

PARISH OF ASSYNT.

PRESBYTERY OF DORNOCH, SYNOD OF SUTHERLAND AND
CAITHNESS.

THE REV. CHARLES GORDON, MINISTER.

L.—TOPOGRAPHY AND NATURAL HISTORY.

Name.—THE word *Assynt*, or *Assint*, is supposed to be a Gaelic compound, "*as agus innte*," signifying out and in, evidently referring to, and descriptive of, the general outline of the parish. Indeed, a glance at the map of Assynt makes it extremely probable that this derivation is correct. Other derivations have been given, connected with legendary traditions; but the above seems the preferable one.

Extent and Boundaries.—The parish contains 97,000 acres of surface. Its extreme length, viz. from Cromalt to the point of Store, is about 36 miles. Its greatest breadth from Inverkirkig to Ardvar, about 18 miles. In breadth, however, it varies much. The parish is situated in the north-west part of the county of Sutherland, and is thus bounded: on the north, it is divided from the parish of Edderachillis, in the Reay country, by an arm of the sea of considerable breadth, called the Kyle, which runs betwixt both parishes from west to east; on the east and south, by Kincardine, Creich, Lairg, and Lochbroom; and on the west, by the Atlantic.

Topographical Appearances.—Few districts in Scotland are more mountainous. The general aspect of the parish is rugged. Many of the mountains are of considerable altitude. The most remarkable of these are, Benmore, Cuniack, Suilven, or Sugar-loaf, Cannisb, &c.

The first mentioned, Benmore, or Conval, is supposed to be the loftiest mountain in the county—about 3230 feet above the level of the sea. It is seen in various directions from a considerable distance. Ptarmigan are easily got here, especially during snow storms.

Cuniack has a most romantic and peculiar shape and appearance.

SUTHERLAND.

H

ance. It is a lofty ridge, extending southwards from Unapool to Loch Assynt, where it terminates in a minute peak. On the west it is lofty, precipitous, and inaccessible. On the east it is more gradual.

Suilvhen, or Sugar-loaf, as it is called by sea-faring people, on account of its resemblance to that article, is southward of Lochinver, and near the boundary of Coigach, in the county of Cromarty.

These mountains are often covered with snow. Game is found in these and in other districts of the parish, but by no means in such abundance as before the introduction of sheep-farming.

The other hills, which are extremely numerous, are of less note, being diminutive in comparison of those we have mentioned. Most of these abound in springs, and the quality of water is excellent. The lower part of the parish, particularly the Store district, is not so well supplied with this essential of life.

Caves.—There are several caves, and some natural arches, to be found, chiefly along the coast, and some in the interior. There are two which are often visited by the tourist, within two miles of the parish church, and on the Stronchrubie farm. Into one of these, if you enter, you must proceed in a creeping posture for several yards, through a rugged and dark passage, when you find yourself suddenly introduced into a well-lighted and somewhat spacious apartment. There is another cave of large dimensions near the point of Store.

The extent of the coast from the water of Inverkirrig, round the point of Store, to Ardvar, is about twenty miles.

The shore, in general, is bold, rocky, and dangerous; though in some places there is a fine sandy bottom, and safe landing.

There are many islands, most of them, however, so small as to be utterly insignificant; some of these are merely bare rocks, affording neither pasture nor shelter. The largest and most valuable is the island of Oldney; its length probably a mile, its greatest breadth a quarter of a mile. It is attached to the sheep farm of that name, and is valuable as a grazing. Its insular situation renders herding and fences unnecessary.

Crona, a little flat island adjoining Oldney.

Soya and Klett, two small islands on the south side of Rhustore, attached to the adjoining farm of Filin.

Meteorology.—There has been no record of observations kept. The climate is extremely wet, and high winds prevail. From what has already been said regarding the mountainous nature of

the district, and its proximity to the sea, it will readily be concluded, that we have much rainy weather—so much is this the case, that the harvesting of our crop, is an operation extremely precarious. We frequently experience severe storms of thunder and lightning, and two years ago, a young man was instantaneously deprived of life by the electric fluid. At the same time some cattle also were struck dead. Instances of this kind are fortunately rare. The climate, though severe, is upon the whole salubrious, and the inhabitants healthy. Consumption, however, is not unfrequent, and is generally induced by exposure, during the long harvest nights, at the herring-fishing. The prevailing wind is westerly, and invariably accompanied by torrents of rain. With easterly winds we generally have dry weather, but these are piercing and intensely cold.

