

## III.

## LOCH-IN-DORB, AN ANCIENT ROYAL FORTRESS.

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Standing bare, ruinous, and lonely, amid black, forbidding hills, frowned on by grey, weatherbeaten rocks, and washed by the sluggish waves of the peaty lake, in a region well-nigh inaccessible and irresponsive to the reforming zeal of the later Scottish kings, it appears a strange perversion of history that the chief title of the island castle of Loch-in-dorb to a place in history should be due to its close associations with the early Plantagenet kings of England. Bare and bleak as the surrounding country now appears, in comparatively recent times it was covered with one dense forest of pine, oak, birch, and hazel, from the Spey to the Findhorn. There is clear evidence that the forest was destroyed by fire, since in many places in the neighbourhood may be seen black stretches of moss, utterly devoid of vegetation, covered with thousands of charred tree stumps. How this wanton destruction occurred, history does not record.<sup>1</sup>

This wooded country was called the Forest of Leanich and Braemoray. Its suitability for a royal hunting domain was seen by King Alexander II., who, in 1236, exchanged with Andrew, Bishop

<sup>1</sup> Tradition says that in the days of Queen Mary a chief in the uplands of Strath-spey tarried long amid the pleasures of the Court at Holyrood, while his lady pined in her Highland keep. At last, in despair, she despatched a trusty servitor to Edinburgh to seek her lord, giving him strict injunctions to treasure well the first queries with which his chief might address him. The mission was duly accomplished, and on his return the henchman was ushered into his lady's presence. In answer to her eager questions, he informed her that his chief had first inquired as to the state of his woods, in which he took great pride. He then questioned him as to the welfare of two favourite staghounds, while the last inquiry was as to the health of his lady. Transported with anger and jealousy that woods and hounds should rank in her husband's mind before herself, she forthwith ordered the woods to be set fire to, while the favourite hounds were immediately slaughtered.

of Moray, the lands of Fynlarg (near the church of Inverallan) for this forest.

Loch-in-dorb is two miles long, about two-thirds of a mile broad, and the surface of the water is 969 feet above sea-level. The island on which the Castle is built is more than an acre in extent, and bears evident traces of being partly artificial. In this it resembles Loch-an-Eilan and Loch Moy in the same province.<sup>1</sup>

Probably the original stronghold was a crannog, or fortified retreat, which in peaceful times might be used as a hunting shelter by the Caledonian kings who followed the chase in the surrounding forests. Afterwards it became the stronghold of the Comyns, then the most powerful clan in the Highlands. From public records, we learn that Black John Comyn of Badenoch, Governor of Scotland, died in his Castle of Loch-in-dorb in 1300. His son, the notable claimant to the Scottish throne, was slain by Bruce at Dumfries. His son, John, in turn possessed Loch-in-dorb until his death in 1326, and in him came to an end the direct line of a family once the most populous and powerful in Scotland.

When Edward I. of England returned from Flanders to crush Wallace, he invaded Scotland with a large army of English, Welsh, Irish, and Gascons, and, penetrating to Moray, took up his abode in the Castle of Loch-in-dorb. As Andrew of Wyntoun tells—

“ And owre the Mownth (Grampians) then also fast  
Til Lowchyndorbe then stracht he past  
There swjourned a quhile he bade  
Quhill he the North all wonnyn had.”

Having settled there on 25th September 1303, he despatched his forces against the opposing strongholds of the north. Those of

<sup>1</sup> In the statistical account of the parish of Cromdale of 1791, it is stated that—  
“ Great rafts or planks of oak, by the beating of the waters against the old walls, occasionally make their appearance, which confirms an opinion entertained of the place that it had been originally built upon an artificial island.”

Inverness, Nairn, Forres, and Elgin surrendered at once, and the strong Castle of Urquhart, on Loch Ness, after a long siege, also capitulated to "The Hammer of the Scottish Nation." Fordoun relates that during Edward's residence here, the northern parts of the kingdom submitted to him. The conditions as first laid down as a basis for treating of submission were extremely hard, and many of the Highland chiefs, like the bard of Wales, must have cursed in their hearts Edward of the long shanks.

But when the submissions were duly accomplished, Edward entertained the vanquished chiefs right royally. Long and strenuous days were spent in hunting in the Royal forests of Leanich and Braemoray, while by night the island rang with revelry. Edward left the Castle in December 1303, and spent the winter in Dunfermline.

