# The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

## Marmion, A Tale of Flodden Field: A Marketing Triumph.

*Transcript of the talk given on the Thursday 12th September 2013 by **Alasdair Hutton** to members of The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club in Edinburgh.*

It is always alarming to have to face an audience of people who know a subject better than I do so please forgive my inadequacies. I will be more than happy to learn from you at the end where I have stumbled and fallen.

This year, as I guess all of you will know, we commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of the most disastrous military defeat that Scotland ever suffered, at the Battle of Flodden in September 1513 and you will also know that our hero Sir Walter Scott called one of his greatest epic poems Marmion A Tale of Flodden Field.

It is a curious tale which uses the battle as a hook to tell a completely different story of villainy getting its just deserts in parallel with the preparations for and the fighting of the battle.

Tonight I wanted to think a little about the battle itself, why the Scots with all the aces lost so badly and how that great national tragedy is portrayed in Marmion.

I thought that I would first run over the causes of the battle, why it was fought as it was and why this led to such a catastrophe and then see where Marmion touches what we know of reality and where its poetic licence departs from it.

The causes which brought the Scots and English armies to battle that day are hardly remembered now. There were some trivial quarrels. Henry the Eighth of England had refused to give up the jewels which had been promised as the dowry of his sister Margaret on her marriage to James the Fourth. The Lord High Admiral of England had attacked and taken two Scottish ships and slain their captain, Sir Andrew Barton. When James, who was fond of Barton, demanded redress Henry insolently replied that kings should not quarrel about pirates.

But the real cause, perhaps surprisingly to us now, had its roots in a European conflict far from this Borderland. It is no exaggeration to say that there was intense interest in the outcome of this battle right across continental Europe and most particularly in France and Italy. This was not merely another incident in the continual scrapping between Scotland and England, it was a part of the wars of the Holy Alliance which involved most of the great powers of Western Europe.

Pope Leo X, like his predecessor Julius II, had decided to drive the French out of Italy but instead suffered the ignominy of watching the French king, Louis XII, capture Italian towns and summon a General Council against him on his own territory.

The Pope sought allies in return and, perhaps surprisingly to us now, much the most important to him was the young Henry VIII of England who had men, money and ships and could force France to fight at both ends of the country. Henry wanted war with France and to provoke it he laid claim to the former English provinces there and what he regarded as his "lawful" inheritance of the French crown.

James IV of Scotland, on the other hand, had consistently played the part of a peacemaker and tried to persuade Henry against war. James sought an alliance among the Christian Princes of Europe against the Ottoman Turks and had announced that he wanted to lead a crusade against the infidels in the Holy Land. It was a dream he was never to realise. Instead he was drawn into the quarrel with the Pope and because of the Auld Alliance was bound to take the French part.

In July 1512, just over a year before Flodden, James had renewed the Alliance and promised Louis that if Henry invaded France, the Scots would march into England. Nevertheless, James continued his peacemaking role and in May of 1513 wrote to Henry welcoming the prospect of a truce. It was a false dawn. At the end of that June the English king crossed the Channel to join his army at Calais.

And so the die was cast. The Scottish King marched on England hoping to weaken Henry by forcing him to fight on two fronts or draw him home.

James had been warned that his action would have terrible consequences. A man appeared to him at Linlithgow, clad in a long blue gown, with bare head and carrying a pikestaff and having told the King that he had been sent by his dead mother to warn him not to go to war against England, he disappeared as suddenly as he had come. At the dead of night a voice had been heard proclaiming aloud at the Mercat Cross in Edinburgh the names of those who, within 40 days, would be no more.

At the time it was thought that these happenings were instigated by Queen Margaret but King James persisted with his policy and led an army of some 15,000 across the border.

On the 22nd August the King laid siege to Norham Castle, which was regarded as well nigh impregnable but which yielded fairly easily after 5 days. He then consolidated his position by capturing Wark and Etal Castles and made his headquarters at Ford Castle, where he did not, as the legend has it, dally with Lady Heron and nor could the rumours be true that his young son, the Archbishop of St. Andrews, had wasted his time with her daughter since she did not have one.

It was a sound start by a commander who was clearly not a military fool.

To a seasoned campaigner, as the English Commander the 70 year old Earl of Surrey was, it was obvious that the Scottish King had all the advantages.

The Scots were well provisioned and with good communications to the north.

The English were on short commons, with no beer and were weary with marching and counter marching in the rain.

The Scots Army was enhanced by experienced French officers who brought with them new ideas and knowledge of the most modern and effective techniques being used by continental armies.

The Scots were splendidly sited on the high ground of Flodden Edge and could have stayed there, well provisioned, until hunger forced the English to move.

The French advisers had introduced the then novel concept of “digging in” to a prepared position and it upset the English.

