



Balconie Castle, Evanton.

BALCONIE

Dr. F. B. Chisolm

THE meaning of the name "Balconie", according to W. J. Watson's *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty* is "the strong place—the dwelling place", the original castle being one of the strongholds and dwelling places of the Earls of Ross. It was famous in Scottish history and legend, dating back to the early part of the fourteenth century.

The estate of Balconie, in the parish of Kiltearn, was fairly extensive and the land fertile, and one reads in Macrae's *The Romance of a Royal Burgh* that, in the days of the Earls of Ross, Dingwall Castle had associated with it a number of home farms, one of which was Balconie. These were let and yielded a rent of 198 chalders victual, 102 marks, and 98 sheep yearly.

Balconie Castle has had various occupants, many of them Munros. Notably, following the Earls of Ross, there were the descendants of George Munro, 10th Baron of Foulis, who fell at the Battle of Bealach-nam-Brog in 1452. One of these, Hugh, in 1492 was on record as the progenitor of the cadet family of Coul and Balconie Munros. Thereafter, there were John Munro, 1st of Balconie; John Mor Munro, 2nd of Balconie, who married Katherine, daughter of John Vass of Lochslin; John Munro, 3rd

of Balconie, who married Catherine, a daughter of Robert Munro, 14th Baron of Foulis; Hugh Munro 4th, who died in 1640; Robert Munro 5th; Donald Munro 6th; and finally, John Munro 7th and last of Balconie who alienated or sold the lands.

Between 1700 and 1800, Inchcoulter (otherwise Balconie) was owned by Mackenzies of the Lochslin branch. It is recorded by the Rt. Reverend Robert Forbes of the Dioceses of Ross and Caithness in his *Journals of 1762*, which describes his journeys in the dioceses in that year, that he was entertained by one Alexander Mackenzie of Inchcoulter and, writing from Balconie, he says "This is one of the closest neighbourhoods in any rural place visited, for, within 3 miles east and 3 miles west there are about 17 or 18 Gentlemen's houses—a strong and convincing argument of the fertility of this corner."

The estate was purchased at the beginning of the 19th century by Alexander Fraser, said by tradition to have made a fortune abroad and to have founded Evanton, naming it after his son Evan. According to W. J. Watson, Evanton also comes from the Gaelic "Am Baile Ur", meaning "New Town" as distinct from the old village of Drummond on the west side of the River Skiach.

Inchcoulter was sold in two parts in 1838, the part north-west of Balconie Street to Novar, and the part we now know as Balconie to Hugh Munro of Teaninich, the "blind captain", for his illegitimate daughter, Catherine. Miss Catherine Munro of Balconie is remembered as the lady who, in 1860, founded the girls school in the Chapel, Evanton, and who kept it up at her own expense for 17 years. It is not surprising to find that following the passing of the Education (Scotland) Act, 1872, the five elected members of the first Kiltearn School Board included Miss Munro, the others being Charles Munro, Younger of Foulis, who became chairman, John Munro of Swordale, Rev. Duncan Campbell of the Free Church in Evanton, and George Sellar, miller in Culcairn. Miss Munro, who became Mrs. Reid, died in 1877 and was succeeded at Balconie by her cousin Mary, a daughter of the last Mackenzie laird of Ardross.

Mrs. Reid sold the estate in January, 1890, to Mrs. Murray Bankes of Letterewe, and George Hildyard Bankes, D.L., J.P., her son, who was the last proprietor to live in the castle. George Bankes was associated with Balconie for some forty years and, at the home farm during that period there was held annually a roup, when "lots" of crops, which were measured off in acres, roods and poles, were auctioned, and farmers and crofters came from all around to bid for them. When the Bankes family arrived at Balconie for the season from their winter home at Winstanley

Hall, Lancashire, it gave great pleasure locally, for the Evanton shops benefited and the Bankes were very generous in support of local community affairs.

