

# CAPTURE OF INCHKEITH

A.D. 1549.

MONSIEUR D'ESSE, an experienced French commander, arrived at Leith in 1549 with an army of six thousand men,

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\* History of the Campaigns of 1548 and 1549, being an Exact Account of the Martial Expeditions performed in those times by the Scots and French on the one side, and the English and their Foreign Auxiliaries on the other, by Monsieur Beague, printed at Paris in 1556, and translated by Dr Patrick Abercrombie, author of the Martial Achievements of the Scottish Nation, in 1707; Campbell's History of Leith; Lindsay's (of Pitscottie) History.

all veteran soldiers, to assist the Scots in their contest with England during the regency of Mary of Lorraine, the mother of Queen Mary. The arrival of this force is thus noticed by a poet of those times :

At Leith they landit harmless in the haven,  
With powder, bullet, guns, and other geir,  
Drest all their platforms in to days seven,  
Nor lacking naething that belanged to weir.

Perceiving the importance of securing a place possessed of many advantages, the French commander began to fortify the town by throwing round it strong and regular works. These consisted chiefly of a rampart of earth, and it appears to have been a most formidable defence, constructed after the best principles of fortification as adapted to the warfare of the times. It is proper, however, to state that this is not the opinion of the valiant Captain Colepepper in the *FORTUNES OF NIGEL*. “ You speak of the siege of Leith,” says the redoubtable Captain, “ and I have seen the place ; a pretty kind of a hamlet it is, with a plain wall, or rampart, and a pigeon house or two of a tower at every angle. Uds, daggars, and scabberds ! if a leaguer of our days had been twenty-four hours, not to say so many months, before it, without carrying the place, and all its cocklofts, one after another, by pure storm, they would have deserved no better grace than the Provost-Marshal gives when his noose is reeved.”

But whatever may have been the state and appearance of the fortifications at Leith, we shall delay noticing these matters for the present, and direct our attention to Inchkeith. This little island, which is most conspicuous in the Frith of Forth, half way between Leith and Kinghorn, was taken possession of by the English at this period, and fortified. The garrison were in a situation which afforded them many advantages, and they committed considerable depredations on the shores of Mid-Lothian and Fife, secur-

ing themselves from pursuit by returning to the island upon any alarm, where they were out of all danger from sudden reprisals. D'Essé resolved to dislodge the enemy from this stronghold, and ordered Monsieur de Biron, one of his officers, to sail out and reconnoitre the island. There is only one easy landing place, the island being very steep on almost all sides, and a handful of men could easily hold out against a superior force brought against it in those times.

Monsieur de Biron embarked in a galley belonging to a French captain named Villegaignon—the same galley, it is said, which carried the infant Queen Mary to France from Dumbarton Castle, and sailing round the island he carefully noted every point favourable for an attack. The English garrison were either ignorant of his intentions, or set him at defiance, for although he was nearly the whole time within reach of their guns he was not only unmolested, but was able to give a tolerably correct account of their numbers and condition, and of the state of the works upon the island.

Mary of Lorraine had resorted often to Leith since the arrival of her countrymen, and she took such an interest in the projected expedition against Inchkeith, that she personally superintended the embarkation of the soldiers selected for the attack. The French, accompanied by some Scottish troops, sailed from Leith Harbour in small boats, and at first endeavoured to conceal their intentions from those on the island. They accordingly pretended to be merely sailing up and down the Frith, but their frequent approach to the island, where they were evidently selecting a place to land, excited the suspicions of the garrison. Finding themselves discovered, the assailants made directly for the rock, and found the English prepared to dispute their attempt to land. The assailants nevertheless sprung out of their boats, and after a severe contest they not only maintained their ground, but forced the English to the

higher parts of the island, where their commander, named Cotton, and George Appleby, one of his officers, were killed. Besides those gentlemen, several persons of some note fell on the side of the English.

