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*Samuel Rutherford, c. 1600-1661.*

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## John Row the Reformer and the Miracle at Loretto

DOUGLAS W. B. SOMERSET

John Row (c. 1526-1580) was one of Scotland's leading reformers. Born near Stirling, he went to the University of St. Andrews and then spent a while as a Church lawyer in Rome. Returning to Scotland in the summer or autumn of 1559, he aligned himself with the Protestants and became minister of Kennoway in Fife briefly and then minister of Perth from summer 1560 until his death. He was one of the "Six Johns" involved in the preparation of the Scots Confession of 1560 and the *First Book of Discipline*. He had an extensive family, several of whom became ministers in the Church of Scotland, and their sons after them, and his family connections of this sort extended at least into the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Biographical information on John Row is surprisingly meagre, given his family connections, and one of the most detailed accounts – though limited in its scope – is found in the "Additions to the Coronis", thought to have been written or transcribed in about 1670 by his grandson William Row (c. 1614-1698) who was minister of Ceres in Fife.<sup>2</sup> The largest part of this is devoted to John Row's conversion to Protestantism in about 1559 through the exposure of a fraudulent miracle at the shrine of Loretto in Musselburgh; and this account was obviously current in William Row's family because Robert Wodrow recorded a version of it in July 1702 which he had received, at one

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Maidment (ed.), *Memorials of the Family of Row* (Edinburgh, 1828).

<sup>2</sup> John Row, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland, from the year 1558 to the year 1637* (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842). The material on John Row the Reformer in the "Additions to the Coronis" occupies pp. 447-457.



*An aerial view of Loretto School. The supposed site of the hermitage is the group of buildings in the centre of the photograph. The Mound, mentioned in footnote 17 and in the Appendix, is just across the road from these buildings.*

remove, from William Row's daughter Agnes. Agnes was married to Andrew Bowie who was William Row's ministerial colleague in Ceres from 1692 until his translation to North Leith in 1697.<sup>3</sup>

The account in "Additions to the Coronis" describes John Row's return to Scotland in September 1558, partly because of ill-health and partly to act as a papal legate to counter the nascent Reformation. It gives the exact dates on which Row left Rome and landed at Eyemouth and then relates in great detail the pretended miracle and its exposure. The "miracle" was performed at the hermitage of Loretto and consisted in the restoration of sight to a "blind" young man, who had a trick of flipping up his eyelids and rolling up the whites of his eyes to appear blind. He had been kept in a vault by the nuns of St. Katherine of Siena (Sciennes) near Edinburgh for eight years so that his parentage would be forgotten, and

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<sup>3</sup> Wodrow's informant was Mr. John Kennedy, who seems to have been a very elderly surgeon, *Analecta* (4 vols., Maitland Club, Edinburgh, 1842-3), Vol. 4, p. 285. The account of Row is omitted in the published version of *Analecta* (see Vol. 1, p. 30), but is given in J. Maidment (ed.), *Liber Conventus S. Katherine Senensis Propre Edinburgum* (Abbotsford Club, Edinburgh, 1841), pp. lxxv-lxxvii.



had then gone around for a while, pretending to be a blind beggar, prior to the miracle. The miracle was exposed by a Protestant, Robert Colville of Cleish in Fife,<sup>4</sup> who witnessed the occasion and subsequently caught the young man and threatened him with his sword until he confessed the trick. Colville persuaded the young man to declare the truth at the Cross of Edinburgh, and then fled with him back to Fife, which at the time was under the control of the Lords of the Congregation. Immediately afterwards, John Row happened to visit Colville's house to see his wife who was a Papist, and during the ensuing discussion on religion between Colville and Row, Colville produced the young man and got him to show his trick. The effect of this on Row was to guide him towards Protestantism. Wodrow's account is much briefer but broadly the same, except that Colville of Cleish is replaced in the story by Cockburn of Ormistoun.<sup>5</sup>

The account first appeared in print in a letter to the *Edinburgh Weekly Magazine* on 4th June 1772, then in abridged form in James Scott's *Lives of the Protestant Reformers* in 1810, and in Thomas M'Crie's *Life of Knox* in 1812, and in James Maidment's preface to *Liber Conventus S. Katherine Senensis* in 1841.<sup>6</sup> It was given in full in Row's *History* in 1842 and in Paterson's *History of the Regality of Musselburgh* in 1857.<sup>7</sup> Its genuineness was accepted by Scott, M'Crie, Maidment, David Laing, Paterson, the writers of John Row's entries in *Dictionary of National Biography* and *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*, and Audrey-Beth Fitch;<sup>8</sup> but it was challenged by a Roman Catholic correspondent to the *Scots Magazine* in 1824 (who signed himself "C.C."),<sup>9</sup> by George

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<sup>4</sup> Colville is called "Esquire Meldrum" in the account. We discuss the reason for this in Section IV below.

<sup>5</sup> In 1651, Colville's great grandson Robert was raised to the peerage as Lord Colville of Ochiltree, and William Row's daughter Agnes may have confused Colville of Ochiltree with Cockburn of Ormistoun. The village of Ormiston is much nearer to Musselburgh than Ochiltree is. Probably mistakes of this nature are common in oral history.

<sup>6</sup> *Edinburgh Weekly Magazine*, 4th June 1772 (not seen); J. Scott, *A History of the Lives of the Protestant Reformers in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1810), pp. 156-164; T. M'Crie, *Life of Knox* (Edinburgh, 1812), pp. 219, 469-70; *Liber Conventus S. Katherine Senensis*, pp. lxvi-lxxv.

<sup>7</sup> J. Paterson, *History of the Regality of Musselburgh* (Musselburgh, 1857), pp. 100-106.

<sup>8</sup> A. Fitch, "Marian Devotion in Scotland and the Shrine of Loretto", in E.J. Cowan and L. Henderson (eds.), *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland, 1000 to 1600* (Edinburgh, 2011), pp. 274-288 (pp. 281-2).

