

CHAPTER II.

CLAN NEISH OF UPPER STRATHEARN—THE FEUD WITH THE CLAN
MACNAB—BATTLE OF GLEN BOULTACHAN—THE MASSACRE ON
NEISH ISLAND—GLENTARKEN—NEISH ISLAND—CRAIGNEICH—
DUNDURN.

THE CLAN NEISH OF PERTSHIRE.

THE Neishes, a tribe which possessed the upper parts of Strathearn and inhabited an island on Loch Earn, called after them Neish Island (6). Very little is known of the early history of the clan; they appear to have been almost exterminated or scattered early in the sixteenth century; various traditional accounts have been handed down in Strathearn concerning them, and the written records of the country contain only notices of individual members of the clan.

During the fifteenth century the Neishes of

Upper Strathearn commenced the struggle with the Clann an Aba; many battles were fought with various success, and the culminated fight ended about 1522 in the defeat of the Clan Neish at the battle of Glen Boultachan.

THE BATTLE OF GLEN BOULTACHAN.

The last battle was fought in the glen by the present farm of Littleport, in which the MacNabs were victorious, and the Neishes were defeated, with the loss of nearly all their fighting men. This occurred in 1522.

Finlay MacNab of Bowain gathered all his fighting men for one decisive effort for the supremacy of the northern Loch Earn district, and the two clans met in battle in the wild Glen of Boultachan, between two high and solitary mountains, about two miles north of the lower end of Loch Earn. Each clan was led by its chief, and they rushed at once down the green slope to mingle in close and mortal strife, with wild yells and bitter epithets, while the war-cries rang and the pipers blew with

their might. Conspicuous among the struggling throng was the eldest son of the chief of Clan Aba. He bent all his energies to capture the Neishes' banner, which bore their crest—viz., a cupid with his bow in the dexter, and an arrow in the sinister hand, with the motto "Amicitiam trahit amor."

On the other side the aged chief of the MacNeishes fought with great strength and activity and unparalleled bravery, but the MacNabs eventually bore all before them, and the aged chief, on beholding three of his sons perish by his side, placed his back to a large rude granite block, which still marks the scene of the conflict, and, poising overhead his mighty claymore, stood like a lion at bay. His vast stature, his known strength and bravery, as he towered above the fray, with his white hair streaming in the wind, the blood streaming from his forehead, which had been wounded by an arrow, and from his huge sword, which had a remarkable accessory in the shape of an iron ball that slid along the back of the blade to

give an additional weight to every cut—all this combined made the bravest of the MacNabs pause for a moment ere they encountered him; but after a dreadful struggle, in which he slew many of his assailants, the brave old man sank at last under a score of wounds inflicted by swords and daggers; the MacNeishes were swept from the field, and the majority of them were slain (27).

The red lichens which spot the old grey stone in Glen Boultachan are still believed by the natives to be the encrusted blood of the chief of the MacNeishes.

According to tradition, MacCallum glas, their bard, with about twenty of the tribe, escaped and took refuge on their isle on Loch Earn.

Several accounts of the feud have been handed down, including the following in 'Annals of St Fillans,' by A. Porteous, 1912:—

“Like all the rest of the Scottish clans, the Neishes had their own particular feud. This was with the Clan MacNab.

The feud was the outcome of a long-continued series of petty jealousies and imagined grievances on both sides.

Frequently, isolated parties of the clan met, and a fight ensued.

At last both clans mustered their full force, and, meeting in Glen Boultachan, a regular battle was fought.

The chief of the Neishes for long held his own, standing with his back to a large boulder, until at last he was overcome, and fell covered with wounds. Tradition says that his blood still stains this boulder, and that the marks cannot be obliterated.

The rest of the Neishes fought equally stubbornly, but finally they were completely overcome, a remnant only making their escape.

