

MYSTICAL ROSLYN

The grand secrets which cleave to the stones of Roslyn Chapel are as rich in vivid life as when these stones were laid nearly five centuries ago. Their complete apprehension is for the spiritual man alone. The worldly behold only a vista of carven pillars, an involved mass of petrified foliage, a grotesquerie of sculptured fable. But even at the first step the visionary comprehends the nature of this labyrinth and more especially so if he be knowledgeable of that region in the literature of Romance where lies the traditional Arthurian, born of Celtic wonder and tempered to a passionate but exquisite poetry by the mystical genius of the Norman.

The heroes of this "Matter of Britain," as the old minstrels dubbed it, in quest of the highest of earthly rewards, and riding with jingling bridle through the arches of the forest, invariably halt at a chapel so environed by woodland as at first to be hardly distinguishable from it. They dismount and enter. In that instant they are men enchanted, upraised and glorified, their hearts and souls penetrated by the ineffable wonder of supernatural experience, be spelled by the amazement of the divine. They realize that at long last they have arrived at the goal of their quest. And so it is that such as these enter the gates of Roslyn, which is indeed the Chapel of the Grail.

And if we piously peruse the details of the sacred chapel to be found in these immortal books, we shall realize that they are reproduced in their entirety in the spiritual fantastic architecture of Roslyn. There is nothing quite like it in Scotland or England, nay, there is nothing approaching its uniqueness in Europe, for it is assuredly a terrestrial reproduction of that visionary shrine of which the Norman poets dreamed.

The masters of architectural science combine to deride the principles upon which it was constructed. It belongs, they say, to no given school or period, it reveals no national traits. But the standards by which the Courts of Paradise were up building we can but guess at. You may remind me, if you choose, that this so-called chapel is but the forlorn choir of what was intended to be a great cathedral church. For such an end, indeed, it was designed by man. But Heaven dissented, and so a chapel it remained.

Fourteen nations, says legend, conspired at the building of Roslyn. Nay, the whole earth paid it tribute of symbolic device. The East sent it quaint designs of fantasy, borne hence by the memories of pilgrim and crusader. Only seven years before its first stone was laid on the bluff which towers above the long afforested glen Byzantium had crashed, falling like a pyramid stored with a thousands marvels, its glittering wreckage drifting across the sere and rugged West like the spoils of a magic galley. Even so, its reflections in Roslyn are darker than the shadows seen in a mirror of silver. Even the types of paynim Morocco are to be faintly described here, and this has inspired some to find in it resemblances with the jewel-like chapels of Portugal. But none who apprehends the secrecies of divinity will or can deny that the chisel of celestial purpose drove here miraculously and indelibly. Roslyn is a chapel in Heaven wondrously transplanted to earth.

At the time of its building the associations of the Church with the art of masonry had well-nigh come to an end. Until that period the art of ecclesiastical architecture had been mainly cultivated and directed by priest and prelate. This is not to say that the builder's craft was wholly exercised by men in holy orders, for guilds of operative masons had functioned in all parts of Europe since Roman times. Societies of

working masons, known in France as "compagnonnages" and in the German states as "steinmetzen", were in active existence at the time in which Roslyn was built. That a craft brotherhood of such operative masons may have had their headquarters at Kilwinning in Ayrshire appears as not improbable, but the circumstances of their edification of the great abbey there is so commingled with legend that care seems indicated in dealing with the claim. And Edinburgh had also a mother lodge of operative masons of equal or of even greater antiquity.

It was from some such craft brotherhood as these, I am convinced, that William St. Clair of Roslyn, the third Earl or "Prince" of Orkney, drew the nucleus of that establishment of skilled artisans who were to undertake the erection of the Church of St. Matthew at Roslyn. But to this corps of Scottish builders, we are aware, he added craftsmen from abroad, masons, smiths and carpenters. That he was his own architect appears as not improbable, for he seems to have had much experience in the art and is described as one "given to policy, as building of castles, palaces and churches."

