

## A Portincross Cannon

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A ruined castle stands on Portincross, a headland on the Ayrshire coast just south of Fairlie. In the long grass nearby, coated with rust from cascabel to muzzle and with its barrel filled with tar lies an ancient iron cannon. More accurately it is what was known in Elizabethan times as a demi-cannon. There was little difference in length between it and the cannon but the latter had a larger bore and fired heavier shot. It is nearly eight feet long with a six inch bore and would have fired thirty pound of iron shot. Its exact age is virtually impossible to determine but it would appear to be a type of gun in common use, and carried by large ships, for over a century after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Traditionally it came from "one of the large ships of the Spanish Armada which sank in about ten fathoms of water at no great distance from the shore."

As the cannon is the only external evidence of a possible shipwreck in this vicinity it merits close scrutiny. One thing is certain, it has lain at Portincross since the summer of 1740. In August of that year Sir Archibald Grant, 2nd Baronet of Monymusk and a celebrated land improver, in company with a Captain Rae began diving operations off the shore there. The divers dragged a lead weighted line along the sea floor, diving whenever the rope was disturbed. At ten fathoms and about quarter of a mile from the shore, Captain Rae, submerging in a diving bell, found something. It was a warship! By means of powerful iron tongs several brass cannons and an iron one were raised. The exact number recovered is problematical. One authority gives five brass and the aforementioned iron one; another estimates twenty. According to the latter source one of the partners in the diving venture died and operations ceased, leaving, it is said, about sixty guns unrecovered.

This figure, obviously inaccurate, can be disregarded, but the following remarkable information given in both the nearest 18th century accounts cannot be discounted. These accounts affirm that one of the brass cannons had a Tudor Rose and beneath it the inscription "Richard and John Phillips brethren made this piece, 1584." This could not have been a figment of someone's vivid imagination as these men were Elizabethan unfounders.

The brass cannons, however, were sent to Dublin, presumably for smelting, and the iron one rejected and left to rot at Portincross.

The fact that there was an English cast cannon on board the wreck, does not, of course, invalidate any 'Spanish theory' regarding the Portincross gun. In the first place it is known to have had, just below the touch-hole, a Spanish Crown and Coat of Arms. This was discernible during the first half of the 19th century. Moreover, Philip II was not averse to using the heretics' weapons. Raleigh, for example, reported the delivery in 1587 at Naples, then part of the Hapsburg dominions, of a large consignment of culverins, long range guns, from Bristol merchants. Encouraged by the bait of a Spanish pension and despite Privy Council measures there were several gun runners operating between England and the Channel ports. An English cannon could have reached a Spanish ship through either of these agencies.

In ascertaining the possibility of a Spanish wreck at Portincross the route of the homeward bound Armada is of considerable importance. It is common knowledge that the badly-battered fleet, after losing a few ships in the Channel and off the Dutch coast, sailed round the North of Scotland. Thence, states one of their pilots, the course was one that skirted Ireland ('taking great heed lest you fall upon that island') and eventually brought ships like the "San Martin," the "San Juan" and the "Florenzia," into Spanish waters. Many, however, found that battle damage, inaccurate maps, shortage of food and water, illness, leaks and bad weather forced them on to the inhospitable shores of Western Ireland.

In places like Clare Island, the Blaskets and Dingle Bay, Philip lost almost one-sixth of his fleet. One vessel ran aground off Devon. Two ships, it is generally agreed, were definitely wrecked on the Scottish coast. "El Gran Grifon" was lost on Fair Isle and the "San Juan de Sicilia" became the famous "Tobermory Galleon." The fate of the unfortunate captain of the "Gran Grifon," Juan Gomez de Medina, and his crew, and the treacherous episode at Mull can be found in several documents. There is one vague mention of a wreck 'about Cape Cantyre on the mainland' but on the question of an actual Spanish wreck on the Clyde the Scottish and foreign sources are silent.

