

Post-Reformation Catholic houses of north-east Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Roman Catholic imagery associated with secular buildings (as distinct from churches) in north-east Scotland took the form of the Arma Christi or arms of Christ and the IHS or Jesus monogram. The former symbol first became popular in the late medieval period and the latter was used by Jesuits as a symbol of Counter-Reformation. Architectural and social history are combined here, the former demonstrating that those images that have survived belong to the post-Reformation period.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with Roman Catholic symbols of the post-Reformation period which were placed on the walls of castles and houses. Catholicism was a regional affair in the early modern period, stronger away from Edinburgh and the central Lowlands and strongest in the north-east. The Catholic heartland was at first in Buchan and Strathbogie, with Deeside and the Enzie (close to Speymouth) becoming more important in the 17th century. Party allegiance was often expressed in religious terms. It seemed natural to the castle-builders and restorers of the time to include symbols of belief either inside the building or, more assertively, on its outer walls.

Although we are not concerned here with imagery in churches it is worth mentioning that religious emblems also decorated family vaults. Indeed the theme of this paper on the imagery in Catholic houses can be introduced through Catholic tombs. Sir John Gordon had a gravestone carved for himself in 1597 at Cairnie Kirk in Strathbogie (NJ 489446): 'A mutilated coffin-slab bears the letters . . . GORD . . . Another piece of rude carving represents a human being in the act of tearing open his breast, and thereby exhibiting the heart' (Jervise 1875, 31). Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was popularized by the Jesuits in the late 16th century. Tombs of this kind were liable to suffer damage when the Calvinist party took to arms, although at Cairnie the iconoclasts cannot have recognized a central part of the symbolism as Catholic (illus 1). Even the highest families in the land were not spared, witness the Earl of Erroll and Constable of Scotland: at Slains Kirk, Collieston (NK 040289) in 1642 'the superstitious Monuments in my lord Erroll's Yle are ordeanit to be demolishit' (Mair 1898, 152).

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ILLUS 1 Carved figure, Cairnie Kirk, Strathbogie

Sometimes the religious statement seems neutral but is not. At Auchanachie (NJ 498469), a small late 16th-century fortified house in Strathbogie, the prayer FROM OVR ENEMIES DEFENDE VS O CHRIST 1594 (Pirie 1906, 27) above the outer door has Catholic significance, since the Gordon laird set off in that year to resist Argyll's Highland army at the battle of Glenlivet. Patrick Gordon of nearby Auchindoun (NJ 349375) was brother to the priest who led his fellow Jesuits in support of the army, hearing confessions and saying mass there, so it is more than likely that the dressed stone which was taken from that castle in the 18th century (Wordsworth 1990, 169) had carved imagery of the kind to be discussed. This rising of the 'popish lords' ended with the virtual destruction of one notable building. Erroll's castle at Old Slains (NK 052301) was reduced to ruins, and there is no way of telling whether Francis Hay, the 10th Earl, employed Catholic symbolism either there or at New Slains (NK 102362). Nothing significant remains in the way of artefacts although New Slains was the headquarters of the Jesuit mission to Scotland during its most active phase in the 1620s (Forbes Leith 1909, 74).

HUNTLY CASTLE, STRATHBOGIE

Erroll's comrade in arms at Glenlivet was George Gordon, from whose seat we have both artefacts and documentary evidence. The damage inflicted in 1594 on Huntly Castle (NJ 532407), the principal Gordon stronghold in Strathbogie, amounted to no more than a token demolition, because 'struck with the beauty of the palace, the King was unwilling to visit it with the drastic fate of the ruder Erroll fortalice' (Simpson 1922, 158). The continuing

Roman Catholic allegiance of the head of the Gordons was later proclaimed in stone above his own arms and those of the monarch as part of 'probably the most splendid heraldic doorway in the British Isles' (Innes 1935, 388). The imagery has been described by Simpson (1960, 16):

This next compartment contains the Five Wounds of Christ (the Pierced Heart, Pierced Hands and Pierced Feet), with the instruments of His Passion, and two supporting figures, probably St Mary and St John. Above is the text (Gal. 6: 14): ABSIT NOBIS GLORIARI NISI IN CRUCE DOMINI NOSTRI JESU CHRISTI, 'God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.' . . . Over this is a circular panel (likewise defaced) displaying the Risen Christ in glory, within a circle of clouds, accompanied by the proclamation DIVINA VIRTUTE RESURGO, 'I rise again with divine power'. On one side of this panel is the Scottish lion, and on the other side the twin-headed eagle of the Holy Roman Empire. . . . Above all is the figure of St Michael, the warrior archangel, triumphing over Satan. In 1545 the fourth Earl of Huntly was created a knight of that illustrious French Order of Chivalry.

