

The Siege of Edinburgh Castle, March-June, 1689.

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THE military history of the Revolution in Scotland is the sum of two episodes. The more vital and engaging is the adventure which saw Dundee's death at Killiecrankie and flickered out at Cromdale. The second is the siege of Edinburgh Castle and its surrender on 13th June, 1689. Of it no considerable account exists. A pamphlet bearing the promising title, *The Siege of the Castle of Edinburgh*, is reprinted by Mr. Henry Jenner in his edition (1903) of the *Memoirs of the Lord Viscount Dundee*. But the information it contains is of the slightest. The Minutes of the Convention of 1689 furnish a few details, and other contemporary authorities eke out scanty information. There exists, however, a source of information which has been practically overlooked. From March, 1689, while the issue of the



Sally Port or Postern Gate at the NW corner of Edinburgh Castle

Revolution was still in the balance in Scotland, a series of bi-weekly newsletters were published in London, giving information transmitted by Scottish correspondents. Under the title *An Account of the Proceedings of the Meeting of the Estates in Scotland* (London. 1689), this series of letters furnishes interesting and, for the most part, reliable information regarding

the progress of the siege of the Castle. Upon it the account given in the following pages is chiefly based.

When the Convention opened at Edinburgh on 14th March, 1689, Edinburgh Castle was held for King James by the Duke of Gordon. His Jacobitism was of a timorous character. In February he had been on the point of evacuating his command, when a timely visit from Dundee and the Earl of Balcarres, on their return from the Stuart *debacle* in England, induced him to stiffen his back, and ‘to keep it out until he saw what the Convention would do.’¹ The opening of the Convention on 14th March found him at his post. The Castle’s menace was intolerable, and on the first day of its session (14th March) the Convention commissioned the Earls of Lothian and Tweeddale to demand its surrender on ‘ane act to Exhoner his grace and other papists there for bygons.’ The message was verbal; and Gordon demanded the undertaking in writing, with ‘tyme allowed him to advyse.’ The two Earls made their report to the Estates, and returned to the Castle with a written summons and undertaking, signed by

the Duke of Hamilton, as President.² Dundee and Balcarres watched the negotiations with anxiety. That afternoon (14th March) their messenger got into the Castle, and exhorted the Duke to stand to his guns. Gordon asked of them a written declaration that it was ‘of absolute necessity’ for James’s affairs that he should hold out. He had no mind to immolate himself unless his party proved to have a kick in it. Dundee and Balcarres hastened to assure him that the retention of the Castle was vital. Early next morning (15th March) Dundee himself got access to the Castle, and ‘confirmed him [Gordon] absolutely in his Resolution of keeping it out.’³ A few hours later (15th March), Gordon’s reply was communicated to the

Convention. He had written it before Dundee’s visit, and it no longer reflected his present resolution. It expressed his willingness to remove from the Castle, but desired that before doing so he should be allowed to await the Prince of Orange’s reply to his request for conditions. He offered bail in £20,000 sterling that he would not molest the Convention’s ‘illustrious assemblie’ in the meanwhile. The conditions he required were: A promise of indemnity for himself and his friends, ‘both protestants and papists,’ to be ratified by the next ensuing Parliament; permission to the Protestant members of the garrison to continue their employment; to himself, and to others who preferred that course, license ‘to goe beyond seas or remane within the Kingdome as our occasion shall lead us’; and payment to the garrison of



At this postern JOHN GRAHAM OF CLAVERHOUSE VISCOUNT DUNDEE held a final conference with the Duke of Gordon, Governor of Edinburgh Castle, on quitting the Convention of Estates 18th March, 1689



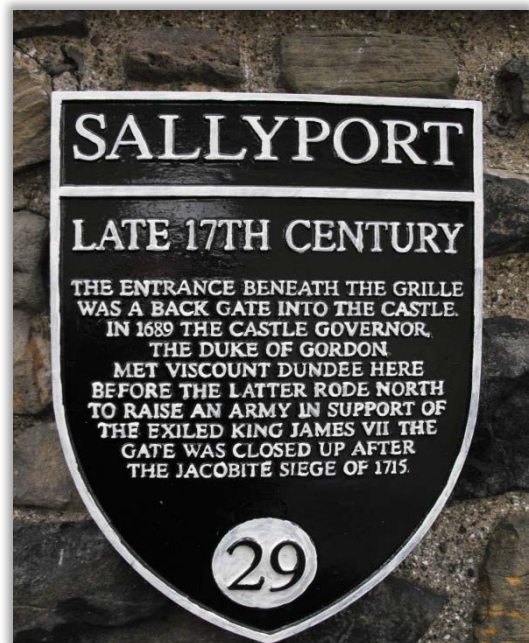
¹ Colin, Earl of Balcarres, *An Account of the Affairs of Scotland*. London 1714, p. 58.

