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Opening Extract from...

Flodden

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BURGHMUIR – AUGUST 1513

For he had charged that his array
Should southward march by break of day
Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*

TWO HUNDRED YEARS after Robert Bruce led his men against King Edward II at Bannockburn another outstanding Scottish king again gathered his nation's host to confront the English.

James IV gave orders for his men to attend on 13 August 1513 'with 40 days provisions'[1] at two assembly points, the Burghmuir (Edinburgh's common moor) to the immediate south of the town, and a forward mustering point at Ellem Kirk in Berwickshire's Duns forest, where he had gathered for his previous foray against Norham Castle in 1497. A good proportion of the men from Lothian, together with those from the north-west, were due to assemble initially at Edinburgh, while those from East Lothian, Fife and Angus would march directly to Ellem,[2] where the whole army was scheduled to meet before moving southwards to the Tweed about twenty miles away. The Edinburgh muster gave James an opportunity to fill the old city with all the panoply of war and show himself in the dual capacity of monarch and military leader, thereby helping him demonstrate the extent of his country's military commitment. Virtually every smith, wheelwright and seamstress would have been enlisted to support the host, the town's bakehouses would have worked continually, while Edinburgh's provost and baillies, after leaving the city's affairs in the hands of their deputies,[3] moved onto the Burghmuir and presented themselves for roll-call.

The muir covered five square miles, with its northernmost

point marked by the Burgh loch lying near the base of the city's walls; its southernmost boundary was the Pow burn. Today the loch that provided Old Edinburgh with drinking water has been drained and transformed into the parkland area of the Meadows, presently surrounded by busy streets, while the burn (now piped and running underground) bounds the city's southernmost districts of West Morningside, Canaan, Blackford, Wester Grange and Mayfield. With such extensive development it is not easy to visualise the Burghmuir of the early sixteenth century, with its unprepossessing air of rough grassland intersected by clumps of ragged and ancient oaks from the one-time forest of Drumselch. King David I had gifted it to the city in 1143, and by the time of Flodden the muir had been used for several purposes: as a haven for outlaws and vagrants who skulked in rough huts or found refuge beneath the trees; as a quarantine area for the city's plague victims; and, in 1384, as the point of assembly for a previous Scottish army reputedly 30,000 strong under the command of the earls of Fife and Douglas.[4] James IV knew the muir well and gave Edinburgh's magistrates the privilege of letting pockets of its land; such grants encouraged the clearing of some of the massive trees, as feu-holders could use the felled timber to extend the frontages of their Edinburgh houses by a maximum of seven feet. This may have helped open out the muir but it came at the cost of reducing the width of Edinburgh's High Street dramatically.

The king had both ridden and hawked on the muir and, in 1507, he established a little chapel dedicated to Saint Roque, the French saint of the plague-stricken, on a site close to the present Astley Ainslie hospital. This chapel, together with the adjacent open ground, became the focus for his muster before Flodden. In his poem *Marmion*, Sir Walter Scott vividly described the likely spectacle of tents 'spread over all the Borough-moor and chequering all the heath between the streamlet (the Pow burn) and the town ... oft giving way where still there stood some relics of the

old oak wood.'[5] In the centre of the assembled tents Scott writes:

> The royal banner floated wide,
> The staff a pine tree strong and straight,
> pitched deeply in a massive stone.

The detail may not be authentic – the massive numbers described by Scott were unlikely to have much exceeded 40,000 men (still a large army) and the hole in the present bore stone now cemented into the boundary wall of Morningside parish church, whether the original or not, would not have held any large trunk. Yet Scott's scene, as ever, is compelling:

> The horses' tramp, and tingling clank
> Where chiefs reviewed their vassal rank
> And charger's shrilling neigh;
> And see the shifting lines advance,
> While frequent flash'd from shield and lance,
> The sun's reflected ray.

The bustle and urgency of the assembly was also captured by a reference in the contemporary treasurers' accounts to last-minute embroidery. This was to complete the fringes of the royal standard before the flag could be handed to a horseman who galloped off after sunset to give it to the king.[6] As unit after unit joined the muster, even the more cautious leaders and men must have felt increasingly confident of success, especially as they knew they were yet to meet up with further detachments at Ellem Kirk.

