

The Gowrie Conspiracy

Reference: *The Book of Jared, Vol. 3*

By Eleanor M. Hall

pgs. 264 – 272

with reference to the book,

*The Ruthven Family Papers: The Ruthven Version of the Conspiracy and  
Assassination at Gowrie House, Perth, 5 August 1600*

By Samuel Cowen, J.P.

About two years after the death of the Earl of Gowrie his forfeiture was reversed, by the King's decree. Either through a sudden whim, or a new and subtle plot, loaded with deceit. All the estates and titles were restored to the eldest son, James, a lad of tender years, who died in 1588, in the fourteenth year of his age. He was succeeded by his brother John, the third and last, Earl of Gowrie. It was perhaps, the beginning of a new and diabolical conspiracy the king was meditating toward the House of Gowrie. On the surface it appeared to be his wish to obliterate, if possible, in the minds of the children of William, Earl of Gowrie, every resentful remembrance of their father's death. The estates and honors which had been forfeited were returned to the. The King was continually giving them tokens of his favor. The daughters were in great credit with the Queen, and thus obtained honorable marriages. The younger son, Alexander Ruthven, when almost a mere boy, was raised to an office at Court near the King's person.

At a very early age John manifested a disposition which had characterized most of his race, to engage in perilous enterprises. In his sixteenth year he was elected Provost of Perth, an office which had become hereditary in his family. In the same year he was implicated in the plots of the Popish Earls through the influence of his brother-in-law, the Earl of Athole. The religious wars had no abated.

Immediately after this restoration in 1586, Earl John Gourie, left for the Continent to complete his education. For five years he studied with great distinction at the University of Padua, a university of high recommendation in Italy. His reputation for ability and learning was so great that he is said to have been elected 'Rector of the University, and to have been offered a Professor's Chair.'

He left Italy at the end of the year 1595, and went to Geneva, where he spent three months in the house of the learned Beza, to whom he so endeared himself that the famous divine 'never made or heard mention of his death but with tears.' He then proceeded to Paris, where the English Ambassador, Sir Henry Nevil, 'found him to be of very good judgement.'

Upon leaving the Continent he passed through London, and was received by Queen Elizabeth with flattering distinction. He spent two months as a guest in the English Court. This may have been a time of great nervous excitement on

the part of King James VI, of Scotland. He knew that Queen Elizabeth had received Young Gowrie with open arms. She had treated him with lavish hospitality. She ordered the Court to supply him with a bodyguard, and to treat him in every respect as a royal personage. All expenses were paid out of the English Exchequer. It appears, that John Gowrie, first cousin to both Elizabeth and James, had fully as much right to succeed for nobody had the slightest idea what would be the result of Elizabeth's uncertain mind. Samuel Cowen may be quoted, "The Catholic Party determined his ruin. The King's suspicious temper, above all, his jealousy, that the Protestants of England would prevail on Queen Elizabeth to name Gowrie as her successor, made him heartily fall in with a scheme of destroying Gowrie.' The Lords wanted the Gowrie property. The King wanted the English Throne. The question was how it could be done, so as not to raise suspicion and incur the blame of shedding innocent blood."

James, because of Gowrie's supposed precedence, as a competitor for the English Throne, evidently resolved in his own mind that whatever the consequences, Gowrie must be removed, as Elizabeth, in his opinion, would undoubtedly prefer Him. He was an accomplished scholar, and the most handsome young man of his time. These were points that would influence the Queen in the nomination of her successor; and further, James was indebted to Gowrie in a very large sum of money, advanced on mortgage by the First Earl of Gowrie, and he evidently believed that Gowrie's removal would forever extinguish and cancel the debt.

After leaving the Court of Elizabeth on his homeward journey, John, Earl of Gowrie entered Edinburgh amidst a brilliant retinue of noblemen, gentlemen, and dependants on horseback. Great crowds of citizens went out to welcome him with every mark of popular favor. The people, and especially the clergy, regarded him as the destined leader and champion of the popular cause. James was greatly displeased with these marks of popular enthusiasm towards John, Earl of Gowrie.

