



Siol nan Gaidheal

The Bloodiest Battle

Some will say that life ultimately is a lesson in that which endures; that the brief time allotted to us invites us to contemplate that which transcends it; that the issues which assume great importance to us when we are of a tender age recede into insignificance as we mature until finally we are relieved of the greatest illusion and at last come into full knowledge of our mortality. Certainly it is true that an animal that has no concept of its own mortality has no concept of history. However such verities must not manifest themselves as fatalism, or a sense that all effort is futile, that our voice will be lost in the babble of ages. The undying fame of men who have exerted themselves in the service of that which is greater than themselves, that which endures, echoes down through the centuries from the remotest times. The renown of those who participate in the service of that which endures lives forever. The tide of blood spent in battle, even as it ebbs in the veins of heroes, is resurgent in the history that delivers what they defended to us, now.

The bloodiest battle fought on Scottish soil occurred very nearly 700 years ago, on 24th of February 1303. A hastily mustered army of 8,000 Scots faced an English army 30,000 strong at Roslin, at a site where farmers have been ploughing up cartloads of bones even until the 19th century. The origins of the conflict were rooted in many different matters. The English incursion was a probe in anticipation of a later assault that would be made in response to the lapse of a truce. However as is often the case with tales of arms, the involvement of a woman most readily prompts the listener's attention.

Edward of England had used the invitation to adjudicate over the disputed Scottish succession in 1291 to assert his feudal superiority over Scotland. He sought to legitimise his later invasions of Scotland as being in defence of this claim, an irony given that his grandson Edward III would precipitate the Hundred Years War with France in order to resist precisely this sort of claim made by the King of France over England. Thus was the Unicorn manacled. Edward appointed Sir John Segrave governor of his "province" of Scotland and commander of Edinburgh castle. In this capacity Segrave came into the acquaintance of the beautiful Lady Margaret Ramsey, sister of Sir Edward Ramsey of Dalhousie. And despite his frequent visits to Dalhousie to press his suit, she smiled not on him but upon Sir Henry St. Clair of Rosslyn.

The young Henry St. Clair was elevated to knighthood by Sir Symon Fraser of Neidpath in 1297. William Wallace was present at the ceremony and Lady Margaret was appointed Queen of the Day. The young knight, St. Clair, and the queen of the day became inextricably besotted with each other. During the proceedings news arrived of an English army marching on Stirling, led by de Warenne and including the hated Cressingham amongst its number. Wallace called a war council and the Scots met the English on September 11th. The conduct of Wallace on that day displayed his ability to exploit terrain decisively which would be a factor nearly 6 years later at Roslin, when among the issues of the contest would be the favour of the young Lady Margaret Ramsey.

Late in 1302 Segrave was astonished to receive the intelligence at his base in Carlisle that Lady Margaret Ramsey had consented to marry Sir Henry St. Clair. He flew into a rage and had a letter dispatched to Edward asking for permission to invade Scotland. Edward saw the benefit to him of such an incursion in advance of his planned invasion later that year and allowed him to invade with a force of 30,000 men. Segrave crossed the border at night and successfully avoided detection until reaching Melrose in the middle of February 1303, the Scots' warning beacons remaining unlit. He then divided his force into three units. The objective of the first unit, led by Sir Robert Neville, was to take Borthwick castle, which was in the hands of Sir Gilbert Hay, St. Clair's friend and ally. The second unit of 10,000 men, which was commanded by Sir Ralph Confrey, was to proceed to Dalhousie and secure Lady Margaret's residence. Segrave himself, assisted by the English paymaster Ralph de Manton, assumed command of the division which was to advance upon the seat of his rival, Rosslyn.

As the English forces advanced upon their objectives, word reached the Cistercian Prior Abernethy of Mount Lothian at the western gate of Balantradoch, the Templar headquarters in Scotland, near Rosslyn. Abernethy had been a Templar before laying aside the sword for a life of contemplation. He now put down his rosary to take up the sword again in defence of Scotland, and sent riders to rouse the Scots to the peril facing them. Sir John Comyn was contacted near Glasgow, Sir William Wallace near Paisley, Sir Symon Fraser at Neidpath, and Somerfield of Carnwarth, Simon of the Lee, Flemming of Cumbernauld and the Knights of the Hospital at Torphichen were all contacted, along with Sir Henry St. Clair. The Scots mustered hastily at Biggar, managing to assemble a force of 8,000 to repulse the invasion, by the night of the 23rd of February. A collegiate command developed. Wallace was offered supreme command but refused as he felt his position had been compromised by his failure at the Battle of Falkirk, and recommended Sir Symon Fraser, whose appointment was duly confirmed by all present. Nevertheless, Abernethy's knowledge of the local terrain and Wallace's ability to exploit it were not ignored, nor was the rank of Sir John Comyn, Guardian of the Realm, who nominally assumed overall command. They moved to Carlops, 10 miles north of Roslin, where the Prior conducted Mass and his monks fed the troops.