These settled down on the easter island of Loch Earn under the leadership of a relative of the chief, and became practically freebooters, lying in wait for defenceless travellers, whom they robbed and murdered. Many years elapsed since the battle of Glen Boultachan ere the

Neishes thought themselves once more formidable enough to try conclusions with their ancient enemies, the MacNabs.

The Neishes lay in ambush in Glen Lednoch," &c. &c.

A short account of the Nish feud is also given in the 'Statistical Account of Scotland,' published in 1838.

THE CLAN MACNAB ACCOUNT.

In 1487 Finlay (IV.) became chief of the Clan MacNab. At this time the MacNabs seem to have set about the recovery of those of their possessions which had been lost in their struggle with the Bruce. They became involved in a feud with the Dewars concerning certain relics of St Fillan, and at the same time they commenced that struggle with the Neishes which culminated many years afterwards in the defeat of the Clan Neish at the battle of Glen Boultachan, about two miles north of the lower end of Loch Earn.

In 1487 the Dewars obtained a charter con-

firming them in their possessions, and from that date they had no further trouble with the MacNabs.

Finlay (IV.) died (between the years 1502-11), and was succeeded by his son Finlay (V.). It was in the time of this chief that the Neishes were at last defeated, and reduced to a small band of reckless outlaws.

This Finlay MacNab of Bowayne died at Illa Rayne, and he was buried at Killin, 13th April 1525.

Finlay (VII.), chief of the MacNabs, married Catherine Campbell, daughter of the Laird of Glenurchy, and had a family of twelve stalwart sons, of whom the weakest is said to have been able to drive his dirk through a two-inch board.

At Christmas-tide, 1612, MacNab sent some of his clansmen to the neighbouring town of Crieff to purchase the necessary stores for the approaching festivities. On their homeward way the MacNabs were ambushed by a party of the Neishes, who sallied from their island fortalice in Loch Earn and captured the supplies.

Dire was the wrath of chief and clansmen when the plundered messengers returned to Eilean Ran and reported their mishap. Enraged as the MacNabs were, they could think of no method by which they could punish the reivers. In the evening the twelve strong sons of MacNab were assembled in the hall of Eilean Ran, and busily engaged in planning some signal vengeance on their foes, when their father entered and said in Gaelic: "Si an nochd an oidhche nam b'iad na gillean na gillean" ("This night is the night if the lads were the lads"). In an instant the twelve lads were on their feet and arrayed in their war gear. Then hurrying down to the waterside they crossed the stream and took up the family barge, which they bore on their shoulders across the hills to Loch Earn, by way of Glentarken. Having reached the loch, they launched their boat and rowed to the island, where the robbers were holding their carousal with the stolen supplies. On their arrival at the island the grim avengers sunk all the boats in the little harbour, and then

proceeded to the habitation of the Neishes. In the keep was a scene of revelry and confusion, for, holding all the boats on the loch in their own keeping, the Neishes deemed their hold to be impregnable.

Strange, therefore, must have been the thoughts which passed through their minds when, loud above the din of their noisy mirth, they heard a sharp and sudden knocking at the outer door. Immediately their noisy merriment ceased, all became silent, and then in a quavering voice the terrified Neish demanded the name and mission of the one who had thus disturbed their orgy. Swiftly came the answer, "Whom would ye least desire?" The speaker was Iain Min, or "Smooth John," the heir of MacNab, and the strongest and fiercest man in all Braidalbin.

With this stern voice sounding in his ears, and with a foreboding of his doom rising before him, the Neish replied, "Iain Min."

Sharp through the midnight air came again that grim voice, "Then I am he, but rough

enough I'll be this night." Trusting in the strength of the stout door, the robbers attempted to treat for terms. But spurning all thought of parleying, Iain Min, with one swift blow, sent the door reeling off its hinges, and next instant he and his brothers were dealing death to the hereditary foes of their House. The Neishes, surprised and demoralised by the rapidity and ferocity of their assailants, offered but little resistance. When the fighting, if such it can be called, was over, there remained of the Neishes but two survivors: one was a young lad who had succeeded in concealing himself in time to avoid the vengeance which overtook his family; the other was a female child who escaped the notice of the MacNabs by being under an overturned cradle.

