

II.

NOTES ON THE DISPUTED TOMB OF MARY OF GUELDRES, QUEEN OF JAMES II., AND THE STUART VAULT IN HOLYROOD. By JOHN SINCLAIR, F.S.A. Scot.

Fifty-five years have passed away since the demolition of the venerable Trinity College Church of Edinburgh, and the controversy over the search for the remains of Mary of Gueldres, the pious foundress, is well-nigh forgot. The members of our Society still alive, who were then grown men, are but few, and the controversy, now but a memory, is only to be found in our Society's Proceedings of that time. This quiescent state of matters has hitherto given no signs of reopening the unsatisfactory discussions of 1848 and 1862 as to the unearthing of the remains of Mary of Gueldres, but quite recently the reappearance of both claimants gave motion to the thoughts of those more immediately informed.

The subjoined notes flow from what came under the personal observation of the writer, and have arisen from an after discovery consequent on the restoration of the Royal Stuart Tomb in the Chapel Royal of Holyrood by Her late Majesty the Queen. It may be as well here to say that a fairly full and accurate account of that much-called-for restoration has never yet been afforded, and is here necessary as an introduction to these notes.

It is well known that no precise date or person can be fixed upon for the origin of this tomb. Usually it is assigned to the period after the death of James V., when the remains of David II., James II. and others were disinterred from separate graves and placed therein. The mean look of the place indicates that it had been a work of haste in a time of trouble, and an inspection of the interior certainly confirmed that belief. True, the mad mob of 1688 did their worst, but there were no remains to be seen of what might have been expected from a Royal Mausoleum. The Stuart Tomb is of the plainest description,

the only attempt at ornamentation being a floriated scroll extending along the north front a few inches from the top. The exterior measurement gives an area of 15 square feet. The front elevation is 7 feet 6 inches. The Norman Arch at south side is 6 feet in width and 12 feet in height, 4 feet 6 inches of which reach above the roof of the vault. The door of entrance to the north is 3 feet 6 by 2 feet 3½ inches. The moulding over the door is 5 inches in depth, the front is of dressed stone, the roof flagstones, and the west side next the Roxburgh Tomb is rubble. The interior, as inspected a short time before the death of Her late Majesty, was simply an earth-beaten square of most uninviting aspect, the descent being by a deep step through the narrow entrance. At the south side stood upright large flagstones, not unlike headstones in a churchyard, evidently erected as blinds against prying eyes through the open sparred iron gate. Behind these tomb-like stones was the old Norman Arch which in time of James IV. formed the egress from the Abbey to the cloisters and his newly-erected palace. This doorway is of great thickness, and a partition had been run across and stone shelves inserted, on which, "gleaming in their chalky whiteness," lay the bones of generations of the Royal Stuarts, hidden only from public view by the stone erections.

There was no discrimination or signs of sepulchral order with these remains. Only could be discerned what might be the thigh bones of the six-feet-two Darnley intermingled with the infantile remains of the sons of James IV. and V.—both princes of Albany; and those of what were doubtless other adults of this royal house. On the bottom shelf rested the gaudy coffin of 1848, brought down with magisterial pomp and circumstance from old Trinity College Kirk, and declared to be the remains of Queen Mary of Gueldres. Of all these kings, queens, and princes mouldering and uncared for, only the resurrected lady of 1848 was named, confined and intact. The disorderly mass of bones, old and young, spoke plainly of the mad rioting mob.

The only record we have of the previous state of this tomb is contained in a manuscript held in the Advocates' Library, showing that

an official visit by procurement of the Bishop of Dunblane was made five years before the Revolution of 1688, when it was violated and the contents destroyed. The bishop was present, "Lord Strathnavar and E. Forfare, Robert Scott, minister of the Abbey, and others." We are told that they viewed the body of James V. in both wood and lead coffin, and in an embalmed condition, and that they saw some lead plates giving his titles and particulars of his death. This coffin must have been on trestles or some raised erection, because the account next tells us that in the arch—that is, on the stone shelves—was a shorter coffin (the shelf being only six feet across) with the teeth in the skull, also with a leaden inscription, and two gilded "floor-de-leuces" and a leaden crown, showing it to be the body of Magdalene of France, "Sponsa Jacobi V.;" and beside this coffin lay the coffins of two children, one in lead, the other in wood. Next the king's body "lay ane gret coffin of lead with the body in it." This body, they agreed, was that of Lord Darnley; and at the east "lay a coffin with the skull sawn in two, and ane inscription in small letters, gilded upon a square of ye lead coffin, making it to be ye bodye of Dame Jane Stewart, Countess of Argyle," natural daughter of James V. It is quite clear that the order and arrangement of this place of sepulture in 1683 was pretty much as found on inspection a few years ago; that is, the greater coffins lay in the outer or open space of the tomb, while the smaller were laid on the stone shelves in the Norman Arch.

This, then, was the state of matters when the Board of Works, under directions of Her late Majesty, set about the reconstruction of the interior. An inner tomb of polished stone was built within the original, but still having the old Norman Arch of David the First as its back wall.¹ A coffin for the regal remains followed, and the bones of the

¹ It is curious to reflect that this doorway, now the Stuart Sepulchre, formed on 7th August 1503 the exit by which James IV. led his Tudor child bride from the altar when they had performed their devotions that day of her arrival at the Abbey, "in a most loving manner . . . out of the Church, through the cloisters to her apartments in the adjoining Palace" which he had built for her; that being the palace burned by Cromwell in 1650.