Hydrography.—Every hill and valley, particularly in the heights of the parish, is abundantly supplied with springs of water, some of which are very large. There is one at Achumore, ten or twelve feet in circumference. There are several beautiful lakes, some of which deserve to be particularly noticed.

Loch Assynt.—Its extreme length is $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles; its greatest breadth about a mile. It is a fresh water lake, and its banks in most places covered with brushwood. The scenery altogether is most delightful, and cannot fail to attract the notice of the intelligent tourist. It abounds in trout of various kinds, and as there is no restriction as to angling, or setting nets, the few inhabitants in the neighbourhood are able, in the proper season, to supply themselves, with an agreeable and wholesome addition to their daily fare.

Loch Assynt possesses considerable attraction for the angler. About two years ago, it was visited by Sir William Jardine, the naturalist, and others, who minutely inspected the different kinds of trout found here and in other lochs in the neighbourhood, the result of whose researches must no doubt prove interesting and useful. Before there was a road from the height of the parish to the shores, there were several boats kept on the loch for the purposes of carriage. At the east end of the loch stands the church. Next in size to Loch Assynt is Cam-Loch, i.e. the crooked loch, in the Elphine, or highest district of the parish. It is a beautiful lake, very irregular in shape, as its name implies. Trout are found here in abundance, as well as in Loch Assynt. Cam-Loch is in a most sequestered spot.

Friths.—1. The Kyle, already mentioned, is an arm of the sea, dividing Assynt from Edderachillis. 2. On the south side of Rhustore, there is an arm of the sea running into the bay of Loch-inver, which affords safe anchorage for vessels.

Waterfalls.—There is a fall at Inverkirkig, and another near the boundaries of the glebe. The former possesses considerable attraction for the admirers of nature. With regard to the latter, except when there is a great body of water, after heavy rain, it appears insignificant.

Geology and Mineralogy.—From Ledbeg to Achumore, a distance of eight miles, there is abundance of limestone; it then disappears, and little more is seen of it, till the traveller reaches Duirness. On the Stronchrubie farm is a stupendous ridge of limestone rock, interspersed with strata of sandstone. The scenery here is truly majestic. In the vicinity of populous cities, this rock could not fail to prove the source of much wealth. It extends about a mile and a half, overhanging the public road. It is almost perpendicular, except about the centre. In many parts it is mantled with ivy. Birds of prey have their nests here. Its height is probably 200 feet. Beyond Achumore there is no limestone found. The pasture on limestone bottom is uncommonly rich.

Botany.—The alpine vegetation of the parish of Assynt is very similar to that which is met with in equal elevations in the greater part of the north of Scotland. As types may be mentioned,

Saussurea alpina
Hieracium alpinum
Asplenium viride

Cherleria sedoides
Vaccinium uliginosum,

as plants which are not very rare in alpine districts: but less generally diffused than such as these last named, may be mentioned, *Carex pulla*, *Carex pauciflora*, and *Arbutus alpina*.

The limestone districts in the parish are characterized by *Epipactis latifolia*, *Dryas octopetala*—the latter in great profusion, and perhaps, in Sutherlandshire, only growing on limestone or micaceous rocks.

Among the rare plants found in alpine or subalpine districts of the parish, may be mentioned *Pyrus Aria*, *Apargia alpina*, *Luzula arcuata*,—this last found in Scotland only in three stations, of which Benmore, Assynt, is one.

Silene maritima also grows on Benmore.

The following may be named as yielded by the bogs in the parish:—

Carex filiformis
 ——— *limosa*
Utricularia minor
 ——— *intermedia*
Drosera Anglica, in profusion
 ——— *longifolia*

Drosera rotundifolia
Sparganium fluitans
Cladium Mariscus, in a swamp half-way
 between Kylestrome and Badcall.
Ligusticum Scoticum is abundant on the
 shores in some places.