² *The Minutes of the Convention of Estates of the Kingdome of Scotland holden att Edinburgh 14 March 1689* (Advocates’ Library MS. 33. 7. 8), fol. 3.

³ Balcarres, pp. 64, 66.

arrears due to it. The Convention rejected Gordon's request to be allowed to await the Prince's reply before surrendering, but was otherwise sympathetic to his conditions. It was, therefore, with considerable surprise that the Estates received a further communication (15th March) from the Duke. Gordon now refused to surrender the Castle, 'notwithstanding what the meeting had agreed to,' but, in a letter to Dundee, offered to vacate his Captaincy of the Castle in favour of the Earl of Airlie. It is probable that Dundee himself had suggested the proposal. Airlie had served in his regiment, and could be better relied on than Gordon. For that reason, no doubt, among others, the 'overture' was not agreed to. In place of it, the Convention ordained two heralds, two pursuivants, and two trumpeters to formally require Gordon 'and other papists in the Castle of Edinburgh to remove themselves therefrom immediately on pain of treason.' Proclamation was also made 'discharging the leidges to converse with, abbet, or assist the Duke 'and his adherents. A reward of six months' pay was offered to any of the garrison who should succeed in expelling the Duke and possessing themselves of the Castle.⁴ Orders were given 'to block up the Castle' forthwith.⁵

The third day's meeting of the Convention (Saturday, 16th March) proved critical. A plot against the lives of Dundee and Sir George Mackenzie was communicated to the Estates, and the managers of the Jacobite party that evening resolved to leave Edinburgh and summon a rival Convention at Stirling. A hint of what was maturing probably reached Gordon. On the night of the 15th he appears to have ventured from the Castle into the town to confer with his colleagues.⁶ On the 16th he wrote to Tweeddale begging him to see him at the Castle, with a hint that 'what I have to communicate shall not be disagreeable.' Captain Lawder, 'commander of the Edinburgh guards,' received a similar invitation, and had permission to report 'what should be overtured by the Duke in writing subscribed by the Duke.'⁷ Gordon's 'overture' proved to be a threat 'to rane down his cannon on the toun nixt week.' He had written to the Provost and Magistrates to desire 'a correspondence with the good toun.'⁸ In the course of the afternoon (16th March) 'several Barrels of Provisions' on their way to the Castle were impounded.⁹



⁴ *Minutes of the Convention*, ff. 5-8.

⁵ *Account of the Proceedings*, etc., p. 6.

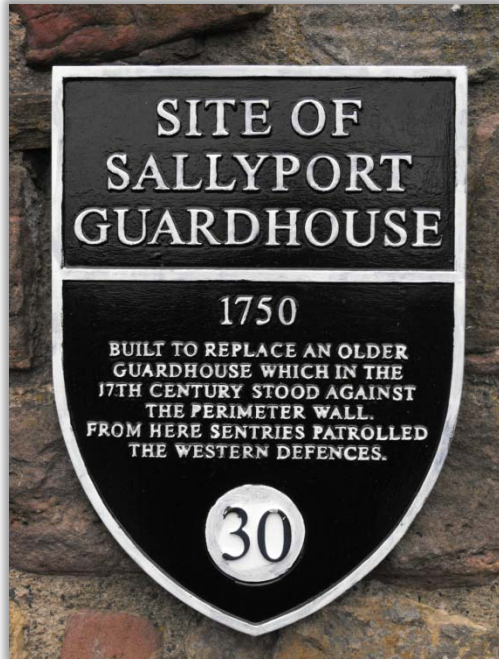
⁶ See *Minutes of the Convention*, ff. 8, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.* fol. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.* fol. 12.

⁹ *The London Gazette*, No. [2438](#).

