rulings and decisions.

On the west side of the Parish Church there is a pillar about 6 ft tall. Probably it marked a meeting-point for the early inhabitants of the upper glens, and religious services may have been held there long before the building of a chapel. Though apparently composed of soft slaty stone the pillar has weathered the storms of centuries in an almost miraculous way.

Dermid and the Wild Boar

So much for the stones, cairns, monoliths and megaliths. But the great legend of Glenshee concerns not a stone but a mountain—Bengulbein, whose rugged shoulder dominates upper Glenshee at the Spittal.

This fine mountain forms the setting for dramatic incidents in an ancient Fingalian poem which may well be Ossianic in origin. Apparently, Grainne, wife of the noble Fingal, became infatuated with her nephew Dermid, when she saw him quelling with manly spirit some fighting dogs. Against his will she persuaded him to elope with her, declaring she would die if he did not. The outraged King Fingal then plotted for Dermid's death.

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Feinne) and nearby is Ossian's Well (Tober na Ossian), the water of which incidentally, is tinged with a stain of iron.

Then, on rising ground over the burn from the Old Spittal Farm, there is a hill tarn into which Fingal is said to have thrown his golden cup, and to the north of this is a group of boulders, said to be the burial-place of Queen Grainne, Dermid and his white hounds.

These names and associations are by no means modern. Some of them have appeared in deeds of land-ownership for hundreds of years. In a Gaelic poem entitled "The Boar Hunt" by Allan M'Rory, published by the Dean of Lismore in 1512, the author unquestionably lays the scene in Glenshee. The opening verse (translated by the Rev. Dr. M'Lauchlin) runs as follows:

"Glenshee, the vale that close beside me lies,
Where sweetest sounds are heard of elk and deer,
And where the Feinn did oft pursue the chase,
Following their hounds along the lengthening vale,
Below the great Ben Gulbin's grassy height,
Of fairest knolls that lie beneath the sun,
The valley winds."

Obviously then, the belief existed in the early 16th century, and probably the tradition goes back very much farther. It seems a tale truly redolent of an ancient world of darkness, light and legend.

Tales of M'Comie Mor

In contrast to the Fingalian heroes and their heroic universe of the sun and mist, the man most eminent in Glenshee's history was M'Comie Mor, already mentioned in connection with the Cock Stane.

The M'Comies had associations with the Clan M'Intosh, and that clan can be traced back to the 12th century. It was about 1160 that Shaw M'Duff, son of the 5th Earl of Fife, distinguished himself in quelling a rebellion of the Moray tribes against Malcolm IV, and thereafter his descendants assumed the name M'Intosh (Mac-an-Toiseach), son of the chief.

The M'Intoshes of Glen Tilt later settled at Dalmunzie, and a branch of the clan came to be known as M'Thomas, son of Thomas. In time this became corrupted into M'Thomie, M'Comie and M'Combie.

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First, he invited, or dared, his nephew to take part in a great boar-hunt. A huge, ferocious wild-boar which had been alarming the district, was to be tackled in its lair in a rocky ravine of the mountain.

Dermid's spear was soon shattered in the encounter that followed, but he avoided vital injury and bravely slew the monster with his sword. Fingal then suggested cunningly that he should measure with his bare foot his quarry from snout to tail, and then take the measurement the reverse way. In doing so, some of the poisonous bristles pierced his foot, and after a futile appeal to the King for a draught of life-giving wine from his golden cup, he died in agony. The Queen, learning of his death, then flung herself upon an arrow, and also died.

Many places in Scotland are given as the scene of this Fingalian tragedy, chiefly on account of some boulder being associated with the name of Dermid or Diarmid. But there is no locality with so many landmarks connected with the theme as Glenshee.

There is, first, the mountain Bengulbein, or Goolbein. There is a gully called the Boar's Bed. In Glenbeg, twenty yards to the right of the road, is Fingal's Well (Tober na



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By the 16th century the M'Combies possessed Finnegand, and about the middle of the 17th century John M'Comie also entered into possession of Forter (Glenisla). Forter Castle was then in ruin, so he built a mansion-house on the estate at Crandart, and took up residence there.

Big John M'Comie could claim to be a descendant of Finla Mor, the Deeside hero who was Bearer of the Royal Standard at the Battle of Pinkie, and he seems to have inherited much of Finla's prowess. Among many tales recalling his personal strength, his famous feat with the stone now called "M'Comie Mor's Putting-stone" is certainly worth telling.