II.—CIVIL HISTORY.

There are no printed or manuscript accounts of Assynt extant, so far as the narrator knows. Various traditions, however, speak of individuals, noted in their day, living in or connected with the parish. Among these we may mention Neil Macleod, who resided at Ardvreck Castle (now a ruin), built on the banks of Loch Assynt, on a peninsula, situated within two miles of the eastern extremity of the loch.

It is said that the unfortunate Marquis of Montrose, who figured so conspicuously as a Royalist in the civil war in the reign of Charles I., after being defeated by General Strachan at Invercarroon, fled towards Assynt, and was betrayed by Macleod, in whom he had reposed confidence.

There are correct plans and maps of Assynt in the possession of the noble proprietrix, and a recent map of the county, both minute and accurate, has been published.

The Duchess-Countess of Sutherland is sole proprietrix of the parish. It has been in the possession of her Grace's family since the early part of the eighteenth century, when it was purchased by the then Earl of Sutherland, grandfather of the present Countess. In the former Statistical Account, published in 1794, is the following narrative:—" *State of property, &c.*—The property of this parish has, perhaps, undergone as few changes as any. Tradition, and even documents declare, that it was a forest of the ancient Thanes of Sutherland. One of these prime Thanes gave it in vassalage to one Mac-Kry-Cul, who in ancient times held the coast of Coigach, that part of it presently (1793) called the village of Ullapool. The noble Thane thus made Assynt over, as Mac-Kry-Cul had recovered a great quantity of cattle carried off from the county of Sutherland by foreign invaders, Scandinavians, who burnt the great fir forests in this and the neighbouring coast.

"Mac-Kry-Cul's family, by the fate of war in those days of old, being reduced to one heir-female, she was given in marriage to a younger son of Macleod, Laird of Lewis, the Thane of Sutherland consenting thereto, and also making this parish over to the new married couple with its superiority. The result of this marriage was fourteen successive lairds of the name of Macleod.

"In 1660, or about that time, this parish and its superiority became the property of the Earl of Seaforth, who made it over to a younger son of his family, whose successors possessed it for three or four generations. Thereafter, it was purchased by Lady Strathnaver, who gave it as a present to her Noble and no less deserving grandson, the late William, Earl of Sutherland, father of the present Right Honourable Countess of Sutherland, married to Earl Gower, heir-apparent to the Marquis of Stafford. Thus the barony and parish of Assynt reverted to the Noble family who gave it to Mac-Kry-Cul."

The term of the Thane of Sutherland's charter to Macleod was, "as long as a cow gives milk, and waves beat on a rock."

Family of Assynt.—The whole of the estate and parish of Assynt once belonged to the Macleods of Assynt, a branch of the ancient family of the Macleods of Lewis. The first of the Assynt branch was Norman, second son of Torquil, fourth Baron of Lewis, from whom he got Assynt as his patrimony about the year 1360. From Norman, the estate passed through nine generations, to Neil, ninth baron, who, from a combination of his enemies to effect his ruin, and other unfortunate events, was denuded of his estate about the year 1679. There were encumbrances on the property of long standing, and the laird having become security for friends, in several small sums, some of his more powerful neighbours, taking advantage of his indolence, and the difficulty of access to public justice, bought up his debts, by which means they carried off his whole estate for less than half its value; and though both he and his heirs raised several actions for the recovery of their just rights, they never obtained any redress. To such a length was the spite of his enemies carried against this unfortunate gentleman, that, not satisfied with having deprived him of his estate, a criminal process was instituted against him before the Court of Justiciary on various charges, of which he was finally acquitted by the verdict of a jury of his countrymen, as appears from the records of that Court. His estate, having fallen into the hands of the Seaforth family, was forfeited to the Crown, together with the possessions of that family in 1715, and was sold in 1758 to the late Earl of Sutherland, so that it now forms part of the vast territorial property of her Grace the Duchess-Countess of Sutherland. On the death of Neil, the last Baron of Assynt, without issue, the representation of the family devolved on his brother John, who left a son Donald, a captain in the Dutch ser-

vice, and he having married an heiress, was enabled thereby to purchase the estate of Geanies in Ross-shire. He was succeeded by his eldest son Hugh, and Hugh by his son Donald Macleod of Geanies, the late venerable Sheriff-depute of Ross and Cromarty, who filled that office with credit to himself and advantage to his country nearly sixty years; having departed this life in January 1834, in the 89th year of his age. His eldest son predeceased his father, leaving a son, still a minor, the present representative of the family. *

Parochial Register.—There is no register of date previous to 1798. Since that period, births and marriages have been recorded with tolerable regularity, but there is no register of deaths.

