THE BATTLE OF MONS GRAUPIUS

By David Henderson-Stewart

THE Romans invaded Britain in A.D. 43. Their subsequent progress appears to have been surprisingly slow, for after forty years they had over-run the Island only as far as Chester and York. Even then there was no clearly defined frontier, and their forces were engaged mainly in keeping order within the already occupied Province. A new initiative was taken in the year 78, when Gnaeus Julius Agricola was appointed Governor. Capable, ambitious, and probably more fortunate than his predecessors, after two years spent in Wales he was able to penetrate northwards as far as the waist of Scotland. Little is known about this campaign nor about the next two years, during which he established his new position; but in A.D. 83, from fortifications built between the rivers Clyde and Forth, he undertook a further advance. This time it is known that he met with considerable resistance from the native tribes, apparently united under a single leader named Galgacus. That winter Agricola passed by the river Tay, and the next year, probably compelled by the necessity to bring his elusive enemy to battle, rather than by the simple desire for further conquest, he set off again. Throughout this season he marched on without success, until unexpectedly he came upon the Scots who had finally decided to make a stand at a place called Mons Graupius. In the ensuing battle the Romans won an overwhelming victory, killing some ten thousand of the enemy and putting the rest to flight.

The campaigning season was now almost over and Agricola was obliged to retire for the winter before he could follow up his victory. Then suddenly and for no apparent reason, the Emperor Domitian recalled him to Rome. Not only did Agricola have to leave, but the whole army abandoned Scotland with him; and the Battle of Mons Graupius was forgotten.

In the next century the Romans re-entered Scotland; a permanent wall was built between the Forth and the Clyde, and at least one general, Septimus Severus, advanced some way beyond it. As Domitian may originally have suspected, the natural difficulties were too great and Rome never achieved a substantial settlement in Scotland. It is probable then that Mons Graupius represents the most northerly point ever reached by the forces of the Roman Empire.

A feature of this battle is that, from the moment it was announced

in Rome up to the present day, it has remained shrouded in mystery, hardly diminished by the one vivid glimpse of it which is given in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus. There have been many attempts to locate the site, but nothing approaching certainty has been achieved, and unfortunately most of the pains taken in the past on this subject are proved to have been wasted in the light of recent archaeological discoveries. The evidence upon which I have worked in this investigation is equally liable to be discounted by further revelations from the aerial camera or the excavator or the historian.

The Evidence of Tacitus

There is only one piece of direct evidence for the battle, which is found in the *Agricola* of Tacitus; indeed, had not this book survived the dark ages, it is doubtful whether it should ever have been suspected that such an event had taken place at all. Tacitus, who was the General's son-in-law, wrote in A.D. 98, five years after Agricola's death, and intended the work to be a vindication of the memory of his father-in-law, after the great injustice which he had suffered from the Emperor. Thus the *Agricola* is not primarily a history, but rather a study of character, and somewhat idealized at that; and facts and events are included only where they are relevant to the main theme, or, occasionally, because they are particularly interesting or picturesque in themselves. Thus, for example, Tacitus gives a detailed account of the battle itself, but in recording the campaigns of eight years, only seven place-names are mentioned. Moreover what Tacitus does relate should be treated with much caution, as the principle of strict historical accuracy and objectivity had not the same importance for the Romans as it has to-day; and where their sources could not help them it was their custom to improvise as best they could, to keep the story going, or to make more vivid the picture of some action.

All that Tacitus relates of the campaign which led up to the battle is this:—

> "In the beginning of the summer (A.D. 84), Agricola lost the son born a year before. . . . Among other things he turned for comfort to fighting. Accordingly he sent forward his fleet to make descents on various places . . . and then, with his army in light marching order and strengthened by the best British soldiers . . . he advanced to Mons Graupius, which the enemy had already occupied". (*Ch.* 29).

