

“A Candidate for Immortality”: Martyrdom, Memory, and the Marquis of Montrose

Rachel Bennett

A salient theme in this book is that death neither has an entirely static definition nor does its timing always have a discernible chronology. To quote Thomas Laqueur, natural death is something that happens in an instant but “becoming really dead...takes time”.¹ This chapter engages with the central question of “When is Death?” by looking at the death of one man in particular, James Graham, the 1st Marquis of Montrose (1612–1650). Montrose played a prominent role in the early part of the mid-seventeenth century religious and military conflicts between the Covenanters in Scotland and the Stuart monarch of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. His place in the history of the struggle was complex because he initially supported the Covenanting cause before switching to support King Charles I. This chapter demonstrates that Montrose’s death had multiple timings and that the use of his body highlights an

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important interplay between issues of power and punishment, and martyrdom and memory.

First, this chapter provides a brief timeline of the events that made Montrose a key figure in the struggle between Covenant and King, and which made his death noteworthy. Second, it investigates the multiple stages of what will be defined as his “legal death”. Montrose led Royalist forces in battle against the Covenanters, and for this he was outlawed, excommunicated, and attainted for the crime of treason in 1644. Thus, the process of his legal death began years before he was finally captured and publically executed in Edinburgh in 1650. This section also shows how Montrose’s capture began a social death, as he was paraded from northern Scotland to Edinburgh with his crimes advertised and his name degraded. Within the black catalogue of offences that carried a capital punishment in this period, the crime of treason was set apart in how it was punished. The punishment for treason extended beyond the extinction of life as the corpses of traitors were used to send out stark and richly symbolic messages. In Montrose’s case, his head was spiked on top of Edinburgh’s Old Tolbooth and his limbs were displayed in four of Scotland’s main towns. However, as the third section of this chapter demonstrates, he was still not yet truly “dead”.

After the wars of the three kingdoms, and the Interregnum of republican government, the three kingdoms were restored under Charles II in 1660. This led to a wave of Royalist sentiment, and the martyred Montrose was used to propagate the themes of loyalty and sacrifice. In 1661, the first parliament of Charles II resolved to provide some “honourable reparation” for the barbarity committed upon him.² Montrose’s dismembered body, once used to mark out his criminality, was gathered together and given a full public funeral at the King’s expense in order to mark a legal, spiritual and social rehabilitation. This, again, provokes questions over the timing of his death. The third section of the chapter charts the journeys of particular parts of Montrose’s body, namely his heart and one of his arms. These body parts were not buried with the rest of his body in 1661 and they have legacies of their own. In 1925, a newspaper article discussing the potential sale of Montrose’s arm argued that the desire to possess it came from “our interest in the past and a craving for the most convincing form of testimony.”³ These body parts were transformed into relics and were passed down through the generations, attracting beliefs about Montrose and also about the power of the dead body.

MONTROSE: COVENANTER AND CAVALIER

In 1638, Scottish nobles and common people alike signed the National Covenant, the purpose of which was to provide a written document stating their commitment to the Reformed religion and the principle of a church that was not controlled by the crown, but whose followers remained loyal to their king. It was signed in the Kirkyard of Greyfriar's in Edinburgh by the great Scottish lords, including the Marquis of Montrose, a young and energetic military campaigner. King Charles I alienated his Scottish subjects by reforming the liturgy and discipline of the church, leading to fears of an eventual return to popery. To the King, the Church of Scotland was greatly inferior to the Anglican Church as it lacked proper liturgy and its bishops did not have a suitably exalted status.⁴ After the signing of the Treaty of Berwick in 1639, which ended the early hostilities known as the First Bishop's War, Montrose was sent to discuss the religion question with Charles I, and it was not long after this that he began to switch his allegiances. John Buchan argues that Montrose became aware that the governance of Scotland was increasingly in the hands of certain individuals, notably his great enemy the Marquis of Argyll, who he feared were committing the very breaches of the law for which they had previously condemned the King.⁵

