

Evanton Wood
Places of Historical Interest

- **Coulags** (cf. na Cùileagan, Torridon).
- **'Dead Man's Grave'**. Alternatively The 'Trampie's Grave'. Near the river, near the dump.
- **Balconie Well**

Provided water by pipe to Balconie Castle.



- **Loch an-t' Saighdear**. Apparently so called because a soldier drowned in it (Frank MacIannan). Location not known. The ponds in the wood do not appear on the 1st OS Map (1880s). FM states: 'A lochan once, or maybe nor more than a bog, now silted up and hard to find, in the wood behind Cnoc Rash crofts, close to the Black Rock.' (Ferindonald Papers)
- **Allt Cul na Greine** (literally stream at the back of the sun; ? behind the sunny place). a.k.a The **Blayrach Burn**. NB biolaireach = rich in water-cresses (M. MacIannan). Edible Water cress or Brooklime (Veronica Beccabunga) grows there today (AC). Sonny Dick Munro in a poem writes 'The peace I knew when just a boy like them will ne'er return - But memories linger with me as I pass the Blayrach burn - On a Sunday afternoon by my parents' side - We would wander through the Culags, wild daisies spreading wide' (EOH).
- **Poll Lucais** - Poll Ookitch/'Plookage'/ Poll Lucais/ Pool Intlugich (Bishop Forbes 1762) = the pool that swallows. 'The good fishing pool where the river issues from the Black Rock. I give the phonetics of 50 years ago – Poll Ookitch. There are indications that it is now called the Plookage. Poll is G for pool. The pool "swallows" the torrent. Bishop Forbes visiting the Black Rock in 1762 mentions a deep pool or pot, Pool Intlugich. So we get the original Poll an-t'Slugaid, Pool of the Swallows, finely descriptive.' (F.MacIannan - 'Ferindonald Papers'). cf Poll an t-slugaid, pool of the gulp or swallow on R.Carron - the pool in question was one of the largest on the river (Watson, PNR, p.2).
- **Mags 'the Wood'**. Married Alec Munro, son Peter. House inside the wood (behind Rosie's). It was a 'decent house' 'there was a well beside it' (George Munro 2011). Moyna Keenan contacted 2013: 'Moyna Keenan: My family were thrilled to learn that it seems to have been affectionately nicknamed after my great-grandmother, Mags, known as Mags the wood. My grandad was Peter Munro, son of Mags and Alec. They used to live in a wooden house in the woods.'

- **Clach a Cholumain** NH 5945 6681 The name translates as 'The Pigeon (or Dove) Stone' and some people believe the name may be pre-Christian. There are 2 large stones near the gorge.

Janette MacLennan remembers as a girl sitting on the rock, with the key imprint. They told each other the story that if a certain number sat on the stone it would roll into the gorge (Evanton Oral History Project).



Mark Stevens by the large rock.

- **Lady of Balconie and the Blackrock Gorge**

- a) Full story told by Hugh Miller in *Scenes and Legends*.
http://gerald-massey.org.uk/miller/c_scenes_04.htm

- b) Frank MacLennan adds: 'The Lady of Balconie appears to have been the daughter of an old Lord or Balconie. Her nurse was a witch and secretly trained the girl in the black art. This became known after the pupil had developed considerable skill. There were visitors; they and the family were strolling on the lawn on the eastern end of the castle. The subject of witchcraft cropped up, and someone made a scoffing or sceptic remark.

The young lady bridled: - "See what I can do!" On the instant the castle rose several feet into the air, so that the startled people were able to see, between it and the foundations, the fields out beyond, the blue reach of the Cromarty Firth and the slopes of the Black Isle. For a few seconds the building hung thus; then it was lowered to its original base – not a stone being displaced.' (*Ferindonald Papers*, 10).

