William Moir Bryce, 'The Great Plague of 1585',
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XII. The Great Plague of 1585

In the year 1585, the good town was in the throes of the most appalling outbreak of plague that had visited Scotland since the dreadful 'Black Death' of the fourteenth century; and it must be admitted that an examination of the city records proves that the magistrates faced the calamity with considerable fortitude and with the ability derived from sad experience. These outbreaks of pestilence were in those days a matter of constant occurrence, and the measures adopted for their suppression bulk largely in the pages of the Council Minutes. Unfortunately, the Town Council were much hampered in their work by the pusillanimous behaviour of their Provost. The weak Earl of Arran had been nominated by James VI. and, accordingly, 'elected' by the Council to the provostship; but his lordship, in view of the dangers attaching to the office in the year 1585, thought it more prudent to absent himself from the city. His reappointment in October roused the Town Council to action, and, as the result of a strong petition to the King, his lordship was deposed and William Little, a merchant burgess of considerable eminence and ancestor of the Little Gilmours of Craigmillar, was elected in his place.

The sudden death on the 30th April 1585 of a woman in the Fishmarket Close gave the first signal of the appearance of the dread disease, and orders were at once issued for the segregation of the suspects, while those actually infected were taken to the Burgh Muir for treatment, such as it was. Here, for their accommodation, several wooden huts or lodges were erected, and a to-fall or shed was built against the ruined walls of the Nunnery of St. Catherine of Siena. At the foot of the Blackford Hill the principal hospital was erected on what was then known as 'Adam Purvis' Acres'—a piece of ground held by Purvis under a lease or tack from the Council,

and situated between the lands belonging to St. Roque's Chapel on the east and the present Canaan Lane on the west—and here a special gibbet was erected as a deterrent to disorder among the 'foule folk' and their attendants. On 1st June two men were hanged at this gibbet for stealing clothes belonging to the infected.[1] The 'foule hangman' was a man named Smith, who was paid for his gruesome services the exceptional fee of ten pounds Scots per month. This man, however, had been only a short time in office when, for some flagrant misdemeanour, the magistrates found it necessary to issue orders to have him placed in irons, and kept bound to his own gibbet until further orders! A small corps of attendants on the sick, termed 'clengouris and cureris of the pest'—cleansers and curers of the pest—was formed and placed under one named Alexander Fraynche, who was evidently considered an expert in such matters; and this man was urged by the bailies, under a promise of a free house and a pension for life, to be diligent in his work. He and his assistants wore over their clothes a black jowpe or over-all 'with a (piece) of quhyte claith sewit above the same.' They also carried in their hands wooden staffs some six or seven feet in length and provided at the top with a crook to assist them in washing the clothes of the infected either in a huge iron cauldron erected on the Muir for that purpose, or in the running water of the Powburn. There was also established on the Muir a large storehouse in which bread and drink were kept for distribution among the sick, the official in charge being paid the special fee of £6 monthly 'as the said office will be veray paynfull and chairgeable.'[2] By the middle of the month of June the virulence of the epidemic had reached its height, and thereafter the sickness began rapidly to abate. In July the 'fowle lugeis (huts), fowle folk, and fowle geir' were ordered 'to be placit be-eist the greit fowle luge which is at Purvessis Acres'; while the convalescents with their huts

[1] *Burgh Records*, iv. 416-422. [2] Responsible.

and geir were to be confined in the West Burgh Muir, *i.e.* in the lands now known as Canaan, Greenhill, and Morningside, with the Jordan Burn, at that time called the Strand, as the southern boundary. It was in connection with the brewing of the beer for the use of these convalescents in the Wester Muir that Robert Fairlie, the Laird of the Braids, granted the city on the 22nd September the use of his 'houssis callit Littil Egipt besyde the commoun mwre for brewing thairin of the drink to the folkis in the mwre, and sic necessar usis as the toun hes found guid to employ on the samyn.'[1] The Town Council were now able to take a calm survey of the situation, and at the weekly meeting on 17th September it was reported, that, although the ordeal through which the city had passed had severely tested the fortitude of the city fathers—many of whom, like the Provost Arran, had fled the city—two of the bailies—Henry Nesbit and William Nesbit—Nicol Vadart the Dean of Guild, James Ros the City Treasurer, and three Councillors—William Littill, Andrew Sclater, and George Smith—as well as Jhoun Stevenson the Deacon of the Websters, had sustained 'the burding of the offices laid upoun thame vnto this hour with the lose and deyth for the maist pairt of dyuers of thair childrein, seruands, and familie, and nocht without the extreme danger of their awin lyffes.'[2] But, while the Council thus modestly and pathetically put on record their own share in coping with the public dangers, they wax eloquent in descanting on the services of James Henrysoun, the town surgeon, who, by his unfailing attention both by day and by night to the sick and the dying, had proved himself the hero of the hour. We learn that 'throw his guid care and diligence, he spairet nocht the hazard of his awin lyfe, and contracted the said seikness in his awin body with the lose and deyth of his wyfe in the same deseise of pestilence.'[3] In token of their gratitude the Town Council exempted him during his life-time from further payment of all 'extents,

[1] *Burgh Records*, iv. 436. [2] *Ibid.*, iv. 435. [3] *Ibid.*, iv. 436.