<sup>9</sup> "A Defence of the Letter to the Editor of the Edinburgh Review, on Miracles", *Scots Magazine*, Vol. 15, Part 2 (July-December 1824), pp. 257-275; 550-557; 677-696 (see pp. 693-4). The correspondent found the whole story "so ludicrous and absurd" as to carry a conviction of its own falsity with it (p. 694).

Grub in 1861, and by David McRoberts in 1965.<sup>10</sup> Grub's criticisms are the most detailed and we give them some consideration in the next section. In subsequent sections we consider the plausibility of the account as it relates to Loretto; to John Row; and to Robert Colville of Cleish; and in the final section we draw some conclusions. We think that, with high probability, the account is of sixteenth-century origin, and basically genuine.

## I. THE STRICTURES OF GEORGE GRUB

Grub's criticisms of the account are numerous, the principal ones being these: that the account is not referred to by earlier writers such as Knox and Spottiswoode (to whom one might add Calderwood); that John Row, secundus (to whose writings the "Additions to the Coronis" are appended), was not twelve years old when his father died, and that he wrote his "History" when he was an old man; that the "Additions" are anonymous and were not written until about 1670; that the name of the one exposing the imposture is corrected by another hand in the manuscript from "Esquire Meldrum" to Robert Colville of Cleish; that the account asserts that John Row returned to Scotland in September 1558 whereas he is known from a surviving letter to have been in Rome on 11th May 1559; and that the events of the account, if they happened at all, must have happened in autumn 1559, by which time the nunnery of St. Katherine of Siena had been destroyed along with the other chapels and religious houses of Edinburgh.<sup>11</sup>

To these, Grub adds the improbability of the young man's being detained for eight years in the nunnery, of his acquiescence in the subsequent proceedings with Colville, and of Row's holding of the office of papal legate. Another possible objection, which Grub does not mention, is that the account says that John Row disputed with John Knox on his return to Scotland in September 1558, whereas Knox was out of the country from 1556 to May 1559. Grub's conclusion is that: "On a review of the whole circumstances, there does not appear to be sufficient evidence for the narrative, while there are strong indications

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<sup>10</sup> G. Grub, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland* (4 vols., Edinburgh, 1861), Vol. 2, pp. 80-83; D. McRoberts, "Hermits in Medieval Scotland", *Innes Review*, Vol. 16 (1965), pp. 199-216 (see p. 212).

<sup>11</sup> Grub, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, Vol. 2, pp. 82-3.

of wilful fabrication or of extreme credulity.”<sup>12</sup> For similar reasons, the correspondent in the *Scots Magazine* declares the story to be “a complete fabrication from beginning to end”; while McRoberts, after mentioning the silence of Knox, Spottiswoode, and others, “can only conclude that this dramatic tale is a late seventeenth-century fiction regarding the account, written for the purpose of creating a legend around one of the founding fathers of the Reformation”.<sup>13</sup>

Numerous though Grub’s strictures are, we will see that few of them have any weight; and even those that do are quite insufficient to outweigh the much greater improbability that the story was a seventeenth-century fabrication.

Some of the points that Grub raises can be dealt with at once. As far as the dating is concerned, it is accepted by Grub and McRoberts that the event, if it happened, must have taken place sometime from June 1559 onwards. Thus either Row came to Scotland in September 1558, returned to Rome by May 1559, and then came back to Scotland later in 1559; or else the date of 1558 should simply be amended to 1559. The latter alternative seems to be the simpler one. It is quite possible that Row did come over twice, and that the person relating the incident conflated the two trips, but we will see in Section III a strong reason for thinking that September 1559 was intended in the first place.

The circumstance of the young boy’s being detained in the convent for eight years is certainly unusual, but it is not impossible; and in the last few years in Europe and America several people have come to light who had been held prisoner in houses for long periods of time. In Wodrow’s version of the story the eight years are reduced to “a year or thereby”, which shows that those who were re-telling the story felt the awkwardness of this detail and were smoothing it out.<sup>14</sup> This rather suggests that the detail was original and authentic. Why a boy who had been imprisoned for eight years should be ready to co-operate with a kindly man who wanted to expose the evil of his captors may have been puzzling to George Grub but it is hardly likely to puzzle anyone else.

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<sup>12</sup> Grub, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, Vol. 2, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> *Scots Magazine*, Vol. 15, Part 2, p. 693; McRoberts, “Hermits in Medieval Scotland”, p. 212.

<sup>14</sup> See *Liber Conventus S. Katherine Senensis*, p. lxxv.

## II. THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE ACCOUNT AND THOMAS DOUCHTIE OF LORETTO

In considering the account in detail, we want to begin with its general plausibility. Was it the sort of thing that might well have happened in Scotland in 1559? One way to see that it was is to consider what is known of Thomas Douchtie, the Loretto hermit. Thomas Douchtie was probably no longer alive by 1559 – there is no mention of him in Row’s account – but his hermitage was a recognised place of “miracle”, and similar things to the pretended restoration of sight had apparently been happening at Loretto while he was there.

