Black Agnes and the Defense of Dunbar Castle

By Ed Moore

The period after the death of King Robert the Bruce was turmoil for Scotland and England. Battle after battle followed giving this era the name, The Second Scottish War for Independence.

At the time of Bruce's death, his son and heir, David, was only five years old, so once again a regent had to be found. Before dying, Bruce had obtained oil blessed by the Pope and, at the same time, received permission for it to be used to anoint his son at his coronation. The Bishop of St. Andrews officiated at the coronation, which took place at Scone in 1329. It was the first time that a Scottish king had been anointed during the crowning ceremony. The Bishop sprinkled the oil on ten areas of the young king's body: his head, breast, shoulders, armpits, elbows, and the palms of his hands. Thus, David II was then considered 'the Lord's anointed'.

Realizing the vulnerability of the Scottish throne, Edward III of England again tried to conquer Scotland. He had a claimant he wished to reign there: Edward Balliol, son of John. The Scots had forgotten the lessons of warfare they had been taught by Bruce and, when they met the English in battle at Dupplin Moor, they were defeated. Edward Balliol had himself crowned, and Scotland now had two kings.

The Scots threw out Balliol, but he returned the next summer and the young King David of Scotland was sent into safekeeping in France. Scotland was shared between Edward III of England and Edward Balliol, but David's cause was kept alive by John Randolph, Robert Steward and later, Sir Andrew Moray.

The ninth earl of Dunbar and March, Patrick, was English in his sympathies. However, he had changed sides before and in the year of 1337 was with the friends of King David Bruce in the Highlands. The castle of Dunbar was left in charge of his wife, Agnes. She was the daughter of Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, and sister of John Randolph. She was also a grandniece of King Robert Bruce and called "Black Agnes" from her dark complexion.

The coastal fortress of Dunbar (whose name in Gaelic means "the fort on the height") was considered key to the control of the surrounding district. It was here that the English decided to concentrate their attack, as the castle's capture would ease pressure on East Lothian.

On January 13, 1338, William de Montague, the Earl of Salisbury, commenced the most famous siege in the history of Dunbar castle. It would last for 22 weeks. At any one time 50 miners and 50 carpenters were employed. Siege engines were brought from Berwick and the Tower of London, and two Genoese ships armed with crossbowmen blockaded from the sea. Agnes led the castle's defenses. She apparently showed "manly feelings," ridiculing the invaders wittily with gestures and words.

Agnes's brother, John Randolph, the last male of his name and the third Earl of Moray had been captured on the Scottish border. He was brought before the castle walls. It was threatened that he would be drawn between the tails of two horses and then beheaded if the castle did not surrender. Black Agnes replied, "If ye do that, then I shall

be heir to the earldom of Moray." In the face of that, the English were forced to take him back to captivity in Nottingham.

The English placed their catapults in position and hurled massive stones against the walls. Agnes stood on the battlements, and when a great stone struck the stones just below her, she scornfully ordered one of her handmaidens to wipe off the marks of the impact with her clean handkerchief, gaily observing that it was scarcely gentlemanly on the part of Salisbury to throw dust in a lady's eyes.

The earl, with infinite pains, advanced to the foot of the walls with an immense shed covering battering rams, called a sow. The lady tauntingly cried out, "Beware, Montagow, for farrow shall thy sow!" and caused to be hurled an immense fragment of rock using a giant catapult. This utterly demolished the roof of the shed, and caused the men inside who remained alive to scatter in all directions, thus speedily fulfilling the prophecy.

Having exhausted his resources in this direction, the earl tried the power of gold, and attempted to bribe the keeper of the gate to open to him in the night. The canny guardian agreed and took the purse, but then laid the whole story before the countess. At the appointed time Salisbury and his men approached and found the gate indeed open. The Earl pressed forward to enter first, but John Copeland, one of his officers, rushed before him and reached the courtyard. As he did so the grating of the gate fell, but failed to trap the earl. Agnes was watching from a high tower, and jeeringly exclaimed: "So, Montague! We had hoped to-night to have received the noble Salisbury as our guest, and consulted with him on the best means to defend a Scottish fortress against an English army; but as my lord declined the invitation, we will e'en take counsel of ourselves. Farewell, Montague! With truth within, we fear no treason from without!"

The earl was disheartened by this failure and sat down to a close blockade of the castle, every avenue to which by sea or land was closely watched. When the garrison was at it's most extreme need and distress, Alexander Ramsay of Dalhousie determined to relieve it. Embarking at midnight with forty determined men, he eluded the English flotilla, and landed at the water postern or rear gate. The garrison, freed from danger of famine, received him most joyfully, but Ramsay was satisfied with no half relief. He immediately sallied forth from the main gate, surprised and cut to pieces the enemy's advanced guard, and returned to safety. Salisbury was so discouraged by this new reverse, and the length of the siege, he broke camp on June 10th, and retired to England. This was after nineteen weeks of blockade, six months of siege, and a cost of 6,000 pounds. This became the stuff of ballads, in one of which Lord Salisbury cried 'Came I early, came I late, I found Agnes at the gate.'

As for Agnes, she reputedly said after the battle, as the English fled, "behold of the litter of English pigs." Earl Patrick and Agnes would have no children so the title of Earl passed to her sister, Isabella, who was married to Patrick's cousin, Patrick of Wester Spott. Afterward, she fades from the pages of history.

In time the English king began to lose interest in Scotland, his attention focusing more upon his ambitions in France, where he would lead his armies to further victories in the beginning of the One Hundred Years War.

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