

Post-Reformation Catholic symbolism: further and different examples

Ian B D Bryce† and Alasdair Roberts*

ABSTRACT

An earlier discussion of the Arma Christi and the IHS or Jesus monogram (both Roman Catholic symbols) on or inside post-Reformation houses and castles of north-east Scotland is here expanded with further examples of the latter. The final section is concerned with the architectural features known as crosslet gunloops. On the basis of their association with families known to have had Catholic sympathies or connections, it is argued that crosslet or cruciform loops were Christian symbols.

INTRODUCTION

In a previous paper (Bryce & Roberts 1993) it was shown that certain castles and houses of north-east Scotland, built after the 1560 Reformation and even as late as the 18th century, demonstrated the continuing Catholic faith of their owners by means of the *Arma Christi* and the IHS or Jesus monogram. The problem of missing evidence was discussed in relation to castles not merely ruined but destroyed, over two centuries of party conflict, and symbols erased for their ‘popish’ associations. The paper ended with the suggestion that further evidence might emerge as excavators and restorers became alert to the significance of these symbols; also that there could prove to be other less obvious ways of professing religious allegiance (as well as less durable ones in the form of wood carvings and painted walls and ceilings). Further examples of the IHS symbol are presented in the first section of this paper, while a less obvious way of professing religious faith is discussed later.

FURTHER EXAMPLES OF THE IHS MONOGRAM

Fetternear in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 723 171) was used in the previous paper to show the late 17th-century confidence of the Catholic Leslies, based on military achievements against the Turks on behalf of Christian Europe. The Jesus symbol IHS (with its additional MRA for *Maria Regina Angelorum*) above the main entrance was also a reminder of Fr William Aloysius Leslie, Jesuit rector of the Scots College Rome when the carving was made in 1691. Neither the authors nor a previous writer on Fetternear (Slade 1971) thought to consider that the owners of this mansion, who were and remained Leslies of Balquhain, might have used the same symbolism on their former house.

