

James V: "King of the Commons"

A brief genealogy and some anecdotal evidence in the form of entertaining stories!

The House of Stewart which became the ruling house of Scotland, had its origins in Celtic France in the County of Dol in Brittany.² This fact might seem to place the Stewarts in the position of incomers. A perusal of their background however enables the claim to be made that their origins gave them a kinship with the largely Celtic Scots, which neither the House of Bruce or Baliol, being respectively Norman and Picard in origin, could claim.³ Certainly, by the time the Stewarts became the royal family of Scotland their credentials as domiciled and loyal Scots had been well established.

The Stewarts were descended from a kinsman of the Count of Dol in Brittany, one Fleald or Flahault. In the eleventh century this Breton doing what most younger sons of French houses did at this time, sought his fortune in the new Franco-Scandinavian kingdom which England had become after the Norman Conquest in 1066.⁴

Fleald's move to England appears to have met with success for, by the end of the century, he is reported as having a Lordship in the March of Wales. What is not recorded however is what services he had performed for this reward. Fleald's son Alan succeeded to the Lordship and was made Sheriff of Shropshire by Henry I, the son of William the Conqueror. The son of this Alan was to become the first Scottish Stewart and the founder of a House whose male line came to an end in 1807 with the death in Italy of Prince Henry Benedict, a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church.⁵

How did the success of the Breton adventurer in England translate into the founding of the Royal House of Stewart? Henry I of England married a Scottish Princess, Eadgyth, known in English history as Matilda or Maud. Eadgyth was the daughter of Malcolm Canmore and his wife Margaret. By this marriage Henry hoped to strengthen his hand against the Norman Barons who were actively hostile to him. In the eyes of his English subjects the children of Malcolm and Margaret were the rightful heirs to the English

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Society on 15 October 1992.

² Agnes Mure McKenzie, *The Rise of the Stewarts*, London, (1935) p. 5.

³ Gordon Donaldson, *Scottish Kings*, London, (1967) pp. 20-2.

⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, transl. & coll. by Anne Savage, (1982) p. 191; Mary MacGregor, *The Story of France*, London, p. 77; McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵ *The Royal House of Stewart*, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, (1958) p. 62; A. McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Crown. The marriage of course also gave prestige to Eadgyth's brothers in Scotland.⁵

The Scots, meantime, were in the throes of a succession dispute between Donald Ban, the brother of Malcolm Canmore, who claimed the throne through the old law of Tanistry which had operated North of the Forth, and Edgar, Malcolm and Margaret's heir.⁶ Eadgyth had her two youngest brothers Alexander and David brought to England for safety. They were brought up and married in England, eventually returning to Scotland to claim their heritage. Alexander to rule the northern half and David the southern. In the end David ruled all of Scotland as David I.⁷

When David returned to Scotland he took with him certain friends among whom was Walter, a son of Sheriff Alan. Alan had in fact three sons, Jourdain who had the Breton heritage, William who succeeded to the English lands and founded the House of the Fitzalan Earls of Arundel, and of course Walter. David made Walter his High Steward (the chief officer of the Royal Household), and endowed him with lands in Kyle and Renfrew. In 1158 the office of High Steward was made hereditary in his family. Walter the High Steward who lived through the reigns of David I and Malcolm IV died in 1177, during the reign of William I, being buried in Paisley Abbey, which he had founded.⁸ Walter's son Alan succeeded to his lands and title, passing these on to his son Walter when he died in 1204.

This Walter was the first to take his official title as a surname. He had the title of Justiciar added to that of High Steward by Alexander II. He married a daughter of the Earl of Angus and had one daughter and three sons. The daughter married Neil, Earl of Carrick, John who died on a Crusade, Alexander who was the mainline. The third son Walter married the co-heiress of Menteith, eventually succeeding to the undivided Earldom, and founded the first cadet branch of the dynasty: the Lennox Stewarts.⁹

The main line heir Alexander, married the daughter of MacRuari or Macrorie of Bute,¹⁰ who was descended from Somerled, King of Man and the Isles, who in earlier times had fought against Norman and Saxon influences in Scotland. This marriage brought Alexander lands adjacent to his own and enabled him to command the Firth of Clyde. He took a leading part in the Battle of Largs, that broke the menace of Norway for good and gave the far North and the Isles to Scotland.

5 P. Hume Brown, *History of Scotland*, 3 vols, Cambridge, (1909) vol. 1, p. 67; *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 198 and 240.

6 P. Hume Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

7 *Ibid*, pp. 69 -70.

8 A. McKenzie, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

9 *Ibid*, p. 10.