Thomas Douchtie was probably a native of Musselburgh. He had been a captain fighting the Turks but had returned to Scotland in 1533, bringing with him an image or picture of the Virgin Mary, concerning which he claimed to have received instruction from heaven.<sup>15</sup> He was given land by the bailies and burgesses of Musselburgh and set up a shrine there to “Our Lady of Loretto”, with himself as the resident hermit. The shrine was a success and within three years there were seven chaplains connected with the establishment. In August 1536 the shrine was honoured with a pilgrimage on foot from Stirling Castle by James V himself. A few months previously, however, one of the chaplains had been excommunicated, and Douchtie and several others had been fined for attacking another priest at night and wounding him with a dagger. In autumn 1542, shortly before the battle of Solway Moss, Mary of Guise, heavily pregnant, walked out to the chapel from Edinburgh to secure the Virgin Mary’s help in the war with the English. Her pilgrimage was ineffectual, however, in preventing the Scottish defeat; and the chapel was damaged by English Protestants in 1544 and again after the Battle of Pinkie in 1547. The image of the Virgin Mary was presumably destroyed by the Scottish Reformers in June 1559, but the premises were still habitable in April 1560 when Lord James Stewart spent the night there.<sup>16</sup> Building materials from the chapel are said to have been used in the construction of the Musselburgh Tolbooth in 1590.<sup>17</sup>

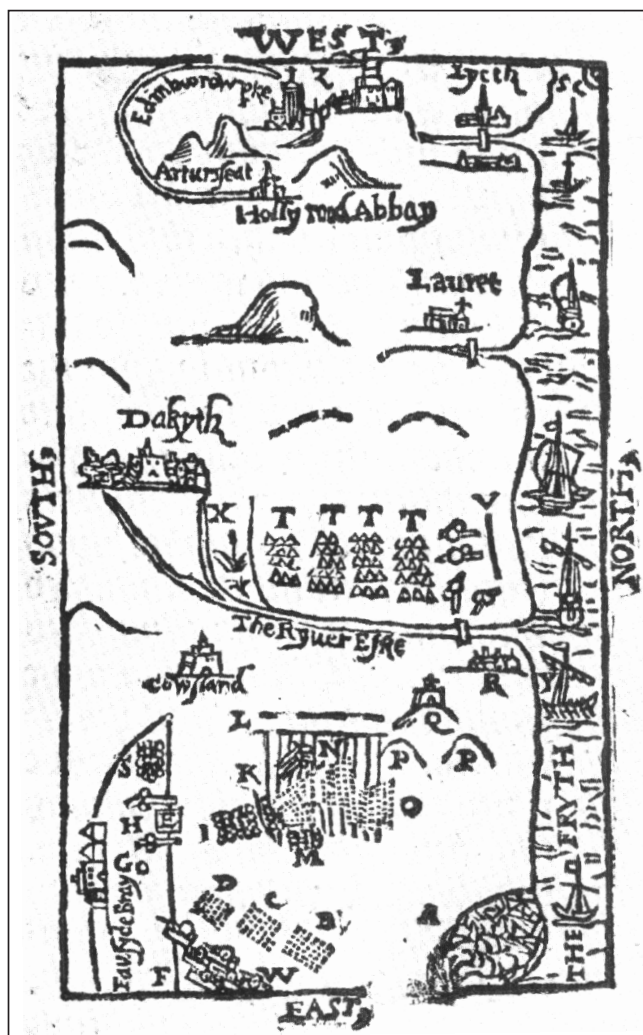
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<sup>15</sup> John Lesley, *De Originis Moribus et Rebus Gestis Scotorum* (1675 edition), p. 434. The fullest accounts of Thomas Douchtie are in Paterson, *History of the Regality of Musselburgh*, pp. 95-106, and in McRoberts, “Hermits in Medieval Scotland”, pp. 209-212. McRoberts presents Douchtie in a more favourable light than we think he deserves.

<sup>16</sup> G. Dickinson (ed.), *Two Missions of Jacques De La Brosse* (Edinburgh, 1942), p. 93.

<sup>17</sup> Paterson, *History of the Regality of Musselburgh*, p. 106. The traditional site of the chapel is a mound on the north side of Linksfield Road in Musselburgh, in the grounds of

Most early writers who mention Thomas Douchtie refer to the miracles or purported miracles associated with the shrine at Loretto. Sir David Lyndsay of the Mount speaks satirically of the blind receiving their sight and the lame being healed at Loretto; the Earl of Glencairn, in his satirical poem recorded by Knox, has the hermit suggesting to the Grey Friars that he might perform some miracles with their advice; John Lesley says that “many miraculous cures” were accomplished there; and David Calderwood says that when any priest came to say mass there, Douchtie “had either one colluding beggar or other, who fained he was cured of some infirmity either of body or mind”.<sup>18</sup>



*Sketch of the Battle of Pinkie from 1547. Loretto Chapel appears in the upper right-hand side under the name “Lauret”.*

While the accusation of bogus miracles made by Lyndsay, Glencairn, and Calderwood can arguably be dismissed as a hostile “stock

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Loretto School. A close examination of the 1534 charter granting the land to Douchtie, along with other documents, suggests that the correct location for the chapel, with his small house and garden, should be the opposite side of the road (now the Loretto School Junior Boys’ Boarding House); see E. P. Dennison and R. Coleman, *Historic Musselburgh* (Scottish Burgh Survey, 1996), p. 24. It is likely, however, that further buildings were constructed as the shrine grew in wealth, and perhaps it is the remains of these that are on the north side of the road. Lord James Stewart’s entourage would have required more than a hermit’s house for their accommodation in 1560.

<sup>18</sup> D. Laing (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Sir David Lyndsay* (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1879), Vol. 3, p. 41; W. C. Dickinson (ed.), *John Knox’s History of the Reformation in Scotland* (2 vols., London, 1949), Vol. 2, p. 334; Lesley, *De Originis Moribus et Rebus Gestis Scotorum*, p. 434; D. Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland* (8 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842-49), Vol. 1, p. 102.

charge against popular shrines at this period” – as McRoberts endeavours to do<sup>19</sup> – the same cannot be said of the contemporary Roman Catholic writer John Lesley; and it is certain from these four sources that miracles were being claimed for Loretto, and highly likely that Douchtie was pretending to perform them. McRoberts concedes that “there were cases of misguided clerics who made the charge [of bogus miracles] justifiable”, but he gives no reason for doubting that Douchtie was just such a case. Unless one believes that Roman Catholic hermits can work miracles – as presumably McRoberts did believe – one is shut up to the conclusion that any miracles claimed by Douchtie were bogus, and that he himself was a charlatan. This being so, it is natural to accept the statements of Sir David Lyndsay and David Calderwood at face value. Thus the “miracle” of 1559 described in Row’s account was probably just the sort of thing that had been occurring at Loretto in the 1530s and 1540s. There is no difficulty, therefore, over the plausibility of this aspect of the account.

