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## "THE BONNY EARL OF MURRAY": THE BALLAD AS HISTORY

ANDREW LANG SPOKE of the murder of "The Bonny Earl" of Moray as "a deed which for years influenced the politics of Scotland."<sup>1</sup> It is also the subject of one of the most beautiful and stirring of the Scottish ballads (Child 181)<sup>2</sup>, compelling even to people hearing or reading it for the first time. A ballad should certainly not be judged on whether or not it is good history; either it tells a story well or it does not. Neither will our knowledge of its historical background make us see a poor ballad as a good one. On the other hand, such knowledge can and often does add another dimension to our enjoyment. In the present study of "The Bonny Earl of Murray," for example, it can show us the ballad as both history and something that helped to make history—an expression of a people's anger.

Child's headnote (which is mainly taken from Spottiswoode)<sup>3</sup> gives the essentials of the ballad's historical background. To summarize briefly: Murray had come south to his mother's castle Donibristle, just across the Firth from Edinburgh, ostensibly to be reconciled with his traditional enemy, the Earl of Huntly. Meanwhile, a rumor was circulated that Murray had been seen with Bothwell on the night of his raid on Holyrood House, so Huntly was sent to bring Murray to trial. Instead, he set fire to Donibristle and slew him. Murray's death was "universally lamented," and the "clamors of the people" were enough to make the King leave Edinburgh. Huntly was allowed to go free after what amounted to token punishment. There would be no point in my simply retelling the whole story

from other sources, interesting as that story may be.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I will take it for granted that the reader is acquainted with the account given by Child, but I would like to give him some interesting additional material that might not otherwise be easily available. I would also like to show why this particular murder caused such great excitement, what its effects were, and, finally, what part the ballad itself may have played in the whole affair.

The reaction to Murray's murder was evidently profound. Even if we grant that most of the contemporary accounts were written by true sons of the Kirk, we still see that the event put Edinburgh in a turmoil. David Calderwood is comparatively restrained: "Upon Tuisday, the 8th of Februar, Edinburgh [was] full of mourning and lamentatioun, earelie in the morning, for a cruell murther committed in the night before, upon the Erle of Murrey, in his own place at Dinnybrissill, and the Shireff of Murrey, by the Erle of Huntlie."<sup>5</sup> Mr. David Moysie, writer and notary public in Edinburgh, becomes much more indignant: "And vpon the morne thereafter, quhaire [?] the said erle of Huntley with his bloudie menzie [retinue] maist tressonable reased fyre, brunt the house of Donnybrisell, and maist unvorthelie and schamefullie murdreist and slew the said vmquhill [late] erle of Murray . . . to the great regrait and lamentatioun of the haill pepill." Huntly and his men are "bloodie traitoris," and they "returnit peceable fra that execrable murthour."<sup>6</sup> James Melville speaks of it as treason which "yit mightelie cryes and importunes the ear of the righteous inqyrrar and avengar of bloode."<sup>7</sup> An English "intelligencer," one Aston, wrote from Edinburgh on February 8 that the murder "is counted very odywos be al men, the King takes it very hevily. . . . The pepil cryes outt of the crewelty of the ded. We loke for nothing but mischef."<sup>8</sup> The King and Chancellor Maitland, as we know, left Edinburgh "to eshew the obloquic and murmuring of the people. Hardly could they be asswaged."<sup>9</sup> The provost had difficulty keeping the crafts from restraining the King by force!

Murders of this sort were not particularly uncommon at the time. Why did this one cause such a stir? We know that Murray was a popular figure; Moysie calls him "the lustiest youthe, the first noble man of the Kingis bloode, and one of the peiris of the countrey."<sup>10</sup> We also know that his mother, the Lady Doune, was doing her best to keep the issue alive and burning:

Upon the nynth of Februar, the erle of Murrey's mother, accompanied with her friends, brought over her some's and the Shireff of Murrey's deid corps, in litters, to Leith, to be brought from thence to be buried in the

yle of the Great Kirk of Edinburgh, in the Good Regent's tombe; and, as some report, to be made first a spectacle to the people at the Croce of Edinburgh. But they were stayed by command from the king . . . The Erle of Murrey's mother caused draw her sonne's picture, as he was demained [injured], and presented it to the king in a fyne lane cloath, with lamentatiouns, and earnest sute for justice. But little regard was had to the mater. Of the three bullets she found in the bowelling of the bodie of her sonne, she presented one to the king, another to \* \* [sic] the thrid she reserved to herself, and said, "I sall not part with this, till it be bestowed on him that hindreth justice."<sup>11</sup>

But nothing so far can account for a reaction so violent that it bordered on insurrection. The Scottish historian James Browne gives us the clue: "The death of the Earl of Moray," he says, "would have passed quietly over, as an event of ordinary occurrence in these troublesome times; but as he was one of the heads of the protestant party, the presbyterian ministers gave the matter a religious turn by denouncing the catholic earl of Huntly as a murderer, who wished to advance the interests of his church by imbruing his hands in the blood of his protestant countrymen."<sup>12</sup> The central issue, then, was religion.

