

A RARE CIVIL WAR TRACT.¹

By F. A. HYETT.

I have recently become possessed of a Civil War Tract, relating to the City of Gloucester, of great rarity. It was evidently unknown to Washbourn² and Fosbrooke.³ There is no copy of it in the British Museum or in the Bodleian, nor have I seen one in the more important private libraries in this county, the contents of most of which I have carefully examined. When I first read it, I thought I had obtained a prize indeed—valuable alike to the student of local history and the bibliophile—for not only is it, as far as I know, unique, but it gives an account of a severe engagement in the vicinity of Gloucester, unchronicled elsewhere. But on closer examination I soon came to the conclusion that however precious it may be to the book-collector, it does but throw dust in the eyes of the historian. None the less it is not without a kind of historical interest. Its title is as follows :—

“Exceeding // True and happy Newes from the // City of // Gloucester. // Being a perfect relation of a great // and bloody Battaile, fought before the // said City, Octob. the 11. 1642. // By Captaine Bustone, and Sergeant Major // Berry: sent thither by the Earl of // Essex, against the Lord Grandeson, and // 2000 Cavaliers which had pos-//sessed themselves of the City. // With the exact number of men slaine on both sides. // Attested by severall persons of good fashion // especially one Thomas Loworth, who was // an Eye witnesse of the said Battaile. // London, Printed for T. Franklin, Octob. 15. 1642.

¹ Read in the Historical Section at the Annual Meeting of the Institute, at Gloucester, August 16th, 1890.

² Author of the *Bibliotheca Gloucesterensis*, 2 vols., 4to., 1825.

³ Author of *Abstract of Records and Manuscripts Relating to the County of Gloucester*, 2 vols., 4to, 1807; and of *An Original History of the City of Gloucester*, 4to., 1819.

It is, like nearly all the Civil War Tracts, of the size known as pot. 4to., and like many of them, a poor literary performance. It consists of 4 leaves, unpagéd, but signed A 2, A 3. It gives little information beyond that which may be gathered from the title. Its story is as follows:—

“A great army” under Lord Grandison, consisting of about 2000 foot, and 500 or 600 horse entered Gloucester without resistance, and although Lord Grandison prohibited pillage, his soldiers committed depredations on the surrounding district. Whereupon the knights and gentry of the said County, being unable to protect their property, petitioned Lord Essex to send them assistance. In response to this appeal Essex sent 1000 horse and foot and four pieces of ordnance, under Captain Belfore and Sergeant Major Berry. The relief party met with no resistance until they came within five miles of Gloucester, when they were encountered by Lord Grandison, ‘on a comely white steed,’ who had marched out of Gloucester at the head of the greater part of his force. The first cannon shot fired by the Parliamentary forces knocked Lord Grandison’s hat from off his head and made him swear ‘many terrible oaths’ and then the fight began and lasted from two to eight p.m., ‘very hot and furious.’ In fact, ‘the number that was slain in this great conflict were about 50 of the enemy, besides 30 taken prisoners, and of our party about 23. At the length we obtained the victory by God’s assistance, and have strongly fortified the towne, insomuch that there dare not one malignant be seen in the County.”

Those who are conversant with the practices of the Civil War Pamphleteers will not be surprised to hear that the whole of this story is in all probability a fabrication. My grounds for believing it to be so are as follows:—

It is mentioned by no co-temporary historian, nor (to the best of my belief), in any other Civil War Tract or Newspaper. Now, considering the early period of the war at which it is alleged to have occurred (viz., between the skirmish at Powick Bridge¹ and the battle of Edge-Hill),² this is the more remarkable, for the nation had not got used to the intelligence of such encounters, and news of every action was eagerly sought for and widely circulated. It must, moreover, have been numerically the

¹ On Sept. 23, 1642.

² On Oct. 23, 1642.

most important encounter that had occurred, for the forces engaged were more than double in number those engaged at Powick Bridge.