### III. JOHN ROW

Next we want to consider John Row, and whether the account tallies with what is otherwise known of him.

The manuscript from which the “Additions to the Coronis” are taken falls into three sections, and appears to have been put together from three separate sources. The final compilation cannot have happened before about 1650, as we shall see in a moment. The first section gives some general facts about the early part of John Row’s life; the second section is the detailed account of the Loretto “miracle” that we are discussing; and the third section is a story about John Row, Dominie William Rind of the Grammar School in Perth, and his son Patrick Rind, minister of Dron.<sup>20</sup> The story in this third part is less interesting than that concerning Loretto, and the dénouement involves the death of Patrick in 1641 and its aftermath (hence the date of “about 1650” given above); so there is no difficulty in supposing that

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<sup>19</sup> McRoberts, “Hermits in Medieval Scotland”, p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> For Dominie William Rind and Patrick, see Scott, *A History of the Lives of the Protestant Reformers in Scotland*, p. 182; Hew Scott (ed.), *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* (8 vols., 2nd edn., Edinburgh, 1915-1950), Vol. 4, pp. 201-2, 218; M. Todd (ed.), *The Perth Kirk Session Books, 1577-1590* (Scottish History Society, Boydell Press, 2012), p. 482.

this anecdote about John Row remained in the Row family until the mid-seventeenth century without coming to general knowledge. The difficulty with the Loretto story is that it seems too striking to have easily remained hidden.

There is little doubt that the material in the first section of the manuscript is authentic. Spottiswoode appears to have used it, or something very similar, in the account that he gives of John Row;<sup>21</sup> and likewise the Latin account that John Row, tertius, gives of his grandfather is almost identical to it in places.<sup>22</sup> For example, the Latin account applies the Scottish adage “*corvum legatum*” to John Row’s being sent as a papal legate or messenger; while the “Additions to the Coronis” manuscript gives this in the form “he proved Corbie messenger (as it is in the proverb)”.<sup>23</sup> (The proverb refers to Noah’s raven which was sent out from the Ark but failed to return.) Indeed, given that Row is known to have been in Rome in May 1559, the application of this proverb to him makes it virtually certain that the correct date for his mission to Scotland was September 1559 rather than September 1558.

It is interesting that John Row, tertius, uses the word “nuncius” to describe his grandfather. James Scott translates this word as “messenger” but one wonders if John Row, tertius, was not using the word in the technical sense of a papal nuncio, which would confirm that aspect of the “Additions to the Coronis” manuscript, or at least explain how the idea arose that Row was a papal nuncio.<sup>24</sup> The exact dates for Row’s leaving Rome and arriving in Eyemouth can only have come from John Row, primus, himself, but there is no suggestion as to how these dates were preserved or why they were thought particularly worthy of remembrance.

One detail which helps to confirm the genuineness of this first section of the manuscript is the landing of John Row at Eyemouth, rather than at Leith. This would seem to be an unlikely touch for a

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<sup>21</sup> J. Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland* (3 vols., Spottiswoode Society, Edinburgh, 1847-51), Vol. 2, pp. 273-4.

<sup>22</sup> John Row’s Latin account occurs in the “Epistola Dedicatoria” of his *Hebraeae Linguae Institutiones* (Glasgow, 1644).

<sup>23</sup> *Hebraeae Linguae Institutiones*, “Epistola Dedicatoria” (unpaginated, p. 4); “Additions to the Coronis”, p. 448. See also Scott, *A History of the Lives of the Protestant Reformers in Scotland*, p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Petrie also describes Row as a papal nuncio, but probably based on the Latin account of John Row, tertius; see A. Petrie, *Compendious History of the Catholic Church* (The Hague, 1662), Part 2, p. 352.



*Seen from the air, earthworks are all that remain of Eyemouth Fort.*  
[Photo taken by the UK Civil Aviation Patrol Lowland Unit]

fabricator a hundred years later. The fort at Eyemouth was built by the French in 1557 with the intention of mounting an attack on the English stronghold at Berwick.<sup>25</sup> It was agreed at the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in April 1559 that it should be cast down, but, not surprisingly, this did not happen, and the fort was still standing in September 1560.<sup>26</sup> Bothwell landed from the continent at Eyemouth in 1565, presumably on his way to Crichton Castle.<sup>27</sup> In September 1559, the Queen Regent controlled the south side of the Firth of Forth and the Protestants the north side, so possibly it was prudent to land at Eyemouth to avoid any trouble, particularly if there was anything valuable in the cargo. Three French ships did arrive in Leith in September 1559 but they had the protection of 800 soldiers on board.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The fort at Eyemouth has been the centre of recent archaeological attention, and there is a considerable amount of material about it on the internet.

<sup>26</sup> J. Bain (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Relating to Scotland and Mary Queen of Scots, 1547-1603* (Edinburgh, 1898), Vol. 1, no. 906, p. 481.

<sup>27</sup> Dickinson, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*, Vol. 2, p. 169 note.

<sup>28</sup> Dickinson, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 216 note.



If Row did indeed land at Eyemouth on 29th September 1559, then this gives a narrow window in which the exposure of the pretended miracle could have happened. The most likely date for the miracle was 29th September itself, which was Michaelmas; and the likelihood is that the miracle would have been arranged for a major Roman Catholic Feast Day. The Protestants had mainly dispersed for the harvest during the late summer and they re-assembled at Stirling on 15th October and marched from there to Edinburgh, so this would have left a fortnight for John Row to call on the Queen Regent in Edinburgh and hear about the recent miracle, to cross over to St. Andrews for a dispute with John Knox and others, and then to arrive at Robert Colville's house at Cleish. It would, therefore, probably have been in the second week of October that he would have reached Cleish. Thus, with the amended date, the account fits remarkably well with the general chronology of the period.

