

The Not-So-Secret Scroll Priceless Relic or Floorcloth?

By Brian Smith

It is eight years since Andrew Sinclair first drew our attention to the interesting ‘scroll’ in the Masons’ lodge at Kirkwall, as part of his campaign to prove that Earl Henry Sinclair went to America. ‘The earliest Masonic document in existence in Scotland’, he said, ‘may well be the Kirkwall Teaching Scroll, which is held to date from the late fourteenth century, when Prince [*sic*] Henry St Clair became the Earl of Orkney.’ He didn’t say who ‘held’ the scroll to be so old. In his bibliography he revealed that ‘The Lodge at Kirkwall still keeps a copy of the medieval original Teaching Scroll.’

Sinclair hadn’t seen the scroll at that juncture, as his reference to a ‘copy’ makes clear. The Kirkwall scroll isn’t a copy: it’s an original. But an original of what date? It wasn’t until 1997 that Sinclair viewed the artefact, along with fellow delegates to the ‘Sinclair symposium’. Although his colleagues ‘could not assess the evidence in front of their eyes’ that the scroll was a medieval masterpiece, Sinclair had the ‘knowledge or the vision of experience’ to enable him to do so.

He became ecstatic. ‘As I gazed up,’ he breathed, ‘I sensed that I had chanced upon one of the great treasures of the Middle Ages, perhaps rivalled only by the 13th-century Mappa Mundi that hangs in Hereford Cathedral. It was a priceless relic that would demand the rewriting of medieval history.’

These proposals, set out and surpassed in his *The Secret Scroll* (Sinclair-Stevenson 2000), are bilge. Sinclair’s methods led to faulty conclusions. As Masonic antiquaries have said since 1897, the Kirkwall scroll dates from the eighteenth century. It is most likely to have been designed and presented to the Kirkwall lodge as a floorcloth. And a little research enables us to identify its only begetter.

Sinclair’s research was curiously incomplete. ‘I was given a drawn copy of the Scroll,’ he says, ‘together with an interpretation of it by the late Brother Speth of the Quattuor [*sic*] Coronati Lodge of London.’ He also received something else ‘by another Brother Flett’. In text and bibliography—his books contain no footnotes—Sinclair fails to give any sources for these documents. This is a pity, because Speth’s and Flett’s contributions, once located, are very important.

Sinclair goes on to cite quotations and opinions by Speth, which seem to confirm his own view that the scroll is medieval in date. For instance, he quotes Speth as saying that the right-hand margin of the scroll was ‘the work of an artist who knew the Nile Delta and Sinai and the land of Canaan’. ‘In the opinion of Brother Speth’, according to Sinclair, ‘the Kirkwall Scroll was the work of a skilled Knight Templar whom he identified as the large mounted figure drawn beside the besieged Nile city. ... During his advance from Palestine ... the Templar “evidently made notes or sketches as he went his way with the army, or probably made very accurate mental notes of the whole country ... and later drew short maps for future reference.”’ I was perplexed to read these alleged quotations by Speth, because they don’t appear in my copy of his article.

George William Speth (1847-1901) was an erudite Freemason, a founder and secretary of the famous Quattuor Coronati Lodge and editor of its important journal, *Ars Quattuor Coronatorum*. In 1897 he commissioned an article about Kirkwall’s lodge from another

masonic enthusiast, Archdeacon Craven of Orkney. The article duly appeared in volume 10 of *AQC*, with a contribution by Speth himself about the scroll. Far from concluding that it was the work of someone who had been to the Middle East, or who was a Templar, Speth speculated that it was a lodge floorcloth from ‘the first half of the eighteenth century, or very little later’.

Speth died four years after writing his paper. I can’t believe that he changed his mind about the scroll during that short period. Andrew Sinclair owes us an explanation for the disparity between his quotations from Speth, and Speth’s 1897 text.