The French officers were also skilled gunners and the Scots had brought with them seventeen artillery pieces of various sizes, all made of brass and including seven elegantly crafted weapons admired by the English and

known as the “seven sisters”. These were valuable weapons and the day after the battle a force of 800 Scots tried to recover them but was driven off with the loss of another 200 men.

In the custom of the time James had offered to meet Surrey in battle at midday on the ninth of September by the old Julian calendar – the twentieth of September by the calendar we use today - and there was no thought in his mind of not honouring that agreement, even though the English eventually arrived four hours late and from an unexpected direction.

Surrey had proposed that the two armies, roughly the same size, should meet on the plain at Millfield to the south east but James had rejected this “level playing field” and it seems clear now that Surrey had decided he had no option but to manoeuvre himself into a position to attack the Scots on Flodden but clear of the fortifications which they had constructed.

For some reason which is now hard to explain James allowed the wily Surrey to manouevre behind Barmoor a full seven miles to the east of the Scots army. The Scots appear to have interpreted scouts’ reports of English movement northwards as a diversion to draw them off their magnificent position and remained firm until it was clear that the movement was the English main body and that far from heading for Berwick, as also seemed possible, it had hooked around the Scots and was marching from the north having recrossed the River Till at Twizel bridge.

The date and time though were not nearly as important as the place. If the battle had been fought on Flodden the outcome might have been substantially different but when James, well dug in on Flodden Hill, saw the English coming unexpectedly from the north at about four o’clock in the afternoon he hurried forward to deny them the ridge at Branxton towards which they were making. Indeed, the old name for the battle was Branxton Moor.

But he was in no great hurry. He set fire to his camp litter which sent clouds of thick smoke billowing towards the English approaching across the marshy ground towards the foot of the hill. It would have made sense to use smoke to obscure the Scots move from their enemy.

A long spell of rain had left the ground sodden and the Scots, who had deliberately decided to abandon their horses and fight on foot, threw off their boots to manage the wet and slippery slope better.

To their horror, the Scots on the higher ground found that they could not work their artillery which fired over the heads of the English although it was enough to scare off the Tynemouth and Bamboroughshire men.

The Scots had decided to fight in what was then the current fashion of using the old Macedonian phalanx which employed a deep column of men wielding long pikes.

The Scots had favoured the long pike for many years and in 1474 the Scots Parliament had forbidden the import or the making of spears less than 6 ells or 18 feet 6 inches long.

The formation was extremely effective against horsemen and normally ought to have been enough to sweep the enemy before them, but the fatal weakness was that it could be broken up on uneven ground and that is what happened.

The Scots found it difficult and perhaps impossible to keep their formation as they slipped and slithered hurrying downhill.

With the help of their archers, the English infantry, using an 8 foot spear axe known as a halberd or bill, split the phalanxes and clove the men within them like wood.

The Scots had depended on using shock tactics with their long spears and were without an effective weapon for close-quarter fighting. They found that their swords were too long for the short, stabbing strokes needed and too short to avoid the murderous halberds.

Both armies had formed themselves into four main divisions. King James had the Highlanders of Argyll and Lennox on his right, with Crawford and Montrose on his left and Home and Huntly beyond them.

In effect they joined four separate battles with the English divisions. The first to clash was the body on the King's left under the Scottish Chamberlain, Alexander Home, which drove off a force drawn from Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire under Edmund Howard, a younger son of the English Commander.

It was very much in accordance with medieval ideas that, having done his part, Lord Home should hold his ground. That custom, along with a natural caution in Border warriors that there was nothing to be gained by deliberately provoking English Borderers in another part of the field, has quite unfairly brought odium on the name of Home down the years. Lord Home had contributed substantially towards what ought to have been a Scottish success.

The phalanx commanded by the Earls of Crawford and Montrose on the Humes' right. It was held, thrust back and broken up on the uneven ground fatally exposing the left flank of the King's column. The Highland column on the right under Lennox and Argyll also broke up. They more skirmishers than a properly formed phalanx and I fancy that under the irritating pressure of the English longbow-men the Highlanders gave way to their instinct to charge upon the enemy and the English column under Sir Edward Stanley took them in the flanks and rear.

As the forces on each side of him perished the King found himself with the enemy on each flank and in front.

The King's code of chivalry demanded that a leader should slay the opposing General with his own hand and he fought his way to within a lance's length of the Earl of Surrey.

There was no doubting the King's courage. His body pierced with arrows, his left arm half severed by a bill stroke, his neck gashed, he was still fighting towards Surrey when he fell and around their brave monarch the nobles of Scotland fell with him.

The hand-to-hand fighting had lasted not much more than an hour.

The English, bitter about the invasion of their country, dealt savagely with the Scots. They took no prisoners but slew and stripped every man they found.

Sir Edward Stanley's column broke off chasing the Highlanders and fell to spoiling the slain they found on the battlefield.