The fortalice or castle, which has long disappeared, was secured by the assailants, who pushed the English to an extremity of the island, where they surrendered without farther resistance. The gallantry of the little band who attempted its defence was most conspicuous. They disputed every yard of the rock with their antagonists, and only yielded when there was no longer any chance of success. In this assault Monsieur de Biron was wounded in the head by a harquebus, and his helmet was so beaten about his ears that it was necessary to carry him into a boat to dress his wounds. One Desbois, his standard-bearer, was killed by the pike of the English commander, and Gasper Strozzi, the commander of a party of Italians, was also slain. The fortalice of Inchkeith was kept in repair for some time, but it was finally ordered to be dismantled by the Scotch Parliament, to prevent it being of any farther use to the English.

There is a French account of this enterprise written in 1556, which is not a little amusing, as it is expressed in the bombastic language peculiar to that extraordinary nation, and is at the same time extremely scarce. The following is their narrative of the capture of Inchkeith abridged and condensed. To those familiar with the present state of the island, an account of it by an eye-witness, as it appeared in the reign of Queen Mary, during the Regency of her mother, must be entertaining and curious.

“ The Island of Inchkeith, upon its being recovered from the English, was named by the Queen Dowager the *Island of God*, but formerly the French called it the *Island for Horses*, and the reason was because hitherto it had been thought useless to men, and remained uninhabited. Yet Inchkeith is not destitute of the *blessings of nature*; it is

pretty large, possesses excellent water, has spots of ground fit to be converted into pasturage or gardens, and places proper for salt-pans and harbours. Its inhabitants at a small charge might make lime, build houses, and fortifications of all sorts. The island is so advantageously situated in the midst of the Frith of Forth, that it commands the ships that sail to or from the better part of the kingdom. Nature itself has fortified it, for the access is so difficult, that it cannot be come at except by three fit places, and in these the sea, which is intermixed with the river, is about a foot and a half in depth.\* Hence, on account of the rocks, obvious at all times to the eye, no sort of shipping can come near the island, and one must set foot upon these huge stones, jump from one to another, and so gain the island, unless he chose to wade, in which case he would be in danger of falling unawares into one of those deep and narrow pools which are within a short distance of the island between the rocks. On all sides nothing is seen but a continued precipice, only towards the west nature has carved out steps which ascend to the height of about twenty French fathoms, but there is little possibility of getting up by these means. Thus the island is very strong and advantageously situated, and besides the above impediments, the paths leading to the banks are so very narrow, winding, and steep, that scarcely three men can walk abreast, while the whole is commanded by the summit, on which the English had built a square fort, and had made it tenable within less than fifteen days.

“ Not long before the English fleet came up the Frith, the Queen was informed that Monsieur de Termes had arrived at Dumbarton with two hundred horse, one hundred men-at-arms, and one thousand foot, and that he was appointed to the command of his Majesty's (the King of France) army in Scotland in the room of Monsieur D'Essé.

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\* This must refer to low water.



These accounts added to the desire the latter felt to obtain possession of the island. The Queen Dowager, on her part, sensible how prejudicial the presence of the English was to the kingdom, used every exertion to keep the French officers close to their resolution to attempt the recovery of the island. But this was, as the proverb expresses it, *to set the spurs to a courser*, for the whole of them were bent upon the thing, and in compliance with her Majesty's suggestion, it was resolved to send a man of prudence to view the fortifications commenced by the enemy. Monsieur Chappelle de Biron was singled out on account of his great experience for the purpose, who, together with Messieurs De Dussac, De Ferrieres, De Gourdes, and Nicolas, went on board a small frigate commanded by M De Villegaignon, sailed round the island, and returned with an exact account of the outward appearance of the works, the numbers, and the state of the garrison.

“ The reports made by these gentlemen to her Majesty considerably affected her, for she saw that a post of such importance could not be easily recovered, but she had the prudence to conceal her sentiments, and gravely and civilly intimated to us her anxiety on the subject, and the value she would hold our services in the enterprize. All those who had served under Monsieur D'Essé, solicitous that the attempt should be made by them exclusively, were informed of the design, but not of the day fixed for putting it into execution. This was politic, for if the English had by any means got information, they would have summoned to their assistance twenty ships of war, waiting at Eyemouth for a fair wind to carry them to Calais.

