

THE STEWART EARLS.



IN 1565 began the most cruel oppression which the islands suffered under Scottish rule. Lord Robert Stewart, a son of James the Fifth and half-brother of the Earl of Moray, obtained a feu charter of Orkney and Shetland. This grant was illegal in every way. It was not sanctioned by Parliament, and it disposed not only of the actual property which the crown of Scotland had acquired in the islands, but of the lands and services of the udallers or free landowners, which had never belonged to Norway or Denmark, and could not therefore have been acquired by Scotland. In exchange for the revenues of the Abbey of Holyrood, the new earl also obtained possession of the lands and revenues of the Bishopric of Orkney.

To oppress the udallers so as to compel them to accept feus from him was the unvarying object of Earl Robert's policy. He aggravated the burdens of the islanders by making them use weights and measures of his own devising, and increased their liabilities to him by a coinage of his own valuation. He raised the rents of the tenants to the limits of endurance, made every occasional or special payment

an annual burden, imposed parish taxes as household taxes, and by pretended decrees of the Thing, or council, evicted many udallers without a show of justice. Heavy tolls and duties were laid on all fishermen and traders who came to the islands, and secret encouragement was given to pirates, whose booty was shared by the earl.

The more bitter the complaints of the islanders, the more grievous became their oppression. To prevent these complaints reaching the ears of the authorities in Edinburgh, the earl forbade any one to cross the firths or ferries without his permission. It began also to be whispered that Earl Robert was plotting to sever once more the connection between Orkney and the Scottish crown. He had made additions to the old palace at Birsay, and on a stone over the principal gate he had caused to be inscribed: DOMINUS ROBERTUS STEWARTUS FILIUS JACOBI QUINTI REX SCOTORUM HOC OPUS INSTRUXIT—that is, “Earl Robert Stewart, son of James the Fifth, King of the Scots, erected this building.” Those who know a little Latin will observe that by his using the nominative case *rex*, it is Earl Robert himself and not James the Fifth whom he describes as “King of the Scots.” This was probably a mere mistake in the earl’s Latin, but a much graver meaning was attached to it by the Scottish King and Parliament when the whisper of treason somehow reached their ears.

The complaints of the udallers might be unheeded, but the accusation of treason was a much more serious matter. The earl was summoned to Edinburgh to answer the charges against him. He was kept for some time a prisoner in Linlithgow Castle,

but the storm quickly blew over. No trial ever took place. That ordeal Earl Robert escaped by the help of his powerful friends and relatives; and not only so, but in 1581 he was once more granted the Earldom of Orkney and Shetland, with extended powers.

When Robert Stewart died, the islands were granted to his son, Patrick Stewart, the most cruel oppressor of all. Skilful in tyranny and extortion as Earl Robert had been, his son showed still more ability and ingenuity in his evil courses. The multiplication of enactments and penalties for the most trivial offences, confiscation, torture, and judicial murder—these were the additions Earl Patrick made to the machinery of oppression used by his father. He had palaces built for him at Scalloway and at Kirkwall by the same forced labour that had already reared Earl Robert's palace in Birsay. But Earl Patrick's career is best described in the words of Mackenzie:—

“Earl Patrick—still remembered in Orkney tradition as ‘Black Pate’—was a man of kingly ideas, and had his lot been cast in Egypt instead of in Orkney, would have done very well as one of the Pharaohs. ‘Heaven is high and the Czar is far away,’ says a Russian proverb. Orkney is far from Holyrood and farther from London, and the earl did his own pleasure in his domain, without having the fear of the distant king before his eyes.

“Most astounding and extraordinary was the system of tyranny and extortion which he carried on. He accused one and another of the gentry of the islands of high treason, and tried them in his own court. But it was not his object to punish these gentlemen as traitors against the king. In that case their for-

feited estates would go to the king, which would be no profit to the earl. The earl was not so simple. The frightened udallers were glad enough to compound with the formidable earl by making over to him a portion of their lands to save the remainder and their own necks.

“The Orkney potentate dealt in exactions of every description. He extorted taxes and duties. He created ferries and levied exorbitant tolls on them. He compelled the people to work for him all manner of work. He forced them to row his boats and man his ships, to toil in his quarries, to convey stones and lime for the building of his palace and park walls, and to perform whatever other kinds of slave-labour he chose to demand, ‘without either meat or drink or hire.’

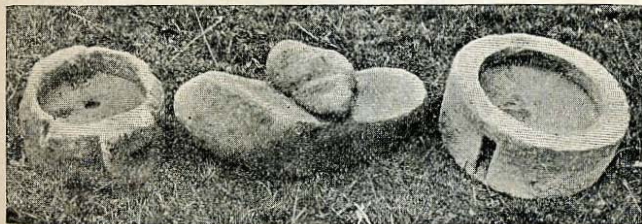
“The Czar though far away sometimes hears at last. The doings of this tyrant of the isles attracted the attention of the law. He was seized and put in ward in Dumbarton Castle. What schemes were in his proud, fierce head it is difficult to guess. This is known, that, under his instructions, his son Robert occupied the castle of Kirkwall with armed men, fortified the cathedral, and stood ready to hold his own.

“As soon as it became known in Edinburgh that Orkney was in rebellion, the king’s Secret Council dispatched the Earl of Caithness to bring it under. Two great cannons were wheeled down from Edinburgh Castle and shipped at Leith along with a strong military force. The expedition landed safely within a mile and a half of Kirkwall. The great cannons were pointed against the castle. They shot and got their answer in shot. The siege continued about a month, when the rebels gave in. Caithness returned

to Edinburgh with Robert Stewart and other prisoners, and the two great cannons passed up the High Street in triumph, to the sound of drum and trumpet, with the keys of Kirkwall Castle hanging at their muzzles.

“Robert Stewart was condemned to death and hanged at the Market Cross along with five of his accomplices. The people pitied him greatly, for it was his father’s scheming that had led him to destruction. His father’s execution soon followed. The ministers who tried to prepare him for death, finding him so ignorant that he could not say the Lord’s Prayer, asked the Council to delay his execution for a few days, till he could be better informed. The request was granted, and then he went his way into the great darkness.”

The rebellion of Earl Patrick led to the abolition of the Thing and the ancient laws of Orkney and Shetland, but there was little change for the better in the government of the islands. They were assigned to one nobleman after another, no one having any interest in their improvement. It was, indeed, not till the eighteenth century that any very great effort was made to give them the benefits of good government and a chance to regain somewhat of their ancient prosperity.



Pot Querns and Saddle Quern.