

These are your people

The Lesliees

By John Mackay

*"Thick sit the Lesliees on Gady side,
At the back o' Bennachie."*

Less thick now, by those peaceful banks of the Gady Burn flowing through the parish of Leslie, passing the village of Leslie, curving north when it is met by the bulk of Bennachie, then onwards east by the lands of Garioch to join the river Urie, in its turn meeting the quiet waters of the Don. The Don, winding through the Howe of Alford to the south of Bennachie has come from the feet of the mountains marking the Highland line — from the wilder places, haunts of the clansmen — the Highlanders of old who found their marauding way barred often enough by Leslie men upholding law and order for the King. The King, Malcolm Canmore. History thus establishes the Lesliees as a family of ancient origin.

"A man of vigorous intellect as well as of great bodily strength," called Bartolf founded the family. He was one of the retinue attending on the refugee princess Margaret on her way from Hungary to Scotland. She married Malcolm Canmore and Bartolf took as wife one of the King's sisters and was given extensive lands in what are now the counties of Aberdeen, Angus and Fife; and the governorship of Edinburgh Castle, where the chapel of Queen Margaret remains and can be used on request as a place of worship at the wedding of a soldier of the garrison of today.

Bartolf built his own castle at a place then called Lesselyn in the Garioch district of Aberdeenshire, and from the name Lesselyn evolved Leslie. Sir Norman, fifth in descent from Bartolf, was the first of the family to take the name Leslie. Before that, the chief had been called, simply, "Constable of Inverurie."

In the 14th century Baron David Leslie was so long gone to the Crusades that he was given up as dead and a kinsman, Sir George Leslie, by then settled at Rothes on Speyside, was made chief and came to live in the Castle by the Gady Burn. He had hardly taken possession when the crusading David reappeared. With a tolerance strange for these days, David waived his right to the chief-



The Earl of Rothes, Chief of the Clan Leslie

tainship, and Sir George's son Sir Norman in time inherited both the lands of Rothes and the original settlement under the shadow of Bennachie. In this way, the Rothes branch became the more powerful and — "gained higher rank and greater prominence in the history of Scotland than the main stem of the family."

Just as David of the Crusades had

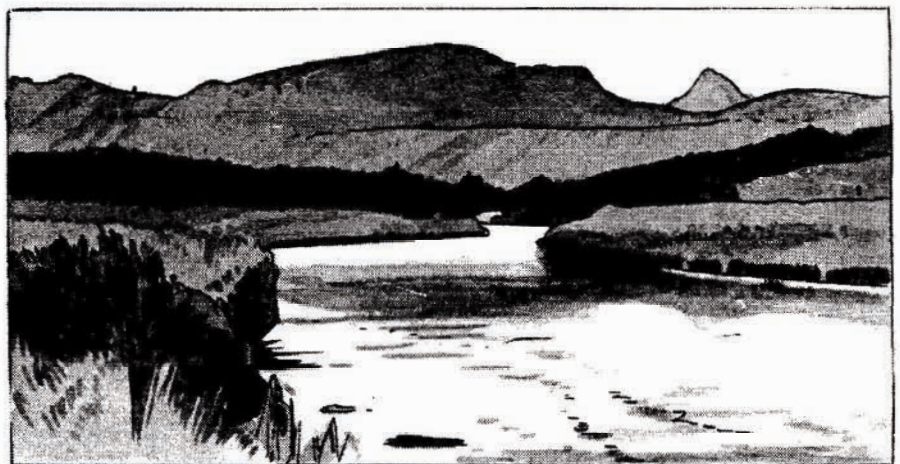
"Quiet flows the Don." The cone marking the Bennachie hills is at the right.

