

William Alexander, 1st Earl of Stirling

William Alexander, 1st Earl of Stirling (c. 1567 in Menstrie, Clackmannanshire – 12 September 1640) was a Scotsman who was an early developer of Scottish colonisation of Port Royal, Nova Scotia and Long Island, New York. He was the son of Alexander of Menstrie and Marion, daughter of an Allan Couttie.

Early life

As a young man William Alexander became tutor to the Earl of Argyll and accompanied him abroad. At a later date he received the place of Gentleman Usher to Prince Charles, son of James VI of Scotland, and continued in favour at court after Prince Charles became Charles I of England in 1625. He built a reputation as a poet and writer of rhymed tragedies, and assisted King James I and VI in preparing the metrical version known as "The Psalms of King David, translated by King James" and published by authority of Charles I. James knighted him in 1609 and appointed him the Master of Requests for Scotland in 1614, effectively his private secretary. In 1615 he was made a member of the Scottish Privy Council.

Nova Scotia

In 1621 King James the first, granted him a royal charter appointing him mayor of a vast territory which was enlarged into a lordship and barony of Nova Scotia (*New Scotland*); the area now known as Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and part of the northern United States. The creation of Baronets of Nova Scotia was used to settle the plantation of the new province.

He was appointed Secretary for Scotland in 1626 and held that office for the rest of his life.

Lord Stirling's efforts at colonisation were less successful, at least in monetary terms. He briefly established a Scottish settlement at Port Royal, Nova Scotia, led by his son William Alexander (the younger). However the effort cost him most of his fortune, and when the region—now Canada's three Maritime Provinces and the state of Maine—was returned to France in 1632, it was lost. He spent his later years with limited means, and died in London on 12 September 1640. However Alexander's settlement provided the basis for British claims to Nova Scotia and his baronets provided the Coat of arms of Nova Scotia and Flag of Nova Scotia which are still in use today.

Long Island

In 1630, King Charles rewarded his service by creating him Viscount of Stirling and in 1633 he became Earl of Stirling.

On 22 April 1636 Charles told that the Plymouth Colony which had laid claim to the Long Island but had not settled it give the island to Alexander. Through his agent James Farret (who personally received Shelter Island and Robins Island) in turn sold most of the eastern island to the New Haven Colony and Connecticut Colony.

Farret arrived in New Amsterdam in 1637 to present his claim of English sovereignty and was arrested and sent to prison in Holland where he escaped. English attempted to settle at Cow Bay at what today is Port Washington, New York in 1640 but were arrested and released after saying they were mistaken about the title. Following Alexander's death in 1640 eastern Long Island was quickly settled by the English while the western portion waited 40 years until the Dutch left.

Author

Stirling also wrote closet dramas: classical tragedies titled *Croesus*, *Darius*, *The Alexandrian*, and *Julius Caesar*. His plays were published in several editions (1604, 1607, 1616, 1637).

Family

According to Memorials of the Earl of Stirling and of the house of Alexander, Charles Rogers, Edinburgh, W. Paterson, 1877, pages 38, 253 and 254, John Alexander, the 4th son of William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, was born about 1612, and died 1641 in Scotland. John was matriculated a student in the University of Glasgow in 1630 (Reg. Col. Glasg.) He was roughly 18 years old at that point.

About 1633/1634, John Alexander married Agnes, the only daughter of Robert Graham of Gartmore, Perthshire. Agnes was married to John when her father died in 1634 and was described in estate documents as "lawful dochter of . . . Robert Graham of Gartmoir, and with consent of John Alexander, lawful son to ane noble and potent erle, William, Erle of Stirling, Lord Alexander, her spouse." Agnes Graham Alexander died some time prior to 23 January 1636, when her husband, John Alexander, was "invested in that portion of the lands of Gartmore which had passed to her at her father's death." There is no evidence that John Alexander married for a second time after the death of Agnes Graham Alexander.

Agnes Graham Alexander had a brother Gilbert Graham who also inherited a portion of Gartmore, on the death of their father Robert Graham. Gilbert died in 1641 without children or siblings to inherit. As a result, his niece "Janet Alexander, only daughter of John Alexander and the deceased Agnes Graham" received her uncle's share in the lands of Gartmore (Sheriff Court Book, Stirling). If John and Agnes Graham Alexander had other children, they were dead by 1641, otherwise they would have inherited from their Uncle Gilbert along with Janet Alexander.

"On 20 April 1635, [John Alexander] was, conjointly with his father, appointed Master of Minerals and Metals in Scotland (Reg. Mag. Sig., vol. iv., p. 60, Paper Register). He was afterwards nominated General of the Mint, an office which yielded his successor £500 per annum, with perquisites (Reg. Mag. Sig, lib. iv., No. 237)." John served as General of the Mint until 1641, shortly before his death in Scotland.

Another Viewpoint

The account of the family of Sir William Alexander 1st Earl of Stirling presented by the above mentioned "Memorials" may be challenged. The statement that Janet Alexander was the only daughter does not mean during this period that she was the only child. In fact in this period an only child would be referred to as the 'only child and heir' of her parents. It is thus likely that Janet had at least one brother. The dating of the birth and marriage of Lord John Alexander is highly speculative. There is also a story that Lord John Alexander did not die in 1641 but that he escaped from his prison by faking his death with the help of Mackenzie and with his son the Honourable John Alexander they fled firstly to Ireland and then to France. They were given permission to return to Novo Scotia and eventually moved to Virginia.^[6] It is from this John that General William Alexander descended not from an uncle John of the 1st Earl. Due to the rights of Novo Scotia the British Government could not afford to acknowledge any descendants of the 1st Earl.

The Irish Earls of Caledon and their cousins the Baronets of Alexander of Belcamp also claimed to descend from the family of the Earl of Stirling.^[8] Their ancestor John Alexander (1667-1747) was not the son of Captain Andrew Alexander (of a different Alexander family descended from John Alexander of Eredy) but his maternal relative (uncle or grandfather). John the grandson of the Honourable John Alexander (grandson of 1st Earl of

Stirling) had returned to Europe from Virginia to participate in the Jacobite cause and eventually settled in Ireland.

Honours

The Canadian Coast Guard has named the CCGS *Sir William Alexander* in his honour

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