

LEGENDS IN EVERY NOOK

St Regulus Burial Ground has in the past often been popularly, but mistakenly called the "Pirate's Graveyard," because of the grisly symbols of mortality associated with piracy on many of the "table-top" tombs. Ironically, these ornate carvings were in fact regarded as status symbols by the 18th Century merchants buried in them, who wanted to proclaim their respectability and civic worth, even in death!

The place is primarily associated with Clan Urquhart, for centuries the ruling landowners on the Black Isle, and rebounds with the many stories Hugh Miller collected around their Cromarty lairds, their medieval castle, their famous deeds and in many cases, sad fates. International gatherings of the clan's honorary members still take place in the town every few years.

On this page, we gather together for you summaries of Miller's astounding tales set here in his epic *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland*, his first published book. We strongly recommend a read. It is available in digital reprints or second hand through online antiquarian booksellers. If you can access it, you can enjoy a quick dip right here in the graveyard, if it's a sunny day! No sense of Cromarty's rich social history is complete without it.

THE MEDIEVAL CASTLE

Look all around you and try to imagine the ancient pile of the Clan Urquhart chiefs, some 500 years old before it was demolished in 1772 by merchant George Ross. Miller evokes a dark, damp, forbidding pile, where it was "always twilight" above its many turrets, vast walls, and an interior full of massive doors, stairs and hearths. Later occupants related it was "the scene of many terrors," describing "shrieks, moans and long whistlings," and spectres including strange animals scurrying within and without.

THE URQUHART LAIRDS

Perhaps the most extraordinary of these was **Paterhemon**, variously said to have had between 20 and 40 children. In old age, he caused himself to be raised slowly in his couch from the ground floor to the battlements above by pulleys, an act which he deemed "emblematic of the resurrection."

In his day, the Sheriffs of Cromarty held the "power of pit and gallows" to punish and terrify their citizens, and used them. Miller cites two locations in the parish where gibbets performed the executions. However one particularly cruel and oppressive

Sheriff found himself locked in his own dungeon by a tenant who seized his key, and walked away with it in his pocket.

When it came to eccentricity, blended with a certain genius, none could compare with the Cavalier **Sir Thomas Urquhart**, celebrated for tracing his ancestry back to Adam, as the inventor of a universal language, propounder of incomprehensible mathematical theories, and as the uproarious translator of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, while Cromwell's prisoner in the Tower of London.

THE CHAPEL

A grassy mound roughly at the graveyard's centre is all that remains, with a vault below, of the Chapel which once served the castle. Over time, much of the chapel walls fell into the ravine below, while "little urchins of the town" threw most of the remaining stones down the same way.

An Urquhart coat of arms sits above the vault entrance; the dank interior is thankfully no longer littered with old bones. Miller once sat in there the whole of one stormy night, just to absorb the "melancholy scene" while he "listened to the mingled utterance of a thousand sounds of earth, air and water."

THE TOMBSTONES

Miller describes the stones being occupied by "the rude semblance of skulls and crossbones, dead-bells and sand-glasses, shovels and sceptres, coffins and armorial bearings," as "a striking lesson in the vicissitudes of human affairs," adding "no fewer than seven landed proprietors" are buried there, "none of whose families now inherit their estates." He once compared the tombs, "clustered together beneath the fence of trees which overtop them to the west, to a covey of waterfowl sleeping beside a...lake."

FAVOURITE STORIES

Among Miller's best-loved episodes in his collection is that of his great grand-father **John Feddes**, who did the jilted lover's time-honoured escape and left the town for a buccaneering life at sea, only to win the hand in the end of Bonnie Jean Gallie, the prettiest lass in the town. Together they founded the Miller dynasty at the Birthplace Cottage. He is buried beside Eliza.

Undoubtedly one of the most tragic deaths was that of **John Macleod's son**. The father was a leading merchant and innkeeper. His only son engaged, as he once had, in

smuggling. The son stowed barrels of Genvas (gin) in the father's cellar. Revenue officers arrived one night and demanded access to the cellar. In the ensuing scuffle in the dark, the innkeeper accidentally killed his son with a blow of a poker. Macleod the father has been said to haunt the house until well into the 20th Century. His long since broken grave can no longer be traced.

A goodly number of tales concern the decades-long battles between some of the lairds and the kirk's ministers adhering to opposing religious faiths. These only serve to remind the modern reader of the passions which sectarian divides can arouse. Some sense can be made of the conflicts at the town's Reformation-era **East Kirk**, whose entire congregation deserted during the Disruption of 1843 in which Miller played a leading role.

One amusing example of religious faith still remembered is that of **Sandy Wood**, who sought to get his argument in first with the Almighty on Judgement Day over a territorial dispute with his neighbour by having himself buried *outside* the graveyard.

Wood was "a man of strong passions, sparingly gifted with common sense, and exceedingly superstitious." His neighbour was a shoemaker, "famous for his great wit and his very considerable knavery." Wood became convinced that he was losing every year a bit of his garden the width of a row of cabbages, and eventually caught the shoemaker in the act. The scoundrel turned the tables on Wood, counter-charging him with the same offence. Eventually Wood sickened of his wrath and died. He shared a then common belief that the Day of Judgement was held at Navity, the settlement a mile or so above the town, and therefore he would have a head start from outside the graveyard to reach God first. His grave is still clearly visible, but fenced off from access for safety reasons.