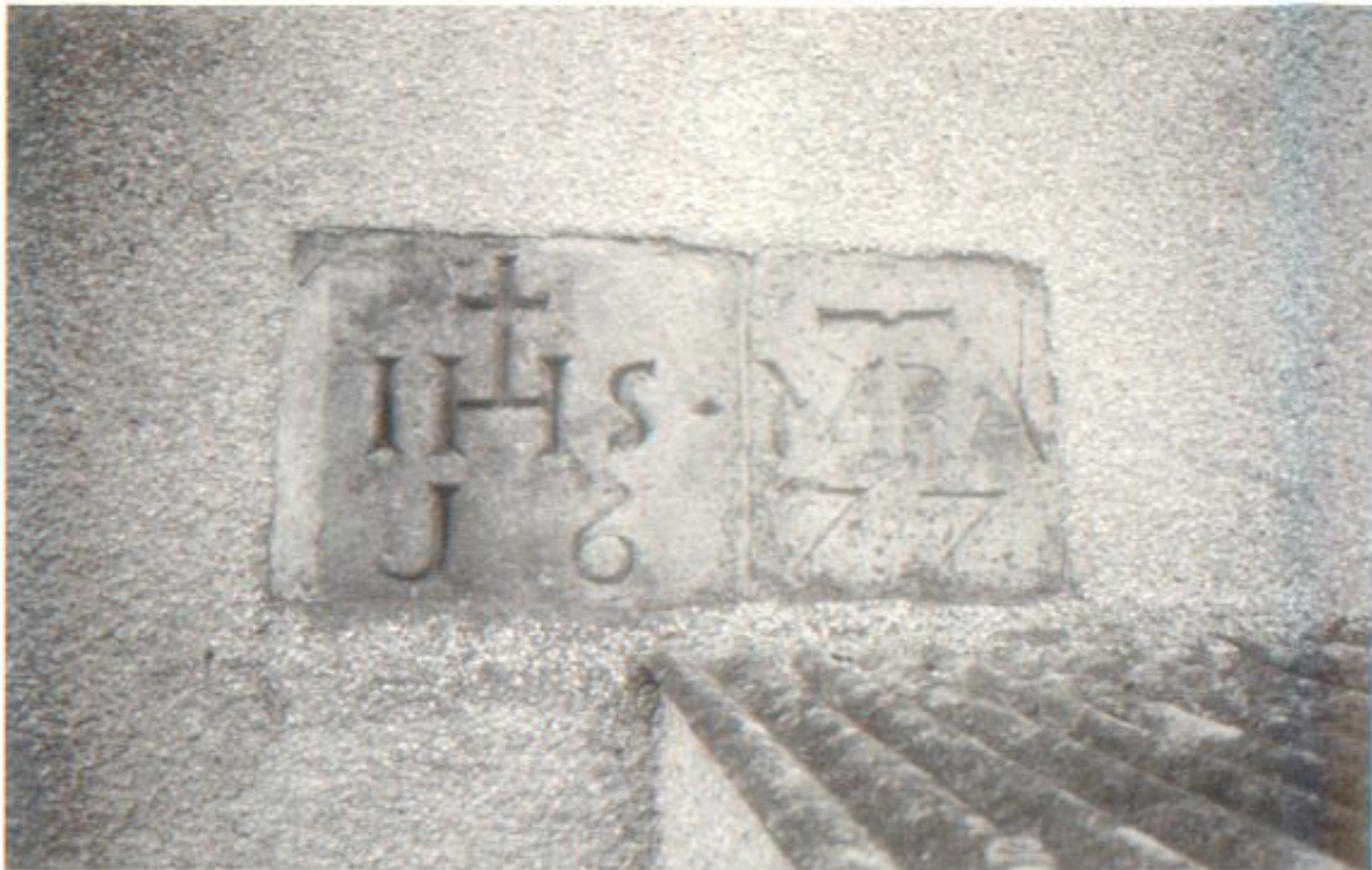
The nearby castle of Balquhain in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 731 236) is no post-Reformation house since its keep dates from the early 16th century (illus 1). Shortly before the Reformation

† 1½ Devanha Terrace, Aberdeen, AB11 7TW.