The headwaters of the Prosen gather near the summit of Mayar, 3043 ft, and in this vicinity is a level stretch of short grass. From its surface appears the edge of an earth-fast boulder about five feet long. This forms a "stance," and about twenty-six feet beyond it lies a round shaped stone of about thirty-five pounds in weight. This stone is embedded in a circular hollow which holds it nicely.

For 300 years now tradition points to this hollow as the mark to which M'Comie Mor putted the stone from the stance, and many highland athletes have made a pilgrimage to this hilltop "jousting haugh" to see how their efforts could compare with that of the 17th century stalwart. Nearby, too, is a gushing spring known as M'Comie Mor's Well. Big John is certainly well remembered on the high slopes of Mayar.

Another tale of M'Comie Mor tells of his capture of a water-kelpie's wife. This happened in the forest of Caenlochran, when he was crossing the weird hollow called Glascorrie.

Taken unawares, this supernatural creature had not time to escape into the river before the chieftain had her in his grasp. He determined to take her to Crandart, but realised that if he crossed water she would almost certainly escape. He therefore set out on a long and difficult route homewards, around the headwaters of the Brighty, along the summit of Creag Leacach, Carn Aighe, Black Hill and Monamenach, then cautiously descending towards his house.

Once he nearly lost his burden when he stepped over a streamlet flowing under the peat, but at length he landed his kelpie-wife safely home. There, his captive bargained for her release, offering in return for her freedom to tell the chief some circumstance relating to the manner of his death. She then pointed to a stone on the hill above Crandart, and told him he would die with his head above it.

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After giving the lady her liberty, M'Comie Mor set about bringing the stone in question down to his house, and there it was placed under the head of his bed. Many years later he did die, as foretold, with his head above the stone, but at least in more comfort than he would have had on the windswept hillside!

Many other tales of M'Comie Mor are given in a delightful *Memoir of the Family M'Combie*, written by Wm. M. Smith, and published in 1887. M'Comie Mor's long-lasting feud with Broughdearg is especially factual and interesting.

A strange tale of Broughdearg

Early in the 18th century the young laird of Broughdearg was sent by his parents to Italy to study medicine under a famous sage named Cagliostro. Returned, and staying at Braemar, he received a letter from the Italian saying that he, while still in Italy, could see a white serpent going daily to drink from a well in a hollow called Corrie Chronic or the Dubh Corrie (Corrie of the Echoes, or Black Corrie). He asked Broughdearg to capture the serpent, and bring it to him.

The young man did so. He was then instructed to cut up the serpent, and boil it in a large cauldron, but on no account to taste the contents or let the brew boil over.

Unhappily, the hissing, bubbling liquid did boil over. "In for a penny, in for a pound!" thought the unhappy Broughdearg, and dipping his finger in the brew he applied it to his lips and fled for his life, with bloodhounds on his heels!

He escaped, however, made for the shore, got aboard a vessel, and eventually reached home.

The tasting of the serpent broth had an extraordinary effect—it rendered him omniscient in medicine. He could now cure all diseases, except old age!

When the 1745 Rebellion came, he threw in his lot with the Pretender, and became one of the Prince's surgeons. Then, after Culloden, he found a hiding-place at Invercauld, and continued his studies. He maintained, incidentally, that another white serpent could be found at Pannamich, and certainly the wells there were later found to have healing virtues.

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It's an ill cause that the lawyers think shame o'.

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full of snaw-bree, and its angry roar told him all too plainly that it was unfordable.

However, with his pursuers closing in upon him, the young man risked his life and liberty in one wild, daring leap, and he could scarcely believe his senses when he alighted on the rocks on the far side of the torrent. The outlaws shrank back, and so the second son hurried away rejoicing in his escape. The place where he crossed the burn is still known as Grewar's Leap.

The third brother was less fortunate. He took a more southerly route than the others, hoping to climb the rocky barrier on the opposite side of the glen. He was a skilful climber, but the route he chose was a very difficult one.

At this point a furrow cleft the precipice from top to bottom, and down this a rill of water cascaded. The outlaws following him could make little of the steep, slippery rocks, and were soon left far below.

With great courage and agility the young man drew nearer and nearer to the summit. Then alas, pausing to look behind to see how far he had outdistanced his pursuers, he slipped on an icy patch, lost his balance, and fell headlong to the rocks below. This rock-chimney where the youth fell is still known as Grewar's Gutter, and was probably named so by the caterans who had sought, and obtained, their revenge.

