

Clach Thogalaich Gleann Laoigh Beag (Lifting Stone of the Glen of the Little Calf)



“.....there is a Clach Thogalach, i.e. lifting stone, near the junction of the Luibeg and the Derry”¹

As you enter Braemar from the south on the A93 road, a large stone sits on the eastern verge with the numbers “1715” inscribed in white paint. It is a political message which appeared prior to the 2014 referendum held to ask to the Scottish people the simple question as to whether they wanted to once again be an independent nation or remain part of the United Kingdom.

Pivotal to the history of Scotland are the Jacobite uprisings of 1715 and 1745 being attempts to put the expelled Stuart monarchs back on to the throne of Great Britain. The majority of Highland Clans were supportive of the uprisings, essentially a war based around religious association and belief that the Roman Catholic Stuart line which had been removed during the English Glorious Revolution, should be returned to its rightful position.

The history of the Jacobite uprising is complicated and indeed colourful however suffice to say the 1715 uprising centres around one man; Sir John Erskine, the Earl of Mar (1675-1732). The Earl of Mar has been much maligned in Scottish history, being ascribed the nickname “Bobbin John” for his indecision in warfare but it was he that decided to stand up to the Hanoverian forces of the British Government. He raised the battle standard at

¹ *The place-names of Aberdeenshire. William McCombie Alexander (1952)*

Braemar on 6th September 1715 however it is the to the days shortly before this that we focus our attention.

Mar decided to gather his troops in the area surrounding Glen Lui and it was while waiting for the assemblage of Highlanders from near and far that some Highlanders do what they do best, test each other in strength and the following is an account of a competition in stone lifting which took place.

“Mar was reconducting Grant of Rothiemurchus up the Lui when he broke the news of the intended rising to him. The laird objected to the design, and an altercation ensued that was likely to end unhappily.

“ Why,” said Rothiemurchus, “where are your men, my lord ? ”

“Men!” replied Mar; I should think you only needed look behind you to see a pretty respectable pattern in my present following.”

Rothiemurchus did look round. Some hundreds of Braemar and Strathdee men accompanied them. While the discussion went on, the men stood aloof ; and the followers of Rothiemurchus, tall, powerful fellows, though not very numerous, were each in turn lifting an immense block of stone that lay on the burn bank, nearly to their knees, to brag the lads of Mar ; and verily they, after the most determined efforts, were unable to free it from the ground, to the great triumph of the Grants.

“ Do you call those boys men, my lord ? ” said Rothiemurchus, taking advantage of the incident ; “ why, not one of them can move that stone, which my lads, you see, make a plaything of.”

The earl looked exceedingly displeased; and Invercauld, who, with others stood by, observing this, walked away to one of his following, a Finlay Mor Farquharson.

“Finlay,” demanded he, “have you tried to lift up that stone?”

Of course he had not.

“ Well, my lad, you just go and try.”

The earl, Rothiemurchus, and the company drew near, for all felt interested and anxious. In a trice Finlay Mor walked ' up to them carrying the stone easily in his arms like a little baby, and asked what they wanted with it.

“Just throw it over my horse's neck here,” said the earl. ²

Finlay did so, and then turned away lazily as if that were nothing. Sampson alive again ! Ajax playing at marbles, if you please!

“ Well, laird, and what think you of our Mar boys now ? ” inquired the earl triumphantly. “Let me see one of your Spey lads play me that again.”

² In the Scotsman Newspaper dated 17th September 1924 the celebrated naturalist and historian Seton Gordon explains that Finlay Mor threw the stone over a horse without rider.

- Rothiemurchus said nothing; but he was one of those present with Mar at Sherrifmuir. Finlay Mor, I need not tell you, was not forgotten. The "Clach thogalach" lies still on the Lui, but no one has ever yet played me that again with it ; perhaps no one ever will."³

Perhaps an historical interjection is required to explain a few of the points raised in this story which has been recorded directly from the Gaelic oral tradition. Correctly the stone being lifted in a form of ad-hoc competition is named Clach Thogalaich but there are a few other pointers to, in particular, the style of lifting.

Raising the stone to the knees is itself an acceptable lift in Gaelic strength culture but when Finlay Mor lifts the stone and throws it over the horses back, this is merely him asserting his strength in Gaelic terms in replicating the **lift and throw** being the ultimate feat known in Gaelic culture. It should be noted that after lifting the stone the following is stated - **Finlay did so, and then turned away lazily as if that were nothing**. This is an emphasis on style of lift and attitude towards it. As mentioned before the Gaels had a word for it; **fraigalchd** meaning ostentatious of strength. Finlay Mor has let his strength do the talking for him.