The account attributes Row's conversion to the exposure of Romanism through this false miracle, together with his reading of 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2.<sup>29</sup> One would think that some knowledge of the gospel was also necessary, and John Row tertius says that his grandfather was "caught in the gospel-net, allured by the pure, godly, and pathetic preaching of the famous Knox, and was happily delivered from the miry clay and the corruption of popery".<sup>30</sup> There is no reason to set these experiences in opposition to each other, as George Grub seeks to do, and both of them may have been important steps in his coming to the knowledge of Christ.<sup>31</sup> Spottiswoode says that it was Lord James Stewart who dissuaded him from returning to Rome, and this may have occurred between Row's leaving Cleish and his hearing the preaching of Knox.<sup>32</sup> The connection between Robert Colville of Cleish and Lord James (mentioned below) would add to the likelihood of this.

Given the number of descendants that John Row had in prominent Church positions, it is surprising that so little is known about him. It seems likely that he was reticent about his own experiences, and did not pass on as many stories to his children as one might have expected.

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<sup>29</sup> Row, "Additions to the Coronis", p. 455.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *A History of the Lives of the Protestant Reformers in Scotland*, p. 164; *Hebraeae Linguae Institutiones*, "Epistola Dedicatoria" (p. 4).

<sup>31</sup> Grub, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, Vol. 2, p. 82.

<sup>32</sup> Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland*, Vol. 2, p. 274.

#### IV. ROBERT COLVILLE OF CLEISH

Coming now to the second section of the “Additions to the Coronis” manuscript, it must, if genuine, have been written with information provided by Robert Colville of Cleish.

Robert Colville was the natural son of Sir James Colville of Easter Wemyss and was born around 1520.<sup>33</sup> In 1537 he married Francisca Colquhoun of Drumskeith whose mother was a Colville of Ochiltree, and at the same time his father gave him the estate of Cleish, which had formerly belonged to William Meldrum, the “Esquire Meldrum” of Sir David Lyndsay’s poem.<sup>34</sup> His place of residence, Cleish Castle, was enlarged in the seventeenth century but fell derelict in the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> Since then, however, it has been most attractively restored.

Robert Colville became a Protestant before the Reformation, but little is known about his life. He was the Master of the Household to Lord James Stewart, and he was sent by the Archbishop of St. Andrews to deliver the famous warning to Knox against preaching in St. Andrews.<sup>36</sup> Knox described him as “ane man stout, modest, and wise”; and he was killed on 7th May 1560 at the siege of Leith, not many months after the supposed incident at Loretto.<sup>37</sup> The little that is known of Colville, however, supports the picture of him as man of action who might have ridden to Loretto, apprehended the man whose sight had been “restored”, taken him to his lodging in Edinburgh, threatened him with a sword, persuaded him to declare the truth at Edinburgh Cross, and then fled with him back to Fife. The supposition that Colville’s wife Francisca was still a Roman Catholic in 1559 does not seem to contradict the even less that is known of her.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For Sir James Colville, see G. Brunton and D. Haig, *Senators of the College of Justice* (Edinburgh, 1832), pp. 23-25. The fullest account of the Cleish branch of the Colville family is in David Laing (ed.), *Original Letters of Mr. John Colville, 1582-1603* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1858). For Robert Colville, see pp. xii-xiii.

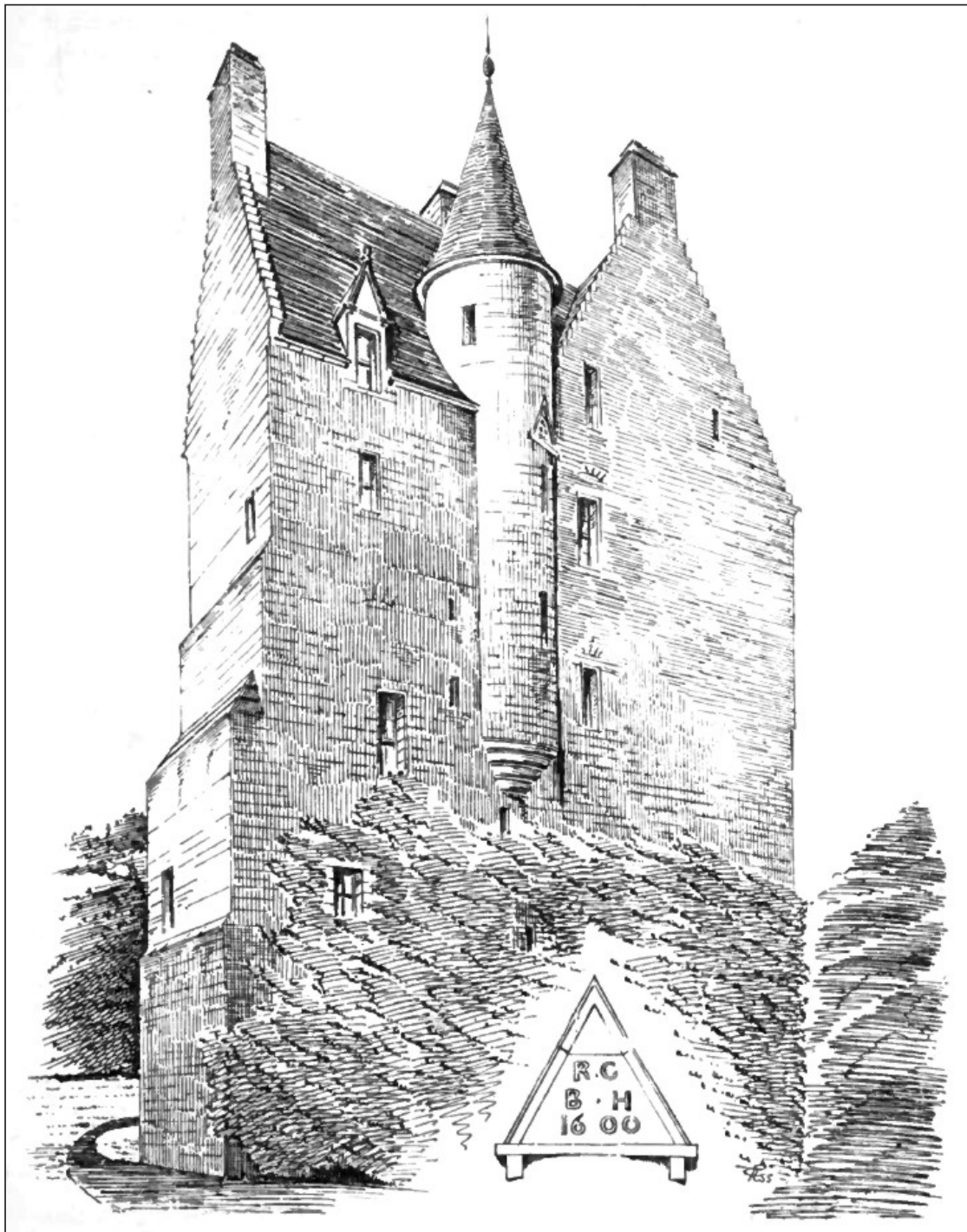
<sup>34</sup> *The Poetical Works of Sir David Lyndsay*, Vol. 1, pp. 159-220.

