

# 1. Queen Blearie

## The Vicissitudes of a Legend

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The idea of a child being cut from its mother's womb and surviving has exercised a shuddering fascination for centuries. Anyone who saw the light in that manner was most surely destined for something. Reliably attested cases of it actually occurring seem to be non-existent before anaesthesia and aseptic surgery (though now routine, some say too routine, obstetric practice) but legends flourished. Julius Caesar's name was attached to it, with the help of a mistaken etymology, and that ogre Henry VIII was rumoured to have sacrificed Jane Seymour to secure his heir Prince Edward, though a ballad has Jane volunteering and Henry rejecting the idea with horror. She died anyway, perhaps from childbed fever.

Some reference to a 'bloody child', a Caesarean birth, seems to have been connected with the history of the Scottish kingdom, though not directly with the House of Stewart. The witness is Shakespeare. In the Scottish play which he wrote to entertain his new royal, and scholarly, patron, there is a scene celebrating the Stewart dynasty, which they both believed to descend from Banquo. Among the other unsettling visions which the witches show Macbeth is a 'bloody child', but it is not an ancestor of the Stewart line; it is Macduff, the Thane of Fife who is destined to kill Macbeth; the vision names itself. 'Beware Macduff.' It is a warning to look at the wording of the promise that 'none of woman born' can kill Macbeth; the witches play fair.

Away from the courtly and scholarly world, the people of Renfrew countryside had by the 17th century developed a story incorporating a Caesarean birth to account for an old monument whose purpose and traditional name they did not understand. Antiquarians and topographers heard of the story and went to work to improve it, explain it, and demolish it. Their texts were used as reliable source material by later local historians. The result is that the journalists and guide-book writers who have taken over the popularising functions of the old wife in the inglenook are at this day sustaining the story and transmitting it with new details and fresh impetus and it is, or was until quite recently, taught as fact in schools. However, what was originally an essential ingredient of the story, the name Queen Blearie, has been jettisoned on the way and something the mediaeval tale-tellers would have rejected - that the horrific operation was carried out in the Infirmary of Paisley Abbey - seems to have become intrinsic in its place.

Facts : Marjory Bruce, the daughter of Robert I, returned from captivity after the Battle of Bannockburn and was married to Walter the Steward of Scotland and Baron of Renfrew. Their child, Robert, was born in 1316 and some months later Walter referred to Marjory as his deceased wife. The child eventually became King Robert II; he had some eye trouble. The chronicler Froissart noted that the King's eyes were covered with a film like a fine, reddish veil. Walter ordered tombs in Paisley Abbey for himself and Marjory.

Two more facts whose relevance will appear presently: there was a battle, called 'of Renfrew', fought near the mouth of the White Cart in 1164, and there was an octagonal stone pillar standing at a place called Knock between Paisley and Renfrew until the 1770s. Less noticeable, but well-attested, was a flat-topped circular artificial mound not far from it. A knock, incidentally, is a small hill.

Traditions and Transmitters: James Montgomerie's Description of the Shire of Renfrew , written some time in the 1650s, includes this passage:

In this shire, at a hill called the Knok, on Grieff near Renfrew, was King Robert,

called Blear-eye, cutted out of his mother's womb by Sir John Forrester of Elliestoun (who hazarded in extremity to use that remedy to preserve the child's life, the Queen having there taken her child ill, being in the fields and dying, the child being quick in her belly) who before that was reputed a simple man, from whom the house of Sempill and Lords thereof have their name, and part of their estate. In memory of which there is yet a stone pillar erected and standing in that place.

The Sempill or Semple family of Elliston were important functionaries in the Barony of Renfrew long before Marjory was born. The strange thing is that James Montgomerie was a relation of the family. Was this myth current among the old wives in the family's service?