On Monday, 18th March, Dundee rode out of Edinburgh, and held his [famous interview with Gordon](#) as he skirted the Castle rock. That he exhorted the Duke to hold the Castle at all hazards can easily be inferred. Gordon, however, within a few days again made overtures to the Convention. Their purport was a proposal that he should be allowed to visit James in Ireland to gain his sanction for the surrender of the Castle. With greater daring he proposed



that he should be commissioned to act as intermediary between James and a Convention assembled in defiance of his authority.¹⁰ His proposals were naturally rejected, and on 25th March he proclaimed defiance in a message to the Convention and to the Magistrates of Edinburgh, asserting his intention to 'set up King James's Standard, and give the ordinary vollies of Cannon, which he desired them not to fear, or mistake, and accordingly he fired the Cannon without Bullets, but not without fear to those that lie at the mercy of his Cannon.'¹¹

The blockade of the Castle had so far been entrusted to the Western levies, or Cameronian 'rabble,' which had been brought into Edinburgh on the eve of the Convention. Besieged and besiegers fired 'often one at the other with Small Shot,' but without serious casualty.¹² According to the pamphlet printed by Mr. Jenner, the blockaders

had drawn 'a trench from the West Port to the West Kirk, which was performed with so great ignorance, that if his grace [the Duke or Gordon] had not been merciful, and a lover of his countrymen, he might have killed the most part of them, and done great mischief to the city of Edinburgh.'¹³ On 27th March, Major-General Hugh Mackay of Scourie, who had lately arrived with the regiments of the Scots Brigade in Dutch service, took the blockade of the fortress under his care, and was empowered 'to parley with the Duke of Gourdon from time to time, as he shall see cause.'¹⁴ The next day (28th March) the Western levies marched from Edinburgh, leaving the conduct of the siege to more experienced forces.¹⁵ Batteries were raised, one at 'the Mouterhouse Hill,' another at 'the castle of Collups,' a third at 'Heriot's work,' behind which a bomb battery, under Captain Brown, was emplaced. The second of these batteries was alone successful in effecting a breach in the wall, 'near the back gate,' though the steepness of the hill made it impracticable.¹⁶ To mask and protect the batteries from the Castle's guns, Mackay made a requisition for the supply of wool-packs, and placed them on the Castle Hill, 'near the Blew Stone.'¹⁷ On 2nd April, upon the petition of the Magistrates, the Estates guaranteed compensation 'for what damage shall happen to the Wool

¹⁰ *Account of the Proceedings*, pp. 14-16.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 19.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 20.

¹³ *Memoirs of Dundee*, ed. Jenner, p. 30.

¹⁴ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 22.

¹⁶ *Memoirs of Dundee*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 30.

they furnish'd to Major General Mackay, to build up a Defence against the Cannon of the Castle.'¹⁸

The siege was now in full swing. The garrison 'fired so hotly' upon the wool-pack screen that the besiegers were forced to abandon that enterprise.¹⁹ There was 'great shooting' on both sides, and several were killed, though not many.²⁰ On 3rd April Gordon beat a parley, and communicated his willingness to allow the besiegers to carry off their wounded, 'to whom they durst not send Chyrurgeons, because of the danger.' Gordon's courtesy was curtly repulsed by his enemy, who replied: 'That they would take off their wounded Men when they pleased, without his leave.'²¹ Mackay pushed on his attack with vigour. By 5th April preparations were in train for an assault, 'which is intended to be done in few days.'²² The entrenchments were heightened and strengthened, so that by 9th April the Castle's guns were no longer able to 'prejudice' them.²³ A few days later (18th April), 'more Cannon, Mortar-pieces, Bombs, etc.,' arrived from England, and 'smart work' was anticipated.²⁴ Gordon again beat a parley (28th April), but for what purpose is not clear. At least he was resolute not to surrender, and the besiegers resorted to another expedient. Directions were given to drain the North Loch, 'of design to find out the bottom of the Well of Water that furnishes the Castle, and some think with a further design, to undermine the Castle on that side.'²⁵ The plan failed of result; 'for the castle well had always two fathom of water.'²⁶

The siege caused considerable danger and discomfort to the town and its non-combatants. James Nimmo, who lived in the Grassmarket, 'could hardlie go out or in but in vew of the Castle,' and some of his neighbours were killed 'upon the streat.'²⁷ At the beginning of the siege, 'some foolish easie Countrey People kept their ordinary Road to the Markets by the Castle-wall, and so a few of them were reach'd and destroy'd by the Garison.' Experience taught, 'That the furthest way about is the safest,' and the markets were removed to 'the other remotest end of the Town.'²⁸ On 13th May the Castle 'plays fiercely against the Trenches and the Town, to the loss of some Lives.'²⁹ A few days later six men and one woman were killed by a bomb. The citizens were indignant, and on 24th May 'The Duke of Gourdon beat a Parley, with this Message, That he had been sick for eight days, and declared that the shooting into the Town was without his knowledge, and passed his Paroll of Honour, That during his life he would never prejudice the Town; which gives great satisfaction to the Citizens.'³⁰

Gordon, in fact, was already running short of ammunition. On 28th May 'The Besiegers and Besieged in this Castle play warmly one at the other: The Besiegers constantly throw in their Bombs and other Fireworks into the Castle, tho often for whole days the Garison is so uncivil as not to return one Bullet.' 'By this constant firing,' the newsletter adds, 'the Garison will

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p 24.