Let us review the religious situation. Scotland was a strongly Protestant country. Ever since the invincible wreckage of the Great Armada had washed ashore in 1588, there seemed to be little danger of a Catholic uprising, and even less of a restoration. James himself was clearly a Protestant, but the question arose as to just how Protestant, for within the Kirk there was a struggle going on between the Calvinist, Presbyterian Left and the Episcopal Right. Had this been a purely ecclesiastical squabble, it would be less important, but it impinged upon the civil power, especially that of the King, for the Presbyterians were clearly envisioning a State subservient to the Kirk. "The preachers," said Andrew Lang, "desired the State to be ruled by God's Word, of which they were the infallible interpreters."<sup>13</sup> King James, then, was in an awkward position. This militant Presbyterianism was clearly in the ascendant and had great popular support, yet to give in to it would mean that he was that much less the king. If he tried to restore the hated episcopacy to power, he would be in even worse trouble. As might be expected, he tried to trim between the two, but the Left felt that he was either with them or against them, so James found himself accused of having Catholic tendencies, even of having dealings with Papal agents. And James, to make matters worse, chose to be lenient with, and even friendly toward, the most notoriously Catholic of his lords, George Gordon, the Earl of Huntly, a man who was continually engaged in intrigues with Philip of Spain and the Duke of Parma, it would seem. James was perfectly aware of this fact; at least it had been pointed out to

him both by the Kirk and by Elizabeth, but he had a fondness for Huntly and did not seriously discipline him. Needless to say, the Kirk viewed the King's leniency to Huntly as even worse than his insistence that his Queen be anointed to her coronation.

Huntly was a dangerous man, no doubt, but he was in no position to challenge the real Protestant power. His attack on Murray at Donibristle was the logical result of a long standing feud between the two men, a feud which may have had its roots in the fact that the Gordons had been Earls of Murray as well as Earls of Huntly until Mary had made her half-brother, James Stewart (the "Good Regent"), Earl of Murray, thus taking land and title from the Gordons. But even if the feud did not carry back this far, there were inter- and intra-clan rivalries (notably the one concerning the succession to the Earldom of Argyll)<sup>14</sup> which were more than sufficient to cause the two men to hate each other roundly. Whether they thought in ecclesiastical terms when they faced each other at Donibristle I cannot say, but I doubt that they did. The Kirk, however, saw in the affair an excellent stick with which to beat God's good sense into the rather-too-Episcopal James. Here, within sight of Edinburgh, a popular Protestant, who held the same title as the "Good Regent," had been murdered by "the great Papal potentate who held rule in the north, defying the laws for the establishment of the Protestant religion."<sup>15</sup>

Certainly the King did not help his cause by the leniency he showed Huntly in the matter of Murray's murder. The Earl was warded in Castle Blackness, but he was set free under surety in less than ten days. At this point, according to Calderwood, "The Ladie Down, seing no justice lyke to be obtained for the murther of her sonne, left her maledictioun upon the king and died in displeasure."<sup>16</sup> The Kirk wished to excommunicate Huntly, but the King replied hotly that Bothwell and the rest of the Holyrood raiders had not been excommunicated. "He seems to have forgotten," says Andrew Lang, "that Bothwell was, or feigned to be, a Protestant and had only attacked a king."<sup>17</sup> Chancellor Maitland, that "puddock-stoole of a night," as Bothwell called him, was finally forced to leave the Court. Again and again the King was implicated in the murder and blamed for it, "and not without caus," says Calderwood. "For he hated the erle of Murrey, partlie becaus he hated that hous for the Good Regent's sake; partlie becaus the erle was suspected to be a favourer of Bothwell."<sup>18</sup>

Finally, James sent for several of the ministers; he disclaimed any part in the murder and desired them to clear him before the

people. "They desired him," says Calderwood, "to cleere himself by earnest persuing of Huntlie with fire and sword."<sup>19</sup> Again, nothing was done; the King claimed that his part was like David's, when Abner was slain by Joab. He had a proclamation read "with beating of the drumme" to declare himself innocent, but he could not stem the tide. He was in trouble, and in order to redeem himself he gave the Kirk everything it wanted by passing the so-called "Golden Act" of June, 1592: "The Ratification of the Libertie of the True Kirk." The act swung the Kirk decidedly to the Left and gave it greater civil power than it had ever had before.

