

Documents reveal Mary Queen of Scots paved way for Geneva Convention

AS Britain rediscovers its fascination with Mary Queen of Scots, the world's oldest surgical college has released documents proving that she paved the way for the Geneva Convention 300 years before it came into force.

With the BAFTA-nominated film wowing audiences in cinemas, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (RCSEd) has made public a document showing how Mary Queen of Scots protected and preserved the status of surgeons, making it law that they should not have to bear arms in battle.

The Letter of Exemption states that surgeons should focus on caring for and remedying the wounded instead of fighting. It is unclear whether this refers to injured soldiers on the side of the enemy too, or not.

The Queen's letter is available to be viewed on the website archiveandlibrary.rcsed.ac.uk – a new resource launched by the RCSEd that allows people to delve easily for the first time into the fascinating world of medical history.

The RCSEd full Library and Archive holds institutional records dating from the 1460s and extensive archival material relating to the College membership and to the history of medicine and surgery in Scotland.

The perception of medical staff as non-combatants in warfare is usually ascribed to the first Geneva Convention from 1864. But this document shows that, three centuries earlier, Mary Queen of Scots clearly set down the right of surgeons to be exempt from bearing arms.

Chris Henry, Director of Heritage at RCSEd, said: “This unique artefact is one of the College’s treasured possessions.

“It gives us a fantastic insight into the ethics and civilization of 16th Century Scotland as well as the standing of surgeons in the capital back then.”



Saoirse Ronan and the cast of Mary Queen of Scots were entertained by The First Minister at a reception at Edinburgh Castle on 14 January 2019. Photo ©2019TheEdinburghReporter
The new movie, starring Saoirse Ronan and Margot Robbie, charts the power politics of Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I as young rival Queens.

Signed ‘Mary by the Grace of God, Queen of Scots’, the letter is thought to be from the Queen for the whole population.

It puts a responsibility upon surgeons, writing that they must always be ‘present with our armies ready to do their cure and duty to all sick persons.’

The document is dated May 1567, meaning that Mary Queen of Scots signed the documents during a time of turmoil in her life, just after her son was born and her husband tried to take her throne and murdered her secretary in front of her.

Her husband was then murdered before she was abducted and allegedly raped just months before she signed the letter of exemption.