

A.R.B. HALDANE

*New Ways
Through
the Glens*



By the same Author

BY MANY WATERS
THE PATH BY THE WATER
THE DROVE ROADS OF SCOTLAND

NEW WAYS THROUGH THE GLENS

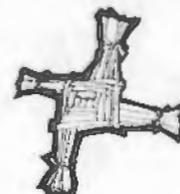
Highland Road, Bridge and Canal Makers of the
Early Nineteenth Century

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Time passed without serious mishap for which the floaters could be blamed, but in the autumn of 1825 trouble again threatened, and Ballater Bridge which had so narrowly escaped in 1809 was again the danger point. A great sale of timber had taken place for Lord Marr's creditors at a price of twenty shillings a tree, and Hope warned Rickman that sixty to seventy thousand trees were soon to be cut and floated down the Dee.¹ Sellers and purchasers were warned of the danger, in the hope, as Hope later wrote to Farquharson of Whitehouse that 'they may be staggered by undefined responsibility'. That danger too passed. Ballater Bridge survived, only to fall in the disaster which was to bring ruin to so much of the Commissioners' work in the great floods of 1829.

While the bridges on Deeside were under attack from the battering-rams sent down from the wood-cutters on the upper reaches of the river, others further to the north were faring little better. The weather during the winter of 1817 had been more than usually severe and indeed far into the spring of 1818 snow lay deep in the Highlands. Early in the New Year news reached Edinburgh of a great flood immediately north and south of the Great Glen. 'I am truly sorry', wrote Hope to Mitchell in the last week of January, 'to receive what I fear is only the commencement of your accounts of the injury sustained by our different works. . . . I almost fear to receive the next accounts as I observe the Inverness papers mention the rise in the Ness to have been very great'.² Hope's fears were well founded. John Mitchell had gone south to Dunkeld on an inspection of the Perthshire roads when news reached him of great damage in Inverness-shire. The road up Glen Garry and over Drumochter Pass was blocked by snow, but through drifts in places six to twelve feet deep he made what speed he could back to the north. The new bridge over the Spey at Laggan and that at Drumnadrochit on the north side of Loch Ness had been badly damaged. At Torgoyle, the bridge over the River Moriston on the new road to Loch Duich and the Skye Ferries had been completely destroyed. Four thousand birch logs, cut and ready for floating on the river bank had been swept away by the height of the flood.³ These birch logs, destined for conversion into herring barrel staves for the fisheries of the north-east coast, were much smaller than the great logs which ruined

¹ Hope, 10 October 1825

² Hope, 22 January 1818

³ H.R. & B. 5th Report (Repair), 1818

Minto's work at Potarch, but caught in the narrow waters of an impetuous river they had proved too much for the bridge, the ruins of which greeted the tired inspector. To keep open the road to Skye a temporary wooden bridge was built, the men working for long spells in four feet of water in frosty weather to drive the piles for the piers, and it was left for John Mitchell's son five years later to design a new stone bridge as one of his first major works for the Commissioners.

Far to the north, on the north-eastern border of Ross-shire and in Sutherland, plans were afoot for improving the road to Wick and Thurso. For the important droving traffic southward bound to the great tryst at Muir of Ord near Beauly, the crossing of Loch Fleet and the dangerous Meikle Ferry over the Dornoch Firth had for long been formidable hazards for men and beasts. Where the small River Fleet flows into the narrow sea-loch, Telford's plan was to construct an earthen mound nearly 1,000 yards long which would carry a road across the junction of loch and river, at the same time damming back the sea-water and reclaiming some 400 acres previously covered at high tide. The plan entailed the construction of flood-gates which, while holding back the sea-water as the tide rose, would allow the passage outwards of the fresh water of the river as the tide fell. Offers for the construction of this large and unusual work were slow in coming, but finally Lord Gower, who stood to benefit from the improvement more than any other single proprietor, undertook the work, which was completed in 1818 at a cost of £8,000 shared by the County of Sutherland, Lord Gower himself and the Commissioners.

