

Stories of the Spey Catchment

(The quotations from Gray are taken from 'Legends of the Cairngorms by Affleck Gray, Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1987)

(The words in italics are Scottish Gaelic.)

RIVER SPEY

The Horses of Spey

(extracted from Gray 41-42)

"The Spey is an eccentric river; it seldom chuckles or wimples, but it often grumbles and roars. Like a woman, whose strength of character is more obvious than her beauty, it gains in respect and fear what it may lose in admiration. Many, over the years, neglected to pay it respect and consequently lost their lives. There was a saying that her waters demanded at least one life a year...

Little wonder that in olden days the people who lived close to Spey believed in an evil spirit that lurked in its depths – *An t-Each Ban* (the White Horse). White horses figure frequently in Celtic fairy tales but the colour is unusual for the *Each Uisge* (Water Horse or Kelpie) is usually black. In all other respects, however, the handsome beast that emerged from Spey behaved in the traditional manner. Most frequently it was to be encountered on stormy nights...

The unwary traveller ... might suddenly find the great horse at his side... Here to the traveller was a heaven-sent gift for his weariness, and a speedy way of reaching his journey's end. But woe to him! Once mounted he knew instantly that his fate was sealed. With a hideous scream the white horse broke into a furious gallop...and then, with a great leap from the bank, it plunged into the deep pool it knew so well leaving nothing but a scream of triumph for yet another victim to devour.

In the deep pools of Spey a yellow horse also had its abode. At one time it carried away only girls, then changed its habits and took married couples."

GLEN TRUIM

Loch Ericht

Extracted from Gray, 20-21

“In olden days it was believed that Loch Ericht was once a fertile, well-populated valley which in past ages disappeared in some awful cataclysm. According to tradition, the long expanse of water reaching from near Dalwhinnie to Rannoch ... was called *Sgir Eadail*, the Parish of Eadail...

According to legend the cataclysm, if such there was, caused the destruction of everything in the valley. People, cattle, houses disappeared. It is even said that in clear weather the ruins of buildings can be seen at the bottom of the Loch, and on a calm evening the tolling of a church bell may be heard.

In 1928, when the dam was being constructed at the Dalwhinnie end of the loch by the Grampian Electricity Authority, the ancient bed of a river which ran towards the Truim was discovered. The conclusion reached then was that an upheaval of some nature had dammed the river and the water had ponded back and flooded the valley to some extent.”

GLEN BANCHOR

The Bewitched Mill of Banchor

Extracted from Gray 84-5

“The Old Mill of Banchor above Newtonmore, the ruins of which can still be seen in a crook of the River Calder, had a weird, almost supernatural history.

It was a busy mill for it supplied the countryside with all the meal it required, but on one day every year, the 12th of February, it remained idle. This was known as *Latha Feile Breidh* (St Bride’s Fair Day), on the eve of which the miller turned off the lade and locked the mill door. Neither he nor any member of his family would dare to go near the mill until the day had passed, nor would the locals go near it.... The origin of the custom is obscure, but the most popular belief is as follows.

In remote times a widow with two children had a croft in Glen Banchor, not far from the mill, and paid for her rent in kind. However, hard times came upon her and she fell in arrears. Threatened with eviction she sent all her corn to the mill for grinding, but the miller was a rogue and abused her trust in him. He informed another creditor who promptly seized the corn and carried it away. The poor woman and her children were in due course evicted on a cold wintry day, and made their way towards Lochan Ovie under Craig Dubh where a small clachan existed. In one of the houses lived the woman’s grandmother who was reputed to be a witch. On the way the party was overtaken by a fierce snowstorm and perished.

When the grandmother was told about the tragedy she promptly invoked a curse on both the miller and the creditor. Soon after corn was brought to the mill by the creditor, and after it had

been put in the kiln to dry they both retired to bed. The next morning, alerted by smoke rising from the mill, neighbours discovered the kiln burned to the ground, and the charred bodies of both men lying together with a broken bottle between them....

