

II.

NOTES ON CLACH-NA-BRATACH, THE STONE OF THE STANDARD, NOW DEPOSITED ON LOAN IN THE MUSEUM BY ALASDAIR STEWART ROBERTSON OF STROWAN. BY SIR NOEL PATON, Kt., LL.D., R.S.A., F.S.A. *Scor.*

Since our first parents ate of the tree that grew in the midst of the garden, men have everywhere been prone, by means more or less dignified, to pry into the secrets of futurity, or to endeavour to acquire for themselves some share of those occult powers believed to exist outside themselves. Amongst these means—not all of them quite wholesome or well-savoured—charm stones or amulets have played a conspicuous part, both for purposes of divination and of cure; and few things would be more interesting to the archæologist, or more instructive to the student of mental science, than a systematic and exhaustive history of these strange growths on the world-overshadowing tree of Superstition. But to write such a history would be no easy task. I am not without hope, however, that ere long it may be undertaken by some one possessing the learning and leisure requisite for its successful accomplishment.

Of charm-stones still preserved in Scotland, perhaps the most celebrated is the one I have now the privilege of bringing under your notice (fig. 1) through the liberality of its present owner, the young Chief of Clan Donachaidh, who, bravely defiant of several solemn warnings on the part of good people in the north, as to the possible consequences to himself of such an act, has ventured to deposit the venerable heirloom on loan in the Museum. And associated as it has been with the personal fortunes of the chiefs of that ancient and rather turbulent race,—coinciding as these frequently did with important events in the history of the country,—it would be strange if it did not to some extent touch the imagination and excite the interest of all for whom the past has not become a dead letter.

In his “Notes on some Scottish Magical Charm-Stones, or Curing Stones,” printed in the *Proceedings* for 1862, vol. iv. part 1, the late

Sir James Simpson gives the following account of the interesting relic, from the pen of Mrs Robertson, sen^r., of Strowan :—



Fig. 1. Clach-na-Bratach (actual size).

This stone has been in possession of the chiefs of Clan Donnachaidh since 1315. It is said to have been acquired in this wise. The (then) chief, journeying with his clan to join Bruce's army before Bannockburn, observed on his standard being lifted one morning a glittering something in a clod of earth hanging to the flagstaff. It was this stone. He showed it to his followers, and told them he felt sure its brilliant lights were a good omen, and foretold a victory,—and victory was won on the hard-fought field of Bannockburn. From this time, whenever the clan was "out," the Clach-na-Bratach accompanied it, carried on the person of the chief, and its varying hues were consulted by him as to the fate of battle. On the eve of Sheriffmuir (13th November 1715), of sad memory, on Struan consulting the stone as to the fate of the morrow, the large internal flaw was first observed. The Stuarts were lost,—and Clan Donnachaidh has been declining in influence ever since.

The virtues of the Clach-na-Bratach are not altogether of a martial nature, for it cures all manner of diseases in cattle and horses, and formerly in human beings also, if they drink the water in which this charmed stone has been thrice dipped by the hands of Struan.

Sir James describes the stone as a transparent, globular mass of rock crystal, of the size of a small apple; and notes that its surface has been artificially polished.

The account here given by Mrs Robertson of the finding of the crystal is that generally current. But a somewhat different version is given in the following memorandum,—the original of which, written on paper bearing a Parisian water-mark, I unearthed some years ago from among old documents connected with the family. The writer of this “Apologia” was Duncan Robertson of Strowan, a man of scholarly habits and marked piety, who succeeded Alexander, known as “The Poet Chief,” in 1749. He was deeply implicated in the rising of 1745, though prevented by ill-health from taking the field. Exempted by name in the Act of Indemnity passed in 1747, he was dispossessed in 1752, when he escaped to France, with his wife—a great-grand-daughter of the heroic Charlotte de la Tremouille, Countess of Derby—and three children,—one of them the future mother of Lady Nairne, the poetess. He died in exile about 1780. The memorandum must therefore have been drawn up between 1749 and 1780, and is chiefly interesting as a record of beliefs still existing at that date in the minds alike of the educated and uneducated in one of the more civilised districts of the Highlands.