In 1644, Montrose pledged allegiance to the King and, soon after, was appointed the Viceroy and Captain-General of Scotland. In the same year, he was attainted and outlawed for treason as well as being excommunicated by the Covenant Committee of Estates, thus marking the beginning of his legal, but also his spiritual death, in the eyes of his enemies. Montrose's cavalier forces went on to achieve victories in various parts of northern Scotland, including a particularly bloody campaign in Aberdeen that blackened his reputation. In an account of the sufferings inflicted upon the Church of Scotland, the early eighteenth-century ecclesiastical historian Reverend Robert Woodrow called Montrose and others who supported the King "malignants and anti-Covenanters".⁶ Even the anti-Covenanter Sir George Mackenzie referred to Montrose as a "vain-glorious butcher" for his actions in the Highlands.⁷

In contrast, Montrose fared better in later interpretations of the period. Robert Chambers, in his *History of the Rebellions in Scotland* (1828), argued that the conduct of the Covenant meant that Montrose—his hero—had to join the King to protect the rights of society from church oligarchy.⁸ Other accounts praised his "heroic

moderation” and the lack of malice in his military campaigns.⁹ Although Montrose missed out on a heroic status in life, he enjoyed a vibrant after-life in works of fiction that portrayed him as a romantic hero. Catriona MacDonald shows how, in the post-1745 Jacobite Rebellion period, Montrose’s legacy was refashioned, along with that of the Highland clans, to exemplify Scottish national virtues in works such as Sir Walter Scott’s *A Legend of Montrose* (1819).¹⁰

Despite winning some significant victories, Montrose encountered a lack of support in the Scottish Lowlands and he fled to Norway in 1646. It was not until 1649, following the execution of Charles I, that Montrose was restored to the lieutenancy of Scotland by the King’s son and heir Charles II. In the following year, Montrose landed in the Orkney Islands with a small force of Royalists, but he failed to gain significant clan support and was defeated by Covenant forces at the Battle of Carbisdale in April 1650. He spent a few days on the run in the Scottish Highlands before coming upon a previous ally named Neil McLeod. However, instead of offering him assistance, McLeod apprehended Montrose and handed him over to the Committee of Estates for a bounty. This perceived treachery fed into the Royalist cult of martyrdom in the wake of Montrose’s death. When he was apprehended by McLeod, Montrose apparently requested that he be killed quickly where he stood, rather than be handed over to his enemies.¹¹ However, McLeod refused this request and the Covenant made plans to use his death to make a political statement about their strength and to avenge Montrose’s betrayal. The Committee of Estates wanted to bring Montrose to Edinburgh to be put to death before King Charles II arrived in Scotland and interceded to prevent the execution. Despite this urgency, they made the execution a three-day long public spectacle replete with all possible ignominy.

THE EXECUTION OF MONTROSE

Montrose had been attained, convicted, and excommunicated by the Committee of Estates in 1644 and this still stood at the time of his capture in 1650. Therefore, in this sense, his legal death had already begun years before he was physically present to hear his death sentence. Following his capture, Montrose was brought from northern Scotland to Edinburgh. While this journey was intended to bring shame to his name, and mark the continuation of his social death to Covenanters, Montrose

actually received a multitude of reactions during the procession. In some places he was given food, comfortable shelter, and fine clothes thought befitting to his status. However, at places where his forces had been victorious, a herald was placed above him that proclaimed, "here comes James Graham, a traitor to his country".¹²

On 19 May 1650, Montrose was met at the city gates and conveyed with all possible ignominy to the Old Tolbooth. He was placed in a cart bare-headed and tied to a specially made seat to ensure that he was in full view of the crowd.¹³ Although the distance between the gates and the Tolbooth was little more than half a mile, the procession took three hours as special stops were made along the way, including a lengthy pause outside the house from which the Marquis of Argyll and other Covenanting authorities viewed the spectacle. The city's ministers urged people to throw things at Montrose and abuse him during the procession to add further shame. However, some in the crowd were moved by his dignity and courage in the face of his ordeal, and various commentators spoke of a "tense air of sympathy and startled admiration" for him.¹⁴