10 Muirheartach is old gaelic, and Mc Urdardaigh, modern gaelic; the modern translation is McKirdy or McCurdy.

Alexander had two sons James and John, and a daughter Elizabeth. James fell heir to the Stewardship in 1283, and married the sister of the Earl of Ulster. In the dispute over the Scottish Succession, he and his brother and brother-in-law supported the claim of Bruce of Annandale, but the succession was settled on the infant daughter of Margaret, Queen of Norway the only representative of the male line surviving; but the young princess died on the sea voyage to Scotland.¹¹

James Stewart fought with Wallace at Stirling Bridge, and when he died in 1309 Scotland had been won back to the line of the Tay, and King Robert had held his first Parliament at St. Andrews. Walter son of James and the sixth hereditary High Steward married the Princess Marjorie, daughter of Robert the Bruce. They had a son Robert, who was brought into the direct line of succession to the Scottish throne by the death of his mother, his uncle Edward Bruce, and the deaths of the King's other three brothers, all childless, on English scaffolds.¹² On the death of Robert the Bruce's son David II, Robert Stewart succeeded to the throne of Scotland, and was crowned Robert II on 26th of March 1371, at the age of 54; the first of a long line of Stewart Kings.¹³

The period of the first Stewarts has usually been regarded as one of chronic misery and arrested national development. Yet compared to the history of England and France throughout the same period, Scotland was relatively stable; no Wars of the Roses, no bloody and protracted feud as that between the Burgundians and the Armagnacs, after the danger from England had ceased.¹⁴ There was a steady expansion along every line of social progress; in the fifteenth century three universities were founded, a succession of poets testifies to the existence of educated opinion, there was a prosperous burgher class, and there is the testimony of foreigners that the country was largely under cultivation, and the poorer farm workers lived on better terms than their fellows elsewhere.¹⁵

Whatever faults emerged in the rule of succeeding Stewart Kings, one thing was very much in their favour. This was their vision of Scotland as a whole nation. The Stewarts tried to rule Scotland as one nation Highland and Lowland, peasant, burgher and noble. This concept appeared under James I (1406-1437),¹⁶ but it is during the reign of James V that the concept became a reality.

11 A. McKenzie, p. 12; G. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

12 A. McKenzie, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

13 *Ibid*, p. 61; G. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

14 At this time a truce of fourteen years was still extant.

15 A. McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

16 G. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

When James V succeeded to the throne of Scotland in 1513, the House of Stewart was well and truly ensconced as the ruling house of the nation. James has not had a very good press from historians in general. In particular a perusal of Professor Gordon Donaldson's writing on James V shows a decided bias against James, in fact he dubs him 'the ill-beloved'¹⁷ and a succession of historians have applied more colourful language in disparaging him; he was considered to be a very unsavoury character.¹⁸ James it would appear appealed to nobody. He was compared unfavourably with his father James IV who was hailed as a great hero. But he was a dead hero. Is it because James V had the effrontery to die in bed instead of on the battlefield that he is reviled? Not particularly, but it might have helped his case if he had. There are many reasons that could be given for the alleged unpopularity of James V. It is sufficient for the moment to say that it is reported that many people did not like him.¹⁹ How then do we reconcile the expression of intense dislike with the character of the "King of the Commons"?

Of all the Scottish Kings, except Robert I, James V would appear to have been the most popular among the common folk. The designation under which his subjects knew him attest to the general affection with which he was regarded. He was the "King of the Commons", the poor man's King, the Red Tod (fox).²⁰ The commons are said to have loved him as their protector. If the concern for his poorer subjects which is attributed to him, was genuine, then his popularity would be well deserved. Without deeper research into the subject there is no way to disprove or prove the extent to which stories of his popularity are true. So for the moment we will accept them at face value.

James V had an inherent love of justice and the special gift of adapting himself to all ranks of people, though the latter has on occasion been seen as a fault by some historians.²¹ James V's care and concern for his people is shown in his extraordinary personal exertions to secure justice for his subjects. Numerous edicts for regulating the inferior courts were introduced as well as better education for the executors of the law. He revived the appointment of an advocate for the poor; he issued letters for the protection of tenants against eviction; his proposals for the abolition of mortuary dues levied by the church, and reform of the teind system were in the interest of smaller men. Professor Donaldson quotes a near contemporary writer who says, 'that James earned goodwill because his people lived quietly and in rest out of oppression and molestation of the nobility and rich men'.²²

17 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

18 Frequently used adjectives describing James V: cynical, opportunist, ruthless, acquisitive, covetous.

19 P. Hume Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 379-380; Gordon Donaldson, *James V-James VII*, Vol.3, *Edinburgh History of Scotland*, Edinburgh, (1965 repr. 1978) pp. 54-55.