Never the less, the learning and scholarship of the young Earl, together with his handsome countenance, and graceful manners, soon gained for him the royal favor, and James often conversed with him on strange and abstruse subjects. It speedily became apparent, however, that Gowrie had no intention of becoming a Courtier, or of looking to the royal favor for promotion. He was the leader of the successful opposition of the Estates to a cherished project of the King, that a liberal grant of money should be made to enable him to raise and equip a body of troops for the purpose of maintaining his right to the English Throne. His bearing towards the enemies of his house excited a suspicion that he may be determined to avenge the death of his father on all who had been concerned in that deed, not excepting the King himself.

In all probability the plot, which ended in the ruin of the Ruthven family was concocted soon after John's return to Scotland. If indeed, it was not long

persued and pre-meditated, even from the murder of their father, eight years before.

The King's story, as it has been told in its many conflicting versions and widely published accounts, goes about like this:

The King, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1600, was going a hunting in the woods of Falkland. He was accosted by Alexander Ruthven, younger brother of John, who told him an unlikely and suspicious story of a man who was being held at the home of the Earl of Gowrie, because he had been found with a pot of gold. Alexander enticed the King to go to interview this suspicious character. Thus to bring him into John's house where he could be foully murdered by the two Ruthven brothers. This, in a nut shell, is the plot of the Gowrie Conspiracy against the Kings Royal Person. James claimed such an attempt was made, and that he had overcome the young men, and made a successful escape. He even declared a National Annual Holiday to celebrate his miraculous escape.

Samuel Cowan says, "Even at the time when it occurred there were many who doubted, and not a few who denied altogether, the existence of a conspiracy. Sit William Bowes, the English Ambassador; Nicholson, and agent of Elizabeth at the Scottish Court; and Lord Scope, the English border Warden, in their communications to their Governments, threw the principal blame on the King himself. The Presbyterian Clergy, who had no great goodwill towards James, indicated as plainly as they could venture to do, their distrust of the royal narrative. The celebrated Robert Bruce of Kinnaird, though he was ultimately induced, after a rigid cross-examination of the King, to express his belief of the guilt of Gowrie and his brother, would never consent to declare this from the pulpit, and was, in consequence deprived of his benefice and banished from the Kingdom.

The story, as gleaned by many historians from The Ruthven Family Papers, and State Papers found in both Scotland and England, is best told by Samuel Cowen.

"The plot for the assassination of the two young men, Gowrie and his brother, appears to have consisted of the following parts: - The catastrophe in view was, that the Earl and his brother should be put to death in a sudden scuffle; in which, however, they were to be made to appear as traitors. The present safety of the king, and of the persons immediately employed, was to be secured by corrupting some of the Earl's servants; and by bringing a sufficient number of armed men from the country. A specious pretence was to be contrived for the King's coming to Perth. The King, after dinner at Gowrie House, was to pretend a necessity for retiring to a private apartment. A report was to be raised that he had gone away to Falkland. When the courtiers were assembled in the street under the windows where the King was, the King was to cry to them from the window that his life was in danger. His confidential servants were then to ascend a private stair, and kill first one brother, and afterwards the other."

What most historians have agreed really happened is recorded, and aptly related by Cowen.

On the evening preceding 5 August 1600, Alexander Ruthven, a younger brother of the Earl, and a Courtier in the Court of James, was summoned to Falkland, where the King was then residing for the purpose of buck hunting. Upon returning from the hunt next morning "His Majesty told Alexander he meant to dine that day with his brother at Perth. It is said Alexander Rughven earnestly begged leave to go and acquaint his brother, that some provision might be made for the dinner. The King ordered him expressly not to go, and keep him close by him, under his own eye, till within a mile of Perth, to prevent Gowrie getting earlier notice. Is it possible that the King, uninvited, would go to dine with Gowrie without some other reason than to see 'the man with a pot full of gold?'

"Gowrie was ignorant and unprepared, so that he had no other provision but a dinner made that day for a wedding, which he caused to be carried to Gowrie House, and with which he was glad to entertain his guests.