Even more spectacular than the stream of horsemen and foot soldiers hurrying along the town's narrow streets was the rumbling progress of the king's great guns from the castle. These started out on 17 August, two days before the main body left the Burghmuir. The heaviest guns went first but did not get far on the first day; the five great curtals were dragged from the castle to St Mary's Wynd outside the Netherbow Port, where twelve sentries watched over them during the

night. On Thursday they resumed their journey; each with its team of thirty-two oxen, their heads swinging and flanks glistening in the rain, probably triple yoked into eight ranks, with more animals roped behind to prevent the carts and their heavy burdens from running away when negotiating the sloping wynds. These were followed two days later by the remaining fifteen guns, accompanied by their own teams of oxen and handlers. In all 400 oxen were needed to pull the guns. Others dragged a crane, pack-horses followed, loaded with shot, both stone and metal, and lastly, after due interval, came a line of carts carrying the vital powder. On Saturday morning the leading infantry units commenced their journey and that evening the king left his palace at Holyrood for the last time to join them.

In spite of widespread support, not everyone shared the king's enthusiasm for the campaign into England. James' veteran adviser, Bishop Elphinstone, spoke openly against it in council and was supported by Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus. Many other prominent nobles were only too aware of the long and arduous process by which they had reached their present eminence, including both political marriages and shrewd switches of allegiance, and of how much they stood to lose if James were defeated. However, while all were not necessarily over-enthusiastic they duly gave James their support and, apart from Elphinstone and Angus, only the queen made public expression of her concerns about the dangers of such a campaign, especially as the royal succession rested at this time on the uncertain life of their one infant boy, also called James.[7]

In addition to these individual doubts there were reports of two public auguries against the king going to war. The sixteenth-century chronicler, Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie, described how, shortly before the army left the Burghmuir at midnight while some of the artillery was being trundled down from the castle, Robert Lawson, a prominent member of the Lords in Council, heard a raised voice close to the Mercat cross.

This summoned all men, earls, lords, barons, gentlemen and honest burgesses to appear before Plotcok or Pluto (a common name for the devil) within forty days. Lawson appealed against such a mortal threat by calling upon the mercy of God and Jesus Christ, and it would seem his pleas were heard, for of those who were assembling there only Lawson escaped death at Flodden. Pitscottie subsequently qualified his account by acknowledging in his *Historie* that in spite of the information he was given this might just possibly have been a jape mounted by drunks for their amusement.

Pitscottie referred to a second portent, also reported by the renowned sixteenth-century Scottish historian, George Buchanan, who described it as 'a device of the queen and the party averse to the war, to operate on the King's superstition and divert him from his rash projects.'[8] Pitscottie tells that while the king was in Linlithgow praying in church for the success of his expedition, a yellow-haired, balding man, fifty-two years of age, wearing a blue gown and carrying 'ane great pyk staff' in his hand, asked to see the king, and when he had been admitted told him not to lead his army to war and not to use female counsel 'nor lat them twitch they body nor thow thairs'. With this he apparently disappeared, although David Lindsay, later Lyon Herald and Marshal of the royal household, attempted to lay a hand on him.[9] Professor Mackie has suggested that as the king's religious susceptibilities were well-known the figure was most likely to have been an actor dressed to resemble St James.[10] Pitscottie's reference to the further piece of alleged advice, namely that the king should not 'mell' with women, was not taken up by later commentators, although if the actor was, in fact, following the queen's instructions, her indignation over James' mistresses could well have prompted such advice.

The showpiece assembly held by James at the Burghmuir and his forward muster at Ellem Kirk help to confirm other indications that he loved the opportunities for spectacle that attended the reality of war. The very fact that his wife or

another of his councillors felt it possible that a suitably devised portent might deter him from his warlike purpose also points to James being a very different war leader from Robert Bruce, who may have been scrupulous in dedicating himself and his men to his maker but had no doubts who shouldered the prime responsibility for their success in battle.

