

SIR GEORGE ERSKINE OF INNERTEIL (c.1570–1646) AND THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF EDINBURGH

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INTRODUCTION

In 1707 the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh was the recipient of an important collection of alchemical manuscripts, including a rare and unusual alchemical document, a Ripley Scroll, most of which had belonged to Sir George Erskine of Innerteil. The manuscripts were gifted by his grandson, the first Earl of Cromartie. A biographical account of Erskine was published over 100 years ago by Small,¹ who regarded him as one of Scotland's outstanding alchemists. Small gave limited information on Erskine and the manuscript collection, but an excellent description of the Ripley Scroll appeared in the same year.² The manuscripts have had little attention since then, although they are well known internationally, and they are worthy of much more detailed study, as is the life of Erskine. Sir George Erskine's name is variously spelled as Areskyne (Figure 1), as he signed himself, Erskyne or Erskin, changing almost universally to Erskine in the mid-seventeenth century.

On the first page of Volume I of the manuscripts is an inscription by the Earl of Cromartie who wrote:

I having found by letters directed from one Dr Politus (a polonian or Silesian) to my grandfather Sr George Areskyne of Invertile brother to the Earle of Kellie, & grandchild to the Earle of Marr, A Senator of the Colledge of Justice & privy Counsellor to K. Jas the 6th & to K. Cha 1st & who was a great student in

naturale philosophy, evn to a considerable advancement in the Hermetic Schoole & had a correspondence in very remote parts wt the sonnes of Hermes: & of whose fruits of his extensive & secret correspondence with them I have depositat some volumes of manuscripts, mostly of his owne handwritt. This was sent to him, by the Society at Hess; & directed under the convoy of the sd Dr Politius who by his letters to Sr George declares that by direction of that Society; his chief errand to Scotland was to conferr with him. And I judged it a monument, not unworthy to be consigned to that Honorable Colledge of phisitians at Edinburgh: both for its convoyance & matter: evn tho perhaps, much of it may be or is now in print: yett this being long or it was is to print as ane αὐτογράφων (autographon): & hath more be much then is printed, & many authors not mentioned in ye print: To the Royall Colledge of phisitians; this vol & severall other volumns is affectionately & humbly offdred on the nynteen of june An Chr 1707 by Geo: Cromertio.

The letters to Erskine from the Rosicrucians of Hess are not identifiable in the manuscripts and do not appear to have survived.

SIR GEORGE ERSKINE OF INNERTEIL

Sir George was the third son of Sir Alexander Erskine (Figure 2) of Gogar, Stirlingshire, near Bridge of Allan

Resaved from Patrick Wood in his own bytyme
 be bill of Exchange to William Smyth the sum is payed
 and wherof I have receved the discharge fro the partie
 And fro Jhon Lind and David Jhonson his Executof the
 soume of nyne hundredth and fourtie mks. So this
 band is coplitly payed tua thousand mks.
 Geo. Areskyne

FIGURE 1

Erskine's signature on a manuscript. (Courtesy, Scottish Record Office)



FIGURE 2

Alexander Erskine of Gogar, father of Sir George Erskine.
(Courtesy, National Portrait Gallery)

and a brother of the first Earl of Kellie. George Erskine's birth date is unknown but Comrie, the historian of Scottish medicine, concludes that he was born around 1570.³ From the time of David II (1329–1371), at least up to the death of James VI in 1625, the Erskine family were keepers of the royal castles of Edinburgh, Stirling and Dumbarton, and entrusted with the care and education of royal children.⁴ Their influence with royalty is shown in the role of John Erskine, second Earl of Mar, in settling with Queen Elizabeth of England the right of James VI to succeed her.

The future king, James VI, was taught in Stirling Castle by the reformer George Buchanan (1506–1582), who was the royal tutor from 1570 to 1578, and by Peter Young, and also David and Adam Erskine, Commendators (i.e. holding a benefice *in commendam*, or tenure) of Dryburgh and Cambuskenneth respectively.⁵ James' fellow pupils were the Earl of Mar (his cousin), Sir William Murray, Lord Invertye, Walter Stewart (Lord Blantyre) and George Erskine. The curriculum included rhetoric and dialectic, mathematics and grammar, Latin literary texts and verse composition, French, political theory, history (with an emphasis on royalty), religion, travel, geography, natural history and Greek. Erskine shared in a demanding and wide-ranging education under a strict master.

There are references to George Erskine in the family papers of the Earls of Mar and Kellie in the Scottish Record Office (GD 124) and in a number of accounts of contemporary affairs. For example, Mr George Erskine is mentioned as one of the witnesses to the signing of a covenant on 10 March 1593 at Inverness⁶ when

Mackintosh joined with the Earl of Argyll in a treaty for mutual help against Huntly.

The relationship with Argyll is interesting. Erskine is referred to as his secretary, his guide and as his man when Argyll (5th Earl) was in Ireland in 1594/5.⁷ As Queen Elizabeth had no resident ambassador in Scotland she used George Nicolson as her agent, a commoner, with whom Erskine was on close terms. Erskine was involved in an expedition from Arran to Ireland by a fleet of galleys and small boats. Argyll used Erskine as a special messenger on various errands and at one point he was in a ship which was driven by a storm to Beaumaris in Wales. Nicolson's many letters addressed to Sir Robert Cecil (c. 1563–1612), Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State, contained highly important information dealing with the innermost secrets of the state. Nicolson wrote from Berwick in May 1598 to Sir William Bowes:

Mr George Erskine may be well regarded as a gentleman of good account (Sir Thomas Erskine's brother) and a chief guider of this good Earl of Argyll. On Friday last they passed through this town and had passport made in Mr George Erskine's name of that date.

