

A Brief History of Melville Castle

And the lives and times it encompassed

Earliest records indicate that in 1155 in the reign of King Malcolm IV, Malleville was an estate in the ownership of an Anglo-Norman Baron called Galfrid de Malle who was Sheriff of Edinburgh and Governor of Edinburgh Castle. It remained in his family until the time of King Robert Bruce II. When, in 1371 it passed through marriage to Sir John Ross of Halkhead. The castle continued as the seat of that branch of the Ross family for many generations.

In 1542, owing to the death of the Scottish King, James V, Mary Stuart, his daughter became Queen of Scotland. She was only six days old. Because of political and religious unrest in Scotland she was to spend her early years in France with her mother Marie de Guise, adopting much of French culture, and controversially, the Roman Catholic faith.



In 1558 she married the Dauphine of France and on his accession to the throne as King Francis II she became the Queen Consort of France. However 1561 after the premature death of the King, Marie Stuart, a nineteen year old widow made the decision to exchange the culture and splendour of the French Court and returned to Scotland. She had been Queen Consort of France for a year. Though the Scottish Royal Court was established in Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, the malodorous city persuaded the Queen to settle her French retinue a few miles to the south, in an area which is known, even today, as Little France. In 1565 after four years of widowhood, and against the earnest pleadings of her



advisors she chose to marry her Catholic cousin, the overbearing and arrogant, Lord Darnley, a disaster from which her later problems sprang. Her future life was to be etched in blood.

The Queen, a fine horsewoman, became a frequent visitor to the nearby Melville Castle, invariably in the company of her Italian secretary and close companion Seigneur David Rizzio. This close friendship caused jealousy and hatred in the mainly Protestant Scottish Nobles. In an attempt to raise Rizzio's standing the Queen tried to persuade Lord Ross to give the Lordship of Melville to Rizzio. Though it was not to be, Rizzio nevertheless took apartments in the castle. The castle became known to the local people as Rizzios house. This further incensed the Nobles. On one of the Queens visits he planted a tree as a token of his love for her. The tree, a majestic Spanish chestnut (*castanea sativa*) survives to this day some 450 years later. The Queen responded by planting 5 oak trees along the drive which also survive to this day.

Such blatant displays of love however, were to be Rizzio's downfall. The Scottish nobles persuaded Lord Darnley that Rizzio was the Queens lover and, in 1566 they

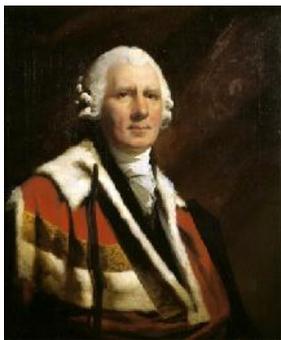


forced their way into her apartments in Holyrood palace and murdered him before the Queens eyes. He was to suffer many stab wounds as each lord fulfilled his obligation. A few years later Lord Darnley was persuaded to spend the night in a house previously primed with gun powder. He survived the explosion and his injured body was found in the garden. He was then strangled where he lays, all to the order of Earl of Bothwell, Mary's new suitor. Mary was accused of complicity in the murder and was held in captivity by the Scottish Lords. She was later to escape and seek sanctuary in England where she was eventually to be betrayed, imprisoned and beheaded by her cousin Elizabeth of England. The trees however remain enduring symbols of The Queen and Rizzio's ill-fated affection for each other.



In 1762 Sir David Rannie purchased the estate. He had acquired a vast fortune after 30 years of trading with the East India Company in Eastern seas based on Calcutta. His return to Scotland was short lived, as after 5 years he died leaving his two young daughters prey to the landed gentry. The shrewd Henry Dundas, a lawyer, and son of the neighbouring estate of Arniston, was 24 when he married the 14 year old Elizabeth acquiring both her estate and her fortune. He was clever and industrious with consuming ambition. His service as a Member of Parliament in London under Prime Minister Pitt was to be rewarded by an appointment as the first Viscount Melville. He also held the most prestigious and powerful position in Scotland as Lord Advocate. This

is commemorated in a marble statue in the Advocates Hall in Edinburgh.



His new found wealth allowed him to commission James Playfair, the renowned Scottish architect of the time to design a new castle and in 1786 the old medieval edifice was demolished and the new Castle was built on its footprint. This building, an impressive castellated mansion with its spacious pillared entrance hall, elegant staircase and fine reception rooms, was created principally for entertaining on a grand scale.

In 1791 at the time of the French revolution and Britain's war with France, Lord Melville was appointed Home Secretary and Minister for War. He now wielded enormous power throughout Britain and its dominions. His preoccupation in state matters however, resulted in a rash investment and the loss of all of Elizabeth's fortune in the crash of the Ayrshire Bank. This misadventure resulted in an impoverished Countess and a mortgaged Melville Castle. His successful political career however continued with his appointment as First Lord of the Admiralty but these various government appointments meant that he was required to spend long months in London whereupon his long suffering wife, her fortune lost, eloped into the arms of another.