After the account of the battle he concludes:

> "Accordingly, since the war could not take a wider range at the end of the summer, he led his troops back to the territory of the Boresti. From them

he took hostages, and ordered the commander of the fleet to circumnavigate Britain. . . . He himself marched slowly, in order that the very leisureliness of his progress might strike terror into the hearts of the new tribes, until he lodged his infantry and cavalry in winter quarters". (*Ch.* 38).

Neither Mons Graupius nor the Boresti are heard of again[1]; and although Tacitus gives a lengthy account of the actual fighting, he offers no direct description of the nature of the battlefield itself. Such details as can be deduced are quite insufficient to indicate any particular spot and by themselves are of no immediate value.

This is all the historical evidence that is available; it sheds hardly any light on the most important problems, namely, from where did Agricola set out, in which direction did he march and how far did he go. For answers to these three questions we must rely on other, unwritten sources.

The Roman Camps

Fortunately the Romans were methodical, and wherever they went they left their tracks in the shape, chiefly, of fortresses and earthworks. On the first question, concerning Agricola's point of departure, the work of Sir George Macdonald[2] would seem to have established that Agricola spent the winter of A.D. 83-84 at a large legionary fortress standing on the north bank of the Tay at Inchtuthil. Archaeologists on the whole seem agreed on this point, which it seems safe to accept. Furthermore, investigations during the last two hundred years, and, more recently, the technique of aerial photography, have revealed a large number of Roman marching camps in Scotland, and in particular a chain leading from Inchtuthil up Strathmore towards Aberdeen and then northwards in the direction of the Moray Firth. (Fig. 1). It was the custom of the Romans, when marching on a campaign, to build temporary camps separated by roughly a day's journey from each other. These camps—not to be confused with permanent fortresses—consisted simply of rectangular earthworks, and served as halting places for the supply train, upon which the troops were constantly dependent.

Although the remains are hard to detect, a considerable number of camps have been discovered in this chain. Not all of them are of the same type, indeed, contrary to the general supposition, there is some reason to think that the main body of them was built not by

[1] The word "Grampian" was adapted by Renaissance scholars from a mis-reading of Graupius: the theory that the word Boresti is connected with the name Forres is not accepted by all philologists.

[2] Journal of Roman Studies, IX (1919), p. 113 ff.

