

9/61

RENNIE McOWAN discovers a love affair with a mountain

# The Bailies of Bennachie

I CAME ACROSS a passionate love affair the other day. All kinds of people seemed to know it was going on, although they were confined to one locality, but others knew only vaguely that something serious was afoot.

I have read their letters, their declarations of undying affection, their descriptions of the beloved's features, character, shape and nature. I have seen them unashamedly baring their souls in public.

This outpouring of deep rooted passion is an infectious thing, and having seen for myself the object of their affections I can well understand how they all feel.

Given half a chance I will be joining their ranks of worshippers. After all, where else (outside the Stepford wives) can one find such fervour apparently returned to all in equal measure, thus perpetuating a bond that seems unbreakable?

I am talking, of course, as any north-east person will recognise, of Bennachie (pronounced Bain-a-hee), the best known and most popular mountain in Grampian Region, and a devoted band of people who spend their spare time helping to look after it and who call themselves the Bailies of Bennachie.

They have produced a book that is almost religious in its fervour, a collection of poems and articles which read like a Canticle of Praise.

Bennachie is not high as mountains go - 1733ft - but it has undoubtedly got something special.

It is a five-mile east-west ridge between the Rivers Don and Gadie, with five main summits over 1500ft (some argue there are really seven and some eight tops). Its slopes are clad in trees and heather, and there are now four discreet car parks and an intricate network of paths.

It is inextricably intertwined into the history of the north-

east, and the pipe tune and song, "Oh! Gin I were far Gadie rins . . . at the fit o' Bennachie" brings tears to the eyes of exiles and a kindling of the heart to those lucky enough to be still at home.

One can talk of its Iron Age fort, with its thick walls and traces of wells and huts, thought to have been a refuge from probing Roman armies; of the robber Leslies of Balquhain who used it as a stronghold and who sent six sons to red Harlaw, all of whom returned feet first.

One can talk of its myths and stories, of the renowned giant Jock o' Bennachie, who crushed his rival and his stolen lady love by hurling a huge boulder at them, of sad Hosie's Well whose namesake was taken prisoner at Harlaw and who returned to find his sweetheart had married another and who died of a broken heart.

One can talk of the renowned visitors, such as Prince Bernard of the Netherlands, who skied on Bennachie, or of the moss at 1500ft where peat was cut in past centuries, or of the colony of hardy people who dug hard-won fields on its sides and built their homes on common ground, only to find themselves absorbed by law into one of the estates. Then followed a bitter tale of rents and evictions, and their only memorial now is an area of bright green grass.

One can talk of all these things, for they are part of the Bennachie story but, above all, it is its siting that makes it such a favourite.

It has been described as a great bastion of the Highlands thrust boldly into the howe of the Garioch. Its position at the eastern end of the Grampians means it is seen from far afield. Far out in the North Sea fishermen and sailors used to take their bearings from the red granite mass of its best-

known top, the Mither Tap. It is the first hill seen by fishermen returning to Aberdeen.

It has a way of popping up and drawing the eye.

On a lovely day of spring sunshine I got lost amid a tangle of dusty roads in the area of Monymusk, Alford and the ancient Chapel of Garioch, where strong farms are set among rolling ploughed land and the landscape has a settled and ancient look.

A blue triangle dominated the horizon, and I had a compulsive feeling that I should stop asking directions and just give the car its head, as one would a horse, and drive towards it. It had a magnetic appeal, and as one of the Bailies wrote: "Yon's the hill rug's at the hert when you're awa."

Others have described it as the Fujiyama of Aberdeenshire and as "the presiding deity of the whole valley."

One fervent admirer wrote that seen from the extreme north of Buchan it resembled the prow of a proud Viking longship. From Tyrebagger it seemed to spread its covering wings around the whole landscape. From the Howe of Alford it was a lion resting but vigilant. Above the road between Insch and Oyne it towered like a turreted fortress.

Another wrote of Romeo describing his love: "Ah, she doth teach the torches to burn bright," and added, "so do I feel about Bennachie, the mountain of light. I first saw the hill as a boy, for the first time, in the red summer gloaming. It was love at first sight and the relationship has deepened with the years. In war it was for me the emblem of peace, and, exiled abroad, the symbol of home."

On my spring day on top there came from all sides in the manner of lemmings marching to the sea continuous little groups of people, or indi-

viduals, strolling in from differing points to the top of the Mither Tap.

They were of all ages, including a man in his late 70s and a baby in a papoose-style harness. There were experienced mountaineering gangrels in well-used gear and one-hill-only tourists openly delighted at being able to scale such a fine summit.

There was a constant coming and going, and it reminded me of a pilgrimage mountain.

Love and popularity bring problems of litter, boot pressure and erosion, and this love has now given rise to practical expression.

Dr Daniel Gordon, a retired family doctor, who is now 80 and lives in Inverurie, felt that help was needed in looking after Bennachie. He and others were concerned about growing numbers visiting Bennachie and the litter problem.

