

## SIEGES OF THE CASTLE OF MERCHISTON.\*

A.D. 1571, 1572.

AT the head of the common called Burntsfield Links, belonging to the city of Edinburgh, and near the little village called Boroughmuirhead, stands the ancient castle of Merchiston, a baronial residence in good condition, and celebrated as the birth-place and patrimonial residence of the great John Napier, the inventor of Logarithms. This castle, a building of no strength, and without defences, was in those years of troubles which succeeded the flight of Queen Mary into England the scene of many contentions, and the future abode of science and philosophy often resounded with the clash of arms and the violence of mutual strife. The dreadful state of Scotland during those times is eloquently described by Archbishop Spottiswoode. "A new civil war," says that venerable prelate, "did then (1571) break out, which kept the realm in trouble the space of two years very nigh, and was exercised with great enmity on all sides. You would have seen fathers against their sons, sons against their fathers, brothers fighting against brothers, nigh kinsmen and others allied together as enemies, seeking one the destruction of another. Every man, as his affection led him, joined to the one party or other; one professing to be the *King's men*, and the other the *Queen's*. The very young ones, scarce taught to speak, had

---

\* Memoirs of John Napier of Merchiston, by Mark Napier, Esq.; Bannatyne's Memorialles, printed by the Bannatyne Club; Archbishop Spottiswoode's History; The Historie and Life of King James the Sext, printed by the Bannatyne Club, from a MS. in the Library of the Marquess of Lothian at Newbattle Abbey.

these words in their mouths ; and were sometimes observed to divide, and have their childish conflicts in that quarrel. But the condition of Edinburgh was of all parts of the country the most distressed. They that were of quiet disposition and greatest substance were forced to forsake their houses, which were, partly by the soldiers, partly by other necessitous people, who made their profit of the present calamities, rifled and abused."

The Lothians were often overrun with fire and sword in those unhappy feuds, and almost every baronial residence or castle was plundered. Among these the old fortalice of Merchiston, on account of its situation, was often assailed. Sir Archibald Napier, the seventh Laird or Baron of Merchiston, and father of the immortal philosopher, was its then proprietor, a man of high character, but who, although a staunch friend to the Reformation, was, like his immediate neighbour, Fairley of Braid, what is called a *quiet man*, and took part with neither faction. The Laird of Braid was exposed to similar military visitations, of which the following is a specimen, as recorded by Richard Bannatyne, secretary to John Knox. On Friday the 25th of May 1571, a dozen of soldiers came to Braid at supper-time, and rifled the miller's house, the miller being at supper with the Laird, not as his *guest*, but in conformity to the practice then and long afterwards observed, of all the domestics and servants taking their proper places at the family table, and dining or supping with their master. Of this custom there is an admirable illustration in "Old Mortality," when Sergeant Bothwell enters the hall of Milnwood, and finds old Morton, his nephew, Cuddie Headrig, his mother Mause, and the servants, all at dinner together. When the soldiers on the present occasion saw the miller hastily approaching to prevent their plunder, they seized him, and led him to the Laird's gate. The Laird himself had by this time appeared, but they treated him with the utmost contempt, ordering

him to come out and surrender to Captain Melville, or they would burn the house about his ears. From the mention of Captain Melville, it appears that this was a party in favour of Queen Mary, as he was one of the eight sons of Sir James Melville of Raith, and his lady, Helen Napier of Merchiston, who were all devoted adherents of Queen Mary. It may be noticed, that soon after this affair at Braid, Captain Melville was killed by the igniting of a barrel of gunpowder which he was in the act of dealing out to his soldiers on the hill of Craigmillar Castle. The Laird of Braid, being a *quiet man*, though more courageous than old Morton of Milnwood, told the soldiers that he would have nothing to do with them, and that if Captain Melville, whom he knew well, wanted him, he ought to have sent very different messengers. Still continuing their insulting expressions, and abusing the miller, the wrath of the quiet Laird was roused, and he rushed into the house for a weapon of defence. He soon appeared, flourishing a double-handed sword, followed by several of his domestics. Some of the soldiers discharged their pieces at the Laird, who was, however, unhurt, and brought one of them to the ground by a stroke of his sword. Two of them, whose pieces were still loaded with three bullets, now fired, to rescue their companion. The Laird and his servants were still untouched, but the soldiers unfortunately killed a comrade. Three of them were taken prisoners, and the rest of them, after discharging their pieces, fled to Edinburgh, where they circulated a report that the Laird of Braid was at the head of a company of soldiers wanting to attack them. This alarm being given, a number collected to oppose the Laird, but in their progress towards Braid they were stopped by the Laird of Merchiston, who informed his cousin, Captain Melville, that the report was false, and intimated to him that he had better go no farther, as a party was approaching from Dalkeith to protect the Laird.