This said, circumstances were more straightforward for Bruce prior to Bannockburn than for James IV before Flodden. As his country's defender Bruce's task was clear, he faced an attack from a massive English army moving into Scotland, if one led by an inept king supported by a divided nobility. In 1513 James himself took the initiative by allying his country to France, and he consciously upped the stakes by assembling his army on France's behalf against a reawakened England under its young king. However warlike James' dreams and colourful his army, his country's interests would not be served by a major battle of attrition, nor, unthinkably, by a serious reverse against the English northern levies.

PART ONE

Rival Kingdoms

CHAPTER ONE

THE DEFENDERS

> And much he marvelled one small land,
> Could marshal further such various band
> Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*

PROBLEMS SIMILAR TO those facing James IV as he prepared to cross the border had been experienced by other Scottish monarchs during the previous four centuries. For in spite of the Romans' failure to subdue the fierce tribesmen of the far north and their acceptance of that fact by building the great barrier wall separating England from what is virtually modern Scotland, it was not, of course, inevitable that Britain should remain so divided. That James IV was still king of an independent Scotland owed as much to generations of its soldiers as to the statecraft of past kings and their advisers. Those men who, whatever the dangers or however serious the defeats, bore arms for their kings and chiefs; men who were not always well led and had to meet an enemy who, whatever the calibre of its own leaders, usually possessed both superior resources and better weaponry.

There were calls to arms from the late eleventh century onwards for, although much of Europe was still fragmented, Scotland, under its Canmore line of kings, and England, under its Saxon and then Norman monarchs, were already distinct and different countries despite having a border that remained fluid and created much friction between them. Scotland's chances of survival against the richer and far more powerful state to its south were not enhanced by what Scottish historian Ranald Nicholson saw as one of its chief characteristics, namely that 'Diversity was more obvious than uniformity, local self-sufficiency more obvious than national inter-dependence.

The concept of one race, one law, one tongue, did not apply in medieval Scotland'.[1] Equally relevant, the writ of Scottish monarchs, including their ability to call out their national host, was traditionally much less pervasive than that exercised by kings in feudal England.[2]

Despite Scotland's greater diversity and looser system of governance, through more than four hundred years, until the union of the two crowns in 1603, Scottish soldiers duelled with their southern adversaries. Sometimes these were mere skirmishes hardly warranting the name of a battle, but at other times they were massive and highly significant engagements, such as Bannockburn or the cataclysmic encounter at Flodden. The reason for such clashes and the nature of their fighting understandably owed much to the prevailing political climate. In this regard three distinct stages can be identified in the ongoing rivalry between the two countries.

The first stretched from the eleventh century until the commencement of the Wars of Independence in the late thirteenth century. This was a time when the English were generally willing to live and let live and the military activity on both sides was relatively unsophisticated. The second was marked by the Wars of Independence from 1286 to 1357 where England was determined to bring about unity by force and Scotland fought for its very existence, with significant strategic and tactical developments taking place on both sides. The third stage ran from the end of the Wars of Independence until the union of the two crowns in 1603.

During the first stage which saw periodic clashes in both countries between the Crowns and their nobility, like that in Scotland following the accession of Alexander I, their external forays tended to be relatively unstructured, with those taking part quite accustomed to changing their allegiance from one side to the other. Frequent marriages took place between the respective royal dynasties, although from time to time England raised its claims of feudal superiority over Scotland

and Scotland showed itself reluctant to give up its claims to the English northern counties. However, like the Romans before them, the English did not give the conquest of the turbulent north a high priority. It did not seem a particularly valuable prize, for the Normans were consolidating their domestic power and had other fish to fry.

When fighting did break out it was more often than not due to Scottish aggression. Such clashes were usually provoked by courtly factions or border disputes and did not amount to serious war. Scottish claims for much of Cumberland and Northumberland were countered by the English belief that the existing border should run on the more northerly Tweed/Cheviot line. Inevitably all military actions in support of Scottish claims meant crossing the English border, and long before James IV Scottish kings came to appreciate the hazards of moving onto English soil. For example, in 1093 when Malcolm III headed an army into England, he was trapped near Alnwick and killed, together with his eldest son.