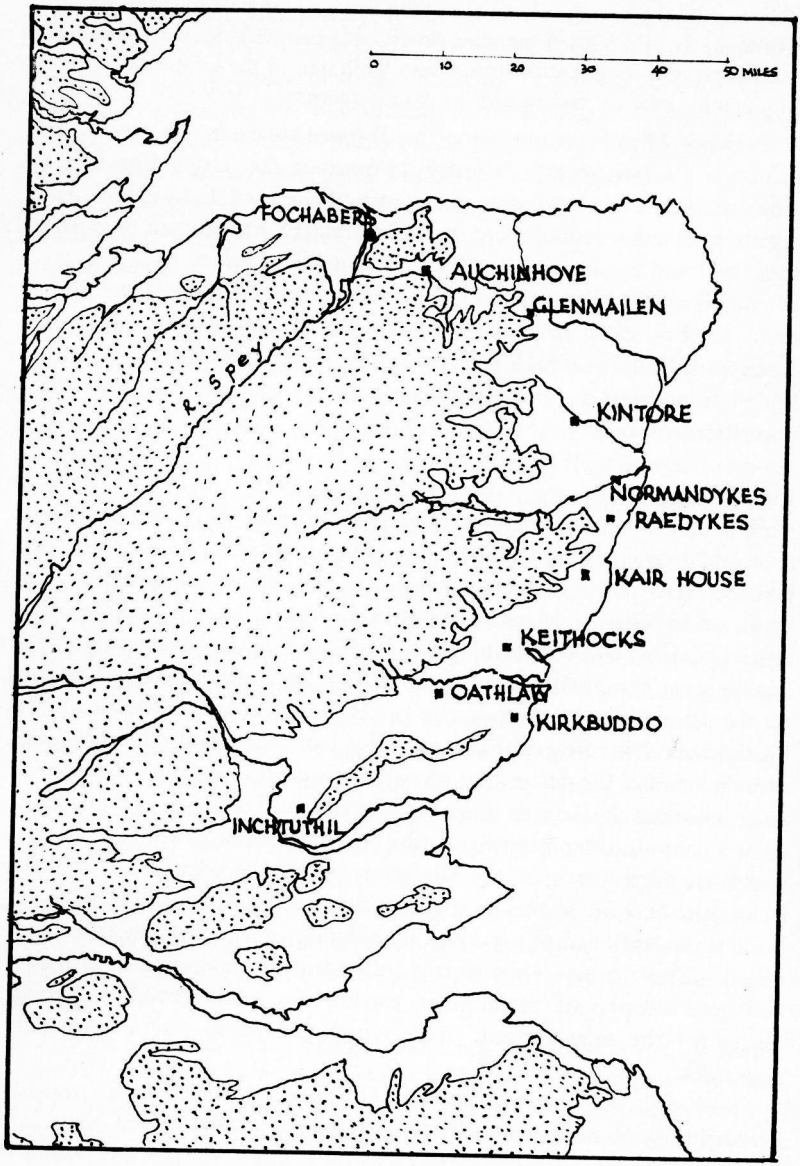

FIG. 1. Eastern Scotland, showing position of Roman camps.

Agricola but by some later expedition, possibly that of Septimus Severus. The dating of the camps is a complicated question to which no conclusive answer has yet been found; many unexpected discoveries have been made recently, notably by Dr. J. K. St. Joseph,[3] using the technique of aerial photography, who in 1950 discovered a hitherto unknown camp at Auchinhove. This differs considerably from the rest, but is identical to several others further south,[4] which are almost certainly Agricolan—from which it is implied that Auchinhove is also. In view of this, the dating of the other camps may be disregarded for present purposes, as Agricola must have passed that way to reach Auchinhove.

This answers the second question. As to the third, Tacitus states that the battle took place at the end of the season, and that Agricola was unable to carry on further. Apart from an unsubstantiated site at Fochabers, on the mouth of the Spey, Auchinhove is the furthest that the Romans' march can be traced. Thus, although it is not certain that Agricola went no further, yet this is a strong argument for supposing that the battle was in that area; certainly it can hardly have been very far south of it.

Why did the Scots fight at Mons Graupius?

If Tacitus is to be believed, Galgacus was a general of unusual ability, with good control over his troops and considerable resources; (although it would be fair to assume that Tacitus would tend to exaggerate the opposition to his hero). In the previous year Galgacus had been very successful in his guerilla tactics and so far seemed to have had no difficulty in avoiding battle with the Romans. This must have been his chief preoccupation for, apart from the more obvious reasons, unlike most generals in his position he did not heavily out-number the enemy.[5]

What was it that made Galgacus suddenly and deliberately reverse his old tactics and make this stand? And why did he stand at this particular point?

If it is assumed, as the passage from Tacitus would suggest, that this

[3]There is an annual report in the Journal of Roman Studies. For his discussion of this question, see J.R.S., vol. XLVIII, p. 86: for a report on Auchinhove, see also vol. XLI, p. 65.

[4]At Stracathro, Dalginross, Castledykes and Dalswinton.

[5]According to Tacitus, the Scots numbered about 30,000, against Agricola, who had up to 25,000 men at his disposal. (Tacitus mentions 8,000 provincial infantry and 3,000 cavalry in the front line, plus perhaps 2,000 more cavalry held in reserve, plus the legionaries, who took no part in the fight. These would have been detachments from 2 or 3 legions; 10,000 seems a reasonable mean between widely-differing estimates of their numbers.)

was a deliberate step there appears to be only one explanation for it, namely, that the Romans were approaching or had reached a position beyond which Galgacus, for some reason, was resolved not to let them pass at any price. This critical point can only have been the frontier to the Scots' territory; only a direct threat to the security of their own homes could have justified so suicidal a step.