In June 1601 Nicholson writes to Cecil 'For no plat [plan] goes forward with the Earl but is crossed by Mr George Erskine', and Argyll 'has Mr George Erskine for intelligence with the rebel of Ireland, but first to go to my Lord Deputy and go or stay as he shall please. But with this I meddle not. Mr George draws deeper.'⁸ In writing to Cecil in September 1601 he mentions Erskine from time to time, and suggests that he was an important man behind the scenes: 'Mr George Erskine, Sir Thomas's brother also attending the Earl (of Argyll) and his great guider'

ERSKINE OF BOQUHAN

On 6 April 1610 and again in 1614 Erskine is recorded as Sir George Erskine of Boquhan,^{9,10} but by 13 September 1611 he had a charter of Innerteil (in its modern form Inverteil), a short distance to the west of Kirkcaldy, and other lands. On 15 March 1617 Erskine was admitted a Senator of the College of Justice, a Lord Ordinary of the Court of Session in place of Sir James Wemyss of Bogie, taking as his judicial title Lord Innerteil. Sir George also had a base in Edinburgh and he is given as a tenant of John Maknath, a merchant who lived in what was later called Nairne's Close upon which New College was built in 1845.^{11,12} Although most of the information on Erskine is in short and limited references in correspondence or in legal documents, taken together they begin to provide some insight into his character: reserved, thraven and ambitious.

Erskine is mentioned from time to time in a series of letters written between 1612 and 1625 from the royal court in London, Theobalds or Newmarket to John, Earl

of Mar Thomas Erskine, Viscount Fenton, later Earl of Kellie (1619). Thomas, Sir George's elder brother, was resident with the court.¹³ The Reverend Henry Paton¹⁴ comments that the letters are difficult to decipher, and quotes Fenton writing to Mar in 1616:

Remember my service to your sone, Lord Erskine. If I could read his letter he should have an answer. I thank God one of the name wrets noe better than myselfe.

Viscount Fenton wrote to the Earl of Mar on 25 June 1616:¹³

I most humbillye thank your Lordshipe for your last letter, where in was noe thing bot that whitche did concerne my brother Sir George. I hope that there, or in onye place els, your Lordshipe shall finds him bothe a kynd man and an honnest. For that particulare place, it is not without his Majesties desyre that I have left it to Carnegy, and his Majestie has settilld with me that my brother shall have Logye his plaice; and therfor I must intreat your Lordshipes favore with sutche of the cessione as you think best to hald hand when it cumes to his presentatione. But, my Lord, I must acquent your Lordshipe that notwithstanding that I had acquented the Chanslaire of my resolutione to deall for my brother for the first plaice that shud fall, yet has he wretten to me to gett a presentatione for Mr Alexander Gibsone, a man that I love with all my hart, yet I find his Majestie not verye willing to have onye Clairke on the Cessione; but I hope he shalbe the first that his Majestie will think of in that kynd.

King James remained well disposed towards Erskine, and in a letter to the Earl of Mar, Treasurer and his Deputy dated 30 June 1618 the King records a gift of liferent and escheat (forfeited goods) of the Earl of Argyle bestowed on 'our trustie & welbeloved Sr George Ereskine of Innerteill'.¹⁵ The letter, which carries the King's seal, reads in full:

James R

Righte trustie & righte welbeloved cusen & counsellor And trustie and welbeloved counsellor wee greete you well/ Whereas the escheate and liferent of the earle of Argyle is fallen in our hand and at our guifte by the said earles being denounced as rebelle and putte to our horne wee are well pleased to bestow the said escheate & liferent on our trustie & welbeloved Sr George Ereskine of Innerteill it is therefore our pleasure that (in respecte the sd Sr George is bound cautioner in greate sumes of munie for the said parle) hee give way unto our said guifte and expedie the same gratis unto him to the present it may be past through our seales with such curve nient expedition

as may be/ and this muse earnestlie recomending unto you wee wis you farewell/ Given at our Manner of Greenwich the last of June 1618.

Writing to Mar on 6 December 1618 from Newmarket, Fenton says 'My brother Indereteill will communicat to your Lordshipe sume thing that I have wrettin to him twiching the Erll of Argyll his besines.'¹⁶ During the absence of Argyll on the continent James appointed George Erskine Justice General.¹⁷ Erskine was given assise (subject to tax) herring of the West Seas from the Mull of Galloway to the Pentland Firth on 9 August 1619.¹⁵

On 26 November 1619 Thomas, Earl of Kellie wrote to Mar from the Strand, London:¹³

The steate of things as thaye go heir I have wrettin to the Chanslaire . . . and my brother Inderteill has sume things send to him that had bein longsume for me to wret . . . speciallye of the battell where it is thocht that the Boemians hes the best. We expekt daylye to heir of the landing of sume imbassadours from the King of Boemia. Or it be long I shalbe aibill to geve your Lordshipe sume better knowledge hoe the world shall goe.