“ Messieurs D'Essé, De Termes, Biron, and Villegaignon, had taken the measures connected with their respective duties, and other officers had been active in prevailing upon the Scots to bring into the harbour of Leith

all boats found lying in the neighbouring creeks and havens. The Queen pressed the immediate execution of the project, and came to Leith on Corpus Christi Day (the 2d of June), that her presence might prevent any quarrellings about the choice of the boats, and encourage the soldiers to their duty. As they saluted her before they entered the boats, she addressed them as follows—‘ You are obliged, my good friends, to the favour of Heaven, who has endowed you with courage, and afforded you so many honourable occasions to evince it. If I doubted the ascendant you will gain over the enemy, I would forget that you are Frenchmen. As such, you have a natural right to vanquish the English, and have kept yourselves in possession of that glorious privilege since you came hither. Continue, then, brave soldiers and my very good friends, to overcome. Remember that God is propitious to this kingdom, and that He has sent you from France to preserve Scotland.’

“ The soldiers, animated by these expressions, and fond of serving her Majesty in any circumstances, unanimously took Heaven to witness that they went off with a determined resolution to conquer or perish. It is no new thing to see a few soldiers so nobly disposed, but it is not a little remarkable to see some hundreds thus influenced. The Queen, overjoyed at their enthusiasm, asked Monsieur D’Essé, when stepping on board his ship, how many soldiers he had with him in this expedition?—‘ Madam,’ he replied, ‘ I do not precisely know their numbers, but this I certainly know, that your Majesty may depend upon their courage.’ ‘ The wise,’ replied the Queen, ‘ are seldom disappointed in their expectations, and since you, as well as those under your command, promise so fair, I cannot doubt that you will come off with victory.’ The event of all things, Madam,’ he rejoined, ‘ is in the hand of God, yet thus much I declare, that if yon island is not

regained this day, D'Essé shall never again unsheathe a sword.' These words I overheard, and some more, but not so distinct as to enable me to set them down.

“ The ships or galleys, commanded by Villegaignon and De Seur, had in the meantime sailed to prevent the English from coming out of the fortress to dispute the landing, and now all the boats made to the island. We had to contend with a violent gale on the way, and during this the enemy having observed us, stationed their Italian harquebusiers and some English bowmen to deter us from landing. The rest of their forces they divided into two bodies, placing the one within the fort they had begun to build, and the other without, at the distance of forty paces, so far as we could judge from our boats. The Italians were drawn up towards the east of the island, where a part of the land descends towards the sea, which they considered to be almost inaccessible, and for that reason they had not fortified it. When they were approaching the island Monsieur D'Essé sailed from boat to boat, exhorting his men to courage and resolution. ‘ Comrades,’ he exclaimed, ‘ only follow me, and you will know ere long that it is not the place on which men fight, but the resolution with which they handle their arms, that wins the day.’

“ While Monsieur D'Essé was speaking, and about a dozen of boats were sailing by his side, he approached within reach of the stones and arrows of the enemy, who did him all the mischief in their power. He ran his vessel against one of the rocks which are discoverable only at low water, and thus his progress was for a time interrupted; but Monsieur Biron gained the eastern point of the island, near which the Italians were stationed. He secured the advantage of a rock which the ebbing tide had abandoned, and there with some gentlemen kept his position, until three or four boats which followed him landed their soldiers,



who beat off the Italians to the summit of the island. Monsieur D'Essé and several officers also effected a landing, but they had to contend with the steep declivities of the rock before they could reach a convenient place to attempt the summit, where the English and their Italian auxiliaries were now joined. While Monsieur Biron was advancing and gaining ground upon the enemy, he was wounded by the shot of an harquebuss, and a part of his helmet was driven into his head. When his followers saw the blood copiously flowing, they urged him to leave the contest, but he exclaimed, 'Since it is impossible that I can be preserved to die on a more honourable occasion, I entreat you, gentlemen, not to deprive me of the pleasure of either falling on the spot, or of sharing with you the glory of the day.' He became, however, so weak with the loss of blood, that it was necessary to convey him on board one of the galleys, and commit him to the care of his followers.