The Stewards did retain a surgeon; at the time of his coronation Robert II made a grant of Fulbar, west of Paisley, to Thomas Hall, surgeon, for his services. But it is not at all probable that he was expert in making abdominal incisions. Mediaeval surgery concerned itself with repair jobs, not with 'invasive' interventions; its limits were set by the danger of sepsis, lack of safe analgesics and poor anatomic knowledge because of the veto on human dissection. The female human anatomy was the province of midwives, who were quite content that it should be so.

If it is unlikely that the Steward's surgeon would be a practitioner of obstetric surgery, it is practically unthinkable that anyone at Paisley Abbey would be. A respectable monk, unlike the Antonite friars of Soutra Hospital, did not occupy his thoughts with women's reproductive organs - and the Cluniacs were a very gentlemanly Order. Confronted with a woman in labour they could only have arranged a lodging for her (a monastic infirmary did not allow much privacy) and summoned a midwife. It did not occur to the originators of the Queen Blearie story to think that a delivery would take place in the Abbey; this is a 20th century development of the legend.

Local historical writers over the next half-century repeated the central point of what must have been a purely local tradition, since no historian of Scotland mentioned it, but took liberty to vary the details. By collating William Dunlop (Description of Renfrewshire, c.1690), Walter Macfarlane (ditto 1690), William Hamilton (Lanark and Renfrew, c.1703) and George Crawford (Renfrewshire, 1710), we gather that the story originated with the pillar. It had been known as Queen Blearie's Stane time out of mind. The 1690 story went that the Queen was hunting and was thrown from her horse, which, as Principal Dunlop put it, dislocated the vertebrae of her neck - not an expression typical of folk memory, but one that was copied for three centuries. Someone unnamed cut out a future king, but 'the operation being by an unskilful hand', the child's eye suffered a permanent injury.

There were some improbabilities and inconsistencies; some of the educated transmitters of the story substituted for the hunting a less imprudent reason for riding between Paisley and Renfrew, and 'Queen Blearie' was an error which had to be excused. The story was introduced with non-committal words - 'a tradition', 'it is said' etc. But it was not until the 1770s - appropriately, just when the pillar was demolished - that its whole basis was subjected to a destructive criticism. This came from Sir James Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, in his monumental Annals of Scotland (1776-9).

Dalrymple pointed out that 'Queen Blearie' sounded very like the Gaelic for 'battle memorial' - Cuine Blair, in his spelling. And he also learned that the area where the pillar stood was known as the Kemp Knowe - the combat, or champion's hill. Eureka - this must be the site of the Battle of Renfrew of 1164. Queen Blearie was not a person, but the stone itself. Rather superfluously, he also poured derision on the incidental improbabilities, which he called absurdities.

Thomas Pennant, the topographical tourist, would naturally consult Dalrymple, who had published shortly before him, and he was so satisfied with this explanation that he confidently said he had seen the memorial of the Battle of Renfrew in passing from Paisley to Renfrew, and it consisted of a pillar rising from a flat-topped mound. Chalmers's *Caledonia* (1807) ignores the story.

But the end of the 18th century was a period of changing taste. The romantic and picturesque were coming in. William Semple's and George Robertson's *Continuations of Crawford's Renfrewshire* (1782 and 1818) distance themselves a little from the tradition of a riding accident and the Caesarean birth but they refrain from trampling on it. In 1817 the Reverend Dr Boog put on display in the Abbey Church a stone effigy surmised to be of Marjory Bruce, resting on a stone chest made up of fragments of mediaeval sculpture. It was dubbed Queen Blearie's Tomb and succeeded the then long-demolished Queen Blearie's Stane at Knock as tangible confirmation of the legend.

William Motherwell, a romantic Tory, a devoted collector of songs and traditions, and a quite prolific poetaster in his own right, edited the first printed version of Hamilton's work of c.1703 in 1830, and made it the occasion of an Appendix passionately defending the story. The theme of this essay is the reliability of tradition.

