

Crossraguel Abbey



R. L.



Crossraguel Abbey

A History and a Description.

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J. AND R. PARLANE,
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PREFATORY NOTE.

I am indebted for several of the facts of this book to an interesting and able work, on the History of Paisley Abbey, by Dr. Cameron Lees, of St. Giles's Church, Edinburgh. One or two of the incidents are taken from the " Historie of the Kennedyis," an old book, by an unknown author, published by the Bannatyne Club. A rare book, entitled, "A coppie of the ressoning, which was betuix the Abbote of Crosraguell and John Knox, in Mayboill, concerning the Masse, in the year of God, a thousand five hundreth thre scoir and two yeares," has supplied the facts regarding the Great Debate. The rest has been furnished by local tradition and other sources. To Mr. James A. Morris, F.S.A., Scot., my thanks are specially due, for friendly discussions regarding the recent investigation of the ruins, which he has undertaken, at the instance of the Ayrshire and Wigtownshire Archeological Society.

R. L.

CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introductory	9
2. The Name	13
3. The Founding of the Abbey	16
4. The Building of the Abbey	20
5. A Peep within the Walls -	26
6. Incidents in its History	31
7. The Abbot's Debate with John Knox	37
8. The Roasting of the Commendator	45
9. Present Condition -	51
10. Retrospect	60

ILLUSTRATIONS.

1. Crossraguel Abbey from the South	<i>Frontispiece.</i>
2. Turnberry Castle from the East	--- - p. 16
3. Glasgow Cathedral.....	25
4. Paisley Abbey—Nave - -	31
5. Dunure Castle from the East - -	45
6. Sketch Plan of Crossraguel - ---	51
7. Crypt of St. Mungo, Glasgow Cathedral---	59

CROSSRAGUEL ABBEY.

THE old Abbey stands by the highway side,
Facing the wind and rain, Its days of pomp
are over now,

Its ruins alone remain. The monks who
paced its cold nagged floor,
And taught their lips to pray, Have gone and
left their places now To silence and decay.

Its belfry still, with cross o'er-topped,
Looks into the empty air, But no bells within
ring the vespers now

Which summon the good to prayer. The
chapter-house is seated still,

The brethren ready to greet, But no abbot is
there to claim his chair,
Nor monk with unshod feet.

The cloister-well is there as of yore,
With steps leading down to the brim, And the
sacristy still seems waiting to hear

The sound of the evening hymn. And the
abbot's tower looks as fresh as though

Its master had just gone away, And the dovecot
sounds with the rustling of wings
As it did on a former day.

But no shaven monk, with coarse black robe
 And cowl to cover his head, Is seen
 hovering now these ruins around
 With silent, solemn tread. And no abbot
 comes from his castle door,
 Or paces the cloister square; And no
 incense is flung, or hymns are sung,
 Or voices go up in prayer.

For the altar high is broken down.
 And Masses are said no more;
 And the holy fonts are swept aside,
 And the green sod paves the floor; And the blue-bell
 springs from each crevice and chink,
 And the starling builds in the wall, And the
 winds and the rain still moulder amain,
 And the strong tower nods to its fall.

And the lesson it teaches to all who pass,
 Is plain and clear to see, That
 error is transient—truth alone
 'Dures to eternity. Man's little
 systems live their time,
 And then they pass away; They
 perish, like Crossraguel's pile,
 By slow but sure decay.

About two miles south of the town of Maybole, although included within the parish of Kirkoswald, stand the ruins of Crossraguel Abbey. It stands close by the wayside, in a natural hollow, down which runs a small burn. The highway in former times ran along the brow of the rising ground to the right, and crossed the line of turnpike a little farther on at a place called Willholm. It is from this rising ground that the best view of the abbey is to be obtained.

Although now standing roofless for more than 300 years the building is wonderfully complete. Robert Chambers says of it—"There is no ecclesiastical ruin of the kind in

Scotland where the cloisters and other domestic buildings are so entire." And that this is the case, every one who has visited our Scotch abbeys will acknowledge. The abbot's tower merely needs a roof to render it habitable; and the chapter-house does not need even that, but seems waiting, with abbot's chair, and stone benches all round, to receive its former occupants.

Billings, in his "Ecclesiastical Antiquities," draws attention to the somewhat incongruous character of the buildings at Crossraguel. He calls it a "half baronial, half ecclesiastical ruin, in which the rough square tower, such as those from which the moss-troopers issued to their forays, frown over the beautiful remains of some rich and airy specimens of the middle period of Gothic work." And this, too, must be acknowledged to be just. The aspect of Crossraguel speaks of days when ecclesiastical rulers wielded other swords than the Sword of the Spirit, when man's life was greatly insecure, and when the church had begun to forget that Christ's kingdom was not of this world.

