

Sir Robert Cotton, James VI and I and an English cenotaph for two Scottish princes

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ABSTRACT

For Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), collector, bibliophile and benefactor of the British Library’s Cotton Collections, dynastic prestige was paramount. Through his ancestors, the Bruces of Conington, he claimed descent from the ancient Scottish royal line and therefore kinship with his new sovereign, King James VI and I. A distinguished antiquarian, his extensive engagement with his own family history was coupled with a degree of self-interest and shrewd self-promotion. This article examines how Cotton publicly displayed his links with the royal Stuarts as a means of securing his own advancement and of increasing his influence within the royal household. In particular, it considers how a cenotaph, which he erected in the parish church of All Saints in Conington, Huntingdonshire, to his distant forbear, Prince Henry of Scotland (c 1115–52), may also represent an oblique response to the politically destabilising death in 1612 of his own contemporary, Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales.

Throughout the 17th century the untimely deaths of Stuart princes were marked by periods of public mourning, as well as by the large-scale production of memorial paraphernalia. In particular, the premature death in 1612 of the 18-year-old Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales (1594–1612), elder son King James VI and I, was met with an outpouring of popular grief. On both sides of the border a torrent of elegies, poems, songs, commemorative prints and medals responded to his tragic loss. By all accounts James and his consort, Anne of Denmark, were also greatly affected by Henry’s demise. A contemporary observer described the King as a man ‘whose sorrow noe tounge can expresse . . . more like a dead than a living man, full of most wonderful heaviness’.¹ Anne retreated into a self-imposed confinement at Somerset House – over a month later she was still indisposed, sitting in a dark room, hung with black.² The splendour of Henry’s obsequies exceeded all precedents, with

around two thousand mourners participating in the funeral cortege, four hundred more than had processed before the corpse of Elizabeth I (Woodward 1997, 149).

Yet, despite this and in a period when funerary sculpture flourished, no permanent monument was erected to the Prince. The Venetian Ambassador, Antonio Foscarini, recorded that ‘a rich tomb of marble and porphyry is being prepared, and many statues; it will take a long time and cost much’.³ These plans, however, were never realised. Instead, Henry’s body was interred at Westminster Abbey in the vault beneath the recently executed memorial to his grandmother, Mary, Queen of Scots. Recent scholarship has tended to ascribe this absence either to King James’ emotional distress following his son’s death (Howarth 1997 [1], 172) or paradoxically, to his deliberate neglect of the Prince’s memory (Parry 1981, 87). Jennifer Woodward has argued that the

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magnificence of Henry's exequies precluded the need for a tomb monument (Woodward 1997, 163). Yet, the wealth of references to tomb architecture – both visual and literary – in commemorative pamphlets indicates that, on the contrary, there was a general consensus that a permanent memorial was required.⁴ For example, the frontispiece to John Taylor's *Great Britaine, all in Blacke* showed two black columns, inscribed 'HP' and topped with pyramids, while in *Mausoleum* (1613), William Drummond of Hawthornden's altar poem ruminated on the material most suitable for such a monument.

Of Jet
Or Porpherie,
Or that white stone

(Drummond 1613, 3)

By the end of the verse, which is presented in the form of a crowned pyramid, all worldly materials have been rejected as unworthy and, instead, a crystal tomb erected from the tears of the Muses. Published at the end of 1613 this poem may, in fact, constitute a direct response to – and perhaps even justification of – the lack of a monument.

While James I's failure to erect a monument to his late son's memory has provoked comment from modern historians, it would appear to have sparked surprisingly little reaction from his contemporaries. In *A Discourse of the Most Illustrious Prince, Henry late Prince of Wales*, written in 1626 and published in 1641, Sir Charles Cornwallis bemoaned the absence of a memorial, declaring: 'I wish it were in my power to raise such a monument unto his fame, as might eternise it unto all posterities' (Cornwallis 1641, 29). Few others openly expressed the same sentiments. It may well be, however, that Prince Henry was, indeed, to receive a monument in the years following his death – in a provincial parish church in Huntingdonshire. In his essay, *Sir Robert Cotton and the Commemoration of Famous Men*, David Howarth details how Cotton, the renowned antiquarian and courtier,

had erected a series of family tombs in the Church of All Saints in Conington. Among these memorials are two royal cenotaphs, dedicated to princes of the house of Canmore, David Earl of Huntingdon and Henry of Scotland (Howarth 1997 [2], 45).⁵