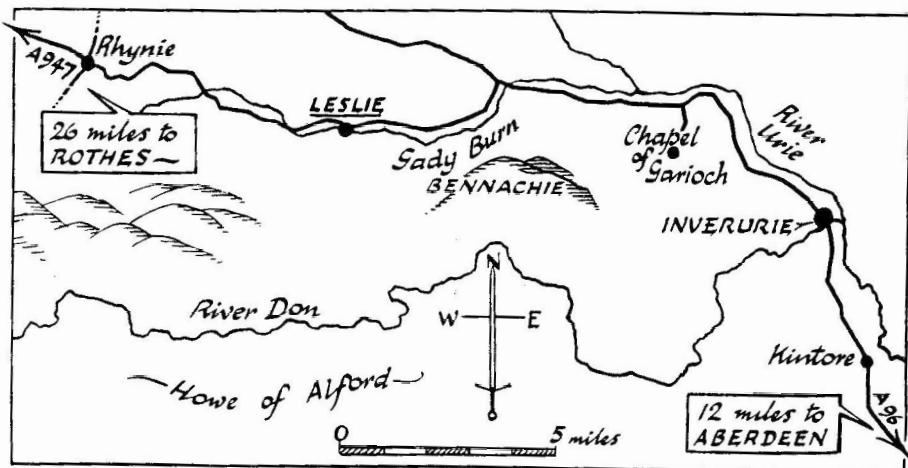
shown tolerance with the problem of who should be head of the family, so an intolerance more characteristic of the times was shown following a certain marriage early in the 15th century. We have already noted that the Lesliees were enemies of the men beyond the Highland line, but love, knowing no such boundaries, marriage with a Leslie and a lady of the Highland aristocracy of Ross took place. The Leslie bridegroom assumed his bride's Highland title: upon which, Donald, Lord of the isles challenged the right of the man Leslie to so assume, and came to enforce his challenge through Moray into Garioch with 10,000 men and a vandal desire to sack Aberdeen town.

Donald was met at the river Urie by — "the chivalry of Aberdeen Angus and the Mearns" and battle was long and indecisive — "Baith Highland and Lowland mournfu' be" — and it cost Sir Andrew Leslie the life of his newly wed son and of his five brothers.

Tragedy stalks through the family history again in the troubled times of Mary, Queen of Scots, when George Leslie, 4th Earl of Rothes, one of eight Commissioners representing the Scottish nation at the marriage of Mary with the Dauphin of France in Paris in 1558, died on the way home, at Dieppe, along with his colleagues the Earl of Cassillis and Bishop Reid. *All were believed poisoned* because — "they refused to settle on the Dauphin, the Crown matrimonial of Scotland."

That 4th Earl, however, had lived to some purpose since he had been married five times, one of the wives





Land of the Leslies

being disowned for a passionate intrigue with the Abbot of Cambuskenneth, one Patrick Panter by name.

A salute now, to the Leslies from a military historian: "No Scottish surname has been more widely known than theirs or more famous, on the Continent of Europe."

At one time in the long Continental wars of the 17th century, five Leslie generals commanded armies in Scotland, Germany, Sweden and Russia all at the same time and indeed, correspondence by this magazine regarding the Leslies produced a fascinating document from a Count Alexander Leslie de Vergennes Lavalie who left

Russia when he was five years old, escaping from the Revolution. Now resident in Portugal and, with his daughter, sole survivors of his branch of the Leslies, he recounts how his original ancestor served in Russia under General Sir Alexander Leslie of Auchintoul in the early 17th century, 14 of whose officers were also Leslies.

In the latter part of that same century and back again on the home front, John Leslie, 7th Earl of Rothes, deserves attention. A staunch Royalist, he was often accused by his detractors of a too-free style of living, but excused himself by saying that if he was to be a worthy Royal Comis-

sioner to Charles II, then it was fitting that he should represent both the Royal character and conduct!

Maybe that same Earl was less keen to obey always the commands of the Privy Council when an order came for him to carry out a persecution of Covenanters believed in hiding on his estates, for knowing that his wife was a staunch supporter of the sober-clothed Covenanting clergy he would warn her: "My lady, my hawks maun be abroad the morn; ve had better look after your blackbirds."

The Fife branch of the family, the Leslies of Leven, are a reminder of the little burgh of Leslie (nine miles north of Kirkcaldy) whose Green once held field sports and games — and even a bull fight! The "Kirk" on its "Green" is said to be the setting for "Christ's Kirk on the Green," a poem attributed to King James V. And some ten miles north of Leslie, stands the ruins of Lindores Abbey whose last Abbot before its destruction by John Knox's followers, was John Leslie an ardent supporter of James V's daughter, Mary, Queen of Scots.

