

Fatal Rivalry, Flodden 1513: Henry VIII, James IV and the battle for Renaissance Britain

Review Number: 1768

Publish date: Thursday, 14 May, 2015

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ISBN: 9780297867395

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £20.00

Pages: 288pp.

Publisher: Weidenfield and Nicholson

Publisher url: <http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=4294972224>

Place of Publication: London

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On the ninth of September, 1513, the reign of James IV, Scotland's increasingly powerful and well-regarded Renaissance prince, came to an abrupt and unforeseen end near to the village of Branxton in Northumberland. The unmitigated disaster of the battle of Flodden, which resulted in the death of King James and the wholesale destruction of his army, was one of the most politically and militarily significant actions fought in 16th-century England. The battle's outcome, immortalised in contemporary songs, poetry, and histories, not only reflected the Tudors' growing power, but also cast a long shadow over Anglo-Scottish relations, instigating a renewed period of intermittent conflict which continued into the mid-1500s. Despite this importance, Flodden occupies an uncertain position for historians of early modern warfare, with the victory of an English army, employing late-medieval weaponry and tactics, over the modernising forces of the Scots challenging the supposed superiority of Renaissance military methods and technologies. This has prompted sustained analysis and criticism of James IV's army, and, indeed, of the King himself, in a bid to discern the reasons behind its surprising and devastating defeat at the hands of an outnumbered and poorly provisioned force of northern militiamen armed with theoretically obsolete weapons. But interpretations of Flodden are not confined to the battle itself, with the encounter on the ninth of September merely representing the culmination of an increasingly hostile relationship between the neighbouring kingdoms of England and Scotland.

This context provides the inspiration for George Goodwin's *Fatal Rivalry*, which locates the origins of the battle of Flodden in the incrementally deteriorating situation between the two realms and their rulers. Ultimately, Goodwin suggests that the rivalry in question stemmed from a long legacy of mutual antagonism, coupled with renewed competition between the occupants of both thrones following Henry Tudor's death. By emphasising Henry VIII's belligerent pursuit of power and status in his dealings with Scotland, Goodwin also counters the prevailing contemporary view of Scottish aggression, arguing instead that James's invasion was the direct product of English provocation. In discussing the enmity between the two kings, *Fatal Rivalry* also explores the implications of Renaissance 'new monarchy' in the British Isles, which resulted in the carnage of Flodden as a manifestation of competition in an age of personal rule.

The book consists of 21 short chapters, which progress in chronological order from the accession of James

IV and Henry VII to the events of 1513 and their aftermath. Although these chapters are not assembled into explicit groups, the work can be divided into five main sections, which serve to advance the narrative and pursue relevant digressions into related issues. The first section details the situation preceding the Treaty of Perpetual Peace (1503), which united England and Scotland via the marriage of Margaret Tudor, while the second discusses the principles of Renaissance monarchy and its expression in the reigns of James IV, Henry VII, and Henry VIII. The third section outlines the various short-term factors that created the conditions for war in 1513, preparing the ground for the final groups of chapters, which cover the campaign and battle itself. In choosing this approach, Goodwin provides a background not just to the 1513 campaign, but for the era as a whole, placing the events of the early 16th century in the context of the longstanding conflict between Scotland and England. Overall, the work's short chapters and direct, conversational tone, enables the incremental evocation of the late-medieval British Isles in a manner suitable for general readers, although subject specialists may find some of this detail, particularly a chapter on ancient Scottish history, extraneous to the central narrative.

The opening chapters reach backwards into the late 15th century to highlight the similarities between the rulers of England and Scotland, drawing attention to the parallels between the careers of Henry Tudor and James IV, both of whom attained power by force, and both of whom had initially limited control of their kingdoms. This comparison develops into a discussion of the means by which royal authority was expanded and consolidated in both realms, while also noting James's efforts to destabilise England with his support for the pretender Perkin Warbeck in 1496⁷. By focussing on both monarchs' strengthening of their position, and the painstaking process by which Anglo-Scottish hostilities were eventually suspended, the work highlights the significance of the Treaty of Perpetual Peace, emphasising the robust nature of the agreement and its capacity to endure in the absence of subsequent interference. Additionally, the meeting between King James and Thomas Howard, the Earl of Surrey who escorted Margaret Tudor into Scotland for her marriage, establishes another important pairing, that of the opposing commanders at Flodden, who had previously confronted one another six years before the signing of the Treaty.