Some Victorian Tales

FOR some years before the extension of the railway from Aberdeen to Ballater, Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort made the journey to and from Balmoral by Glenshee and the Devil's Elbow, and while the Court resided on Deeside there was quite a stir of traffic coming and going by the Spittal. The Queen's Messenger also passed daily, bearing the correspondence of the Court and the Royal despatches.

When the Queen herself travelled it was customary for a gentleman in each district, as officer of the road, to accompany the Royal carriage on horseback, and see that everything went smoothly.

William Shaw of Finegand held the office over the ten-mile section of road between the Spittal and Persey. On one occasion when the Royal carriage halted at the Spittal Hotel to take on a fresh team of horses, an on-looker had the effrontery to press forward to the carriage

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Grewar's Leap

The names "Grewar's Leap" and "Grewar's Gutter" occur in upper Glenisla, and of them the following tale has lingered through the years.

At the farm of Crandart there lived a man named Grewar, along with his wife and five stalwart sons. Grewar died, just about the time his youngest son reached manhood. Then a newcomer arrived on the scene—Mudie by name—and he married the widow. He was a very fine swordsman, and taught his five stepsons his skill with the broadsword.

One day a band of caterans, or highland freebooters, swooped down on the Braes of Lintrathen, and carried off a herd of cattle. Driving the beasts before them they came up Glenisla to go over the Monega Pass, a favourite route for such marauders, as it led to the safety of the hills and glens beyond Glen Clunie.

Mudie and the five young men went after them, and eventually came upon the cattle in a grassy hollow. The outlaws had apparently killed an ox, and were cooking their dinner in a nearby shieling.

Mudie could have taken the cattle unobserved, and disappeared with them into the mist, but instead he entered the hut and began flaying about him with his sword. The sons had been left outside to see that none of the outlaws escaped, but they made the mistake of following their step-father into the shieling. One outlaw climbed through the roof by the chimney hole and made his getaway. He cried vengeance as he disappeared over the misty crest.

Mudie was vexed about this outlaw escaping, as he knew there would be a sequel. Sure enough, when three of his sons were out hunting one day at the head of Glenisla they came face to face with a band of caterans. Knowing they were recognised, they realised their grave predicament.

They decided to separate. One climbed away to the eastwards over Tom Bhuidhe, Tolmount and Fafernie, outstripped his pursuers, then hid among the rocks that lie under the great crags of the Dubh Loch.

The second ran westwards, speeding along the foot of the rock walls, then breasting the White Brae with some of the outlaws close at his heels. From the summit he turned northwards, descended into a corrie, and made for the Altoetch Burn. This mountain torrent ran in high spate,

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and peer in at the occupants. Mr Shaw rode forward, raised his riding-whip and cried "Stand back, you rascal, or I'll crack your croon!" And as he did so he overheard the Queen say to the Prince Consort, "What did the gentleman say about the Crown?"

Before the road at the foot of Glenshee was altered, there was, at the Lair Brae, a dangerous hill with a sharp turn and narrow bridge. On one journey south, the horses of the Royal carriage took fright and dashed downhill in spite of all the postillions could do to stop them.

Mr Shaw put his horse at full speed, and managed to seize the bridle of the near leader, eventually bringing the carriage to a standstill. Knowing the extremely dangerous nature of the road, he used to declare, not without pride, that he had once saved his Queen's life.

In those days one of the gamekeepers in Glenshee was named Sandy Duff, but on account of his surname the glensfolk goodhumouredly called him "Lord Fife." One day there was an auction alongside the Spittal Hotel of some farm stock, and a cow passed under the hammer. Someone called out "Wha got the coo?" and the auctioneer replied "Lord Fife."

At that, an elderly man sprang from a seat in front of the hotel, and declared hotly that he had nothing to do with the cow. He had made no bid for the wretched beast, and utterly refused to receive it!

It was the Earl of Fife, who happened to be travelling north! However, when it was explained that the purchaser was merely his neighbour's keeper, Sandy Duff, all was well, and the Earl went chuckling on his way.

