

# The Siege of Leith

In 1560, a siege of Leith by an English army – against the occupying French – marked both the end of the ‘Auld Alliance’ that had been in place for 265 years and the establishment of the Protestant religion in Scotland.

James V died in 1542, days after his army was routed by the English at Solway Moss, leaving his new-born daughter Mary as his heir and the Earl of Arran as Regent. The late king’s widow, Mary of Guise, kept control of their daughter. The vacillating Arran was soon facing armed challenge to his leadership, as well as trying to balance the aspirations of the queen for a French alliance and a faction of Protestant lords wanting rapprochement with England.

Advised by the astute Cardinal Beaton, the queen waged a skillful campaign to preserve the Roman Catholic religion. The church had long been corrupt and controlled half the wealth of the nation. Reformers had been working in Scotland since the 1520s and had gradually built up popular support. The dissolution of the monasteries in England after Henry VIII declared himself head of the church and the parceling out of their land to the aristocracy led much of the Scots nobility to become enthusiastic supporters of reform. Beaton and Mary were in favor of an alliance with France, which was also at war with England; the reformers wanted closer ties with England and, particularly, its wealth.

King Henry wished the infant Mary to marry his son, but the Catholic faction, with the support of the parliament, preferred a French union. So English armies rolled north in what came to be called the ‘Rough Wooing,’ creating mayhem in much of Scotland. After the assassination of Beaton in 1546, the campaign culminated in the battle of Pinkie Cleugh in 1547, which cost up to 15,000 Scots lives against 2,600 English.

The critical national situation quelled the dissent of the pro-English faction of Reformers and strengthened the hand of Mary of Guise. France had already sent troops to help Scotland and now 10,000 of their soldiers landed at the port of Leith and fortified the town. The infant queen was sent to France and betrothed to the Dauphin in August 1548. The regent Arran was created Duke of Chatelherault by Henry II of France for arranging the French marriage and in 1555 he handed the regency over to Mary, who ran the country with the help of French advisers. They were quite popular, but the Protestant magnates were resentful of their power and influence. Declaring themselves to be the Lords of the Congregation and allying themselves with John Knox, they deprived Mary of the regency and raised an army of 12,000 to expel the French. They soon controlled the Lowlands and Edinburgh, but Mary retook Edinburgh and settled in the castle. Her troops continued to fortify Leith, enclosing about 90 acres with huge earth ramparts and bastions.

In October 1559, the Lords of the Congregation blockaded the town. They built ladders to scale its defenses and mounted an assault. The ladders were too short and the attack was easily repulsed. The ladders had been built in St Giles church – an impious use of the building – and the Lord consequently had frowned upon the enterprise. The Scots army was unpaid, lacked much interest in a battle and was no match for the 3,000 experienced French soldiers who sallied out from behind their earth ramparts to plunder for provisions and launch small-scale attacks.

The Lords of the Congregation asked for help from the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth. In 1560, at the beginning of April, 6,000 troops and artillery arrived and the English fleet sealed the port. The English raised mounds round the fortifications for their guns and began to bombard the town. They succeeded in knocking down the steeple of St Anthony’s church, on top of which the French had winched a cannon. The French commanders were celebrating Easter mass in South Leith Parish Church. During the service a cannonball passed harmlessly in through a window and out of the church door.

The French continued to make damaging sallies; many such skirmishes took place on Leith Links in full view of the opposing commanders so they were desperate affairs as each side sought to prove its gallantry.

A major assault with more than 5,000 men was launched against the town on May 7<sup>th</sup>. Once again the ladders were too short and it was repulsed with a loss of 1500 men. The French lost less than 20. It was reported that the ramparts were defended by women hurling rocks down on the attackers and supplying the men with ammunition. The Frenchmen's harlots were of the most part Scotch strumpets, remarked John Knox. As the siege continued, provisions within Leith were running very low. They were eating horses and harvesting weeds from the ramparts.

Then, on the June 11<sup>th</sup>, Mary of Guise died at the castle. She was known to be suffering from dropsy – heart failure – but her death had not been expected. She was the reason that the French were in Scotland and so a truce was arranged. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, the opposing sides feasted together on the beach. The English brought beef, bacon, poultry, wine and beer, the French cold roast chickens, a horse pie and six roast rats.

The hostilities were officially ended by the Treaty of Edinburgh signed on July 7<sup>th</sup> in the names of Elizabeth, Queen of England, and Francois and Mary, King and Queen of France and Scotland. The French and English troops left Scotland and the Edinburgh town treasury had to pay for clearing up the mess they left behind.

During the following month, the Scots parliament abolished the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church and instituted the Reformed Confession of Faith drawn up by John Knox and his colleagues. A year later the Catholic Queen Mary, by then a 19 year-old widow, landed at Leith to take up her kingdom, the most fiercely Protestant nation in Europe.

The siege of Leith has to a certain extent been forgotten and regarded as just another incident in an eventful and bloody period of Scottish history however it has great significance. For one thing it was the first time that Scotland and England fought side by side. It could also be considered as the last significant foreign occupation of the British mainland and marked an end to both the alliance with France and the catholic domination of Scotland.