"Though there were but twenty horsemen said to have been with the King when he came to Perth, yet thrice that number of men on foot came with, or soon followed him, in threes and fours, so that special notice of them might not be taken. Some of the King's attendants, shocked at what happened, plainly told thereafter that it was the King who requested Alexander Ruthven to go upstairs and not Alexander, urging the King. There was scarcely an hour between the King's arrival at Perth and the death of the two brothers; what was said of Gowrie or some of his people calling out that the King had gone to Falkland was false. It had been concerted beforehand that when the King went upstairs the company were to go out to the lane or passage which the window in the study overlooked, so they would be able to take their next clue when the King called from the window.

"Ramsay and Herries did not go into the courtyard, but remained below the stairs, till they heard the King call from the window. Then was the time they hurried up the stairs and killed both brothers. Lennox, who was married to Gowrie's sister, but she was dead, knew both the stairs well, was in the secret, and directed Ramsay to the private staircase; while himself, mar, and others went up the great staircase and battered at the door till all was over. The story the King told of Gowrie rushing to the chamber is also without foundation; for the moment Ramsay killed Alexander he went in quest of the Earl, who met him on the top of the stair and asked what was the matter; Ramsay replied, 'The King is dead.' The Earl, astonished, was heard to say, 'Waes me, poor man, the King dead in my house.'

"The Earl of Tullibardine came in time to rescue the King, for the people of Perth were battering the great gate, and threatened to blow them all up with powder if

the King would not send them out Gowrie, their Provost, alive. The King and his company durst not open the gate, but went secretly down through the garden to the summerhouse, which had a door that went down by steps to the river. They slipped into some small boats, and were carried to the Sotyh Inch of Perth, where Tullibardine and his party received them, and escorted them to Falkland.”

The King had previously sent Captain David Murray, Controller of his Household, with a message to his cousin, the Earl of Tullibardine, ordering him at a certain hour to come on that 5<sup>th</sup> day of August to the South Gate of Perth with 300 horsemen in arms. “Douglas’s history of the families of Tullibardine and Stormont makes a merit of this service done to his Majesty; and it is also said for the King, that the accidental coming of Tullibardine to the South Gate of Perth, at that critical moment saved the King for imminent danger of being destroyed by the mob of the people of Perth; but Tullibardine did not come to Perth, with so numerous a retinue, without a cause.

“The King durst not attempt the murder of Gowrie in Perth without being sure of such aid. Tullibardine’s coming could be no accident, and is a proof of premeditated design. When Tullibardine knew what was said he wished the King had excused him that service. The two Earls were cousins. It was then well known that the King sent for Alexander Ruthven the night before, or early that morning, purposely to give a colour for his going to Perth to know where his brother the Earl was, if at Perth, and who were with him.”

“The narrative the King gives of what passed in the closet shows that Alexander Ruthven did no hurt to the King; and it is no wonder he died declaring with his last works that he was innocent.....The King was known both before and after to have dealt in such practices; such as the murder of the Earl of Moray and the deaths of Lady Arabella Stuart, and Sir Walter Raleigh.”

“Cowards are always cruel, and James, whose cowardice was notorious, at once adopted measures of the most revolting cruelty against the brothers and sisters of the slain Earl, and he and his greedy courtiers sought to hunt them down and extirpate them like wild beasts. ‘On the very night of the catastrophe,’ wrote the English ambassador to Cecil, ‘the King, at his return to Falkland, presently caused thrust out of the house Gowrie’s two sisters, in chief credit with the Queen, and swears to root out that whole house and name.’ ”

“The next day an attempt was made to seize the two surviving brothers of the family, who were living with their mother at Dirleton; but a friend had sent timely warning of their danger, and accompanied by their tutor, headed by the Marquis of Orkney, and Sir James of Sandilands, reached the castle to effect their apprehension.” The brother were William & Patrick.