Earl of Mar's Punchbowl

The height of the horse can reasonably be assumed to be just over 4ft in height. The Highlanders did not use thoroughbreds for transport – movement from Glen to Glen was by

³ Page 103 *Legends of the Braes of Marr*. John Grant (1876)

a **Highland Garron Pony** which being slightly over 13 hands was about the equal height of a dyke wall or reception plinth stone such as the **Pudrac** in Balquhiddy.

The story of this gathering expands over many nearby linked Glens with reputably, the Earl of Mar holding true to culture in providing sustenance to the gathering warring Highlanders. In Glen Quoich he ordered that gallons of whisky be mixed with honey and hot water to provide a beverage for the troops and his "punchbowl" is a well visited tourist site in neighbouring Glen Quoich. The ravages of the River Quoich have now holed through the punchbowl but it is a spectacular site none the less.

Gaelic story telling is not a subject of historic precision. It usually is subject to variation but underpinned by the factual in that any particular story in the oral tradition would not have existed unless a specific fact had occurred. In relation to strength and stone lifting this is the actual feat itself. It is therefore no surprise to have a second version regarding the lifting of the Clach Thogalaich.

"Tradition asserts that the party came clown to Glen-Quoich where beside the water-fall of the Quoich are "pot holes" worn in the rock in time of flood by stones swirled round and round in a narrow eddying circle. Such a hole, of considerable dimensions, the Earl of Mar determined to make tributary to the interests of the Prince. Into its capacious interior he caused to be poured several anchors of whisky, some hundredweights of honey and some gallons of boiling water. From the liquor thus compounded, he distributed bumper after bumper to the thirsty and delighted clansmen, whose enthusiasm under such liquid inspiration, so generously bestowed by the hands of a nobleman so affable and condescending, soon became fired to the highest pitch.

In playful mood, some stalwarts among the Grants of Rothimurcus made exhibition of their prowess by lifting from the ground and almost to their knees a huge block of stone, to the sad discomfiture of some Braemar men who could not lift it from the ground. Standing by, the Earl of Mar and Rothimurcus discussed the prospects of the proposed rising, as to the expediency of which the latter had expressed some doubt. Observing the easy triumph of his men and the humiliation of the men of Mar, Rothimurcus gleefully exclaimed "Do you call these boys men, my Lord? Why, none of them can move that stone that my lads can make a plaything of." The Earl manifested some annoyance, observing which Invercauld walked up to Finlay Farquharson, one of his men, and obtained his consent to try his hand. Finlay not only lifted the stone, but carrying it in his arms, approached His Lordship asking what he would do with it. "Throw it over my horse's neck" was His Lordship's reply. That feat successfully accomplished, Finlay retired as if nothing had happened. The Earl's invitation to Rothimurcus to repeat the feat was not accepted. But Rothimurcus was, nevertheless, with his men, present at the battle of Sheriffmuir. Although myself a loyal Mar man it is only fair to state that another version of the story substitutes for its Farquharson hero Nathaniel Forbes of Daluhandy, who afterwards attained the rank of Captain under Mar."⁴

⁴ *Reminiscences of Cromar and Canada. Donald Robert Farquharson (1846)*

This second text points to the stone lifting competition being held in Glen Quoich perhaps due to an omission in mentioning Glen Luibeag to emphasise the unique punchbowl in Glen Quoich and of course we now have **Nathanial Forbes** lifting the stone.

Of course all the above is the in the your face history but like many other stones of strength, it is the surrounding area that one has to also examine because the Clach Thogalaich Glen Luibeag may not simply have been a random stone selected to have a competition with. It could well in fact be far older than the 1715 date ascribed to it.

The story of Nathanial Forbes or Findlay Mor lifting the heavy stone and throwing over a horse is great history but the aftermath of their actions was a rather inglorious stalemate at the battle of Sheriffmuir in 1716 and a further uprising in 1745 concluded with the battle of Culloden Moor in 1746; major contributing factors to the ending of Gaelic tradition and culture as well as the beginning of the expulsion of the people.

As one takes the long walk into Glen Lui from the Linn of Dee, there is spectacular Highland scenery, perhaps unmatched anywhere in Scotland but a keen eye will pick out evidence of habitation and at one point it was far more obvious than now.



