

STRANGE HAPPENINGS AT BEN ALDER COTTAGE

By Paddy Buckley

JUST AFTER THE Great War of 1914–18 Joseph McCook, a deer forester, left his lonely and isolated cottage on the north-western shore of Loch Ericht, where he and his family had lived for almost forty years. He loaded his few possessions into a boat and rowed nine miles up the loch to Ben Alder Lodge, where he spent the last years of his working life before retiring to Newtonmore. He died there at the Cottage Hospital on 4 July 1933 at the age of 85.

‘He was a very fine type of Highland stalker, level-headed and sensible.’ Thus wrote the Reverend Archibald Eneas Robertson, Minister for the parish of the Braes of Rannoch from 1907–20. Robertson, in 1901, was the first man to complete the Munros, and became President of the Scottish Mountaineering Club from 1930–2. During his journeys into the Badenoch hills, he would occasionally stay with the McCooks at Ben Alder Cottage, having called there for the first time in 1893. One of McCook’s granddaughters, Nan Michael, who lived at the Cottage until she was 15, remembered the visits of a Minister, on a walking trip from Rannoch to Dalwhinnie, who gave her some round shiny metal objects. Never having seen coins before she threw them into the stream!



*Ben Alder Cottage around 1905, with McCook, his wife and their youngest daughter outside.
Photo: SMC Image Archive (A.E. Robertson Collection).*

By the early twenties the uninhabited cottage had deteriorated. No one was willing to live in such an isolated place. A new head stalker, Finlay McIntosh, came to Ben Alder Lodge on 3 June 1920, and he had the Cottage put into good repair. He installed a watcher, Magnus McLeod, from Skye, but Magnus found it too lonely. So the Cottage was lived in only occasionally by the Estate gillies and stalkers, and more frequently by travellers – tramps, walkers, fishermen, poachers – and bit by bit the woodwork vanished into their fires.

By the end of the Twenties a new sort of traveller was on the move around Loch Ericht; the navy. In September 1928 Balfour and Beatty began work on the vast Grampian Electricity Scheme, and over 1000 men, mainly from the Western Isles and Ireland, started boring tunnels and building dams on Lochs Rannoch, Ericht and Tummel. Construction camps were erected at both ends of Loch Ericht, the western camp incorporating a Roman Catholic chapel. The old right of way from Rannoch to Dalwhinnie (shown on Roy's map of 1755) became busy once again, and Ben Alder Cottage became a regular halfway house, where tramps and navvies met and swapped stories by the bothy fire. And very soon there were ghosts in the cottage where McCook had lived for forty years.

A good account of these times was given in *Happy Hawkers* (1937) by Elizabeth and Ian McPherson. Ian had been a ghillie on the Ben Alder Estate, and in order to frighten away unwelcome travellers, had invented a ghost at McCook's Cottage.

The house was haunted by a woman who once took refuge there from a storm. She was storm-stayed until hunger crazed her and she killed and ate her child. She was seen passing through Rannoch so wild-eyed with despair that no one dared to cross her path. Some said that she returned to the wastes of Rannoch, driven by remorse, and was lost in the morasses of that place.

The stalker Finlay McIntosh could see the value of such a story. When asked by a navy for his opinion, he replied;

The truth of it, how can I tell? She went past here with the child that's truth I know. She had no child when she came to Rannoch, that's truth I've heard. What happened to the child?

Finlay's daughter, Eileen MacPherson, who kept the Dalwhinnie shop in 1988, was adamant that it was her father who propagated the story of the 'Ghost House' as a ruse to deter unauthorised visitors. She grew up at Ben Alder Lodge, and she and her husband Johnnie, a former stalker on the Ardverikie Estate, were both familiar with the local history and legends. Elizabeth McPherson (later Mrs Bremner of Nethybridge) admitted that at the time *Happy Hawkers* was published, she and her husband were freelance writers keen to sell their stories wherever they could. A good story was more important than scholarly research.

Thus after centuries of peace and quiet the Badenoch hills were visited by new groups of travellers. First the working men, the surveyors engineers and navvies, and then as the Twenties gave way to the Thirties, came those out of work, or those seeking some brief escape from hard times in the towns and cities. (The atmosphere of this period is preserved in Alastair Borthwick's classic account, *Always a Little Further*.) The hills were being used as places for recreation.

In 1938 Bob Grieve (then an apprentice civil engineer but later Sir Robert Grieve, Chairman of the Highlands and Islands Development Board) went into Ben Alder with his friend Tom Robertson, who had heard of a loch at over 2000ft where marvellous trout could be caught. They stayed at Ben Alder Cottage for almost a week, found the famous loch, and fished it to their hearts' content. On the last night of their stay they were disturbed by strange sounds at midnight for which they could find no explanation. Similar uncanny noises were heard on another visit, years later, and three groups of friends also reported happenings that could not be explained. I spoke to Bob on 5 December 1987 at the SMC Dinner and asked him about his visits to Ben Alder Cottage. That one trip in 1939, almost 50 years ago, was still etched in his memory. In essence the story he told me was the same one he had recorded on tape in 1973 for Chris Brasher, then Editor of *Mountain Life*, and which Chris later published in the Dec '73/Jan '74 issue, assuring his readers that although the author's name had been concealed 'because he is fed up with having his leg pulled', this was no leg-pull.