Their task having been accomplished, the young MacNabs secured the gory head of the Neish as a trophy of their victory. They then recovered their boat, and retraced their journey of the previous night.

Ere they left Glentarken they abandoned

their boat, as it retarded the news of their triumph. The boat was never removed from the place where it was left by the MacNabs, and men born within the past century have talked with men who have viewed its well-bleached fragments.

Some time early in the past century a portion of the keel was dug out of the moss in which it was embedded. Part of it was given to Mrs MacNaughton who lived near St Fillans, and she had it made into a walking-stick. She was Margaret, daughter of James MacNab, Milmore, near Killin, and was known as "Margaret Innishewen." The bicker is still preserved by her descendants.

In the morning the chief was delighted to find that the mission of vengeance had been successful: the proof was convincing when Iain Min cast Neish's head at his feet, and said in Gaelic, "Na biodh fiamh oirbh," or "dread nought." And MacNab acknowledged as he received the gruesome trophy that the night

had been the night, and the lads were the lads. From this deed are derived the modern arms of the MacNabs. **1135600**

There is a local tradition to the effect that but three of the sons took part in the enterprise, and that the chief in giving the signal for the attack on the Neishes only acted at the instigation of his wife, who had some real or fancied cause of grievance against the three eldest sons. It is said that she hoped that they would be slain, so that her favourite son should be heir to the estates. And, according to the same tradition, the three were by an early marriage. History, however, makes no mention of a second wife (46).

The MacNab arms are: Sable, on a chevron argent three crescents vert, in base an open boat with oars argent, sailing in a sea proper. Crest—The head of a savage affronté proper. Supporters—Two Highlanders with shouldered claymores. Motto—“Timor omnis abesto” (“Be all fear absent”).

John MacNab of MacNab matriculated the modern arms in 1765, but they had been used before that time.

The author of 'The Clan MacNab' informs me that his account of the Neishes was obtained from the following sources: (6), Shearer's 'Traditions of Strathearn,' 'Scottish Wars,' also from some private histories of the Clan MacNab, and from old natives of Braidalban.

The Rev. Samuel Ferguson, minister of Fortingall, mentions the feud in his 'Queen's Visit.'

Malcolm Ferguson also gives the story in his 'Rambles in Breadalbane,' published in 1891.

A short account of the Neishes is given in 'The Beauties of Upper Strathearn,' 1870; also in the 'Scottish Tourist,' 1825, p. 79.

The Neish tradition was utilised by James Grant in 'Mary of Lorraine,' pp. 261-281. Grant's account contains some facts and much fiction. He describes the country of the

MacNeishes as : Glentarkin, Dundurn, part of Glenartney, the Pass of Strathearn, and the Hill of St Fillan (Dunfillan Hill).

It is curious that Grant says that one of the Neish survivors in 1522 was Muriel, daughter of the chief, who eventually married the Laird of Torwood.

The Lairds of Torwood were the Forrester family, the ancient hereditary foresters of Torwood Forest.

Mariot Forester, spouse to James Campbell of Lawers, obtained a charter of the lands of Glentarkin in 1525 (17).

Campbell of Lawers was granted a charter of Glentarcane in 1540, and a confirmation of the grant was given in 1616 by James VI. (17).

Glentarkin was probably held by the Neishes originally by the sword; many of the Gaelic clans in earlier times neglected to obtain charters of their lands from the crown.

We find that the lands of Glentarcai, Morall, and the Fordees were set to John of Murray and his mother before the year 1492 (18).

The lands of Glentarkane were granted to the Drummonds by James IV. in 1511 ('R. M. S.' i. 3574).

