

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING



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Pantagruel, characters drawn from popular folklore and his own inventiveness. But their coarse and ribald nature does not indicate a lack of sophistication. On the contrary, these stories are subtle reinterpretations of the original tales offering a satirical commentary on contemporary life.

The Rabelasian images on the ceiling are not merely chosen for their general effect: those who commissioned such work were not seeking decoration 'bought by the yard': at Prestongrange this is evident from alterations made to the original, presumably intended to make some specific point which can now only be guessed at. One figure, for example, appears on the ceiling with a wooden leg, instead of the sound limb he enjoyed in the original engraving.

It is not unreasonable, given the unique nature of this particular choice, to assume that Mark Ker intended to establish an affinity between himself and Rabelais. Ker, like Rabelais, was both a man of the church and a man of the secular world. He, too, had a wife and children. As an educated man of his time the issues which occupied the Renaissance intellect were part of his mindset: faith in God balanced against the desire to question and discover, the reconciliation of established belief with newer, more independent thought and the life of the mind balanced against the earthly realities of everyday existence.

The sources for the images at Prestongrange are essentially the same as later ceilings such as those at Nunraw and Pinkie. However the structured, orderly mode of expression found most particularly at Pinkie is not that found on the Prestongrange ceiling. The disparate images, framed by ornate architectural fantasies, appear to have no discernible relationship other than that imposed by the patterns which surround them and the images themselves, many of them bizarre representations of human and semi-human figures – some displaying grossly exaggerated phallic attributes – appear, by and large, to have no specific individual meaning. The wealth of fruit and flowers surrounding the central images and the inclusion of several cereal crops in the images themselves are clearly copied from de Vries' *Grottesco* series. However, when this is taken in conjunction with the Rabelasian emphasis on the physical nature of existence, it would seem that the inference drawn when the ceiling was originally uncovered, ie that the work is intended to some degree as a celebration of fertility, of the natural cycles of birth, death and rebirth, may well be valid.³⁷

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It was partly due to this initial interpretation of its content that the discovery of the ceiling in the 1960s was taken as confirmation of occult practices and pagan beliefs associated with the Ker family. These rumours centred on the younger Mark Ker, 2nd Baron of Prestongrange. It was alleged that his wife, Margaret Maxwell, maintained an entourage of witches who harassed visitors to the house and that she brought about the death of her adulterous husband by the use of magic spells.³⁸

It has subsequently become clear that the ceiling is not, in fact, based on occult or pagan imagery but derives from sources which have no such association and that the work is, in fact, an innovative piece of contemporary decoration. However, this does not mean that witchcraft has no relevance to the history of the ceiling, most particularly when one considers that Prestongrange House is situated only a few hundred yards from the alleged site of events which triggered a period of witch mania unparalleled in the previous history of Scotland.

In 1591, John Cunningham, a Prestonpans schoolmaster, was executed for witchcraft. Cunningham, otherwise known as John Fian, together with Geilles Duncan of Tranent and Agnes Sampson of Humbie, confessed under torture to a catalogue of crimes involving the black arts, including a plot against the person of the king by raising a storm at sea in 1589, when King James I and IV was returning to Scotland with his bride. It was alleged that the witches assembled on the Prestonpans shore:

*“...att the Newheavin callit Aitchesounes-heavin, betuix Musselburcht and Prestonpannis.”*³⁹

The sensationalist press of the day, in the form of a pamphlet, cheaply printed and widely distributed, were quick to take advantage of the public's thirst for detail. The earliest known tract on Scottish witchcraft, a pamphlet entitled *Newes from Scotland. Declaring the damnable Life of Doctor Fian a notable Sorcerer, who was burned at Edenbrough in Ianuarie last. 1591*⁴⁰ enjoyed a wide distribution, largely thanks to its sensationalist account of sorcery maliciously directed at the highest in the land.

Witch trials had been on the increase throughout the second half of the 16th century, but it was the arrest and trial of Cunningham, Duncan and Sampson and the King's obsession with witchcraft which triggered a witch hunt lasting into the

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