During the first four decades of the 17th century visitors were greeted by this expression of solidarity with continental Catholics. The panel is dated 1606 (Giles & Simpson 1936, 5), establishing that the imagery was put in place as a Counter-Reformation statement.

The signing of the National Covenant in 1638 signalled a campaign against Charles I's 'prelacy' and led to an armed rising which was even more hostile to 'popery'. When northern hostilities broke out, Huntly Castle was 'not in conditione to be made tenible' (Gordon 1841, 216) and no defence was offered to Munro's Covenanting army in 1640. Thus Roman Catholic symbols 'by the industry of one captain James Wallace (one of Munroes foot captaines) wer hewd and brocke doune off the frontispiece of the house' (Gordon 1841, 211). The same Presbyterian officer was presumably responsible for similar work on the hall's ceremonial fireplace (Simpson 1960, 144, 162). The parallel destruction in 1640 of 'our blissit Lord Jesus Christ his armes' (Spalding 1851, 313) in St Machar's Cathedral is relevant here, with one erasure a precedent for the other. Both followed an act of the Kirk's General Assembly, meeting in Aberdeen that summer, for 'idolatrrouse monuments to bee destroyed in all places, specially in the north, wher they wer said to bee most frequent, such as crucifixes, images of Chryste, Mary, and saintes departed' (Gordon 1841, 217). There is documentary evidence of missing artefacts, almost certainly statues, since the General Assembly appointed 'some brethren to visit the Idolatrous Monuments brought from the late Marques of Huntlie's house,' and later charged 'the Ministers of Edinburgh to take course with the Monuments of Idolatrie brought from the North' (Peterkin 1838, 146).

THE ARMA CHRISTI IN SCOTLAND

The heraldic arms of Christ were the main form of Catholic affirmation in the 16th century as a traditional expression of faith. This took a variety of forms: 'The *Arma Christi* not only honoured Christ with a blazon of arms but gave concrete form to a cult which grew in importance and popularity during the later Middle Ages. The imagery associated with the cult of the Passion instruments and five wounds is sometimes symbolical only, even abstract, as when the wounds are shewn rather than the members which bore them' (Carter 1957, 112). Carter drew attention to the first half of the 16th century as the period of the greatest popularity of the *Arma Christi* in Scotland but made regional points for both pre- and post-Reformation periods. The Mass of the Five Wounds was prominent in the devotions of Old Aberdeen's King's College Chapel as well as in St Machar's Cathedral (Carter 1957, 116) and

eight of Carter's examples come from secular buildings, five of them in north-east Scotland. There is a regional tendency in the imagery itself, with the instruments of the Passion (nails, spear, etc.) being equally in evidence throughout Scotland, but with the Five Wounds being more popular in the north. Carter noted a tendency for the imagery to be found at or near the east coast and linked this with trade routes to the Netherlands and north Germany, 'where Passion symbolism was popular' (Carter 1957, 127). In fact, the European connections of those families which used Catholic symbolism, at least in the post-Reformation period, were more commonly with France.

A GROUP OF ABERDEENSHIRE CASTLES

Roman Catholic symbolism is to be found in four Aberdeenshire castles which were built between c 1565 and 1593 at Gight, Craig of Auchindoir, Delgaty and Towie Barclay. Branches of the Gordons, Hays and Barclays each made a common statement with carved and painted stone. The four castles form a closely related group, and were evidently the work of a school of master masons traditionally identified as the Catholic Cons of Auchry. Heraldic evidence shows that Craig (NJ 422248) was erected by the third laird, James Gordon, shortly after his accession in 1559 (Simpson 1930, 74–5), its religious symbolism clearly Counter-Reformation in purpose. Craig's square entrance vestibule has a ribbed and groined vault with the royal arms in the centre. The ribs spring from four corbel caps, two of which are decorated with shields: the north-west shield bears the arms of William Gordon while on the south-west are the *Arma Christi*. Behind the altered floor levels and wall cladding of the first floor hall is a mural chamber in the north gable, almost certainly an oratory or private chapel.