Antiquities.—1. Ardrack Castle, supposed to be built about the year 1581 or 1591 by the Macleods, who originally came from Lewis. It has for a considerable period been in ruins, but appears to have been strongly built and fortified.

2. Calda House, a more modern building, erected by the Mackenzies, who succeeded the Macleods as Lairds of Assynt. This building was destroyed by fire, (some say designedly,) about 100 years ago. Nothing remained but the bare walls.

3. There is a very large dun or heap at Clachtoll, the remains of a Druidical temple, with a double line of stone wall on the landward side; towards the sea it is sufficiently protected by that element, and a rocky shore. It used to be called "Tighe tal-mhìdh na Druinich," i. e. the earthly house of the Druids.

4. Close to the parish church there is an enclosed burying-ground, in which are interred several of the Macleods of Assynt.

This building is evidently part of what was once a place of worship. The following tradition connected with it explains the cause of its being built:

One Angus Macleod, supposed to be the great-grandson of the first Laird of Assynt of that name, had a quarrel with some neighbouring family. Out of revenge, he set fire to their chapel or place of worship. The consequence of this sacrilegious act was, his being excommunicated by the Pope. The displeasure of the Roman Pontiff was a serious matter in those days. Angus submitted, and asked forgiveness at Rome. This was granted, but by way of penance, he was enjoined to erect three places of worship,

* When the estate was sold, as mentioned above, some small compensation for the losses of the family was granted by the Crown to the then proprietor, Hugh Macleod Esq. of Geanies.

Character of the People.—The character of the people may be said to be good. They are kind, civil, and extremely hospitable; patient of labour, and capable of enduring much bodily fatigue. In general they prefer making immense exertions at times, to more moderate but constant labour. They live sparingly. Their chief articles of food are herrings and potatoes. Some attention has, of late, been paid to cleanliness and neatness about their dwellings, but very much remains to be done. Upon the whole, they may be said to be contented with their situations. They are naturally shrewd and intelligent, and regular in their attendance on public worship. Poaching and smuggling, particularly the latter, were carried on to an alarming extent, and proved extremely prejudicial to the morals of the people. Now, the narrator is happy to be able to say, that, through the judicious and determined exertions of the Noble proprietor, aided by the gentlemen who have the management, such irregularities are almost unknown amongst us.

IV.—INDUSTRY.

From situation and climate, the greater part of Assynt, particularly the interior, is peculiarly adapted for pasturage. Accordingly a large portion of it is laid out in sheep-walks, viz. Ledbeg, Filin, &c. at a rent of L. 540; Achumore, L. 338; Ardvar, L. 220; Stronchrubie, L. 205; and Ledmore, L. 80.

It will thus be seen that sheep-farming is carried on to a considerable extent. It is also prosecuted systematically.

The great bulk, however, of the population dwell along the shores, where they have the benefit of fishing. They occupy lots of land at rents ranging from L. 2 to L. 5. The land is not high rented, but the occupants, in general, are in straitened circumstances. This arises from the over-crowded state of the population. On the lot of land which, according to the rental book, is assigned to only one family, two are frequently found residing. This is the true cause of our poverty, and, unless emigration on a large scale takes place, matters must soon come to a painful crisis. At the same time, from want of climate, a great part of Assynt is unfit for cultivation.

Rents.—Of old, the valued rent of the parish was L. 1000 Scots. In the year 1794, it was L. 1000 Sterling. In the year 1812, when there was a general setting of the farms through the parish, it was about L. 5000; now it is reduced to something less than L. 3000.