To meet the emergency a number of tribes had united under Galgacus. This in itself was exceptional, for in other circumstances the inhabitants of Britain would have known no loyalty to any cause beyond that of their own tribe; the repeated treachery, of which there is evidence, shows this clearly enough. Who were those tribes? According to Tacitus, the army which Galgacus commanded was composed of the "tribes living in Caledonia"; therefore outside the limits of Caledonia Galgacus would have not have felt directly responsible. But where exactly was this territory? Caledonia was then only part of what is now called Scotland, stretching, according to the map of the almost contemporary geographer Ptolemy, from Moray to Lennox, that is, including the lands along the Moray Firth and the central Highlands, but excluding Strathmore and the south. In this connection it should be noted that, on the evidence of ancient finds, it was the coastlands of the Moray Firth rather than the latter areas which supported the heaviest population in Pictish and pre-Pictish days.

If this is so, the critical point at which Agricola approached the homeland of his enemy is to be found somewhere beyond the camp at Glenmailen, where his route descends from the deserted uplands into the broad valley of the Deveron, an area particularly fruitful in ancient remains. If this reasoning is correct, Galgacus and his Caledonian army would have regarded the progress of the Romans through southern Scotland, Strathmore, and the Aberdeenshire hills only as a threat to their own lands farther to the north, and would not have felt themselves directly concerned until they were approaching the area of Auchinhove; and there finally they were compelled to risk everything, to protect their families, lands and homes.

I have examined this question at some length, because I think it is an important one, which has not received sufficient study from those who have pronounced on this subject. There is some satisfaction in the exercise, for it seems to lead to the same conclusion as the previous argument, by approaching the problem from another direction.

The Battle

Academic reasoning will not take the argument much further, and

it remains to examine and analyse Tacitus' account of the battle itself to see what help it affords.

As already noted, Tacitus nowhere directly describes the battlefield, but his account is not wholly valueless in this respect. From his lengthy narrative it is necessary to reproduce everything that seems at all relevant to the problem.

According to the custom of Roman historians, the battle was preceded by elaborate orations from the two opposing generals; these were probably written almost entirely from Tacitus' own imagination and contain little of historical value, apart from the celebrated judgement of Galgacus on the Roman Empire:—

"Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant."—Where the Romans create a desert they call it peace.

However, two things which may be learnt, quite incidentally, are that Agricola addressed his troops behind some fortifications and, later on, that the legions, who took no part in the actual battle, "were posted in front of the palisade", which must have been some way behind the front. These two items must refer to the same thing, which can only have been a camp. Assuming this is so, it is necessary to look for the battlefield near a camp.

Then follows a concise and clear account of the two armies:—

"He (Agricola) drew up his troops so that the detachments of provincial infantry, which amounted to 8,000 men, made a strong centre, while the 3,000 cavalry circled round the wings; the Roman legions themselves were posted in front of the palisade. . . .

"The British line, in order at once to be impressive and alarming, was drawn up on higher ground, in such a way that the front line was on the level while the rear, on a gentle slope, seemed to be towering higher and higher; the chariots, noisily manoeuvring, filled the intervening plain.

"Then, because the enemies' numbers were superior, and fearing to be attacked simultaneously in front and on the flank, Agricola opened out his ranks, although his line was bound to become too long proportionately. . . ." (*Ch.* 35.)

The battle began with an exchange of missiles, which was followed by a charge of the Roman infantry, who inflicted heavy damage on the Scots and managed to gain a footing on the hill: all this is described in great detail. Then:—

"Meanwhile the squadrons of [Roman] cavalry, when the [Scots'] chariots fled, took a hand in the [foot] battle."

