

ART. XIII.—*New light on the skirmish at Clifton on 18 December 1745.* By the Rev. C. M. L. BOUCH, F.S.A.

Read at Clifton, July 12th, 1955.

THE brief engagement between the English army under H.R.H. the duke of Cumberland and the Jacobite forces of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, fought at Clifton in the evening of 18 December 1745, has an interest much beyond its real importance, because it was not only the last battle fought on English soil between Englishmen and Scotsmen, but the last clash of military forces of any kind on English ground: care must be taken as to the exact words used in this context, because it may be felt, not without reason, that the old feud between the two nations is still renewed yearly at Twickenham or Murrayfield.

The classic account of the skirmish is Chancellor Ferguson's lengthy Article in the tenth volume of the Old Series of this Society's *Transactions*, entitled "The retreat of the Highlanders through Westmorland in 1745", which was read at Kendal and Clifton in July 1883.¹ Since then, little fresh light has been thrown on the subject until the paper on "The court-martial of General Oglethorpe", by C. Roy Hudleston, F.S.A., was read to the Society at Penrith in September 1954.² That paper, as originally planned, was to contain in an appendix a letter from Joseph Yorke to his father, the first earl of Hardwicke; but when Mr Hudleston's MS. came before me as editor, I at once realised that though this letter had only an indirect bearing on General Oglethorpe's court-martial (hence the proposal to give it as

¹ CWI x 186-228.

² CW2 liv 200-211.

an appendix), it contained most important new evidence for the Clifton skirmish—in which, as rector of the parish, I was of course much interested. When I spoke to Mr Hudleston on the matter he at once, and most kindly, gave me leave to omit the proposed appendix from his article, and to use the letter as the basis for a separate study of the skirmish itself, which is now offered.³

The writer of the letter was a man of obvious ability who had a distinguished career in the army, becoming a general in 1777; in the diplomatic service, he was ambassador at the Hague, 1761-80, and in parliament he was M.P., 1751-80; in the latter year he was created Lord Dover. Before the '45 he had already, as Lieut.-Colonel of the 1st Regiment of Foot Guards and A.D.C. to the duke of Cumberland, seen service at the battle of Fontenoy, May 1745.⁴ These facts are important, for they show that the writer was not an amateur soldier, but already a man of experience, likely to know the facts—he was probably, as at Fontenoy, one of the duke's A.D.C.s—and that his evidence is therefore of first-class historical importance.

The events leading up to the skirmish are well known, and need only be mentioned briefly here.⁵ The essential point is that, in the retreat of the Prince's forces, the artillery train lagged a day behind the main body; as a result, most of the Highland army spent the night of 17 December at Penrith, but the rearguard, with the artillery, was still at Shap. Meanwhile the pursuing English army had been overtaking them rapidly, and by the morning of 18 December it had almost caught up. What happened next can be followed in Joseph Yorke's letter:—Joseph Yorke to Lord Hardwicke,⁶

³ Mr Hudleston wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the Leverhulme Research Trustees, without whose help he could not have undertaken research at the Public Record Office, and to his daughter Miss Anne Hudleston, who checked his transcription of the letter.

⁴ *Complete Peerage*, iv 448.

⁵ See Ferguson's article, CW1 x 186-228, and the present writer's *Prelates and People of the Lake Counties* (1948), 322, where a brief account is given.

⁶ British Museum, Add. MSS. 35354.

Penrith,
Dec: 19th: 1745
Thursday

My Lord,

The last night was so busy a one that I had not time to write a Line when H.R.H. dispatched the Express, besides not knowing what the Morning might produce, I thought it needless to write till all was over.—

Your Lordship knows the orders we received in the prosecution of this Scheme, so that it seemed almost unlikely that we should come up with the Rebels before they reached their own country; however, the consequence of protecting the country they were to pass thro' on their return, and continuing the Pannick they had got amongst them was too great to be at all neglected, accordingly, H.R.H. march'd the very instant he received the order, to Lancaster wch the Rebels had left the morning before, the next day to Kendal where they had stay'd till late of Tuesday morning, imagining that we were stopped by order, according to the Intelligence they received, & yesterday morning pursued his march for this place, where we heard the Rebels were; Genl. Oglethorpe with the Corps from M. Wade's army, wch was advanced before us, had orders to cut off the Retreat of the Rear Guard which was obliged to stop that night at Shap on acct. of the Artillery which could not get thro' to this place on acct. of the Badness of the Roads, wch lays all the way over barren mountains, but by what —— accident — I know not —— the affair was neglected, & gave us more trouble as the sequel will show:—that Rear Gd. was commanded by Lord George Murray and consisted of between six and seven hundred men.