In the year 1446 Sir William initiated his great work at Roslyn. A patent tradition alleges that he was granted the privilege of Grand Master of the Scottish Masons by King James II and that this honor became hereditary in his family. The documents which endorsed it are said to have perished in the fire at Roslyn castle in 1447, although the later charters granted by the Masonic craft to the baron of that day in 1630 lay stress upon the hereditary character of the privilege and make allusion to the destruction of the older documents by which he held it.

We must then envisage the hill above the glen as the scene of extraordinary undertakings. The draft plans of the carved designs were, in the first instance, drawn upon wooden blocks and were then chiseled out by carpenters so that they represented the piece or section in its completeness. These were then passed on to the masons as patterns. The process was a protracted one, copying as it did nearly forty years from first to last.

It is these carvings which compose the chief glory of Roslyn. And first as to those which represent what may be described as "vegetal symbolism" and which fill practically every space in the chapel not otherwise occupied by more strictly "pictorial" themes. The significance attached to such emblems in church folk-lore is recognized. The fern, for example, signifies sincerity, but has a still profounder meaning, for its seed was believed to confer invisibility on him who carried it about him. The trefoil implies constancy, and in another and more sacred sense the Trinity, in this resembling the shamrock. Primarily the oak stands for honor, but has a deeper and more mystical history harking back to Druidic times. The kail, which appears so frequently on the walls of Roslyn, has deep roots in Scottish superstition, as those who have read Burn's "Halloween" will recall.

But there is one piece of vegetal symbolism at Roslyn which must not pass unnoticed. That is the face with foliage crossing the mouth sculptured on a capital of one of the pillars near the Lady Chapel on the right aisle, which is known as "the Green man." Now "the Green Man," a theme common to many English churches, has been proved by the researches of Lord and Lady Raglan to be a form of the legendary Robin Hood, who, as we are now aware, was no outlaw, but the spirit of god of the woodland. It is a striking fact that Roslyn was one of the chief centers where the drama of Robin Hood was enacted, the several parts in it being taken by the gypsies who furnished the dramatis personae of

the ancient masque, a the stage of which was set on the Stanks of Roslyn, a low-lying mead to the north-west of the Castle. The towers assigned to these players at Roslyn Castle as lodgings were indeed known as "Robin Hood" and "Little John." Such conditions were upheld until the Reformation, when the "game and play of Robin Hood" was forbidden much to the popular disappointment.

Outstanding indeed is the Pentice Pillar, with its marvelous wreathing. The legend associated with it is familiar to most. It is said that the Master Mason of the work at Roslyn had received from the founder the model of a pillar of marvelous design, the shaping of which he was to undertake. But before commencing work upon it, he resolved to examine and study the original, which was situated in a foreign milieu. In his absence one of his apprentices undertook and completed the task, which so enraged the Master that on his return he slew the lad with a blow of his mallet. It is believed that this tradition has prevailed in the family of St. Clair since the period of the building of the chapel.

But, as I indicated elsewhere many years ago, the legend of the pillar bears a certain resemblance to that, so familiar to Freemasons, which tells of the assassination of Hiram Abiff, the architect of the Temple of Solomon, who was slain by his jealous underlings because of his superior skill in the builder's art. He also was done to death with a mallet, and was probably the artificer of the two marvelous pillars Jachin and Boaz, which stood at the entrance to the Temple. It seems not improbable that the Hebrew story came to be attached in some manner by the men of the mason's craft to the church of Roslyn. At the top of the roof at the west corner is the sculpture of a head with a scar on the right temple which is said to represent the hapless apprentice, while another head elsewhere in the building is thought to be that of the Master who slew him, and a third the mother of the victim. So does tradition readily discover proofs by which to justify its vagaries.

The dragons which twine and cluster at the base of the Prentice Pillar I formerly believed to be of Norse design. But the type is so deeply implanted in our earliest Scottish sculptural forms, dating from the seventh century onward, that I now prefer to label it "Caledonian" for want of a more precise denomination. I feel, too, that much the same may be said of the sculptures of the elephant and the camel as discovered in our chapel, the former being abundantly, if erroneously, displayed in our early "Pictish" carvings, notably at Dunfallandy and Glenferness, while the camel appears more than once, as at Canna, in Invernesshire and less palpably on the famous stone at St. Vigean's.