Stuarts were reverently deposited and sealed up at sight of a high official. The two coffins were then replaced on stone shelves and left to a new lease of undisturbed repose. The inner tomb being completed and the lady of the sacristy of Trinity College Kirk consigned to her former position, an outer door of oak was placed inside the iron sparrèd gate, and a handsome plate of bronze in old English characters affixed. This plate bears a singularly interesting narration, which, along with every step in the proceedings, had the sanction and supervision of Her Majesty the Queen :—

“This Vault of the Scottish Kings contains the remains of David II. ; of James II. ; and his Queen Mary of Gueldres ; of Arthur, third son of James IV., of James V., his Queen Magdalene, and second son Arthur, Duke of Albany ; and of Henry Lord Darnley, consort of Mary Queen of Scots. Their resting place was desecrated in the year 1688 ; but in September 1898, these remains of her Stewart ancestors were reverently collected and entombed by command of Queen Victoria.”

This reverential act of Her Majesty, which again showed not only her regard for her Stewart ancestors, but her singularly good taste, seemed to leave the much disturbed Trinity College lady finally at rest. The interior of the Chapel Royal, however, coming in for a share of the renovations of the last few years, the incised tombstones were carefully levelled, new turf laid, and a system of surface drainage carried out, and it was during these operations that the controversy betwixt Dr David Laing and Dr Daniel Wilson was again recalled. Dr Wilson, writing of the second discovered Mary of Gueldres, says :— “The lead coffin with its enclosed remains were accordingly placed in a wooden coffin, and interred in Holyrood Chapel, *outside* the royal vault.”¹ David Laing says :—“In the meantime, the leaden coffin, containing, as I believe, the mortal remains of Mary of Gueldres, the Queen of James II., is also there deposited, waiting for a more worthy receptacle to be prepared than the so misnamed Royal Vault in the Abbey Church of Holyrood.”²

The spot selected for the re-interment of the second found coffin of

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. iv. p. 559.

² Vol. iv. p. 573.

Trinity College Kirk, declared by David Laing to be that of the real Mary of Gueldres, was outside the royal vault (fig. 1), in front of the great

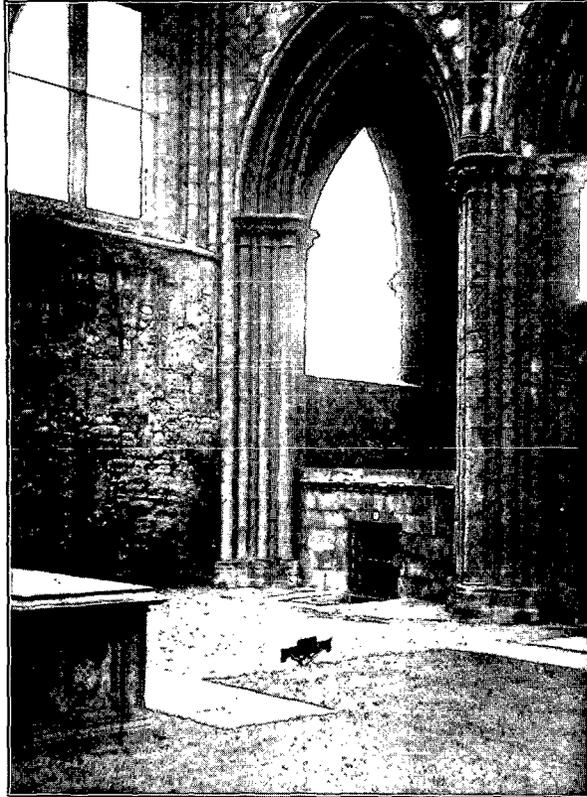


Fig. 1. View of entrance to the Stuart Tomb, showing also the gravel walk in front, where the second-found remains from Trinity College Church were re-interred. (From a photograph by C. W. Sinclair.)

eastern window (where the high altar stood), in a straight line running north from the tomb—at the spot where Mary of Guise received the Scottish Crown, and Mary Stuart was joined in wedlock to the ill-

starred Henry Darnley by John Sinclair, Dean of Restalrig and Bishop of Brechin. And it was here that during the late renovations in Holyrood the second found of the rival claimants for the motherhood of James Third came again in evidence. The leaden shroud and skeleton had been enclosed in an outer chest of wood, when they were brought from the high altar of Trinity College Kirk and placed in the sacred ground of the high altar of the Holyrood of King David ; and here, below the gravelled walk, the operations disclosed the wooden shell of the disputed remains, where they had been re-interred half a century before. Had both coffins been found at the demolition of the church, on that 22nd May 1848, there is an almost certainty that David Laing, head and shoulders above Dr Wilson, would, aided by Joseph Robertson and others, have carried the leaden shrouded lady who lies under the gravel walk into the vault of the Stuarts, beside the bones of James II. And who knows but had the second of the rival Queens thrown off her gravel shroud in time, she might have found sepulture in the royal vault at its renovation ?