

III.

THE STORY OF THE FABRICATION OF THE "COFFIN-PLATE" SAID TO HAVE BEEN FOUND IN THE TOMB OF KING ROBERT BRUCE IN DUNFERMLINE ABBEY. BY T. B. JOHNSTON, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

Enquiring recently of my friend, Mr William Nelson, as to the health of an old acquaintance, Mr John Nimmo of Paris, he informed me that he not only was in good health, but that he was as active as ever.

Mr Nelson also informed me of what I had not previously known, that Mr Nimmo was a party to, or knew all about, the "coffin-plate" said to have been that of King Robert Bruce. Knowing that the genuineness of this plate had been called in question, I requested Mr Nelson to get from Mr Nimmo an account of the whole transaction, which that gentleman has kindly sent, and his letter is now before me.

Before reading an abstract of the communication I have received, it may be as well to refer briefly to the circumstances which led to the fabrication of the plate; this I will do as shortly as possible, as the whole details of its supposed discovery will be found in the Report made by Henry Jardine, Esq., His Majesty's Remembrancer in Exchequer, which was communicated to this Society on the 10th December 1821, and published in an abridged form in vol. ii. of the "Archæologia Scotica," published by this Society.

The Report states that the remains of the church in Dunfermline, used as a place of public worship, were in such a state of decay that it was resolved to rebuild the church, and Mr Burn, architect, Edinburgh, was employed to make a design for it. In making preparations for the building of the new church, the workmen, on the 17th February 1818, came upon a vault covered by two flat stones, which, on being removed, disclosed a body wrapped in lead, having an embroidered linen cloth over it.

As this was thought to be the remains of The Bruce, Mr Burn gave directions that further investigations should be delayed till the authorities were consulted; large stones in the meantime being placed over the vault.

Accordingly, nothing more was done till the new church was well advanced, when, on the 5th November 1819, the vault was again opened

in the presence of the Lord Chief Baron, Mr Baron Clerk Rattray, the magistrates of Dunfermline, Drs Gregory and Monro, and many others. On the removal of the skeleton wrapped in lead from the vault, a quantity of fragments of wood, apparently of oak, were found, and two or three iron nails. On the removal of the lead, the skeleton of a man about 6 feet high was found, the skull being very perfect. "But the most remarkable circumstance which we observed," says Mr Jardine, "was the state of the *sternum*, which was found to have been sawed asunder from top to bottom—the most satisfactory evidence that it was the body of King Robert Bruce, as it proved beyond doubt that it had taken place previous to interment, in order to get at the heart, which he had directed to be carried by Douglas to the Holy Land." After describing the details connected with the reinterment of the remains, Mr Jardine goes on to say that "no doubt can exist as to those being the remains of that illustrious prince, but a circumstance afterwards occurred which put the matter beyond the possibility of doubt. The workmen in the course of their operations, on the 10th November, found a plate of copper, $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length and 4 in breadth, and about $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch in thickness, with holes at each corner for fixing it on the coffin, bearing the inscription—'Robertus Scotorum Rex,' the letters resembling those on the coins of the King. A cross is placed under the inscription, with a mullet or star in each angle, with the crown precisely of the form on those coins. It was found among the rubbish removed on the 5th, and most probably had been adhering to one of the stones of the vault, and had thus escaped our notice at the time."

This plate was ultimately deposited in the Museum of the Society of Scottish Antiquaries, and an engraving has been made of it from a very accurate drawing by James Skene, Esq.

I have thought it necessary to read the above extracts from Mr Jardine's Report, that you may understand Mr Nimmo's letter, the essence of which I shall now proceed to read; the letter itself I shall hand over to Mr Anderson for preservation. Mr Nimmo writes from Paris, under date of August 9th, 1877:—

"The hoax or joke in question was (56 years since) intended to convince the simple-minded bodies of Dunfermline of the truth of an assertion often made, but reposing on no reliable foundation, that the mortal

remains of Robert the Bruce occupied a resting-place in the churchyard of their native town.

“Although but an unauthenticated report, was it not an honour of which the mass of inhabitants might fairly boast? and was it not excusable that they should lend a willing ear to whatever tended to establish the solidity of an assertion so flattering to their civic vanity? The old church had lasted its day—a new building was deemed necessary. The architect employed was assisted in his labours by a younger brother, who dearly loved a joke.

“This young church-builder had a friend as waggishly disposed as himself, by profession a portrait painter, named Thom, an acquaintance of my own, and, at the time alluded to, employed in Dunfermline.

“‘Could not we two,’ said the young architect one day to the painter, puff up the vanity of the natives of Dunfermline, by affording them something resembling proof positive that Robert the Bruce’s ashes lie in the churchyard mingled with the dust of their ancestors?’ ‘All very well, replied the painter, ‘so far as words go; but I don’t see how the thing can be done.’ In this the young architect instructed him, and he at once promised to carry out his share in the deception.”

The finding of the plate manufactured by the artist, and a description of it, we have already read in the report by Mr Jardine, but Mr Nimmo goes on to say that, a few days afterwards, Mr Thom called on him in a very sad state of mind, and informed him that the coffin-plate of Robert the Bruce had turned out a more serious affair than was intended, as it had set all the authorities in movement, and “heaven only knows where it may end.” Mr Thom further said that “The Provost (Wilson) of Dunfermline, a banker, begged me to wait on him; well pleased, I lost no time in walking to his house, counting to a certainty that an order for a portrait would reward my pains. An order for a portrait certainly awaited my arrival, but of a kind that shook my nerves to a degree from which they can hardly be said to have as yet wholly recovered. It was my horrid-looking bit of copper that, lying on a table near where I stood, and staring me in the face, I was requested to sit down and make a drawing of, for instant transmission to the Antiquarian Society of Edinburgh, to the members of which the invaluable discovery had just been made known! Imagine if you can the fever this unexpected request

threw me into. A nervous tremor, succeeded by a cold sweat, passed over me from head to foot, that unfitted my hand from holding a pencil, or doing anything else properly. As it was impossible to calm my nervous irritation, it now only remained for me to propose that I should take the plate home with me, where I could make the drawing more at my ease. 'What!' exclaimed the first magistrate of Dunfermline, in a tone of amazement, 'you would take it home with you? why, man, let me inform you that there is more money in the bank at this moment than for some time past, and I would sooner lend you the entire sum than suffer that bit of dirty copper to pass from my possession for a single hour, until the Museum, or place in which it is to be kept, has been decided on by the highest authority in the realm.'