<sup>35</sup> David Laing describes it in the 1870s as “a large massive building . . . about 85 feet high, the walls still almost entire”, *The Poetical Works of Sir David Lyndsay*, Vol. 1, p. 311.

<sup>36</sup> The message was: “That in case John Knox presented himself to the preaching place, in his town and principal church, he should gar him be saluted with a dozen of culverins, whereof the most part should light upon his nose”, Dickinson, *John Knox’s History of the Reformation in Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 181.

<sup>37</sup> Dickinson, *John Knox’s History of the Reformation in Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 320. Colville was presumably also with Lord James Stewart when the latter spent the night at Loretto in April 1560.

<sup>38</sup> The *ODNB* entry for John Colville says that Francisca (his mother) died in 1591, but gives no authority for this statement.



*Cleish Castle, home of Robert Colville from 1537.*

[Picture taken from *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*,  
by D. MacGibbon and T. Ross]

One puzzle is why the “Additions to the Coronis” manuscript refers to “Esquire Meldrum” as the protagonist of the story, with the name Robert Colville as an addition or correction. David Laing says that the addition serves “to correct an error fallen into regarding the person

who is mentioned as having discovered the imposture of a pretended miracle”; but it could well be that Laing himself has put subsequent writers on the wrong track with this comment.<sup>39</sup> What the manuscript says is: “There was in Fife, Esquire Meldrum, so he was commonly called, a gentleman of good understanding”; and both James Scott and Thomas M’Crie suppose that Colville was jocularly known as “Esquire Meldrum” after the former owner of his house and the hero of the Lyndsay poem.<sup>40</sup> Certainly this would have been an obvious nickname for him. Furthermore, Esquire Meldrum, both in the poem and in reality, was unmarried, whereas the protagonist of the story was necessarily married, so this would have been an evident blunder for anyone familiar with the poem.

William Meldrum, the “Esquire Meldrum” of the poem, was still alive in July 1550 when he appears as a witness in a legal document, so the poem cannot have been written much before 1551.<sup>41</sup> It does not seem to have been printed in Lyndsay’s lifetime and it was probably intended for family or local circulation in Fife.<sup>42</sup> A printed edition appeared about 1582, with subsequent editions in 1594, 1610, 1634, 1669, 1683, and 1696. For some reason the poem was omitted in the fifteen-or-so collected editions of Lyndsay’s works prior to 1670, and this practice continued to the nineteenth century; so, when William Row was compiling the “Additions to the Coronis”, the poem was considerably less well known than Lyndsay’s other works. The reference in the manuscript to “Esquire Meldrum” tends, therefore, to support an early date and a Fife origin for the account of the Loretto miracle.

The information in the manuscript must, as we have mentioned, have been supplied by Robert Colville, and he may well have written out the dialogue before his abrupt death the following summer, but it is evident that he was not the author of the final version of the account. Statements such as “in these days there was a nunnery in the Sheines beside Edinburgh” show that it must have been put together perhaps twenty years or more after the Reformation. Colville had two sons, both

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<sup>39</sup> Row, “Additions to the Coronis”, p. 449. The remark is repeated in *The Poetical Works of Sir David Lyndsay*, Vol. 1, p. 307.

<sup>40</sup> Scott, *A History of the Lives of the Protestant Reformers in Scotland*, p. 162; T. M’Crie, *Life of John Knox* (1855 edn., Edinburgh), p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> J. Maitland Thomson (ed.), *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum: The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, A.D. 1546-1580* (Edinburgh, 1886), Vol. 4, no. 490.

