



ART. XXVI.—*Solway Moss*. By W. NANSON, B.A., F.S.A.  
*Read at Arthuret, 23rd July, 1885.*

IN the course of our excursion to-day along the south side of the Esk we kept in view, towards the north, the tract of country once known as the Debateable Lands. At Kirkandrews, where we crossed the Esk, we stood within the limits of the disputed territory; and at Arthuret you look from the slope of the higher ground across the stretch of level country between the Esk and the Sark, which formed the western part of the Debateable Land, upon the scene of one of the most memorable incidents in the long history of the border warfare of the Western Marches.

The battle of Sollom, or Solway Moss, as it is commonly called, belongs to a period in the conflict between England and Scotland, when the struggle was no longer for conquest on the one side, and for freedom on the other, as it had been in the great wars of the Edwards. The English attempts at conquest had failed, and the existence of Scotland as an independent kingdom was ensured; but the old enmity lived on, and the national hatred found vent in marauding expeditions on a large scale in time of open war, and at other times in border raids, which still went on, even when the two nations were supposed to be at peace.

This was peculiarly the sort of warfare waged between England and Scotland during the closing years of the reign of Henry VIII. Henry had thrown off his allegiance to the Pope, and was anxious that his nephew, James V. of Scotland, should do the same. But James took the catholic side, and allied himself with France. Such was the state of things in 1542. "Already," says Froude,  
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“at the close of the summer before the harvest had been gathered in, the depredations began on a scale which was the prelude of war. Lord Maxwell, the Scottish Warden, having been in vain called upon to keep the borderers quiet, Sir Robert Bowes crossed the Marches in pursuit of a party of them; and falling into an ambuscade at Halydon Rigg, was taken prisoner with a number of other gentlemen.” This trifling success seemed to increase the ardour of the Scots for war. They were to invade England from the north; the French were to land in the south, and England was to be conquered. But Henry did not choose to wait for the invasion. He declared war at once, and on the 21st October, 1542, the Duke of Norfolk entered Scotland with twenty thousand men. The object of the expedition was to punish the borderers, and it was merely a border raid on a grand scale; so after having ravaged the Lothians for nine days, without having been attacked by the Scots, Norfolk returned to York, and disbanded most of his army.

The inactivity of the Scots was due to dissensions between the king and the nobles. They refused to fight, and the king went back to Edinburgh. But James was determined to be avenged. The better affected lords and their retainers were summoned to meet by night at Lochmaben. A force of from ten to fifteen thousand men assembled, but they were without organisation, without discipline, and without a leader. The king himself was at Carlaverock; Lord Maxwell, as warden of the Marches, had a sort of nominal command, but Oliver Sinclair, the king's minion, and a worthless favourite, was secretly authorised to declare himself commander as soon as the border was crossed.

At midnight on Friday, the 24th November, the eve of St. Catherine, more like a mob, it is said, than an army, the Scots marched out of Lochmaben. They came we may suppose through Gretna, and then, as all the accounts say,  
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they crossed the Esk, then probably took the old road towards Carlisle by way of the ford at "Willie of the boats." No warning of their approach had reached England, and Froude says that "the Cumberland farmers, waking from their sleep, saw the line of their cornstacks smoking from Longtown to the Roman Wall." But it is questionable whether the Scots got as far south as the Roman Wall, for Hollingshed's Chronicle merely says "they passed over the water of Eske, and burnt certain houses of the Grames on the verie border."

Though taken by surprise the English borderers were soon in arms. "The farmers and their farm servants," says Froude, "had but to snatch their arms and spring into their saddles and they became at once the Northern Horse, famed as the finest light cavalry in the known world." At the head of this gathering were those two valiant captains, Thomas Dacre, the Bastard of Lanercost, and Jack Musgrave of Bewcastle, who in Froude's most picturesque, but slightly fanciful account, are styled Lord Dacres and Lord Musgrave. They set upon the Scots though they had only about a hundred horse, and at the least show of resistance the rabble of invaders fell into utter confusion. To quote from Froude again, "The cry arose for direction, and at the most critical moment, Oliver Sinclair was lifted on spears and proclaimed through the crowd as commander. 'Who was Sinclair?' men asked. Every knight and gentleman, every common clan follower felt himself and his kinsman insulted." And John Knox says, in speaking of the reading of the royal commission in favour of Oliver, "There was present the Lord Maxwaill, Wardane, to whome the regiment of things in absence of the king propirlye apperteined. He heard and saw all, but thought more than he spak." But if they would not fight under Sinclair, there was nothing for it but to retreat. Meanwhile, evening was drawing on, and Sir Thomas Wharton, the deputy Warden  
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and Governor of Carlisle, hurried up with reinforcements. A state or ambush was planted on the side of a hill, perhaps it was at Arthuret, "wherewith," says Hollingshed, "the Scots were wonderfullie dismaied, thinking that either the Duke of Norfolk with his whole armie had beene come to these west marches, or that some other great power had been coming against them, when they saw onlie Sir Thomas Wharton with three hundred men marching forward toward them."

