

III.

JOHN KNOX'S HOUSE, NETHERBOW, EDINBURGH. BY SIR DANIEL WILSON, LL.D., F.R.S.E., HON. MEM. S.A. SCOT.

Among the picturesque features of historical interest which claim a special value as relics of Edinburgh in the olden time, none attracts more general notice than the tenement in the Netherbow, familiarly recognised as John Knox's house.

The Reformer's occasional and frequently interrupted residence in Edinburgh, from the date of his return to Scotland in 1559 till his death thirteen years thereafter, would, in the absence of authentic evidence, seem to be inconsistent with the probability of his repeated return from his prolonged wanderings to the same abode. But the venerable structure which still stands at the foot of the High Street has for some generations been an object of interest, not only to the citizens of Edinburgh, but to many visitors from distant lands, owing to its association with his name as the assumed manse provided for him as first minister of St Giles Church.

That the lodging both of the Abbot of Dunfermline and the first minister of St Giles was in the Netherbow has been established on undisputable evidence; and the vague survival of this fact no doubt had its share in the final assignment of the house which the veneration of later times has associated with the memory of the great Reformer. His biographer rested his statement that John Knox removed to the lodging of Abbot Durie on the trustworthy authority of an entry in the Burgh Records; and tradition completed the coveted evidence by identifying

the house, which for at least three generations has been regarded with devout reverence, as his dwelling-place throughout those eventful years, in which, amid the strife of civil war and embittered theological conflict, the brave Reformer fought the good fight, and finished his course.

Happily, whatever reasons there may be for reviewing the evidence which has long sufficed to give currency to a popular tradition, the picturesque building assumed to have been the town mansion of the abbots of Dunfermline still constitutes a notable feature among the survivals of that sixteenth century, when Scottish abbots and other church dignitaries were falling into disrepute. With its antique gabled architecture, its ingenious emblematic sculptures, its heraldic decorations and inscriptions, it is replete with interest as a relic of older centuries, and of an obsolete style of building, altogether apart from traditional associations either with mitred abbots or with the Reformer.

It is with extreme reluctance that I venture on a reconsideration of the evidence that has long been accepted in proof of the location of so many striking personal incidents pertaining to the life and times of the great Reformer in the antique building known as "John Knox's House." Had it rested with myself alone, I should have preferred to leave the associations undisturbed on ascertaining that the actual lodging in which the first Protestant minister of St Giles succeeded the last Abbot of Dunfermline had, while still unidentified, been involved in the indiscriminating ravages of an Improvements Commission.

Dr M'Crie's statement that John Knox removed from his temporary residence in the house of David Forrester "to the lodging which had belonged to Durie, Abbot of Dunfermline" proves to be strictly correct, though later historians and local topographers have failed to note that it was not as his immediate successor. Accepting his statement without verification, and superadding to it the assumption that the traditional identification of the house at the Netherbow rests on no less indisputable authority, subsequent writers have given free rein to their fancy, and supplemented the available facts with manifold amplifications of detail.

But tradition having assumed the identification of the picturesque old house at the Netherbow as the manse of the Reformer, busied itself in later years in specifying every detail, and associating each nook and

cranny with some real or fancied incident in his chequered career—the window through which he was shot at, the study where he plied his busy pen, and the room in which his eventful life drew to its end. Fancy having, as is believed, the actual house on hand, might be pardoned thus entering on the tempting process of transmuting probabilities into fact, but the process is a misleading one, and the appetite of credulity having been once whetted, the first probabilities were supplemented, not only by “the preaching window,” but by a subterranean baptistery in which the Reformer was credited with secretly administering the sacrament, as in the catacombs of Rome during the persecutions of Nero and Diocletian.

The evidence is now indisputable as to Knox’s first abode having been in the house in Trunk Close, or Turing’s Close, as it was formerly called.