The artist had considerable difficulty in restraining a fit of laughter at the expense of the worthy Provost; but seeing it could not be avoided, he sat down and made the required drawing.

Mr Nimmo adds—"I never saw him again. A circumstance occurred to myself at this juncture (December 1821) that rendered it necessary for me hastily to exchange Edinburgh for Paris, and when, thirty years afterwards, I returned for a few days to 'Auld Reekie,' I heard nothing of my friend Mr Thom, and by that time the Dunfermline burial-ground had settled down to its usual quiet. Let me add that the engraving (in the *Archæologia*) contains a serious blunder in the date, as the finding of the plate took place in 1821, not in 1819."

I will now add a few words as to the author of this communication, who forms a link between a past generation and the present:—

Mr Nimmo's father was a printer in Edinburgh. He occupied in 1825, on the authority of the late Dr Robert Chambers, the house at the Cowgate Head which had previously been the residence of Mr Brougham before he removed to 19 St Andrew Square, where his son, afterwards Lord Brougham, was born. The house at the Cowgate Head, according to the same authority, was, in 1745, the birthplace of Henry Mackenzie, the author of "The Man of Feeling." Mr John Nimmo followed the profession of his father, for, when a young man, we find him connected with the establishment of Mr Duncan Stevenson, the printer of the *Beacon*, which had made its appearance in the beginning of the year 1821.

The *Beacon* was started for the avowed purpose of supporting the Government; but it soon began to devote its columns to the defamation of private character, particularly of the leading whig noblemen and gentlemen of Scotland,—amongst others, Mr James Stuart of Dunearn, who, justly offended, demanded the name of the author of the articles. Mr Stevenson gave the name of Mr John Nimmo as the editor of the paper. Mr Stuart, however, refused to recognise him as the author; and, on the 15th of August 1821, Mr Stuart horse-whipped Mr Stevenson in the Parliament Square. Mr Stuart then wrote to the Lord Advocate, who, along with several professional gentlemen, had signed an obligation to a considerable amount to support the *Beacon*, holding him responsible for the calumnies alluded to. The Lord Advocate replied, that he and the other subscribers, although approving of the political principles of the *Beacon*, never contemplated that the paper was to be made the vehicle of attack upon private character. After a long correspondence, the result was that the supporters of the *Beacon* withdrew their bond from the bank, and the *Beacon* was extinguished on the 22d of September 1821.

From the embers of the *Beacon* arose the *Sentinel*, commenced in Glasgow on the 20th of February 1822, the editor and printer being Mr William Murray Borthwick. In this paper the abusive articles were continued against Mr Stuart. At length this gentleman obtained from Mr Borthwick the original letters, which were found to be in the handwriting of Sir Alexander Boswell of Auchinleck, the eldest son of the biographer of Johnson. Mr Stuart immediately sent his friend the Earl of Rosslyn to arrange a meeting, which took place on the 26th of March 1822, near Balmutto in Fife, when Sir Alexander was mortally wounded and died next day. Mr Stuart stood his trial on the 10th of June, and was honourably acquitted.

Mr Nimmo's connection with the *Beacon* was the cause of his leaving this country; and when I first met him in Paris, some thirty years since, he was then engaged on *Galigani's Messenger*, and his valuable services there have been rewarded by a retiring allowance, which I hope he will long enjoy.

Dr J. A. Smith begged to be allowed to remark that although Mr Johnston and perhaps some other Fellows of the Society had a distinct

recollection of the old communication, illustrated as it is with several plates, published in the "Archæologia Scotica," which details the discovery of a large tomb in an important part of the old church of Dunfermline, in the course of the alterations made in 1818—the church which it is believed included or perhaps adjoined the choir of the older church in which Robert the Bruce was interred—still they seemed to forget that it was by no means generally accepted by antiquaries that this was really proved to have been the tomb of King Robert the Bruce. It was also long ago known that the copper plate was the work of some clever and unscrupulous joker; and in the first published catalogue or "Synopsis of the Museum," in 1849, it is stated that "The genuineness of this relic has since been questioned."

Accordingly, when the Society received the bequest of the late Rev. Dr Chalmers of Dunfermline, of various antiquities, and among them some fragments of the sculptured marble ornaments of this shrine or tomb, supposed to have been that of Robert the Bruce, an opportunity was naturally taken, by myself indeed, as one of the editors of the "Proceedings," to add a note to the donation, giving the explanation which had been well known and believed long before, but which no proper opportunity had occurred of enabling the Society to refer to in its "Proceedings;" if indeed it had been considered necessary to do so. Of course it was obvious enough to any numismatist that the letters on the rude copper plate did not resemble those on the coins of Robert I., and that the plate itself was simply a clumsy etching with acid.

Mr Johnston has, however, in this communication, told us who the guilty parties really were, and as they have, I believe, now all passed away, it seems almost a pity that their memories should thus be recalled as taking part in a thoughtless and rather stupid attempt at a hoax, of which I have no doubt they were very soon after most thoroughly ashamed.