The day after his arrival in Edinburgh, Montrose was taken before the Committee who repeated their charges of rebellion against the state and desertion of the National Covenant. He was not given a formal trial because he was already attained, and thus convicted, for his crimes. Montrose was sentenced to be hanged on 21 May at the Cross in Edinburgh on gallows that were 30 feet high. Throughout Europe during this period many noble traitors were executed by beheading, perceived as a more honourable end than hanging. However, this concession was not extended to Montrose because of the desire of the Covenanters to add even further infamy to his death. His private chaplain George Wishart wrote a biography of Montrose that favourably detailed his previous military campaigns, and this book was ordered to be placed around his neck as a reminder of his crimes. After the body was hung for three hours, it was ordered that it be cut down, beheaded and quartered. Montrose's head was to be fixed on top of the Tolbooth and his legs and arms distributed to Stirling, Glasgow, Perth, and Aberdeen. Various ministers visited him before the execution because it was stipulated that if he repented his crimes, the sentence of excommunication would be lifted. However, Montrose stated that, although he continued to hold to the Covenant he had taken, he could not support any actions against the authority of the King, to whom he pledged a greater allegiance and in whose authority he had acted. Furthermore,

Montrose apparently stated that he thought it an honour to have his loyalty remembered in Scotland's five most eminent towns.¹⁵ During the Restoration regime, such reports of Montrose's gallantry when faced with unjust death were used to further establish his position as one of the most celebrated Royalist martyrs of the period.

On the morning of his execution, Montrose ascended the scaffold wearing fine scarlet with white gloves and silk stockings that had been provided by friends. Traditionally, criminals about to suffer the last punishment of the law were given the opportunity to address the watching crowd in order to express public penitence for their offences and to reconcile themselves with their fate. However, fears that Montrose might be rescued meant the authorities limited his access to the public. He was only permitted to address those immediately around him, one of whom recorded what he said. In his investigation of the behaviour and last dying speeches of the Jacobite rebels, Daniel Szechi argues that, during his execution, Charles I had set a precedent in refusing to publicly accept the justice of his sentence.¹⁶ Instead of showing penitence during his last moments, Montrose reaffirmed his loyalty to God and the King, and expressed satisfaction that he was to follow in the footsteps of the martyred Charles I.¹⁷ Reporting upon Montrose's gallant deportment, a contemporary pamphlet commented that "it is absolutely believed that he hath gained a better repute by his death than ever he did in life".¹⁸

After hanging for three hours, Montrose's body was cut down and his head and limbs were cut off with an axe—a scene that was met with sounds of regret from the crowd.¹⁹ The Covenant then began to display their authority and justice by distributing the body parts. Montrose's head was spiked on top of the Old Tolbooth to mark out his treasonous criminality and to prolong his public humiliation beyond execution. One of his arms was put up at Justice Port in Aberdeen, and another was sent to Dundee. The legs were sent to Stirling and Glasgow.²⁰ Often, the torsos of victims thus dismembered were given to relatives for burial; this was not the case with Montrose, however. Because he had been excommunicated, his torso was buried in unconsecrated ground under the gallows on the Borough Muir. At the time, this final insult by the Scottish Kirk was considered a greater torture than the punishments inflicted upon his body in life.²¹

These post-mortem punishments were broadly consistent with other treatments meted out on the corpses of traitors during the period. The legal death sentence was designed to deny the condemned a decent

burial and also to harness the power of the criminal corpse to make a political statement: this is what happens to traitors. In many cases, the dismembered body parts of the executed remained on display for years until they rotted away to nothing, or were eventually taken down without ceremony and lost to historical record. Montrose's body, however, became a vehicle to promote an entirely different political message in 1661.

"AN HONOURABLE REPARATION"

In his biography of Montrose, Wishart called him a "candidate for immortality", and provided one of the earliest examples in which Montrose's death was held up as iconic in the Royalist cause. When lamenting Montrose's treatment by the Covenant, Wishart stated that his death "was not bewailed as a private loss but rather as a public calamity".²² However, following the Restoration, Charles II's first parliament resolved to bestow upon Montrose "an honourable reparation" for the barbarity committed against him and sought to officially rehabilitate him as a martyr.²³ While this would finally give Montrose the decent death he had previously been denied, his funeral also served a broader political purpose. The Restoration gave rise to a wave of Royalist sentiment in which the themes of loyalty and sacrifice were carefully woven into the fabric of the regime.²⁴ Because of its political currency, Montrose's story was told and retold by Scottish Royalists into the eighteenth century and beyond.²⁵ In 1661, his courage in fighting for the King's cause and his defiance in the face of death was rewarded by a lavish funeral, the like of which had not been seen in Scotland since the coronation of Charles I in Edinburgh in 1633.