The bleakness of Glen Lui

"The upper part of Glen Lui is covered with the ruins of many houses; we also picked up a fine deer's horn which was lying on the grass. Of the policy that depopulated these valleys when there was no longer a prospect of a civil war to use men, and gave them over to sheep and deer, I do not mean to say a word. Scripture to be sure does

say that a man is better than a sheep; the English aristocracy however, of whom we are all justly proud, say quite the contrary.”⁵

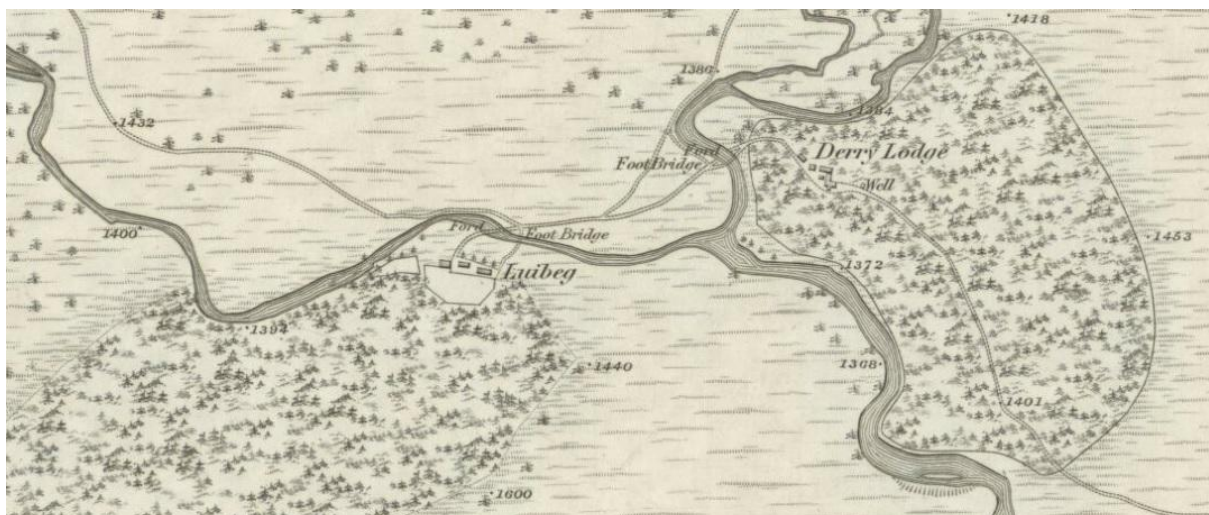
Suffice to say that when the truth of the matter is spoken by an Englishman, it is the truth and following on from the Jacobite rising of 1715, the Earl of Mar lost his lands and the new landlords between 1726 and 1776 began to evict the many hundreds of Glen Lui residents that worked and lived in this beautiful Glen which was turned over for sheep and the recreational shooting of Highland Game.

So the true perspective of the Clach Thogalaich Glen Luibeag is not so much that of an isolated lifting stone situated in an as now remote Highland Glen; it was a stone that would have been known to and perhaps even lifted by the inhabitants. The stone had community associations.

Another reason for the existence of the lifting stone at this site is like for the vast majority of stones being the presence of an ancient track. In this case perhaps one of the most famous and well known and equally a good reason why the Earl of Mar decided to rally forces where he did.

The ***Lairig Ghru*** is a long established track that cuts through the Cairngorm massive and which links the communities of Speyside and Deeside. It is a hazardous high mountain route that has claimed many lives, even today, but centuries ago it was known to be used by whisky smugglers and cattle thieves with the track passing right by the Clach Thogalaich. In later years, the residents of Glen Lui were actually paid money to keep this track open by removing boulders from it when it was used as a Cattle drove route.

In addition to this busy commercial traffic, it is also known that saw mills had been established in both Glen Lui and Glen Quoich as early as the 17th century so when we look at the lifting stone and the Glen today, it should be appreciated that when strength was applied to the Clach Thogalaich the entire setting was perhaps less than the rural unspoiled environment that we view today.



Victorian six inch to one mile scale map of Glen Lui Beag

⁵ Page 82 Report of the Marlborough College Natural History Society (1870)

The Clach Thogalaich is located in one of the most scenic and rural settings of any traditional lifting stone in Scotland. As a primary access to the southern Cairngorms there was and still is today, a heavy reliance on river crossings. There are only two building structures in this area, Derry Lodge, a now disused hunting lodge which in Victorian times was frequented by Royalty as a stop-over during hunting expeditions and the nearby cottage at Luibeag. The present cottage at Luibeag, perhaps the only eyesore in the area was constructed in the 1940's, built on top of the old Game keepers residence of a far older vintage. The lifting stone is located less than 100 yards from the cottage.