It is in the second set of chapters, when documenting the Renaissance monarchy's hunger for power and prestige, that Goodwin identifies the accession of Henry VIII as the key component in the later breakdown of the Treaty of Perpetual Peace. Whereas Henry VII and James IV were evenly matched, beginning their reigns in similar circumstances and concurrently developing their support and influence, the new English king, driven by pride, ambition, and the pursuit of glory, had much to prove. By offering a character study of the young Henry VIII, informed by the accounts of the Spanish ambassador, Goodwin sustains the popular parallel between the prince's frustrating seclusion from the hazards of the tiltyard and his subsequent self-assertion upon attaining the throne. This characterisation of Henry as an aggressively insecure king, keen to win acclaim, is emphatically contrasted with the author's presentation of James as a more developed and mature ruler, whose early impetuosity had been tempered by experience of government. Not only is James's appreciation of political compromise shown by his delegation of power and gradual extension of authority over the Scottish islands, but instances of extravagant display, exemplified by the construction of royal palaces and holding tournaments, are invoked to demonstrate his use of pageantry as a substitute, rather than a precursor, for force. In this sense, Goodwin suggests that it was ultimately the rivalry between an established and an aspiring Renaissance prince, and in some cases a misinterpretation of the expression of that rivalry, which introduced a dangerous and unpredictable variable into the relationship between the realms and made hostilities an increasingly likely outcome.

Having established the dynamics of the disagreement between Henry and James, the book moves on to addressing the short-term factors leading to conflict in 1513, outlining the impact of an increasingly bitter propaganda war between the two kings. By merging discussion of the 1512 Subsidy Act, which sought to reconfigure Scotland's status as a vassal rather than an independent realm, with the refusal of Queen Margaret's inheritance, Goodwin ably demonstrates the Tudors' mixture of political and personal affronts to James's royal prestige. Such insults are noted alongside increased tension on the Borders, and details of isolated clashes at sea, and serve to underline the argument that signs of the irreconcilable differences between the two kingdoms were discernible long before the formal outbreak of war. While these

provocations were individually insufficient grounds for repudiating the Treaty of Perpetual Peace, their cumulative impact in the context of a deteriorating European situation was such that both kings were committed to war, even before Henry's invasion of France compelled James to support his international allies. The apparent English commitment to returning Scotland to a state of vassalage is thus offered as an explanation for James's decision to invade, with the pattern of Tudor policy suggesting that a breakdown of the peace between the nations was imminent. It is difficult to fault Goodwin's reasoning that, as a breach of the Treaty was inevitable, it served King James's strategic interests to strike first, while Henry and his main army were in France.

In keeping with the author's character study of the two rulers and their rivalry, the penultimate set of chapters follows both campaigns, counterpointing descriptions of Henry's expedition to France with James's attack on England. While this alternating focus allows the recounting of Henry's triumphs, including the capture of Tournai and Thérouanne, and the victory of the 'Battle of the Spurs' at Guinegate, it arguably detracts somewhat from Goodwin's coverage of the response to the Scottish invasion. When describing the mustering of the northern army, for instance, relatively little is said about the organisation and training of the soldiers that opposed the Scots at Flodden, beyond a description of the troops of the Earl of Surrey and the Lord Admiral, a state of affairs which contrasts with the extensive information provided regarding James's forces. Similarly, the chapters' split format sometimes results in key details, such as the sustained references to the composition and equipment of the Scots' army, being dispersed, rather than concentrated into a single, comprehensive section. Regardless of these occasional problems of coherency, Goodwin succeeds in establishing vital links between the two campaigns, with the progress of the English army in France being mirrored by James's advance southwards, and his taking Norham and other key fortresses.