In the 1920s another erudite Freemason turned his attention to our scroll. Brother William Reginald Day, from the Sydney Research Lodge in New South Wales, wrote a long article about it, again in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* (vol. 38, 1925). Andrew Sinclair seems to be unaware of this important piece of work.

Day was an expert in Masonic iconography, and he looked closely at the structure and subject matter of the scroll, building on and amending Speth’s conclusions. There is no space here to describe his findings in detail. On two occasions, however, he finds important clues to the cloth’s date. On the face of the altar on panel 6, for instance, he finds ‘the arms of the Grand Lodge of the Antients’. Since the ‘Antients’ came into existence in 1751, it would be a brave commentator who claimed that our scroll was 300 years older. Day discovered that the ‘Antient’ arms were first portrayed in a work of 1764: ‘[c]onsequently’, he says, ‘it is reasonable to assume that the Scroll is of later date than that, especially as there are other traces of Antient influence’.

Thus in panel 8 Day found ‘Antient’ themes in some figures on top of globes. ‘In *Freemasonry and the Concordant Orders* ...’, he says, ‘there is an illustration entitled the “Dermott Arch” with exactly similar figures on the top of the two pillars, but no globes are depicted. ... [T]he name of Lord Blesington appears in the wording. This will give some idea of the antiquity of the design, as Lord Blesington’s term as Grand Master lasted from 1756 to 1760.’

Day also spotted that in panel 7 of the scroll there are (in cipher) three verbatim quotations from the King James Bible (from Exodus chapter 3: ‘I am that I am ... I am hath sent me unto you’, and Song of Solomon chapter 2: ‘I am the Rose of Sharon and the Lilly of the Vally’). Sinclair must now explain how his medieval Templar anticipated King James’s English translators of 1611. (Sinclair actually imagines that these well-known biblical texts are ‘A Gnostic inscription concerning the Sophia, the ancient goddess of divine wisdom’!)

I have only been able to give a taste of Day’s scrupulous work. His paper is a tour de force. Like Speth, he had no doubt that the Kirkwall cloth was a modern production.

Why would there be a Masonic cloth in Kirkwall in the eighteenth century with influences from an ‘Antient’ source? We must now turn to the other work that Andrew Sinclair ‘received’ during his research: James Flett’s *Kirkwall Kilwinning No. 38²: the story from 1736* (1976). According to Flett a lodge minute of 27 December 1785 records that ‘Bro. William Graeme, *visiting brother from Lodge No. 128, Ancient Constitution of England*, was, at his own desire admitted to become a member of this Lodge’. (My italics!) Lodge 128 wasn’t in Yorkshire, as Sinclair thinks, or Bury in Lancashire, as others have suggested.

According to Lane's standard work on Masonic records (1894 edition) it was at an unknown location in the West End of London.

Who was William Graeme (more correctly Graham)? Paul Sutherland has written an entertaining account of Graham's career, in a dissertation which should be published as soon as possible. He was a son of Alexander Graham, the Stromness merchant who waged a famous legal battle with Kirkwall notables in the 1740s and 1750s. 'For a time', two of William's enemies wrote later, '[Graham] was *employed as a journeyman house-painter* in London. He returned to Orkney in poor circumstances, *but Mason-mad.*' (My italics ...)

A month after Graham's application to join the Kirkwall lodge he presented 'a floorcloth' to his new brethren. There can be no doubt that this cloth is our scroll. Flett reports that when he joined the Kirkwall lodge, around 1900, 'there was at that time a very old Brother who occasionally visited Lodge meetings at the advanced age of over 90. On one occasion I asked him if he could tell me anything about the Scroll. He said he did not know very much about it except that it was used to be called the floorcloth, and that at his initiation it lay on the centre of the Lodge room floor when he was a young lad of 20.'