Montrose's attainment for treason in 1644 was intended to attach shame to his family's name and contribute to his social death in the eyes of the Covenant. However, in 1661, this social death was undone. Those "nearest in blood" to Montrose, including members of the Graham and Napier families, became a focal part of the funeral proceedings with one contemporary pamphlet commenting that the event marked a restoration of the good name of the Graham family.²⁶ On 7 January 1661, the funeral procession made its way through Edinburgh to the sound of drums, trumpets and the firing of cannons, to collect Montrose's torso from the Borough Muir. It was disinterred from under the gallows and carried under a velvet canopy to the Old Tolbooth where his head was

taken down by members of his family, before the procession continued to Holyrood Abbey. He was placed in a coffin where he lay in state until the funeral was held in St Giles on 11 May, followed by a large banquet in his honour. During his invasion of Scotland, Oliver Cromwell had supposedly ordered Montrose's displayed limbs to be taken down. The arm sent to Aberdeen was interred in the vault of fellow Royalist George Huntly, 2nd Marquis of Gordon, who had been beheaded in 1649. In 1661, it was raised up and put in a velvet-covered box and carried by a procession of over 500 people through the city.²⁷ The celebration in Aberdeen was an important milestone in Montrose's public rehabilitation, as during his campaigns in the 1640s, he had attacked and plundered the city.

The funeral was conducted at the King's expense and was directed by Sir Alexander Durham who, as the Lyon King of Arms, was responsible for overseeing state ceremonies in Scotland. Durham's accounts show that he distributed, at least, the enormous sum of £802 sterling for Montrose's funeral. This lavish expenditure was more than mere remorse on the part of the monarch for a fallen cavalier. If we examine the great number of nobles and gentry who were present for the whole spectacle, it becomes clear that it brought together Montrose's friends and foes.²⁸ This demonstrates that the Restoration regime intended the spectacle to act as a vehicle to propagate the value of loyalty and to show its strength after a generation of civil wars. Following the funeral, Montrose's remains were buried in the cathedral of St Giles, in the vault of his grandfather, a previous Viceroy of Scotland.²⁹ Although the funeral and burial were intended to provide Montrose with an honourable death, not all of his body found its final resting place in the vault in St Giles. The next section looks at the separate journeys of one of Montrose's arms and his heart in order to highlight the beliefs that were attached to them and to demonstrate the continued agency of his body.

“A MOST CONVINCING FORM OF TESTIMONY”

There were various ways to think about, and be affected by, dead bodies in seventeenth-century Britain. These included: debates about when a person was medically dead; debates about the religious importance, or power of corpses; and beliefs about the potency of the dead and the healing properties of certain body parts.³⁰ Popular ideas about dead bodies were frequently noted at public executions, where people

showed a desire to possess mementos, such as the blood, hair, clothing, and personal possessions of the executed person. Indeed, at the execution of Charles I, the monarch gave friends pieces of his clothing as relics, while after his death, his silk shirt and gloves became coveted curios. As was customary, the silk stockings worn by Montrose for his execution were claimed by the executioner. He had taken care not to cut them when severing the limbs, and after the event, they were purchased by Montrose's niece Elizabeth Erskine, Lady Napier. In 1856, a descendant of Lady Napier mentioned that the family was still in possession of the stockings, along with other relics of Montrose.³¹ While this was an example of the repatriation of Montrose's possessions and memory by his family, Royalists were also concerned to "re-member" his body by tracing down his missing arm and heart.