Glentarken is a glen in Comrie parish, descending from an altitude of 1150 ft., 2 miles south by eastward to Loch Earn (306 ft.), at a point $1\frac{3}{4}$ mile west by north of St Fillans.

It contains a huge monolith, "The great stone of Glentarken." It is not a travelled stone, but a mass detached from the low cliff below, which has rolled but a short distance, and is poised in the most singular way upon one of its edges. It measures 70 ft. in circumference at the base, 110 ft. in circumference 10 ft. above the ground, and its solid contents above ground exceed 25,000 cub. ft. The glen probably derives its name from "Tarachin," or "Talargan," an old Pictish personal name.

In the olden days what might be called a clachan existed on the hillside at the entrance to Glentarken, but life on that exposed site was latterly found inconvenient and uncomfortable; accordingly, the families were moved to

more suitable surroundings at the foot of the loch, and the cottages in the glen were allowed to fall into ruins. The remains of these may still be seen in heaps of stones here and there (19).

Loch Earn is one of the most picturesque of Scottish lakes, and next to Loch Ness, the deepest in Scotland, in one part being about 300 ft. deep.

Limited as are the dimensions of Loch Earn, it is exceeded in beauty by few of our lakes. Its style is that of a lake of far greater dimensions, the mountains which bound it being lofty, bold, and rugged. The mighty Ben Vorlich stands majestically above the loch, which is sometimes calm as a mirror, and other times dark and turbulent, its waves dashing wildly against the shores.

At the east end of the loch is a beautiful small wooded island, known for many centuries by the name of Neish Island.

It is an artificial isle, which appears to date back to the era of the lake-dwellers.

In after ages, according to tradition, the island became a Royal fortalice of many of the kings or chiefs of Fortrenn.

The island was a residence of the Clan Neish at an early period, probably from *circa* 1250 to 1420; after that date it was probably only in occupation by the Neishes at periods until 1622, the date of the massacre.

In 1445 we find that Andrew Mercer had a fee of £10 for the custody of the manor of Loch Earn (Louchearn), and in the following year he received 53s. and 4d. for the custody of the island in Loch Earn (*pro custodie insule lacus de Erne*).

On the 9th January 1490, in the presence of King James IV. and his Council at Linlithgow, John, Lord Drummond, engaged to “within 15 dais fra this day furth to ger cast doon ye house of ye Ester Ile of Loch Ern, and distroy all ye strenthis of ye samyn, and tak away ye bate, and put her to ye Wester Ile.”

The keep was a stone building, divided into different chambers, which now lies in ruins;

the great thickness of the walls testifies to the care, foresight, and energy which was expended in the erection thereof.

A small harbour and landing-place for boats still exists on the east side, and at one time the island was connected with the mainland by a kind of causeway formed of large boulders, the remains of which may still be seen in a line between the isle and the villa called Portmore.

The island was once the rendezvous of a desperate banditti of the name of Neish, whose history is as brief as it is tragical (47).

Neish Island was latterly occupied by the family of Ardvorlich, who had an occasional residence and a granary there (48).

The following is an extract from the Stewart of Ardvorlich traditions, in 'The Red Book of Menteith,' vol. i. p. 403:—

“I have heard tell that the Ardvorlichs had once to live for safety on the Neish's Island at St Fillans; once Ardvorlich was in hiding in a cave in Glentiarken, for the Graems were after him,” *circa* 1644.

Craigneich—*i.e.*, the craig or rock of Neish, a place-name in the old Neish district in Strathearn.

There is a standing stone there, of rounded whinstone, 6 ft. 4 in. in height; it is described in 'Proc. of Soc. Ant. Scot.,' xlv. pp. 62-63.

Dun-d-Earn is romantically situated among thick trees at the base of stupendous mountains, and at the junction of a mountain torrent with the Earn.

St Fillan died at Dundurn in the year 649.

The original chapel of St Fillan was replaced some centuries ago by the old church of Dundurn, situated a short distance from the farmhouse of Easter Dundurn.