taxatiouns, impositiouns or contributiouns to be sett, imposet, or rayset vpoun this burgh and the inhabitants thairof any maner of way.' The same privilege was also granted to Bailie James Nicol, who, to the 'greitt regraitt of the commoun pepill,' was attacked by the plague, but escaped with the loss of an eye.[1]

At length—'prayset be God'—the reduction in the number of the unfortunates lying out on the Muir became so pronounced that, on 17th December, the magistrates issued instructions that the remnant of the infected 'be put in and incloset with thair kepers in the Quhite hous, and gevis commissioun to Andrew Sclater, bailyie, and (blank) to aggrie with the possessouris of the said hous for the use thairof a certain space.'[2] The lands and manor-place of Whitehouse were in the occupation of Ewfame M'Calzeane of Cliftonhall, only daughter and heiress of Thomas M'Calzeane, Lord Cliftonhall, one of the Senators of the College of Justice. Her husband was Patrick Moscrop, son of John Moscrop, an advocate of considerable eminence in his day, and he adopted his wife's name of M'Calzeane, probably in terms of her deed of entail. The Lady of Cliftonhall, however, stoutly objected to the intrusion of the plague-stricken into her lands of Whitehouse, and, with consent of her husband, she appealed to the Lords of the Privy Council for protection. In the complaint by her and Patrick M'Calzeane, her husband, for his interest, it is stated that 'she and her predecessors have been for many years in possession of the lands of Quhytehouse, with the manor place adjacent to Sanct Gelisgrange, beside the burgh of Edinburgh, quhill that laitlie, upon the xxv day of December last bipast, the provost, baillies and Counsal of Edinburgh wranguslie, by all ordour raisit and liftit thair haill pestilent personis being upon the Burrowmure of the said burgh, and hes inputt and intrusit thame in the saidis landis of Quhytehous and houssis thairof.' They detain

[1] *Burgh Records*, iv. 447. [2] *Ibid.*, iv. 444.

them there, 'thinkand thairby to mak the saidis landis and houssis . . . waist, and to deprive the complainers of the rents and duties of the same, extending yearly to 400 merks.' [1]

The case came before the Privy Council at Holyrood on 31st January 1585-6, when the Lords ordained the Provost and Bailies to remove the 'saidis pestiferous personis, thair baggage, guidis, and geir furth of the saidis houssis, and mak the same sufficiently purgeit and clene of the said pest' within twenty days, or else to satisfy the complainers for the skaith sustained by them in this matter, with proviso that 'thir presentis sall not induce a preparative be astricting of the said hous to the use foirsaid quhenevir the like occasioun sall happin to fall oute heireftir.' [2] The proviso, no doubt, explains the strange action of the magistrates—that it was an attempt to enforce a right to some control over the properties belonging to their vassals. Strange to say, some five years later—on 24th June 1591—this same Lady of Cliftonhall was burnt at the public place of execution on the southern bank of the Castlehill for the impossible crime of witchcraft.[3] The record of the evidence led at her trial has been lost, but she was convicted upon eleven out of twenty-eight articles in the indictment. These consisted of charges of consorting with well-known witches, obtaining the enchantment of a picture to bring about the death of her father-in-law, for making another picture of flour and clay for the bewitching of Mary Hume or M'Gill, for attending a conventicle of witches at North Berwick, and for the 'seiking of ane pictour for the tressonable destruction of the King.' Pitcairn alleges that she had a full belief in her own supernatural powers; but it is evident that no woman of the social rank and upbringing of the Lady of Cliftonhall would, if in possession of her senses, have resorted to the ridiculous and absurd means mentioned in her indictment to bring about the death of the King or the

[1] *Reg. of the Privy Council*, iv. 45. [2] *Ibid.*, v. 46.
[3] Pitcairn's *Criminal Trials*, vol. i. pt. ii. 247.

other persons to whom reference is made. In ordinary cases of witchcraft, the culprit was previously strangled at the stake; but, for some reason, this unfortunate lady was sentenced to be 'brunt in assis (ashes), *quick*, to the death.' She endured her dreadful fate with great firmness, and it is also to be noted that her neighbour, Robert Fairlie, the Laird of Braid, was one of the twelve jurymen whose verdict sent her to her death.

In 1601 there was a recrudescence of these outbreaks of plague, and again the proprietor as well as the tenant of the lands of Whitehouse suffered misfortune. Not only had the latter, a man named Hew Craufurde, lost five of his 'puir bairnies' through the plague; but, also, in the process of cleansing, the house took fire and all his belongings were destroyed. Then, on the allegation that he had 'wrangouslie and maliciouslie' set the house on fire, Craufurde was cited before the Sheriff by the proprietors—Mrs. Katherene Bankis, relict of William Hereis, and her husband James Weill, as the life-renters, and her son Robert Hereis, the fiar—to be decerned to rebuild the house and make it as good as before the burning. In this extremity the poor man appealed for protection to the Lords of the Privy Council, who referred the matter back to the Judge Ordinary.[1] The outcome of the case is unknown; but the mansion-house was afterwards rebuilt, and, in 1834, was incorporated with other buildings to form the present Convent of St. Margaret of Scotland in Whitehouse Loan.

XIII. The Wester Burgh Muir

The Burgh Muir continued to fulfil its wonted military function as the rendezvous for the Scottish Army, although, after the death of James v., it attracted less attention in the Council meetings of our civic rulers down to the time of the

[1] *Reg. of Privy Council*, vi. p. 521.