Tacitus is typically vague here, as he never exactly states what the Scots' chariots did do. He would seem to imply that the chariots,

operating on the wings, were engaged and put to flight by Agricola's cavalry, who were then free to help their own infantry.

The fighting continues; then:—

> "Such of the Britons as had been on the tops of the hills, as yet unreached by the fighting, began little by little to descend, and surround the flanks of the conquering army."

These were routed by cavalry whom Agricola had held in reserve, who then rounded on the Scots' line from the rear.

"Then began a grand and gory drama etc., etc. . . .";—this sort of thing, like the preliminary harangues, is indispensable to an account of a Roman battle.

The Scots fled, but they were not quite finished; they managed to regroup themselves in woods behind the field, and inflicted casualties on their pursuers. These remnants Agricola finally dealt with by combing the woods with his cavalry, and the Scots' resistance was at an end.

"Night and exhaustion put an end to the pursuit", wrote Tacitus. Apparently about ten thousand of the enemy were killed for the loss, if Tacitus is to be believed, of only 360 Roman lives.

The battle was evidently fought along the foot of a hill, with some ground flat enough for cavalry and chariots to manoeuvre in, on the wings at least. In between was the Roman line of 8,000 foot soldiers. In the normal formation of three ranks, and spaced a yard apart, these men would have extended over a front of about a mile and a half; so, elongated to a point where they became "dangerously thin", it seems likely that this line would have stretched for over two miles. If this is so, and allowing for cavalry on the wings, a front of some three miles is required.[6]

It seems that there were hills at the sides from which the Scots descended on the Roman flanks, and there were woods behind the Scots' position. One negative point of some possible significance is that Tacitus nowhere mentions any river; had there been a river in such a position or of such a size as to interfere with the battle, Tacitus would surely have referred to it. In front of the battlefield, we have conjectured that there must be a Roman camp.

A final point of interest is found in Tacitus' description of the scene after the battle. He says that all around were the smoking remains of houses, and that the battle was fought within the view of the Scots soldiers' families. This must support the point already made that the

[6]For this calculation I am indebted to A. R. Burn, in a short paper given on this subject to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Proceedings 1952-3).

battlefield was within the borders of Caledonia, which again points to a site in the neighbourhood of Auchinhove.

The Field Examination

Having now made out as precise a specification for the battlefield as possible, and having come to certain conclusions about the area in which the battle was likely to have been fought—though here no certainty has been achieved—it remained to go out and look for a place conforming as nearly as may be possible to the picture one had in mind.

I believed that I had now eliminated as possibilities all the more southerly camps in the chain, but they are hardly suitable anyway; those at Oathlaw, Keithocks and Kair House are in flat agricultural country in Strathmore. Raedykes stands on high open moorland on the most easterly spurs of the Grampians, overlooking the sea. This camp has been widely supported as the site of the battle, the case being put forward most lucidly by the late O. G. S. Crawford in his book "Roman Scotland"[7] It depends chiefly on the argument that, if Galgacus wanted to catch or trap the Romans, this would be the obvious place for him to do so, for at this point the gap between the hills and the sea is at its narrowest, and they could hardly escape him. However, the premise of this argument seems manifestly false, since all the evidence shows that it was the Romans who wanted to catch the Scots, rather than vice-versa: wherever the Scots stood it was for Agricola to go and get them. Moreover although Raedykes stands in hilly country there does not appear to be any site compatible with Tacitus' description, imprecise as it is.

Passing Normandykes and Kintore which overlook the Dee and the Don respectively, and passing what may be some undiscovered camp lying in the valley of the river Ure, we come to Glenmailen. This camp is again in high and remote country, but nowhere could a site be discovered which could possibly be identified with Mons Graupius. In any case it seems most unlikely that there could have been much habitation in the district, for even to-day the area is very desolate.