It appears that the left arm sent to Aberdeen was the only one of the four distributed limbs to be collected in 1661. The right arm sent to Dundee to be nailed up above the principal town gate was subsequently carried to England by a Cromwellian officer named Pickering.³² When one of Pickering's descendants left England for Spain in 1704, he placed the arm into Ralph Thoresby's antiquarian collection in Leeds. Upon Thoresby's death in 1725, the arm was purchased by Thomas Graham of Woodhall in Yorkshire.³³ It remained in the Graham family for decades and one his descendants, John Graham, wrote about the arm in 1752, stating its journey thus far and attesting to its authenticity. By 1834, Mr. C. Reeves of Woodhall, perhaps a descendant of the Graham family of Yorkshire, was in possession of the arm, and he provided details about its current condition. It was a mummified limb, he said, that had been cut off at the elbow and was in an excellent state of preservation.³⁴ In 1891, the arm was purchased by Mr. J.W. Morkill, along with a written statement of authenticity, and in 1925—the same year Charles' silk waistcoat was donated to the Museum of London—Morkill attempted to sell it at Sotheby's auction house. At the time, one newspaper stated that the arm was more than a gruesome relic because it offered a very definitive indication of the character of Montrose: "for understanding eyes it is an historical document, in addition to being a relic coveted by all who have fallen under the spell of a very gallant gentleman."³⁵ However, Morkill's notice of sale caused a public outcry and he withdrew the arm from Sotheby's. It was not mentioned again until 1932 when it was left to Morkill's son, Mr. Alan Greenwood Morkill, in his will.³⁶ After 1932, the arm disappeared from the historical record. Yet, despite the

uncertainty of its final destination, the journey of the arm across almost three centuries demonstrates that people considered it to be a powerful curio as it was a tactile memento of the great Montrose worth possessing, and because the stories about it generated a sense of authenticity.

Following the execution and dismemberment, Montrose's torso was buried at the Borough Muir with the gallows used to hang him. However, when his body was disinterred in 1661, it was discovered that the chest had been broken open and heart removed. This had been done on the orders of his niece, Lady Napier. The post-mortem journey of Montrose's heart can be traced through a letter written by Alexander Johnson, a descendant of Lady Napier, to his daughter in the early nineteenth century.

According to Johnson, Lady Napier had the heart embalmed and enclosed in a case made from Montrose's sword. It was then placed into a gold filigree box that had been gifted to the Napier family from a Doge in Venice, and then placed inside a silver urn. She sent the heart to the Netherlands, where Montrose's son was in exile. After this, the heart was apparently lost for some time until a friend of the fifth Lord Napier recognised the gold box in a collection of curiosities in the Netherlands and purchased it for him. The Napier's had him sign a certificate attesting to its authenticity and the circumstances by which he had acquired it and Johnson wrote that it was then taken back to the Napier ancestral home at Merchiston. Johnson's grandfather often told the story of Montrose's heart to his mother and when he died he had left the heart to her. As a child, Johnson travelled to India with his mother and father, who was an officer in the East India Company, but on the voyage their ship had been attacked and the gold box was damaged. In India, his mother had it repaired by a goldsmith and also had another silver urn made with an engraving, in the two most common languages of the southern peninsula of India, telling the story of Montrose. The Johnsons displayed the urn in their home in Madura and, because of his mother's care for it, the locals believed it to be a talisman with the power to protect the bearer in battle. Owing to this superstition, it was stolen and sold to a powerful chief. But this was not the end of the heart's journey.

In his letter, Johnson recalled how he was often sent to hunt with local chiefs in order to learn more about their culture, and on one trip he earned the praise of a particular chief for an act of bravery. In a remarkable twist of fate, this was the chief who had purchased Montrose's heart, without knowing it had been stolen, and he agreed to return it

to the family. (Interestingly, some years later, the chief was executed for his part in a rebellion, but before this, he told his attendants the story of Montrose and asked them to preserve his heart in the same way.) Montrose's heart then returned to Europe with the family in 1792, but during their journey through France, they found out that the revolutionary government was confiscating gold and silver. The Johnsons therefore entrusted the gold box into the safe keeping of an English woman in Boulogne named Knowles. When Knowles died soon after, the family were unable to trace the heart.³⁷ But still, the trail did not go cold.