But what, standing alone, is almost sufficient to impugn its authenticity is that Corbet,¹ in his "Historicall Relation of the Military Government of Gloucester, 1645," makes no mention of it. Now, Corbet, though a fairly reliable historian, is a strong partizan and not given to pass over in silence any incident which would redound to the credit of his party. He mentions the skirmish at Powick Bridge, some twenty-five miles from Gloucester, where 500 of the Parliamentary forces were routed by an inferior number of royalists. Is it credible that the rout of 2000 royalists by 1000 of his own party, almost under the walls of his own city, could have escaped his memory, or have been considered too unimportant for notice?

There is also some internal evidence that the Tract is an invention. The ostentatious parade on its title of the "severall persons of good fashion especially one Thomas Loworth who was an Eye wnesse of the said Battaile," who are called on to attest its truth, must at the outset arouse suspicion. Nor have we to read much further before our suspicions are increased. In the opening sentence the author writes as if narrating what he had heard. "From Gloucester it is credibly reported, and signified by divers letters that the said City [?] is in a lamentable estate and condition by reason of the Cavaliers having entered therein, &c." But before he has got to the end of the sentence he has changed his position, and is posing as a resident in Gloucester, for he continues, "but yet our hopes was to gather some certain number, and to oppose the said malignants, but before we could bring that notice to any perfection, there appeared within sight of the City a great Army, consisting of about two thousand Foot, &c." It is noticeable, too, that while the writer is very explicit respecting the numbers engaged, as to the locality of the encounter, he maintains a discreet silence.

There is a paragraph in the "Perfect Diurnall" for Oct.

¹ John Corbet was incumbent of St. Mary-de-Crypt, Gloucester, 1640—c. 1646

and Chaplain to Col. Ed. Massey during the siege of that city.

3-10, 1642, which at first sight may appear to tell in favour of the authenticity of the Tract, but which, on examination, tells strongly against it, if indeed it is not the very cause of its appearance. That paragraph is as follows:—“Oct. 4, we had letters from Gloucester declaring that the town, with the whole county, is in great danger of being utterly ruined and destroyed by the malignants and cavaliers, if not speedily prevented; the Lord Grandison, with about 2000 soldiers, having placed themselves at Gloucester and daily made excursions into the country, plundering and spoiling the same, etc.” Now the statement that Gloucester was at this time occupied by Lord Grandison is absolutely without corroboration, and must be rejected as untrue. It was either a rumour set on foot by the royalists to inspirit their party at a distance from Gloucester, which had gained credence with the editor of the Parliamentary newspaper, or it originated with the Parliamentarians, and was promulgated by them for some political or strategical purpose. In the former case when found to be untrue, it was desirable that its effects should be counteracted; in the latter, when it had served its object it was necessary that it should be effaced. Hence I believe the publication of the Tract in question. The similarity between the opening sentence of the Tract (which I have quoted) and the paragraph from the “Perfect Diurnall”, and the identity in the two of the number of Lord Grandison’s forces, strengthens the inference that the former was the sequence of the latter.

It may also be noticed that the skirmish is alleged to have taken place on the evening of Oct. 11, and that the Tract was printed in London on Oct. 15. It is not probable that news should have been carried from Gloucester to London, and printed in so short a time, though perhaps it is not impossible.

Bennett, in his History of Tewkesbury, gives another instance of fictitious news relating to affairs in this part of England. He mentions a tract entitled “True News out of Herefordshire,” published 1642, which purported to give an account of an action between the forces of the King and Parliament on Wednesday, Nov. 14, 1642, on the very field on which was fought the great battle of Tewkesbury between the houses of York and Lancaster.

I have never seen this tract, though I have often searched for it.

"In the unhappy times of our civil wars under Charles the First," says Isaac D'Israeli, "the newspapers and private letters afford specimens of this political contrivance of False Reports of every species. . . . There is no class of political lying which we want for illustration if we consult these records of our civil wars ; there we may trace the whole art in all the nice management of its shades we may admire that scrupulous correction of a lie which they had told by another which they are telling." If my contention is right the Tract which is the subject of this paper is a good instance of the truth of D'Israeli's assertion. As he truly observes "Such reports, if once printed, enter into history, and sadly perplex the honest historian."