

XIII.—*On the Burial Place of John Napier of Merchiston, the Inventor of Logarithms.*

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DEAR SIR,

THE inestimable benefit which John Napier, Baron of Merchiston, conferred on science by his invention of Logarithms, has rendered any memorial of him in the highest degree interesting to every one that can appreciate its value, and to every native of the country which gave him birth.

In his time abstract science was just recovering from the torpor which had overtaken and suspended its powers during the ages which had intervened between that period and the days of Archimedes and Apollonius, and Physical Science had just advanced so far as to be capable of profiting by his labours.

Few of his contemporaries were qualified to judge of the immediate benefit of his invention, and certainly none could foresee how much it was to conduce to the progress of future discovery. He lived in a rude country, and in an age under the dominion of superstition and bigotry. In Scotland improvements in science were then but little regarded in comparison to differences on points of religious belief. The minds of men were also continually agitated with questions arising out of the struggles of political parties. At such a period, and amidst so many conflicting interests, the discovery of a property of abstract numbers, and any application of it, however useful, were not likely to excite great attention among the chroniclers of that age.

It is no doubt from the combination of these causes, that although we know the exact period when one of the greatest men that Scotland, or even Europe, ever produced, left the stage of mortal existence, yet, with the exception of what I am presently to communicate, there is no record, so far as I have been able to discover, of the place where he was buried.

It is in the recollection of the older inhabitants of Edinburgh, that when the church of St Giles was skirted on the north side by a fringe of wooden erections occupied as shops, there was to be seen, on the front of the church, a stone in the wall, with this inscription :

S. E. P.

FAM. DE NEPERORVM INTERIVS
HIC SITUM EST.

From this it was evident that some of the family of Napier were interred in the church, and it was commonly believed that John Napier, the inventor of Logarithms, must have been one of them.

In support of this opinion, Maitland, the author of the History of Edinburgh, has always been quoted. He says, "The following inscription is fixed on the outside of the northern wall of the choir of the church of St Giles, in commemoration of the illustrious and ever memorable Lord Naper, Baron of Merchiston, inventor of the Logarithms, whose remains were interred in the choir of the church. Now, although no monument can add to the fame of this great man, he being most gratefully and honourably remembered in the works of the learned in all parts of Europe as the author of that most curious and useful art, I have nevertheless chosen to point out the place of his inhumation by the said humble inscription." Another writer on the history of Edinburgh, Arnot, says, "In different quarters of this church (St Giles) there are monuments of the celebrated Lord Napier of Merchiston."

I think it probable that Arnot followed Maitland in saying that the inventor of Logarithms was buried in St Giles'; and also that the late Earl of Buchan, who says the same thing in his Life of Napier, had no other authority. I have consulted the very ingenious John P. Wood, Esq. the editor of the second edition of Douglas's Peerage, who, in his additions to that work, agrees with these writers in saying that Napier was buried in St Giles'; but I find that he had followed the Earl of Buchan.

On the whole, then, the popular opinion, which, I found, was also the belief of the present family of Napier when I first brought forward the question, has no other foundation than the assertion of Maitland; and his opinion seems to have been formed merely from the inscription on the stone, formerly on the front of the church, but taken down and placed in the inside by Mr R. Johnston, a zealous preserver of the antiquities of Edinburgh, at the time the Luckenbooths were demolished. It is now restored to its first position, and would cer-

tainly be contemplated with veneration if it could be proved to be the genuine monument of the celebrated Napier.

I have good reason, however, to believe that the inventor of Logarithms was not buried in St Giles' Church, but, on the contrary, that he was buried in the old church of St Cuthbert, which has been long demolished, and replaced by the present church on nearly the site of the former.

My authority for this belief is unquestionable: It is a Treatise on Trigonometry, by a Scotsman, James Hume of Godscroft, in Berwickshire, a place still in possession of the family of Hume. The work in question, which is rare, was printed at Paris, and has the date 1636 on the title-page; but the royal privilege, which secured it to the author, is dated in October 1635, and it may have been written several years earlier. In this treatise (page 116) Hume says, speaking of Logarithms, "*L'inventeur estoit un Seigneur de grande condition, et duquel la posterité est aujourd'huy en possession de grandes dignitez dans le royaume, qui estant sur l'age, et grandement trauaillé des gouttes ne pouoit faire autre chose que de s'adonner aux sciences, et principalement aux mathematiques et à la logistique, à quoy il se plaisoit infiniment, et avec estrange peine, a construit ses Tables des Logarymes, imprimees à Edinbourg en l'an 1614, qui tout aussitost donnerent vn estonnement à tous les mathematiciens de l'Europe, et emporterét le Sieur Biggs (Briggs), professeur à Oxford, d'Angleterre en Escosse pour apprendre de lui cette admirable inuention de construire les Logarymes, et l'ayant enseigné à construire vne nouvelle espèce de Logaryme, lui laissa ceste charge pour les faire apres sa mort, ce qu'il fit comme on le voit aujourd'huy par toutes les boutiques de libraires: Il mourut l'an 1616, et fut enterré hors la Porte Occidentale d'Edinbourg, dans l'Eglise de Saint Cudbert.*"

Here we have a direct assertion that Napier was buried *without the West Port of Edinburgh, in the Church of St Cuthbert*; and this is made not more than eighteen years after his death, which happened 3d April 1617 (not 1616 as stated by Hume). Besides, this circumstantial declaration is made by Napier's countryman and contemporary, perhaps his personal friend; at any rate, by one who had good means of knowing the truth, and who seems to have taken a deep interest in Napier's invention, and in every thing connected with him.

Further, I would add, that the probability of the thing gives a weight to Hume's testimony, which, however, it does not require; for Merchiston, the re-

sidence of Napier, was in the parish of St Cuthbert; and nothing is more reasonable than to suppose that he would be buried in his parish church.

It, however, cannot be doubted but that persons of the name of Napier may have been buried in St Giles', for that family seem to have been patrons of the church. It is stated in Douglas's Peerage, that a "Sir Archibald Napier, with consent of Lady Rusky his mother, for the safety of the souls of Alexander Napier his good sire, and Elizabeth his goodam, John his father, his own, and Katharine Douglas his spouse, &c., mortifies to a chaplain at St Salvador's Altar in St Giles Kirk an annual rent of ten merks yearly, 9th November 1493." It is highly probable that this Napier or some of his ancestors may have been buried here, and there is a probable connection between such an event and the annual grant to the chaplain.

At any rate, the guess of Maitland, made almost 150 years after Napier's demise, on the view of the stone in front of the church, cannot stand in opposition to the positive and direct testimony of Hume, Napier's contemporary, who seems to have intended to record the exact spot where the object of his respect was interred.

I had entertained a hope that some notice might have been found in the records of St Cuthbert's Parish, of the burial place of Napier; but on a search (not indeed very minute), I could not find anything.

On the whole, the question as to where the remains of the man that has done the highest honour to his country and to his age were deposited,—that, I presume, has been completely resolved; and much is it to be regretted that no memorial of him appears near the place where his ashes repose. This is a tribute which I trust his countrymen will one day pay to his memory; and it is with a view to hasten this event, and direct the views of those who take upon them this patriotic duty, that I have addressed to you this letter, which I request may be communicated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, of which you are a member.—I have the honour to be, Dear Sir, your most obedient Servant,

WILLIAM WALLACE.

To JAMES THOMSON GIBSON CRAIG, Esq.
F. R. S. E. and S. A. Scot.