Memorandum by Duncan Robertson of Strowan, 1749–1780.

[MS. 44.] There is a kind of stone in the family of Strowan which has been carry'd in their pockets by all their representatives time out of mind. Tradition says that this stone was found by Duncan Ard of Atholl the founder of that family in Perthshire in the following manner; as Duncan was in pursuit of McDougal of Lorn, who had made his escape from him out of the Island of Lochranoch, night came upon him towards the end of Locherichk, and he and his men laid them down to rest, the Standard Bearer fixing the Staff of his Standard in the Ground; next morning when the man took hold of his Standard (as it happen'd to be in loose Spouty Ground near a fountain) the Staff which probably was not very small nor well polished in those Days brought up a good deal of Gravel and Small Stones, and amongst the rest came up this Stone, which, being of a brightness almost equal to Crystal, Duncan thought fit to keep it. They ascribe to this Stone the Virtue of curing Diseases in Men and Beasts, especially Diseases whose causes and symptoms are not easily discover'd; and many of the present Generation in Perthshire would think it very strange to hear the thing disputed. From being found out by this accident of the Standard Staff it is called in Gallick, *Clach na Bratich*, *Clach* signifying Stone, and *Bratich* a Standard or Colours. The Wits and Philo-

sophers laugh at the notion of ascribing such Virtues to a Stone, as a thing impossible and ridiculous. I wou'd not positively affirm that it has such Virtues as are ascribed to it, but I think I may safely say there is nothing impossible in it. They say, how can so hard a substance communicate any Qualities to the Water into which it is plunged; but I wou'd ask them in my Turn, how does a plant, a seed, or root communicate its Qualities to water or &c.? Why they tell me that those are Soft Bodies that easily yield their Essence, besides we can distinguish their different Natures by our very Senses. In short, the Strength of the Argument lies here, the one is an object of taste and smell, the other escapes both; but I wou'd ask another question, viz., if it is not agreed by Philosophers that all the Bodies in the Universe emit certain effluvia (some obvious to our gross perception, and others too subtile for our Senses), a general property implanted in them by the Creator, by which they, as it were, make effort to communicate themselves to all other Bodies around, and that this effort has its effect in Proportion to its force and the Distances of Bodies. If this is so, it is not impossible that a stone as hard as a Diamond may communicate its virtues, whatever they are, to other bodies. Besides, Pliny, who was as inquisitive about natural things, & had perhaps as much learning and good sense as most of our Philosophers now-a-days, ascribes particular Virtues to many Stones and Several Properties to a stone resembling, by his Description, the very one in Question; add to this that hundreds in former ages, and many alive at this day, affirm that this Stone has been the means of curing some Diseases in Man and Beast consistent with that Experience, so that from first to last, we may conclude—1st, that no Man on Earth can be positively sure that this stone has no virtues; and 2^{ly}, that there is great possibility on its side, as many do testify the good Success attending the use of it, and those people cou'd not dream that they themselves, their Children, or their Cattle were afflicted with Diseases which they had not, or that they recover'd when they did not, or that the progress of an epidemick Disease amongst their Cattle was not stay'd when it was. If it be said that the Events had been the same, tho' the pretended Cure had not been administered; I answer that this is only talking upon Trust, and the same Argument may be used to depreciate all Medicine; for the best Physicians (particularly Pitcairn) do not pretend to Reason *a priori* upon the Connexion between natural Causes and Effects, and Pitcairn says expressly that he who has collected the greatest number of the most accurate Experiments must be the best Physician. In short, He who was pleased to communicate Virtues and Properties to animate or inanimate things for the Benefit of Man and Beast, is not confined in His choice of the Means of doing good, and Experience alone (for few now-a-days pretend to Revelation) can discover which of His Creatures he has endu'd w^t such Virtues & Properties.

From all which I infer that when occasion offers I ought use this Stone as my predecessors did; for—

1st. It is so far innocent that it does at least no harm to the Bodies of those that use it, and this is an Experiment I won't give up to Reasoners.