An examination of the occupants of the cottage in Victorian times may also provide us with some indirect lifting history of the Clach Thogalaich.

"I then proceeded up Glen Lui for three or four miles, as far as the forester's lodge, at the entrance of Glen-Lui-Beg ... He [Peter McHardy] is considerably above six feet in height, straight and active, without an ounce of redundant flesh...Some years ago he was adept at throwing the hammer and putting the stone, as was testified by several elegant silver medals which he showed me."⁶



Keepers Cottage at Luibeag

Old Parish records⁷ indicate that **William McHardy** was the resident "game keeper" at Luibeag cottage in 1833, father of **Peter McHardy** as mentioned in the above text and also the grandfather of the celebrated Highland Games athlete **Charles McHardy**. It would be churlish to expect that the Clach Thogalaich being virtually located at their doorstep was not lifted by various members of the McHardy family.

⁶ Page 196 *Autumnal Ramblings among the Scottish Mountains*. Rev Thomas Grierson (1851). In 1843 Peter McHardy won a medal for winning the caber throw competition at Braemar for three consecutive years.

⁷ Parish records indicate that William McHardy was Game-keeper at Luibeag when his son James was christened. The 1841 census indicates William McHardy as tenant and by 1851 the tenant is Peter McHardy.

Perhaps more than a coincidence that this level of family association with a lifting stone is also applied to the McHardy's and the lifting stone at Inver.

Suffice to say, the last recorded lift of the Clach Thogalaich was in 1715 and we have to travel forward exactly 300 years for its next lift.

On 9th August 2015 the stone was visited by **Peter Jensen (Denmark)**. Peter being no stranger to the traditional lifting stones of Scotland having lifted many during a tour in 2014 braved the long walk into Glen Luibeag and necessary river crossing simply to get to the stone. Peter lifted it with ease estimating its weight at circa 240lbs. I dare say had there been a Highland Garron Pony nearby the stone may well have been thrown over its back and with no alternative available a simple lift to the chest was sufficient.

Perhaps the outcome of the 1715 uprising may well have been different had the Highlanders had some assistance from the sons of Enecus.⁸



Historic lift of the Clach Thogalaich by Peter Jensen (Denmark)

⁸ *Enecus (also known as Enetus) was the General of an invading Danish army who after rampaging over the North East in a two year campaign were eventually defeated at the battle of Mortlach circa 1010AD. After the battle the Scots erected a stone in his memory which for centuries was known as the Enecus Stone. Strangely the stone was subject of feat of strength when a local farmer asked a strong farmhand to remove it for a bottle of whisky. The stone was lifted and carried a distance where it was broken up and built into a dyke wall.*

Directions - From Braemar the Main Street of the village travels east and habitation is quickly left behind as the road travels to Mar Lodge. The car park at the Linn of Dee is easily found and where there are signs showing the way to Glen Lui. Initially a wet footpath makes its way through a forested area however it quickly joins a far better prepared track. The track initially trends north and at a bridge crossing the Lui Water it sharply turns to the east. Follow the track for some distance when eventually the forested area at Derry Lodge will come into view.

Having to cross the water of Lui once again to approach Luibeag there are two options depending on the water level of the river.

Just prior to the forested area at Derry Lodge there is an obvious path striking left down to the river that follows the tree line. This path leads to an obvious ford which was once used to reach Luibeag and from which a track can be seen on the opposing river bank. Crossing the river at this point if suitable, the obvious track should be followed and as it leads to Luibeag another track will be seen to join it from the right. At the junction of these paths the stone will be seen on the left.

Alternatively, the initial track through Glen Lui can be followed to Derry Lodge where a sturdy bridge over the Derry Burn should be crossed. From this point follow the burn to the point where it enters the Lui Water. Further to the north another ford will be obvious and when crossed the obvious track followed to the junction mentioned above.

The choice of route to the stone is very much dependent on the water level of the water of Lui. If in spate or fast flowing it is suggested that the stone is best left for another day. The Cairngorm Massif can expulse water at a tremendous rate causing extreme flash floods and indeed the former bridge over the Derry Burn, many tons in weight, was washed away within minutes of such a flood.