It is of this Abbey I purpose here giving a popular account. I shall trace its history so far as known, give a peep into its internal arrangements, point out the probable use of the buildings still remaining, and narrate one or two incidents connected with its history. Crossraguel never became famous in any wide sense of the word, nor do we read of it much in general history, but it was of supreme importance in this southern district of Ayrshire, where it formed the central influence both as to learning and religion. I am only sorry that the original documents are so scanty. Every monastery in old times kept three books—a Chartulary for its charters of property, an Obituary for its deaths, and a Register for passing events. Not one of these documents regarding Crossraguel can now be found. They were in existence, it is believed, some years ago, but have

now disappeared. But even if found, it is not supposed they would throw much light on interesting topics. Crossraguel was, after all, a comparatively small establishment. It was a country monastery, doing good work, doubtless, in its place, but not shaking the world. Its story, therefore, need not be looked forward to with any degree of excitement, but on that account may prove the more interesting and profitable. It is common thought and common everyday work that make the world what it is.

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure ;
 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
 The short but simple annals of the poor.

The Obituary, or Obit Book of an Abbey, contained properly the names of those who had left money to pay for prayers to be said for the repose of their soul. The Obit Book of the old church of St. John the Baptist, in Ayr, is still preserved in the municipal archives.

THE NAME.

"The sacred tapers' lights are gone;
 Grey moss has clad the altar stone ;
 The holy image is o'erthrown; The
 bell has ceased to toll;—

The long-ribbed aisles are burst and sunk ;
 The holy shrines to ruin shrunk; Departed
 is the pious monk,— God's blessing on his
 soul! "

Scott.

The first thing to be noticed regarding our Abbey is its name. We call it *Crossraguel*, but the spelling is modern; it is never so spelled in ancient books.

The oldest form of the word is *Crosragmol*—whatever that may mean. This is evidently the original form of the name, although how it came to be changed into Crossraguel is not very clear.

When we come down to the Reformation times, we find it spelled *Cros-ragudl*. This is the way Abbot Quintin Kennedy spelled it, who debated with John Knox; and it is evidently from Abbot Quintin's spelling that we have got ours, for we have merely added an s, and cut off an l, and then Cros-raguell is changed into Crossraguel.

The *meaning* of Crossraguel again is quite as misty as the spelling of it. Some say it means cross regal or the royal cross, but that is merely guess-work. In the first place, if *raguel* means regal, how did the letter u get into it ? And then, in the second place, how does that explain Crostragmol, which was apparently the oldest form of the word ? Besides, I have never heard elsewhere of a royal cross. Crosses are not usually counted royal things at all; and I am beginning now to think that Crostragmol was the original name of the site on which the Abbey stands, and that it gave its name to the religious house itself. In that case we are thrown for a meaning back upon the uncertainties of the Celtic language, which gave names to nearly all the localities around.*

Of course we have still to explain how Crostragmol became Crossraguel, but we must not lay too much stress on the *spelling* of a name, for one of the puzzling things about old books is the variety of ways in which they spell names of places. Girvan, for instance, was spelled in at least three different ways—Girwand, Garvane, Invergarvane; Maybole has at least as many—Maibothel, Minnibole, Mayboill. Not long ago Ayr was spelled, Air; before that, Aire ; while both come from the Gaelic Ar, which means *clear*. In old documents Dailly is spelled Day lie, and Ailsa, Ailysay; while in Dr. Lees's book on Paisley Abbey, there are given not fewer than eleven ways of spelling Paisley—Paslet, Passeleth, Passelay, Passelet, Paslowe, Passleke, Pateslo, Pasle, Paslewe, Paslay, Paisley.

Most people have heard of the man who defended his bad spelling, by saying that anybody could spell a word always

* Professor M'Kinnon, of Edinburgh, in reply to a query I addressed to him thinks that Crostragmol marks the site of a cross erected in memory of some local hero of former days, whose name has otherwise perished. In this way, the name resembles *Crossmichael* in Kirkcudbright, or *MacLea-Ss Cross* in Iona. A second correspondent suggests that it may be *Crossreguhts*, from the well-known St. Rule.

in the same way, but it required a man of genius to vary his spelling, and strike out something original. Perhaps old writers held a notion of the same kind. At any rate we may learn from this custom the uncertainty which must ever attend researches into etymology, seeing that the spelling varies so much. Whether we should spell the name of our Abbey Crostragmol, Crostraguell, or Crossraguel, does not matter very much.* They all mean the same thing, I suppose; and we have Shakespere's authority for thinking that—

A rose by any other name
Would smell as sweet.