The Castle bears such a strong resemblance to the mediæval military fortresses in England and Wales, that we are justified (apart from the vague evidence of tradition) in assuming that it was entirely rebuilt, or, as Tytler suggests, had extensive additions made under the orders of Edward, between the close of 1303 and the beginning of 1306. Its irregular quadrangular shape, curtain walls, and strong circular towers, bell-shaped at the base (one commanding the entrance), would in England at once rank it amongst the "Edwardian" castles.<sup>1</sup>

The magnificent gateway on the east side, built of freestone, was a pointed arch of the early English style. The walls were built of whinstone and granite. According to Sir Thomas Dick Lauder,

<sup>1</sup> Dr Mackintosh, in his *History of Civilisation in Scotland*, vol. i. p. 247, writes: "During this period a new form of defensive work was gradually introduced, usually called the Norman type of castle. The earliest remains of castles of this style in Scotland belong to the thirteenth century, and the best examples of them were the castles of Loch-in-dorb, Hermitage, Bothwell, Kildrummy, Caerlaverock, and Dirleton. These appear to have been built in the latter half of the thirteenth century. Massive walls of enormous strength were the chief features of these structures, but they presented little distinctive art characteristics, as strength and defence was the original idea and end contemplated by their owners."

“ the lime used in the building of the castle was brought in the state of stone in creels on horses’ backs from the quarries near to Grantown, and burned at limekilns on the opposite side of the hill from the loch.”

The massive iron gate (one of the few distinctive Scottish “ yetts ” now in existence) which guarded the entrance, may still be seen at Cawdor Castle.

The outer walls were seven feet thick, and are still, in spite of the “ gnawing teeth of time,” almost 30 feet in height. Within the inner walls were the keep, banqueting hall, chapel, and domestic offices. Nor were dungeons, those necessary adjuncts of mediæval strongholds, wanting.

The most notable event in the history of Loch-in-dorb was its siege by Sir Andrew Moray, Regent of Scotland, and its relief by Edward III. of England in 1335. A civil war was raging in Scotland round the rival claims of Edward Baliol and David Bruce to the throne of Scotland. At this time David Bruce was a prisoner in England, while Sir Andrew Moray was Regent of Scotland.

On St Andrew’s Day, 1335, the Earl of Athol, who was besieging Christian Bruce, sister of King Robert, in Kildrummie Castle, was surprised and slain in the forest of Braemar. His wife, Catherine de Beaumont, fled for refuge to the Castle of Loch-in-dorb, where she was besieged for seven months by Sir Andrew Moray. All the early historians of Scotland gave prominence to this notable siege and its subsequent raising.

The account given by Hector Boece, Canon of Aberdeen, as translated by Bellenden in *Cronikles of Scotland*, is probably the most complete. John of Fordoun’s account is similar ; the only difference is his mentioning that Edward of Baliol accompanied the King, and that they brought away “ the wife and heir of David, Earl of Athol.”

King Edward left Blair Athol on 12th June 1336, and arrived with 500 horsemen at Loch-in-dorb on 15th June. The country was densely wooded, trackless and inhospitable, and many horses were lost on

the way. Both the above historians omit to mention the masterly retreat of Sir Andrew Moray when almost surrounded by the large army of Edward. It is to this feature that Andrew of Wyntoun devotes special attention in Book VIII. of his *Cronykil*. The besieging army lay on the east side of the lake, on a flat peninsula opposite the Castle, and the double ditches and redoubts may still be traced.

“That time the Erlis wyfe Dawy,  
 With other ladyis that were lovely,  
 Were in Lochindorb lyand,  
 And when the King of England  
 Herd that so thae ladyis  
 Were environed with thare enemies  
 He busk'd to rescue them thane  
 With twenty thousand chosen men.”

The force of Sir Andrew Moray, alarmed at the near approach of such a large army, fell into a panic, which was only allayed by the example of perfect coolness set by their leader. He was about to celebrate mass, and would not permit a move until his devotions were ended. At last his steed was led forth, and his men clamoured for him to mount with all haste. He delayed until a broken piece of his armour was repaired.

“ He leaped on syne, and in array  
 Held welle his folk, and held his way,  
 And when the English saw thame there,  
 Hold so together all their men  
 They followed noucht out of array.”

Sir Andrew managed his retreat so skilfully, and availed himself so well of the nature of the ground, that King Edward was entangled in the intricacies of the forest and lost sight of him. The King, believing the enemy to be still in front, pressed on in pursuit till the forest grew thinner, when he saw that he had been outmanœuvred. He camped for the night, and next day returned to Loch-in-dorb, where he stayed for some time. On his departure, he conveyed the Countess

of Atholl and her ladies to a place of safety in the south. He was so enraged at having been baffled by the Regent, that in revenge he ravaged and burned Morayland. Sir Walter Scott styles the masterly retreat of Sir Andrew Moray "one of the finest actions of the period, and most characteristic of Scottish generalship." There is a local tradition to the effect that the besiegers made an attempt to flood the Castle by constructing a dam at the north-west end, where the stream issues from the loch. The barrier, however, proved too weak and broke, several of the besiegers being drowned in the impetuous rush of waters.