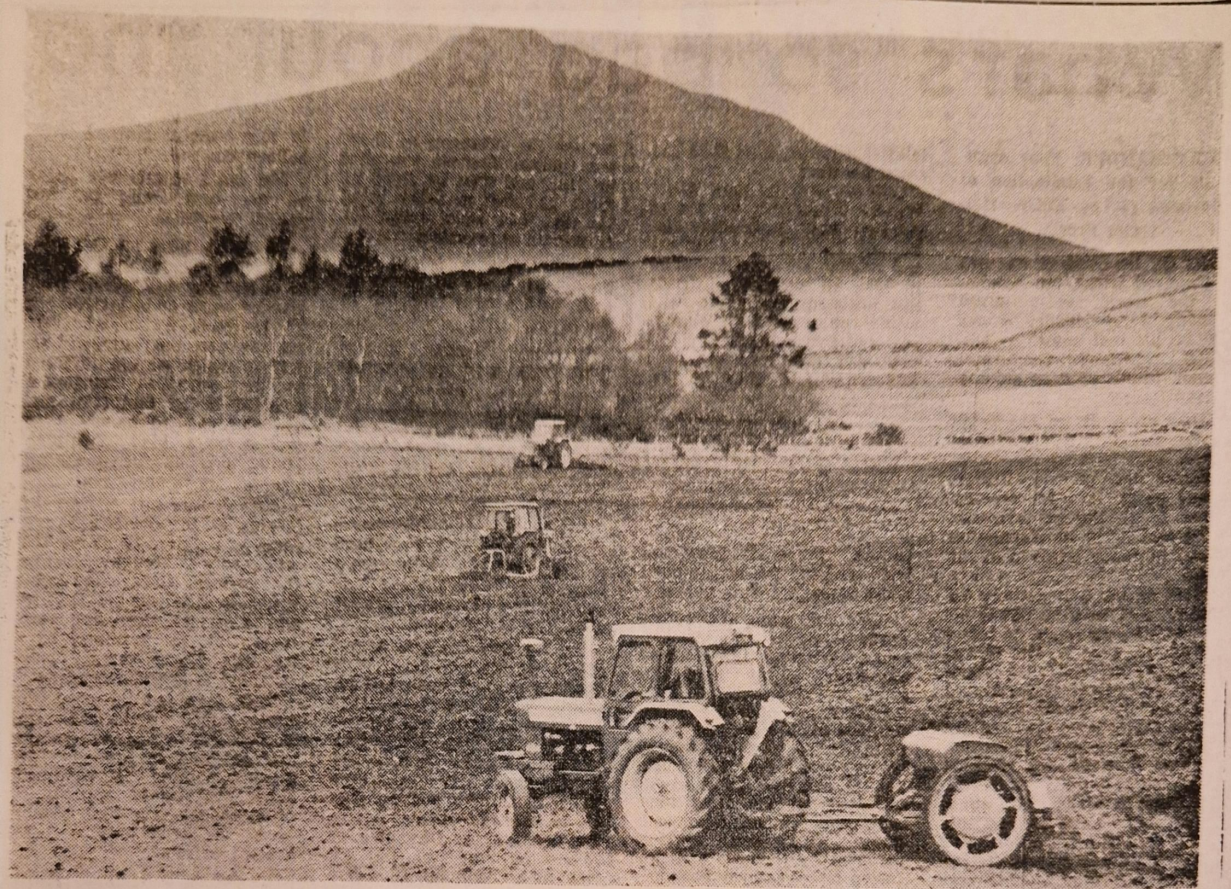
The matter was discussed with the landowners, the Forestry Commission and the estates of Monymusk and Pitodrie, and with friends, and all were of like mind.

The outcome of these informal conversations with Dr Gordon as instigator, was that in 1973 the Bailies of Bennachie organisation was set up. It was formed of people from all walks of life, and included many exiles.

There are now over 1600 bailies, paying a life membership fee of £1 (£3 for families), and including members in Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United States and England.

They strive to preserve the amenity of the hill, to discourage litter and vandalism, to maintain footpaths and rights of way, to study plants, animals, rocks and their interaction, to collect and preserve the legends, ballads, poetry, literature, art, music and customs relevant to Bennachie, and to encourage and stimulate





Sowing seed in the shadow of Bennachie. The picture was taken from the Monymusk Estate.

public interest in and care for the hill.

Car parks, picnic sites and paths have been built or reshaped by the Forestry Commission in collaboration with the Bailies, and so far they have largely succeeded in doing that very difficult thing - controlling numbers without destroying the beauty they have come to see.

The name of Bailie was suggested by another local doctor, Dr James Gill, based on the plea of the town bailie caring for law and order of his burgh - the country bailie for the comfort of his cattle.

In the first year 900 people joined, and the first 1000

copies of a booklet were paid for by Inverurie philanthropist, Mr Alexander L. Gray. An updated edition of their remarkable book, "The Book of Bennachie" is under way.

The lairds of Bennachie, Lady Grant of Monymusk, the Master of Forbes, Mr Theo Smith of Pittodrie, and the Conservator of the East of Scotland of the Forestry Commission are honorary Bailies and automatically members of council.

There are seven wardens, three for the high tops and one for each of four marches. The council is completed by a lady bailie, a senior bailie and

deputy, a clerk and treasurer.

Members can obtain a badge, scroll, postcards, lettercards and a special map.

Many young people have joined, and they have laid stepping-stones across the bog above the Rushmill Burn on the way to Mither Tap, removed loose stones on other paths, and got rid of litter.

An indicator was made by masters and pupils at Inverurie Academy and unveiled on Mither Tap in July 1974.

There have been rallies, meetings, lectures, conferences and work projects, including a recital of Flo Garry's poems on the slopes of the hill in the autumn of 1974, with readings

by some of the Bailies, plus Douglas Kynoch and Flo herself.

So it goes on, this love affair between thousands of people and what one philistine called "a wee hill."

Bennachie is part of the folk life of the north-east, of the farming community, of the city dwellers. It has been in men's minds in far-off lands in time of war; it has meant happiness and replenishment for many in times of peace.

Try it for yourself and you will surely agree with the late Lord Aberdeen, who said: "To hell with your Alps, Rockies and Himalaya, Bennachie is the hill for me!"