Some additional information came up during our conversation. The note from F. McIntosh, Head Stalker, which Tom had found on Bob's rucksack, had been kept by Tom. It said, 'You must leave this house immediately – you are not permitted to stay here'. Bob conceded that the note could have been placed on his sack during the day when they were out fishing the loch, and that he could perhaps have failed to spot it when they returned. Head stalkers are forthright men, and if Finlay had called there in the evening he would surely have confronted the two trespassers and told them to leave.

Ben Alder Cottage stands at the junction of two ancient rights of way; one a low-level route along Loch Ericht to Dalwhinnie; the other a high track going over Bealach Cumhann and Bealach Dubh and down to Culra and Glen Pattack. The present Ben Alder Cottage probably dates back to 1871 when Sir John Ramsden, owner of Ardverkie and Ben Alder estates, inaugurated a vast programme of building and renovation, road making, fencing and tree planting. But there had been a bothy at Ben Alder Bay in former times, and certainly during the period just after Culloden. Prince Charles Edward Stuart was said to have spent one night in a bothy known as 'Doom's Smoky Place' before meeting Cluny McPherson. Bob Grieve claimed that in 1938 he could trace the outlines of an older building at Ben Alder Cottage, on the same site but at an angle

to the present structure, and that this could have been ‘Doom’s Smoky Place’. If there are ghosts there perhaps they sprang up after Culloden.

Bob related another strange occurrence. Some years after the Great War a former officer in the Royal Engineers was walking from Rannoch to Dalwhinnie, and he stayed overnight at Ben Alder Cottage at a time when it was inhabited by a stalker and his wife. During the night he heard what seemed like footsteps in the adjacent room. Next morning the wife explained that a semi-tame stag was in the habit of banging its antlers on the outside walls, but she told this story so unconvincingly and with such a look of guilt upon her face that the visitor was sure that she was covering up the real truth, which was that the cottage was haunted. A nice tale, but after McCook left, circa 1920, no other family ever lived at Ben Alder Cottage.

Bob Grieve’s original story first appeared in print in 1951, in *Undiscovered Scotland*, written by Bob’s friend and fellow SMC member, Bill Murray:

...the previous tenant, a stalker named McCook, had hanged himself on the back of the front door.

Bill was quoting Bob Grieve, who told me (December 1987) that the suicide story was ‘common knowledge among climbers at that time’, although he was not aware of it when he first visited Ben Alder Cottage.

The alleged suicide caused great distress among McCook’s descendants, and Murray published an apology in SMC Journal Vol. 24, No 142, April 1951, p. 355:

I have been informed by the Rev. A. E. Robertson that the rumour, current among climbers for many years past and quoted in my book, “Undiscovered Scotland,” connecting the name of the stalker McCook with the alleged suicide at Ben Alder Cottage, is without foundation. McCook died in his bed at Newtonmore, honoured and respected. Mr Robertson assures me that he was a very fine type of Highland stalker, level-headed and sensible.

By this time the Rev A.E. Robertson had died (1870–1958; an obituary notice appeared in the SMC Journal Vol. 26, pp. 362–6, May 1959), but his widow, Winifred, was ever vigilant in the cause of truth. In a letter published in the Scotsman on 1 August 1973, p. 6, she wrote from 17 Cluny Gardens, Edinburgh on 28 July 1973:

Sir, I much enjoyed ‘To the wilderness and back’ in the Scotsman today, until I came to the repetition of the cruel untruth of Mr McCook’s suicide. Sixteen or eighteen years ago this appeared under the hand of W H Murray. My late husband, the Rev A E Robertson was greatly shocked and asked W H Murray to make a public apology, which was done, I think in your columns. Mr McCook, in old age, died in his bed in either Kingussie or Newtonmore, I forget which. My husband, when minister of the Parish of Braes of

Rannoch, frequently stayed with the McCooks at Benalder Cottage. There is a theory that certain workmen on a very large 'scheme' were enjoying large scale poaching and purposely circulated the suicide tale to deter visitors.

A similar disclaimer appeared in the *Scotsman*, but this failed to kill the rumour. A centrepiece spread called 'To the Wilderness and Back' was published in the *Weekend Scotsman* on 28 July 1973. Author Harry Reid did not actually visit Ben Alder Cottage, but wrote:

The cottage is notable chiefly from the fact that it is haunted, a stalker called McCook being alleged to have hung himself there.

