

ROSSLYN CHAPEL: A LEGACY IN STONE

By W/B David P. Stuard, Jr.

Just seven miles from Edinburgh, on the edge of the beautiful Esk valley, stands one of the most intriguing structures in the world, the mysterious Rosslyn Chapel. Designed and built by the third and last Prince of Orkney, Sir William St. Clair, it is a monument to craftsmanship, bristling with flying buttresses and gargoyles in the highest gothic style on the exterior, its interior covered with curious carvings representing Egyptian, Celtic, Jewish, Templar, and Masonic symbolism. Entangled pyramids, Celtic Green Men, images of Jerusalem and of Moses, engrailed Crosses, and Squares and Compasses abound, along with images depicting Maize and Aloe, chiseled fifty years before Columbus's famous voyages. These are said to confirm speculation that Sir William's grandfather, Prince Henry St. Clair, also known as Henry the Navigator, may have reached the New World one hundred years earlier, naming it *Novae Scotiae*, or New Scotland. It is a testament to days past, a library carved in stone ciphers, an attempt to impart arcane knowledge in something more durable than paper; knowledge hidden in plain sight, to be understood only by those with the intellect to decode it. Even its name "Rosslyn" is significant; the two syllables "Ross" and "Lyn" are Gaelic in origin, "Ross" denotes "ancient knowledge" and "Lyn" meaning "down the ages".

Many claims, superstitions, and theories add to the aura of mystery and intrigue surrounding Rosslyn Chapel. Part of this mystique arises from the known associations of the St. Clair family of Scotland with the Templar and Masonic orders. It is known that Sir William himself was of the order of the Knights of the Golden Fleece. It is also a fact that one of the founders of the Knights Templar, Sir Hugues de Payen, was married to Katherine St. Clair, and it was he who directed the Templar excavations beneath the ruins of King Solomon's temple. It has been theorized by many that what they uncovered set them at odds with the Church, causing the Holy See to turn against them in 1307. Fleeing to Orkney, they were taken in and befriended by the relatives of Katherine and Hugues, among them Sir William St. Clair, who then designed and built the Chapel as an exact replica of the temple atop Mount Moriah, following their descriptions. St. Clair masterminded the entire operation himself, from its inception until his death in 1484, just two years before its completion. He personally supervised every detail of the construction, drawing plans on trestle boards from which carpenters created wooden models for his approval before being sent to the masons to replicate in stone. Father Richard Hay, the principal authority on the history of the chapel and of the St. Clair family, wrote that,

"Prince William, his age creeping up on him, came to consider how he had spent his times past, and how he was to spend his remaining days. Therefore, to the end that he might not seem unthankful to God for the benefices he received from Him, it came into his mind to build a house for God's service, of most curious design. The foundation of this work he caused to be lain in the year of our Lord 1446, and to the end that it might be done with greater glory and splendor, he caused artificers to be brought from other regions and foreign kingdoms, and caused daily to be present all manner of workmen, as masons, carpenters, smiths, barrowmen, and quarriers. And because he thought they had no convenient place to lodge in, he made them build the town of Rosslyn, and gave each one a house and lands, paying each according to his degree, to the Master Mason he gave Forty Pounds a year, and to the rest, Ten."

Many Masonic marks can be found in the elaborate engravings of Rosslyn, which is not surprising given the number of stonemasons employed in its construction, but the obvious symbolic design of the building and of its carvings point to a more speculative Masonic intent. Rosslyn chapel is not just an interpretation of the ruins at Jerusalem; as far as the foundation plan is concerned, it is an exact copy, carefully executed in every detail. The unfinished sections of the great western wall are there. The main walls and the pillar arrangements fit like a glove, with the pillars of Boaz and Jachin standing precisely at the eastern end of what would be the inner temple. A Seal of Solomon (known today as a Star of David) can be formed from the alignment of the columns between the entrance and the Triple Tau, exactly as described in the Royal Arch degree today. At the very center of this arrangement, in the arched roof above, there is a large suspended boss in the shape of an arrowhead, which points straight down to a keystone in the floor below. This spot corresponds exactly with the middle of the "Holy of Holies" where the Arc of the Covenant was placed in the temple at Jerusalem. It is believed that this keystone is the one which must be raised in order to enter the reconstructed vaults of the temple and recover the lost Nasorean Scrolls.

One particular aspect of Rosslyn chapel that merits special consideration is the so called "Apprentice Pillar", which echoes the Masonic legend of the murder of Hiram Abiff during the building of King Solomon's temple. The importance of this single column was such that the Master Mason in charge of its construction journeyed to Rome for instructions and inspirations. Upon his return he found that his ambitious apprentice had completed the pillar in his absence, and made of it an exquisite masterpiece. Enraged with jealousy, he struck the lad dead on the spot. Whether this is true or not is unsure, but it is known that the Bishop of St. Andrews obtained the Pope's permission to delay the consecration of the chapel because a violent deed had taken place. One of the carvings, referred to as the "Son of the Widow" depicts a young man with a gash on his forehead. The pillar itself is symbolic of the "Tree of Life", with luxuriant carvings coiling down its length. At its base lie eight winged serpents which have tasted of evil's forbidden fruit. Adding to the mystery is the inscription, "Here beneath this pillar lies the Head of God". It is said that the pillar conceals at its center a leaden casket containing the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, and which was later used to collect his blood at Golgotha. Metal detectors have been trained on the column, and there is indeed an object of the appropriate size buried within, however the St. Clair family, clinging to the Scottish "Right of Sepulchre", even today adamantly refuses to allow the Apprentice Pillar to be X-rayed.