Such incidents, which then occurred daily, are striking illustrations of the state of the country, when force alone was the sole protection. But Sir Archibald Napier was not long allowed to remain unmolested. His castle of Merchiston was the most prominent place in that neighbourhood, and formed an important station on the south-west approach to Edinburgh, which the King's party were endeavouring to reduce by famine. Sir Archibald's distinguished son, John Napier, had recently returned from the Continent, being driven home in all probability by that state of affairs which led to the massacre on St Bartholomew's Day. He was busily engaged in his scientific avocations, but it was not to be expected that amid such contentions the peaceable inhabitants of Merchiston Castle would be suffered to enjoy the pursuits of science unmolested within its walls. Sir Archibald Napier incurred the displeasure of the Queen's party by taking no active share in the civil brawls, and upon the 18th of July he was apprehended by the Laird of Minto, and conveyed a prisoner to the Castle of Edinburgh. It is also related by an old historian, that after the appointment of the Earl of Mar to the Regency in 1571, Sir William Kirkaldy, who commanded the Castle of Edinburgh, bombarded the house of Merchiston with iron balls from his great guns, because certain soldiers of the King's party occupied it, and intercepted the provisions destined for the Castle and the city. Kirkaldy was a relation of the Laird of Merchiston, and he thus appears to have entertained the latter, when in his custody, with the any thing but agreeable pastime of battering his family residence.

The Laird of Merchiston had married Elizabeth Mowbray, his cousin, a daughter of John Mowbray of Barnboul Castle near Cramond, the ruins of which still form a prominent object on the shore of the Frith of Forth, within the pleasure-grounds of the Earl of Rosebery. At

the commencement of 1572, the Laird of Dundas was entertaining Maitland of Lethington and his lady at Dundas Castle in the neighbourhood of Barnbougall. Although Maitland was well known to be a *Queen's man*, yet his presence in Dundas Castle was no protection, and that party resolved to become masters of it—a project which is supposed to have been suggested by the fertile invention of Kirkaldy. Robert Mowbray, the eldest brother of the Lady of Merchiston, undertook to secure this ancient castle, the ruins of which still indicate its importance. “He obtained from Edinburgh,” says Mr Mark Napier, “thirty mounted soldiers, who were placed in concealment under a bank near the iron gate of Dundas. Two men, disguised in ragged garments, with pistols under them, lurked close to the gate, while Mowbray and a comrade, also disguised and armed, took up their stations in a house in the village of Dundas, close to the place. It happened, however, that one David Ramsay, the Laird of Dundas' servant, went down to the village to get a morning drink, and entered the very house where Mowbray and his comrade were on watch. The result of Davie Ramsay's early potation was upon this occasion, at least, fortunate for his master. He detected the adventurers under their disguise, and instantly started off to give the alarm, pursued by Mowbray and his companion, who fired their pistols at him without effect. The enterprise failed, and Sir John Mowbray, in consequence of his son's participation, was summoned before the Regent and Privy Council, confined in prison for two or three days, and only released upon finding security that he would not suffer the *rebels* (the Queen's party) to occupy his castle of Barnbougall as a garrison. Not satisfied with this, however, the Regent occupied the place with soldiers of his own, and again committed the Laird to confinement in the town of Ayr.”