<sup>42</sup> Janet Hadley Williams (ed.), *Sir David Lyndsay, Selected Poems* (Glasgow, 2000), p. xii.

of whom were grown up, or nearly so, in 1560. The elder son, Robert, would have been born about 1540 and died in 1584. He was the grandfather of the Robert who was raised to the peerage in 1651 as Lord Colville of Ochiltree. The younger son, John, was born about 1542 and had an adventurous life. He became a Church of Scotland minister but gave the General Assembly much trouble and deserted the ministry about 1580. After a complicated career of politics, law, intrigue, and violence, he fled to France in 1600 and converted to Roman Catholicism, probably insincerely. He died in Paris in great poverty in 1605. He was the author of various works, including his *Palinode*, published in 1600, and he may well have been the author of *The Historie and Life of James the Sext*.<sup>43</sup>

It seems likely that the Loretto account was written by someone in the Colville family, and either of the sons might be a possibility. Both would have heard their father's version of events and probably also that of the young man who pretended to be blind; and their father may have been jocularly known in the family as "Esquire Meldrum". John Colville presumably enjoyed writing, but the account has a flavour of genuine Protestantism which would seem less likely from one who subsequently apostatised. Perhaps, therefore, the other son was the author, or some later member of the family, enlarging on Robert Colville's original dialogue. The manuscript might then have remained with the Colvilles into the seventeenth century and been copied out or passed on to the Row family later on. Thus the Rows' source of knowledge for the episode may have been a slight family tradition, greatly supplemented by this account which came into their hands a century after the event. This is just a conjecture, but it would help to explain the apparent ignorance of Calderwood and Spottiswoode, and the seeming appearance of the story in the later seventeenth century. Even then, the story was not widely disseminated: Robert Milne junior, who was a great-great-great grandson of John Row the Reformer, was evidently unaware of it in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See David Laing's "Memoir of John Colville" in *Original Letters of Mr. John Colville, 1582-1603*, pp. ix-xl; Colville's entry in *ODNB*.

<sup>44</sup> *Memorials of the Family of Row*, pp. ii, 1-4.

## V. CONCLUSION

The account of the Loretto miracle appears to be historically accurate, where it can be tested, and otherwise to be in harmony with established facts. There is far too much detail for it to be dismissed as a legend; and the details have a boldness and plausibility which makes it hard to believe that they were fabricated. The references to Loretto, for example, and to the convent of St. Catherine of Siena are not essential to the story, and their introduction, if fictitious, would have run the risk of contradiction from known historical sources.<sup>45</sup> The story could have been placed vaguely somewhere in “the Reformation period” but instead it commits itself to the few months in 1559 when the Lords of the Congregation were in arms in Fife, raising the difficulty of whether the Loretto Chapel had not by then been destroyed by the Reformers.<sup>46</sup> Even less central to the main story, and still more hazardous in its introduction, was the name of John Row, which ushered in a host of potential difficulties, particularly with his extensive circle of living descendants. One would have needed an accurate knowledge of the available information on Row to have invented a new story about him without detection.<sup>47</sup>

Grub, McRoberts, and the 1824 correspondent, all suggest that the account was fabricated, but they do not seem to realise the difficulties with their suggestion, nor its implausibility as far as Presbyterian history is concerned. Pious legends and “mythic stories” about saints, images, and relics have a status in Roman Catholic and High Episcopal circles<sup>48</sup> – even to this day<sup>49</sup> – which they do not possess among sober

<sup>45</sup> For example, as we have mentioned, the convent of St. Katherine of Siena was destroyed by the Reformers, probably at the very end of June 1559 (*Liber Conventus S. Katherine Senensis*, p. 64). This does not contradict the story, however, because by this time the boy, according to the story, was perambulating as a beggar.

<sup>46</sup> As we have mentioned, the image of Mary was probably destroyed in June or July 1559, but the buildings appear to have continued until 1590. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, probably few people outside Musselburgh would have known this.

<sup>47</sup> For a garbled version of the story, centred on Loretto but otherwise omitting all awkward details (especially mention of John Row), see *The Loretto Register, 1825-2000* (Musselburgh, 2000) [pdf available online, p. 3]. The relevant extract is given below in the Appendix. Such a version has much more of the flavour of a legend than the precise and detailed account that we are considering from the “Additions to the Coronis”.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, T. Turpie, “Our Friend in the North: the origins, evolution and appeal of the cult of St. Duthac of Tain in the latter Middle Ages”, *Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 93 (2014), pp. 1-28 (especially pp. 4-10).

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, R. MacAleese, “Notre Dame du Bon Succès or Our Lady of Aberdeen – a Pre-Reformation statue from Scotland?”, *Records of the Scottish Church History*

Presbyterians. The inventing of legends is regarded by Presbyterians as a species of lying incompatible with true religion. The deliberate fabricator of a false story about John Row and Loretto could not have been an upright man, and other evidences of dishonesty would probably have appeared in his life. The seventeenth century is a well-trodden part of Scottish Church history, and if this fabricator existed it should be possible to narrow down his identity and to explain what his motivation was. In what circles did he move; and why did he exercise his talent in this dishonest way; and how did he acquire his detailed but unprofitable knowledge of the history of 1559? Do we have other samples of his work? These are questions that would need to be addressed before the existence of such a person can be conceded as even remotely likely.

Perhaps a comparison with a couple of acknowledged fabrications may be illuminating. Calderwood gives an account of a “forged conference”, involving John Knox, Regent Moray, and others, in 1570, which was circulated after Moray’s death. The forgery is of interest because of the effort to imitate the language and manner of the individual speakers, and Knox’s speech is certainly skilfully done. The forgery is thought to have been due to Thomas Maitland, the brother of William Maitland of Lethington, who would have known the various “participants”; and the motivation was obviously political, to discredit Regent Moray.<sup>50</sup>

A fabrication of a different nature is the account of the Reformation in Perth in May 1559 given in *The Book of Perth*, and said to have been derived ultimately from an eye-witness.<sup>51</sup> The style is obviously nineteenth-century romantic with an excess of description and detail;<sup>52</sup> and as soon as one starts to check the detail one finds error. For

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*Society*, Vol. 42 (2013), pp. 74-103 (especially pp. 97-101). It is surprising that a historical journal in the twenty-first century should devote two whole pages to miracles attributed to a piece of wood.