The Thirty Years War had started in 1618 and the son-in-law of James VI, Frederick the Elector Palatine, had been crowned King of Bohemia in September 1619.

Innerteill's name, together with others, is attached to a document of 1620 relating to lending money¹⁸ and also on a Royal Charter.¹⁹ In 1621 Erskine became a Commissioner for regulating the tax roll of Kincardineshire.²⁰ Kellie wrote to Mar from Theobalds²¹ on 19 December 1622:

I can not wonder anewche at sume letters I have bothe from my Lord Erskyne and my brother Inderteill. Thaye wret to me bothe that for twentye days before the 6 of this monethe you had not a pakkett from me. I can not but mutche mervele at it. I never had pakket from your Lordshipe but I send one uther, and since his Majestie went from Roystone to Newmarket, at whitche tyme I did cume to London, your Lordshipe hes had aither 4 or 5 at the least, I am assured this is the 5; therfore I praye your Lordshipe to let me know if you have reseaved them; if you have not that I maye try where the falt lyethe.

THE ARTICLES OF PERTH 1618

James was intent on having the forms of worship in the Scottish Church the same as those in the Church of England and in 1618 he ordered a General Assembly in Perth to approve five Articles, one of which decreed that worshippers should kneel when they received bread and wine at Communion. Scotland disliked the Articles and in practice they were not strictly enforced.²² In a letter

to Mar on 26 August 1624²³ Kellie raised a contentious issue:

Since the Beshepe of Dumblane his cuming upp I find his Majestie is sete upone that owld ground to have evrye one to kneele at the communyone, and to that effekt has spokin to the Chanslaire, soe that I think their shall a proclamatiome come out for that purpos. And I am advertissed that their hes bein sume thing saide to his Majestie of my brother Inderteill, for the Chanslaire has towled me that the king did aske him for my brothers or whether or not he had done that; and therfor let me intreate your Lorshipe to deal with my brother that he be not willfull, and that he will remember what he promised to his Majestie him selfe when his majestie himselve did speik him. I have wrettin to him to the same effekt, for as his Majestie is now in humore their wilbe noe Gods mercye but that all must remove bothe from Consele and Cessione that will not kneell.

EARTHE DOGGES, HIGHWAYS, AND PAPISTS

On 1 November 1624 James VI wrote to the Earl of Mar from Royston:

Righte trustie and righte welbeloved cosen and counsellour, wee greete yew well whereas wee have presente occasion to sende into France some of those dogges which here they call terrieres and in Scotlande they call earthe dogges, wee have thoughte good by these presentes to require yow to employ your beste meanes by causing Sir George Erskin to send unto Argyle, and yee your selfe sending not onlie the ther bot also to Glenurquhay and all your other frendes, whereby yee may gette for our use four or five couple of these dogges and sende them to us with all expedition possible.²⁴

He then stipulated that the dogs should not be more than three years old and that they be sent 'not all in one shippe, but some in one and other some in another, leaste one shippe shoulde miscarie'.

In 1629 the Earl of Rothesse, the Lords Melville and Innerteill were charged with repairing highways for the impending visit of King Charles I.²⁵ In the same year Erskine was amongst those ordained by the Privy Council to a committee for the suppression of 'Jesuits, seminarie and messe priests and rebellious papists, in all points'. In 1638 four senators of the College of Justice refused to subscribe to the King's Covenant when the remainder of the Lords of Session did so.²⁶ The four were Sir Alexander Gibson, Sir George Erskine, Sir John Hope and Sir John Scott. But later he seems to have changed his mind, though unwillingly: 'The Lord Erskyne subscribes the Covenant in face of the assembly, with tears'.

ERSKINE AND THE SECRET COUNCIL

Erskine was a very active and important figure in public life in Scotland, particularly between about 1610 and 1639. He was a Justice of the Peace for Fife and Kinross in 1613 and 1614, as was another alchemist, David Lindsay of Balcarres.²⁷ Between 1618 and 1625 Erskine was a member of the Secret or Privy Council which virtually ruled Scotland for James VI after his departure for England, and which carried with it political, commercial and legal commitments.²⁸ It is difficult to reconcile Erskine's very practical and mundane activities in connection with the Privy Council with his involvement in alchemy and Rosicrucianism. The Registers of the Privy Council of Scotland between 1610 and 1639 contain detailed accounts of its activities and the name Sir George Erskine (variously spelt), and later Innerteill, frequently occur. The matters dealt with were varied and included disputes between individuals, assaults and violence, customs duties on imported wheat, the illegal import of tobacco, coinage, the purchase of gunpowder and the filthiness of Edinburgh. On 12 February 1618 Sir George was admitted to the Council 'with the usual ceremonies',²⁹ although he is recorded as having been present at a meeting in the previous year. The ceremony was accompanied by a letter from the King to the Chancellor:

Right trustie and right weilbelovit cosine and counsellour, we greete you weelee. Haveing perfyrtlie understoode the sufficiencie and qualificatioun of Sir George Erskine and his goode affectioun to the advancement of all thingis whiche may concerne oure service, we ar weelee pleisit to mak and constitute him one of the ordinair number of oure Previe Counsell in that oure kingdome. We have thairfoir thought goode by these presentis to will and require yow to caus the oathe accustomed in the lyke caises be administrat to the said Sir George, geveing and granting unto him the place of a Previe Counsellour, with all honnouris, digniteis, privilegis, and immuniteis quhilkis ony other oure Previe Counsellour injoyeth be verteu of his place in oure said Counsell. In whiche behalf as these presentis salbe unto you a sufficient warrand, so we bid yow fairweele. At Newmerkatt, the last of Januar 1618.