Gight (NJ 472248) was also a Gordon house, first recorded in 1577. All that remains of its former splendour is the ground floor, where a ribbed and groined vault survives above the square entrance vestibule. Its central ornament, now much worn, is an elaborate *Arma Christi* with the Five Wounds, crown of thorns, ladder, hammer, nails, reed and spear (Simpson 1930, 81–2). There is also a record of a triangular structure consisting of three dressed stones with a cross above the letters MAR for *Maria Angelorum Regina*, 'Mary Queen of the Angels', and underneath a heart pierced by a sword – apparently the upper portion of the chapel's dormer window (Keith 1899, 68). Gight's chapel was ordered to be 'cast down' by the Privy Council in 1608 (Temple 1894, 511).

Delgaty (NJ 755506), near Turriff, which is the third castle of the group, belonged to the Hays. Father John Hay came here to his brother's house, when he returned from France in 1579 to explore the possibilities of a Scottish Counter-Reformation. As the second northern stronghold of the Hays (after Slains), Delgaty was besieged by the royal army for some weeks in 1594. It has no *Arma Christi* but the private room off the much-altered hall has a ribbed and groined vault, consciously Gothic and conservative. This part of Delgaty was almost certainly the work of those same masons who were responsible for Gight and Craig. Over the hall fireplace is the inscription IHS MY. HOYP. IS. IN. YE. LORD, and the date 1570. The IHS monogram (see below) was a Catholic and Jesuit symbol.

Towie Barclay (NJ 744439) has the date 1593 above its doorway. William Barclay was a notable scholar in French exile from the 1570s (Forbes Leith, 1915, 92–4) and the family remained Catholic: John Barclay edited his father's work, which included books on papal authority. In the 1650s Robert Barclay was principal of the Scots College at Paris which educated priests for missionary work in their native land (Hay 1929, 87–90). Once again this castle has the characteristic vaulted vestibule, its central boss bearing the arms of Barclay. The roof of the great



ILLUS 2 *Arma Christi*, Towie Barclay Castle, Buchan

hall has two bays of cross and diagonal ribs meeting at a ridge rib which is punctuated by bosses with heraldic carving, its dimensions virtually identical to those of Craig. Here an oratory set into the thickness of the south gable wall proclaims the religious persuasion of the castle's owner. The corbels for its ribbed vaulting are decorated with the symbols of the Four Evangelists, and the *Arma Christi* forms the central boss (illus 2). Restored in the early 1970s with a blue ceiling lit by gold stars, this chamber (which opens on to the hall below an arch) conveys the desire of these late 16th-century Aberdeenshire lairds to express their faith in stone.

THE WINE TOWER, FRASERBURGH

A notable example of post-Reformation ambivalence is found in a building belonging to Alexander Fraser, 8th Laird of Philorth. In 1592 the royal charter which he received erecting Faithlie into the free port and burgh of Fraser, now Fraserburgh, included a clause permitting the founding of a university. Fraser, as founder and patron, by choosing as the first principal the Revd Charles Ferme, a graduate of the new University of Edinburgh, demonstrated his acceptance of the Reformed Church. Fraser's first wife, however, was a Catholic. Magdalene Ogilvie, of Dunlugas in Banffshire, had two brothers (at least one of them a priest – Giblin 1964, ix) who chose exile in France (Fraser 1879, 9).



ILLUS 3 *Arma Christi*, Wine Tower,
Fraserburgh

Fraser made additions to the castle of Philorth, now Cairnbulg (NK 016639), in order to create a more fashionable house than his grandfather's Kinnaird Castle (NJ 998675) on an exposed headland well suited for its present function as a lighthouse. Another of Fraser's buildings, the curiously named Wine Tower (NJ 999675), stands on the same headland (Bryce 1989). Externally plain, its sole entry is raised high above ground level and was originally reached by ladder. As the lowest chamber is pierced only by a useless diagonal gun-port and the middle chamber above it by a window to the sea, it becomes evident that the entire structure was designed to prevent the viewing of its interior. The uppermost room appears to be a chapel. Set in the arch of the ingoes of each of its four windows is a pendant stone boss, one carved with the arms of Alexander Fraser and his first wife, two others with those of his predecessors, and the fourth with the arms of the earls of Mar and Huntly (Calvinist and Catholic respectively). Three further bosses in the crown of the vault bear the arms of Fraser of Philorth, James VI and, at the north end, the *Arma Christi* (illus 3). As none of the arms is later than those of Alexander Fraser and Magdalene Ogilvie (whose marriage took place in 1570) it is clear that the tower must be the work of the 8th Laird. This is further confirmed by the window sills, which are fashioned to provide triple-splayed shot-holes, an architectural conceit unknown in the north before the 1570s.