The catastrophe is soon told in the words of the chronicle. "But so it fortunued at that time, undoubtedly as God would have it, that the Scots fled at the first brunt, whome the Englishmen followed, and tooke prisoners at their pleasure; for there small resistance or none at all was shewed by the Scots." Lord Maxwell and other nobles, with two hundred gentlemen and eight hundred meaner folk, were prisoners, and much spoil was taken. In the account of the "Ancient state of the borders," in Nicolson and Burn, is printed a list by Sir Thomas Wharton of noblemen captured, with the names of their captors. Amongst them was Sinclair taken by Willie Bell. "Stout Oliver," as John Knox says, "was taken without stroke, flying full manfully."

It is not easy to get from the account in Hollingshed any clear idea of the exact scene of the battle, and there seems to be no other authority to help us. It has always been known as the battle of Solway Moss, and yet we cannot suppose that the actual fighting, such as it was, took place in a semi-fluid peat-bog. If, as is distinctly stated, the Scots crossed the Esk, then it stands to reason that they must have re-crossed it, and been in full retreat when Sir Thomas Wharton fell upon them somewhere near the moss, and it seems most likely that they got hemmed in on the plain you see before you, where they would have the Solway towards the south, the Sark on the west, the Esk, which they had just crossed, on the east,  
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and Solway Moss, ready to swallow them up, on the north. The ordnance map, I am aware, places the site of the battle in the middle of the moss, but in a map published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* shortly after the irruption of the moss in 1771, and described as "a draught of the Solway Flow in Cumberland," the field of the battle is shewn on the plain between the rivers to the south of the moss; and in Donald's map of Cumberland, published in 1774, it is shewn in exactly the same place. The accompanying map, which is copied with slight alterations from the one in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, will serve to shew the locality, but all is confused and uncertain when we try to make out from the meagre account in Hollingshead what were the movements of the opposing forces, or the positions which they occupied. It must be borne in mind too, that in all probability the present road from Gretna to Longtown did not exist in 1542, though there was a Roman road skirting the south side of the moss, which points to the fact that the moss was the same size then as now; and that the March Dyke, by which the Debateable Land was afterwards divided between England and Scotland, and which thus became the boundary between the two countries, had not been made.

To return to the battle, it seems as if the Scotch nobles refused to fight in order to punish the king for the slight he had put upon them, at least that is the explanation given by Scottish writers, with the exception of John Knox, who thought there was only one true cause of the disaster, namely, the judgment of God upon the catholics. No doubt there was a sudden panic, and then the very numbers of the Scots only added to the confusion. They were ignorant too of the country, and in the growing darkness, as they hurried northwards, they rushed straight upon the Moss, where they must either have perished, or been entirely at the mercy of the pursuers.

Never was there a more disgraceful defeat than this rout  
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of an army of ten thousand by a few hundred horsemen, and when the tidings came to James the shame and humiliation of it broke his heart. His servants came to tell him soon afterwards of the birth of a princess, the heir to his crown, she who was to be known as Mary Queen of Scots. But they could not rouse him from his melancholy. He only answered, "The deil go with it. It will end as it began. It came wi' a lass, and it'll gang wi' a lass."\* Eight days later, before the year was out, he died, with the same bitter cry upon his lips which he had first uttered when the news of Solway Moss was brought to him as he waited for tidings at Carlaverock. "Fie! fled Oliver! Is Oliver taken? All is lost!"

I find that it was in the next year, 1543, that Thomas Dacre had a grant from the crown of the lands of the dissolved Priory at Lanercost, so we may conclude that he got them as the reward of his valour. Sir Thomas Wharton, Knight, received a barony and became Lord Wharton, but I cannot find that Jack Musgrave was ever made a lord, except by Mr. Froude. Perhaps he was well content to be Captain of Bewcastle. His name is found among the list of those who claimed ransom for the prisoners. The Earl of Cassil was taken by one Batill Routledge, and Sir Thomas Wharton adds, "John Musgrave claimeth a part for the loan of his horse to the said Routledge." It is hard upon him that sometimes by a mistake his kinsman Sir William Musgrave of Hartley, who was sheriff of Cumberland about the same time, should get the credit of Jack's great exploit at Solway Moss."†

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\* This meant that as it was by Marjory Bruce that the crown had come to the house of Stewart, so by this infant princess it would pass away.

† *Nicolson and Burn*, vol i., p. 44.