2nd. It may possibly do good as is already proved.

3rd. It may probably do good, as may be presum'd from the Accounts of those who have tried it.

4th. I don't use it as a Spell or Charm, but as a supposed natural Cause to which it has perhaps pleased the Almighty to annex Some healing Virtue; and,

5^{thly}. If I shou'd be mistaken in my Opinion of the Virtues of this Stone, and that it shou'd really have no other properties than are discovered in a piece common Crystal, tho' at present I'm of another opinion; yet I use it in such a manner as cannot give offence to men of the best Sense and greatest piety. There is a Prayer to be used at dipping the stone; and such Prayers if used with a Heart full of faith and Confidence in the Divine Goodness, wou'd undoubtedly prevail in every Distress, especially where ordinary means are wanting; however ordinary means are not to be neglected; tho' it is certain no Creature has any inherent Goodness of itself, and all the assistance & Consolation we receive from the Creatures either for Life or health are mere Emanations from the Fountain of all Goodness.

It may here be noted, that the reference to Pliny in the foregoing is somewhat loose. That voluminous and credulous author certainly gives ample evidence of his belief in the efficacy of precious stones and the like as curative and preventive agents; but, so far as I can discover, his only reference to any crystal amulet resembling Clach-na-Bratach occurs in the *Natural History*, B. xxxvii. c. i., where he says—"I find it stated by medical men that the very best cautery for the human body is a *ball of crystal* acted upon by the rays of the sun;" and probably it is to this passage the writer of the memorandum alludes. Still—*pace* the "wits and philosophers"—the views he so gravely discusses are not without support from many of the wise and learned. Burton, for example, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, writes thus of amulets,—“I say with Renodeus (whoever that gentleman may have been), they are not altogether to be rejected. Piony doth help epilepsies, Precious stones most diseases,” &c. “But such medicines as consist of words, characters, spells, and charms are to be exploded,” he tells us, and relegated to the devil.

Along with the stone of the standard, Sir James Simpson refers in

his notes to other ancient crystals of like magical and medicinal repute still preserved in Scotland (of which Clach-Dearg of Ardvoirlich (fig. 2), as the one most closely resembling Clach-na-Bratach, is here figured); and no doubt the list of such, or of similar charm-stones known to have existed, might be greatly extended. Such amulets are spoken of by the author of "Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis," quoted in Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, as having been much used in the Highlands of Scotland and in Ireland. "In the Highlands of Scotland," he says, "a large crystal, of a figure somewhat oval, was kept by the priests

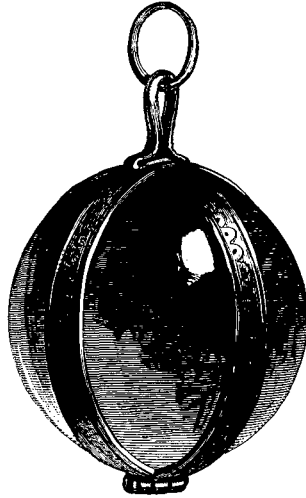


Fig. 2. Clach-Dearg of Ardvoirlich (actual size).

to work charms by; water poured upon it at this day is given to cattle against diseases; these stones are now preserved by the oldest and most superstitious in the country. They were once common in Ireland. I am informed the Earl of Tyrone is in possession of a very fine one."

The actual genesis or nationality of these artificially polished crystals it would be difficult to determine; but that many of them are of the remotest antiquity there can be little doubt. How much older than

the date of Bannockburn the one before us may be we cannot guess; but, borne as it has since been for so many centuries on the persons, and associated as it certainly was with the moments of supreme emotion or activity of men whose lives were one long scene of strife or adventure, the little mass of transparent quartz seems to have derived almost a sort of reflected vitality therefrom. And did the space at my disposal admit, it might not be uninteresting to trace its history in connection with the doings and sufferings of its successive owners from Bannockburn to Prestonpans. Regarding two of these, however, the first and the last who bore it in actual warfare, it may not be out of place briefly to record a few facts.