20 P. Hume Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

21 G. Donaldson, *Scottish Kings*, p. 170.

22 G. Donaldson, *James V-James VII*, p. 56.

To his age also are credited the first printed *Acts of Parliament*, which he caused to be circulated among the Sheriffs not only that they might be read to ignorant people, but also so that no one could claim to be unfamiliar with the Government's edicts. Under his auspices many improvements were introduced in the machinery of the law. A regular record of the criminal court called the "Books of Adjournal" were instituted and he built the first Register House ever to exist in Scotland. This building was housed within the walls of the Castle and there the national muniments were stored.²³

James V may also be said to have been the first Scottish monarch who specially supported the spread of national literature. He had Boeche's *History of Scotland* translated both in prose and verse, as well as the works of Livy and others of the Latin Classics, all of which he paid for out of Treasury. He also contributed toward elevating the native tongue, not only by his own pen but also by the confidential places assigned in the Court to Sir David Lyndsay, Sir James Foulis the poet who was his Secretary, and other writers in the Scots language.²⁴

It was James V's habit to assume various disguises and to mingle freely with his subjects, with the double purpose of ascertaining their wishes and gratifying his own love of adventure.²⁵ There was of course another facet to James, that of the poet. His wanderings evidently supplied him with material which would otherwise have been denied him. He has been credited with the authorship of *Christ's Kirk on the Green*, *The Gaberlunzie Man* and *The Jolly Beggar*. It is quite probable that these works were by James V. They appear to be expressions of personal experience. They have lively descriptions of scenes of peasant life, and are full of broad vigorous national humour. But where or when they were composed remains a mystery. The above appear to be the only known works extant attributed to James V. Whether there were more that have been lost or whether he produced only these three is unknown. James Paterson has no doubt whatsoever of the authorship of these poetic works. Paterson sees them as being personal observations rather than fiction.²⁶ James, says Paterson, patronised the amusements of the people and aimed to elevate them. He liked to study their character to understand their circumstances better. He occasionally took part incognito in their fireside gossip. The higher classes of these days were no doubt better exercised in those chivalrous and knightly accomplishments considered indispensable. But when James V disguised himself as a Gaberlunzie or a wandering minstrel, and ranted and sang at the peasants fireside overnight, he mixed with people equally learned with the generality of the Barons.²⁷

23 James Paterson, *James the Fifth*, Edinburgh, (1861) pp. 301-302.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 298.

25 P. Hume Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

26 J. Paterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-137.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

James V's usual disguise when travelling incognito was as a farmer the Gudeman of Ballengeich. Perhaps he was less successfully disguised than he supposed for the Gudeman of Ballengeich became almost a synonym for the King (One could be very cynical and say that his kind reception in strange houses at odd times may have been due to this recognition). As Caroline Bingham says, 'his brilliant red hair, his tall stature and steely grey eyes would have been hard to disguise'.²⁸ This is not necessarily correct as he would not have been the only man in Scotland answering to that description. It must have made for interesting speculation when such a person appeared on someone's doorstep. But according to Paterson, James V did not always travel for the purposes of gallantry and the love of personal adventure. The administration of justice was frequently dealt with summarily and effectively under the cloak of adventure; he was sometimes known to attack bandits singly or at least with only a few of his courtly attendants.²⁹

James V's adventures in disguise are mentioned by historians but offer very little in the way of proof. What is available is mostly anecdotal and should be treated cautiously. The anecdotes even if apocryphal are, however, entertaining and do no harm. The title "King of the Commons", which is also synonymous with James V, would seem to be taken for granted even by his detractors. What the stories do provide is material for the romancer. The King figures a principal character in many stories; but tracing their authenticity is impossible.

James Paterson says that Sir Walter Scott very happily introduced the King as traditionally portrayed in the *Lady of The Lake* in which a single fight occurs between him as Fitzjames and Roderick Dhu. Paterson further tells of a dramatic production, *Cramond Brig*, played at the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh in the late nineteenth century, which brought into play the James V's love of justice and his love of adventure. Scott, in his notes on the *Lady of the Lake*, has the King as the suitor of a pretty young girl. Four or five persons, whether rival suitors or relatives, beset him as he returned from a rendezvous. The King took post on the high and narrow bridge over the River Almond and defended himself with his sword. A peasant who was thrashing grain in a neighbouring barn came out to investigate the noise, and proceeded to weigh in on the weaker side. He laid about him so effectively that the assailants were dispersed. He then conducted the victim into his barn where his guest requested a basin and towel to remove the traces of the brawl. James then questioned his deliverer as to his dearest wish and found he desired to possess the farm of Braehead, upon which he laboured as a bondsman. The lands chanced to belong to the Crown and James directed him to call at the Palace of Holyrood, and ask for the Gudeman of Ballengeich. This he did and found to his astonishment that he had saved his monarch's life. He was to be

²⁸ Caroline Bingham, *James V King of Scots*, London.