¹⁹ *Memoirs of Dundee*, p. 31.

²⁰ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 22.

²¹ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 27.

²² *Ibid.* p. 28.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 46.

²⁶ *Memoirs of Dundee*, p. 31.

²⁷ [*Narrative of Mr. James Nimmo*](#), Scott. Hist. Soc., p. 92.

²⁸ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 48.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 69.

certainly fail, and surrender, tho it's believed the Rock of the Castle cannot be destroy'd by the Bombs.' Gordon was perhaps of a similar mind as to his chance of success. Elsewhere the outlook was not hopeful. Save for his meteoric raid upon Perth and the Lowlands, Dundee had so far done little. From James and Ireland the prospect of relief was as remote as ever. On 15th May Gordon had been proclaimed a rebel, and the lieges were forbidden to intercommune with him.³¹ A fortnight later (30th May) he beat a parley, and sent a letter to Lord Ross desiring 'to speak with him about some important Affairs.' The interview led to nothing; for while Ross was instructed not to enter the Castle, Gordon refused to venture out of it. He represented, however, that as a result of the bombardment the public Registers preserved in the Castle were in danger, and offered the opportunity to have them removed. The Committee of Estates refused the proposal, 'looking upon it as a contrivance to delay time, whereby he [Gordon] might cover his Bartisons and Roofs of his Houses with Earth; and that in the removal of the Registers, Letters and other things might be conveyed to or from the Duke.' The Castle was, in fact, in dismal plight. 'Several bombs' had fallen through 'the whole stories of the Houses in the Castle, so that many of them are destroyed, and they [the garrison] have neither safety, nor Rest to refresh themselves.'³² A few weeks later (4th July), when Bakarres was sent to it a prisoner, the Castle was so battered that there was 'scarce a roome' in which he could be confined.³³

The persistent bombardment, failure of ammunition and supplies, at length told upon the *morale* of the garrison. In the early hours of 1st June fifteen men and two women deserted, 'the Men having their Musquets ready cock'd, well charg'd with a Brace of Bullets.' One of the women made off 'through the North-Logh.' The other woman and the fifteen men were made prisoners, and were conveyed to the Duke of Hamilton for examination. Upon the woman were found a large packet of letters and many keys, 'particularly the Keys of the Outer-gate of the Castle, and the Key of the Postern-gate of the Castle.' The other woman was apprehended later, near Leith, bearing 'many more Letters.' The prisoners upon examination declared, 'That the Garison is in great want of Provisions, and that they fear that their Water will fail them by constant shooting. They say further, That there is great Discontents and Repining amongst the Soldiery in the Garison; so they believe that it will turn to an open Mutiny, if they get not Relief.' The newsletter adds: 'The Castle holds out still, though they are grown very sparing of their Powder and Bullets, seldom firing on the Besiegers, though there is constant firing against them. The throwing of the Bombs into the Castle is so ordered, to keep the Garison in motion, and without sleep, and to destroy the Houses and other Buildings where the Garison lodges, and where the Store and Magazines are kept.'³⁴

Upon their re-examination, the deserters captured on 1st June gave a more particular account of the Castle's ability to hold out. They declared that there were eighty barrels of powder remaining; that the garrison numbered one hundred and twenty men and eighteen women; that provisions would last for a month or two. They added that 'Drink and Malt' would be exhausted 'in three weeks time,' and that there would have been a water-famine already 'had it not been for the extraordinary Snow that fell here lately.' Gordon, they averred, was 'forced, for his own safety, to retire and lodge in the strongest Vaults, the Bombs making their way through the principal Houses, into the Cellars, where great part of their Beer, Wine,

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 64.

³² *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 71.

³³ [*Letters and State Papers chiefly addressed to George, Earl of Melville*](#). Bannatyne Club, p. 142.

³⁴ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 72. In an account printed in *The London Gazette*, No. [2460](#), the deserters are described as 'the Centinels of the Outward Gates.'

Bread, Meal and Malt were spoiled by them.’³⁵ Some exaggeration the circumstances invited. The fact that a part of the garrison had deserted is sufficient proof that the deserters’ story is, in the main, reliable.