The finder of the crystal, Donacha *Reamhar* or *Ard*—the designation by which he is known in popular tradition, and from which the clan takes its name of Clan Donachaidh,—was born about 1275, being eighth in descent from Malcolm III. (*Callum a chean mhoir*), by his first wife, Ingebiorg, and fifth from Henry, third and last of the Celtic Earls of Atholl. In various charters for his extensive possessions he is styled "*Duncanus filius Andreae de Atholia*." In a charter by David II. he is designed "*Earl of Atholl*," as also in a charter by his eldest son and successor Robert (under whose chiefship, in 1392, took place the Raid of Angus, celebrated by Wyntown), the issue of his first marriage to a daughter of Callum Ruaidh Leamnach, the Gaelic designation of Malcolm, fifth Earl of Lennox, by which he acquired the district of Rannoch. By his second marriage—with the coheirress of Ewen de Insulis, Thane of Glentilt—he acquired the east half of that property. Duncan was a devoted adherent to the cause of Robert the Bruce, whom he sheltered in Atholl after the disastrous reverse at Methven, June 1306, and by whom he was munificently rewarded for his faithful services. It also appears that he held the office of Governor of Orkney at a time when the title to the earldom was in dispute. Along with his son, above mentioned, he was taken prisoner at the battle of Neville's Cross, 1346. He died shortly after December 1355, having on the 11th of that month got a charter from John, Bishop of Dunkeld, for the lands of Adulia—"Viro Nobili Duncanus de Atholia."

It is a long leap from 1355 to 1670,—about which year Alexander Robertson, “the Poet Chief,” was born. By the nearly synchronous death of his father and elder brother he succeeded to the honours and possessions of the family in 1688, while a student at the University of St Andrews. True to the hereditary principles of his race, who had fought for the Royal cause in all the battles of Montrose, and again in the abortive rising under the Earl of Glencairn in 1653, he joined the insurrection under Dundee in 1689, bringing with him 600 fighting men of his name. He seems to have been one day too late to share in the mournful triumph of Killiecrankie; but he and his people had more than their full allowance of the “bluidy wark” that followed the loss of Claverhouse. For this his estates were forfeited in 1690, and he himself (though under age) attainted,—unjustly, he always held, he having been honourably exchanged as a prisoner of war with Sir Robert Pollock of that ilk, with “an allowance to join his misfortunate Master, wherever to be found.” He now retired to France, and during his exile spent much time at St Germain with James VII., with whom the well-known loyalty of his house and his own wit and accomplishments rendered him a great favourite. He also served several campaigns in the armies of Louis XIV. In 1704 he returned to Scotland,—Queen Anne having in the previous year granted him a remission of his attainder, and restored him his estates. But he having conscientious scruples as to taking the necessary oaths to the existing government, this new grant never passed the seals; so that the forfeiture of 1690 was never legally repealed. In 1715 he joined the Earl of Mar with a regiment of his clan, and commanded a battalion at Sheriffmuir. It was on the eve of this engagement, as we have seen, that, while contemplating Clach-na-Bratach, with more or less conscious purpose of divination—as seems to have been the usage,—the internal flaw was first discovered, and the unfortunate issue to the Jacobite cause of the impending battle predicted.

I should be the last to insinuate the prosaic possibility that the internal flaws had always been there, though previously unnoticed, and were not the result of the magic prescience of the ancestral doom-stone. But our friend Pliny tells us that natural crystal “contains filaments

that look like flaws"; and it is just possible that this is the explanation of those appearances. However this may be, the prediction of misfortune was verified by the event. The Jacobites were discomfited (though not disgraced!), Strowan's battalion routed by Argyll's horse, to whom they were opposed, and himself taken prisoner. He was rescued on the field, however, with much daring, by his near kinsman, Robert *Bane* Robertson of Invervack (great-grandfather of the present writer).