From Glenmailen the Romans would probably have made their way westwards, to descend into the broad valley of the Deveron, march down this for a few miles, and then turn up into the valley of the Isla running in from the west. The camp at Auchinhove is about five miles up this valley, that is to say, about 18 miles from Glenmailen. But all the other camps are spaced about ten or twelve miles apart, and it seems most improbable that there should suddenly be this large

[7] O. G. S. Crawford, Topography of Roman Scotland, 1949, p. 130 ff.

gap; this indicates that there may have been another camp, as yet undiscovered, in between, perhaps somewhere in the neighbourhood of the confluence of the Isla and the Deveron.

From Auchinhove on to Fochabers at the mouth of the Spey is about another day's journey, and this would certainly seem the logical end of Agricola's march, though nothing can be established about Fochabers without further examination of the site. (Clearly however it could not possibly be the site of the battle). Auchinhove itself lies in the valley of the Isla with the river to the south and gentle hills to the north and hardly suits the requirements either.

It appears impossible then that any of the known camps could have been that referred to by Tacitus, and I am driven to the conclusion that only in the missing camp between Glenmailen and Auchinhove can the requirements be satisfied; and in this conclusion I am encouraged alike by the strength of the case already made out for this area, and by the topography of the situation itself. (Fig. 2).

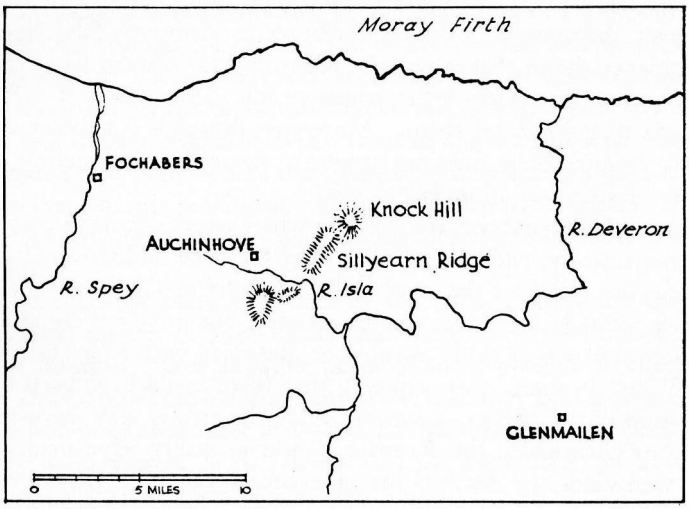

Fig. 2.

From Glenmailen, Agricola would pass into the valley of the Deveron; this is broad and flat with low hills on either side. A few miles down, the River Isla runs in on the left; this valley is similarly broad and flat but with rather steeper hills bordering it. In particular,

about three miles to the north is the very prominent Knock Hill, over 1,400 ft. high, and rising a clear 700 ft. above the surrounding country. Round, steep and symmetrical like a volcano, it is a distinct landmark for many miles around; if *Mons Graupius* refers to one particular Mons, this is about the only likely-looking one to be found anywhere along the route. East and west of this runs a line of lower hills, and a few miles to the north is the Moray Firth.

The valley is broad and flat, but just opposite the Knock Hill it is abruptly broken by the steep Sillyearn Ridge, which cuts straight across it, from the foot of the hill to the very edge of the river, two and a half miles to the south. This ridge rises about 400 ft. out of the plain on either side, at a fairly steep and steady gradient, and leaves only a very narrow pass between it and the river; and across the river just opposite this point there is an equally steep hill, the Little Balloch rising straight from the river bank.

This is the Pass of Grange, a natural gateway to the Moray Firth, through which to-day run the main road and railway and through which the Roman army would have had to march to reach Auchinhove and the sea. Ordinarily of course this Pass would present no obstacle. but if the narrow defile were blocked and the hills on either side manned it could form a very strong defensive position; nor could it easily be circumvented as there are still narrower passes to the north and the east. If an army to-day had to defend itself against an enemy advancing in the same manner as Agricola, given the choice it would probably choose to make its stand at the Pass of Grange, as it offers almost the only position along this route with natural advantages to the defender. Bearing in mind the strategic compulsions of Galgacus, it seems probable that here was the site of the stand of the Caledonian force. It remains to consider how it fits Tacitus' account of the battle.