It is important to note that the St. Clairs have steadfastly guarded Rosslyn's secrets for centuries, even refusing to submit to the Protestant Reformation and remaining Roman Catholic, while the entire country changed around them. For many years, the chapel subsisted upon a generous endowment by its founder, with provisions for a Provost, six Prebendaries, and two Cloisters, but records show that on February 26, 1571, the Provost and all his company resigned, as a result of their endowments being taken by "force and violence", into secular hands, as the Reformation took hold. In 1589 the Presbytery records of nearby Dalkieth describe Rosslyn as "a house and monument of idolatrie, and not ane place appointit for teaching the word and ministratioun of ye sacramentis".

Finally, in 1592, Oliver St. Clair was summoned before the General Assembly and ordered to destroy the altars at Rosslyn. Under threat of excommunication, he complied, and the chapel ceased to be used as a house of worship, falling into disrepair.

But even in its decline, the power of Rosslyn to enchant was strong. During the civil war of 1650, Cromwell's Roundheads swarmed the countryside, destroying everything in their path,

including nearby Rosslyn Castle. General Monk was using the chapel as a stable, but Cromwell took one look and ordered his men to spare it. Was Cromwell, himself a Grand Master of Masons, showing respect for the building's many Masonic symbols, or was he perhaps privy to its secrets? This conjecture is not so far-fetched when one considers the close links that the St. Clairs had and in fact continue to share with Freemasonry today. The St. Clair men were the Hereditary Grand Masters of Ancient Freemasonry in Scotland for centuries, as documented in the famous Schaw Statutes of 1602. Charters confirming this in 1630 still exist. The St. Clairs held this position until another Sir William St. Clair voluntarily gave it up in 1736. This led to the creation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, which promptly elected him its first Grand Master.

Many documents would seem to suggest that the Chapel was designed to hide something of great importance, that a treasure or some sacred object lay hidden beneath its foundations, guarded by the many Templar knights who were buried there, alongside those illustrious members of the St. Clair family, from Prince Henry St. Clair (Henry the Navigator), whom the first Sir William had exhumed and placed into its vaults, to a later Sir William St. Clair, who fell at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650, each interred full in battle armour. The "Theatrum Scotiae" of 1693 states that "the Lairds of Rosslyn lay in a vault so dry that their bodies have been found entire after four score years, and as fresh as when they were buried."

It also states that a great fortune amounting to some millions was hidden in the vaults, giving rise to the speculation that the treasure of the Templars, sought after but not found by Philip IV, might be buried there as well. These vaults, which recent soundings indicate run the entire length of the foundation, and which have lain unopened for centuries, are thought to be the repository for many sacred objects as well, relics of the Templar excavations in Jerusalem. Among those items which rumor attributes to Rosslyn are: The Lost Scrolls of the Temple, The Arc of the Covenant, The Holy Grail, The Holy Rood (a fragment of the true cross), and even the mummified head of Jesus himself. There is a legend that states that if one stands upon a certain step and blows a horn, a vast treasure will be revealed. It is also reported that the entire chapel glows like fire whenever a descendant of the Prince of Orkney dies. Sir Walter Scott wrote of this in his "Lay of the Last Minstrel", in which he paid homage to "that chapel proud, where Roslin's chiefs uncoffined lie".

Today the chapel is in use once again, having been greatly restored by the heirs of Rosslyn, the St. Clair family, who continue to administer it according to the restrictions imposed by the Historic Scotland Society. No excavations are permitted, although they have allowed the use of echo-sounding equipment on the grounds. These soundings indicate a large chamber beneath the ground, just outside the walls of the chapel. Is this the vault of the St. Clairs, with perhaps only its entrance lying hidden beneath the keystone in the floor? Lord Niven St. Clair, the current Earl of Rosslyn, isn't saying. He maintains that the secrets of Rosslyn are not buried at all, but are in fact concealed in plain sight, in the ornate stonemasonry that adorns the interior. It is these, he says, that contain Sir William's message to posterity, and if they could be decoded, would reveal the true meaning and purpose of Rosslyn Chapel. Both the Freemasons and the Knights Templar agree; they say the carvings comprise a secret code which, if broken, will reveal the whereabouts of a great treasure. They refer to the Companion's Jewel of the Royal Arch, which proclaims, "If thou canst comprehend these things, thou knowest enough". This much is certain, Rosslyn Chapel is a "book in stone", which brings in all the apostolic religion, laid over by an astrological encryption. Nothing is missing but the Key.

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