

**REPENTANCE
TOWER
AND ITS TRADITION**

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Repentance Tower and Its Tradition by George Neilson

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GEORGE NEILSON

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TOWER
AND ITS TRADITION**

REPENTANCE TOWER
AND ITS TRADITION.

BY
GEORGE NEILSON,
Author of "Trial by Combat," &c.



REPENTANCE TOWER FROM THE SOUTH.

EDINBURGH:
GEORGE P. JOHNSTON, 33 GEORGE STREET.

MDCCCXCV.

P R E F A C E.

THE fascination which, from childhood, Repentance Tower, in Annandale, has ever had for myself, is my reason for believing that my solution of its historical problem may interest others. I have therefore reprinted 200 copies—150 for sale—of a paper in the *Proceedings of the Glasgow Archaeological Society* (New Series, vol. ii.), making two or three minor verbal changes, and adding three photographic plates. For the first and third of these, I have to thank my friend Mr. Macgregor Chalmers.

G. N.

34 GRANBY TERRACE,
GLASGOW, April, 1895.

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REPENTANCE TOWER AND ITS TRADITION.

*Read at a Meeting of the Glasgow Archaeological Society held on
7th September, 1893.*

I.—THE TRADITION.

"BRIGHT shone the moon on Hoddom's wal',
Bright on Repentance Tower;
Mirk was the lord of Hoddom's saul,
Toat chief sse sad and sour:
He sat him on Repentance hicht
And glower'd upon the sea,
And sair and heavily he sicht,
But nae drap eased his bree.

The nicht is fair, and calm the air,
Nae blasts disturb the tree,
Bith man and beast now tak' their rest,
And a's at peace but me:
Can wealth and power in princely bower,
Can beauty's rolling e'e,
Can friendship dear, wi' kindly tear,
Bring back my peace to me?
Nae lang, lang maun the mourner pine,
And meikle penance dree;
Wha has a heavy heart like mine
Ere licht that heart can be."

Repentance or Traillrow Hill, in Annandale, with its old tower visible from long distances in almost every direction, is a place with unique claims upon the attention of Scotsmen. It commands a view of exceptional extent, interest, variety, and beauty; it is associated with stirring incident in border war; it

* From Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe's ballad, "The Lord Herries: his Complaint," published in Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. One or two other stanzas quoted hereafter are also from this ballad.

has a striking legend touching its origin and its name; and its romantic story has lent inspiration to at least three poets, whose verse has thus thrown a vivid, if fanciful, light upon the past. Without the aid of the imaginative faculty to which we owe the ballads of Kirkpatrick Sharpe, of the lady known to literature as Jeanie Morrison, and of Dr. James Milligan,¹ it may be possible to re-light the torch of Repentance Tower with facts, and by their illuminating power to penetrate its yet unmastered mystery.

Repentance Hill may conceivably be that identical little hill which, according to 12th century tradition, rose up out of "the plain" which is called Hoddom," when St. Mungo first preached the gospel in Annandale, in the year 573. Its name even might be deduced from the great spiritual awakening which followed that memorable visit of the Strathclyde saint, at whose bidding the devils fled out of the district, never to return! This, however, would be a mere philological figment, and is not to be entertained. The oldest name by which we can trace the hill through the mist of far-off years is Trevertrold,² a word the first syllable of which denotes a hillside. Trailtrow is the modern form of that name, one of the oldest in the south of Scotland. The scope of my paper does not embrace the ecclesiastical history of this place in its various phases as a religious settlement³ attributable to St. Mungo, a chapel, hospital, and preceptory,⁴ and a normal parochial charge before the Reformation, until its ultimate passage out of separate ecclesiastical existence when Trailtrow parish was merged in Cummertrees.⁵

Of Hoddom, in its secular aspects, a few words fall to be said. The first Steward of Annandale (which was, down to the present century, known as a

¹ Kirkpatrick Sharpe's ballad has been already partly quoted. That of "Jeanie Morrison" was published in her "Ane Booke of Ballades." That of the late Dr. Milligan originally appeared in the *Annandale Observer*, and was subsequently published in his "Wimpleboro, or Village Sketches."

² *In planicie campi vocabulo Holdelm.* St. Ninian and St. Kentigerna (Historians of Scotland), p. 217.

³ *Glasgow Chartulary (Registrum Episcopatus Glasguensis)*, p. 4.