It has already been decided that the line of infantry must have been at least two miles long; in fact, the Sillyearn Ridge is just that length. Next, on the wings was the Roman cavalry presumably facing the Scots' chariots; on either side of the Ridge is an expanse of flat ground, with the Pass to the south and the low col below the Knock Hill to the north—both well suited to cavalry operations. Beyond these, there is on the one side the steep slope of the Knock Hill and on the other the river, and then the equally steep Little Balloch. To complete his defences Galgacus would probably have manned these hills, as well as Wether Hill, which commands the Pass to the north. The Scots so placed would not have been attacked by the Romans, but when the battle began would have descended from their positions, and tried to

take the Romans on the flank and in the rear; this is exactly what is described by Tacitus.

If Galgacus was holding the ridge, Agricola would have drawn up his line along the foot of the hill, from where the Scots would have appeared as they are described by Tacitus, rising rank upon rank above each other. From Tacitus also we learn that there were woods behind the Scots' position and a number of dwellings in the vicinity. Neither of these points present any difficulty in justifying the site, for a large part of Scotland was then covered by the Caledonian Forest, and, as already shown, the district was probably well populated.

All this may seem to be too good to be true, it being obviously easy, with the slight evidence available, to choose facts so as to make them fit the selected position. Every attempt has been made to avoid this temptation. It is acknowledged, too, that the case is based largely upon the existence of the hypothetical camp. The existence of this is, however, very probable, despite the almost complete lack of physical corroboration at the moment. I would suggest that it is to be found on slightly elevated ground lying some two miles in front of the Ridge and now wooded. All the other camps already noted are in open or agricultural land, but it may well be that further research would reveal traces of the missing encampment.

On the other hand there is another already existing problem which this theory actually clears up, and that is the question why the camp of Auchinhove should have been so different from all the others. One possibility is that it was built by someone other than Agricola, but this seems unlikely. If the Battle of Mons Graupius was fought on the Sillyearn Ridge, a simpler explanation is at hand. Having fought this battle at the Pass of Grange, it is known that Agricola had to turn back almost immediately. But the logical conclusion of his march was obviously the Moray Firth, and there is an indication from Tacitus that he actually did reach this destination, for he says that after the battle he "despatched his fleet to circumnavigate Britain", whilst previously he had said that Agricola used his fleet in conjunction with his army. If this is so, it seems that he must have had a harbour on the Moray Firth, very likely on the mouth of the Spey; in which case, while the main army need not have marched any farther, there must have been some communication between it and the sea. And so I suggest that Auchinhove was built as an intermediate stage between the main army and the fleet; there would clearly be no need to build it as large as the others, as it would not have had to hold nearly so many men. Be that as it may, the very fact that Auchinhove was built so differently from