Queen Victoria in her *Journal* often refers to the fine character and intelligence of the Highlanders. When a minister from London visited Glenshee he was invited to preach in the Parish Church. As he walked to the church on the Sunday morning, he was met by Major Collinson Hall, lessee of the Invercauld shootings at the head of the glen, who wished him good-morning, saying, "I understand, Dr Badenoch, you are to preach today." "Yes," was the reply, "I intend to say a few simple words to a few simple people."

"Well," said Major Hall, "I have been shooting here for several years, and have become well acquainted with several of the people, and it is my opinion they will take the best you have to offer them."

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Every man bows to the bush he gets bield frae.

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John Farquharson

HERE are a few notes on the life of John Farquharson—renowned shot, mechanical genius, gamekeeper and poacher-extraordinary. A much fuller account is given in an interesting book, *The Romance of Poaching in the Highlands*, by W. McCombie Smith.

Farquharson was born in Glenfergale about 1825. When a boy, he was taught to repeat the names of the various MacFinlas and MacLans through whom he traced his descent from Finla Mor, hero of the Braes of Mar.

The Farquharsons had rented grazings for many years from the Duke of Athole, and these extended to the marches of the Athole deer-forest. In those days there was less scruple in stalking deer in Athole from the belief that it was a Royal forest, and that the Duke was merely the Sovereign's head gamekeeper. And no doubt the young Farquharson learned a thing or two about stalking and poaching from his father.

He went in for gamekeeping, however, and served for three years with Lord Abercromby. Then he was nine years with Lord Rosebery. In both these situations he was allowed to attend rifle meetings, and at these he began to do well.

In 1862 he won the Edinburgh Cup for rifle shooting, and it was in doing this that he astonished everyone with what became known as the "Farquharson position". Instead of kneeling and raising his rifle to his shoulder, as did all the other competitors, he staggered them by lying flat on his back, resting his rifle across his body, and passing his left arm round his head to his right shoulder—thus securing a very steady aim. In fact, he hit the target plum centre at every shot, and was loudly cheered by all!

Farquharson had apparently first discovered the possibilities of this position while shooting deer downhill, but he now proceeded to put it to great effect in many contests at Wimbleton and elsewhere. Indeed, his rapid shooting and phenomenal scoring was never equalled by anyone with this class of weapon.

In 1863 he was champion of Scotland. In 1865 he won the Prince of Wales' Prize at Inverness. In 1868 he won the Duke of Cambridge's Prize. In 1869 he won the Albert Prize, and shot and won as the Scottish representative against England and Ireland.

But John Farquharson then proved he was more than an outstanding rifle-shot. The British Government had offered two prizes of £1,000 and £600 for the best breech-loading actions in rifles for military purposes. Seventy or eighty inventions were submitted but none were deemed suitable.

Farquharson made a careful study of the problem, and in 1870 he took out a patent for a cartridge extractor. Then he tackled the problem vexing inventors at that time—how to make a breech-action that would extract the empty cartridge and re-cock the rifle by one and the same movement. He was hampered by want of proper tools and materials to work on. He did not have a well-furnished gunsmith's shop, but only a small cottage at Dunay, Blacklunans. And as for materials, he cut his models from turnips!

Yet, he persevered, and in 1872 he petitioned for the Great Seal to Letters Patent for "Improvements on Breech-loading Firearms." In connection with the Metford barrel this self-cocking patent action led to production of the famous Farquharson-Metford rifle.

When Farquharson left Lord Rosebery's service he became head-gamekeeper with a Mr Dalgleish in Argyllshire. But he was not allowed time here to attend rifle meetings, and he grew very restless. At the end of two years he abandoned gamekeeping, and decided to make up for lost time as a free shot among his beloved Perthshire

mountains. Afterwards, though offered many first-rate situations as gamekeeper, he had become too enamoured of his free-roving life to settle down. The romance, excitement and danger of his calling, the defiance of law and authority, appealed to him, and though he was caught on occasion it was many years before he at last tired of this mode of life.

He married then, and settled down to a more ordinary existence; but the hardships he had undergone on the hill had undermined his health, and he died in 1893.

An extraordinary man, and certainly one to be remembered !

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Welcome's the best dish i' the kitchen.

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Butter and burn trouts are kittle meat for maidens.

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Fools ravel and wise men read.

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Everything has an end and a pudding has twa.

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Three can keep a secret if twa be awa'.

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Better sma' fish than nae fish.

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Keep your breath to cool your parritch.

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It's time enough to skriegh when ye're strucken.

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Auld sparrows are ill to tame.

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God help great fowk, the poor can beg.

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