Sir George was very constant in his attendance at Council³⁰ and took his place with some 52 others who constituted central government as 'one of the topmost men of the nation'. Between 1616 and 1619 Erskine attended 66 Council meetings, first as Erskine of Boquan and later as Lord Innerteill. Between 1619 and 1622 he attended 152 meetings. Most of them were in 'Halyruid Hous'. Erskine was also involved in the coining of new pieces of gold and silver.

COMMERCIAL MATTERS

In 1620 Erskine was a member of a Council committee to enquire into the efficiency of a glassworks in

Edinburgh³¹ and in the following year he was nominated with Lord Carnegy to visit a gait (road) and passage at Blairheads in East Dysart with the Dysart bailies and to report on its state of repair.³² In 1621 he was one of a group from Council who visited a soap factory to determine how the quality of its products compared with that imported from Flanders. They pronounced it as equal and proceeded to forbid importation of foreign soap.³³ In 1622 he took part in the inspection of the Earl of Nithsdale's cloth works in respect of his patent.³⁴

ERSKINE AS CHIEF JUSTICE

At a meeting on 22 January 1624³⁵ Erskine, while still on Council, was constituted under the Signet as Chief Justice of the Kingdom of Scotland. The office was at the time 'voyde, and the administratioun of justice in matteris proper to that judgement ceassis by the absence of these who formarlie supplieit that place'. Sir George was described as 'a persone of sound and upright judgement, and otherwayes accomplished and furneist with giftis ansuerabill to the dignitie of suche ane employment'. He was empowered to hold his courts within the Tolbooth of Edinburgh, or elsewhere as required.³⁶

SEAFIELD TOWER

*The Presbyterie Booke of Kirkcaldie of 1633*³⁷ contains several references to 'my Lord of Innerteyle' (variously spelt). Sir George is listed amongst the 'Heretors of the Paroshe of Kingorne', and among the large number of Heretors and Elders of the parish of Kirkcaldy. In 1633 the Kirk session dealt with a charge that iron windows had been stolen from 'the towre of the Seyfeild pating to My Lord of Innerteyle. Innerteyle had sent ane letter to thair session shewing that he was myndit to pursue the matter criminallie.' The miscreant was duly prosecuted and sentenced to imprisonment. When he made a disposition in February 1645 in favour of his daughter Anne³⁸ 'the Lands of Seyfield' were included in that part of his estate.

THE LAIRDS' DISPUTE

In February 1634 the Presbytery Records³⁷ report that:

Anent the Laird of Graunge his seatt in the Kirk of Kingorne put in be him against ane act of the session of Kingorne and protestatione of the Laird of Tarbett in the contrair as being prejudiciall to Sr Georg Areskine his seatt by impeding his sight and heiring of the minister the Presbyterie appoints the said Kirk of Kingorne to be visited for that effect upon Wednesday next . . .

Later, the Laird of Graunge humbled himself before the Presbytery and Eldership of Kingorne and apologised for his actions. The difference between Sir George and Robert Kirkcaldie of Grange was composed by lowering Grange's seat by half a foot and raising Erskine's by a foot.

THE MEMORIAL STONE

Erskine died on 2 July 1646 and was replaced as Senator by Sir Alexander Gibson, Lord Durie on the same day. Erskine had married Dame Isobel Broune but the date is not known. Nothing is known of her life but it is recorded in the autobiography of John Livingstone (1603–1672), a popular and non-conforming preacher, that between 1632 and 1634 one of the aristocratic ladies who financed him was Lady Ennerteell,³⁹ so this gives a clue to her religious outlook at that time. She died on 6 August 1640 in the Parish of Kinghorn.⁴⁰ It might be expected that Erskine and his wife would have been buried in the kirkyard at Kinghorn but there is no evidence of this. However, in the record of Kinghorn Churchyard⁴¹ is the entry '174 (lying outside the kirkyard walls, removed to Inverleith House 1873?) sir geo Areskine of Invertull kt, w (stag's head in shield flanked by RNK – Mackenzie arms – Jervise 1078)'. The reference is to a page in a manuscript volume containing material collected by the antiquarian Andrew Jervise which is in the library of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.⁴² There are two entries: the first (p. 1,078) is a rough pencil sketch on a small piece of paper entitled 'Slab near to but without the kirkyard at Kinghorn (incised)'; and the second (p. 1,079) a more skilfully drawn version in ink to which has been added 'Removed in the summer 9'73 to Inverleith Ho'. The drawings (Figure 3) show a central shield with 'stag's head' written beside it, presumably by Jervise. On its right side is the letter R or possibly K, on the left MK and above this is written, again presumably by Jervise, '(?McKenzie)'. Round the sides of the slab is written 'E. Wfe to Sir Georg – Areskyne of Inver – teill. Knight. ane of'. The beginning and end of this sentence are lost with the apparently broken end of the slab. Erskine's wife was Isobel, and the McKenzie shield on the slab must relate to his son-in-law Sir John. The McKenzie arms