The book's discussion of English and Scottish seapower is particularly noteworthy, in that it reveals an important, albeit indirect, association between naval warfare and the outcome of the Flodden campaign. By documenting the Howard family's near disgrace in the office of Lord Admiral, culminating in the death of Edward Howard during a failed attack on Brest in April 1513, *Fatal Rivalry* provides an explanation as to why the Earl of Surrey and his sons were left behind to defend the North, rather than accompanying King Henry and his nobles to France. Given the prior association between James and Surrey, with the Earl gaining valuable insights into the King's character at the marriage of Margaret Tudor, this may have been a fateful decision, one which the author asserts as a possible factor in the Scots' defeat. More significantly, Goodwin also advances the theory that James originally intended his expanding fleet to play a far greater role in the campaign of 1513. This assertion is supported with evidence that the King's named gunners, who typically represented the most skilled artilleryists available to Renaissance commanders, were assigned to his ships rather than the field force, depriving the Scottish army of a much-needed tactical asset during the battle.

The final three chapters concern the immediate preliminaries to Flodden, the battle itself, and its aftermath, with just under 15 pages dedicated to the immediate context of the action and a final, brief comparison between the two forces, while a further 23 pages detail the manoeuvres and fighting on 9 September. Although forming a relatively small part of the overall work, these chapters bear the fruits of many of Goodwin's previously executed character studies and build upon the gradual accretion of information regarding both armies. For instance, the exploration of Surrey's dilemma in the days before the battle, with James's forces ensconced atop Flodden Hill, emphasises the vulnerability of the Earl's army to mounting supply problems, ultimately attributing his daring manoeuvre around the Scots' position to desperation and an unwillingness to retreat and incur dishonour. Similarly, James's own, much-criticised, decision to risk battle is shown as the product of his faith in his army, coupled with a gambler's nature and a desire to crown his current success with further glory. In this respect, the chapter's short digression into Renaissance conflict in Italy, as shown by the contemporary battle of Novara, forms a useful illustration of the perceived effectiveness of Swiss pike tactics, serving to justify the Scottish King's trust in the realm's recently adopted weaponry. As with his previous discussion of artillery, however, Goodwin raises doubts regarding the training of James's army, noting that the Scots had received only limited instruction with the pike, and signalling another potential factor in their downfall.

When discussing the engagement itself, the book's 20th chapter opens with the Earl of Surrey's attempted outflanking manoeuvre, and James's subsequent redeployment to Branxton Hill, noting that, by arriving before the English, the Scots' plan to unleash an artillery bombardment as a precursor to a pike charge could be retained. However, Goodwin astutely observes that 'the only risk would be that any advance would be on ground he [James] had not planned to cross' (p. 194), signalling the central role that topography would play in the forthcoming struggle. After setting the scene for the encounter, the chapter briefly summarises the dispositions of the opposing forces, identifying the commanders of each division and the regional affiliations of the various contingents. While such information is useful in establishing who controlled each sector of the battlefield, there is scope for consideration of how the estimated 34,000 Scots were distributed into their component units, particularly as corresponding details are provided for the number of English soldiers in each division. More could likewise be said regarding the arraying of both forces before the action, with Goodwin's assertion that, for the English, 'everything harked back to the Wars of the Roses' (p. 190) suggesting a contest between linear and columnar formations, which unfortunately remains unexplored. In this respect, it would also be interesting to see greater attention paid to deployment maps (on pages 203 and 207), which are scarce and are not provided with a key to differentiate or identify units beyond the names of their commanders.

Nonetheless, the book offers an effective discussion of the battle, defending James's decision to delay his attack until the English army had fully deployed on the grounds that he wanted to achieve a total, rather than a partial, victory, and showing the failure, firstly of the Scots' artillery, and finally of their pike charge. Although the reader is reminded of previously noted limitations in James's army, namely his shortage of skilled gunners and his troops' rudimentary training with the pike, Goodwin ultimately attributes the Scots' defeat to the terrain in which the battle was fought, identifying two crucial factors that magnified these existing deficiencies. The first was the difficulty of maintaining accurate downhill artillery fire, a problem exacerbated by the relatively inexperienced Scottish gunners, and by the slow reload time and high-recoil of their heavy ordnance, which was better suited to sieges than field warfare. The second, much more dangerous, factor was the condition of the ground at the foot of Branxton Hill, which lay directly in the path of the Scots' main advance. In drawing attention to this issue, *Fatal Rivalry* advocates the findings of Paul Younger and describes how the hill's seemingly gentle incline, when viewed from above, conceals a steep slope that gives way to an area of marshy groundwater discharge, which is virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding fields. The impact of this treacherous quagmire on an attacking formation containing thousands of soldiers would, as Goodwin notes, be catastrophic, resulting in a near-total loss of cohesion and momentum, the precise dynamics upon which successful use of the pike depended. Thus James's defeat resulted both from the shortcomings of his army, as noted by Barr and Phillips, but also from the interaction between these weaknesses and the landscape.⁽¹⁾

