

THE BLACK BOOK OF TAYMOUTH

(By A. M. Cowan, Perth, Scotland.)

The Breadalbane Campbells have not been collectors of rare and curious prints like the Grenvilles of Stow, but the books, manuscripts and charters at Taymouth Castle form a collection of historic importance. Prominent amongst these is the Black Book of Taymouth, than which probably no book has more belied its title. For it quite naturally suggests at least some connection with dark deeds and the founder of the family, that Black Duncan of the Cowl who played the grim trick of the black bull's head on Rob Roy's ancestors. According to one version of the story, the Macgregors got wind of what was coming and escaped, but another account has it that Black Duncan exterminated his enemies, and that ever afterwards a bull is heard roaring on the hill when a Breadalbane is going out with the tide. Besides Black Duncan, there is the mysterious Lady of Lawers, of whom more presently. Is it any wonder that highly coloured romances have been woven round a book with such a title and such relations?

Yet the Black Book was never intended to be anything more than a plain statement of facts. It was compiled about the middle of the seventeenth century under the direction of the eighth Laird of Glenorchy, who supplied the materials from which it was written to his notary, a lawyer named Bowie. What the book actually contains is a record of the family history with all the facts and incidents that have been gathered together from time to time. It is a strange, eventful history of course, stranger in parts than most fiction, but it has no connection with the black art.

A volume of that sort, and a bulky one at that, could be produced without much difficulty from the legends and traditions that cluster round Loch Tay like the mists on the hills. Some of these have reference to the strange gift of the second sight which was possessed by at least one old woman who died only a few years ago. A remarkable instance which occurred at the close of the last century is described in the late Marquis of Lorne's "Adventures in Legend," and there are other instances known to persons still living in Perthshire which have never been published.

To give one or two examples of what is contained in the Black Book, it is related that the first Laird was a Knight of Rhodes and was "three sundrie tymes in Rome." The sixth Sir Colin was "ane great justiciar" and incurred the deadly enmity of the Clan Gregor. "He caused execute to the death meny notable lymarris," amongst them the chief of the Macgregors who was beheaded at Kenmore in the presence of the Earl of Athol and other magnates. His successor was the first who tried to civilise the clansmen by turning their attention to agriculture. One of his regulations throws a lurid light on the social habits of the times. "No man," so it ran, "shall in any public house drink more than a chopin of ale with his neighbour's wife in the absence of her husband, upon the penalty of ten pounds and sitting twenty-four hours in the stocks."

A notable passage records how "the Laird of Glenorchy his whole landis and estate, were burnt and destroyit by James Graham sometime Erle of Montrose." This happened in 1644 through Glenorchy having joined the Covenanters.

There is an entry in the Black Book that Sir Duncan Campbell built the great hall and chapel in the isle of Loch Tay in 1480. Centuries previously there was a priory on the island founded by Alexander I. whose wife Sybil, daughter of Henry I. of England, lies buried there. Far earlier still there is a misty tradition that a King of Scotland was drowned in the loch in the seventh century. This was Donald IV. who, as an old chronicle says, went there "at fishing with his servants." The ruins of the priory are briefly described by Sir Walter Scott in his notes to "The Fair Maid of Perth."

Among the manuscripts at Taymouth there is one in the form of a diary written by a Roman Catholic priest in the sixteenth century, which makes frequent mention of bloody feuds and murders among the people. Another old manuscript deals with the coins of all periods, including the Roman, which have been found at various times in the district round Loch Tay. A literary curiosity is preserved in a rare copy of John Knox's dispute with the Abbot of Crossraguel. The Boswells of Auchinleck were at one time supposed to possess the only copy in existence. Both copies are imperfect.

The accusation about the black art might be levelled with at least some show of reason against another remarkable volume of the Taymouth collection, the Red Book of Balloch, which contains the prophecies of the Lady of Lawers. Balloch, it should be explained, was the name of the feudal fortress that stood originally on the Taymouth site. It was associated with centuries of clan feuds and desperate deeds. With the building of Taymouth the whole atmosphere of the place was changed. There is nothing now to suggest the days when the Campbells marched into Caithness to seize the lands of its Earl for debt, the amazing incident, even for those times, that is said to have been the origin of the song, "The Campbells are coming."

The Red Book is a bulky volume, barrel-shaped and bound with twelve iron hoops or clasps. The prophecies relate to the house and lands of Breadalbane; the Lady of Lawers was the wife of Campbell of Lawers and she lived in a house by the lochside three hundred years ago. Some of her "sooth words" actually came to pass, so that her reputation was firmly established throughout the country-side. Instances are recorded of people who disregarded her warnings suffering the penalties that she had foretold, like the farmer who uprooted her ash-tree and was gored to death by his own bull.

One of her prophecies was that an old white horse would carry all the heirs of Taymouth across Tyndrum cairn. There were thirty in the family at the time but soon after in a clan battle near Killin twenty-five of them were slain.

A stranger instance of her gift referred to the kirk. She is said to have declared that when the red cairn on Ben Lawers fell, the Church would split in two. The saying could not have had any meaning for her own time. The cairn was erected by a company of sappers and miners and collapsed in the year of the Disruption in the Church of Scotland.

Some of the prophecies are still unfulfilled. The huge boulder known as the Boar Stone, standing in a meadow near the loch, is to topple over on the day when a strange heir shall come to the castle. When the face of a certain rock shall be concealed by wood, the house of Breadalbane will be at the height of its glory.

There is an element of mystery connected with these twin volumes of the Taymouth library that has always appealed strongly to the popular imagination. If they should ever come into the market like the castle, they will assuredly cause some stir among collectors.

A reference to the inn at Kenmore in the Black Book, recalls the visits of Burns and Scott to the Perthshire highlands. Taymouth with its fine setting among the Grampians inspired the lines pencilled over the inn mantelpiece at Kenmore, "Admiring nature in her wildest grace." "The Birks of Aberfeldy" is another classic memento of the poet's tour. The bard got into trouble with the critics over this poem, for there are no birches at Aberfeldy. The explanation is that he borrowed from an older poem referring to Abergeldie where birches are numerous. But what Burns has