The miller's brother took over and rebuilt the kiln. Within a year he had lost a hand in the machinery, and soon after he became so ill that he died. Then the whole establishment was destroyed by fire. The mill was such a necessity to the community that it was forthwith rebuilt. Public feeling was so aroused by these unaccountable calamities that attention became concentrated on the witch and a deputation approached the old woman and begged her to lift the curse. She partly relented, but still upheld the curse to the extent that anyone working on the anniversary of her grand-daughter's death would suffer terrible consequences. For generation, *Latha Feile Breidh* was religiously observed by succeeding millers."

GLEN TROMIE

The Ruthven Ferry

(Extracted from Gray, 80-81)

"Before a bridge was built across the Spey the only way of crossing from Ruthven to the Kingussie side, or vice versa, was either to ford the river, which could be hazardous, or cross by the ferryboat at a charge of one penny. The boathouse was on the Kingussie side and stood in a hollow to the east of the present bridge. The ferryman was, of course, a person of some consequence in the community, but at the time of this tale the encumbent was an unprincipled, surly character.

The Spey was big in spate when Communion Sunday arrived and taking advantage of the situation the rascally ferryman raised the fare to sixpence. The result was that a number of people who had come a long distance to celebrate the sacrament were both unwilling and unable to meet such exertion. Included in the number was a pious old lady who had come a long way for fifty years to attend Communion. After pleading with the ferryman for some time, even promising to pay at a later date, she was refused the crossing and had to return home. Her absence was commented upon by the Minister and elders who feared that illness had caused her non-attendance. A few days later an elder paid her a visit, and found the poor old soul very ill in bed. In the course of conversation the elder learned with horror the reason for her absence. On his return to Kingussie he went straight to the boatman's house, and conformed the ferryman.

'You cruelly refused to bring a poor woman across the river so that she could attend the sacrament of our Lord because she had not enough money to satisfy your greedy soul', he thundered. 'For this vengeance will overtake you here and in the hereafter. You will be

deprived of your living, your house and your land, and be sure of this you will die an unnatural death, and your body will be devoured by beasts.'

It is remarkable how this prediction was fulfilled. About a year later a bridge was erected over the Spey, and the ferry fell into disuse. The ferryman moved to the village where he earned a bare living at odd jobs.

At the time a meal mill stood somewhere near the centre of Kingussie High Street, and here the ferryman occasionally found work. One day he was sent to close the mill sluice which meant he had to walk a narrow plank from the mill loft to the sluice. He turned the water off, but he did not return to the mill. Observing after some time that the ferryman was still absent the miller went to investigate, and hearing a commotion amongst the pigs he turned his attention to the pigsty. To his horror he discovered the ferryman's body being devoured by the voracious beasts. In all probability the ferryman had slipped off the narrow plank into the pigsty immediately below, and so frightened the pigs that they attacked and killed him."

The Devil at Loch Gynack

Gray p. 103

"The Devil was reputed to haunt Loch Gynack, and spend some months there every year. When he emerged from the loch in Spring he was said to have created such a wave that the nests of the *stuirteags* (black-headed gulls) close to the water were flooded. This provided the devil with much merriment because these gulls are said to be messengers of the angels, and have within them the spirits of the people who were filled with good deeds while on earth, and so qualified to be angels themselves. Meanwhile they expiate whatever sins they may have been guilty of by wearing the distinguishing black cap on their heads. "

Loch Alvie

From Gray p 124

Loch Alvie is reputed to be haunted by a *Bean Nigheadaireachd* (a phantom washer woman) who is seen only by those about to die.

GLEN MORE

Floating Timber Down the Spey

From Gray p. 256-260

“When the logs had been felled, they were dragged to the banks of the Spey tributaries by garrons (highland ponies), the Luinneag flowing out of Loch Morlich, the Beannaidh from Loch Eanaich and the Milton Burn from Loch an Eilean. At the outfall from these lochs artificial embankments were constructed, and fitted with heavy sluice gates. When a desirable water level was reached, by ponding back the water, the gates were opened so that the flood water reached the waiting loggers by first light. These embankments are still visible, and the remnants of the sluice gates were to be found quite recently....