There is nothing inconsistent with probability in the tradition which was revived at the beginning of the present century, and has ever since assigned the house in the Netherbow as Knox’s latest home. Why need we, in the absence of any proof to the contrary, renounce the pleasant belief that, after all, the great Reformer did actually spend his last days in the venerable lodging associated with his name? that it was in its chamber that my Lords of Morton, Boyd, and the Laird of Drumlanrig held their last conference with him? that the Lord Lindsay, Lord Ruthven, and the Earl of Glencairn were visitors there? and that it was to the old fabric still standing in the Netherbow that he returned from his last sermon in St Giles Church? We look in vain in the contemporary narratives of the closing scenes of the Reformer’s life, furnished by his devoted attendant Richard Bannatyne, and by Mr Thomas Smeton, for the definite information they could so readily have given, but which would then have been superfluous. Smeton described his last sermon in St Giles Church, on the 9th of November 1572, and then adds: “After he had pronounced the blessing upon the people with a mind more cheerful than usual, but with a weak body, and leaning upon his staff, he departed, accompanied by almost the whole assembly, to his house, from which he did not again come forth in life.” Some memories transmitted from older times recalled, in the beginning of the present century, the associations of the locality. Let us be thankful for

the tradition that connected anew the picturesque building in the Netherbow with the name of the great Reformer. It has other associations of genuine historical interest belonging to his age, and giving it strong claims on the protecting care of all who value such links with past generations and the national history. Yet, had it not been for the faith in it as the former abode of John Knox, its doom would have been sealed in 1849, when the Dean of Guild condemned it as a ruinous fabric, dangerous to the lieges, and an encumbrance to the street.

I sketched the old fabric when it seemed to be reduced to its last stage of decrepitude, and regretted afterwards that I allowed the drawing to be engraved for my *Memorials of Edinburgh*. But it suffices to show the ruinous condition into which it had then fallen. An ill-regulated spirit of veneration had combined, after a fashion of its own, with careless negligence and the inevitable effects of time, to reduce the old building to such a dilapidated and unsightly condition that it was hard to persuade the ordinary citizen that the time-worn, battered structure was worth preserving. The idea, moreover, had got possession of the popular mind that if the old house could be got rid of, it would lead to a general widening of the street; and I have a vivid remembrance of the response of a wealthy citizen, who at the latter date was a liberal co-operator in the preservation of some of the choicest features of Old Edinburgh. When appealed to to aid in preventing the demolition of the ruinous tenement, his reply was that he would not give a shilling to preserve it, but would willingly contribute five pounds towards clearing it out of the way. Its doom was accordingly accepted as inevitable; and the erection of a memorial church on its site was advocated by zealous venerators of Knox as the only means left for preserving his name in association with the locality. Misguided zeal had helped to disfigure the building, and effectually disguised some of its choicest attractions. The curious bas-reliefs on the west front, now recognisable by all as the delivery of the Divine Law to Moses, had been transformed into a ridiculous caricature of the Reformer. So entirely had the true significance of the sculpture and the accompanying inscription been lost sight of that in 1825 it was thus described even by so careful and intelligent an observer as Robert Chambers: "Close beneath the window there has long existed a curious effigy of the

Reformer stuck upon the corner, and apparently holding forth to the passers-by. Of this no features were for a long time discernible till Mr Dryden (then tenant of the house) took shame to himself for the neglect it was experiencing, and got it daubed over in glaring oil colours, at his own expense. Thus a red nose and two intensely black eyes were brought strongly out on the mass of face; and a pair of white iron Geneva bands with a new black gown completed the resuscitation."¹ But this was one of the later stages of transformation which effectually obscured the true meaning of the sculpture. A pulpit, with canopy and desk, obviously modelled after that of St George's Church, and probably therefore about the date of 1814, had been superadded, not without serious mutilation of the kneeling figure. The absurd transformation was rendered still more ridiculous by a subsequent appendage of a precentor in his desk under the pulpit; while the key which the inscription supplies to the meaning of the bas-relief was hidden under modern signboards. At some much earlier date the so-called "preaching window, from which, says tradition, he preached to the populace assembled below,"² had been stuck on over another of the sculptured decorations, the recovery of which, as will be seen, furnished a valuable clue to the history of the building, and its first occupants. As to the story of the preaching window, it is a modern invention, wholly inconsistent with the actions of the bold Reformer who in 1559 preached on four successive days in St Andrews Cathedral in defiance of the Archbishop, controverted the articles of Quintine Kennedy in his own Abbey of Crossragwell, and fearlessly rebuked Lord Darnley from the pulpit of St Giles Church. Veneration and neglect combined in the defacement and dilapidation of the old house; and its ruin had been wellnigh completed by breaking out a door in the west front in place of a small window, the removal of the lintel of which threatened the downfall of the wall. Such was the condition of "John Knox's house" when in 1849 the Society of Antiquaries interposed; and with the aid of others who venerated the memory of Scotland's great Reformer, after tedious negotiations, the interdict of the Dean of Guild was withdrawn, and the work of restoration proceeded with.