Sir Archibald Napier was soon released from *durance*



W B Scott

Robt Scott

*Craig Millar Castle*

*vile* in the Castle of Edinburgh, and he appears to have retired to an estate in the district anciently called the Lennox or Menteith. In the meanwhile, as the old baronial fortalice of Merchiston was possessed by the King's party, on the 5th of May 1572, the Queen's troops issued from the city to besiege it. They succeeded, after a considerable struggle, in obtaining possession first of the outworks, and finally of the castle, with the exception of the *donjon keep*, to which the King's soldiers retreated as a place impregnable. Finding it impossible to dislodge them, the victors set fire to the outhouses, with the intention of smoking the garrison into a surrender, but the King's party in Leith marched in great force to raise the siege, and compel the victors to retire. The besiegers were commanded by one Captain Scougall. The assailants from Leith were exposed to the fire of Edinburgh Castle, from the guns of which upwards of forty shots were discharged to cover the original besiegers. Scougall, their commander, was mortally wounded, but the Queen's troops were eventually driven back to the city, scampering over Burntsfield Links and the adjacent fields in all directions, impetuously pursued by the Laird of Blairquhan. Among the incidents of this skirmish, a contemporary journalist records that "ane cannon bullet dings the revel, the spur, and the heel of the sock and hose of ane of the horsemen's legs," without injuring him.

On the 10th of June following the soldiers at Leith belonging to the King's party laid siege to the castle of Niddrie-Seton in the neighbourhood of Craigmillar, and on the same day, by way of retaliation, the entire disposable force in Edinburgh in favour of the Queen, with as many of the citizens as chose to join them, and a small train of artillery, made another attempt against Merchiston Castle. This enterprise, which was conducted by George Earl of Huntly, was almost successful. The assailants battered the

wall of the old fortalice with their cannon, while their cavalry scoured the fields on the south between it and the hills of Braid and Blackford, where the villas and the village of Morningside are now the ornaments, bringing in forty head of cattle and sheep. The cannon were played against Merchiston Castle from two to four o'clock, and great "*slaps*" were made in the walls. The principal commander of the castle being absent, it was proposed by the garrison to surrender the place if the Earl of Huntly would allow them to depart in an honourable manner, but while this negotiation was in progress a number of people assembled from the city, and from the farm-houses near the Pentland Hills. Although attracted to the scene of action by the noise of the guns and from mere curiosity, the Earl of Huntly and the besiegers took it into their heads that they were menaced by the King's forces. He instantly sent his battering train back to Edinburgh, which arrived in safety, but he was not so successful when he returned with his soldiers. The King's party, who were again advancing from Leith, overtook him as he was leading his men over the fields now occupied by the streets and squares of the southern districts of the city, and rushed on his forces with such fury, that they threw away their arms, and fled in all directions. A few were killed on both sides, and some of Huntly's men were carried prisoners to Leith. The Earl had his horse slain under him by a shot from the Palace of Holyroodhouse.

Another conflict occurred before Merchiston Castle, of a more serious nature, on the last day of the same month of June. The inhabitants of Edinburgh were suffering great privations by famine, and a party of twenty-four horsemen were sent out to forage. "The well stocked fields in the neighbourhood of that fortalice were the constant scene of enterprise, and upon this occasion the foragers collected many oxen, besides other spoil, which they were driving

triumphantly into the town. They were, however, pursued by Patrick Home of the Heucht, who commanded the Regent's light horsemen. The foraging party, whom hunger rendered desperate, contrived to keep their pursuers, amounting to eighty, at bay, until they were passing the gate of Merchiston Castle, when the Regent's garrison issued forth and drove back the cattle. The Edinburgh horsemen instantly alighted from their horses, which they suffered to go loose, and *faught creullie*. A strong body of infantry quitted the town to support this brave little band, and turned the fight in their favour. All the loss fell upon the party of the Regent. Home of the Heucht, their leader, Patrick Home of Polwarth, besides four other gentlemen, were killed. Of the Queen's party a few were wounded, and only one foot soldier lost his life, who was killed by a shot from the battlements of Merchiston."

Such are a few notices of this fine old fortalice, still entire and habitable in the immediate vicinity of Edinburgh—a structure venerable as the birth-place of the illustrious inventor of the Logarithms, and still the property of the Noble Family of Napier. It is happily observed that Merchiston was at that time "no retreat for the lovers of mathematics and alchemy, or for those who only sought its battlements to consult the stars."