Turnberry Castle, a representation of which is on the adjoining page, is the oldest building in this district; and as the probable birth-place of our great king, Robert the Bruce, must ever have an interest for all Scotchmen. Little more than the foundations of the walls are now remaining, although at one time we know there was a village and a church in the neighbourhood. It fell into ruin shortly after the Bruce family left this locality to rule the kingdom. A lighthouse has recently been erected on part of its site.

*I have jotted down the following spellings of our Abbey from old books:—Crostragmo], Crostragmer, Corsragall, Corsragwell, Crostraguell, Croceraguall, Corsreguall, Crossraguel.



THE FOUNDING OF THE ABBEY.

The Pope he was saying the high, high Mass,
All on Saint Peter's day; With the power to him
given, by the saints in heaven,
To wash men's sins away.

The Pope he was saying the blessed Mass,
And the people kneel'd around; And from
each man's soul his sins did pass,
As he kiss'd the holy ground.

And all, among the crowded throng,
Was still both limb and tongue; While,
through vaulted roof, and aisles aloof,
The holy accents rung.

The Cray Brother.

Crossraguel Abbey owes its existence to the great Carrick family, who lived at Turnberry Castle. This family came originally from Galloway, but settled down here; and one

of the most notable things they did was to build and endow Crossraguel. Their name was M'Dowall; and although I have just said that they originally came from Galloway, that is hardly correct, for Carrick was formerly considered a part of Galloway rather than of Ayrshire. In course of time, one branch of the M'Dowalls settled in Galloway proper, and became lords of Galloway, while another branch settled at Turnberry, and became lords of Carrick.

This Turnberry family were good benefactors of the church. They endowed nearly all the parish churches hereabout. Maybole, for instance, and Girvan, Straiton, Dailly, and Kirkoswald, owed their existence to their munificence. But their great gift to the district was Crossraguel Abbey. This crowned all their other benefactions, and secured permanence to the whole. It was Duncan M'Dowall, first Earl of Carrick, who founded the Abbey, and he did so in the year 1244. At that time Alexander II. was King of Scotland, and the country was gradually pushing its way out of the darkness of the middle ages. One of the favourite ways at that time of promoting the welfare of the people was by founding monasteries. One by one they were beginning to be dotted over the land. Dunfermline led the way, founded by King Malcolm Canmore. Then, amongst others, came Paisley, founded by the ancestors of the Stuart kings of Scotland. And then, after a time, came our own Crossraguel, founded by a family soon after to give a king to Scotland, in the person of Robert the Bruce.*

There was, however, a strange law plea at the founding of the Abbey, which threatened at one time to nip the whole in the bud. It appears that Earl Duncan thought the best way to carry out his intention, would be to employ another monastery to set his own one agoing. And so he went to

*Marjory, Countess of Carrick, was in 1271 married to Robert Bruce, Earl of Annandale, of which marriage was born in 1274. the great King Robert.

the superiors of Paisley, giving over to them all the money and lands he had provided, and agreeing with them that *they* should build the Abbey and provide it with monks. The Paisley people, however, were in no haste to fulfil their bargain. They took the money and lands, built a small chapel at Crossraguel, and kept the rest of the funds to themselves.

At this, of course, the Earl (or his successor rather) was very angry, and appealed to the law. The Bishop of Glasgow was chosen arbiter, and he decided in favour of the Earl. He ordained that the Paisley people should forthwith erect a monastery at Crossraguel, that the monks should be drawn from Paisley, and that these monks should have, in all time coming, the power to elect an abbot for themselves. He ordained, too, that the abbot and monks of Crossraguel should be free from all interference on the part of the Abbot of Paisley, except that he should have the right of visitation over them once a year. All the possessions which Paisley had in Carrick were to be handed over to Crossraguel, with the exception of the parish churches of Turnberry, Straiton, and Dailly, and an annual tribute of ten marks.

Very wrathful, one may be sure, was the Abbot of Paisley at the decision of the Bishop of Glasgow. Ten marks a year and the right of visitation were poor compensation for his goodly possessions in Carrick! He accordingly appealed to the Pope in 1265, stating the enormous lessening his income had sustained by this decision, and praying his holiness for redress. The Pope, however, could not see his way to alter the bishop's decision, and so the gift of the Earl passed away from Paisley, and Crossraguel became to all intents and purposes an independent abbey.