A few years later the Castle was the scene of the imprisonment and death of the famous William Bullock. Bullock was an ecclesiastic of obscure birth, but possessed great military talent. When evil days fell upon Baliol, Bullock, who had been his chamberlain, deserted him and his English friends, and for an adequate consideration transferred his allegiance to the Scots, and delivered up the Castle of Cupar, which he commanded. He became a great favourite at court, and was raised to high honours. His enemies, who were neither few nor powerless, procured his arrest on a groundless charge of treason. He was imprisoned within the massive walls of this fortress, and at last flung into the "water-pit" dungeon, where he perished of cold and hunger in 1342.

For twenty-five years afterwards the Castle was used as a State prison. On 16th November 1367 David II. granted to Symon Reid, the Constable of Edinburgh Castle, the forest and Castle of Loch-in-dorb, which had fallen to him by the forfeiture of the late John Comyn, knight. We have, however, no record of the Constable ever taking possession of the fortress. In 1370, the first year of his reign, King Robert II. gave Badenoch, with the lands, forests, and Castle of Loch-in-dorb, to his son, Alexander, Earl of Buchan, Lord of Badenoch. "The Wolfe of Badenoch" was a man of huge stature, bold as a lion, but unscrupulous and unprincipled. His fierce, ungovernable temper

and haughty bearing earned him the apt but undesirable sobriquet of "The Wolfe." He was long at bitter enmity with the Church, and did not scruple to issue forth from his insular stronghold and seize the fat lands of the wealthy churchmen of Moray and Badenoch. For these and other even less amiable traits he was excommunicated by the Church of Rome. In deep wrath and mortification, he sallied forth in June 1390, and burned Forres and the beautiful Cathedral Church of Elgin, "The Lantern of the North." In his latter days "The Wolfe" became somewhat tamed, and did penance for his sacrilegious deeds in the Church of the Black Friars at Perth. After his death, the Castle came into possession of his son, who possessed much of the fiery temper and ruthless character of his father.

The last occasion on which Loch-in-dorb came into historical prominence was during the "Douglas Wars." It was then strongly fortified by Archibald Douglas, Earl of Moray, who became possessed of lands in Moray in right of his wife. By this time the Douglas family had become so powerful in Scotland that in wealth and power they not only approached to, but even surpassed, the King himself. At last, in 1455, they broke into open rebellion. Decree of attainder was pronounced against the Earl of Douglas, his mother the Countess Beatrix, and his brother Archibald, Earl of Moray. The treasonable acts specified against Archibald, "pretended" Earl of Moray, were garrisoning and fortifying Loch-in-dorb and Darnaway Castles against the King. On 1st May 1455, the Douglasses were utterly crushed at Arkinholme, and the Earl of Moray was slain. The house of Douglas had now reached its fall, and all its lands were forfeited.

The subsequent history of Loch-in-dorb is comparatively uninteresting. The tragic death of James II. prevented the Earldom of Moray from passing directly into the Royal family, although the estates remained as Crown lands until 1548, when the Earl of Huntly, for his extraordinary valour at the Battle of Pinkie, received a grant of the Earldom of Moray and the Lordship of Abernethy.

About 1612 John Grant of Freuchy (commonly called John of Freuchy), the chief of the Grants, exchanged with George, first Marquis of Huntly, the lands then belonging to the family of Grant in Glenlivet and Strathavon for certain lands in Abernethy and Inverallan, "which were a part of the sixteen davochs of the Lordship of Badenoch, and to which the lake and Castle of Loch-in-dorb are a pertinent." Since this time Loch-in-dorb has remained in the possession of the Grants of Castle Grant, Strathspey.

A peculiar herb, locally termed "Loch-in-dorb kail," springs up annually amid the ruins. It is somewhat similar to the red cabbage, and grows occasionally to a pound in weight. The country people transplant it to their gardens, and use it as greens. It is said to have been originally cultivated by the last occupants of the Castle in a space between the outer and inner walls.

For 455 years Loch-in-dorb Castle has been crumbling in ruins, but even now is magnificent in decay. Its history is in many ways unique. So far as we are aware, it never sheltered a ruling sovereign of Scotland, although members of the Royal house were its repeated possessors. Yet two kings of England resided, held court, and dispensed hospitality within its walls. Built on Scottish soil by a Plantagenet king of England, it fell by command of a Stewart king of Scotland. Its stirring history was over ere many castles accounted old were built; its ruin was accomplished more than a century before the Reformation.