

AN EPISODE
IN THE LIFE OF
MRS RACHEL ERSKINE, LADY GRANGE.

DETAILED BY HERSELF

IN A LETTER FROM ST KILDA,

JANUARY 20, 1738,

AND OTHER ORIGINAL PAPERS.

COMMUNICATED

TO THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF SCOTLAND,

By DAVID LAING, FOR. SEC.

EDINBURGH, JUNE 4, 1874.

Thirty-six copies printed for private circulation. November 1876.

When the following pages of the Society's Proceedings were in the printer's hands, the Original Letters had fallen aside, and the volume could not be detained on account of what might have proved only minute corrections. When I had an opportunity to make the necessary collations for the above separate copies, I found the corrections to be rather numerous (although of no great importance), besides some omissions, and words left blank that at first could not be deciphered. I was desirous, therefore, that the revised copy should be submitted to the Members, by adding it as an Appendix to this volume.

D. L.

LADY GRANGE IN THE ISLAND OF ST KILDA.

The interesting communication from Capt. Thomas, R.N., read at the last meeting of the Society respecting the Island of St Kilda, brought to my recollection one or two remarkable Autographs, connected with the strange Episode in the Life of Mrs Erskine, known by the title of LADY GRANGE. This has been a subject of continued interest since the appearance of Dr Samuel Johnson's Tour to the Hebrides in 1773. These Autographs I now exhibit. A few words only of explanation seem to be necessary.

The HON. JAMES ERSKINE of Grange, second son of Charles, tenth Earl of Mar, was born in the year 1679. He was admitted advocate in July 1705, and in the course of a few years was promoted to several important offices. When raised to the bench in March 1707, he took the title of Lord Grange, and in 1710 became Lord Justice-Clerk. His wife was RACHEL CHEISLEY, sister of Major Cheisley of Dalry, in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh.¹ After they had been married more than twenty years, and having a family of eight children, he took such an insuperable aversion to her, that they agreed to live separately; yet considering her to be a dangerous spy on his proceedings, and that she might be the means of implicating him with the Government, he resolved by some means or other to get rid of her. She is said by all parties to have been jealous of his irregularities, of a fierce revengeful temper, and a victim of intemperance. Such reports may not have been wholly unfounded, although much exag-

¹ Their Father had the unenviable distinction of being the assassin of Sir George Lockhart of Carnwath, Lord President in the Court of Session, who thus became a victim to private revenge on the 31st March 1689. A contemporary account of this sad tragedy, by Mr P. F. Tytler, the historian of Scotland, will be found in the "Archæologia Scotica," vol. iv. p. 15.

gerated. He himself, however, was a singular compound of good and bad qualities;—he was an acute and accomplished man as a lawyer, somewhat profligate in private life, yet with great pretensions to piety, restless and intriguing in political affairs, and yet with all his manœuvring, his ambitious schemes were signally disappointed. Some of the least creditable points in his character are exemplified in a volume of Extracts from his Diary, edited by Mr James Maidment, advocate, under the title of “Extracts from the Diary of a Senator of the College of Justice. M.DCC.XVII.—M.DCC.XVIII.” Edinburgh 1843, 8vo.

On the 22d of January 1732, after 11 o'clock at night, Lady Grange, then living in lodgings with a Highland woman, next door to her husband's house, was seized by a party of Highlanders, who carried her off, blindfolded, in what may truly be called a most brutal manner, until, by successive night journeys, they at length reached their intended destination, and afterwards transported her to the remote Island of Hesper, near Skye, where she was detained a prisoner for two years. In order to conceal the fact of her abduction, and to prevent any further inquiries by her friends, Lord Grange gave out, not only that she was a mad-woman, but also circulated a report that his wife had died suddenly. In the year 1734 she was conveyed to the still more remote and isolated Island of St Kilda, to endure greater hardships,

“Placed far amidst the melancholy main.”

I have no intention to enter upon any investigation of Lady Grange's case. It may be sufficient to furnish a list of some well-known works in which the matter is more or less fully detailed.