THE IHS MONOGRAM

The remaining examples of Catholic symbolism in stone date mainly from the mid-17th century and are variations on the letters IHS. The symbol originated in a medieval cult of the

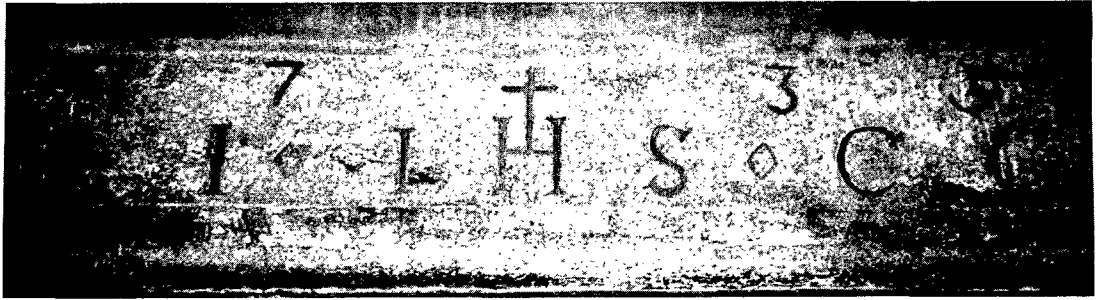


ILLUS 4 IHS monograph, Aboyne Castle, Deeside

Holy Name of Jesus as a Latinized version of the Greek abbreviation I H (Σ O Y) Σ for 'JE(SOU)S'. The letters have also been interpreted (with conscious intention of enriching the meaning) as *Jesus Hominum Salvator* for 'Jesus Saviour of Mankind', and *In Hac Salus*, 'In This (Cross) Salvation' (*OED*). The IHS monogram became a symbol of Counter-Reformation associated with the Society of Jesus. The founder of that order, St Ignatius Loyola, has been portrayed holding a monstrance (used to display the communion host) with IHS superimposed to assert transubstantiation.

The 1st Earl of Aboyne (1634–81) acted as leader of the northern Catholics during the minority of the 4th Marquis of Huntly. The inscription dated 1671 above his main door at Aboyne Castle (NO 526995) expresses that fact, as well as a French influence: O JESUS VOSTRE PASSION ATTIRE MON AFFECTION ('Jesus, your death on the cross draws forth my love'). The IHS symbol has a cross above it (illus 4). Eleven years previously, Lord Charles Gordon (as he then was) played an important part in bringing about the restoration of Charles II and thus felt able to flaunt the Catholicism of a returned exile. The elaborate presentation is partly an expression of social rank. The letters are enclosed within a Sacred Heart pierced stylistically by the spear and nails of the Passion to give added religious emphasis. Uncovered in 1979 during restoration, the imagery above the doorway of Aboyne Castle has not been documented until now. A simpler form of the IHS symbol exists inside a smaller house, Schivas in Buchan, which was once linked with Aboyne in the person of Gilbert Blackhall. He was chaplain to Lady Aboyne between 1638 and 1643 and travelled to several Catholic families on a circuit which included the Grays of Schivas (Stuart 1844, 60). At Schivas (NJ 898368) the symbol is found indoors, above what was formerly an altar in the hall (Wyness 1929, 387).

The latest example of illegal Catholic assertion on the outside of a building is close to Aboyne. The Innes family of Drumgesk and Balnacraig had strong links with the Jacobite court in exile, and their hall-house of Drumgesk (NO 557987?: site now uncertain), where the 'Goodman' (a laird holding his estate from a nobleman rather than the crown) was steward to Aboyne, served as a mass-centre for the area around the turn of the 18th century (Roberts 1990a, 24–5). Following a move across the river to Balnacraig (NO 580982), James Innes



ILLUS 5 IHS monograph, Balnacraig, Deeside

married Catherine Gordon in 1735. She was niece to to the Catholic Bishop James Gordon (whose family home was at Glasterim near Fochabers) and the event was commemorated by a plainer version of the Aboyne IHS – with a cross, but without the nails, spear and Sacred Heart (illus 5). Shortly after Culloden, Balnacraig was threatened with the same destruction by fire which had been visited on the neighbouring Catholic house of Auchinhove (NJ 554024) in April 1746 (Stirton 1929, 17). It may have been at this time that the lady of the house, diplomatic in her dealings with the military (Stirton 1929, 17–21), concealed the symbol; it was rediscovered in the first decade of the present century (Blundell 1909, 16).