Mr James Smith, her Majesty's Master Mason, and a Fellow of this

¹ *Traditions of Edinburgh*, 1st ed., p. 241.

² *Ibid.*, p. 240.

Society, gave his efficient services gratuitously in the superintendence of the work. Mr Handyside Ritchie, a favourite pupil of the great Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen, undertook the removal of the tasteless excrescences and the restoration of the mutilated carving. The curious piece of mediæval allegory thus freed from obscurity and restored to its original expressive significance has long been familiar to a younger generation. It is unique of its class, and dissimilar from any other of the many ingenious emblematic devices once so common on the older dwellings of the Scottish capital. It is therefore well calculated to stimulate enquiry as to the builder of the tenement, to whose taste or professional sympathies the characteristic sculptures may be due. They seemed indeed no inappropriate adornment for the town lodging of a mitred abbot and senator of the College of Justice; nor were they less suitable for the manse of the dauntless Reformer to whom Scotland owed the new evangel. The Hebrew lawgiver is represented as kneeling on the mount, and stretching out his hand to receive the tables of the law. Jehovah appears under the figure of the Sun of Righteousness, veiled in clouds, on the further side; while from the brightness of its effulgence the divine glory descends obliquely in rays of light towards Moses. The disc of the emblematic luminary is inscribed in Greek, Latin, and English, ΘΕΟΣ . DEVS . GOD, and on the entablature below, extending along the whole main front of the building, is carved in large Roman characters the epitome of the ten commandments which the Hebrew prophet is receiving: LVFE . GOD . ABVFE . AL . AND . YI . NYCTBOVR . AS . YI . SELF.

The unity of the whole design is thus apparent. The sculpture and inscriptions are complementary features in this representation of the giving forth of the law on Mount Sinai, when "the Lord called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud; and the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel" (Exod. xxiv. 16, 17). For upwards of forty years this significant piece of symbolic sculpture has been freed from its vulgar obscurations and defacement, yet, such is the tenacity of any long-current popular belief, that the text of Mr James Grant's *Old and New Edinburgh*, published so recently as 1882, perpetuates the misdirected zeal of a past generation, as though no effort had been made to strip the genuine

sculpture of its spurious disguisings. The reader is gravely told by this historian of *Old and New Edinburgh* that, "perched upon the corner above the entrance door is a small and hideous effigy of the Reformer preaching in a pulpit; and pointing with his right hand above his head towards a rude sculpture of the sun bursting out from amid the clouds."¹ The allegorical significance of the ingenious device, as now restored to its true condition, with the epitome of the decalogue as a component part of the design, perpetuates a singularly interesting embodiment of the spirit of that transitional period which everywhere followed in the wake of the Renaissance. Wholly apart from any associations claimed for it with the great Reformer, the preservation of the old building, with its unique decorations, is a matter of congratulation to every one capable of appreciating this highly characteristic memorial of one of the most memorable periods of our national history.

The Divine Lawgiver and the Hebrew prophet, with the symbolic prefigurement of the giving forth of the law, and the epitome of the ten commandments, might perhaps scarcely accord with the popular estimation of abbots and other church dignitaries in the age of the Reformation. Yet the ingenious sacred sculpture could not be regarded as out of place on the town lodging of an abbot, though the terms in which Knox refers to Abbot Durie are inconsistent enough with the appropriateness of any symbolism of Divine law and justice. But the historian of the Reformation penned his narrative amid the bitterest controversial strife, and in the heat of civil war. He introduces his supposed predecessor in the old lodging as principal in a nefarious scheme devised by "the preasts and the schavin sorte" for the betrayal of the Castle of St Andrews in 1546; and again as one of the pair of "cruelle beastis, the Bishope of Sanctandros and Abbot of Dumfermling," conjoined to compass the death of Sir John Melville. But so different was his estimation by the adherents of the old faith that, according to Dempster, he was canonised two years after his death.² But however appropriate the sculptured allegory might be as the adornment of the lodging of any eminent church dignitary, the evidence relied upon for assigning the house in the

¹ *Old and New Edinburgh*, vol. i. p. 214.