An incident on the evening of 1st June went some way to substantiate the story told by the defaulting fifteen. A woman was apprehended on her way from the Castle ‘to buy fresh Provisions.’ She also carried intelligence: letters to Sir James Grant were found upon her.³⁶ The faithless fifteen were instrumental in her capture. They made also a valuable communication to their late enemies by discovering ‘the design of a Grandchild of the late Bishop of Galloway, who lodged in the uppermost House on the Castle-hill (next to the Castle), and did use to write in large, or Capital Letters, any News in a Table or Board, over her Window, whereby the Duke might read it through his Telescope. When anything of good News, she hung out a white cloth, and when bad, a black cloth.’ The daring Jacobite and her mother were at once seized, and were imprisoned in the common gaol.³⁷

Fruitful of incident was 1st June. About three o’clock in the afternoon, ‘three several persons came walking quietly to the side of the North-Loch at the foot of the Castle, and went through all the Mud to the very Rock.’ The guards investing the Castle ‘fired briskly at them all the way.’ In spite of the fusilade, one of the adventurous three, ‘a Genteel-like Man in black Cloaths,’ drew his sword ‘and scrap’d off the Dirt which stuck to his Shoes, and so calmly and unconcernedly walked up to the Castle-gate, into which they all safely entred, to the admiration of all men, there having been some hundreds of Shots fired at them in their passage to the Castle.’³⁸ Clearly the threat to drain the North Loch was not an empty one.

Meanwhile the siege was nearing its end. A newsletter of 6th June reports: ‘The Batteries continue to play still upon the Castle, and a great Battery is ordered to be raised above the Weighhouse, as high as the top of the Houses in the Street.’³⁹ A week later (12th June) Gordon beat a parley, hung out a white flag, and intimated his willingness to consider terms of surrender. Commissioners were appointed to treat with him. But ‘while they were communing together in the Castle, the Duke demanding unreasonable terms, a Man run suddenly into the Castle (during the Truce) and delivered several Letters to the Duke, as it’s supposed from Dundee, or the late King in Ireland.’ The Commissioners demanded the messenger’s surrender, ‘since none ought to come in during the Truce without their consent.’ Gordon refused, asserting, ‘That since he had come to him, he would protect him. And so the Treaty broke off.’ Gordon resolved to make a final effort to convince his foe that he was still capable of giving trouble. That night ‘the Garison fired both their great and small Shot against the Town itself, and every way that they thought to do mischief, several persons being killed, others wounded, and some Houses prejudiced by the Canon.’ The morning (13th June) brought calmer counsel. Gordon agreed to the articles of surrender proposed to him, marched out his men to the Castle Hill, where they laid down their arms, and surrendered the keys of

³⁵ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 73.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 73. In the *Warrant Book, Scotland*, vol. xiii. fol. 216, there is the docquet (dated 10 August 1688) of a warrant creating James Grant, Advocate, a Knight.

³⁷ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 73.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 74.

³⁹ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 76.

the fortress. Lieutenant-Colonel Mackay, Scourie's brother, and Major Somerville, with a force of three hundred men, thereupon entered the Castle, and took possession of it.⁴⁰

So the three months' siege ended. Give Gordon and his garrison their due for a memorable exploit. Yet it ranks with Dundee's campaign in its futility to stem a current which carried the nation at flood tide to its destined haven. The defence of the Castle had been conducted in the spirit of conciliation. 'Tho it hath been very dreadful to us in this Town,' says a newsletter from Edinburgh, 'to lye at the mercy of the Cannons of the Castle during this Siege, yet we must confess, that Gourdon hath not done us so much Mischief as he might have done if he had pleased.'⁴¹ The beleaguered fortress had not been so tenderly handled. 'I have been all through the Castle,' writes another correspondent, 'and seen the Desolations of War: It is not credible what Havock the Bombs have done upon the House, and all the other Buildings.'⁴² Partly on the ground that ammunition was becoming scarce, an order to the besiegers to suspend their fire upon the Castle was issued upon the very day that Gordon surrendered.⁴³ That the Castle capitulated from lack of ammunition to continue the defence seems certain. A Jacobite pamphlet accuses one of the officers of the garrison of 'embezzling' it. The statement matches the assertion that 'all the loss he [Gordon] sustained was a brewing of ale, and one sentinel, Patrick Kelley.'⁴⁴ The writer was not without humour. And Patrick Kelly was clearly an Irishman!

C. SANFORD TERRY.

⁴⁰ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 79. The articles of surrender are printed in *The History of the Affaires of Scotland* (London, 1690), p. 81.

⁴¹ *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 78.

⁴² *Account of the Proceedings*, p. 80.

⁴³ *Letters chiefly addressed to George, Earl of Melville*, p. 57.

⁴⁴ *Memoirs of Dundee*, p. 31.