

A BATTLE TO THE DEATH

THOMAS GORDON VS THE ABBOT OF GRANGE



Thomas Gordon's Gravestone, Ruthven

Thomas Gordon of Ruthven, better known as 'Tam o' Riven' made a fearsome sight arrayed in armour and saddled on his grey charger. His cause was the disputed ownership of Balloch Hill which stood at the boundary between his lands and the Barony of Grange which belonged to the Church. Tam turns and vows to his knights, 'Unless they yield these bounds to me, this day some broken heads must be!' Tam parleys with his rival, the Abbot of Grange, who states that Balloch had been granted by King William the Lion to Kinloss Abbey, centuries before, but they decide to settle the matter in typical 14th century fashion, with a sword duel. Thus continues the ballad penned in 1849 by Banffshire author, John Alexander Cameron, which details the fatal combat between Abbot John and Tam o' Riven. Both lose their lives and the Gordons pursue the remaining monks to seek revenge for their kinsman's death.

Thomas Gordon was a real laird, born in the early 1400s; 'Daach, Sauchen and Keithock Mill/ Oh Tam o' Riven owned Balveny, Cults and Auchindroyne an' many more', runs Cameron's ballad, detailing Thomas' estate. He was the son of Elizabeth Cruickshank and Sir John Gordon of Strathbogie who died in 1394, the latter's grandfather having been granted his estate by no less than Robert the Bruce. Thomas and his brother John (or Tam and Jock) are regarded as the progenitors of the old line of Gordons in this area. Thus, it is no surprise that such a powerful gentleman would take up arms against a local churchman to ensure his borders were not encroached upon. However, it is more likely the 'battle' was administrative rather than involving a display of force.

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All that remains of this legendary battle are the Monk's Cairn on Balloch Hill, and the effigy of Thomas in Ruthven's ruined kirkyard.

Thomas Gordon's descendants went on to build Auchanachie House in 1594, just along the road from Ruthven. The manor stands today, refurbished and clad in traditional 16th century pink render, still a family home. The name Auchanachie, which translates from Gaelic as 'the Merchant's Field', was to become associated with further bloodshed two centuries later, when a brutal murder occurred on the estate at the croft of Upper Auchanachie. The tenant, George Milne, and his daughter were hacked to death by an anonymous axeman who tried to cover up his crime by razing the house to the ground. Although never proven, the reputed killer was the same Andrew Hosack who ended up on Johnny Milne's gallows in Aberdeen's Castlegate in 1810. This was the reason behind the riot which saw Hosack's corpse end up in the hands of the anatomists, the due punishment for a murderer, despite the fact the court records show Hosack was executed for theft.