- c) 'It used to be said, even into this century (20th), when mist rose from the water and lay along the course of the Black Rock, that it was from the Lady of Balconie's fire, and a sign that she was baking – baking the bannocks for her master the Devil.' (p.11)

- d) FM writes if Dr. Robert Munro (1835-1920) remembered as a boy 'going warily up the banks of the Black Rock, aware that it was a haunt of Satan, and sometimes wondering what strange power in past ages had been able to rend the solid stone.' (p.75). In his autobiography he mentions that the gorge is 'so narrow in places it may be crossed on the branches of overhanging trees – a feat which I have frequently performed.' (FP p.79)

- e) Hugh Miller writes in *The Cruise of the Betsy*:

'The boulder beside the Auldgrande has not only, like the *Clach Malloch*, a geologic history of its own, but, what some may deem of perhaps equal authority, a *mythologic* history also. The inaccessible chasm, impervious to the sun, and ever resounding the wild howl of the tortured water, was too remarkable an object to have escaped the notice of the old imaginative Celts; and they have married it, as was their wont, to a set of stories quite as wild as itself. And the boulder, occupying a nearly central position in its course, just where the dell is deepest, and narrowest, and blackest, and where the stream bellows far underground in its wildest combination of tones, marks out the spot where the more extraordinary incidents have happened, and the stranger sights have been seen. Immediately beside the stone there is what seems to be the beginning of a path leading down to the water; but it stops abruptly at a tree,—the last in the descent,—and the green and dewy rock sinks beyond for more than a hundred feet, perpendicular as a wall. It was at the abrupt termination of this path that a Highlander once saw a beautiful child smiling and stretching out its little hand to him, as it hung half in air by a slender twig. But he well knew that it was no child, but an evil spirit, and that if he gave it the assistance which it seemed to crave, he would be pulled headlong into the chasm, and never heard of more. And the boulder still bears, it is said, on its side,—though I failed this evening to detect the mark,—the stamp, strangely impressed, of the household keys of Balconie.

The sun had now got as low upon the bill, and the ravine had grown as dark, as when, so long before, the Lady of Balconie took her last walk along the sides of the Auldgrande; and I struck up for the little alpine bridge of a few undressed logs, which has been here thrown across the chasm, at the height of a hundred and thirty feet over the water. As I pressed through the thick underwood, I startled a strange-looking apparition in one of the open spaces beside the gulf, where, as shown by the profusion of plants of *vaccinium*, the blaeberreries had greatly abounded in their season. It was that of an extremely old woman, cadaverously pale and miserable looking, with dotage glistening in her inexpressive, rheum-distilling eyes, and attired in a blue cloak, that had been homely when at its best, and was now exceedingly tattered. She had been poking with her crutch among the bushes, as if looking for berries; but my approach had alarmed her; and she stood muttering in Gaelic what seemed, from the tones and the repetition, to be a few deprecatory sentences. I addressed her in English, and inquired what could have brought to a place so wild and lonely, one so feeble and helpless. "Poor object!" she muttered in reply,— "poor object!—very hungry;" but her scanty English could carry her no further. I slipped into her hand a small piece of silver, for which she overwhelmed me with thanks and blessings; and, bringing her to one of the broader avenues, traversed by a road which leads out of the wood, I saw her fairly entered upon the path in the right direction, and then, retracing my steps, crossed the log-bridge. The old woman,—little, I should suppose from her appearance, under ninety,—was, I doubt not, one of our ill-provided Highland paupers, that starve under a law which, while it has dried up the genial streams of voluntary charity in the country, and presses hard upon the means of the humbler classes, alleviates little, if at all, the sufferings of the extreme poor. Amid present suffering and privation there had apparently mingled in her dotage some dream of early enjoyment,—a dream of the days when she had plucked berries, a little herd-girl, on the banks of the Auldgrande; and the vision seemed to have sent her out, far advanced in her second childhood, to poke among the bushes with her crutch.'

http://gerald-massey.org.uk/miller/c_betsey_07.htm#VIII.