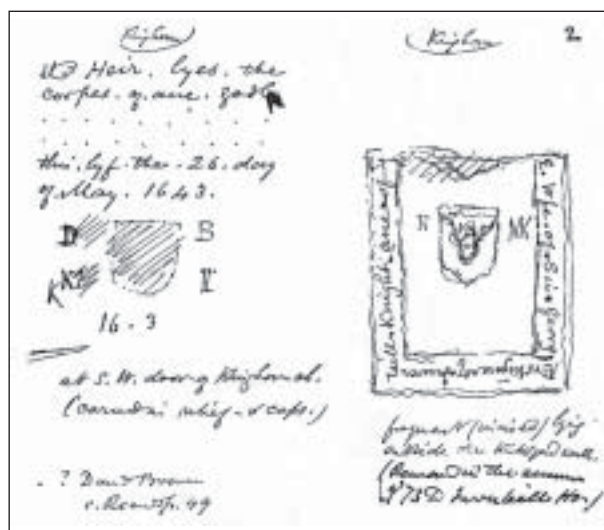


FIGURE 3
Sketch by Andrew Jervise of the Kinghorn gravestone.
(Courtesy, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland)

have a stag's head in the upper right quarter.⁴³ It is likely that this was a memorial stone for Margaret, his second daughter, or one of her family, but its subsequent fate is unknown.

ERSKINE AS ALCHEMIST

It is remarkable that so little is recorded about Erskine's alchemical interests. In such a well-known family with very extensive aristocratic and royal court connections he was perhaps not so outstanding, but he was nevertheless an eminent figure in his time. He has been described as the most important of a number of followers of hermetic philosophy or alchemy in the time of King James VI¹ but apart from his manuscripts it is not known to what extent he was involved in practical alchemy. There is no record of any laboratory activity or of alchemical assistants, and his reputation as an alchemist rests on his manuscripts alone. Some of these are practical documents with instructions on the preparation of chemical compounds, and many have been annotated and show signs of frequent use which is the only indication that he may have carried out experiments. Cromartie states that Erskine had not only studied alchemy but also corresponded with other alchemists abroad.

Scotland had links with many parts of continental Europe. Kirkcaldy, for example, had direct trade with the Baltic States and the Low Countries. If the interest from the continent was from the court of Moritz at Hessen-Kassel, the likely period would be 1606–20 when Moritz's alchemical activities were at their height, and this would suggest that Erskine's alchemical interests were most active at about this time. His manuscript copy of *Arbatel*, Agrippa's text of 1531, is dated 1602 and probably in his own hand. The Rosicrucian *Fama* and *Confessio* were made public in 1614 and 1615 and the Erskine manuscripts contain copies of not only these but of the well-known Rosicrucian work *Speculum Sophicum Rhodostauroticum* by Theophilus Schweighardt (1618).⁵⁷

One wonders in what language Erskine communicated with his contacts from Hess. From the manuscripts he would appear to be familiar with Latin, which could have been the main mode of contact, and with French and Italian, but there are none in German. There is no indication that any of them originated on the continent and many could have been copied in Scotland from other sources. Much of the collection is composed of material by authors who were being widely studied at the time and there seems to have been some interchange of manuscripts between his aristocratic contacts such as Lindsay, who was also involved in alchemy. It would be particularly interesting to know when and how Erskine obtained his copy of the Ripley Scroll but there is no clue to this. It seems likely that it too was acquired in the early 1600s and one can only guess as to its source. It could have come from London because of Erskine's family and professional contacts there.

ERSKINE AND THE ROSICRUCIAN MOVEMENT

The Brethren of the Rosy Cross were a shadowy group of moral and religious reformers who had a mystical interest in alchemy heavily influenced by John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*.⁴⁵ The movement was involved with the struggle between the Protestants of the Palatinate, a Calvinist state, and the counter-reformation and the Hapsburgs. With the marriage of Elizabeth, daughter of James VI, to Frederick of Heidelberg the Elector Palatine in 1613 it was hoped that James VI would support Frederick, but this did not happen. The court of Moritz of Hessen-Kassel (1572–1632) more than any other in central Europe was a focus for occult studies and had 'an entire entourage of alchemists, Paracelsian physicians, Rosicrucians, and natural magicians'.⁴⁶ Moritz was influenced by Basil Valentine's *Triumphwagen Antimonii* and by John Dee who visited the court in 1586 and 1589, and was deeply interested in Rosicrucianism which brought together cabalism, Paracelsianism and spiritual alchemy, combined with Protestant religious and political ambitions.⁴⁷

Thus, contact with the court of Moritz through Dr Politius would inevitably have introduced Erskine to all these influences. But there was probably also a political reason for the contact; the movement had become bound up in the aspirations of Frederick of Heidelberg, Elector Palatinate, the husband of Elizabeth (daughter of James VI).⁴⁵ They were married in 1613 against the background of the Protestant struggle against the counter-reformation and the Hapsburgs, and reigned briefly from 1618 as King and Queen of Bohemia until the start of the Thirty Years War. Erskine, because of his friendship with James VI from their boyhood, is likely to have been considered a potentially powerful advocate for Frederick. In fact, James gave Frederick little or no support. So far no trace of any reference to Erskine or Dr Politius, who came to see him, has been found in the records in Hessen-Kassel (*Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel*) or in records of the court of Moritz. Dr Politius is described by the Earl of Cromartie as 'a polonian or Silesian', which might imply that rather than being from the court of Moritz he could have been connected with that of Rudolf II (1576–1612) whose Bohemian territory included Lower and Upper Silesia, but it might then be expected that Rudolf's name would have been mentioned in this connection. In any case, it is possible that the name Politius was a pseudonym designed for political reasons to cover up the origin of the contact. Erskine lived at a time when involvement in these matters in Europe was intense, and because of the links between Fife and the continent he was well placed to become interested and to be well-informed.