When we had past the village of Shap wch is abt 5 long miles from Penrith, Intelligence was brought to the Duke that our advanced Party of the Dragoons had come up with the Rebel Rear Guard and kept 'em at Bay, whilst the Hussars & Light Groups of both sides were pick(etting?) with one another that the Main Body of the Rebels were still at this place, on receipt of this news we hasten'd our march forward, and when we came to Lord Lonsdale's park wall, of Lowther Hall, we found that 150 of the Rebels had been there to search for Horses, & threatenng to burn the House, who upon our approach retired to Clifton, when we were advanced within half a qr of a mile of the little village of Clifton, we saw the enemy were in possession of it, & intended to make a stand there. I can't say it gave me so much pleasure as it wd. have done in the morning, because it was then after 3 in the afternoon, we had

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a long night before us, & but 120 Foot up with us, who were likewise in the Rear of all, however something it was necessary to do, and that speedily & vigorously. The Cavalry were therefore formed immediately on the rising ground above the village, wch is called Clifton Fell, (or Common), & abt. 500 Dragoons order'd to dismount & attack the village:—by this time it was dark or pretty near it (for had not the Moon favour'd us a little it would have been worse) which was what I dreaded, knowing how they had served Cope & being entirely ignorant whether they intended to bring on a General affair there or only to amuse us with some of their chosen men, whils't the Rest made off for Carlisle: Our Dragoons moved forward in two Bodies to attack the village, wch consisted of one street with poor houses, & all enclosures abt. made with Dry Stone Walls, and thick Hedges wch. served them for Prospects & wch they had lined very thick with Infantry, on our men approaching they gave a smart fire, which put some of the Right of Blands into a little disorder, & exposed their Officers to the fury of some of the most desperate, who leaping over the walls fell upon 'em wth their swords & hacking as they do; crying out Murder 'em no quarter. Poor Phil Honeywood got 4 cuts upon his unlucky noddle but none dangerous, however the Rest of Bland's with Cobham's & Mark Kerr's behaving like Heroes, forced 'em back with loss, follow'd as close as order would permit 'em., and in abt. an hour's time dislodged 'em from the village & we posted ourselves in it. in the mean while care was taken that they should not take us in flank by the advantage of the stone walls wch. we had on each side of our Cavalry. Oglethorpe's Body was in the interim order'd another way round the village to cut off their retreat if they were but a small body, but he came up only with a party of 'em, who gave him one Fire, & then quitted their Post at Eimont Bridge abt a mile out of the village which he immediately took possession of.

As it was so late, & the way very much enclosed, it was thought proper to lye out formed up on that Common all night & to push patroles towards Penrith to take possession of it in case the Rebels quitted it for the country between Clifton & this is almost impracticable for cavalry & our Food was not to be up till this day.

The Rebels with whom we had engaged who consisted of a 1,000 men fled with the utmost precipitation throwing away their arms & Targets to their main body who as they went out say'd they were betray'd, that all the Army was come up & they should all be cut to pieces,—we have taken 2 or 3 officers & abt. 70 or 80 privates & volunteers & as we have People out

with the men of the country in pursuit of 'em we expect more in every hour. They had but few men killed for as it was dark & they had the advantage of the walls & hedges & their dirty dress into the bargain they could not be distinguished from the Hedges, but by the flash of their Firelocks, whereas our men being tall & cross buff belts made them easier perceived. Our loss I reckon is between 20 & 30 killed & wounded & abt 5 or 6 officers wounded, but not above one mortally. We past a terrible wet night on the common with no provision & very little Forage, so that Refreshment to our men & horses will be very necessary. I don't imagine the Rebels will stop at Carlisle in the fright they seem to be in, so that we shall hardly I fear reach 'em again. if we do, this is a good beginning; if we don't it is a great thing considering the consequence & what a risk we run in the night. It is amazing how strong a post they so shamefully abandoned, for had they done their Duty 10,000 would not have found it very easy to have dislodged a 1,000 from it.