Quarries.—From Ledbeg to Achumore the soil is limestone.

About thirty years ago, an attempt was made to quarry marble both at Ledbeg, and in the immediate vicinity of the church. The marble was found susceptible of a very fine polish, and an enterprising individual, a native of Newcastle, commenced quarrying. Roads were formed, or rather tracts for the heavy waggons, from Ledbeg to Unapool, a distance of sixteen miles. This was an undertaking of considerable difficulty, and after a large quantity was shipped, it was found attended with such expense, that it was impossible to compete with quarries, in more eligible situations, and the project was dropped.

Salmon Fisheries.—There are no fisheries in the parish deserving the name, except that on the water of Kirkag, and that which leads from Loch Assynt to Lochinver. These are let at a moderate rent.

Navigation.—There are very few vessels belonging to Assynt. Mr Macdonald, Lochinver, has one or two. Several vessels, however, are yearly employed on our coasts in the herring trade, and a few in exporting the produce of the parish, which consists chiefly of wool.

There are no associations in the parish for the encouragement or improvement of industry; but the Noble proprietors supply this deficiency in a great measure, by rewarding the industrious, and thus inciting to additional exertions.

V.—PAROCHIAL ECONOMY.

Markets.—There is no market-town within the parish; neither have any markets been established. It is intended to establish a cattle market at Inshnadamph. This would prove very advantageous to the people, and save them the expense and trouble of driving their cattle to a greater distance. The Kyle tryst, held in the vicinity of Bonar Bridge, forty miles beyond Inshnadamph, is the nearest cattle-market at present.*

Lochinver is the only place deserving the name of a village. In it are some good houses, shops, and several tradesmen. In the immediate vicinity is a manufactory, for the preserving of butcher-meat, fish, and vegetables, which affords our sailors, and others, the luxury of fresh meat, whilst they are hundreds of leagues out at sea. It is carried on under the auspices of Mr Macdonald, an extensive and enterprising sheep-farmer. Regular employment is thus given to a number of tradesmen and labourers.

Means of Communication, &c.—In this village, also, is a post-

* Since writing the above, a cattle-market has been established, and is likely to prove a permanent benefit.

office. There is another in the immediate neighbourhood of the church. The mails arrive regularly twice a-week. This is one of the greatest improvements imaginable. A letter or newspaper from London we have the fifth day. In connection with the post-office, I am naturally led to notice our excellent roads. Nothing has so much contributed to the external improvement of the country as these, by which this interesting district, till lately inaccessible, and comparatively unknown, has been opened up to the public; and thus, advantages secured to the inhabitants, which our ancestors would have deemed impossible. This improvement is attributable, in a great measure, to the Noble proprietors, and, were there no other benefit conferred on it, Assynt, on this account, owes a lasting debt of gratitude to the late excellent Duke of Sutherland. The length of road constructed from Aultnacaeltach to Store, including branches to Unapool and Inverkirkig, exceeds forty miles. To this may be added several miles of bye roads for the exclusive benefit of the tenantry. There is a small convenient harbour at Lochinver, where a pier has been erected. There are some other harbours, or rather creeks, at Nedd, Oldney, and Ardvar, all lying on the north side of the point of Store, which afford shelter and anchorage.

Savings' Bank.—There was a savings' bank established about four years ago, and it is now in full operation. It has already proved very beneficial. It is under the patronage of the Sutherland family, who encourage industry by giving a higher rate of interest than the banks do, for all sums not exceeding L.20 Sterling.

Ecclesiastical State.—The parish church is situated within nine miles of the southern boundary of the parish—a situation extremely inconvenient for the people. The great bulk of the population dwell at distances from the church, varying from twelve to eighteen miles. The intervening population is very small. The church was built upwards of sixty years ago, but was re-slatted and seated about twenty-five years ago. It is seated for 260 or 280 sitters. It is small, but comfortable. There are two other regular preaching stations, where the minister has to officiate, viz. Lochinver, distant fourteen miles, to which there is a good road leading; and Kyle-side, nearly the same distance, but without any road at all. In the former district there is preaching once in the three weeks generally, or once a month at farthest; in the other, once in the six or seven weeks. At Lochinver there is a pretty good house built by subscription, to which the late Duke, and the Duchess-Coun-

tess of Sutherland largely contributed. It is only partially seated as yet. It is also used as a General Assembly school-house during the week. In the Kyle side public worship has to be performed in the open air, however inclement the weather. Strong applications for additional accommodation in both districts have been made to the Religious Instruction Commissioners, but hitherto without success. There is a Government or Parliamentary church at Store, built in 1829. To this is attached a population of 1408, leaving upwards of 1700 scattered over a vast extent of inaccessible surface, as has already been described.