⁴ *Glasgow Chart.*, 4.

⁵ *Chalmers' Caledonia*, iii. 153-4, 190-1.

⁶ *Acts of Parliament Scotland*, iv. 441.

Stewartry, just as Kirkcudbright is to this day) was Udard of Hoddom,¹ a member of a family which presumably took its name from the place. In the 12th and 13th centuries there may have been a hall or residence of some kind there, but no real evidence has been adduced for the existence of a castle. The alleged castle of the Bruces, at Hallguards,² on the east bank of the river, said³ to have been "demolished some centuries ago, in compliance with a border treaty," is as devoid of documentary voucher as the alleged treaty for its demolition.⁴

Very little information is available about Hoddom until the 16th century. In the 15th century it had become the property of the barons Herries of Terregies.⁵ Still there is no proof of a castle. None emerges until the middle of the 16th century, and when Hoddom Castle appears in the records, it is speedily followed by Repentance Tower.

No romance has woven itself round the history of Hoddom Castle. Repentance, on the contrary, has a tradition which has given it renown as a veritable ballad-maker's joy. That tradition has divers versions. One form of the story is that Hoddom Castle was built out of the stones of Trailtrow Chapel, and that the baron, who built it, erected the tower also, inscribing above its lintel the word "Repentance," because his sacrilegious act lay heavy on his soul.⁶ But another version, much more striking and poetical in character, has taken deeper root in popular mind and memory. Its oldest written form is in Pocock's "Tours,"⁷ where it is stated that the tower was built for a beacon by a Lord Herries, who was an enemy of Mary Queen of Scots, but afterwards turned papist and repented of his deeds. A tourist more renowned than Pocock, the observant Pennant, took note of the story. According to his account,⁸ the tower was built by Lord Herries as an atonement for

¹ Bain's *Calendar*, i. 197, 605, 606, 607; *Glasgow Chart*, p. 64.

² Chalmers' *Caledonia*, iii. 79; *New Statistical Account* (Hoddam Parish).

³ *New Statistical Account*, Dumfriesshire (Cummertrees Parish), p. 292.

⁴ It is noteworthy that in the introduction to Kirkpatrick Sharpe's ballad in the *Border Minstrelsy*, no mention is made of the alleged earlier castle.

⁵ *Reg. Mag. Sig.*, ii. 1654, 2294, 2526.

⁶ *New Statistical Account* (Cummertrees Parish): Chalmers' *Caledonia*, iii. 191.

⁷ Pocock's *Tours in Scotland* (Scottish History Society), p. 34.

⁸ Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*, i. 105-6.

putting to death some prisoners whom he had taken under promise of quarter. The variant most widely current, however, narrates that one of the barons Herries, said to have been known as John the Reif, had made a raid into England. Returning across the Solway, he was overtaken by a storm, and to lighten the boat's load, he cut the throats of several of his prisoners and threw them into the sea. Kirkpatrick Sharpe made this version the basis of his ballad, which describes the luckless persons thus sacrificed as twelve in number, and makes the remorseful baron soliloquise as follows :—

Alas ! twelve precious lives were spilt,
My worthless spark to save ;
Bet had I fallen withouten guilt,
Frae cradle to the grave.

Repentance signal of my bale,
Built of the lasting stane ;
Ye lang shall tell the bluidy tale,
When I am deid and gane.

How Hoddum's lord ye lang sall tell,
By conscience stricken sair,
In life sustained the pains of hell,
And perished in despair.

To examine this weird story, to bring history to bear upon legend, to ascertain, if possible, the builder of Repentance Tower and why he built it, is the object here.

Historical scholars know how greatly tradition, even when well-vouched and genuine, varies in value. They know that it is never wholly reliable although it rarely lacks some reality. They know that frequently it possesses the characteristic of fiction founded on fact, preserving in a distorted and erroneous form an actual historical memory. Can we disentangle the fact from mythical overgrowth in these various editions of the tale of Repentance Tower? Or are the two now so grown together as to be inseparable? They say that of old the fairies were wont to haunt the tree-clad height of Woodcockair, which stands beside Repentance in a bend of the Annan water. Have the fairies with their spells travestied all truth out of the story of this lonesome tower? Or have they only embellished with a playful touch of fancy what at bottom may still be recognised and read as an "ower true tale?"