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Roslin Castle and the Battle of Plattsburgh*

BY STANLEY A. RANSOM

What do Scotland's Roslin Castle and the Battle of Plattsburgh have in common? Roslin Castle stands on the north bank of the River North Esk, a few miles southwest of Edinburgh. It was built around 1304, by Sir William St Clair, soon after the Battle of Rosslyn in

the Scottish War of Independence. It was the subject of a love song written around 1740, by Richard Hewitt of Cumberland. The verses spoke about Colin, a lovesick swain who sang of his love for "Nanny." As he sang of his love, his vocal refrains echoed from the walls of Roslin Castle:

"Twas in that season of the year,
When all things gay and sweet appear,
That Colin, with the morning ray,
Arose and sung his rural lay.
Of Nanny's charms the shepherd sung,
The hills and dales with Nanny rung:
And Roslin Castle heard the swain,
And echoed back the sweet refrain.



"A View of Rosslin Castle," 1803, by Julius Caesar Ibbetson. [Public domain]

ROSLIN CASTLE DEAD MARCH



www.abcnotation.com/tunes

Richard Hewitt (17??–1764) was an amanuensis, or secretary, to Dr. Thomas Blacklock (1721–1791), a blind poet and preacher. In appreciation for his literary assistance, Dr. Blacklock paid to educate the talented young man. Hewitt’s “Roslin Castle,” also called “Roslyn Castle,” was printed on numerous broadsides and became very popular. It was also known by the name of “The House of Glamis.” It became famous outside of Scotland.

Its popularity led it to being adopted as a pipe tune by the British Army. Funeral ceremonies for soldiers and civilians were similar in formal arrangements and in music. The military procession was accompanied by a “dead march.” Civilian funerals often used “Funeral Thoughts,” a fife tune by Aaron Williams. Another was “Roslin Castle.” Played slowly, it became one of the two pipe tunes played at funerals and as a dirge for sad occasions.

It was then commonly referred to as the “Roslin Castle Dead March.” According to legend, the tune was played during the Revolutionary War by Scottish bagpipers stationed in New York in honor of the castle at Roslyn. It was the melody most often associated with funerals during the American Revolution. Fife Major Nathaniel Brown, from Durham, Connecticut, wrote out “The Rosling Castle – Dead March” for two fifes in his 1781 manuscript.

Long Island was occupied by the British during the Revolutionary War. They seized most civilian goods, including their horses and cattle, appropriated goods from the homes of patriots, cut much of their timber, and in many ways outraged the local population who could do nothing to stop them. It was, perhaps, in a funereal state of mind that the defeated British troops in 1781 played the “Roslin Castle Dead

March” tune as they marched out of the small Long Island village of Hempstead Harbor. The oppressed residents, however, rejoiced at the sound, and remembering this in 1844, their descendants changed the name of their village from Hempstead Harbor to Roslyn, New York.

During the War of 1812, the melody appears to have continued to be associated with funerals, and it was included in “Massachusetts Collection of Martial Musick,” Durham, Maine, 1818, and in the 1768 “Gillespie Manuscript of Perth,” and in several other tune books.

What of the association of Roslin Castle and the Battle of Plattsburgh? After the battle on September 11, 1814, on Plattsburgh Bay and Commodore Macdonough’s victory over the British fleet, the British and American soldiers and sailors killed in the battle were laid to rest. One of the first was Captain George Downie, commander of the British fleet, killed during the first few minutes of the battle, crushed by a cannon on his ship, *HMS Confidence*. When that cannon was struck in the muzzle by an American cannonball, it thrust backward into Captain Downie standing behind, killing him instantly. His remains, and those of his officers, were carried to Riverside Cemetery off Broad Street, where part of the cemetery had been set aside for this purpose. According to historian Marjorie Lansing Porter, in her book, *Old Plattsburgh*, published by Clinton Press, Plattsburgh, NY, in 1944 (p. 57), “Captain Nicholas Stoner, one of the famous hunters and trappers of earlier days, was in charge of the fife and drum corps that proceeded with muffled drums to the burial of Downie and other officers killed during the battle. The corps consisted of fifteen drummers and fifers, and the tunes played were ‘Roslyn Castle’ and ‘Logan Water.’” Each year since 1914, on the anniversary of the Battle of Plattsburgh, the citizens of Plattsburgh, relatives of the soldiers and sailors, visiting dignitaries, and relations from abroad gather for a solemn memorial service, acknowledging the sacrifices of Captain George Downie and other British and American

officers buried there and renewing the vows of friendship and cooperation between America and the United Kingdom.

