

The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne

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The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne. A Highland Story is a gothic novel by Ann Radcliffe first published in London by Thomas Hookham in 1789.

The novel is a set in a powerful landscape which became familiar in her later work, with complex clan feuds and mysterious romantic intrigues played out against a backdrop of ruined medieval castles and rugged Scottish coastlines. Each of the characters can be defined by their passions: The present Earl of Athlin, Osbert, is driven by a passionate desire to avenge his father's murder at the hand of Malcolm, the Baron of Dunbayne. His sister, Mary, is ever swooning and fainting in an attempt to resist her passion for Alleyn, a highlander not of noble birth (and therefore unworthy). Alleyn is likewise driven to heroic deeds of rescue because of his love for Mary. Even the villain, Baron Malcolm, is driven by his desire—first a desire to kill Osbert; it is later supplanted by his desire to possess Mary. Although the passions of its protagonists dominate the plot, the castles of the title are as central to the narrative, establishing an enduring Gothic trope.

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Author	Ann Radcliffe
Country	England
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Plot summary

The novel tells the story of two clans, those belonging to the Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne. It begins by relating that Malcolm, the Baron of Dunbayne, murdered the Earl of Athlin. The Earl's son, Osbert, is driven by a passionate desire to avenge his father's murder. Despite the entreaties of his mother, Matilda, to conquer his passion and abandon his quest of revenge, Osbert launches an attack on Malcolm with the help of Alleyn, a noble and virtuous peasant. Alleyn is in love with Osbert's sister, Mary, a virtuous and delicate lady whom he desires to impress. The attack on Malcolm's castle fails, and both Alleyn and Osbert are taken captive as prisoners of war. Alleyn, however, manages to escape. Malcolm's passion for destroying Osbert is supplanted by a passion to possess the beautiful Mary, and he sends men to kidnap her. Alleyn, on his way back to Athlin, intervenes, and after much fainting on the part of Mary, manages to rescue her. Mary, after recovering from the excessive fainting fits, falls in love with Alleyn, despite their class differences. Upon confiding in her mother however, she is urged to forget her love. Malcolm, angry at Alleyn's escape and the thwarted attempt to kidnap Mary, demands a ransom for the release of Osbert: he will release the Earl only if he is allowed to marry Mary. Both Alleyn and Matilda are distressed by such news. Osbert, meanwhile, has found comfort in the fellow prisoners of the Baroness Louisa, Malcolm's sister-in-law by way of his elder (and now deceased) brother, the former Baron, and her daughter Laura. Laura and Osbert fall in love. After many complications, Osbert is able to escape the restraints of Malcolm, whom he eventually challenges. Malcolm is then killed in the ensuing battle. Before he dies, Malcolm confesses to Louisa that her son, whom she had thought dead, was really alive. Malcolm had hidden him away with a peasant family in order to procure the title for himself. Laura and Osbert prepare to wed, but Mary and Alleyn are both unhappy. It is then miraculously discovered the Alleyn is in fact Philip, Louisa's long-lost son. He is recognized by his mother by a strawberry mark on his skin. This makes Alleyn the rightful Baron of Dunbayne. The novel ends with the double wedding of Laura and Osbert, and Mary and Alleyn.

Main characters

- **The Former Earl of Athlin:** Murdered before the start of the novel by Malcolm, bequeathing his title to his son, Osbert.
- **Matilda:** The Countess of Athlin; mother of Mary and Osbert. Matilda devotes her time to the education of her children, especially Mary. She is overcome with grief when Osbert is captured by Malcolm and is unable to decide whether to acquiesce to Malcolm's ransom request (i.e., Mary) or let her son die. Her character is marked by perfect propriety; she attempts to dissuade Mary against loving Alleyn, as he is of a lower class.
- **Osbert, Earl of Athlin:** Osbert is the son of Matilda and the murdered Earl, and the brother of Mary. He is torn between filial duty to his father (avenging his death), and filial duty to his mother, who entreats him to stay his passions and abandon his desire for revenge.
- **Mary:** The delicate, young sister of Osbert. She is clearly educated after the proper fashion of the high-born sentiments. Her fragility is often stressed throughout the novel: numerous times she succumbs to fainting fits and bouts of tears. Despite the stressed importance of propriety, she falls in love with the low-born Alleyn—but she does not go so far as act upon this passion. She suffers the torments of loving a man to whom she cannot possibly give herself. This torment is only solved with the miraculous discovery of Alleyn's true identity.
- **Alleyn:** A highlander, both “manly” and “virtuous” despite his low birth. He falls in love with the gentle and delicate Mary, and devotes himself to earning her favor. He does so by fighting alongside Osbert, and rescuing both him and Mary from Malcolm's cruel ministrations. While he earns the favor and the love of Mary, there is still the problem of his low-birth. It is discovered, however, that he was indeed Philip, the long-lost son of the former Baron of Dunbayne. Therefore this conflict is solved. He assumes the title of Baron and is able wed with Mary.
- **Malcolm, Baron of Dunbayne:** The novel's villain who murdered the former Earl and who is set upon destroying Osbert and possessing the delicate Mary. Malcolm was the younger brother of the former Baron, who died and left behind a widow, son, and daughter. In order to secure the title for himself, upon the Baron's death, Malcolm claimed that his nephew, Philip (AKA Alleyn) had died, when in actuality he had been tossed aside to be raised by a peasant family. He disposed the widow Baroness of her lands, and holds her and her daughter prisoner. He is eventually defeated and slain by Osbert, leaving Alleyn to resume his rightful role as Baron.
- **Louisa, the Baroness:** The widow of the former Baron of Dunbayne; mother to Laura and Philip (AKA Alleyn). Orientating from Switzerland, she is dispossessed of both her husband's lands as well as her own by Malcolm. She concerns herself with the education of her daughter, much like Matilda.
- **Laura:** The daughter of Louisa and the niece of Malcolm, likewise held captive within the castle walls of Dunbayne. When Osbert is also held captive by Malcolm, he hears Laura playing the lute. He is captivated by the sweet melodious tune and it keeps him from committing suicide. Osbert finds comfort in her beauty and feminine charms and succumbs to love. They eventually marry after the defeat of Malcolm.

External links

- The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne (<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/r/radcliffe/ann/athlin/>) available at eBooks@Adelaide (<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/>)
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