* 9 South Crown Street, Aberdeen, AB11 7RY



ILLUS 1 Remains of Balquhain Castle

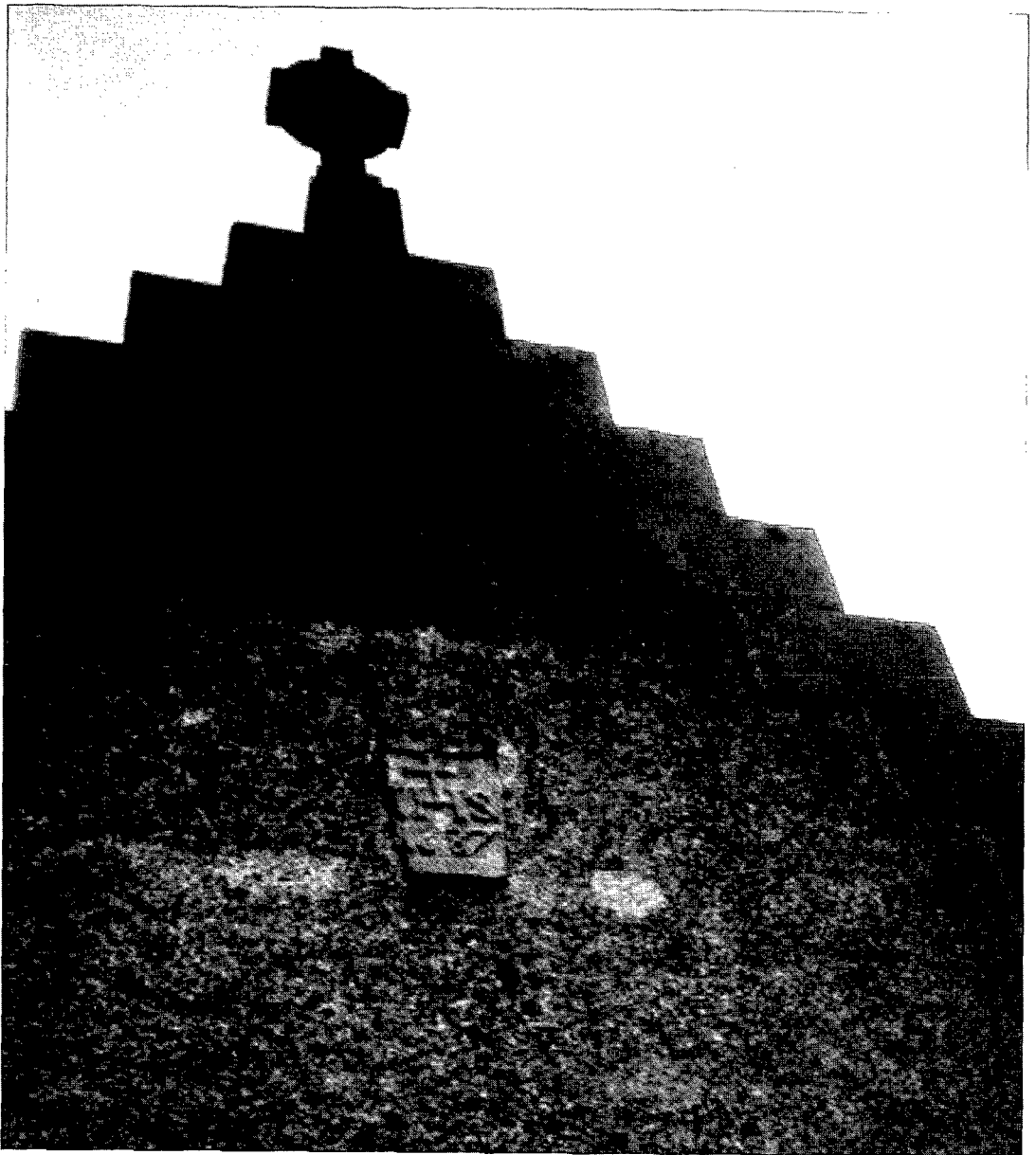


ILLUS 2 Inscribed plaque on a cottage wall at Mains of Balquhain: 'IHS MRA'

Parliament of 1560 the Bishop of Aberdeen transferred his Fetternear summer palace and estate to the Leslies, but Balquhain continued as the family's main residence. Count Walter Leslie's older brother Alexander Leslie, 14th of Balquhain, was head of the house in 1677 when a stone there was inscribed IHS and MRA, with the date. Balquhain was eventually broken up for its 'Roof, Joysts and Flooring (mostly of Oak) . . . with the Iron Stenisons' (Simpson 1936). The religious carving, which may be assumed to have adorned Balquhain's main entrance like its successor at Fetternear, is now built into the wall of a cottage on the farm of Mains of Balquhain (illus 2).

Roman Catholic symbols were removed from churches in the 16th and 17th centuries so it is not surprising that examples of Catholic churches of the post-Reformation period are virtually non-existent. A 20th-century Bishop of Aberdeen, however, drew attention to the former existence of one of these in his own diocese, linking its erection with the fact that during the brief reign of the Catholic James VII & II 'the Tarny or Trinity Church' was handed over to the Catholics of Aberdeen: 'In the North a new church was actually built in the open at St Ninian's in the Enzie' (Bennett 1923, 12). A stone plaque with the IHS symbol, dated 1687, bears testimony to this on the wall of a modern mausoleum in the mainly Catholic graveyard at Braes of Enzie farm (NGR: NJ 393 596), south of Fochabers, and may be assumed to have adorned the former chapel (illus 3). The Catholic Dukes of Gordon were able to protect this building from their seat at Bog o' Gight, close to Speymouth, and it was still in use in 1728 when the ten-year-old heir served mass there. His father died unexpectedly that year and the Duchess brought up her children as Protestants.