It was through David, Earl of Huntingdon and Lord of Conington (1152–1219), that Cotton and his ancestors, the Bruces of Conington, claimed descent from the Scottish royal line and, significantly, kinship with King James I (Howarth 1997 [2], 45). A manuscript in the collections of the British Library illustrates just how important this association was to Cotton. Written in his own hand and dated 1603, the *Pedigree of the Descent of Conington Manor, Huntingdonshire* traces the ownership of Cotton's family estate back to David I, King of Scots, through his grandson, Earl David. With the marriage of Isabella of Mar to Robert Bruce (hereafter, Bruce), the pedigree splits to reveal the parallel descents of the royal line of Scotland and the Bruces of Conington, concluding with 'Jacobus Rex Britanniae' at one branch and at the other 'Thomas Cotton seased of the mannor of Conington by this descent who(se) Heir is possessed of the same at this day 1603'.⁶ The Earl David Monument, which Howarth dates approximately to 1613, should be viewed as part of a campaign to proclaim this illustrious lineage, confirming Cotton's eligibility for the honour and title of baronet, which he had purchased in 1611, and commemorating his links with the new royal dynasty. A little later, Cotton commissioned a cenotaph to David's father, Prince Henry of Scotland (c 1615, see illus 1). His reasons for doing so are rather more problematic. It is this memorial which may represent a veiled response to the death of the latter day Prince Henry.⁷

Prince Henry of Scotland (c 1115–52) was the oldest son and heir of David I, King of Scots. Like his namesake, Henry Frederick, he was a Scottish-born prince who had come to inherit English lands and titles through his mother, Maud of Northumbria. While James I's



ILLUS 1 Anonymous: *Prince Henry of Scotland Cenotaph*, c 1615, All Saints Church, Conington

heir had been named in honour of Henry VIII, he too had been christened in deference to an English monarch, King Henry I. Reputed for his great bravery and military prowess, he also died in maturity before inheriting the throne, to the great sorrow of his subjects. In *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, the 12th-century English chronicler, William of Newburgh, described his demise and character in terms which would have been equally applicable to Henry Frederick. He ‘departed by an early death from human things, to the great grief of English as well as of Scots ... He was a most noble youth, and – what is hard to find in a man walking the broad ways of the world – conspicuous both for courtesy of manners, and for their sincerity’ (Anderson 1908, 229). A heavily annotated manuscript copy of Newburgh’s text from Cotton’s library still survives.⁸ Thus it is reasonable to suppose that Sir Robert was well aware of the historical parallels between the two princes. Indeed, Prince Henry’s renown was not to be diminished by time and he was still considered important enough to feature in John Speed’s *History of Great Britain*, published in 1611. Here, his valour and magnanimity were singled out for praise, referencing the historical chronicles of the Scot, Hector Boece (1465–1536) (Speed 1611, 446–8).

Cotton was closely associated with Speed’s text, loaning the author manuscripts, records and coins, as well as reading proofs. Kevin Sharpe has argued that some of the passages may even have been penned by Sir Robert (Sharpe 1979, 38). It is highly probable, therefore, that Cotton was fully conscious of the similarities between these two Scottish princes and that with Henry of Scotland’s cenotaph he sought to manipulate them as part of a calculated campaign for his own advancement.

What is more, it is possible that yet another historical parallel was being invoked. Some years later, Cotton was also heavily involved in the preparation of John Weever’s *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631).⁹ Here, Weever described a cenotaph as ‘an empty funeral

monument or Tomb erected for the honour of the dead, wherein neither the corps, nor reliques of any defunct, are deposited, in imitation of which our hearses here in England are set up in Churches’ (Weever 1631, 32). He went on to relate a classical example: ‘Octavia the sister of Augustus, buried her son young Marcellus, that should have been heir in the empire, with six hundred Cenotaphs or Hearses’ (Weever 1631, 32). Interestingly, Marcellus, who too had died before receiving his rightful inheritance, was a figure with whom Henry Frederick was frequently compared after his death. For example, in *ANEPICED. Or funeral song* (1613) George Chapman mused:

If yong Marcellus had to grace his fall,
Six hundred Hersedes at his Funerall;
Sylla six thousand; let Prince Henry have
Six millions bring him to his greedy grave

(Chapman 1612, 35)

Perhaps then, the Prince Henry cenotaph was also an oblique reference to this classical precedent, of which Cotton would certainly have been aware and for which the monument’s classicised appearance would have been particularly appropriate.

Cotton was well positioned to exploit these parallels, both practically and intellectually. He was highly versed in employing the lessons of the past to explain and aid the predicaments of the present. Under royal command he had written papers detailing historical precedent concerning, amongst other subjects, *The Manner and Means how the Kings of England have supported and improved their States; Touching the question of Precedency between England and Spain* and *That the Sovereigns Person is required in Parliament in all Consultations and Conclusions*.¹⁰ Indeed, Sir Robert’s propensity for espousing historical models could gall his contemporaries. John Chamberlain described him as a man ‘who has ever some old precedent in store’.¹¹ Thus Cotton was a scholar steeped in history, for whom historical analogies held