1st, “An Account of the Misfortunes of Mrs Erskine of Grange, commonly known as Lady Grange,” in the “Edinburgh Magazine, a new series of the Scots' Magazine,” vol. i., November 1817, p. 333. This, I think, was communicated by Sir George Stuart Mackenzie of Coull, Bart.¹ The writer says, “the MS. is a copy of another, partly written for Lady Grange, by the Minister of St Kilda, and partly by herself (I have understood that there are other copies in existence).” He signs his name, “Gael,” and refers to a personal visit to St Kilda in the year 1800.

¹ See note at the end of the episode, p. 14.

2*d*, "Genealogie of the Hayes of Tweeddale, by Father Richard Augustin Hay," &c. ; edited by James Maidment, Esq., advocate. Edinburgh 1835, 4to. In the Appendix, pp. 106-112, there are two articles, viz., No. 4, "Account of John Chiesly of Dalry," and No. 5, "An Account of the Misfortunes of Mrs Erskine of Grange, commonly known as Lady Grange." The last is a reprint from the Scots Magazine, November, 1817. The editor of this Tweeddale volume, 1835, p. 113, says, "That MS Letters were in the hands of Mr W. Blackwood, and sold to Lord Mar."

3*d*, "The Story of Lady Grange." Anon. "Chambers's Edinburgh Journal," No. 114, New Series, March 7, 1846.

4*th*, "Lives of Simon Lord Lovat, and Duncan Forbes, of Culloden, by John Hill Burton, advocate." Edinburgh, 1847. Also, more recently in the same author's History of Scotland, Chap. xci.

5*th*, "Letters of Lord Grange," in "The Miscellany of the Spalding Club, Volume Third," Aberdeen, 1846 (pages 1-67), edited by John Stuart, LL.D.

6*th*, Since the present communication was read to the Society, another article, under the same title, has appeared in Chambers's Journal, July 14, 1874, fourth series, No. 551, namely "The Story of Lady Grange," signed W. C. [Dr William Chambers.]

It was believed, and the opinion still prevails, that the plan of kidnapping or carrying off Lady Grange to some remote place of the West Highlands, in the North of Scotland, and of circulating a report of her death, was devised, if not actually carried into execution, by Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat, while he carefully avoided anything like personal interference in the abduction itself. No doubt he boldly denied having had any concern in it; and among his original letters now in my own possession, is a strange one, from which the following passage is given. A partial extract from the letter was made many years ago. It is addressed to his cousin at Edinburgh, from Beaufort, September 16, 1732.

"To Mr Thomas Fraser, wryter at Ed'.

"Dr Cusine Thom,

"I give you many thanks for your kind concern for me in the two storys that you wrote to me that has so much surprised you, but I do assure you that neither of them surprised me

[The first has reference to a woman who had sworn a child against Lord Lovat before the Kirk Treasurer.]

“As to that story about my Lord Grange, it is a much less surprise to me, because they said ten times worse of me when that damn'd Woman went from Edinburgh than they can say now; for they said, it was all my contrivance, and that it was my servants that took her away; but I defy'd them then, as I do now, and do declare to you, upon honour, that I do not know what is become of that Woman, where she is, or who takes care of her; but if I had contrived, and assisted and saved my Lord Grange from that devil, who threatened every day to murder him and his children, I would not think shame of it before God, or man; and where she is, I wish and hope that she may never be seen again, to torment my worthy Friend.

“But as to that insolent fellow Mr Hope of Rankiller, I would advise him to to [not to] meddle with me, for the moment that I can prove that he attacks my character and reputation by any calumnie I'll certainly pursue him for *Scandalum Magnatum*. The punishment of qth if proven is perpetuall imprisonment, and forfeiture of estate and moveables, qth will rendre him as miserable as he deserves by acting such a villainus part as he does, upon the whole I am very easie upon that subject, for my enemies can't hurt me if they would, and I think it my honour to be attack'd upon my Lord Grange's account, and if he was at Ed^r he would answer for himself, and so I am sure will every man that is attack'd upon his account, and I hope come off with triumph.

“And Believe me to be very affectionately,

My D^r Cusine,

“Beaufort,

Your most ob^{dt}

“16th September 1732.

humble servant,

(Indorsed) 1732, Missive Lord Lovat.