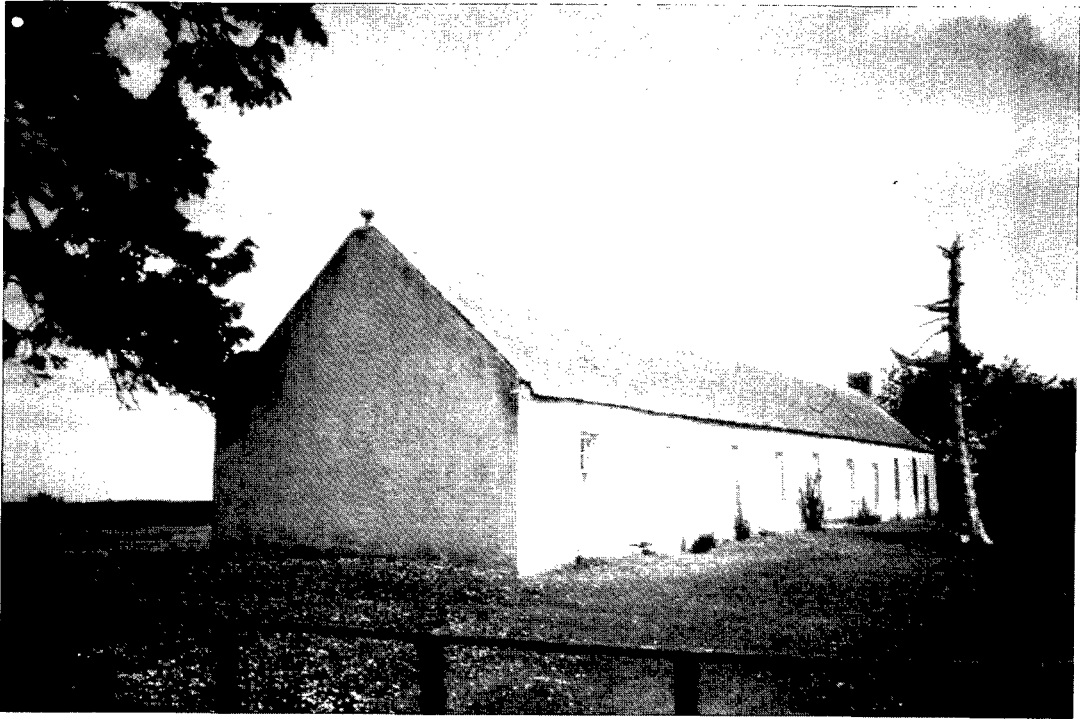
The slated roof of the 1687 chapel (of which no trace remains) was transferred in 1758 to the barn-like structure of St Ninian's Tynet, in Moray (NGR: NJ 379 613) which is the oldest post-Reformation Roman Catholic church in Scotland (illus 4). No symbolism was risked on or even



ILLUS 3 Modern mausoleum at St Ninian's graveyard. Braes of Enzie: 'IHS 1687'

within this deliberately unobtrusive 'Banffshire Bethlehem' (Anson 1947), which takes the plainness of 18th-century church architecture into a new dimension. Later, in striking contrast, the Gordons of Letterfourie took a leading part in erecting the largest Catholic church outside London at nearby Preshome, in Moray (NGR: NJ 410 615) along with a substantial house, later the episcopal residence. Even then the statement above its classical façade was limited to DEO 1788 (illus 5).

The Catholic associations of Beldorney Castle in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 422 369) have been