The revenues of Crossraguel were not so considerable as some of the other Scottish abbeys, and yet they were sufficiently large to make the inmates tolerably comfortable.

They consisted mainly of certain lands, which they let, and drew the rents of. At one time (as I will afterwards show) they possessed the island of Ailsa Craig, although I don't suppose they would draw much rent from that!

There is a curious old Roll in existence which gives the exact income of the various religious houses in Scotland, about the time Crossraguel was built. It is usually called Bagimont's Roll, and was drawn up by a certain Italian named Boiamund de Vicci, whom the Pope sent over to tax the Scotch abbeys, for the purpose of relieving (as he said) the Holy Land. The Scottish abbeys vigorously resisted this taxation for a while, but were at last forced to yield. According to this roll, the yearly rental of Crossraguel was £533 6s 4d, which, of course, would mean a much larger sum in those days. But, at the same time, it did not place it at all in the first rank for wealth, seeing that, in the same roll, Paisley is set down at exactly five times that amount.

Still, even as it was, the gift of Crossraguel Abbey to this district was a great gift for a single man to make. It was, in fact, a small fortune in itself. And when we take a walk out to the abbey, we should not forget to thank old Duncan M'Dowall, who, in those early days, found it in his heart to provide a seat of learning and place of worship for this part of the land. Sir Walter Scott has told us that over the little well at Flodden, where Marmion slaked his dying thirst, were engraved the words :—

"Drink, weary pilgrim, drink and pray
For the kind soul of Sybil Gray, Who
built this cross and well."

Similar words might well be written at Crossraguel, in memory of one who, in abounding darkness, cherished the light; and who, in days when learning was precious, sacrificed much of his worldly substance, that others might be benefited thereby.

THE BUILDING OF THE ABBEY.

"If thou wouldst view fair Melrose aright, Go visit it
by the pale moonlight; For the gay beams of
lightsome day Gild, but to flout, the ruins grey.
When the broken arches are black in night, And
each shafted oriel glimmers white; When the cold
light's uncertain shower Streams on the ruin'd
central tower; When buttress and buttress, alternately
Seem framed of ebon and ivory; When silver edges
the imagery And the scrolls that teach thee to live
and die; When distant Tweed is heard to rave, And
the owlet to hoot o'er the dead man's grave ; Then
go—but go alone the while— Then view St. David's
ruin'd pile; And, home returning, soothly swear Was
never scene so sad and fair" !

Lay of the Last Minstrel.

A Roman Catholic church, as everybody knows, is always built, as nearly as possible, east and west,—the idea being that people in worship should face the east, whence the light of the gospel came, and where Christ is expected to appear. The same idea prevails with the Jews, who always pray, like Daniel, "with their windows open towards Jerusalem"; and also with the Mahommedans, who turn in their prayers towards Mecca. We Protestants, of course, don't put any faith in this idea. We build our churches without any regard to the points of the compass, which is very bad,

indeed, in high church people's eyes. But surely these people have not yet rightly studied the meaning of those words of the Master—"The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth." In those early days, however, when Crossraguel was built, the practice of worshipping towards the east was a received article of faith. Accordingly, when the plan of the building was drawn out, they would see that the high altar faced the rising sun.*

We may, therefore, fancy, on some fine sunny day, 600 years ago, a grand ceremony, attendant upon laying the foundation stone of the Choir, which would naturally be the first part erected. The country folks for miles round would gather to see the spectacle. The grand folks from Turnberry Castle would likewise come, and the rising family of the Kennedys, from their castle at Dunure. All the country priests in the district would be there to assist. The Abbot of Paisley, with his monks, would be of great consequence on that day. And, head of all, the Bishop of Glasgow would be there in his robes of office, with his mitre, crozier, ring, and sandals all complete. And then there would be imposing marchings to and fro, and psalms would be chanted, and banners waved, and holy water sprinkled, and, perhaps, *speeches* made (if people had got into that bad habit in those days); and then everybody at the close would go home talking about the grand Abbey that was to be, and what a blessing it would prove to the district, t

The choir and nave being finished, the builders would next turn their attention to providing accommodation for the monks, as well as apartments for transacting the business

* In the same way people, long ago, were buried so that they might face the east on rising.

t A friend has suggested that the chief ceremonial would rather be at the dedication of the church to the patron saint. Perhaps he is right!

of the monastery. Leading off the choir, we have, of the accordingly, the *sacristy* or vestry. This room was used as a robing apartment, as well as for holding the various articles used in the service of the church. Next, with an entrance from the cloister, was the *chapter house*, the room in which the monks held their business meetings. Here they assembled weekly to listen to the rules of their order, and discuss all matters pertaining to their common benefit.