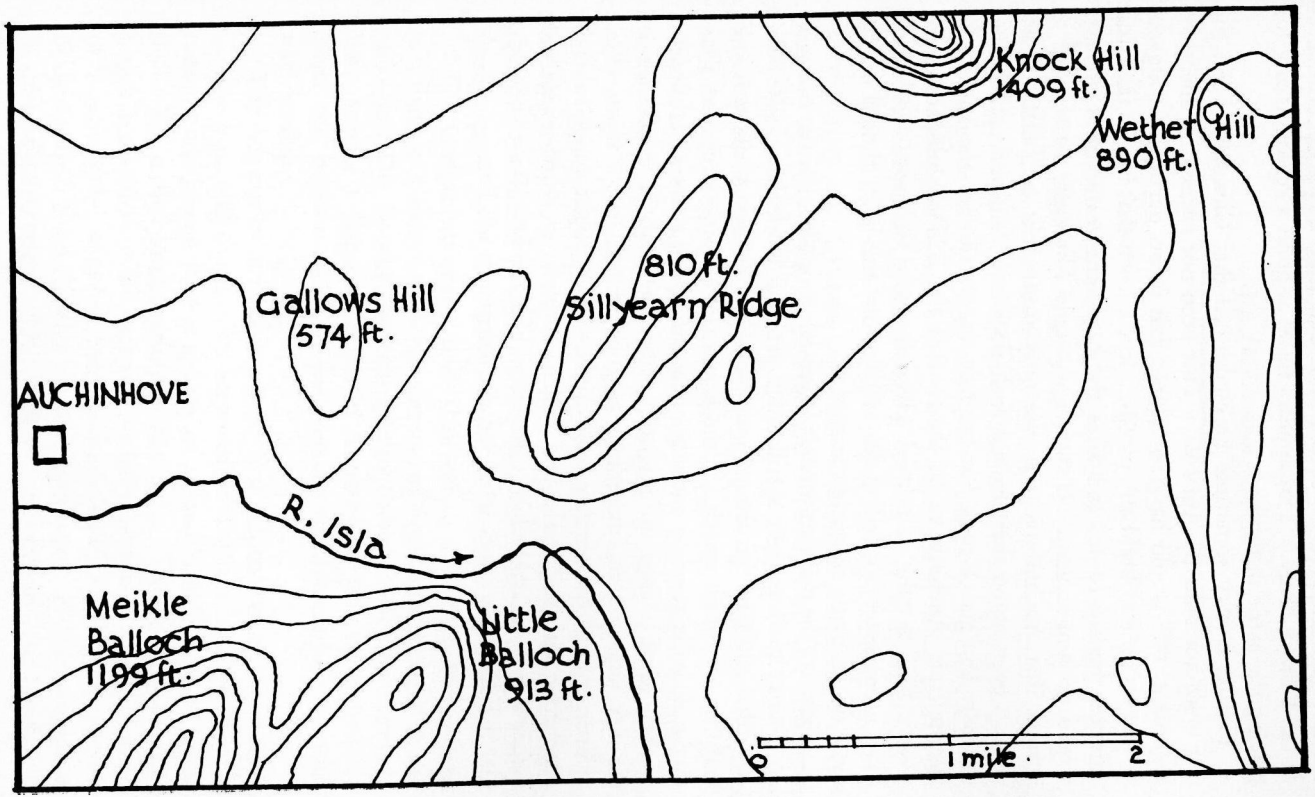

FIG. 3. The Pass of Grange.

the rest must imply some considerable alteration in the circumstances of the Roman army. This appears to be as good a reason as any for placing the battle in this area.

Finally, it may sometime be established that Glenmailen and the rest were not built by Agricola. This need not necessarily affect the argument; one would have to assume that in his pursuit of Galgacus he had no time to build any camps. It is known that before the battle Agricola built a camp, and after the battle the compulsion of haste would no longer exist. However it would obviously be simpler to assume that Auchinhove was the only camp that he built. It has already been noted that the site itself does not seem very promising, but Mr. Douglas Young has recently suggested that the battle was fought from Auchinhove, at the foot of the Balloch hills across the river. This has the additional advantage that Galgacus would thus have been better assured of his retreat into the hills, though as the scene of the battle this is less attractive.

These are the main arguments at present proposed, but the case is by no means closed, as there is still much practical work that can be done. A further study of the camps, and also of the Fochabers site would be useful; a thorough search for the hypothetical camp proposed above might settle the question one way or the other, and a closer examination of the Pass of Grange site might even be revealing. For instance, on the site, and in the immediate neighbourhood, there is an extraordinarily large concentration of cairns, which might conceivably be connected with the battle, and which are anyway worth examining before they are ploughed in as they seem likely to be. It is to be hoped that this and other work is carried out before it is too late.