[LOVAT].”

But any assertions or denials on the part of a man who was devoid of all principle, can carry but little weight; and it required the influence and bold resources of such a man as Lovat, rather than her husband, to have attempted and carried out such a scheme. Mrs Erskine of Grange, in her statement, No. IV., dated in January 1741, makes this very clear, and she continued to assert—

“One of Lord Lovat’s lyes, which he said to John Macleod the young man of Dynwick, that I was going to kill my husband—*you know that a lye.*”

“I hear Alexander M’Donald in the Hasker is dead: His wife has since married Logan M’Donald, tennant to Glenronald in Sown . . . *She knows ’twas Lord Lovat and Roderick M’Leod that stole me.* The minister’s daughter, Mrs Margaret, saw me taken out of Mr M’Lean’s house by Roderick M’Leod.

“Sir Alexander any time he wrote about me, the name he gave me was the ‘Cargo.’”

The Autographs I now exhibit, which fell into my hands unexpectedly, and not at one time, are as follows:—

No. I.

The original letter of Rachel Erskine, dated St Kilda, January 20th 1738, giving an account of her treatment. At the foot it is marked, “To the Solicitor.” This was Charles Erskine of Tinwald, who had been a Regent from 1701, and first Professor of Public Law in the University of Edinburgh in October 1707. He was admitted advocate in July 1711; appointed Solicitor-General for Scotland in May 29, 1725; and Lord Advocate in January 1737 (a fact which Lady Grange could not have known); and he was afterwards raised to the Bench, by the title of Lord Tinwald, in November 1744, and promoted to be Lord Justice-Clerk in June 1748.

As perhaps the only existing specimen of the handwriting of Lady Grange, a facsimile is here given of the beginning and the close of her letter, written at St Kilda in 1738.¹ The faintness of the ink, and the folds of the paper, rendered a good facsimile of the four folio pages scarcely practicable. Nor was this very necessary, as a literal transcript is here subjoined without any corrections. It was evidently written at different intervals, and the smaller size of letter near the end was occasioned by the necessity of completing it on a single sheet of paper.

¹ This facsimile forms Plate XXIII. in Vol. X. of the Proceedings.

ST KILDA, *Jan. 20, 1738.*

SIR,—It is a great blessing and happiness to a nation when the King employeth such a man as you are to Act and do for him who I'm perswadid his the aw and fear of God on him. Job was a just man and a perfect and the cause that he know not he searched out to deliver the poor and oppressed and him that had none to help him, a Patterne for on in your office. I have the Honour to be your Relation and I know you have much interest with Lord Greange if you can make Peace for me you know the promices that is to the Peace maker; you know I'm not guilty of eny crime except that of loveing my husband to much, he knowes very well that he was my idol and now God his made him a rode to scourgeth me. Most just, you know he took a dislike and a hatred to poor unfortunat me can a woman get or ask better security of a Man then Vows and Oaths from a man of Conscience and Honour that tho he had sworn to his own hurt yet changeth not, he told me he loved me two years or he gott me and we lived 25 years together few or non I thought so happy there is no person but his a fault but ought he not to forgive me as he desires or expects to be forgiven of God, his heart I know is in God's hand and I know he can turne it as he Pleaseth. I know he will do much be the advices of friends. I pray God to incline your hearts to intercess'd for me, non on earth his so much power with Ld Grange as Lord Dun and you have if you both favour me I hope it will do. Make my complements to L^d Dun I would have written to him but I want paper I'm sorrow for the great losses that his been in his family since I had the Honour to see him last you may remember you heard the Queen of Spain was put in prison and the Princess Sobeseke went to a Monastre you heard the reason of both no doubt and yet the Pope and other friends made Peace for them if friends take paines the same blessing may happen to me I'm sure you cannot but see how great a dishonour and blot it will leave on his memorie. but if friends can not prevaile with L^d Greange then let me have the Benefit of the law it is impossible for me to write or for you to imagine all the miserie and sorrow and hungre and cold and hardships of all kindes that I have suffer'd since I was stolen, if my paper allowed me I would give a particular account of the way, but I must be short and I have a bad pin, upon the 22d of Jan 1732, I lodged in Margaret M'Lean house and a little before twelve at night Mrs M'Lean being on the plot opened the door and there rush'd in to my room some servants of Lovals and his Couson Roderick Macleod he is a writer to the Signet they threw me down upon the floor in a Barbarous manner I cri'd murther murther then they stopp'd my mouth I puled out the cloth and told Rod: Macleod I knew him their hard rude hands bleed and abassed my face all below my eyes they dung out some of my teeth and toere the cloth of my head and toere out some of my hair I wrestled and defend'd my self with my