ILLUS 4 St Ninian's Tynet: Scotland's oldest post-Reformation Catholic church

noted (Slade 1974) but an example of the IHS symbol was then concealed from view. It is in a tower room which family papers show to have been a chapel, close to a concealed room between first and second floors which sheltered the laird during a military search of 1746. In contrast to the tendency in English Catholic houses for priests to come down with their chapels from attic to first floor at the start of the 18th century (Bossy 1975, 127), the worsening conditions for Scottish Catholics show a reverse trend. On the plastered wall of the tower room are the symbols AM for *Ave Maria* and IHS along with a cross, all inconspicuous at about an inch in height. Restrained religious symbolism on plaster suggests a late addition, supporting the view that Síleas MacDonald (the bard of Keppoch in Lochaber) and her husband Alexander Gordon did not move to Beldorney until the opening years of the 18th century (Ó Baoill 1972, xlix; Slade 1974, 264). The same plastered wall also carries, against a background of earlier paintings which deserve separate consideration, a naïve image which appears, in this context, to be a depiction of Christ the Good Shepherd (illus 6). The poetic imagination of Síleas MacDonald may be surmised as its source: this was a woman who sought consolation in religion, and who came from a part of Scotland where outdoor altar stones were gathering-places for public worship (MacDonell & McRoberts 1968).

In a chamber which opens off what was the first-floor hall at Beldorney there is a small garderobe with two windows and two aumbries. A similar but simpler mural chamber with one aumbry, designed for a kneeling priest, has been noted at Craig (NGR: NJ 472 248) (Simpson 1931b, 100). This is clearly where the clergyman donned vestments from the garderobe and kept communion vessels. It would have served as an oratory for his daily private mass, with family and servants gathering in the hall on Sundays and feast days. Two aumbries have been noted in relation to the



ILLUS 5 Classical façade of the late 18th-century Catholic church of St Gregory's, Preshome: 'Deo 1788'

eucharist. Slade gave appropriate attention to what he further identified as a sacrament house, with resemblances noted between this presumed import from the Walla Kirk (nearby on the Deveron) and other examples at Kinkell, Kintore, Cullen, Deskford, Airlie and Auchindoir. Sacrament houses were a 16th-century version of the medieval hanging pyx, a more secure way of reserving and sometimes displaying consecrated hosts. Elsewhere their purpose was indicated by the IHS monogram (Hay 1966, 88). This one was probably brought in from the parish church for safe-keeping, about the time of John Knox's iconoclasm at Perth, and placed above the main entrance as an ogee-headed panel (Slade 1974, 267).

No further examples of *Arma Christi* symbolism in its varying forms have come to light other than those already on record (Carter 1957; Maxwell-Irving 1971; Bryce & Roberts 1993). However, at the castle of Craigston in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 762 550) which was built at the start of the 17th century for John Urquhart, there is a space in the centre of the tower vault which was probably 'the seating for a carved stone or timber boss, which has since been lost' (Slade 1977, 270).



ILLUS 6 Naïve image at Beldorney Castle: 'Christ the Good Shepherd'?

Urquhart's first wife was one of the Catholic Gordons of Cairnborrow. A unique feature at Craigston is the manner in which paint is used to create the impression of a groined Gothic vault, 'with diagonal, longitudinal and transverse ribs', in a way which is reminiscent of the nostalgic Gothic vaulting at Gight, Towie Barclay and Craig of Auchindoir where stone *Arma Christi* have remained in place.

CROSSLET GUNLOOPS

Of all possible Catholic symbols of the post-Reformation period crosslet or cruciform gunloops are the least considered. Their reintroduction has puzzled architectural historians, who have tended to regard them as decorative but meaningless. They have been described as 'curious, . . . of restricted distribution and of retrospective tendencies', with the arbitrariness of different types of shot-holes causing them to be recorded 'without reflection on purpose or practicability' (Cruden 1960, 216, 222). Following the arrival of hand-guns, variations of the vertical arrow-slit emerged: the double-ended or 'dumb-bell' loop with upper and lower oilettes, and the 'keyhole' and 'inverted keyhole' types, where the oilette was placed at top or bottom. The advent of circular gunloops modified by vertical and horizontal slits to form a cross has been noted as the 'curiously archaic-looking crosslet type . . . of questionable efficiency both for purposes of sighting and ventilation' (Stell 1981, 41). The impracticality of some 16th-century gunports, as with 13th-century arrow-slits, has also been noted