² Knox's *Hist.*, vol. i. pp. 183, 224.

Netherbow as the residence of the Abbot of Dunfermline proves to be misleading. The main building is a well-finished piece of masonry, consisting of squared and polished ashlar, with moulded cornices, string-courses, and pilasters. But to this additions of a less substantial nature had been made from time to time; and on the removal of some of the later timber work an ornate and well-finished window-frame of stone was brought to light, and beneath it an elaborately-sculptured panel bearing the arms and initials of the original builders.

This discovery effectually disposed of much vague tradition relative to the old structure; for there, enclosed within a sculptured wreath, is a shield bearing on a chevron three crowns, with three oak-trees, two and one, in the field; and on either side of the shield the initials I. M. and M. A. With the help of this clue to the owner, and guided in part by evidence derived from Stoddart's *Scottish Arms* and the Register of the Great Seal, there can be little hesitation in assigning the erection of the house to James Mosman, burgess and goldsmith of Edinburgh, a zealous adherent of Queen Mary, and a keen participator in the embittered conflict of rival factions after her deposition. The identification is confirmed by the accompanying initials, M. A., no doubt those of the owner's wife. It appears from the Register of the Great Seal that in 1570, Edward Hume, burgess of Edinburgh, "vendidit dicto Jacob Mosman et Mariote Arres ejus sponse terras de Langhermandstoun in Baronie de Currie." He was the son of John Mosman, goldsmith, a man of note and influence in his day, under whose direction skilled workmen were brought from Germany, Holland, and Lorraine, in the reign of James V., and employed in working the mines, from which returns in gold and silver were eagerly looked for. The elder Mosman was, moreover, the skilled artificer who in 1540 remade the Scottish crown, now carefully guarded in the crown-room of the Castle, and which, with the sceptre and the sword of state, constitute the Honours of Scotland. He also made the crown of James's royal consort, Mary of Guise. It was natural that in the conflict of parties and opinions which pre-eminently marked the period subsequent to the death of James V. the royal goldsmith should be found on the side of the Crown. His son may be presumed to have inherited his wealth and shared his opinions. They

proved for him a fatal inheritance amid the troubles of this transitional period, when men had to take sides as Queen's men or King's men in the struggle that ensued.

The further history of the ancient tenement which still stands at the Netherbow confirms the evidence furnished by its heraldic decoration as to its original owner. Whoever may have been its later occupants, it remained the property of the old goldsmith; and on his execution as a traitor passed, as part of his forfeited estate, to the Crown. As appears from the Register of the Great Seal, James VI. in the same year granted to John Carmichael, Yr., of that Ilk, certain houses in Edinburgh, including "tenementum apud lie Netherbow dicti burgi de Edinburg que Regi dixerunt ob forisfacturam Jacobi Mosman aurifabri olim burgensis de Edinburg." The various items thus enumerated: the arms, the initials of the old burgess and his wife, and this confirmation of his ownership and forfeiture of the tenement in the Netherbow, establish beyond any reasonable doubt that James Mosman, the son of the royal goldsmith of James V., was the builder and possessor of the ancient lodging still decorated with his arms. Trained, as we may assume, under his father's care as a skilled artificer, with such artistic culture as was calculated to fit him for practising the highest branches of the goldsmith's art, it is not surprising that his house at the Netherbow should present an exceptional amount of ingenious fancy in the decorations and inscriptions with which it is adorned. As characteristic survivals of a past age and of a critical period in the national history, they are of genuine interest and value now. But they have a further significance from the evidence they supply of the influence of the change in thought and feeling that followed in the wake of the revival of learning, and affected many who still adhered to the ancient faith.

It is apparent from the facts adduced that, apart from the long-accepted tradition pointing out the last home of John Knox, and all real or fancied relations of the picturesque old tenement in the Netherbow with the great Scottish Reformer, or, as Beza styles him, "the Apostle of the Scots," it is indisputably associated with another citizen of note, and with the historical events in which Knox played so prominent a part.