Five years before the Fleet Mound was complete, Telford had already bridged the upper part of the Dornoch Firth at what is now called Bonar Bridge. Southey, who passed that way in the early autumn of 1819, records that trouble with the foundations caused serious alteration in the plan at an advanced stage of the work, but by the autumn of 1812 Simpson and Cargil, the Shropshire bridge-builders who had already done good work for Telford in the Severn Valley, had successfully spanned the Firth with iron-work cast on the Welsh Borders, which a local inhabitant described as 'a spider's web in the air . . . the finest thing that ever was made by God or man'.¹ The strength of the new bridge was soon to be tested. The winter of 1813/14 in the north-east was

¹ Southey, pp. 128-9

long and severe, and before the spring came, a great accumulation of ice had built up above the bridge. 'A large number of fir logs which had been rolled into the River Carron in readiness to be floated by the first flood came down altogether fixed irregularly in a mass of ice which was thus converted into a formidable instrument of destruction. Those logs, which were in an upright position, struck the iron arch with such violence that the crash of the timber was heard at considerable distance; but the Bridge stood firm without suffering either crack or flaw from this violent collision. So favourable a result was the more satisfactory to us, because another Iron Bridge on the model of this at Bonar had already been commenced at Craigellachie on the River Spey.'¹ Four years later Bonar Bridge was tested from the seaward side. A schooner, caught in a strong tide, was drifted under the bridge. The schooner lost two masts, but the bridge stood firm.²

While the Shrewsbury contractors were at work at Bonar Bridge, plans were in the making for a new bridge over the Spey. From above Grantown to Fochabers no bridge at that time spanned the river, and the ferries were often unusable for weeks on end. An earlier plan for a bridge at the ferry of Boat of Bridge eight miles from Fochabers had been turned down by the Commissioners on the ground that this was too near Fochabers to serve a useful purpose. In place of this the local landowners now proposed a site at Craigellachie. Telford had reported favourably on the plan, estimating the cost at £8,000 and the Commissioners had given their approval, subject to the usual contribution by local landowners of half the cost. In the autumn of 1812 a printed broadsheet was lodged with Coutts and Co. and Sir William Forbes and Co., the London and Edinburgh Bankers, with Messrs Mackenzie and Innes, the Edinburgh Writers to the Signet, with the Editor of the *Inverness Journal* and with many others interested, appealing for subscriptions. 'The building of the bridge', wrote its advocates, 'must be an object of considerable and lively interest to travellers whether for business or pleasure, to the Merchant, the Manufacturer and especially to all dealers in Cattle and Sheep. To the philanthropic and benevolent,' added the promoters, never prone to understate their case, 'to all interested in the cause of humanity it affords a favourable and noble opportunity of snatching from a watery and untimely grave

¹ H.R. & B. 7th Report 1815

² H.R. & B. 9th Report, 1821

hundreds of their fellow creatures, for the number of lives which are annually sacrificed in the passage of this rapid and impetuous river exceed all belief.'¹ The eloquence of the promoters served its purpose. The half share of Telford's estimate was raised, and only Hope's prudent advice dissuaded the local landowners from the indiscretion of undertaking the work themselves.

On Hope's suggestion Simpson, at work on Bonar Bridge, was invited to become the contractor, an invitation which he accepted, the iron-work to be provided by Hazeldine of Shrewsbury at a cost of £2,891 and to be maintained by him for three years. Telford was in Sweden visiting the Gotha Canal. His plan for the bridge had provided for the iron arch to be placed on abutments seven feet above low water, but at a meeting at Craigellachie on 26 July 1813 Simpson readily accepted the evidence of the local people that the Spey rose in flood nearly twelve feet, and to that height the abutments were raised. A land arch too was added to provide for flood water in the adjoining meadow land.² By 1815 Simpson's work was complete. Telford's graceful arch spanned the river, and years later when he saw the narrow margin by which it had survived the great floods of August 1829, Telford must have felt no little gratitude to the local knowledge without which Craigellachie Bridge would surely have gone.

¹ H. of L. October 1812

² H. of L. 26 July 1813