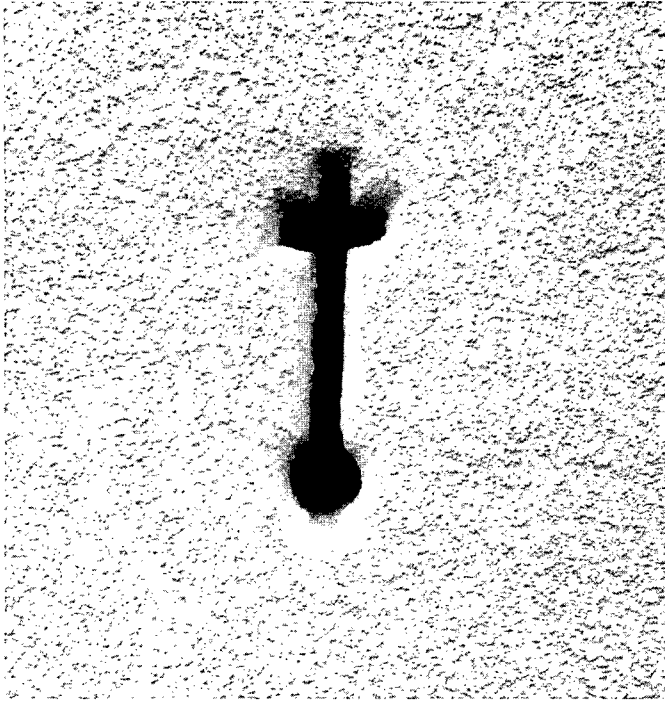
(Stell 1985, 201). Where Scottish examples of crosslet loops appeared after 1560 it was usually in association with wide-mouthed gunloops: castles defended by hand-gun never had crosslet loops alone.

It is argued here that the crosslet loop had a purpose which superseded the obvious practical role of defence and that, in common with the symbols discussed in the first part of this paper, its significance was Christian and Catholic. Its recurrence in north-east Scotland in the late 16th century has received only passing attention (Cruden 1960, 216–17; Maxwell-Irving 1971, 215) but a pattern emerges from the northern Catholic houses already discussed, along with others to be presented here, of castles with crosslet loops being erected by lairds who remained loyal to the old faith or who, having married into Catholic families, were concerned to keep their options open. As has been argued elsewhere (Roberts 1991) wives often had a significant role in guiding the religious ethos of a household.

The question may be considered under the aspects of architectural affinity, family links and political associations, all of which were understood by the builders of late 16th-century castles. Craig, Gight and Towie Barclay provide the best-known examples of crosslet loops, with their close affinities of design (Gothic vaulting enriched by heraldic and sacred motifs), their family links, and their associations with the old French alliance as distinct from the new English-supported Reformation (Simpson 1929, 70–91). The first laird of Gight was third son to the second Earl of Huntly (his mother a sister of Francis Hay, Earl of Errol) while the Gordons of Craig were a junior branch of the same stem. Both families intermarried with the Hays of Delgaty (linked to Errol) and the Barclays of Towie. Mathew Lumsden of Tillycairn, another Aberdeenshire site with crosslet loops (Slade 1982), had a nephew who is held responsible for the painted chapel ceiling of Provost Skene's House in Aberdeen when it was owned by the Catholic Lumsden family in the 1620s (McRoberts 1954, 122). Inverugie seems to deny the idea of crosslet loops as Catholic symbols since its laird, George Keith, Earl Marischal, founded a Protestant university college in Aberdeen. His second wife, however, was Margaret Ogilvie of the Catholic Airlie family. This is reminiscent of the founder of Fraserburgh's university who erected a Catholic chapel for his first wife (Bryce 1989) and warns us against putting such canny old birds into pigeon-holes.

There are other examples. The tower-house of Udney in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 882 268) may date from the 15th century but its upperworks are post-Reformation. A crosslet loop illuminates a mural chamber at first-floor level and cannot, at such a height, be considered a serious defensive feature (Bryce 1974). The Udnys of Udney also illustrate religious ambivalence. In 1589 the 8th laird signed a 'bond in defence of the true [reformed] religion' although married to Matilda Gordon, reputed daughter of the former Bishop of Aberdeen. Their son William 9th of Udney married Helen Cheyne of Arnage, whose uncle was principally responsible for founding the Scots College at Douai which provided seminary training for missionary priests (Wightman 1954, 35).