References to a *Dr Pellitius* (Polytius) have now been found in Wolfenbüttel, which could mean that Erskine was in touch with the court of Duke Heinrich Julius of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel or of Rudolf II rather than

that of Moritz in Hessen Kassel. Dr Jodocus Pellitius, from Hamburg, was court physician to Duke Julius in the 1560s (Nummedal, personal communication). How Pellitius, and presumably Julius, got in touch with Erskine and why is conjectural but it is possible, now that Pellitius has been identified, that there is correspondence or other information in archives in Saxony which could shed light on this relationship and its date. Wolfenbüttel, which has the Duke's castle and an outstanding alchemical library, is in Lower Saxony, south of Braunschweig on the River Oker; Hesse is to the south, Lüneburg to the north-west. The Duke (1564–1613) was a scholar, theologian and patron of the arts who brought English actors and writers to Wolfenbüttel, but in 1607 he moved to Prague. Evans⁴⁸ includes 'the astrologer Julius of Brunswick' amongst the German rulers of the day who were either 'religious bigots or a gallery of curious characters'. Julius, although a Protestant, was a loyal and close adviser to Rudolf. He was one of the leading patrons of the Prague literary world and built a fine house near the castle. He was interested in Cabalist literature and had a copy of Pico's *Cabalistarum Dogmata*. Martin Ruland the younger's *Lexicon Alchemiae sive Dictionarium Alchemistarum*, Frankfurt 1612, is dedicated to Julius and dated Prague, 10 April 1611.⁴⁸ Julius was also involved with Giordano Bruno who matriculated at the Brunswick University at Helmstedt (founded by Julius in 1577) on 13 January 1589⁴⁹ and delivered an oration, *Oratio consolatoria*, on Julius' death.

ERSKINE'S DESCENDANTS

Erskine's wife had two daughters who were born at Innerteil: Anne, who married John, third Lord Melville of Monimail, in October 1627; and Margaret, who first married Sir John Mackenzie, first baronet of Tarbat (born 1608), on 25 July 1629 when she had a tocher (dowry) from her father of 20,000 merks (scottish currency until 1707). They had six sons and five daughters. He was made a baronet of Nova Scotia by Charles I on 21 May 1628. He died on the 10 September 1654, and Margaret married again (contract 1 June 1661) to Sir James Foulis of Colinton, Lord of Session 1661, and Lord Justice Clerk 1684. He died in 1688.

THE EARL OF CROMARTIE

Margaret's son George Mackenzie, Viscount Tarbat (1630–1714) (Figure 4) was born at Innerteil in 1630 and was educated at St Andrews and Aberdeen Universities, graduating from the latter in 1646. He was created First Earl of Cromartie by Queen Anne in 1703. He was a man of considerable charm but with the reputation of being a wily intriguer; he was a Jacobite (although a Protestant), and held a number of important offices such as Lord Register Clerk, Secretary of State for Scotland and was a member of the Privy Council.⁴⁸ Towards the end of the seventeenth century Cromartie had a house and grounds in Edinburgh on the site of the Blackfriars Monastery, a part of the central area of the old town



FIGURE 4
The Earl of Cromartie. (Courtesy, National Portrait Gallery)

between the High School and the Town Wall to the south of the Cowgate. The west part of this site was owned by John Thomson W.S. in 1724 and was bought in 1742 by the managers of the Infirmary to add to Thomson's Yard, which they had purchased in 1738.⁴⁹ Apart from his estates in Ross and Cromarty, he acquired Royston House and land a few miles from the centre of Edinburgh in 1683. The house, which is still there, is now known as Caroline Park.⁵⁰ Although the Earl had a good library of which a record exists, none of his books appear to have survived.⁶⁴ He wrote about 20 papers on a variety of political and historical subjects ranging from family history to the second sight, the Isles of Hirta and Rona, meteorology and mosses. Most notably he instituted the Register of Sasines in which all land transactions in Scotland must be copied and other records may be retained. They are in Register House, Edinburgh which also holds the Cromartie family papers. He was distinguished not only in politics but was consulted by Sir Robert Moray about the formation of the Royal Society of London and contributed to its *Transactions*. It is sometimes stated that he was a founder member of the Royal Society but I have not been able to confirm this.