In future memorial services, it would be appropriate for the pipers to consider including “Roslin Castle Dead March” as part of the tribute to Captain George Downie and others buried there.

Pipers and others wishing to hear the tune are referred to my 2001 CD, *The Battle of Plattsburgh: Songs and Tunes of the War of 1812*, by Stan Ransom, The Connecticut Peddler, where it is played on the hammered dulcimer. The CD can be purchased from the NYF Gallery, the Corner-Stone Bookshop in Plattsburgh, Amazon.com, or from Stan Ransom at sransom@northnet.org. ▼

Note

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Grave of Captain George Downie, d. 1814. Plattsburgh, NY Cemetery. [Public domain]

Stanley Austin Ransom, Jr., was born in Winsted, Connecticut in 1928, served in the Army of Occupation in Japan and graduated from Yale University in 1951. After receiving a Master's degree in Library Service from Columbia University, he worked five years for the New York Public Library and, in 1956, became Director of the Huntington, Long Island Public Library. In Huntington, he became interested in Jupiter Hammon, a slave-poet, who lived north of Huntington from 1711–1805, and researched his life and poems for five years. His book, *America's First Negro Poet: Jupiter Hammon of Long Island*, was published in 1970, with a second edition in 1983, and received a Certificate of Commendation from the American Association for State and Local History. In 1972, he was elected President of the New York Library Association.



Stan originated Black Poetry Day, celebrated nationally each year on October 17th, the birthdate of Jupiter Hammon, in 1711. The purpose of Black Poetry Day is “to recognize the contribution of Black poets to American life and culture and to honor Jupiter Hammon, first Black in America to publish his own verse.” Plattsburgh State University has invited noted Black poets to read their poetry on campus for the past 34 years on or near October 17th. Stan is a member of their Black Poetry Day Committee.

At a Regent's Meeting in Lake Placid on April 18, 1978, Stan proposed an Olympic and Winter Sports Museum for Lake Placid. It was eagerly adopted by the attendees, and a Board of Trustees was appointed, including Stan. He served for 13 years as a Charter Trustee of the Olympic and Winter Sports Museum, until it was taken over by the Olympic Regional Development Authority.

Long involved in the research, collection, preservation and promotion of the history and folklore of New York State, in 1994, Stan was awarded a Certificate of Commendation for his work as a folklorist. For more than 65 years, he has also been a folk singer, playing guitar, hammered dulcimer, mandolin, and autoharp. His stage name is “The Connecticut Peddler,” and his website is www.stanransom.com. His song, “The Ironville Mine,” is part of the permanent exhibit on mining at the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, New York. He has produced 10 recordings of New York State folk music, including *Down the Saranac* (songs about the history of Plattsburgh, which was called “wickedly funny” by the Saratoga press); *Adirondack Sampler*, which received a Certificate of Commendation from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) in 1994; *North Country Christmas*; *Songs of Lake Champlain*; *Civil War Songs of Upstate New York*; *My Long Island Home*; *I Love Long Island*; and *The Battle of Plattsburgh: Songs of the War of 1812*.

Stan is a professional storyteller and a member of the National Storytelling Institute. For over 50 years, he has been a member of the Sons of the American Revolution and the Plattsburgh Rotary Club. In 1998, his popular “Ice Storm Song” appeared, and sales proceeds of \$2,403 were donated to the local Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund. Later in 1998, the Plattsburgh Chamber of Commerce named him “Irishman of the Year.”

In 2005, he composed his “City of Plattsburgh March,” arranged by Andrew Lower of Plattsburgh State University College, for bands playing at the Battle of Plattsburgh celebration in September. He also presented the score to the Plattsburgh Mayor and Common Council.

From 1992 to 2005, he was the North Country American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) Coordinator and worked in Albany to pass the Elderly Pharmaceutical Insurance Coverage (EPIC) senior prescription bill and other legislation of interest to seniors, receiving the AARP Citation for his work in 2005.

Stan and his wife, Christina, have been co-chairs, since 2000, of the Battle of Plattsburgh “Kid's Games,” teaching 40 children's games played in 1814. In 2017, they were honored to be chosen Parade Marshals for the Battle of Plattsburgh celebration. He and his wife Chris, retired head of the Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital (CVPH) Medical Library, volunteer early mornings at the Skilled Nursing Facility at CVPH Hospital.

On May 22, 2019, Stan was honored to be chosen as one of six “6 Over 70” honorees by the Senior Citizen Council of Clinton County. Photo by Christina Ransom.

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