The cause of the disaster can only be conjectured. There are no hidden reefs or unseen shoals to trap mariners sailing in unfamiliar waters. A sudden squall surprising a sick crew and a vessel with open gun ports, or an unstoppable leak conquering the men at the pumps, seem the most feasible reasons. Furthermore

there would appear to be a good chance of some members of the crew reaching safety. They were only four hundred yards from the shore and an inhabited castle. Indeed there is a tradition that the captain and sixteen members of the crew were rescued.

If this was the case what happened to them? Again the records are unhelpful. Juan Gomez and his men, after enjoying the hospitality of the people of Anstruther, were sent to Edinburgh and thence, with a few Irish survivors, via France to Spain. It is hard to believe that a large foreign warship could sink off the South West coast of Scotland within sight of land and yet remain outwith the cognizance of either the Privy Council or Bowes, the vigilant English Ambassador. This diligent official of Queen Elizabeth frequently made enquiries as he himself said, 'whether any Spanish shallops had arrived in Scotland.' When he concerned himself with the smallest of foreign shipping it is unlikely that he would miss a plum like a galleon, "great ship," carrack or urca, whatever the Portincross one was.

Unless, that is, the information about the event at Portincross was kept secret. It is conceivable that Archibald Boyd, the owner of the castle, was pro-Spanish and suppressed any news concerning Spanish sailors stranded on his property. He had supported Mary Queen of Scots at Langside and, since her execution, he could possibly have harboured the fond dream of a Spanish success. Yet, even allowing for local sympathy, it would clearly be extremely difficult for a group of foreigners to remain undetected on Scottish soil.

Since there is no contemporary report of the event it might be argued that the traditional Spanish story was a garbled version of some naval calamity which happened in the late 16th or early 17th century. Admittedly ships saw long service four hundred years ago and famous Armada veterans like the "Vanguard" and the "Dreadnought" remained in service during James VI's reign. Thus the previously mentioned 1584 inscription on one of the brass cannons need not restrict any research on the subject to the year of the Armada. Nevertheless during the next fifty years there is a total absence in Scottish records of any reference to the loss at Portincross of a Scottish, English, Dutch or Spanish ship. In fact, the first disaster recorded there was in the spring of 1770 when a negligently handled Glasgow ship ran aground and became a total loss. There are frequent notices of Spanish naval activity, threatened invasions and suspected attacks. There is mention of a bullion ship aground at Montrose. But there is not even a hint of such a spectacular occurrence as the Portincross one must have been. However, before leaving the subject,



there is one rather interesting entry for the year 1642. That summer an English ship was abandoned on the Clyde at Newark (Port Glasgow). The Duke of Argyle was granted permission to remove the cannons on board, said to number four. It will be recalled that one account of the 1740 diving enterprise gave the number of cannons retrieved as five whereas another quoted a very much larger amount. If the smaller is accepted, it is just possible that some lightly armed salvage vessel sent by the Duke met with misfortune off Portincross on its return voyage and lay for nearly a hundred years before deceiving Sir Archibald Grant and his partners.

On the other hand there is no evidence of this happening and a major flaw in this solution is the veritable size of the Portincross cannon. A small, four gunned English ship, even if it was carrying pre-Armada ordnance, would hardly have a Spanish piece of this calibre on board as well. Furthermore, a theory of this kind completely ignores the testimony, given by several authorities, of the wreck being, 'from the size of her guns a capital ship.' For these reasons such an explanation must be rejected.

Any conclusions about Portincross, its cannon and its wreck, must inevitably be partly hypothetical. It has been seen that the gun is either of late 16th or 17th century design and almost certainly Spanish. The remains of the ship that carried it lie somewhere between the point and the Little Cumbrae. Although not necessarily a member of the Armada, as the Spanish navy was frequently in Scottish waters in the years after 1588, it is not unwarrantable to assume that it might be one of those ships assigned a melancholy "fate unknown" by Philip's officials. The "San Nicholas Prodaneli," "La Juliana," the "Castillo Negro," "La Trinidad" and the "San Estiban" were all large ships which never returned and whose final whereabouts remain uncertain. Portincross is probably the last resting place of one of them.

### SOURCES

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