In 1716 he was again taken prisoner in the north, but escaped from the military escort by which he was being conveyed to Edinburgh, through the pluck and ingenuity of his only sister, known as "Black Lady Margaret." Once more he returned to France; but having again obtained remission for his life, he in 1725 returned to Scotland, and took possession of his hereditary estates, holding them, though without legal right, during the remainder of his life. In 1745 he a third time raised his clan,—now sorely diminished in numbers, as shown by cotemporary lists,—and joined the standard of Prince Charles; but immediately after the battle of Prestonpans he was obliged by the infirmities of age to return to Rannoch. The journey was performed in General Cope's carriage, captured in the battle (*Edinburgh Magazine*, Sept. 1799). In 1746 Strowan's house of Carie was burnt by the soldiers of Cumberland; but the Government having failed to prove any act of rebellion against him, his life was spared, and he died in possession of the estates in 1749,—perhaps the only man in the empire who had borne arms in the three "Rebellions" of 1689, 1715, and 1745, and who had never owned allegiance to the Revolution Government. He has been fitly characterised as a man "brave, learned and loyal, distinguished alike for his generosity, kindness, and humanity, as well as for his wit." He died unmarried, and was buried in the family place of sepulture, 18 miles distant from Carie, the funeral being attended by no fewer than 2000 persons of all ranks (*Scots Mag.*, 1749, p. 206).

Of the poems surreptitiously published under Strowan's name after his death, there is no evidence that all were his. Many of them, it must be admitted, are quite as objectionable as those of Dryden and

other popular English writers of the time; but others are remarkable no less for their patriotic and high moral tone than for their occasional elegance of versification.

Up to the time of Strowan's departure for France in 1716, Clach-na-Bratach had been always borne on the person of the chief in a gold filigree case—probably of great antiquity. But during the hardships and privations of exile—of which his existing letters prove he had his full share—it is understood that he was obliged to part with it. The small pouch of silk netting in which it is now kept was made for it, I believe, by a sister of the late Marquis of Breadalbane.

The next reference to the stone which I find in the writings of the family occurs in an interesting MS. genealogy of the Strowans in the possession of Mr W. F. Skene; extracts from which I was enabled through his courtesy to make some years ago. This MS. was written about 1777, "At the sight and by the help of his father, commonly called Duncan of Drumachine" (writer of the Memorandum on the stone given above), by Colonel Alexander Robertson, then an officer in the Scots Brigade in the service of the States-General—to whom the Estates were restored in 1784,—“15th Strowan, were it not for the forfeiture,”—for “the Amusem't” of Principal Robertson, a cadet of the family. Naturally he adopts the account of the finding of Clach-na-Bratach given by his father, adding, “It is still looked upon in those countries [the Highlands of Scotland] as very Precious on account of the Virtues they ascribe to it, for the cure of diseases in Men and Beasts, particularly for stoping the progress of an unaccountable mortality amongst cattle. Duncan (*i.e.*, *Donacha Reamhar*) and all the representatives of the Family from Generation to Generation have carried this stone about their persons; and while it remained in Scotland People came frequently from places at a great distance to get water in which it had been dipt for various purposes.”

The latest occasion on which I find this amulet to have been used as a curative agent was described to me by my cousin, the late Donald Robertson of Pennyghael. When visiting as a boy Captain Alexander Robertson (grandfather of the present representative of the family), who was born in 1745, at Longwy, in Lorraine, served in the British Army

during the American War, succeeded Colonel Alexander just mentioned, as chief of Clan Donachaidh, in 1822, and died in 1830,—Mr Robertson well remembered seeing the old soldier—a man remarkable for the stately courtesy of his manners—with much ceremonious gravity dip this crystal in a great china bowl filled with spring water (a *fairy spring* it was, the name of which I have unfortunately forgot), which he then distributed to a number of people who had come great distances to obtain it for medicinal purposes.

We may smile at the performance in all seriousness of such incantations by an educated man of the world in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. But while so smiling, we ought not to forget how many forms of gross superstition may be witnessed amongst us to-day, under the full glare of that scientific light which is so fondly supposed to have routed for ever from the murkiest chambers of human imagination the last phantoms of supersensuous credulity.