We would now-a-days call it a presbytery hall. This is the most handsome of all the apartments in the Abbey. There is a pillar in the centre to support the arched roof, and a stone seat running round it, with a special seat for the abbot, or whoever might act as chairman. Above the chapter house and vestry was a room which may have been used for the *scriptorium* and library.

Next came that most useful and necessary part of an establishment—the *kitchen*—where, doubtless, many a savoury mess was prepared on feast days. It stood, probably, on the opposite side of the cloister from the church; while the *refectory* or dining room, stood in a line with it. The monks here all took their meals together in solemn silence, one of the brethren being deputed to read while the others were eating, so that mind and body might be fed at the same time.

At the extreme corner of the grounds, the *abbot's house* reared its stately walls. It was three storeys in height, and seems to have been a very comfortable mansion. A strange thing about it was that it had a stream of water flowing right through it, unless, indeed, this has been a modern deviation. In course of time *another abbot's house* was built. This stands on a different portion of the grounds, and is still in excellent preservation. It is, however, a much smaller building than the other (although quite large enough for a bachelor). It is surmounted by a neat little *watch-tower*,

where, doubtless, in old times, a watchman would be placed to give notice of the approach of strangers. It is just possible, however, that this house may have been the residence of the prior, or other leading official under the abbot.

The *cells* of the monks, probably, were built over the row of vaults or cellars, which may still be seen stretching from the refectory to the old abbot's house. It is not easy to say how many monks would inhabit them; but from the accommodation provided, there could hardly be more than a dozen, if, indeed, there were so many. Paisley Abbey had only fifteen.

Standing in the extreme west corner of the grounds, may still be seen the ancient dovecot or *columbarium*. It is shaped like an egg, and has accommodation for a very large colony of pigeons. In all probability, the materials for a good many pigeon-pies were taken out of this oval abode, not to speak of the eggs which might be fried as an accompaniment to their bacon. There is another dovecot of a similar pattern at Dunure Castle.

The only remaining part of the building of which we can speak with confidence, is the *cloister*, which was simply a square enclosure, with a covered walk round it. The cloister of Crossraguel formed a square of about 70 feet, and may still be traced quite clearly. It was their favourite walk in rainy days ; had a well in the centre ; and probably a few flowers, in what they called the cloister garth, to refresh the eye.

The architecture of Crossraguel, I must acknowledge, is not very superior. Of course the windows that stood round the altar are now thrown down, and they would, probably, be the finest part of it; but still we may judge pretty accurately of the parts that are gone by the parts that remain. A visitor who has seen Melrose or Roslin is apt

to be disappointed with Crossraguel. The building seems paltry, and the carvings coarse. It *is* like a homely church in the country, after seeing the magnificent temples of the city. Still there is a certain beauty about it too; and the quiet seclusion in which it is placed gives an additional charm to it.

Some time ago the Glasgow Society of Antiquaries visited our Abbey, and I had the advantage of hearing their criticisms. They acknowledged the beauty of certain parts. The window in the nave, for instance, which is still entire, was noticed with pleasure, and some of the carvings at the *sedilia*, near the high altar, and the workmanship of the sacristy and chapter house; but, generally speaking, I must confess they did not speak so respectfully or admiringly of our Abbey as I could have wished. They seemed to look upon it as the beadle looked upon the old minister's sermon, as "gude, coorse, country wark." Be that as it may, it is *our Abbey*, and we are bound to stand up for it, with all its faults. It may look paltry in some people's eyes, but it ought never to look paltry in ours. For it is the grandest specimen of antiquity we have; and in early days, "when darkness covered the land, and gross darkness the people," it was a centre of light, and a source of civilisation to all the region around.

It is hardly fair to contrast our unpretending Abbey with the stately cathedral, founded by Bishop Jocelin, at Glasgow, in 1181, and which is exhibited on the adjacent page. They were built with different objects in view. At the same time, Mr James A. Morris, than whom no one has given more attention to the subject, is of opinion that the taste displayed in our Abbey's architecture, is much greater than at first sight appears, or than it usually gets credit for.



Glasgow Cathedral