By emphasising the importance of the physical environment, in the form of gradient and hydrogeology, to the outcome of an engagement, Goodwin implicitly aligns himself with the growing body of work associated with Military Terrain Analysis. This series of methodologies, which has yielded results at both North American and British conflict sites, seeks to define an area's historic, as opposed to modern, terrain, allowing scholars to plot the probable movement of soldiers and determine the impact of topographical features on an action.⁽²⁾ While the book does not directly explore these approaches, their successful application to Wars of the Roses battlefields such as Towton (1461) and Bosworth (1485), combined with Goodwin's assertion of Young's conclusions, illustrates a potential direction for further research at Flodden.⁽³⁾ Given the significance accorded to the landscape, which is described in various passages as 'generally open treeless scrubland' (p. 194) comprised of 'dips and ridges' (p. 202), the book's inclusion of gradient data on its maps is pleasing, although greater clarity of the different terrain types would be enabled by colour images and detailed labelling. Similarly, the decision to include only two greyscale tactical-level maps seems at odds with the book's numerous reproductions of portraits in colour, although a pair of photographs showing the view to and from Branxton Hill provides a valuable illustration of the battlefield's modern geography.

Throughout his discussion of the engagement, Goodwin pays particular attention to Flodden's transitional status as 'the last medieval and the first early modern British battle' (p. 190), witnessing the involvement of both archers and artillery alongside Scottish use of the pike versus the English bill. This analysis of the various weapons' strengths and weaknesses is well-handled, highlighting the battle-winning yet circumstantial advantages of bills over pikes at Flodden when the Scots' pikemen had lost their cohesion, and noting the relative novelty of field artillery in an English context. Equally, the work illustrates the longbow's limited impact at the battle's outset, attributing it to the consequences of inclement weather and improved armour, but noting its greater role at closer quarters. However, Goodwin's statement that Flodden was 'the last time that the longbow would prove its worth' (p. 206) elides a complex debate and fails to account for the weapon's continuing use in tandem with firearms as part of a Tudor tactical system, which achieved subsequent success at the battle of Pinkie (1547). Notwithstanding these details, the work provides a succinct and engaging commentary on the battle that makes use of available source materials and highlights, albeit at the very end of the book, the lacuna in Scottish accounts, which has led to narratives of dubious reliability seeking to fill the gap. Goodwin not only places the action within the framework of the campaign and its aftermath, but also considers Flodden's consequences for the successors of James IV, for the development of the Tudor state, and for future Anglo-Scottish relations.

Overall, the book's main strength lies in its ability to situate the battle of Flodden within a background of sustained rivalry between the realms of England and Scotland, with the encounter itself representing an expression of the destructively competitive nature of Renaissance monarchy. Goodwin presents not just the history of a battle, but, crucially, the history into which the battle fits, making his work a valuable addition to the body of literature discussing 16th-century Renaissance kingship and conflict in a British context.

Notes

1. N. Barr, *Flodden, 1513: The Scottish Invasion of Henry VIII's England* (Stroud, 2001); G. Phillips, *The Anglo-Scots Wars, 1513 ? 1550: A Military History* (Woodbridge, 1999).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Douglas D. Scott and Andrew P. McFeaters, 'The archaeology of historic battlefields: a history and theoretical development in conflict archaeology', *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 19, 1 (2011), 103-32.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Veronica Fiorato, Anthea Boylston and Christopher Knüsel, eds, *Blood Red Roses: The Archaeology of a Mass Grave from the Battle of Towton A.D. 1461* (Oxford, 2007); G. Foard and A. Curry, *Bosworth 1485: A Battlefield Rediscovered* (Oxford, 2013).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review.

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