Historians tell of the famous Christmas feast which was arranged to be held at Balconie Castle in 1485 when Alexander Macdonald of Lochalsh invited there a considerable number of highland chieftains and guests, including Kenneth Mackenzie, heir to the chiefship of Kintail, and his wife who were then residing on the island in Kinellan Loch, one of the old hunting lodges of the Earls of Ross. According to tradition, Kenneth had married into the family of Macdonald of the Isles more as a political move for advancement, it was said, as she was ugly. Some say he never married her but later married Agnes Fraser, thought to be a daughter of Lord Lovat. Kenneth went to the feast at Balconie attended by forty men, but without his wife. This was taken as a great insult to the Macdonalds. To make matters worse Maclean of Duart, who was responsible for the arrangements, and who had previously had a quarrel with Kenneth, purposely assigned him to the kiln as a lodging place at Balconie. Kenneth was now the one to be insulted, and he felled Maclean who was an important vassal of the Macdonalds. Maclean's retainers looked upon this as an act of war and at once drew their swords. However, Kenneth and his men escaped to the shore of the Cromarty Firth, manned boats which were lying there, crossed the firth to the Black Isle, and returned to Kinellan. This act started up again the old feuds between the Mackenzies and the Macdonalds, culminating in the Battle of the Pairc in 1490 near Kinellan. There Mackenzies by strategy drew the Macdonalds, who were superior in numbers, into a bog and won the day.

During the last war, forces were billeted at Balconie for training purposes and in 1949 the estate was again taken over by a Munro whose son, Mr. A. H. Munro, still farms there. The castle was demolished in 1966 and the stones were used in the building of the Invergordon Aluminium Smelter. There are now plans for an industrial estate with marine facilities in the area, and the new trunk road by-passing Evanton is to pass through the estate of Balconie.

In spite of all these changes in the name of progress, the memory of the historical events and legends associated with Balconie will long remain.

THE LADY OF BALCONIE

A LEGEND

This is an edited version of the famous legend of the Lady of Balconie as told by Hugh Miller in his book *Scenes and Legends* which first appeared in print in 1834. Hugh Miller (1802-56), stonemason, geologist, folklorist, writer, and churchman, was born in Cromarty and was the subject of last year's annual Edinburgh Festival Exhibition at the National Library of Scotland. The story of his early years in *My Schools and Schoolmasters* includes descriptions of Munro relatives.

THE river Auldgrande, after pursuing a winding course through the mountainous parish of Kiltearn for about six miles, falls into the upper part of the Firth of Cromarty. For a considerable distance it runs through a precipitous gulf of great depth, and so near do the sides approach each other, that herd-boys have been known to climb across on the trees, which, jutting out on either edge, interweave their branches over the centre. "The wildness of the steep and rugged rocks—the gloomy horror of the cliffs and caverns, inaccessible to human tread, the waterfalls, which are heard pouring down in different places of the precipice—the hoarse and hollow murmuring of the river, which runs at the depth of one hundred and thirty feet below the surface of the earth—the fine groves of pines, which majestically climb the sides of a beautiful eminence that rises immediately from the brink of the chasm—all these objects cannot be contemplated without exciting emotions of wonder and admiration in the mind of every beholder."

The House and lands of Balconie, a beautiful Highland property, lie within a few miles of the chasm. There is a tradition that, about two centuries ago, the proprietor was married to a lady of very retired habits; who, though little known beyond her narrow circle of acquaintance, was regarded within that circle with a feeling of mingled fear and respect. She was singularly reserved, and it was said spent more of her waking hours in solitary rambles on the banks of the Auldgrande than in the house of Balconie. Of a sudden, however, she became more social, and seemed desirous to attach to herself, by acts of kindness and confidence, one of her own maids, a simple Highland girl; but there hung a mysterious wildness about her—a sort of atmosphere of dread and suspicion—which the change had not removed; and her new companion always felt oppressed when left alone with her, as if she were in the presence of a creature of another world. And after spending with her, on one occasion, a whole day, in which she had been more than usually agitated by this feeling, and her ill-mated companion more than ordinarily silent and melancholy, she accompanied her at her bidding, as the evening was coming on, to the banks of the Auldgrande.