Hear James Robertson read from his novel '**The Testament of Gideon Mack**' (2006) which uses the Blackrock gorge as the inspiration for this piece:

http://www.ambaile.co.uk/en/item/item_audio.jsp?item_id=72952

'Come on.' I said to Lorna and I put my arm through hers. 'Let's go and see the Black Jaws.'

We could already hear them. The last few days of rain had poured off the hills and swollen the upper reaches of the Keldo, and now thousands of gallons of water were being funnelled through the ravine every minute. The black cliffs were drumming with the sound of it. It was difficult to tell if the haze surrounding the trees was part of the fresh rainfall or spray rising from below. The path took a turn to the right and dropped a little towards a wooden bridge stretched across the ravine - an innovation since Augustus Menteith's day. Immediately to our left, at the path's turn, the ground fell away even more steeply, with trees stretching from it at odd angles, some almost horizontal, their roots like clawed hands clutching fiercely at the earth. The roar and reverberating boom of the river seemed to be coming up through the soil itself, through the layers of rock, through the trunks of the trees and the very soles of our boots. Even Jasper, who had shown only curiosity towards the crashing waves at the beach, trembled a little and slowed to a walk, keeping himself within easy reach of us. If he hadn't been behaving like this, I would have suggested to Lorna that she put him on the lead. As it was, there seemed little risk of him doing anything daft.

But I had reckoned without the appearance of the rabbit. As we came down to the bridge, there was a sudden burst of movement to our right, and a brown shape shot across the path and into the undergrowth on the other side. Jasper was after it in a second. Lorna and I both yelled at him, but he was oblivious to anything but the rabbit. I have never seen a dog move so fast. The pursuit was over in seconds, however, because the rabbit, plunging down through the wet grass towards the wetter ferns and creepers which marked the edge of the cliff, took one leap too many as it

strove to outpace the dog. Suddenly it was in flight, launched from the last scrape of rock into the spray-filled air. It hung there for a long second and then dropped out of sight like a flung toy. We couldn't hear above the din but we could see Jasper's desperate efforts to halt, the shower of mud and twigs and grass his back claws threw up as he skidded down the slope, and then he too disappeared. For one ghastly moment we waited to see his taut black body also flying into space, but there was nothing. Lorna let out a long scream, 'Jasper, O God, Jasper, O God, O God.' Nothing. And then, faintly above the terrible roar of the Black Jaws, a pitiful howl came back to us. Beyond our vision, but evidently perched somewhere on the edge of the precipice, Jasper was still alive.'

James Robertson was born in Kent in 1958 but has connections to Easter Ross and Sutherland - his ancestors on his father's side came from Kindeace and his parents live in Dornoch. He grew up in Bridge of Allan in Stirlingshire and studied history at Edinburgh University. His first book of short stories, 'Close', was published in 1991.

From 1993 to 1995 James was writer-in-residence at Brownsbank Cottage, near Biggar in Lanarkshire, the former home of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid. He is the editor of 'Itchy Coo', the Scots language children's imprint, and has also edited two volumes by Hugh Miller, the Cromarty stonemason and geologist.

His novel 'Joseph Knight' (2003) won both the Saltire Society and Scottish Arts Council book of the year awards while the 'The Testament of Gideon Mack' (2006) was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize and Commonwealth Writers Prize. He received a Creative Scotland award in 2006 and is working on a fourth novel. He lives in Angus.

James used the Black Rock Gorge, near Evanton, as his model for 'the Black Jaws' featured in 'The Testament of Gideon Mack'. The gorge is also the setting for a legend retold by Hugh Miller in 'Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland'.

[This person is featured in Literary Landscapes](#)

Horses. George (Sonny Dick) Munro used his horses to take out timber from the wood. One ex-mines pony 'Bobby', 2 Clydesdales from E. Ross . Stabled at Culcairn Farm. Thinned the wood with Jimmy Armstrong; sawmill at the top of the village.
(Sonny Dick recollects being paid 10 pence a tree cutting timber at Assynt in 1950.Worked all hours).

AC Aug. 2011