CROMARTIE AND THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF EDINBURGH

The *Charter of Ratification in favour of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* was signed on 16 June 1685 (*Tarbat Cler. Reg.*).⁵² Cromartie was then George Viscount Tarbat, Lord McLeod of Castlehaven, Clerk to His Majesty's

Parliament, Council Register and Rolls &c.⁵³ He was on very friendly terms with founding members of the College⁵¹ including Balfour, Sibbald, Pitcairne and Stevenson, all, like him, with a Fife background. Between 1704 and 1770 the College was located in Fountain Close at the lower end of the High Street, only a short distance to the north of the Cowgate where Cromartie had his town house at the end of the seventeenth century.

THE ERSKINE ALCHEMICAL MANUSCRIPTS

In the records of donations to the library from 1681 is an entry for June 1707 of the receipt from the Earl of six manuscript volumes and a Ripley Scroll which had belonged to his grandfather, Sir George Erskine. The contents of the rich and important collection of tracts and alchemical notes in the Erskine manuscripts are summarised here. A full list can be consulted in the College library. The *Catalogue* is a folio manuscript volume (17.5 x 25 cms) of 71 numbered pages followed by many blank sheets. Cromartie's gift is recorded as follows:

Anno 1707. Catalogus Librorum in Bibliothecae C.R.M. Edinburgensum.

George Earle of Cromartie &c. Fellow of the Royal Colledge of Physicians Presented the following Manuscripts Folio

1. Volume containing 15 tracts the first qr of is intituld Turba Philosophorum.
2. Speculum philosophiae Joannis Dastin &c
3. Traitte du grand oeuvre de la Pierre des philosophes de frere philippe Rouillach &c.
4. A book containing sevrall Miscellaneous treatises.
5. A Compend of Alkymy &c.

A large vellome scrolle Containing the processe of the Philosophers Stone in several figures.

Below this in another hand is what appears to be an unrelated entry of Anno 1708. On the upper part of the opposite page, in the original script again with apparently unrelated entries below, is:

Quarto
(In margin 'Manuscript') Speculum Sophicum Rhodostauroticum &c per Theophilum Sweighard Constantiensem.

The Erskine manuscripts (MSS) as recorded in 1707 in the College library book thus consisted of five bound folio volumes and one quarto, making six in all, together with the Alchemical (Ripley) Scroll. The tracts have been assembled randomly and many of them show evidence of having been folded and having become grubby in that condition. It is not known when they were bound, but judging by the diversity of the bindings it seems to have been at different times, and at least one document appears to postdate Erskine's death. Small,² however, in presenting

Moncrieff's account of the Ripley Scroll which accompanied the MSS, refers to only five manuscript volumes in his 1876 article, so one presumably went missing before then.

The present group of bound MSS volumes consists of four folio volumes (I, III, IV and V) and a quarto one (VI). It is not at all clear how the items listed above in the catalogue of donations relate to the present manuscripts which form the Erskine collection. Volume VI has an item dated (in Roman numerals) 1651, five years after Erskine's death. It appears that the collection has been added to later in at least two respects, and it seems likely that some of the present volumes have been reordered and rebound at some time; so far no information has been adduced to explain how or when this happened. It seems, however, that some of the material may have belonged to Cromartie himself.

Volume I

On the first page is the Earl of Cromartie's written account of the provenance of the manuscripts. *Turba Philosophorum* begins a total of 50 tracts which include Hermes Trismegistus, John Garland, Morienus Romanus, Calid, John Sautrie, Dastin, George Ripley, Roger Bacon, Arnold of Villanova, Trevisanus, Dorn, Blomfield, Kelley and Thomas Norton. In many cases they are listed as in manuscript only and include a number which were later first put into print by Elias Ashmole in 1652.⁵⁴ Inserted in the volume are two loose sheets of handwritten alchemical poetry in Italian inscribed: 'The two copies of verse I found in the manuscript of the *Turba Philosophorum: Ibi in teñi. Ibi, reliqui.* Cromertie.'

Volume II

In the College catalogue of 1888 'Volume 2 wanting' is pencilled in. Its contents were '*Speculum philosophiae Joannis Dastin &c.*'

Volume III

Cromartie's name is in two places, on the second front leaf and on the back flyleaf. The text is in French, and contains practical instructions for various chemical operations. It is very clearly and neatly written, and there are frequent minor corrections, marginal comments in French and inserted sentences in ink. The handwriting is similar to that in Arbatel (Volume V) and may well be Erskine's. It contains: *Traicte Du Grand Oeuvre De La Pierre des Philophes(sic), de frere Philippes Rouillach, Cordelier* (Franciscan friar) *Piedmontois premier philosophe de son temps.*

Volume IV

A number of the manuscripts have been kept folded at some time before binding. At the beginning is inscribed 'Epitome of Architecture' and there is a passing reference to 'frie masons' in an extract from Norton in this volume. It also contains *Fama fraternitatis or Discovery of the*

