

FRANCIS HAY

EARL OF ERROLL AND THE SPANISH BLANKS CONSPIRACY

Slains Castle, a spectacular ruin perched on a jagged coastline, is locally associated with Bram Stoker's horror tale *Dracula*. But there was another Slains, of which only crumbling fragments remain in a remote hamlet to the south of Cruden Bay.



The Ruins at Oldcastle

Oldcastle, now a picturesque former fishing village, is dominated by this remnant of the fortress given in 1308 as a gift to Sir Gilbert Hay, Earl of Errol, by Robert the Bruce to recognise the latter's loyalty. Almost three centuries later, Slains would be blasted to smithereens by gunpowder purchased by James VI, as a punishment to the ninth earl, Francis Hay, for a treasonable act. What terrible crime had this nobleman committed to merit such royal vengeance?

Hay, like his friends the Gordons, was a Catholic, and wished to restore their country and monarchy to its former religion. After the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, all attention was focused on her young son, James Stuart by both Catholic and Protestant factions; but the teenage king who would later be called "the wisest fool in Christendom" demonstrated his political savvy even then.

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Despite trying to remain on good terms with both sides, things became extremely complicated for King James in 1592. George Kerr, a Scots priest, was arrested aboard a ship bound for Spain, having in his possession certain “blanks” signed by three prominent Catholic nobles, including Francis Hay, kindly addressing Philip II, the Spanish monarch. The empty letters were thought to contain messages written in “invisible ink” outlining a plot to invade Britain. Kerr confessed that one letter was from James VI himself, discussing how Spain could help the Scots monarch gain the English throne from Protestant Elizabeth I.

This left James in a quandary. The Church leaders demanded that the named earls be tried in court, and even the English queen’s ambassadors wanted the men imprisoned for treason. So, James demanded that Hay, Gordon and co-conspirator, William Douglas, come before him and explain themselves, which they refused to do and went into hiding. James’ forces, led by the Earl of Argyll, suffered ignominious defeat by the smaller Catholic army at the Battle of Glenlivet in 1594. Hay, fearing the king’s wrath, fled to Europe, but returned in secret in 1597, claiming he had embraced Protestantism, in order to gain a pardon, which was readily given.

The destruction of Old Slains says more about the young king’s shrewd actions than it does about Hay’s loyalty. Was this a demonstration to Elizabeth I of his commitment to a Protestant succession, now she knew the Tudor line was at an end? Or was it to convince the churchmen that James was not involved in a Jesuit plot involving the Pope and Philip of Spain? Whatever the case, Francis Hay built his new home out of sight of the old one.