During the night the Prior guided the army closer to the enemy. A detachment 3,000 strong under Comyn's command hid themselves in the wood to the west of the English camp while Fraser led the remaining 5,000 around them to close in a tight crescent formation from the east. Under cover of darkness they retained the element of surprise and fell upon the English while they slept. Those who were not killed as they slept were driven into the forest, where they met Comyn's force. Segrave threw himself upon Wallace's mercy to prevent his division's annihilation. The sun rose on the 24th to witness the reek and gore of battle strewn across Roslin Glen. The Scots had won this first engagement almost without cost to themselves, their few wounded being tended in the ground of Roslin castle by the women and servants of the household, who also did their best to furnish a hasty meal to the rest. On receiving news of the calamity that had befallen Segrave, de Confrey immediately abandoned his siege of Dalhousie to advance upon the Scots, who would now have to face the wrath of an English army stung but not subdued, without the advantage of surprise. Consulting the Prior's knowledge of the terrain, Wallace advised that the Scots deploy along a ridge with a precipice at its north end in anticipation of the English advance. When the English closed, their uphill charge was broken by volleys of Scottish arrows so

that they wheeled northwards unaware of the precipice. The Scots then closed on their southern flank and drove them towards it. The carnage that ensued at the bottom of the precipice was terrible. At this point news of the approach of the third division of English reached the Scots who gave no quarter, unable to accommodate prisoners while pressed by yet another numerically superior force. De Confrey died embroiled in the tangled mess at the foot of the precipice and those who survived who could not be ransomed were shown no mercy.

The day was wearing on now, and the Scots were weary. They regrouped further to the north but were exhausted and beginning to doubt whether they could inflict a third defeat on the English that day. They had marched through the night before fighting all day, and were on the point of collapse. The Prior stepped forward to rally them. He spoke of the atrocities that Edward had committed, of the massacre of Berwick 7 years prior, when Edward's army had killed the entire population of the wealthy trading port, including children, old women, and animals, to satisfy the English merchants who were funding his campaign and whose trade revenues Berwick had far exceeded. He spoke of the history of the Scots nation from time immemorial, taking pride in its antiquity. He spoke of the desecration of Scone Abbey by the English. Finally he urged the Scots to look up at the nearby Pentland hills. The Scottish national banner, a saltire argent on a field azure, had been raised at the highest point of the Pentland hills. The most ancient national flag in the world, and now the most widely flown flag in the world, through its inclusion in other flags; the Butcher's apron, consented to and acclaimed only by traitors, in which the cross of St. George is brutally superimposed over it, and all flags that include it; the Stars and Stripes, the blue of which was chosen to commemorate the Saltire and "the courage of the Covenanters" who flew it, and all flags which include or are inspired by it. The Saltire had been born during another earlier struggle to resist the English. In 834 English cupidity and arrogance led them to invade Scotland. They were turned back at Athelstanford by the Picts, led by King Angus, and the Scots, led by King Eochaidh, after Angus and the army saw a St. Andrew's cross formed from clouds against the blue background of the sky - an ancient symbol of power, and also the emblem of St. Andrew, whose bones lay in Fife. The proof of this omen was demonstrated by victory against the English.

Now this sign was once more illuminated by the sun setting behind it to the west. Prior Abernethy had dispatched monks to erect a massive Saltire made of canvas and wood after the first engagement with the English that morning. Now Prior Abernethy bade the Scots to turn and

behold the Saltire, saying it was a sign from the Lord of Hosts that they were fighting under the banner of heaven. The army knelt in prayer, and were given benediction and absolution from their sins by the Prior. They then rose, inspired with fresh zeal, and prepared to meet the final onslaught of the English.

Sir Robert Neville's force proceeded from Borthwick without knowing of the destruction of de Confrey's division, or the manner of its annihilation. They followed the cart road through Roslin Glen. The Scots again waited until the English were between themselves on the higher ground of Mountmarle and the precipices in the glen, and launched volleys of arrows upon them before charging. The fighting was desperate with the English once more pressed hard against a precipice which claimed many, and finally the carnage was so great that Sir Symon Fraser called on his troops to give quarter.