There are a couple of similar tales concerning the local Doctor's visits to the Cottage. On one occasion the Doctor was said to have arrived in such a state of exhaustion that he had to be put to bed and Mrs McCook had to perform the operation herself. On another, Mrs McCook was in childbirth; the Doctor came in blizzard conditions, saved the child, but was unable to save poor Mrs McCook. The true source of these mythical exploits can be found in the archives of the Carnegie Hero Fund Trust. Joseph McCook aged 61 became seriously ill with pneumonia; his daughter walked out in terrible conditions to fetch the Doctor, Donald MacDonald from Laggan. The Doctor set out at 7 a.m. on 9 January 1910, but because of severe gales, swollen streams, snow and ice, did not reach his patient until 6 p.m. He stayed overnight to see his patient through the crisis, and for his efforts was awarded a medal by the Carnegie Trust. The truth yields an even better story than the rumours, although equal credit should perhaps have gone to the daughter, who must have made the double journey in very difficult conditions.

I should interject here a note about the longevity of the McCooks. Joseph was 85 when he died, his mother Betsy was 97, his sister Hannah was 84, his wife Annie was 84, her father Donald was 82, and her mother Jane was well over 80 when she died. The fresh air of Badenoch was undoubtedly beneficial!

Sid Scroggie was a mountaineer who was blinded during the last war, but who still managed to tramp the Scottish hills. His first visit to Ben Alder Cottage was in November 1963. During the night he and his companion heard a series of tappings, scratchings, footsteps and groans, which although mysterious did not appear 'in any way frightening'. The next morning Sid experienced a poltergeist phenomenon, in which a packet of biscuits flew across the room from the mantelpiece to the opposite side of the room. Sid has explained this as a manifestation of the tension between him and his companion. On a later visit with his daughter Mary, some tension had grown up between them, giving rise, Sid believes, to another poltergeist phenomenon; the bothy door crashed open for no obvious physical reason.

Ben Alder and Ardverikie were the estates of the Duke of Gordon

until about 1794, when they were exchanged with Cluny McPherson for land in Speyside. In 1836 the Marquis of Abercorn leased Ben Alder and cleared off the sheep. In 1844 he took a further lease on Ardverikie and cleared it of sheep also. Thus he had an enormous forest but it was poorly stocked with only about 100 of the original wild deer. His head forester was James Cattanach – ‘one of the most honest and experienced foresters’ – who doubled the size of the herd, bringing in deer from another area. In 1844 Queen Victoria and Prince Albert visited Ardverikie, and at one stage were interested in buying it. In the year of the Queen’s visit, the proprietor, out of a total estate rental of less than £2000 received £1360 for the deer forest alone. In 1850 he made over the leases to Lord Henry Bentinck, who kept the forests until his death on the last day of 1870. Sir John Ramsden bought Ardverikie in 1871 and in 1873 added the adjacent Strathmashie estate erecting a deer-proof fence on the eastern march between Loch Ericht and Loch Laggan, thus preventing the deer from straying on the cultivated lands along the valley of the Spey. In 1874 he split the huge estate into Ben Alder and Ardverikie. Between 1871 and 1883 he spent £180,000 on 76 miles of internal fencing, 43 miles of march fencing for which the expense was shared by the neighbouring estates, 473 miles of drains, 20 miles of carriage road and 18 miles of pony paths and walks; 18 new houses were built and 13 restored. He began planting Ardverikie in 1875 and by the end of the Great War, the plantation had reached 10,500 acres. In 1883 Ardverikie employed seven foresters on 28,000 acres.

Joseph McCook, born towards the end of 1849 at Newtonmore, was the second of two children born to George McCook and his wife Elizabeth Grant. George was the son of a gamekeeper and was born at Insh in 1804; he was a blacksmith and carried out his work in Newtonmore where he died of phthisis at the age of 57. Joseph went to school in Newtonmore. By 1871, at the age of 21, he was working as a mason’s labourer at Ardverikie Lodge, one of 24 tradesmen; stone quarriers, masons, joiners, labourers, a blacksmith and a carter; who were at work for Sir John Ramsden on a major improvement of the estate. One of Joseph’s mates was a lad of 18, Alexander Bain. Three miles away at the farm of Gallovie, working as a servant, was Alexander’s older sister, Annie Bain. Ten years later, Joseph had become a deer forester, living with his widowed mother at the ‘Forester’s House Ben Alder’, i.e. Ben Alder Cottage. In 1884 Joseph married Annie Bain, the third of ten children born to Donald Bain and Jane McDonald. They lived at the isolated cottage on the shore of Loch Ericht, a long way from anywhere, and raised three children. The Census reveals that they and their parents all spoke Gaelic. Annie died in 1931 at the age of 84; Joseph died two years later, at the age of 85. Their grandchildren still live in the Spey valley, at Laggan, Newtonmore, and Kingussie, showing a family of at least six generations living in the same small area.