hands then Rod: order'd to tye down my hands and cover my face most pityfully there was no skin left on my face with a cloath and stopp'd my mouth again they had wrestl'd so long with me that it was all that I could breath, then they carry'd me down stairs as a corps at the stair-foot they had a Chair and Alexander Foster of Carsboony in the Chair who took me on his knee I made all the struggel I could but he held me fast in his arms my mouth being stopp'd I could not cry they carr'd me off very quickly without the Ports, when they open'd the Chair and took the cloath of my head I saw I was near to the Mutters of hill it being moonlight; I then show'd them that all the linnins about me were cover'd with blood. they had there about 6 or 7 horses they set me on a horses' behind Mr Foster and tyed me fast with a cloath to him that I might not leope of. if I remember right it was Peter Fraser L^d Lovael's page that set me on the horse, Rod: Macleod and L^d Lovael's tenants rode along with me and Andrew Leishman come attending M^r Foster he is a servant in Wester Pomeis he knows the names of Lovael's Ser: we rode all night it being Saturday we mett no body or day breakes they took me into a house which belongs to John Macleod advocate a little beyond Lithgow, I saw in that house a Gardener a Ser: of Johns and a Ser: of Alex: Macleod advocate but I'm not sure if he was his first or his second man. they keep me there all day at night I was set on a horse behind M^r Foster they rode with me to Wester Pomeis it belongs to M^r Stewart and M^r Foster is his Factore he took me to the house of Pomeis thro a vault to a low room all the windows nailed up with thick board and no light in the room he was soo cruel as to leave me all aloan and two doors lock'd on me, a Ser: of L^d Lov: kept the keys of my prison James Fraser, And: Leishman mention'd before is a tennant-in Pomeise near thirtie years he brought what meat and drink I got and his Wife mead my bed and wash'd my linens. I was kept so closs I grew sick then And: told M^r Foster he would not have a hand in my death then I was allow'd to the court to get the Air I then saw a son and three daughter which this Wife his born to And: I told them I was L^d Grange Wife in hopes they would lett it be known for M^r Fos: kept a gar'ner (George Rate) and his Wife in the house that what provisions came might pass as to them he had a meal yeard and house in Stirlin, they had two sons and a daughter come often to see them I give them some thing to tell the ministers of Stirlin Hamilton and Erskine that I was a prissoner in Pomeise but all in vain. I was their near seven moneth Aug 15 Peter Fraser L^d Lov: page came and three men with him. I had kept my bed all that day with grief and sorrow Peter and James Fraser tho I was naked took me up by force they set me on a horse behind M^r Foster I fainted dead with grief as they set me on the horse, And: Leishman rode that nights journey with me, when ever I cri'd they came to stope my mouth, they rode to the highlands with me our guide a Servant of Sir Alexander Macdonald Rondall Macdonald he