“The news of Gowrie’s deaths reached Edinburgh next morning. The Privy council ordered the ministers to convene their people and give thanks to God for

the King's deliverance, and to read from the pulpit the account sent from Falkland by the King of Gowrie's Conspiracy. The clergy, though they offered to give God public thanks for the King's safety, refused to enter into any detail or particulars, or to utter from the pulpit what neither they nor their people believed a word of."

In the matter of the escape of Gowrie's two younger brothers, William and Patrick, two lads of eighteen and sixteen respectively, we learn from the Ruthven Papers, edited by John Bruce, that their tutor from Edinburgh accompanied them. They procured disguised apparel and traveled on foot across the most unfrequented districts. They left Dirleton on the evening of Wednesday, 6<sup>th</sup> of August. On Saturday, the 10<sup>th</sup>, they reached Berwick and presented themselves to Sir John Carey, the English Governor. The Governor was overwhelmed with commiseration for the young men, and especially for their mother, the Countess. He gave the young men shelter till he could hear from the Queen, who at once permitted them to remain in England.

For more than three weeks they lay concealed at Berwick never leaving their chamber.

The country was so thickly set with spies, and the Countess so closely surrounded by persons whose business it was to find cause of accusation against her, that she dared not send her sons help of any kind. William and Patrick traveled south, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, and with the consent of Elizabeth are said to have resided with their tutor two years at Cambridge. They were in England, penniless and homeless, when the death of Elizabeth placed their royal persecutor on the English throne. No greater calamity could have happened to the unfortunate young men. The deaths of the two elder brothers did not invalidate the pretensions of their brothers who were in life, which made it necessary, from the King's point of view, to destroy them.

Lady Beatrix, after the death of her two brothers, resigned the office she held at Court, but being naturally of a firm temper, was not so entirely overcome with grief as were some of her sisters. Though she had left the Court, she still carried on a confidential correspondence with the Queen, and sought also to be of use to her two surviving brothers, William and Patrick. They had fled to England for safety, August 6, 1600, but in September 1602, they came privately to Scotland, having been encouraged to hope that by the Queen's influence, and their sister's policy, the sentence of banishment might be removed.

The King got notice of their arrival, and was afraid of a plot, but the Queen dissuaded him from using any rigorous measures. The young men were in Scotland about three months; and we are told by several writers that one evening in particular, the Lady Paisley, and the Dowager, Duchess of Angus, brought Lady Beatrix to the Palace of Holyrood House, disguised as one of their gentlewomen, and she continued with the Queen all night, in secret consultation. The scheme, however, of procuring the restoration of the two young men was

impracticable. Their estates were now in the hands of those from whom they could not be recovered, and her brothers were obliged to return to England in a very poor condition but with, perhaps, a degree more safety. (The Queen, by some means, had obtained from Sir Thomas Erskine, the person who had given the last fatal wound to Alexander Ruthven, news of some secret information relating to the affair at Perth, and that she had communicated to Lady Beatrix the information she had received. The King, therefore, was afraid that if he should give them any high provocation, they would divulge to the world the circumstances which had come to their knowledge.)

“Their estates and honors forfeited, their arms cancelled, their very name abolished, and those who bore the Ruthven name were forbidden to approach within ten miles of the King; their surviving brothers, their posterity, heirs, and successors were declared to be in all time coming incapable of enjoying any office, dignity, lands, or possessions in Scotland. The very seat of the family – Ruthven Castle – was to lose its ancient designation, and to be called Huntingtontower. So ruthlessly did James carry into effect his threat to ‘root out that whole house and name,’ that no male descendant of the family is now known to exist.

“To make assurance double sure’ that the hated race should be utterly rooted out, their hereditary estates, comprising the richest soil in Scotland, were divided among some of their neighbors, who were alleged to have long had an eye upon the broad and fertile lands of Gowrie.” (Historic Families of Scotland, by James Taylor.)

The name of William Ruthven, younger brother of Earl John Gowrie, does not appear in the Peerage Histories of either Scotland or England after 1603, when he completed his escape from his mortal enemy, James I of England, VI of Scotland.