We come now to our final question: What part did the ballad of "The Bonny Earl of Murray" play in all this? The clue is to be found in James Melville's *Diary*. Speaking of the passage of the "Golden Act," he says:

The aw [terror] of Bodualls remeaning alwayes within the Countrey, and often tymes hard about the Court, togidder with the horror of the deid of Dinnibirsall, quhilk the vnburied corps lyand in the Kirk of Leithe, maid to be nocht onlie vnburied amangs the peple, *but be comoun rymes and sangs keipit in recent detestation*, alsmickle as the publict threatning of Gods iudgments therupon from pulpites, obtained . . . that quhilk haid cost vs mikle pean in vean monie yeirs before, to wit, the Ratification of the libertie of the trew Kirk.<sup>20</sup>

The italics in the above passage are mine. While no definite proof exists that the ballad we know today was one of the songs sung then, there is every reason to believe that it was. A ballad usually appears very soon after the event it celebrates, and the fact that "The Bonny Earl of Murray" is extremely partisan in tone makes it even more probable that it was one of those "comoun rymes and sangs" that kept public indignation at a pitch for months. Interestingly enough, neither of the extant versions directly implicates the King; in fact, they both show him to have been angry with Huntly for what he had done. But there is no mistake about the pieces being anti-Huntly, consequently anti-Catholic. Further, there are two other ballads that arose from the same complex of events as "The Bonny Earl of Murray" and show political-religious alignments similar to it. "The Laird of Logie" (Child 182) portrays the King "in the role of the duped and mocked oppressor,"<sup>21</sup> and has a Bothwellian for a hero. "Willie Macintosh" (Child 183), although less obviously partisan, is clearly anti-Huntly; after all, the hero is "Bonny" Willie Macintosh, while Huntly is just plain "Huntly." It is also significant that the incidents that these two ballads chronicle occurred after the King had passed the "Golden Act." If folksongs can be taken as indices of popular sentiment (as well as shapers

of it), we see that for all his concessions James had not yet become a popular hero.

We today see "The Bonny Earl of Murray" (especially version A) as high folk art, as something aesthetically pleasing, but it is well to remember that it was once sung fiercely in the streets to inflame the heart of Scotland against the Enemy, the great Papist Lord from the North, and hence against his protector, the King himself. Like some Damascus blade in its museum case, it is lovely to look at, but it once had its work to do and knew the color of man's blood.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Lang, *A History of Scotland from the Roman Occupation* (New York, Edinburgh, and London, 1902), II, 355.

<sup>2</sup> Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, 1882-98), III, 447-449.

<sup>3</sup> For the complete account, see the Right Rev. John Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Spottiswoode Society, 1851), II, 410 ff.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the sources mentioned by Child, see also Lang, II, 357 ff.

<sup>5</sup> David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1842-49), V, 144.

<sup>6</sup> David Moysie, *Memoirs of the Affairs of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1830), The Bannatyne Club no. 39, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> *The Diary of Mr. James Melvill, 1556-1601* (Edinburgh, 1829), The Bannatyne Club no. 34, p. 198.

<sup>8</sup> Lang, II, 357.

<sup>9</sup> Calderwood, V, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Moysie, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Calderwood, V, 145. The picture mentioned may be the one which, according to one historian, is "known to be in existence. . . . It represents the naked body of the Earl as it appeared after death, gashed with wounds, horrid with clotted blood and the blue shades of decomposition." It bears the inscription "1591, Feby. 7. God revenge my cavs. Aeta 24." See Charles Rampini, *A History of Moray and Nairn* (Edinburgh and London, 1897), p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> James Browne, *A History of the Highlands and of the Highland Clans* (Glasgow, 1840), I, 220.

<sup>13</sup> Lang, II, 350.

<sup>14</sup> See Spottiswoode, II, 410-411; Lang, II, 355-356; Donald Gregory, *The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland* (London, 1881), p. 248.

<sup>15</sup> John Hill Burton, *The History of Scotland* (London, 1898-1901), V, 290.

<sup>16</sup> Calderwood, V, 149.

<sup>17</sup> Lang, II, 358.

<sup>18</sup> Calderwood, V, 144. See also Moysie, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Calderwood, V, 145.

<sup>20</sup> Melvill, *Diary*, p. 198.

<sup>21</sup> Agnes Mure Mackenzie, *The Scotland of Queen Mary and the Religious Wars 1513-1638* (Edinburgh and London, 1936), p. 228. Miss Mackenzie's statement implies that Logie's escape occurred before the "Golden Act." Nevertheless, it was her fine book that first brought the Melville passage quoted above to my attention.