In 1822, in anticipation of George IV's visit to Scotland, an impressive fluted stone column 135ft high was erected in the gardens of St. Andrews Square to bear the figure of the King. However, the Edinburgh dignitaries, momentarily displeased with the King, surmounted the column with the figure of Lord Melville. The King was required to make do with a less prominent position in Hanover Street and a modest pedestal of only 15 feet. Lord Melville also had sight of the plans for the New Town, and to the dismay of the officials he acquired the principal site in St Andrews Square and built the finest classical mansion house in the city. The church originally intended for the site had to be relocated to George Street. It is known as Saint Andrews 'the round church which leaves no corner for the devil.'

In 1828, King George IV again visited Scotland as a guest of the Duke of Buccleuch at Dalkeith Palace. Whether aware of his displacement from St. Andrews Square, the King visited Melville Castle. For this, a

special carriage way, now Melville Gate Road was created between the two mansions. A grand review of the Midlothian Yeomanry, of which Lord Melville was Colonel, took place on the south lawn. For this occasion Lord Melville arranged a lavish Banquet and among the distinguished personages gathered to meet the King was Sir Walter Scott who lived nearby and was a frequent visitor to the Castle. It is recorded that a sumptuous meal was enjoyed by the guests and the members of the Yeomanry, who were amply provided for. The Estate workers also enjoyed a feast and there was still enough food remaining for the poor of the district to be fed.

In 1842, on the occasion of her first tour of Scotland, 23 year old Queen Victoria was a guest at the Castle and was greatly enamoured by the beautiful and tranquil character of the Estate. Walter Scott was also inspired to write of 'Melville's Beechy Grove' in his work 'Grey Brother'.



The Castle remained in the hands of the Dundas family for some generations and after the Second World War, the Ninth Lord Melville moved to a smaller house on the Estate and the Castle was temporarily leased as an army rehabilitation centre and later as a hotel. In the late 1980's the Castle, the Estate and the adjoining farms were sold. The Castle however, suffered badly from neglect and the ensuing dry rot brought it to dereliction and eventual closure. In 1993, after being open to the weather and with the roof and floors collapsing, it was acquired by the Hay Trust and over a period of 8 years, it underwent extensive restoration and refurbishment to become again the fine and elegant building you see today. It remains in the ownership of the Trust and was opened as a 4 star hotel in June 2003.

During renovation, an apparition, shrouded and featureless but unmistakably female in form and deportment, was seen to move from the fireplace of the Library bar towards and through the wall opposite. As work progressed, when the old plaster was stripped from the wall, a built up doorway was revealed. It was re-opened and now serves as the entrance to the Arniston room from the Library. The spirit has also been seen hovering at the foot of the bed in a first floor bedroom and most recently as a shadowy figure in a mirror. These visitations persist and invariably occur at dusk or during the hours of darkness! Speculation suggests that it could be the distraught spirit of Mary Stuart searching for her close companion David Rizzio and their times of happiness at Melville Castle.

During the renovations, the foundations of the old castle came to light and a series of stone steps were found, leading down, to what? Time precluded the excavation of the rubble and the steps remain to this day, a mystery under the flagstones of the Entrance Hall.

WG Hay August. 1998



Entrance Hall



Staircase



Ballroom

Willie's Gane to Melville Castle

J.C.H. Gibson

AS A MILITIAMAN, Willie MacDowall of Castle Semple had responded readily to the call to arms. Equally persuasive was the call to his own arms, as the Ladies could individually and collectively vouch. For Willie, prodigal in the bestowal of his favours, had gained the hearts of no fewer than four sisters for whom he was gallantly prepared to mount his steed and ride a mile or two, Willie's leave-taking and its setting - historic Melville Castle- is immortalised in the ballad:

O Willie's gane to Melville Castle,
Boots and spurs an a',
To bid the leddies a' fareweel
Before he ga'ed awa'.
Willie's young and blythe and bonnie,
Lo'ed by ane and a',
Oh! What will all the lassies do
When Willie gaes awa'?

The first he met was Lady Kate,
She led him through the ha',
And wi' a sad and sorry heart
She loot the tear-drop fa'.
Beside the fire stood Lady Grace,
Said ne'er a word ava;
She thocht that she was sure o' him
Before he gaed awa'.

Then ben the house cam' Lady Bell,
"Gude troth ye need na craw,
Maybe the lad will fancy me,
And disappoint ye a'."
Doun the stair tripped Lady Jean,
The flower amang them a',
"O lasses trust in Providence
An' ye'll get husbands a'."

When on his horse he rade awa'
They gathered round the door,
He gaily waved his bonnet blue,
They set up sic a roar,
Their cries, their tears brocht Willie back,
He kissed them ane an' a',
"O lasses bide till I come hame
And then I'll wed ye a'."

Gane=gone

leddies=ladies

ga'ed awa'=went away

loot=let

ava=at all

ben=through

sic=such

bide=stay