Crosslet loops were also uncovered in 1982 at Monymusk House in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 688 155). One had been known to exist (Simpson 1924, 46) but two further loops were found in the east wall of the tower-house of c1587, adjacent to the original entrance which was more seriously defended by a wide-mouthed gunloop in the re-entrant angle. The lands of Monymusk were acquired from the former Priory by Duncan Forbes of Corsindae. This was a branch of a family generally thought of as representing the Protestant interest in north-east Scotland. Nevertheless it was patronizing the Scots College at Douai in the mid-17th century (*Records of Scots Colleges* 1906, 36) and one of them whose mother was of Corsindae had his financial generosity acknowledged by a monument in the Scots College at Rome (Gordon 1874, 547). There were family links with the Grays of Schivas in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 898 368) where the IHS monogram is still apparent in the hall (Wyness 1929, 387) and with the Earl of Angus who



ILLUS 7 Crosslet gunloop in the tower, Kininvie House

acted as one of the ‘popish earls’ and died in French exile. A sister of William Forbes of Monymusk married first the laird who placed the *Arma Christi* on the outer wall of Castle Fraser (Slade 1978, 248) and second James Wood of Boniton who was briefly leader of the Catholic party before being executed in 1601 (Shearman 1954, 29).

Further north at Kininvie House in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 319 441) a crosslet loop is visible (illus 7) beside the door of the late 16th-century tower-house (Tranter 1970, 63). If the two tuskars in the gable indicate the line of the barmkin wall then the crosslet would have been discreetly hidden from passers-by, unlike a second loop outside the barmkin which is a simple slit. The lands of Kininvie were acquired by Alexander Leslie, a grandson of William Leslie, 4th Baron of Balquhain. The castle was probably built by the Robert Leslie who ‘improved his estates and brought them into good condition’ and married Elizabeth Gordon of Beldorney (Leslie 1869, 340, 346). There were cousins to Kininvie at New Leslie in Aberdeenshire (NGR: NJ 598 254) of whom one, George Leslie, entered the Scots College at Douai in 1628 (*Records of Scots Colleges* 1906, 24, 199) and became a Jesuit priest in the footsteps of three Leslie brothers of Conrack (Bryce & Roberts 1997). Finally, on the outer edge of the network of Catholic houses and families under discussion is the now ruinous tower-house of Inschoch, in Highland (NGR: NH 936 567). Its crosslet loop, somewhat obscured by rubble and not hitherto recorded, is situated in the wall of a cellar beneath the western end of the main block. The castle was built by the Hays of Lochloy, a cadet branch of the Errol family. At a later stage the laird of Inschoch rode out as a Covenanter, but that does not deny the likelihood that his forebear was a Catholic like Francis Hay, Earl of Errol.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to widen the context of post-Reformation Catholic symbolism which was discussed by the authors in a previous paper (Bryce & Roberts 1993), and to show that there was a spectrum from assertiveness to concealment. Symbols are only provocative to those who understand their meaning, and the crosslet or cruciform gunloop aroused no obvious hostility in north-east Scotland. The claim concerning its religious significance is novel and may provoke debate. Negative examples, ie crosslet loops on houses which were anti-Catholic after the Reformation, would certainly call into question the claim that these were religious symbols (although not if they had been put in place before 1560) but the hidden complexities of family history can sometimes surprise the modern inheritors of a proudly Protestant tradition. This is an area where documentary history (in an area itself obscured and underplayed by the official records of the victors) can sometimes be used to fill the gaps, offering strong circumstantial evidence where artefacts are of uncertain significance. When the crosslet loop is placed in the context of families with known Catholic connections, and alongside other artefacts such as the *Arma Christi* and the IHS monogram, it becomes easy to see it as a symbol of traditional, embattled, Christianity.