In order to carry on pastoral superintendence properly, a minister is required at Lochinver, and another at Kyleside. There are no missionaries in the parish. Public worship is well attended by the people. The average number of communicants is 80,—a number certainly small when compared with the population. The communion is regularly administered once a-year.

The stipend amounts to L. 158, 6s. 8d., including the allowance for communion elements. The glebe is pretty extensive. It is chiefly adapted for grazing, and, at the rate at which lands in the neighbourhood are let, might fetch a rent of L. 20 or L. 25 Sterling per annum. The manse was built about fifteen years ago, but, from frequent storms, and its exposed situation, it very often requires repairs. The minister of the Parliamentary church at Store has an annual stipend of L. 120, paid by the Exchequer, and a glebe worth L. 7 a-year.

There are no dissenting places of worship, and not above half a dozen Dissenters in the whole parish.

There is a catechist who receives L. 8 annually from the society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, and, with the exception of this pittance, he is remunerated solely by the people. There is no such thing as letting of church seats known amongst us. The average annual amount of church collections is L. 7, 18s.

Education.—The schools in the parish are 7 in number, viz. the parochial school, three from the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, one from the Edinburgh Gaelic School Society, one from the Glasgow Gaelic School Society, and one from the General Assembly's Education Committee. Besides these, in various remote districts the people club together to provide a teacher for their children, during the winter and spring months. None of these schools are endowed except the parochial one. In it the teacher's

salary is L.25; the General Assembly's teacher, L.25; the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge give L.15 to their teachers; and the Glasgow Society, L.12. All these teachers are entitled to demand fees, which privilege is not of much advantage to them, as far as money is concerned. Many of the people, however, make some remuneration, by supplying the teacher with provisions and fuel. The Edinburgh Gaelic School Society allow their teachers a salary of L.25, without the liberty of exacting fees. These schools are pretty well attended from the beginning of November till the end of March. The branches taught are, reading in Gaelic and English, writing, arithmetic, &c.; a very few are learning Latin. There is much need that the system of education amongst us should be improved, and the qualification of teachers raised. At the same time, we would acknowledge the obligations under which we lie to the charitable and religious associations above named. The Bible is read daily in all our schools, and attention paid to the religious instruction of the pupils.

A reading club has been instituted, and promises well.

There is no jail.

Poor.—The number of poor annually relieved, (exclusive of the Stoer district,) 73. Amount annually expended in their relief, L.13, 15s. Amount for that purpose arising from church collections, L.7, 12s. Amount from other sources, L.6, 3s. The poor are divided into three classes, and get respectively 4s., 2s. 6d., and 2s. each.

Alehouses.—There is a competent number of public houses licensed, and all others are strictly prohibited the selling of ardent spirits. In this respect a decided change for the better has taken place.

Fuel.—Peats are universally used, and much difficulty is experienced in seasoning them, arising from the excessive rains with which we are often deluged.

Since writing the foregoing Account, Her Grace the Duchess-Countess of Sutherland has been removed from this world; and her titles and estates have devolved upon Her Grace's eldest son, the present Duke, who has become twenty-second Earl of Sutherland.

To the late Duchess, the parish of Assynt owed much. She uniformly manifested a warm interest in the welfare of its inhabitants; and it is evident they evinced a hereditary and respectful

attachment to her Grace, who, during the singularly long period of seventy-three years, retained possession of the most ancient title in Europe. We look forward with confidence to the present Noble proprietor for a continuation of that kindness, which, for ages, characterized the Sutherland family.

Drawn up November 1837.

Revised March 1840.