<sup>50</sup> Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Vol. 2, pp. 515-525. Knox’s lengthy speech is introduced as follows: “Next my Lord Regent caused John Knox to speak; who, looking up to heaven as he had been beginning a prayer before sermon, (for by a hole I might behold their countenance, and so see what they did); and after he had kepted silence a good while, he beginneth with a sture [hoarse] and broken voice, and said, ‘I praise my God greatumlie [greatly] that hath heard my prayer, which oftentimes I poured forth before the throne of his majesty, in anguish of my heart . . . ’” (ibid., pp. 517-8).

<sup>51</sup> J. P. Lawson (ed.), *The Book of Perth* (Edinburgh, 1847), pp. 92-115. The account may indeed have had a basis in fact, but, if so, this has been buried under the embellishments and is lost beyond hope of recovery.

<sup>52</sup> In rejecting the authenticity of this production, Mary Verschuur gives, as a sample, its description of John Knox entering the pulpit in Perth on 11th May: “The light which streamed in from the east window of the transept fell on the aged reformer as he

example, the assertion that Lord James Stewart and the Earl of Argyll were present to hear Knox preach in Perth on 11th May, is contradicted by Knox's letter to Mrs. Lock of 23rd June.<sup>53</sup> The motivation for the production seems to have been that of the historical novel, written to entertain and to give rein to the imagination, rather than to deceive.

By contrast with these two, the account of John Row and the miracle at Loretto is too compressed and factual in style to have been written for mere entertainment; and it would have been composed too late (if written in the mid-seventeenth century) to have served any obvious propaganda purpose.<sup>54</sup> A late sixteenth-century authorship, by someone seeking to preserve facts with which he had long been familiar, would seem a far more likely explanation.

From the paucity of biographical information about John Row, we have suggested that he seldom spoke about his experiences; and this may further help to explain why Calderwood and Spottiswoode knew nothing about them. John Knox, on the other hand, presumably must have heard about the Loretto miracle and its exposure; but the section of his *History*, covering the first half of October 1559, is entirely taken up with lengthy political items, and perhaps this sufficiently accounts for his silence regarding the incident.<sup>55</sup> He was not able to include everything in his *History*. It is a pity, really, because the Loretto story is one that he would have handled well.

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ascended the pulpit, and rendered every feature of his care-worn countenance distinctly visible where Oliver stood" (*Book of Perth*, p. 104); see *Politics or Religion? The Reformation in Perth 1540-1570* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 94, 107.

<sup>53</sup> *Book of Perth*, p. 104; D. Laing (ed.), *Works of John Knox* (6 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1846-1864), Vol. 6, pp. 24-5. Rather surprisingly, Jane Dawson cites Knox's letter of 23rd June but also accepts the statement in *The Book of Perth* that Argyll and Lord James were present during Knox's sermon; see J. E. A. Dawson, *The Politics of Religion in the Age of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 90, 92 n. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Audrey-Beth Fitch makes some suggestions as to why the story was recorded, but we have to say that these suggestions do not seem entirely coherent, A. Fitch, "Marian Devotion in Scotland and the Shrine of Loretto", pp. 281, 283.

<sup>55</sup> Dickinson, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*, Vol. 1, pp. 234-249.





*Musselburgh Tolbooth, built in 1590 – one of the oldest in Scotland to survive intact.*

## APPENDIX

*The following extract is taken from The Loretto Register, 1825-2000 (6th edn., Musselburgh, 2000). A re-typed and updated pdf of this publication has been made available online, and this extract is found on p. 3 of the pdf.*

[Presumably this version of the story was drawn from memory, with various fictitious details being added for vividness. The first edition of the *Loretto Register* came out in 1908, but we have not checked for the edition in which this story first appeared. The main changes from the “Additions to the Coronis” are that the timing becomes simply “the 1550s”, the location is moved to the Musselburgh cross, and all reference to the nuns of Sciennes, to Squire Meldrum, and to John Row, is omitted. It is sobering to see the effect that a few years of verbal transmission can have on a story.]

Loretto Chapel was afterwards restored [after the Battle of Pinkie in 1547], though it never again regained its former prestige. During the previous twenty years the Reformation had been making great strides in Germany under Luther, and also in England and



*Loretto Mound – the Mound is within the grounds of Loretto School.  
A straight stone passage runs under the Mound, which is popularly associated  
with “Our Lady of Loretto”.*

Scotland. The monks [of Loretto] felt that something had to be done to restore their prestige. It came to their knowledge that a lad long known in the town as blind was not really so. The lad’s mother, a gypsy, had, since he was an infant, taught him so to turn up his eyes that he could for hours on end deceive experts and make them believe that he was blind. This discovery came to the monks as an inspiration and they determined to use it for the purpose of pretending to perform a public miracle.

A stage was erected at the cross of Musselburgh near where the Town Hall stands, and upon it appeared the monks from Loretto with the supposedly blind beggar. Various religious ceremonies were performed in which, of course, the beggar was the central figure, and in due time he was solemnly commanded to open his eyes. To the astonishment of the beholders he did so. The onlookers were asked to verify what had been done, and the beggar was put to severe tests by many of the sceptics who did not wish the Catholic religion to prosper. The immediate result



*The door which opens into the Mound. Over the entrance is the pediment of a dormer window, dated 1647, which is said to have come from Pinkie House.*

was that over a large area of the Lowlands of Scotland the Roman c were credited with having performed a genuine miracle.

The gypsy, however, was at last bribed to tell the truth. Chagrin grew to anger, anger to frenzy, and with cries of “Down with Popery!” the people of Musselburgh rushed one day to the chapel of Our Lady of Loretto and razed it to the ground. It is part of the ruins of that chapel which now forms the Mound, and many of the sacred stones were after-wards taken to renovate the Musselburgh Town Hall. As a consequence of this, for more than two hundred and fifty years afterwards the inhabitants of Musselburgh were annually excommunicated by the Pope.