since marri'd to Lady Macdonald own woman, We rode all night or day breake they took me in to a little house M^r Foster never came near me after that night, but left the charge of me to Lov: Servants I saw Rod: Macleod at that house and a servant of his Duncan Swine since that bond aprentice to a wright in or about Edin' M^r Foster and Rod: Macleod rode a parte of the way with us I was set on a horse behind that vil'd paest fellow James Fraser, I can not write the anguish and sorrow I was in I never read or hear'd of any Wife whatever was her crime so cruely and barbarously treatt as I have been. Peter and James Fraser left me with the three men that came to. Pomeise for me and two other came one of them belong'd to L^d Lov. two days after we came to a Loch on Glangorry ground Lochnern they had a sloop waiting there for me, The master of the sloop told me he had been with Rod: Macleod, he order'd him to take me home to his own house and keeps me till farther orders they met in Scotoss, he is uncle to this Glangerry his wife Rod: Aunt Scotass Sons Ronald and John came to the sloop and saw me on Sep 30 we came to the Isle Huskre it belongs to Sir Alexander Macdonald and this man is the tannent, after I was some time there he thought it was a sin to keep me he said he would let me go for tho Sir Alex: should take the Isle from him he could not take his life. I sent a man for a boat and he ran away with my money. in Jun: 1734 Rod: sent for the tanant of this Isle his name Alex. Macdonald to come to the Captain of Clan Ronalds house he told him I was to be taken from him. on the 14 of Jun: John Macleod and his Brother Normand came with their Galley to the Huskre for me they were very rud and hurt me sore. Oh alas much have I suffer'd often my skin mead black and blew, they took me to St Kilda. John Macleod is call'd Stewart of the Island he left me in a few days, no body lives in it but the poor natives it is a viled neasty stinking poor Isle I was in great miserie in the Husker but I'm ten times worse and worse here, the Society sent a minister here I have given him a much fuller account then this and he wrat it down. you may be sure I have much more to tell then this, When this comes to you if you hear I'm alive do me justes and relieve me, I beg you make all hast but if you hear I'm dead do what you think right befor God.

I pray you make my
Complements to all your
young Family
TO THE SOLICITOR.

I am with great Respect
your most humble servant
but infortunat Cousen
RACHELL ERSKINE

No. II.

Letter from Thomas Hope of Rankeilor, Esq., Edinburgh, December 13th, 1740, addressed "The Right Honble. Charles Ersekine, Esq. His Majesties Advocate."—From this letter it would appear he had only two days previously received information, (in the above letter, No. I.,) respecting this ill-fated woman.

MY LORD,—This day when you appointed me one of your busy hours on Monday, your Lo^d/ had not heard what I said. the affair is concerning poor Lady Grange, I inclose you a Letter from her of an old date, and shall shew you on to myselfe of the same date. they were left att my House two days ago by an unknowen hand. She left a Factory for me with my wife, a little befor her intended Journey for London. I told her I would never use it till I heard she was at a distance from her Husband so as she could not disturb him.—After she was carried off, and being assured she was well entertained and cared for, I thought it was best not to move in that affair, And now this is the first time I have heard from her. She bids me apply to your Lo^d/ first, and ended I wauld have don it whether or not for your advice in so tender ane affair, and if it cannot be compromised among friends, that I should call for her money and take all legall steps to relieve her. She has been so harshly and barbarously used, that I dar say her Husband knows nothing of it, for his friends from him I suppose, alway assured me all care was taken of her. I doubt not but she may be dead by this time, but if she is alive, the hardest heart on earth would bleed to hear of her sufferings ; and I think I can't in duty stand this call, but must follow out a course so as to restore her to a seeming liberty and a comfortable life : And it shall be don with that caution and moderation as your Lops/ shall direct, and Grange and his Friends could wish; though she has mett with much cruelty and barbarity as ever a Chrystian did, and more than any almost is able to bear. I am sure I never thought she could have been alive under such hardships. I would have waited of you to night, but being confined with a Collick, and your time uncertain, I thought proper to delay it. But if am able to come abroad to morrow, and that you are to take tea by yourself, in the afternoon, I shall have the honour to wait on you, as I have of being

Sir

Your most obe^t humble Servant

Edenr. Saturday 13th Dec^r, 1740.

THO. HOPE.

Mr Hope of Rankeillor, on the 6th January following, addressed another long letter to Lord Grange himself ; whose reply, containing an

elaborate Vindication of his own conduct, dated London, January 17th, 1740-1, along with Mr Hope's answer, Edinburgh, February 23d, 1741, are printed at full length in the Spalding Miscellany, Vol. III., pages 58-67.

In order to show the interest felt by Lady Grange's friends in Edinburgh, it may be proper to extract a portion of Mr Hope's Answer to Lord Grange.

No. III.