They reached the chasm just as the sun was sinking beneath the hill, and flinging his last gleam on the topmost boughs of the birches and hazels. All below was dark as midnight.

"Let us approach nearer the edge," said the lady, speaking for the first time since she had quitted the house.

"Not nearer, ma'm," said the terrified girl; "the sun is almost set, and strange sights have been seen in the gully after nightfall."

"How can you believe such stories," said the lady, "I will show you a path which leads to the water: it is one of the finest places in the world; I have seen it a thousand times, and must see it again to-night. Come," she continued, grasping her by the arm.

"No, lady," exclaimed the terrified girl, struggling to extricate herself, "I shall swoon with terror and fall over."

"Nay, wretch, there is no escape," replied the lady, in a voice heightened almost to a scream, as, with a strength that contrasted portentously with her delicate form, she dragged her, despite of her exertions, towards the chasm.

"Suffer me, ma'am, to accompany you," said a strong masculine voice from behind; "your surety, you may remember, must be a willing one."

A dark-looking man, in green, stood beside them; and the lady, quitting her grasp with an expression of passive despair, suffered the stranger to lead her towards the chasm. She turned round on reaching the precipice, and, untying from her belt a bunch of household keys, flung them up the bank towards the girl; and then, taking what seemed to be a farewell look at the setting sun she disappeared with her companion behind the nearer edge of the gulf. The keys struck, in falling, against a huge, granitic boulder, and sinking into it as if it were a mass of melted wax, left an impression which is still pointed out to the curious visitor. The girl stood rooted to the spot in utter amazement.

On returning home, and communicating her strange story, the husband of the lady, accompanied by all the males of his household, rushed out towards the chasm; and its perilous edge became a scene of shouts, and cries, and the gleaming of torches. But, though the search was prolonged for whole days by an eager and still increasing party, it proved fruitless. There lay the ponderous boulder impressed by the keys; immediately beside it yawned the sheer descent of the chasm. At length the search was relinquished, and they returned to their homes to wonder, and surmise, and tax their memories, though in vain, for a parallel instance. Months and years glided away, and the mystery was at length assigned its own little niche among the multitudinous events of the past.

About ten years after, a middle-aged Highlander, the servant of a maiden lady who resided near the Auldgrande, was engaged one day in fishing in the river, a little below where it issues from the chasm. He was a shrewd fellow, brave as a lion and kindly-natured withal, but not more than sufficiently honest; and his mistress, a stingy old woman, trusted him only when she could not help it. He was more than usually successful this day in fishing; and picking out some of the best of the fish for his aged mother, who lived in the neighbourhood, he hid them under a bush, and then set out for his mistress with the rest.

"Are you quite sure, Donald," inquired the old lady as she turned over the contents of the basket, "that this is the whole of your fishing? Where have you hid the rest?"

"Not one more, lady, could I find in the burn, devil a one," said Donald, and then, when the lady's back was turned, off he went to the bush to bring away the fish appropriated to his mother. But the whole had disappeared; and a faintly marked track, spangled with scales, remained to show that they had been dragged apparently by some animal along the grass in the direction of the chasm.

The track went winding over the grass and stone along the edge of the stream, and struck off, as the banks contracted and became more steep and precipitous, by a beaten path which ran along the edge of the crags at nearly the level of the water, and which, strangely enough, Donald had never seen before. He pursued it, however, with the resolution of tracing the animal to its den. The channel narrowed as he proceeded; the stream which, as he entered the chasm, was eddying beneath him in rings of a mossy brown, became one milky strip of white. From the more than twilight gloom of the place, the track he pursued seemed almost lost, and he was quite on the eve of giving up the pursuit, when, turning an abrupt angle of the rock, he found the path terminate in an immense cavern. As he entered, two gigantic dogs, which had been sleeping one on each side of the opening, rose lazily from their beds, and yawning as they turned up their slow, heavy eyes to his face, they laid themselves down again. A little further on there was a chair and table of iron apparently much corroded by the damps of the cavern. Donald's fish, and a large mass of leaven prepared for baking, lay on the table; in the chair sat the lady of Balconie.