Timber is said to have been floated down the Spey from the end of the 15th century. The floaters were specialists. Floating had been a tradition in several families for generations, and the principal floater of the day was called the ‘Admiral of the Spey’....

There was a high degree of skill in constructing the huge cigar-shaped rafts so that on the long journey to the sea the risk of disintegrating in rough waters would be minimal. Certainly over the years the passage had been improved by blasting and clearing rocks, but hazards remained despite the floater’s long experience of shoals, currents and hidden rocks....

At the first sign of a spate preparations were made for the sixty mile journey down river. The current bore them along at a rapid pace, the rafts being controlled by two men with the huge oars at the bow and stern, and preceded by men in *curachs* as guides.

The journey to Garmouth, where the timber was used for shipbuilding, usually took a day. The most expert floaters would make the journey to Garmouth in 12 hours, and return on foot as far as Rothiemurchus by nightfall.”

Whisky Stills

Taken from ‘The Cairngorm Gateway by Ann Glen, Scottish Cultural Press, Dalkeith, 2002, p. 81

A number of illicit whisky stills have been found in the Glenmore and Rothiemurchus area. A small still was remembered somewhere near Airgiod-meall (*Airgead-mheall*, the silver hill) in Glenmore. Another can be found in Glenmore, against a bank. At one corner a stream entered where the roof rose. All around the room were nooks and crannies for storing gear.

ABERNETHY

The Monster of Loch Garten

Gray p. 209

It is said that Loch Garten is inhabited by a large carnivorous water monster – a cross between a large bull and a stallion... which used to haunt the burn which flows out of Loch Garten into Loch Mallachy. It was believed that it preyed on young children and lambs. It came out at night, and its roars could be heard echoing amongst the hills.

An old crofter from Nethybridge decided to try and capture the beast. He hitched a rope round an enormous boulder, weighing several tons on the shore of Loch Garten, and bated a gaff with a lamb. He rowed out into the middle of the Loch with the line and heaved the bated hook overboard and went home. All night there was a tremendous thunder and lightning storm above which could be heard the snarls of the infuriated monster. The old man went back in the morning but there was no sign of the huge boulder. All that could be seen was a deep rut leading into the loch where the boulder had been dragged. Since then there has never again been seen any sight or sound of the monster.

[River Dulnain

Carrbridge – the Bridge of Carr was built in 1717, and is now the oldest surviving bridge in the Highlands, and a dramatic symbol for the village of Carrbridge.]

GLEN AVON

Ford of the Feinne

Gray p. 199-200

Loch A'ann, and the river emerging from it and also the mountain of that name, are frequently but quite erroneously referred to as Loch Avon etc., an anglicized form of the Gaelic *amhuinn* (a river). The origin of the name, however, is much more romantic.

Ath Fhinn was, it is believed, the name of Fionn's wife who was drowned in the river. Before her death the river was called *Uisge Ban* or *Uisge Geal*, meaning clear or pure.

The *Feinne* or *Fianna* was a band of half mythical warriors and hunters greatly admired by mediaeval Gaelic bards and particularly Fionn, their leader. ...

On a day when Fionn was hunting without his band his wife accompanied him. When they came to the river called *Uisge Geal*, or *Uisge Ban nan Clachan Sleamhuinn* (White Waters of the Slippery Stones) it was a rushing torrent in full spate. Fionn crossed in safety, but when his wife

attempted to follow she was swept off her feet and drowned before he could lend any assistance. With sorrow weighing heavily upon him Fionn said:

Chaidh mo bhean 'sa bhathadh

Air Uisge Ban Nan Clachan Sleamhuinn;

'S bho chaidh mo bhean 'sa bhathadh

Behirmeid ath-fhinn air an Abhuinn

(My wife has been drowned in the fair water of the slippery stones; and since my wife has been drowned let us call the River Athfhinn.)

A'an was according to legend the name of Fionn's wife.