EDINBURGH, *23d February, 1741.*

SIR

I had yours dated at London, 17th last moneth, in answer to mine of the 6th, which surely I meant in good part. The interpretation you putt upon it, and of my past conduct with respect to you and family, would seem to proceed either from bad information or imagination. And indeed, were it not your own desire to lay your letter before my lawiers, I should have else thought it an injury done you so farr to have exposed it.

I reckon I lose nothing by it and you gain as little, since both our characters are well known.

I own I have expressed myself on several occasions, and doe still think that the carrying off that unfortunate Lady, in so violent a manner, was cruel and barbarous, and the second tyme much more so; yet you weel know, Sir, that I never resented it further, though at the same tyme I had a regular factory from her, by which I could have called for her separte aliment, which I have never yet done, not so much as for the money you knew I was in advance for her, till now that I gott, under her own hand, her melancholy situation, with new powers and intreatys to relieve her.

On my coolest reflection, I declare I'm not able to call to mind one particular injury, either to you or family, to which I was accessory (unless you count the above such) but, on the contrair, had alwise a regaird for your childeren, and a very particular one for the family you are descended of, and for that whereof your daughter is Countess, and both their relatives. As to my haveing spread the history over Brittain, or even in this town, of that unfortunate Lady; false storyes and suggestions (such as this) may fly about, but none but people possest of inveterate malice, prompted by a bad imagination, will conclude upon the author without examineing.

I declare upon honour these letters were deliverd into my house open, days after others had got theirs, and as to the narrative of her case, it was copied by

those into whose hands it first came before I saw it, so that I could not answer for that, or hinder its being made the publick talk of tea tables or coffee houses, but I can answer since it came into my hands, that no copys have been given of it, unless they were taken by Lady Olivestobb, or Mr Cave, when they desired it might be left with them, and all this only after the story was spread, which I was so anxious to have concealed that I mett once or twice with Lords Dun, and Advocate, eight days before I mentioned it to mortall, not even to my own family, except my wife.

Finding the story blaze almost over all, after conversing with friends it was thought necessary to take advice of lawiers.

I think it right, as well as my duty, I will still concert and contribute my endeavours, by advice of my lawiers, for the mutual quiet and welfare of all the family, and shall on all occasions rejoice in its peace and prosperity. This is without advice of lawiers, and without further correspondence from, Sir

Your most humble servant

THO^s HOPE.

No. IV.

This is one of the MS. copies of Lady Grange's account, with the date January 21st 1741, first printed in the "Edinburgh Magazine" 1819, and other works. It begins, "SIR,—*I'm the unfortunate wife of Mr James Arskine of Grange,*" &c. This MS. is said to have been forwarded by Lady Grange's desire, to the Rev. Dr Carlyle, minister of Inveresk. The manuscript has no date, and wants one leaf (pages 5 and 6), which had been supplied from some other copy. It is unnecessary in this place to republish this statement, as it contains but little additional matter, and is easily accessible in a printed form.

I shall only add, that when the friends of Lady Grange in Edinburgh, were made fully aware of her situation in 1741, measures were taken for her release. The chief result of their interference, however, was her removal to Assint in Sutherland, and from thence to the Island of Skye, where she ended her days in May 1745. Lord Grange himself, who spent most of his latter years in London, died there, January 24, 1754, in the 75th year of his age.

The article in the "Edinburgh Magazine," November 1817, concludes, "From the above curious document, it appears that Lady Grange was at St Kilda nine years after she was taken from Edinburgh. When the author of the notice which precedes the narrative (No. IV.) was at St Kilda, in the year 1800,¹ he was informed by an old man, who remembered having seen Lady Grange, that she had been seven or eight years on that island. On making inquiry respecting what happened afterwards to this ill-fated woman, he was informed by a gentleman in Skye, that, in consequence of a dread of discovery, she had been removed to Assint, (the Western district of Sutherland), and from thence to Skye, where she died."

¹ I find this conjecture or recollection confirmed by my old friend Mr James Wilson, in his "Voyage Round the Coasts of Scotland and the Isles," vol. ii. p. 3, when referring to a plan or map of St Kilda, given in his work, "by the kindness of Sir George Stewart Mackenzie of Coul, Bart., who paid a visit to the Island early in the present century."