a special attraction. Around 1610 he was also engaged by Henry Frederick to write a tract advocating the pursuit of peace, rather than war, with Spain (Howarth 1997 [2], 46; Wilks 2007, 175). Cotton further attempted to ingratiate himself by researching the privileges and prerogatives of the Prince of Wales, sending his notes to Thomas Chaloner, Governor of Henry's household. He insinuated himself with many members of the Prince's circle, a group of men also interested in antiquity and the arts (Sharpe 1979, 120), and, following Henry's death, it is almost certain that Sir Robert acquired books from the library of the deceased (Tite 1993, 2). Perhaps most importantly, he participated in the Prince's funeral – one of ten baronets who followed the corpse in its hearse, each holding a bannerol (Chapman 1612, 51). Although Cotton's ambitions for advancement through Prince Henry came to an abrupt end with his untimely death, he continued to seek favour with his erudite father, King James.

The monument itself, although in a sorry state of repair, displays a refined understanding of the classical architectural idiom and harmonious proportion unusual for its early date. It consists of a wall-mounted tablet framed by two fluted Corinthian columns, bearing a prominent architrave and frieze, upon which rests a heavy cornice. Similar to an aedicule, its depth and solidity render it something of a curiosity when compared to the majority of 17th-century mural monuments, which tended to be shallower. The cornice supports Henry of Scotland's coat of arms, with lion rampant and double tressure, impaling chequy.¹² Although originally polychromatic, the monument was whitewashed in the mid-18th century.¹³ Smaller and more contained than the rather eccentric Earl David cenotaph, it is paired with a similarly conceived (although not identical) monument to Sir Robert's great-grandfather, Thomas Cotton, which is suspended on the opposite aisle wall. Based on its employment of harmonious proportions and similarity to the architectural framework employed in his design

for the tomb of Lady Francis Cotton (1608, see *illus 2*), Howarth has tentatively attributed the monument to Inigo Jones (Howarth 1997 [2], 53).¹⁴ Although far simpler in conception than the project for Lady Cotton's monument, its restraint may be explained by Jones' experiences with the execution of his earlier scheme. In its finished form at St Chad's Church in Norton in Hales (*c* 1610), the Italianate elegance of Jones' drawing has been rendered awkward and cramped by its provincial stonemason, with an abundance of decorative strap-work. If indeed Jones is the master behind the Conington monument, he may have favoured a cautious approach in order to prevent the corruption of this later design.¹⁵ Sir Rowland Cotton, the patron of the Lady Cotton tomb, was no relation to Sir Robert but was also attached to the Court of Prince Henry, where Jones occupied the post of Surveyor (Harris & Higgott 1989, 42). Thus Sir Robert may have been acquainted with the scheme. He was most certainly well known to Jones, whom he lent manuscripts and portfolios (Howarth 1997 [2], 53). As a member of the Prince's household, Jones had also participated in Henry's funeral (Chapman 1612, 44). Could then Prince Henry's cenotaph be the result of collaboration between two members of Prince Henry's circle, Cotton and Jones, who wished, in some part, to rectify the absence of a tomb? While the attribution to Jones is speculative, Sir Robert certainly had the means and the motive. However, this interpretation perhaps places too little emphasis on his more self-interested incentives. If the cenotaph does represent a memorial to the two princes, it was probably conceived primarily to further his own family's interests, rather than to quell any desire for Henry Frederick's permanent commemoration.

If the provisional date of 1615 is accepted then the memorial was erected at a time when Cotton's position and influence was on the ascent. His association with the Howards, earls of Suffolk and Arundel, and their alliance through marriage with the new royal favourite, Robert Carr, earl of Somerset, provided Cotton



ILLUS 2 Inigo Jones: *Drawing for the Tomb of Lady Cotton*, c 1608. Courtesy of the Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings Collection

with opportunities for advancement. In 1614, he became one of the principal agents working towards a Spanish match between Prince Charles

and the Infanta (Sharpe 1979, 131). He had the ear of James I; he was esteemed by the Spanish ambassador as the King's representative; and he

was attempting to broker positions in government for his own associates (Sharpe 1979, 132).¹⁶ Had his negotiations been successful, if not high office, then at least greater royal influence and trust would have followed. As it turned out, in late 1615, discussions were terminated, Cotton was examined and arrested and his gradual fall from grace was set in motion (Sharpe 1979, 133). It seems most likely, therefore, that the Prince Henry Monument was commissioned during his brief rise and that through it Cotton hoped to augment his position and favour with the King.

