

The Real Mystery of Prince Henry Sinclair and Rosslyn Chapel

By Brother Alexander Stuart (Sandy) MacNabb
Lodge Education Officer
Henry Lodge No. 57

If you read the Da Vinci Code or saw the film, the last thing that stood out in that exciting drama was Rosslyn Chapel and the claim that the Sinclair family was carrying on the line of Mary Magdalin. Well, the Rosslyn Chapel **was** built by the Sinclairs. Actually, it was built by Henry Sinclair, the grandson of William Sinclair, the 1st Earl of Caithness.

Many books have been written about the Rosslyn Chapel and the carved stone imagery suggesting Masonic and Templar origin. Andrew Sinclair has maintained a claim that there is a grave within the crypt in the Rosslyn Chapel that is the grave of a Templar Knight. Historian Robert Lomas has maintained that there are engravings in the Chapel which depict a Knight holding a sword over the head of an initiate, supposedly to protect the secrets of the Templars. Lomas also maintains that the Sinclairs and their French relatives, the St. Clairs, were instrumental in founding the Knights Templar and that Hugh de Payn, a Templar founder, was married to a sister of the Duke of Champagne (Henri de St. Clair) who was a powerful broker of the first Crusade and had enough political influence to nominate the Pope.

Here is the background to some of those claims. Henry Sinclair was the son of William Sinclair, Lord of Roslin, and his wife Isobel of Strathearn, a daughter of Maol Isa, Earl of Orkney. He succeeded his

father as the Baron of Roslin, Pentland and Couslan, which were minor properties in Lothian (not the Lothian near Richmond, Virginia), and also became the Earl of Orkney circa 1348.

The Sinclairs also had strong connections and roots in Norway. Henry attended the coronation of, and pledged his fealty to, King Eric of Pomerania in Norway in 1389. Out of this relationship came a warrant or commission from the King of Norway for Henry, to bring law and order to the Orkney Islands, which he did.

Part of Henry's job in cleaning up the Orkney Islands was to eliminate or at least to curb the pirating of shipwrecked vessels. In the 14th century, the practice was to discover a shipwrecked vessel and to capture or murder the sailors and steal the ship's cargo. Prince Henry did much to put an end to this practice, and one occasion was reputed to have saved some mariners from Venice, who had in their possession maps and charts to the New World.

Travel to the New World, at that time, included travel to Greenland and Iceland. Reputedly, such voyages were undertaken long before the time of Prince Henry - for example, the voyages of the Irish Monk, St. Brendan, in the 6th century; and the voyages of the Norse, who sent 500 Norse settlers to Greenland in 985 A.D. Greenland fell under the rule of the King of Norway in 1261.

Prince Henry is best known for making his own voyage to the New World in 1398 - 1399, visiting Greenland, Nova Scotia and quite possibly Massachusetts. Some writers have taken a very suspicious view of Prince Henry's travels to the New World. For example, William Thompson, in his *History of Orkney*, wrote, "*It has been Earl Henry's*

singular fate to enjoy an ever-expanding posthumous reputation which has very little to do with anything he achieved in his lifetime.”

On the other hand, some historians believe that the Zeno Brothers Letters describe Prince Henry’s voyage in detail. The Zeno Brothers, Nicolo and Antonio, were noted Italian navigators from Venice living in the 2nd half of the 14th century. They were Italian aristocrats who held a transportation franchise between Venice and the Holy Land during the Crusade, similar to the Templars. Their letters and a map are the key points of their historic survival.

The Zeno letters, describe the exact course of the voyage in the North Atlantic – to Greenland and on to Nova Scotia – where the travelers encountered villages of Mi’kmaq Indians. The authenticity of the letters was reaffirmed when they were rediscovered and republished in the early 17th century. Historian Reinhold Forster writing in 1784 identifies Henry as being the Prince Zichmini described in the Zeno letters.

In 1889, Frederick J. Pohl published “*Prince Henry Sinclair: His Expedition to the New World in 1398,*” which is based almost wholly on the Zeno letters.

The evidence that Dr. Pohl’s relies upon to support the claim that Henry did in fact make the voyage includes:

- The fact that some of the words in the Mi’kmaq (Abanaki) language are of a Norse origin;

- The existence of the Gluscap legends in what are now Nova Scotia and Newfoundland about original life coming from the east in a big canoe; and,
- The “Westford Knight rock carving,” which originally was believed to be Indian writing, but later was identified by the sword hilt and armor as a recumbent Knight Templar.

More recently, the connection of Prince Henry Sinclair, the Roslyn Chapel, and Masonry were memorialized in the works of Tim Wallace-Murphy, and especially in the book titled: *The Templar Legacy & The Masonic Inheritance Within Rosslyn Chapel.* Mr. Wallace-Murphy dedicated that book to Henry and attempted to capture the role that Henry played in the dedication itself. Here is what he said:

Prince Henry Sinclair

Premier Earl of Norway

Lord of the Northern Isles

Baron of Rosslyn, Pentland, Cousland etc.

“A Man Worthy of Immortal Memory”

“He was the first Sinclair “Jarl” of Orkney which in Scandinavian terms, included Shetland, the Faroes and, some say, Iceland – 200 islands in the North Atlantic which were the “stepping stones” to the New World which he visited with an expedition of Knights Templar and Christian monks in 1398 – almost 100 years before Columbus. Proof of this remarkable voyage is indelibly hewn in stone on both sides of the Atlantic.”

“Henry died defending his beloved Orkney islands circa A.D. 1400 and was buried in the church of St. Mathew at Rosslyn. However, it is thought that his body would have been moved into the burial vaults below Rosslyn Chapel which his grandson, Earl William St. Clair, had built as a resting place for the dead of “The Lordly Line of High Sinclair” – a subject which has been immortalized in Sir Walter Scott’s poem “The Dirge of Rossabelle:

“Seemed all on fire that chapel proud,

Where Roslin’s chiefs uncoffined lie;

Each baron for a sable shroud

There are twenty of Roslyn’s barons bold

Lie buried within that proud chapelle.”

We began this talk by noting that Roslyn Chapel was built by Henry’s grandson, William Sinclair, the 1st Earl of Caithness. It is interesting to note that a later descendent, also named William Sinclair of Roslin, became the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Scotland and, that subsequently, several other members of the Sinclair family have held this position.

Let me conclude first by noting that despite a lot of ink spilt on the topic, the answers to many of the questions regarding Prince Henry are illusive. However, searching for the answers is a fascinating journey. One reference leads to another, and there is much yet to be discovered.

Second, I would observe that the author of this talk, Brother Alexander Stuart MacNabb became interested in Prince Henry while researching the Gluscap Legends, the Battle of Culloden in 1746, and the 2nd Scottish Arms Act. This was not surprising considering that his family has resided in Nova Scotia since the early 1700s, after the Battle of Culloden, that his paternal grandparent was Scottish with the name Alexander Stuart MacNabb – the same name he bears, and that his father's mother was a Mi'kmaq Indian. His interest also was sparked by Masonic ritual, for he is a Knight Templar of the Piedmont Commandery No. 26 of Manassas, Virginia and a Life Member of Scottish Rite Masons in the Valley of Alexandria, Orient of Virginia. I am sure Brother MacNabb would welcome you joining in the search for the truth about Prince Henry, and sharing your results with him.

Finally, the larger point is that you may, by a study of Masonic history, morality and philosophy, find topics of interest that will direct your reading and encourage your research, and you too will be well rewarded for your efforts.