REFERENCES

- Anson, P F 1947 *The Banffshire Bethlehem, St Ninian's Tynet: Scotland's Oldest Post-Reformation Catholic Church*. Aberdeen.
- Bennett, G 1923 *Scottish Catholics under the Penal Laws*. Edinburgh.
- Bossy, J 1975 *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850*. London.
- Bryce, I B D 1974 'Castle of the month: Udney', *Aberdeen Leopard* (Nov 1974), 38–9.
- Bryce, I B D 1989 'The Wine Tower, Fraserburgh', *Double Tressure (J Heraldry Soc Scot)*, 11 (1989), 3–14.
- Bryce, I B D & Roberts A 1993 'Post-Reformation Catholic houses of north-east Scotland', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 123 (1993), 363–72.
- Bryce, I B D & Roberts, A 1997 'Conrack, New Leslie and the suppression of the Catholic North', *Northern Scotland*, 17 (1997), 1–16.
- Carter, C 1957 'The *Arma Christi* in Scotland', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 90 (1956–7), 112–29.
- Cruden, S 1960 *The Scottish Castle*. Edinburgh.
- Gordon, J F S 1874 *The Catholic Church in Scotland*. Aberdeen.
- Hay, G 1966 'Sacrament house at Fowlis Wester', *Innes Rev*, 15 (1966), 88.
- Leslie, C 1869 *Historical Records of the Family of Leslie*, vol 3. Edinburgh.
- MacDonell, A and McRoberts, D R 1968 'The mass stones of Lochaber', *Innes Rev*, 17 (1968), 71–81.
- McRoberts, D R 1956 'Provost Skene's House in Aberdeen, and its Catholic chapel', *Innes Rev*, 5 (1956), 119–24.
- Maxwell-Irving, A M T 1971 'Early firearms and their influence on the military and domestic architecture of the Borders', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 103 (1970–1), 192–224.
- Ó Baoill, C 1972 *Bárdachd Shílis na Ceapach: Poems and Songs by Síleas MacDonald*. Edinburgh.
- Roberts, A 1991 'The role of women in Scottish Catholic survival', *Scot Hist Rev* (1991), 129–50.
- Shearman, F 1954 'James Wood of Boniton', *Innes Rev*, 5 (1954), 28–32.
- Simpson, W D 1924 'The Augustinian priory and parish church of Monymusk, Aberdeenshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 59 (1924–5), 34–71.
- Simpson, W D 1929 'The castle of Craig and the kirk of Auchindoir', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 44 (1929), 70–91.
- Simpson, W D 1931a 'Three Banffshire castles', *Trans Banffshire Field Club*, 75 (1931), 69–96.
- Simpson, W D 1931b 'Lesmoir Castle and the Church of Essie: with some further notes on Auchindoir', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 64 (1931–2), 48–101.
- Simpson, W D 1936 'Balquhain Castle, Aberdeenshire', *Aberdeen Univ Rev*, 23 (July 1936), 1–5.

- Slade, H G 1971 'The house of Fetternear: a history and a description', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 103 (1970–1), 178–91.
- Slade, H G 1974 'Beldorney Castle, Aberdeenshire: an early Z-plan tower house', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 105 (1972–4), 262–80.
- Slade, H G 1977 'Craigston Castle, Aberdeenshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 108 (1976–7), 262–99.
- Slade, H G 1982 'Tillycairn Castle, Aberdeenshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 112 (1982), 497–517.
- Stell, G 1981 'Late medieval defences in Scotland' in Caldwell, D H (ed) *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications, 1100–1800*. Edinburgh.
- Stell, G 1985 'The Scottish medieval castle: form, function and "evolution"', Stringer, K J (ed.) *Essays on the Nobility of Medieval Scotland*. Edinburgh.
- Wightman, W P D 1954 'James Cheyne of Arnage', *Aberdeen Univ Rev*, 35 (1954), 369–83.
- Wyness, F 1929 'The House of Schivas, Aberdeenshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 63 (1928–9), 384–91.