²⁹ J. Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

rewarded with a Crown Charter of the lands of Braehead, on the service of presenting a ewer basin and towel to the King to wash his hands, should he happen to pass the Bridge of Cramond.³⁰

The Howiesons of Braehead whose representatives held the property of Braehead held it on the tenure represented. This service was performed by William Howieson Crawford, younger of Braehead when George IV visited Edinburgh in 1822. The supporters in the arms of the Howiesons are two husbandmen, one holding a flail, the other a basin and napkin. The Howiesons, however, date back further than James V. John Howieson was a Burgess of Edinburgh in 1450, and James Howieson had a charter of Cramond Regis in 1465. In the reign of James V, when the incident occurred with the bandits and he was so ably assisted by Jock Howieson and his flail, the Howiesons seem to have held King's Cramond from the Crown; the gift conferred at this time may have consisted of the lands and croft in the burgh of Cramond, of which Jock Howieson had a charter of confirmation in 1579 from James VI.³¹

The story told of Buchanan of Auchmar and Arnpryor is slightly different but it displays another side to James V. The king was in residence at Stirling Castle which necessitated the carriage of provisions to the Royal Household. These were carried along a common road which passed near Arnpryors house. He, having some extraordinary occasion, ordered one of the carriers to leave his load at his house, where he would pay for it. The carrier refused saying that his goods were for the King, but Arnpryor insisted and finally compelled the carrier to do his bidding, telling him that if King James was King of Scotland he was King of Kippen, so it was reasonable that he should share with his neighbour King. The carrier related the story to some of the Kings servants and it soon got to the ears of the King. Shortly afterwards James and a few attendants came to visit Buchanan of Arnpryor who was at dinner. A servant was despatched to demand access but was refused by a tall fellow wielding a battleaxe. After a further request was denied the King ordered the porter to tell his master that the Gudeman of Ballengeich desired to speak to the King of Kippen. This brought Arnpryor in a hurry, full of apologies, and he proceeded to entertain the King lavishly. The two got on famously and James allowed that his host could help himself to any provisions carried on the road as the occasion arose. James invited Arnpryor to visit the Castle and they continued in friendship. Arnpryor was thereafter allowed to use the title King of Kippen until he died.³²

Another anecdotal story is related by Alexander Campbell from the *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*. James, being separated from his attendants

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

³² Buchanan of Auchmar, 'Essay Upon the Family of Buchanan', in James Patterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-169.

while out hunting and with night approaching, happened to enter a cottage in the middle of a moor at the foot of the Ochil Hills near Alloa. He was kindly received and the man of the house bade his wife fetch the plumpest hen for the stranger's supper. The King was highly pleased with his night's lodging and hospitable entertainment. He told his host on parting that he would be glad to return his civility and requested that the first time he came to Stirling he would call at the Castle and enquire for the Gudeman of Ballengeich. Donaldson, his host, did indeed call at the Castle and his astonishment at finding his overnight guest had been the King afforded James and his courtiers no small amusement. Donaldson was designated King of the Moors, a title which was handed down through many generations until one of the "Kings" put up too much resistance to agricultural improvements in the nineteenth century and was turfed out by his landlord.³³

In the *New Statistical Account fo Scotland* the minister of the Parish of Collessie tells what he claims is an authentic anecdote of James V. In the disguise which he often assumed, one evening James knocked at the door of the miller's home at Ballowmill. After some little difficulty he obtained quarters for the night, joined a circle round the miller's fireside and partook of their homely cheer and social discourse. The King was impressed by the miller's hospitality and kindness and his frank and open bearing. In the morning his host, accompanying his guest to the borders of the farm, there met the Royal Guard. The miller realised that his guest had been the King. As a reward for his hospitality James asked the miller whether he would have a fourth part, an eighth part or a sixteenth part of the land on which they stood. The miller thought about it for a while, then, deciding that to ask for a fourth part would be greedy while a sixteenth would be too little, he settled on an eighth. The eighth part of the land of Ballowmill was allotted to the miller, and the Royal Charter by which it was conveyed was still extant in the Parish of Barrowmill in the nineteenth century.³⁴

In conclusion it only remains to say that instead of being remembered as a loose-living lover of low company, an avaricious moneygrubber, or a cynical opportunist, James V may be considered as having contributed much more to the fabric of life in Scotland during his reign than he is often given credit for. The money that he spent on building and refurbishing the Castles and Palaces of Scotland brought him much criticism. Today they bring in tourist dollars for the industry that is probably the only substantial industry now booming in Scotland.

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33 'The Gudeman of Ballengeich', *Old Staistical Account of Scotland*, in James Patterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-170.

34 *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, collated by the minister of the parish of Collessie, in James Patterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-173.