Fortunately Malcolm had other sons and the reigning English king, William Rufus, was content with sponsoring his favoured candidates from among them for the Scottish throne. Such favour had its costs: the princes came to acknowledge him as their superior, but whether purely for their lands in England or for their possessions further north is not clear. On Rufus' death and the accession of his brother Henry to the English throne, the two crowns edged closer together through the marriage of Henry to Malcolm's III's daughter Edith (whom Henry called Maud). This affiliation was further demonstrated in 1114 after another of Malcolm's sons, Alexander, spent many of his early years at the English court and married Sybilla, daughter of Henry I, before becoming Alexander I of Scotland. After his accession he even accepted joint command of a force campaigning in Wales to establish the English king's overlordship of that country.[3]

The close relationship between the two countries continued

when Alexander was succeeded by Malcolm's youngest surviving son, David, who was to become one of Scotland's most important early kings. David not only spent much of his boyhood in England, but he gained important holdings there, including the English Honour[4] of Huntingdon (through his marriage to Matilda, widow of Simon de Seulis), and later became Earl of Northampton. As brother-in-law to the English king, he introduced Anglo-Norman families into Scotland, including the Morevilles, Soulis', Lindsays, Somervilles and Bruces, although he did not foresee the problems that would ensue from offering them vast tracts of land in a country where their chances of gaining high influence appeared more favourable than in England.

As a rapid dividend such armoured knights and their followers helped to bolster his crown against its Scottish challengers, and after 1130 also helped to subdue a rebellion in Moray, as well as joining his invasion of Northumberland in furtherance of his claims there. Despite their help, however, David, like so many other Scottish kings, over-stretched himself whilst on English soil. In 1138 near Northallerton, at the so-called Battle of the Standard, the English fought round a mast bearing a consecrated host accompanied by the holy banners of St Peter of York, St John of Beverley and St Wilfred of Ripon, and David's impulsive, lightly armed Galwegians broke against a force of dismounted mailed knights interspersed with archers. This tactical formation was designed to protect the mast, but in future years various versions of it would lead to notable English battlefield successes. In spite of his defeat, David believed he still had a good chance of receiving most of Northumberland when his friend, Henry of Anjou, became king of England, but the new English king not only reneged on his earlier promise but forced David's successor Malcolm IV of Scotland to give up any such claims.

In 1173, once again in the hope of gaining land from the English northern counties, David's grandson, William the Lyon, led an army in support of a rebellion mounted by

Henry II's son against his father. William's campaign, like others during this period, was lacking in strategic planning and battlefield control. Intent upon devastation and plunder, William left part of his army in the west and took the remainder, including Norman knights with estates in Scotland and a band of Flemish mercenaries, to besiege the English border town of Alnwick. Under cover of mist an English force succeeded in capturing him and in punishment Henry II made William his vassal 'for both Scotland and all his other lands'; the subsequent treaty of Falaise (1174) declaring that English lordship extended over Scotland and not just William's English estates. By the treaty William also had to surrender his five strongest castles and to make both his bishops and lay barons subject to the English king. However, although William's rashness encouraged the English crown to bring Scotland more closely under its control, it also gave rise to a mounting sense of national identity within Scotland itself against such alien dominance. Henry attempted to speed the process of assimilation by offering his own granddaughter to William in marriage and, when this was rejected by the Pope on grounds of consanguinity, substituted Ermengarde, the daughter of one of his senior barons and great-granddaughter of Henry I. As her dowry he even returned Edinburgh to William.

It is possible that, under Henry I, England and Scotland might have merged, even before England succeeded in subduing Wales, but Henry's policy was not followed by his successor, Richard I. Arguably England's greatest warrior king, he could, in all probability, have conquered Scotland long before Edward I managed it. But Richard preferred to do his fighting on crusade in the Holy Land using England as his milch-cow to provide the money to do so. Willing as he was to put England's interests for sale, it is not surprising he sold the pass in Scotland, too, although the price he set for the Scottish king's release was not low, particularly for a poor country, with the ransom being fixed at 10,000 marks (£6600).