These Fife Leslies produced two famous military men in the Covenanting and the Civil wars: Alexander, 1st Earl of Leven commander of the Covenanting army and David Leslie the General who defeated Montrose at Philiphaugh in 1645. This same Leslie opposed Cromwell at the battle of Dunbar in 1650 and although popular history always tells of Leslie's defeat there, it omits to add that he made a masterly retreat to Stirling and there successfully defied Cromwell's further attacks.

There is evidence of Leslie's defence work showing to this day. Cruising visitors to Edinburgh when landing at the Port of Leith, travel to Edinburgh by Leith Walk. Leith Walk was originally a defence rampart built by Leslie in an attempt to protect the City and its surroundings from any Cromwellian advance from the coast.

In time, in days of peace, the top of this rampart became a promenade for the townfolk and, being ever broadened and strengthened through ensuing years, developed as the main transport link between Port and Town.

Leslie Castle, Aberdeenshire, now being restored by David Leslie, an architect.



There is one place where the rampart edge still shows: just up from the library at the corner of Leith Walk and Macdonald Road. the ground floor of the solitary house next to the garage is below street level — in other words around the level of the ground from where rose Leslie's rampart.

Meanwhile the star of fortune for the Leslies of Rothes was somewhat on the wane, and in 1711 the 9th Earl of Rothes sold the estates — "the beautiful barony lies on the western bank of the broad and rapid river Spey . . . and when the Earl sold the estate he reserved to himself the Castle tower with the bank and the green under the walls thereof." The walls at Rothes still stand by the Spey where this "swiftest and loveliest of rivers," having forged its way from where the Cairngorms mightily crowd the scene, now eases to a nearer pastoral flow; yet there's a witchery about her even here. This river, often referred to as "she" has been likened to — "a woman dangerous, sometimes fickle, but always winsome" — and supposed to have a sprite demanding at least one victim a year. An old historical account might be said to bear that out, telling of a time of flood when the Cairngorm snows melted, and the youths and able-bodied men of Rothes way were set to the rescue . . ." at the risk of being carried away by the waters, dragging the young, the aged and the infirm, some of whom had not been for years from under a roof, out of their windows and doors as best they could . . . peats in black masses, firewood, poultry and pigs were seen tumbling along. And every now and then the young fellows were dashing in and hauling out huge hogs by the hind legs."

The Rothes earls, fortunes restored



Leslie House, Fife, seat of the Earls of Rothes until 1926. It's now an old

peoples' home under the auspices of the Church of Scotland.

in time, went furth of Speyside. Today, the head of the clan is Ian Lionel Malcolm Leslie, 21st Earl of Rothes (late sub-lieutenant R.N.V.R.). Another member of that family, Flight Lieutenant (late R.A.F.V.R.) the Hon. John Wayland Leslie, member of the Royal Company of Archers the Queen's Bodyguard for Scotland, features among the Leslies of the present time. Also in the Services field, Rear Admiral George Cunningham Leslie who was at NATO H.Q. in Brussels from 1968 to 1970; and a more unorthodox serving man is noted in the person of His Honour Judge Gilbert Frank Leslie — a circuit judge of distinction who enlisted as a private in the Sherwood Foresters in 1939, but, as would be expected considering his military ancestors, he rose rapidly from the ranks.

In the academic world. David Cle-

ment Leslie, Professor of Nuclear Engineering in the University of London and head of the Department of Nuclear Engineering of Queen Mary College, upholds the family reputation for learning as did Sir John Leslie, eminent Scottish physicist of the early 19th century.

A lady joins the distinguished company of today: Ann Elizabeth Mary Leslie (Mrs. Michael Fletcher), journalist and broadcaster, winner of the British Press Awards, Feature Writer of the Year in 1981.

And finally, the late Lord Birsay — Harald Robert Leslie (son of Robert Leslie, master mariner of Orkney) whose career of service, political, military and social, had culminated in his appointment twice, as Lord High Commissioner — the Queen's representative at the annual General Assembly of the Church of Scotland held each May in Edinburgh.