In 1931, Captain H. Stuart Wheatley-Crowe, the president of the Royal Stuart Society, led an investigation into the missing heart. Wheatley-Crowe had in his possession an embalmed heart that was believed to have been brought to England from France during the Revolution by the ancestors of the Perkins family who claimed it was the heart of Montrose. He had a medical examination carried out upon the heart that found it to be approximately 300 years old, but could find no other definitive proof of its authenticity.³⁸ In 1951, Wheatley-Crowe sent the heart to Canada to a person he believed had a claim to the relic, a Mrs. Maisie Armitage-Moore.³⁹ Another turn of events came in 2012 when the largest ever collection of memorabilia marking the life of James Graham was exhibited in the Montrose Museum, a museum that opened in the town of Montrose in 1842, to mark the 400-year anniversary of his birth. The exhibition included paintings, documents, weapons, and a heart believed to be that of Montrose himself. The museum's curator acknowledged that there were two recorded accounts of different hearts believed to belong to Montrose and they had located one. However, it is unclear if this was the same heart that had been sent to Canada in 1951.⁴⁰ Despite the lack of proof of its authenticity, the heart was placed alongside other artefacts definitively related to Montrose, and this perhaps is a suitable final destination.

CONCLUSION

While awaiting his execution in the condemned cell of the Old Tolbooth, Montrose remarked to the guard "even after I am dead I will be continually present...and become more formidable to them [the Committee of Estates] than while I was alive".⁴¹ Despite making this statement, Montrose could not have foreseen how both his body and his legacy would be utilised by both the Covenanting and the Royalist

causes to propagate entirely different values. His three-day execution spectacle was replete with the hallmarks attached to the punishment for offences against the state, from the ignominious public procession to the multiple stages of the execution itself. Furthermore, the displaying of his corpse to indefinitely mark out his criminality was intended to prolong his legal death beyond the extinction of life. However, in conducting a public funeral, the Restoration regime changed Montrose's identity from that of an executed traitor to that of a murdered martyr and reconciled him religiously and legally.

We can draw parallels between the posthumous treatment of Montrose and other influential corpses from the Civil War, Interregnum and Restoration period. Following his execution for treason in 1681, the remains of Oliver Plunkett, the late Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, were exhumed in 1683 and went on a journey of spiritual rehabilitation across Europe before he was eventually canonised in 1975. In contrast, upon his death in 1658, Oliver Cromwell, the late Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, received an elaborate state funeral which was intended to serve as a reinforcement of the Protectoral regime. However, this did not mark his final resting place or his final legal death. By order of the Restoration regime, he was posthumously convicted and executed as a regicide with his spiked head on top of Westminster Hall serving as a reminder of the reward for treason.⁴² The chronology of Cromwell's multiple deaths presents an almost reverse pattern to those of Montrose who suffered an ignominious execution in 1650, but received a lavish funeral in 1661 to mark his official death at the same time as his rehabilitation in the public memory.

Will Montrose ever die? This chapter has shown that, even after the honourable reparation afforded to Montrose in 1661, he was not, and perhaps is not yet, truly dead. Some of his body parts, once the dismembered remains of a traitor, were refashioned into coveted relics and instead of marking out his criminality, they attested to his gallantry and loyalty to the king. Spanning four centuries, the journeys of Montrose's arm and heart drew forth beliefs about body parts as signs of punishment, curious relics, icons of political memory, and curated exhibits. For the Covenant, Montrose's execution in 1650 marked the end of his life, but for Royalists it was the honourable funeral of 1661 that marked his legal death and repatriation into a political community. Montrose remains an iconic figure in Scottish history; indeed, the First Marquis of Montrose Society was founded in 1995 to promote his name and

memory. This contemporary relevance, alongside the mobility and multiple meanings attached to his body parts, make it unlikely that Montrose's post-mortem journeys are over yet.

NOTES

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42. Note that, following its removal from Westminster Hall, Cromwell’s head became an object of curiosity and debate over its authenticity before it was eventually interred at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, in 1960. For more information on the respective journeys of the heads of Cromwell and Plunkett see Sarah Tarlow, “Cromwell and Plunkett: Two Early Modern Heads called Oliver”. In James Kelly and Mary Ann Lyons eds., *Death and Dying in Ireland, Britain, and Europe: Historical Perspectives* (Dublin, 2013), pp. 59–76.

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