The King's body was stripped along with the nobles who had fallen around him by soldiers who did not realise who he was.

The next morning 13 dead Earls, 14 Lords, the Archbishop of St Andrews, the Bishops of Caithness and the Isles and a pair of Abbots were found about the slain king, while across the blood-soaked slopes lay many thousands of the "flowers of the forest".

It was said that only four lords were left alive in Scotland after Flodden.

So, what can we say of the battle itself? Flodden was a political battle field. The Scots met the English to help take the pressure off their French allies and paid an appalling price for doing it.

They had made a promise and they did not hesitate to honour it. But the best of the nation's manhood had gone and no country, especially a small one, can replace that easily.

Those "flowers of the forest" who fell on that terrible day five hundred years ago have richly earned our continuing commemoration of their valour.

So how did Sir Walter Scott treat them in his epic poem Marmion?

This is a really curious Tale of Flodden Field for although it is quietly working up to the Battle, the first time that Flodden is mentioned is about a third of the way into the Fourth of the Six Cantos.

Up until then it is the journey north of the fictitious Marmion and the steady peeling away of his evil carapace in his treatment of Clare de Clare, Constance de Beverley and Sir Ralph de Wilton. Thus far we have learned that Marmion is a rotter, a brave rotter but a rotter just the same but until he is met by Sir David Lindesay, the Lord Lyon to escort him to King James we learn little that would help us to know that he is an emissary to King James from Henry.

Scott weaves in those two tales about the visitor to James at Linlithgow asserting that the mysterious and elusive figure was the Apostle James and he repeats the legend of the names being cried aloud at night at the long vanished cross in Edinburgh.

But even after Marmion has seen the Scottish host gathering on the Boroughmuir in Edinburgh and the King has sent him off to Tantallon, while he gets on with the business of the battle, the poem returns to more evidence of Marmion’s perfidy and does not follow the monarch.

Scott spends what I think seems an inordinate amount of time dwelling on the rumoured relationship between the King and Lady Heron and even at the end of the Fifth Canto seems more interested in that than James’s militarily skilful capture of Wark, Etal and Norham Castles which secured his rear on the way to Flodden Edge. Norham had always been regarded as impregnable but yielded to James’ assault relatively swiftly although Scott gives him no particular credit for this.

And then only after eighty five percent of this “Tale of Flodden Field” has gone do we approach what is the declared purpose of the tale – the Battle.

The battle is an exciting read and you can feel the clash of arms and the desperation of men in combat in it. Apart from a couple of references to the plain where Surrey wanted to fight but James did not, Scott’s description is good and you can readily follow the battle in the lines.

I can imagine the enthusiasm in Scott when he was out practising with the Light Horse Volunteers, riding his charger at full speed up and down on the sands of Portobello feeling the spray as his mind turned over the best way to describe the action.

It seems to me clear that Scott was very keen to follow the success of the Lay of the Last Minstrel and lighted on the this tale of dishonour and its rewards set in an age of chivalry when commanders came to battle by prior arrangement and used the continuing tragedy of Flodden which still reverberates

powerfully to us five hundred years after it was fought and must have been more powerfully in people's minds only three hundred years after the dreadful day.

Marmion is a grand tale, very much in the mould of, I think it would only be right to say in this company, Ivanhoe brought to life again by my esteemed predecessor with once again the rotters getting their just deserts.

So if Marmion is not really A Tale of Flodden Field, what is it? I think the finest compliment I can pay Scott about Marmion is that it is a brilliant piece of marketing.

In those dog days after The Enlightenment, Scott was reviving in a new generation of Scottish people a pride in their history and their heritage. And not only with his writing. Ten years after Marmion burst on to the streets, Scott revealed again the Honours of Scotland and followed that with the Visit of King George the Fourth in 1822.

He had already embedded himself in the affections of the Scottish public with the Lay of the Last Minstrel, which was firmly set in the beating heart of the Scottish Borders, so another morality tale of an evil knight paying the just price of his despicable actions had to sit in a Scottish context and Flodden gave him two for the price of one – his wonderful story and a great tragedy knitted into one garment.

There is an irony that the Battle itself was itself a gigantic morality tale with King James binding himself to help France through The Auld Alliance and marching into England to help the Louis the Twelfth by drawing Henry the Eighth back across the channel from France. It was a noble gesture for which the whole country paid a terrible price. I fancy you will not find a finer example of an entire nation living up to Jesus' declaration in John 15:13 that "greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".

The critics were rather haughty about Scott's work at the time but the public, the true arbiters of success, loved it and it stayed popular into the next century. And here we are talking about it again in the twenty first century.

So even in this five hundredth anniversary year of the battle, I think it would be well not to give much emphasis to the tag line A Tale of Flodden Field and simply read Marmion as a fine morality tale, brilliantly told in memorable, ringing language which we can still enjoy just as much today as folk did in 1808.