It is not the purpose of the present writer to reconcile the discrepancies which the incredulous school have pointed out as existing between the traditional versions of this story itself, and the facts of history which run counter to it. He may, however, contend that it is altogether improbable that such a story took its rise wholly independent of some foundation in fact. The historical facts may be disguised by oral embellishment, or corrupted by being fused with other events prior or subsequent to their own era, but they can never be wholly suppressed.

Most of Motherwell's Appendix is at a less Olympian level; he addresses a flow of sarcasm at his opponents and taunts the late Thomas Pennant with being deceived by an optical illusion through failing to dismount and investigate. The pillar did not stand on the mound; they were some distance apart in a straight line from the road. Here Motherwell pulls out a trump card of his own.

He had himself collected an oral tradition about Palm-my-arm Ross, who fought a wrestling match to the death for the honour of the King of Scotland, and, as Motherwell tells the tale, on a mound answering closely to the description of the mound at Knock. So that mound was the Kemp Knowe and the pillar was the site of Marjory Bruce's death and King Blearie's birth, and the Battle of Renfrew did not come into it. It was 'singular enough' that Queen Blearie sounded like the Gaelic for a battle memorial, but it could not weigh against 'unvarying tradition.'

In the 1870s David Semple, the most meticulous of the Paisley lawyer-antiquarians, launched another attack. He repeated Dalrymple's comments of 1779 and added an exhibit. A seal of the first High Steward shows him resting his hand on a pillar. People having their portraits made have frequently taken up such a posture, but Semple would have it that the Steward was boasting of his victory at the Knock. This evidence was brought up again by John Malden of Paisley Museum in connection with an exhibition of the Abbey's documents and treasures in 1992. It seems unsatisfactory that the Cuinhe Blair theory does not include an explanation of the mound - at least not yet. People are working on it, I gather, with the hypothesis that the Knock was a moot-hill and that the fight in 1164 followed some kind of formal challenge made there.

Most Paisley people are now unaware of the mound ever having existed and many have never heard of Queen Blearie either; but many were taught at school that Marjory Bruce underwent an emergency operation at in the Abbey. This extension of the

legend is not found before the 20th century, and it may be due to Charles Stewart Black, author of the only History of Paisley to appear between 1884 and 1988, *The Story of Paisley*, mostly written before the Second World War but published in 1947. Black wrote not only historical works but also romantic fiction and poetry. By his day, monasticism was being given credit for its social usefulness but there were not many books available on the history of medicine.

What passes as 'popular tradition' nowadays is quite often a recycled artefact of authors, journalists and the tourist industry. Guarding the boundary between imagination and reality is one of the duties to which historians are called.

**The principal references:**

In Paisley Reference Library,

*The History of the Shire of Renfrew*, by George Crawford continued by William Semple, 1782; several copies available; on sale. Pp 30, 292, 250 about Queen Blearie's stone; 263 about Robert II's surgeon.

*Description of the Shires of Lanark and Renfrew*, by William Hamilton, c. 1703, and (fragment) by James Montgomerie c. 1650, ed. William Motherwell 1830 - note Motherwell's Appendix.

*Caledonia*, by George Chalmers 1807 Vol. IV, pp 818, 824.

*History of Paisley*, by Robert Brown Vol. I, 1884.

Popular Errors etc, in *Local Memorabilia*, (ie. collected articles) by David Semple. *The Story of Paisley*, by C. S. Black 1947 (several copies).

Elsewhere, but quoted in the above-mentioned works:

*Annals of Scotland*, by Sir James Dalrymple, Lord Hailes 1776-9, quoted by Motherwell and David Semple.

*Description of Renfrewshire*, by William Dunlop c. 1690, quoted by Crawford, Brown etc.

*A Tour of Scotland*, by Charles Pennant 1772, quoted by William Semple and Motherwell.

Other references to this subject (including newspaper articles and Abbey publications) are based on these sources. Standard works on monasticism and the history of medicine are relevant.

A version of Froissart's *Chronicles* is available in Paisley Library but detail about the nature of Robert II's eye ailment is more specific in the original translation by Berners Vol. III, Cp. 10.