Unfortunately, Graham's relations with his brethren deteriorated, and in 1790 he and others formed a new lodge. They paraded through Kirkwall and laid the foundation stone of their new headquarters 'according to the ancient order of the craft'. Graeme was devoted to ancient ceremonies and rites, inside and outside the Masonic fold. In due course he founded an Anti-Burgher meeting-house in Kirkwall; on that occasion, 'after performing a great many *antique tricks* [he] kneeled down, made a long prayer, and dedicated this Church ... and then with his brethren paraded the streets of this place to the no small amusement of the public.' (His enemies' italics!)

In later, happier times, Graham became reconciled with his former brethren. When he died, sometime after 1812, he bequeathed to them his 'Book of the Ancient Constitution of Free and Accepted Masons', for use at his burial.

There is no document that states that William Graham painted the Kirkwall floorcloth. However, he must be the prime candidate to have done so. From Speth onwards the commentators agree that it is a crude piece of work. 'One can easily see', says Flett, 'that the figures and emblems are very roughly painted, just such work as an amateur would have put off his hands'. We know that Graham was a journeyman painter. The scroll contains Antient symbols, and Graham hailed from an Antient lodge. Graham was 'Mason-mad', addicted to 'antique' rites. Most importantly, we know that he donated the scroll to the Kirkwall lodge, as a floorcloth for use in ceremonies.

Andrew Sinclair's alternative suggestion, that the scroll is far older, is less than convincing, especially when he cites George William Speth as a source for his view. His attempts to link it with the Sinclair family are laughable. He imagines that a structure portrayed on panel 4 of the scroll—the tabernacle in the wilderness, surrounded by the tents of the tribes (see Numbers chapter 2)—is the Temple of Solomon, and that it has a close resemblance to the Sinclairs' Roslin Chapel. Interestingly, Sinclair's illustration omits the tents. Most grotesque of all is his argument that the word 'sultcrinea' in panel 3 (the word is actually 'sulterinea') is an anagram of 'St Cler' (as in Sinclair), and 'vina' (as in Vinland, referring to Earl Henry Sinclair's alleged trip to America!)

He has no explanation how such a cloth could have ended up in William Graham's custody.

Finally, there is the question of radiocarbon dating. Sinclair acquired two dates for the scroll, from Oxford University's Accelerator Laboratory. The first result, he says, was 'disastrous', because the samples that he submitted were 'so spoiled by chemicals or use that the process declared them to be not more than fifty years old'. He sent another piece, and this time the result pointed to 'the fifteenth century, most probably between 1400 and 1530'.

Sinclair's grasp of radiocarbon dating seems to be defective. Scientists check for chemical contamination before using the process. When Oxford investigated Sinclair's original sample they found no problem. Their result on that occasion was 85BP +/-35. (I am grateful to the laboratory for this information.) This doesn't mean 'not more than fifty years old', as Sinclair imagines. Such a result translates into a very wide range, and calibrates to the years 1680-1740 or 1800-1960. In other words, if the result is to be believed, William Graham (if he was the painter) could have used a piece of cloth made during the period up to 1740. Such a date would indeed be 'disastrous' for Sinclair's theory!

The second date that Sinclair acquired is 435BP +/-50, which calibrates to the years 1400-1530 or 1560-1640. This radically different result is of course still not incompatible with a late date for the *design* on the cloth. We have already seen that the *design* cannot be earlier than 1611, because of the quotations from the King James Bible on it. However, there is no reason to prefer this date to the other - and, given the incompatibility between them, it might be best to ignore both!

Radiocarbon analysis is useful in the *study* of art objects. It is dangerous to use it to try to *authenticate* them.

If I am confronted with a cloth in a Masonic lodge, stuffed with Masonic symbols, which we know was donated in 1786 by a Freemason entranced by Masonic lore, my inclination is to date it to the eighteenth century, the period when the symbols were devised, not to the fifteenth. When experts like Speth and Day reach the same conclusion, and radiocarbon dating doesn't rule out a late design, I am even more confident that Andrew Sinclair has got it all wrong.

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