"The English had many advantages over us. They occupied a position thought inaccessible; they had supplied by art what was wanting by nature towards their defence: and they were more numerous within the island than we who attacked them, tired as we were by both the *fatigue at sea*,\* and the difficulties which we encountered at landing. To do the enemy justice, they made excellent use for a long time of their advantages, fought most obstinately against both Germans and French, and exposed themselves to infinite danger first when we attempted to land, and afterwards when we made the ascent. They had the boldness to wait, and they wanted courage to sustain the charge. Yet an Italian officer, among others, who for his skill in military affairs was very much esteemed by the King of

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\* This alleged *fatigue at sea* is really absurd. The distance from Leith Harbour to Iachkeith is not *four miles*. One would suppose the French must have been *sea-sick*.

England, found out a thousand means to plague us from a favourable position he contrived to occupy. This man was going from rank to rank, ordering some to fire, and others to advance, sometimes planting his guns and discharging them himself, when his head was carried off by a cannon ball from one of our galleys. The English did wonders as long as they had advantage of ground, but when they perceived that we gave up attempting the narrow paths and defiles, to come to a part of the island which contracts into a plain, they stood close together in a disorderly manner. One of them wishing to stimulate his countrymen, advanced against us waving a pair of colours, but he was killed by a shot, and the colours were taken amid the loud cheers of our men.

“ We were about two hundred altogether in this place, and though we attacked the enemy with all the valour imaginable, yet we could not injure them except with our shot. The English commander, active as he was—for the truth is, he advanced at the head of his small battalion with great resolution—soon found himself surrounded with heaps of slain, but this did not restrain his ardour. On the contrary, he continued to advance and lay about him most desperately. A gentleman named Desboryes, an ensign in Monsieur Biron’s company, made up to him sword in hand, but the English commander, having the advantage of a long pike, thrust it into his neck, and made way for his soul to get out of his frail body.

“ By this time all our men were landed, and Monsieur D’Essé with his soldiers had come to close quarters with the enemy. The English commander fell covered with wounds, and his men made a disorderly retreat to the part of the island where they surrendered. Our numbers amounted to seven hundred, and with the loss of three we made ourselves master of the island, defended by eight hundred English trained to war, and accustomed to slaughter. We

found on it a number of large and small guns, ammunition of all sorts, a quantity of warlike implements, and tools for carrying on the fortifications, besides Spanish wine, bedding, silk stuffs, woollen cloths, and other necessaries. Monsieur D'Essé absolutely refused to share in the booty, declaring that he would never appropriate to himself the property of soldiers, and that he intended to return to France enriched only with honour."

When the day dawned, two English ships and a boat were descried approaching the island to supply the garrison with provisions. One of the vessels was just nearing the island, and a French officer named St André, who had been left in command, exerted himself to decoy the crew, when by some means they discovered that their countrymen had been defeated, and they stood out to sea. St André discharged some guns at the vessels, but no injury was done. On the same day the Queen Dowager sailed to Inchkeith, and landed, with the greatest satisfaction at the result of the enterprise. According to the French account, she beheld between three hundred and four hundred of the slain lying uninterred. In an interview with St André, she said—"Well, Captain, is it in the power of the enemy to retake this island with as much dexterity as we have forced it from them?" "No, by Heaven, Madam!" replied the enthusiastic Frenchman, "the island of Inchkeith has much better ramparts to-day than it had yesterday." When Moncluc, Bishop of Valence, who accompanied the Queen Dowager to Inchkeith, advised the completion of the fortifications commenced by the English, St André replied—"My Lord, the better we are fortified we shall certainly be so much the more invincible, and if the enemy offer any interruption these brave men"—pointing to the soldiers—"will not fail to make ramparts of their arms and hearts."