I don't know whether we march to-morrow or not, but I suppose Yr. Lordship will know from the Duke.

Thank God! I escaped as I have hitherto done, with the utmost good fortune for wch I am always thankful. Excuse the Incorrectness of this acct. but my Head is a little confused & my spirits a good deal fluster'd with the Hurry we have been in, & the agitation of mind for fear of accidents.

I have the honour to be with the
My humble Duty attends . . . greatest regard Yr. Lordship's
Love & compliments to those most obliged & dutiful son
who ask after me. Joseph Yorke.

Our arrival saved this Town wch.
they were going to burn.

The Duke's Running Footmen foolishly
stragling before us yesterday was picked
up by the Rebels & carried off in great triumph.

(Endorsed) Penrith

Decr. 19th
1745.

from Joe

It may be noted that the regiments mentioned in Yorke's letter are represented in the Army to-day by the 3rd The King's Own Hussars (Bland's); the 10th Royal Hussars (Cobham's); the 11th Hussars (Kerr's); and the

7th Dragoon Guards (Ligonier's). The Highland clans engaged were the Macdonells, the Macdonalds, the Macphersons and the Stewarts, together with the Edinburgh Regiment.⁷

Those who are fortunate enough to possess a copy of Ferguson's article will see how closely this letter confirms the accuracy of his account. But the most interesting point about the letter is the light that it throws on the attitude of the English army. It is obvious that Yorke believed that the duke's forces had won a victory, though Oglethorpe's dallying was responsible for the success being less complete than had been hoped; the enemy had "fled with the utmost precipitation, throwing away their arms and targets", and had lost "2 or 3 officers and about 70 or 80 privates and volunteers as prisoners", though only a few men had been killed—whereas on the English side, though troops on the attack generally lose more than those on the defence, between 20 and 30 men were killed or wounded, and "about 5 or 6 officers wounded but not above one mortally".⁸

It is clear, then, from this letter that the English believed themselves to have been the victors. But on the other side, too, there was satisfaction: the objects of the Jacobite commander, "to delay the pursuers, to enable the retreat to Scotland to be continued unmolested and to disengage himself after the fight", had all been achieved successfully.⁹

There may have been one important after-effect of the affair, not previously recognised. Yorke's letter shows the obvious contempt of the professional soldier for the Jacobite clans: "a post they so shamefully abandoned,

⁷ Cf. CWI x 218 and C. R. Hartmann, *The Quest Forlorn* (1952), 133 f.

⁸ The Clifton parish registers show that altogether ten men were killed and one died subsequently:

"The 19th of December, 1745. Ten Dragoons, to wit, six of Bland's, three of Cobham's and one of Mark Kerr's Regiment buried who were killed ye evening before by ye Rebels in ye skirmish between ye Duke of Cumberland's army and them at ye end of Clifton Moor next ye Town."

"Robert Atkins, a private Dragoon of General Bland's Regiment Buried ye 8th Day of Janry, 1745."

⁹ C. R. Hartmann, *The Quest Forlorn* (1952), 134.

for had they done their duty'' and so on. The skirmish at Clifton was fought on 18 December; within a month, on 17 January 1746, the clans overwhelmed General Hawley's army at Falkirk, largely because Hawley consistently underrated his opponents.¹⁰ This was perhaps in part due, we may now suggest, to the false impression of Highland valour that prevailed in the English army after this skirmish. But the duke of Cumberland made no such mistake at Culloden.

APPENDIX.

Chancellor Ferguson records the traditional account of the burial of the Highlanders near the "Rebel Tree". The place has now been fenced off, and a stone erected with the following inscription:

"Here lie buried the men of the army of Prince Charles who fell at Clifton Moor 18 December 1745, erected by Georgina and Wilbert Goodchild 1936."

¹⁰ C. R. Hartmann, *op. cit.*, 149.