It is estimated that the annihilation of the English army was nearly total, only about 10% of their number returning to England after having been disarmed and made to swear they would never take up arms against Scotland again. Some of the mass graves the Scots buried the English dead in have yielded up a steady crop of bones to the plough over the centuries in the area known as shinbanes. The English defeat can in part be attributed to the incompetence of the English commander, Sir John Segrave, who was subsequently ransomed. He divided his numerically superior force whilst knowing little about the terrain or the disposition of his enemy. Nevertheless the completeness of the Scottish victory could only have been achieved through the tactical genius of the collegiate command and the high morale, tenacity and courage of a people's army inspired by a just cause displayed at Roslin. However, the English threat remained in their ability to field further armies. In response to this victory the Scottish magnates engaged in diplomatic efforts in Paris wrote to Comyn to encourage the Scots, on May 25th, 1303, saying "Be of good heart....If the English king harden his heart, like Pharoah, and refuse a truce, then, by the mercy of Jesus Christ, defend yourselves manfully and stay united, so that by your manful defence and with God's help you will prevail, or at least receive stronger support from us. For God's sake do not despair. If ever you have done brave deeds, do braver ones now. The swiftest runner who fails before the winning-post has run in vain. And it would gladden your hearts if you could know how much your honour has increased in every part of the world as the result of your recent battle with the English..."

The broader political context of the Scottish victory also rendered it indecisive. The previous year the Flemish, in their own struggle with the French crown, had all but annihilated the French feudal host at the battle of Courtrai. This battle, along with Bannockburn and the exertions of the Swiss against the Hapsburgs, signalled the beginning of the centuries-long rise of close infantry formations and the obsolescence of heavy cavalry, and helped initiate the attendant shift in the balance of power in society from those who constituted the latter to those who made up the former, that is, from feudal overlords ruling by hereditary right to the people, ruling by the assertion of popular sovereignty. In the short term however Courtrai forced Phillip IV "le bel" of France to come to terms with Edward Longshanks. Both monarchs adjourned their quarrel to pursue their persecutions of the Flemish and the Scots respectively. A truce was signed between England and France which excluded the Scots and freed resources for Edward's campaign in Scotland of the summer of 1303. Stirling castle was held by the Scots, but was circumvented using pontoons built in St. Albans. Edward set the seal on his campaign by returning to besiege Stirling castle. When it fell, he took the garrison out in secret, then destroyed the castle with his siege engines while his army thought they were still inside to satisfy their bloodlust, then sent the garrison to rot in English dungeons; this in stark contrast to the chivalrous treatment the former English garrison had met at the hands of the Scots when they took the castle in 1298/99, who were set free on condition that they never take up arms against Scotland again. Sir John Comyn submitted to Edward. He would die on hallowed ground during a quarrel with Robert the Bruce. Edward, hearing of Comyn's death whilst banqueting, would make his "oath of the swan", when he swore upon his dinner that he would avenge Comyn's death. Dying at Burgh-on-Sands before he could head his army personally into Scotland one last time, he made provision for his flesh to be boiled away from his bones so that they could be borne at the head of his army as it invaded Scotland once more. Comyn's son would fall at Bannockburn fighting for the English. Sir William Wallace was betrayed in 1305. Sir Symon Fraser was captured in 1306, taken to London, drawn and hung until he was dead, then was beheaded, his headless corpse then was hung again and his head set on a spike on London Bridge next to Wallace's. The chiefs of the Frasers of Lovat are called Macshimidh in memory of Symon the Patriot to this day. Phillip IV installed a puppet pope hostile to the Scottish cause, which had benefitted from the support of his predecessor. Indeed, this Pope excommunicated the entire country, making it a safe haven for others persecuted by the church, such as the Templars. Scotland would have to wait for Robert the Bruce to rekindle the cause, and stoke it to the

blaze that shines across the centuries as a beacon to guide us all today, and which we celebrate every 24th of June on the feast day of St. John the Baptist, before she would be free once more.

The lesson of Roslin is a lesson in that which endures. Detractors and revisionists will say that they fought only for the claims of an elite bent on aggrandising themselves, that the beneficiaries of our great national struggles were the lords who acquired forfeited lands. It is true that the factionalism with which the Scottish efforts were riven delivered estates on both sides of the border into the hands of those who declared themselves for the victors, and that the shifting patterns of ownership followed shifting patterns of allegiance. It is true that the constancy of even the grandest among the combatants was found wanting, and that one reason the history of this battle is not more widely known is its association with Sir John Comyn. Nevertheless the fortunes of great men are fleeting things when compared to the fate of nations, and the status conferred upon them for a short time is ultimately only to enable them to serve more fully that which is greater than themselves. The nation grants us access to that which no man can possess. The glory shines not because of the temporary enhancement of the fortunes of man - it is given in the name of something far greater than that. The victory at Roslin remains glorious despite the circumstances that limited its effect, because of what they fought for. They fought for that which endures, that which we will not yield while one hundred of us remain alive. *Alba gu brath !*

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