

Portraits of William St. Clair as a Freemason and the Legends of Roslin Chapel

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In *Picture of Rosslyn Chapel and Castle*, published in Edinburgh in 1825, it is noted that “according to a venerable tradition, the turrets of the Chapel were supernaturally illumined by flames, upon the death of any member of the family of Rosslyn” [also spelled Roslyn or Roslin]. Interestingly, the unusual-shaped turrets of Roslin Chapel seem to be a feature in two undated full-length portraits showing William St. Clair of Roslin in masonic regalia, one housed at the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and the other, at the Lodge Canongate Kilwinning No. 2, both in Edinburgh. In each, this detail is within a scroll St. Clair holds in his right hand. William St. Clair is considered the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, founded in 1736. The likely allusions to Roslin Chapel in the portraits connect St. Clair to his ancestor of the same name who founded the chapel in the fifteenth century. This connection of past to present is a significant aspect of the portraits’ personal, social, and political symbolism.

In each portrait, the left hand, situated next to a symbolic masonic tool (compasses in the Grand Lodge version and a level in the Canongate Kilwinning), is configured in a right angle. This imagery is combined with the symbolism of Roslin Chapel to produce meaning-laden portraits that suggest a narrative about the emergence of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in the eighteenth century and provide insight into how this masonic history is understood in the nineteenth century.

The rising interest in Roslin Chapel during the eighteenth century is important to take into account when considering its significance for William St. Clair and for Scottish Freemasonry. Already in 1693, it was sufficiently valued so that an engraving of the structure, with a brief description that mentions the story of its supernatural flames, was included in the *Theatrum Scotiae*, a visual record of Scottish towns and their notable historical buildings. In 1761, an extensive article about the chapel appeared in *The Edinburgh Magazine*, accompanied by an engraving by the printmaker Andrew Bell. The article was published under a pseudonym and was dedicated to William St. Clair. The distinctive pinnacles or turrets are one of the first things noted in the elaborate description included in this account: Roslin Chapel is characterized as “one of the most curious pieces of old Gothic workmanship in Europe, having on the north-side twelve turrets or spires.” The year this article was published, William De la Cour made several drawings of the building. The spires are a key feature of these drawings and of several later representations of the chapel.

The contrast between the geometry symbolized by the square, compasses, and level, and the notion of the chapel turrets “supernaturally illumined by flames” is indicative of the combination of seemingly contradictory forces within Freemasonry and other movements that emerged in the eighteenth century. The apparent references to Roslin Chapel in the portraits of William St. Clair, in addition, imply that even if the first Grand Lodge was established in England, the roots of the fraternity were to be found in Scotland. This is a case of portraiture’s significance reaching well beyond the individual pictured, with the allusive imagery within the two portraits weaving together ideas about magical forces, past and present, social class, and nationalism to produce evocative and revealing stories.