Another late example of the IHS monogram is at Fetternear (NJ 723171). Above an elaborate coat of arms over the main entrance is the IHS monogram: ‘It consists of two stones and is without a frame. The upper stone is carved with the sacred monograms IHS (Jesus Hominum Salvator) J[E]H[U]S and MRA (Maria Regina Angelorum) or M[A]R[I]A, a cross being cut centrally above the S and M (Slade 1971, pl 20). The lower stone is inscribed with the initials PL (Patrick Leslie) and MI (Margaret Irvine), the date 1691 and a roughly carved buckle and holly leaf’ (Slade 1971, 187). These last two symbols refer to the arms of the Leslies and the Irvines. The Leslies were scarcely less important than the Gordons and Hays in the Catholic scheme of things and provided a number of leading priests: three Leslie brothers of Balquhain went abroad early in the 17th century and came back to Scotland as Jesuits. The family’s title comes from another northern house nearby but it was Fetternear by Kemnay which became the family’s chief residence in the 17th century.

Driven into exile with other royalists, William Leslie and his son Patrick both rose to prosperity through military service. Patrick Leslie returned in 1690 as a Count of the Holy Roman Empire and redeemed the lands of Fetternear. Although the times were unfavourable for Catholics (with James VII & II so recently driven from the throne), Count Patrick was assertive. His new house was completed in three years, almost certainly on the basis of a plan by the architect James Smith who had studied in the Scots College in Rome under the Jesuit rector William Aloysius Leslie of Balquhain (Roberts 1991, 48). There is a structural similarity between the porch of Fetternear and that of Traquair (NT 330354), the Catholic house near Innerleithen (Slade 1971, 187) with which Smith was also linked. The fire of 1919 which left Fetternear House in its present dangerous condition destroyed a property which had survived an 18th-century ruling that Anthony Leslie could not inherit as ‘a Papist and an alien’. The estate has two 19th-century chapels, the older of which (now in ruins) contains the family vaults. The surviving chapel, built in the 1860s for public worship and still in use, has a metal version of the IHS/MRA motif on the outside wall.

DISCUSSION

The use of visual imagery is especially strong in Roman Catholicism and has been associated, in the minds of Calvinists and others, with graven images. It is clear from the foregoing that (under the broad categories of the *Arma Christi* and the IHS monogram) Catholic symbolism was used long after the laws of Scotland had condemned it. The tendency was associated with castles and houses belonging to the aristocracy and gentry rather than with churches, and with the half-century following the Reformation when a reversal still seemed possible. The return of Catholic exiles in the latter part of the 17th century caused a resurgence of religious imagery, however, and the latest example comes from the middle of the 18th century.

An obvious problem for architectural historians is that so much of the evidence is missing. Religious symbolism provoked acts of destruction, and some north-eastern Catholic houses vanished completely. There is no trace of Pitfodels Castle (NJ 910029), seven miles from Aberdeen, where the Menzies family defied religious change, nor is anything left of Pitfodels Lodging (NJ 944063), their town house in the Castlegate. Other houses remain but have no surviving religious symbols. Drum Castle of the Irvines (NJ 796005) is devoid of Catholic imagery but documentary evidence records that its stonework was defaced during the Troubles of the 1640s (Gordon 1841, 198). The castle of the Gordons of Lesmoir (NJ 470280) has gone, although scattered examples of carved stone survive (Simpson 1932), with defacement implying the former presence of Catholic imagery. Harthill (NJ 687252) is believed to have been set on fire by the last of the Catholic Leith family (Bickley 1937, 103) and the stonework which has been returned to the restored castle is hard to interpret (Simpson 1937, 117).

Much of the evidence is missing, but more may be uncovered as excavators and restorers become alert to the significance of these symbols. This paper has concentrated on one area and two kinds of imagery, but there are similar examples of post-Reformation houses elsewhere, such as Bonshaw (NY 239722) in Dumfriesshire (Maxwell-Irving 1971, 216). There were no doubt other less obvious ways of professing religious allegiance, and certainly less durable ones in the form of wood carvings and painted walls and ceilings (McRoberts 1955). When the religious resistance of north-east Scotland settled (for the majority by the 18th century) into a non-juring episcopalianism, its style was to be interior and mystical (Henderson 1934) rather than assertive in the old Catholic way. The new Catholic way also became subdued at this time, its architectural expression shifting from castles to humbler buildings (Roberts 1990b).

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