It is strange indeed that Cotton chose to erect a cenotaph to Prince Henry of Scotland, after he had already erected a cenotaph to the latter's son (Earl David). It was through David's daughter, Isobel, that the Bruces and thus the Cottons claimed kinship with King James. This second cenotaph, therefore, seems superfluous – unless its dedicatee had somehow become topical.¹⁷ By exploiting the parallels between Prince Henry of Scotland and Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, Sir Robert could subtly commemorate the latter, thereby remedying the absence of an official memorial. More importantly, by erecting this monument, he hoped to emphasise further his family's links – both by blood and experience – with the Stuart dynasty. All Saints, was in effect to become a shrine to the glory of the Cotton line. Their intention was recognised over a century later by Nicholas Brett, chaplain to Sir Robert Cotton, fifth baronet, when compiling his own Cotton Pedigree between 1754 and 1755. He comments that the Earl David monument was 'designed to point out the Antient Alliances of the Bruce Cotton Family' while as a group of monuments, he wrote: 'tis highly probable he made these also to preserve the Memory of his Ancestors'.¹⁸ In effect, by comparing his own forbear, Henry of Scotland, with the late Prince, his own lineage was elevated higher still. Furthermore, if this supposition is correct, James I, the erudite scholar, would have been one of only a few in a position to understand its

significance and consequently the compliment it paid to him. For if the cenotaph compared Henry Frederick to Henry of Scotland it also, by implication, compared King James to his own distant ancestor, David I, one of Scotland's most successful and progressive monarchs, a ruler described by William of Newburgh as 'a great and glorious man in the world, and of no less glory in Christ ... He was a man religious and pious; a man of much prudence and moderation in the administration of temporal things, and none the less of great devotion towards God' (Anderson 1908, 229). Such praise would, no doubt, have appealed to James' own self-image.

NOTES

- 1 British Library, Cotton MS Titus C VII, f.65v.
- 2 *Cal. State Papers Venetian* Vol XII 1610–13, 23 November 1612, 449. *Cal. of State Papers Domestic*, Vol IX 1611–18, 17 December 1612, 162.
- 3 *Cal. State Papers Venetian* Vol XII 1610–13, 29 December 1612, 469.
- 4 See Webster 1613 *A Monumental Columnne, erected to the living Memory of the ever-glorious Henry, late Prince of Wales*. London. See Drummond 1613 *Mausoleum, or The Choisest Flowres of the Epitaphs, written on the Death of the never-too-much-lamented Prince Henrie*. Edinburgh. And see Badius 1612 *Monumentum Consecratum Honori & memoriae Serenissimi Britanniarum Principis Henrici Frederici*. Leiden.
- 5 Henry is generally known as Henry, Earl of Northumberland. Throughout this article, I shall refer to him as Prince Henry, according to the cenotaph's inscription: 'Prince Henry of Scotland, Lord of Conington'.
- 6 British Library. Add MS 4712, f.2v.
- 7 For detailed biographies of Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales and Sir Robert Cotton see Matthew & Harrison (eds) 2004 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford.
- 8 British Library MS Cotton Vespasian B VI, ff. 111r–182v. This manuscript was probably owned by John Joscelyn and acquired by Cotton shortly after his death in 1603.

- 9 See 'The Epistle to the Reader' in Weever 1631 *Ancient Funerall Monuments within the united monarchie of Great Britaine, Ireland, and the islands adiacent*, London, which includes a funeral elegy to Sir Robert.
- 10 See Howel (ed) 1679 *Cottoni Posthuma: Divers Choice Pieces of that Renowned Antiquary, Sir Robert Cotton, Knight and Baronet*. London.
- 11 *Cal. State Papers Domestic Series* Vol IX 1611–18, 13 July 1615, 295.
- 12 British Library Add MS 53781.
- 13 British Library Add MS 53781. At the end of the 18th-century *Cotton Pedigree*, Nicholas Brett details the appearance of the family tombs at All Saints. He complains that 'the colours on this & the other old monuments are now lost, some blockhead of a Workman having whitewashed them out but a few years ago'.
- 14 It is interesting to note that the cenotaph to Prince Henry represents a more sophisticated understanding of the classical grammar of architecture, with correctly conceived entablature, column capitals and bases – superior to that of the Lady Cotton Monument. This innovation may have been the result of Jones' experiences during his Italian tour of 1613–14.
- 15 Even so, the sculptor has applied strap-work on the altar front, out of keeping with the cenotaph's classical appearance.
- 16 See also *Cal. State Papers Domestic* Vol IX 1611–18, 24 August 1615, 305.
- 17 According to Timothy Wilks, Robert Peake's equestrian portrait of Henry Frederick (1610, now at Parham House in Surrey) was briefly under Cotton's ownership around this time and may even have been displayed at Conington. If this was indeed the case, Henry's death and commemoration would surely have been pressing on Cotton's mind – see Wilks 2007, 177.
- 18 British Library. Add MS 53781.

DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

BRITISH LIBRARY

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- Add MS 53781: Cotton Pedigree, genealogical roll

- Cotton MS Titus C VII: Papers relating chiefly to the court and politics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries
- MS Cotton Vespasian B VI: William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*

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