Theodore Beza, the successor of Calvin at Geneva, invited the two young refugees to come to him, and offered to befriend them to the utmost of his power. Apparently William availed himself of this invitation because he spent some time in study abroad where he became well educated in Chemistry and Philosophy. Patrick remained in England and sowed an inclination to study physic. About 1603 Patrick was apprehended and thrown into the Tower of London where he languished 19 years with never a trial, or even an accusation. The Scottish Parliament, in 1600, disinherited the brothers, and banished them from Scotland. William did not remain long in England, but went to foreign parts, and nothing further can be added concerning him in British records except Bishop Burnet’s remark that “William lived and died ‘beyond the seas’, became a great chemist and being addicted to alchemy it was given out that he had become a great chemist and ‘had found the Philosopher’s stone.’ ”

The new-found-land, we now call America, was at that early time termed, "beyond the seas".

H.H. Daniel, in his story of the Ruffin family says of Willism, "First it was thought he went to France, and later to Virginia in the United States." In 1635 he sailed from England aboard the ship "Assurance" for the United States.

Patrick Ruthven spent 19 years in the Tower of London. In 1616 he obtained a grant of 200 pounds a year 'for apparel, books, physic, and such other necessities,' as he had become a distinguished physician and an alchemist, and on 4 August 1622 was allowed to go to Cambridge. As 'our well-beloved Patrick Ruthven, Esquire', He received 11 September 1622, a grant of an annuity of 400 pounds a year. His bounds were enlarged 4 February 1623/4, but he was still forbidden to approach the Court. He married a daughter of Sir Anthony Van Dyck, and in 1648 is styled Earl of Gowrie, Lord, Ruthven, but signed as the latter only. He practiced medicine, having 'made it his study, to administer health to others, but not for any gain to himself.' He died within the King' bench, and was buried at St. George's Southwark, 24 may 1652. He married 2<sup>nd</sup> Elizabeth, daughter of Robert Woodford of Brightwell, widow of Thomas Gerard, first Baron Gerard of Abbot's Bromley (who had died in 1617). She died in 1624.

They had issue:

1. Patrick Ruthven: born in Holborn. He appears to have lived in Sweden, being in 1650 'a solicitor of the King of Scotland.' He was 'a most violent and bitter fellow against the Parliament, his father long a prisoner in the Tower.' He married at St. Martin's in the Fields, 14 July 1656, Sarah Head. He married 2<sup>nd</sup> Lic. 9 September 1667, Jane Macdonald of the County of Ross, Scotland, widow, aged forty-two.
2. Robert – living 'in a very lamentable condition' in 1660.
3. Elizabeth
4. Mary: One of the Maids-of-honor to Queen Henrietta Maria. Married first to Sir Anthony Van Dyck, the celebrated painter, who painted her picture, now in the Munich Gallery. He died 9 December 1641, and she was married 2<sup>nd</sup> to Sir Robert Pryse of Geogerddan, Co. Cardigan.

#### Summary:

By way of review and summary we list the long line of ancestors that cover the five hundred years they were active in the national history of Scotland. Though this line of ancestors there is an obvious thread of firm temperament, personal integrity, and decided quality of leadership that they used for the betterment of their fellow men.

Unfortunately they lived during a period when there was only one way gain in worldly goods. The strenuous time of 'Kill and Take.'

With the final defeat of the Rughven War Lords, we can give sincere thanks that on stalwart William Rughven escaped to America to plant his roots, and his ideas of freedom in a new soil from which has grown a spirit of freedom that has blessed his posterity for well over an additional three hundred and fifty years. It has given a heritage of integrity and decision in a land made for personal freedom. Let us all appreciate and maintain this marvelous gift of personal agency, and our American homeland in which it can grow.

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*'Tis of the brave and good alone  
That good and brave men are the seed;  
Yet training quickens power unborn,  
And culture nerves the soul for fame;  
But he must live a life of scorn  
Who bears a noble name,  
Yet blurs it with the soil of infamy and shame'  
\_\_\_\_ Sir Theodore Martin*

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