But allegory at Roslyn may be said to begin with the Dance of Death depicted on a rib of the groined roof above the right-hand aisle. It contains sixteen figures representative of the various classes of society at an epoch when these were defined with feudal exactitude - the abbot, the abbess, a lady with a mirror, a bishop, a cardinal, a courtier, a king, ploughman, carpenter, gardener, hunter, a child, a married pair, a husbandman, and one which is mutilated beyond recognition. Each is companioned by a skeleton and the whole company follows the tradition as expressed in many Continental churches, more especially in the Minorite cloister at Paris, completed in 1424.

The Dance of Death was, of course, a stock piece of the medieval artist, and when we say "medieval" it is well to keep in mind that Roslyn reveals scarcely a hint of debt to the half-born spirit of the Renaissance which began to reveal its influence in Southern Europe only during the period of its edification. In any case, the Dance of Death

at Roslyn is a sculptured representation of the gloomy pageant, which is usually a subject of the brush rather than the chisel.

Scriptural subjects naturally predominate in the riot of sculptured magnificence which is Roslyn - the abortive sacrifice of Isaac, the annunciation, Christ in the Temple, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Fall of Man, the Expulsion from Eden, the Prodigal Son - a veritable "Bible in Stone" as it has eloquently been described. Some of the lesser and more detached pieces reveal signs of high aesthetic feeling and so forcibly remind us of those incidental sculptures which once decorated the interior of the contemporary Trinity College Church in Edinburgh that we are almost compelled to believe that they came from one and the same chisel.

In one corner we have a man playing the bagpipes, a common subject for church decoration at the period, to be found in half-a-dozen English shrines. The vices are depicted on the west side of the architrave in a manner strikingly pictorial, while Satan gropes for their victims with a searching hook. One pillar displays the lion and unicorn in combat, a theme as old as Babylon, and attached to which is the legend that the lion, before attacking the unicorn, permits that stakeless beast to make the first charge. This he avoids, the unicorn impales a tree with his horn, and as he struggles to disengage himself from it, the lion springs upon him and slays him. In the commonplace of myth the twain represents the sun and the moon.

Some of the carvings on the corbels of the niches in the windows invite attention. One of these represents the Nine Orders of the Angelic Hierarchy - Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, and so forth, as enumerated by Dionysius, the so-called Areopagite, that man illuminated. In fact, most of the windows are devoted to carven studies in Angelology, and the amateur of that most alluring department of Celestial Sciences can glean great treasures here.

Two lovers who snuggle together stand almost cheek by jowl with the Devil. On the exterior of the chapel one can see a jovial carving of a fox carrying off a goose, the rhythms of which seem those of the pencil rather than the chisel. Here gargoyles gape. Here is expressed the "joi de vivre" of the happy and potent craftsman all his glory.

I must not omit mention of the legend that on the death of a St. Clair the chapel appears as if in flames. It is the theme of one of Scott's finest ballads, which contains at least two imperishable lines:

"And glimmered all the dead
men's mail,"

which is eclipsed only by the last strophe:

"But the sea holds lovely
Rosabelle,"

a line which for sheer loveliness in sound and sense and in its spacious and imaginative sweep and vision is scarcely to be surpassed. The superstition concerning the phenomenon is perhaps explained by the possibility that the St. Clair's, Lords of Orkney, had in the past been cremated at death after the manner of the pagan chieftains of that island.

Nothing can shake my conviction that Roslyn was built according to the pattern of the Chapel of the Grail as pictured in Norman romance, and that William St. Clair had in his poet's mind a vision of the Chapel Perilous when he set hand to the work. He triumphed, fashioned an enchanted cavern of stone carven in a hundred curious shapes, a gem of glorious medieval achievement. As for its architectural critics,

they remind me of those censors who judge poetry by rule and line and not according to the canon spiritual.

Those carven splendors might create the power of vision even in the hands of a blind man groping along the walls of Roslyn, on which the colors of Heaven slant down even on the darkest day.

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