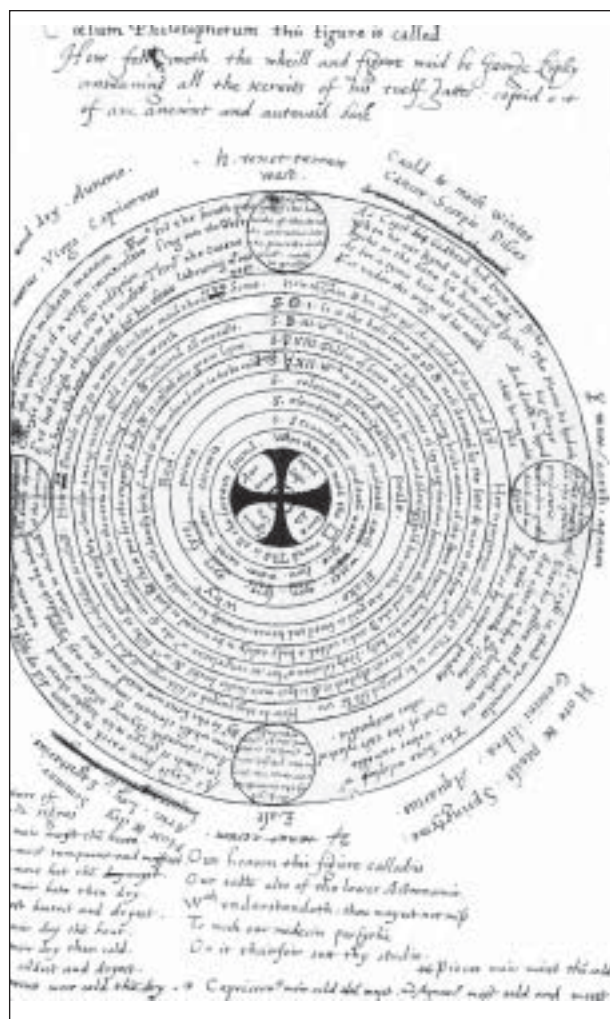


FIGURE 5

Ripley's Wheel. Erskine manuscripts Volume IV. (Courtesy, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh.)

Fraternitie of the most Laudable ordour, of the Rosy Cros in Scots, and the writing is probably Erskine's, followed by *Confessio Fraternitatis: or The Confession of the Laudable fraternitie, of the most honored ordour of the Rosy Cross wrettin to the Learned of Europe.* Other tracts include Pearcy, almost identical to Pearce *The Black Monke upon the Elixir* in Ashmole; Roviliasco, Trevisanus; and in English, Lazarus Erckern's 1598 *Minerall Earths, Metalles, Comprised in five Bookes, the like heretofore never printed, Aurea Cathena* (golden chain) and *Riplaeus Wheele*.

Volume V

Amongst other entries is '*Coelum philosophorum* this figure is called. Heir followeth the wheill and figure maid be George Ripley conteaning all the secreits of his tuelf gattes: copeid out of ane antient and autentik book.' Almost the entire page is occupied by the 'wheel' (Figure 5) which has at its centre a Maltese Cross, surrounded by ten concentric circles containing English text. At the compass points are names of the signs of the zodiac. Tracts in Italian follow, one of which is by Leonhart Thurneisser zum Thurn (1531–1595/6), a goldsmith, alchemist and physician who was a Paracelsian but also a charlatan,

and wrote a number of books, one of which describes diagnosis of diseases by distilling urine.⁵⁵ There are more tracts on antimony, gold and silver and some medical prescriptions. A prominent section is entitled *Arbatel*. *The Magik of the auncient Philosophers, the chieff studie of wisdome*, dated 1602, which appears to have been copied out by Erskine himself. It consists of 49 short aphorisms in English, and is a close translation from the Latin of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), the German cabalistic philosopher who included it in *De Occulta Philosophiae* in 1533.

Volume VI

This is listed on the opposite page of the College catalogue of 1707 by the title of only the first manuscript, a full version of Schweighardt's Rosicrucian *Speculum Sophicum Rhodostauroticum*⁵⁷ (1618) which takes 35 out of a total of 664 pages. The German has been Latinised, and there are crude drawings of the original plates (Figure 6).

The volumes contain a great many alchemical texts copied from a wide range of authors including poems by Ripley,



FIGURE 6

Illustration copied from Schweighardt's *Speculum Sophericum Rhodostauroticum*. Erskine manuscripts Volume VI. (Courtesy, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh)

and a version of *The Hunting of the Green Lion* by the Vicar of Walden. A page entitled *ex Annot. libri de Mercurio. Geo Ripleyae* has written on its reverse 'For my very good lord My Lord Innerteill'.

THE RIPLEY SCROLL

This unusual artefact was first described in 1827² and again more recently in less detail but in the context of most of the 21 other known scrolls.⁵⁶ In brief it is a parchment roll 18 feet long and 3 feet wide which purports to set out the steps necessary for the attainment of the Philosophers' Stone. The colourful iconography and order of emblems is consistent with the majority of such scrolls and it constantly excites interest and wonder by its unusual and striking images combined with alchemical poems, some of which are by George Ripley (early fifteenth century – c. 1490), Canon of Bridlington. There are some differences in style and content between the various scrolls of the same type.

ANOTHER ERSKINE MANUSCRIPT

In March 1995 a manuscript from the Marquis of Bute's collection signed 'George Areskyn 2 August 1633' on the title page was sold at Christie's, London. The manuscript entitled *Lapis philosophicus sine liber veri aureus de perfectissima Lapidis Philosophici ratione, inventione et confectione*, by C.V.M. contains instructions for obtaining the Philosophers' Stone. It quotes Geber, Rasis, Albertus

Magnus, Plato and Norton and includes three verses from George Ripley's preface to the *Twelve Gates of the Compound of Alchemy*.

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