Their astonishment was mutual. "O Donald," exclaimed the lady, "what brings you here?"

"I come in quest of my fish," said Donald, "but, O lady, what keeps you here? Come away with me, and I will bring you home; and you will be lady of Balconie yet."

"No, no," she replied, "that day is past; I am fixed to this seat, and all the Highlands could not raise me from it."

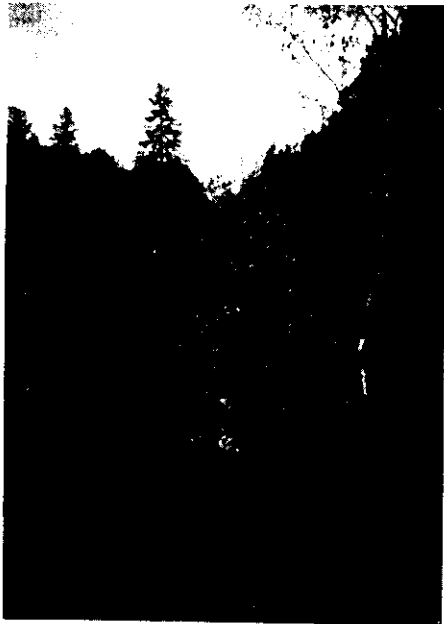
Donald looked hard at the iron chair; its ponderous legs rose direct out of the solid rock as if growing out of it, and a thick iron chain red with rust, that lay under it, communicated at the one end to a strong ring, and was fastened round the other to one of the lady's ankles.

"Besides," continued the lady, "look at these dogs—oh, why have you come here? The fish you have denied to your mistress in the name of my jailer, and his they have become; but how are you yourself to escape?"

Donald looked at the dogs. They had again risen from their beds, and were now eyeing him with a keen vigilant expression, very unlike that with which they had regarded him on his entrance. He scratched his head. "Deed, ma'am," he said, "I dinna weel ken: I maun first durk the twa tykes, I'm thinking."

"No," said the lady, "there is but one way; be on the alert."

She laid hold of the mass of leaven which lay on the table, flung a piece to each of the dogs, and waved her hand for Donald to quit the cave. Away he sprang; stood for a moment as he reached the path to bid farewell to the lady; and after a long and dangerous scramble among the precipices, for the way seemed narrower, and steeper, and more slippery than when he had passed by it to the cave, he emerged from the chasm just as the evening was beginning to darken into night. And no one, since the adventure of Donald, has seen aught of the lady of Balconie.



The Black Rock Gorge, a chasm on the River Glass near Evanton village. This is one of the spectacular scenes of the Munro country.

Photo: R. W. Munro.



Alexander Munro.

MUNRO SCHOOL IN CALGARY

Kenneth Munro, Grande Prairie, Canada, has sent the following interesting notes on Alexander Munro who was once a native of Easter Ross.

A UNIQUE ceremony took place in 1972 in Calgary, Canada, when the Alexander Munro Elementary School was officially opened. The school was named after the late Alexander Munro in recognition of his contribution to the city as an horticulturalist and in his official capacity as Superintendent of Calgary's beautiful public parks.

Alexander Munro was a native of Evanton, where his family was well known, and was one of six sons who all emigrated to Canada and made a successful livelihood there. He began his working life as an apprentice gardener at Balconie Castle, Evanton, then owned by the Bankes family. During the First World War, Alexander served with the 4th Seaforth Highlanders and later, in 1920, emigrated to Canada where he joined the Parks Department in Calgary. Two years later his fiancée, Miss Rodina Munro, a native of Lochbroom, joined him in Calgary where they were married.

In 1960, Alexander Munro, known as "Mr. Gardener", retired after 11 years as Superintendent of Public Parks, gaining the highest honours from the Horticultural profession. He was a