

THE ABORTIVE JACOBITE INVASION OF 1708

The Historical Perspective

The first Jacobite Rising, in 1708, was a disaster even before it began. James VII and II fled back to France after the failure of his expedition to Ireland during the years 1689 to 1691. He was granted what was, for that time, a huge pension of some six hundred thousand livres (about £50,000) by Louis XIV. With this funding James was able to establish a Jacobite Court in exile at St Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, surrounding himself with an ever-increasing community of expatriate Jacobite supporters.

Following the death of James VII and II in 1701 the mantle of Jacobite leadership in exile fell upon his 13-year old son the 'Prince of Wales', James Francis Edward Stuart (the 'Pretender'), whom Louis XIV formally recognised as 'King James VIII and III of Great Britain'. France was reeling from Marlborough's resounding victories on the Continent, and seen from a French perspective a Jacobite rising in Scotland in favour of the 'pretender' would create a diversion and ease the pressure on the French army in Belgium. The victory at Alamanze in Spain provided additional encouragement for Louis to support the rising.

In the years immediately before the Act of Union of 1707, privateers and pirates were very active along the east coast of Scotland, and this continued for several years after the attempted invasion. In 1705 three Aberdeen ships returning from Campheir were seized by the French and the Ostenders, and were held hostage by the French in exchange for the return of the two French or Ostender crews captured earlier by Captains Gordon and Campbell.

Even on land the situation was very unstable, as shown by a letter¹ from Edinburgh, probably written by John Philp, to William Lorimer, Chamberlane to the Earl of Seafield at Cullen on July 3rd 1705

"...wee have a great report of ane skirmish that was among the gentlemen in Banff shyre and that very bloody, which made us believe that Boynd should not have been able to have come to the Parliament, but wee see it to be otherwise...". This probably refers to James Ogilvie of Boynd mentioned later.

The war on the continent continued, and the arrangements for the union with England also continued in Edinburgh. The Scots Parliament met on 3rd October 1706 and the Act ratifying the Treaty of Union was passed on 16th January 1707. The Scots Parliament adjourned some nine weeks later on the 25th March. The Act of Union of 1707, rather than bringing harmony to Scotland only served to bring disaffection and dispute. It is estimated that at least two-thirds of the population were Stewart sympathisers, and anti-union sentiment soon began to be directed towards the possibility of a Stewart restoration. Even such anti-Royalists as the ultra-Presbyterian Cameronians considered being ruled by a Stewart king to be a lesser evil than being suppressed by an Anglo-Hanoverian dynasty and parliament.

¹ National Archives of Scotland. Seafield Muniments GD248/560/42

Scotland was swarming with agents and spies working for France, and intrigue was rife. One of these spies, Nathaniel Hooke, was an Irish Protestant and was active in Scotland in 1705 and again in 1707. He took back information to France in which he made the claim that several influential Scottish nobleman and clan chieftains were ready to support the rising.

*“The memoirs of Colonel Hooke, a Jacobite emissary from Louis XIV to Scotland, and other writers of the time all give us glimpses of a potential intrigue in which the Old Chevalier adherents sought to take advantage of the unpopularity of the union by combining such extremes as the Cavalier and Catholic Jacobite with the westland Cameronian whig. The old active supporters and mainstay of the revolution of 1689, the Covenanting whigs of Galloway, Lanark and Ayr, discontented with the union, were sulkily, through some of their agents, becoming active. The unsettled state of Scotland, and the fairly concrete promises of support carried from that country to the court of Louis XIV by Colonel Hooke, by the young Lord of Boyne and others, made a French and Jacobite invasion of Scotland a feasible proposition”.*²

Encouraged by the supposed promise of an army of 25,000 troops and 5,000 horse awaiting them in Scotland, the French decided to provide the ‘pretender’ with a limited amount of military support, and land him in Scotland, where it was assumed that these promised troops would meet up with the invading forces. An expeditionary force of 5,000 men was to be sent aboard a French fleet comprising five men-of-war and fifteen troop transports, under the command of Admiral Claude de Forbin.

A motion was made for Prayers and a fast in the Church against the possibility of invasion, but the wheels of ecclesiastical bureaucracy turned slowly indeed, the date being set for the first Thursday in April “*albeit that many thought that before that tyme the hazard might rather be over, or the fast too late.*”.

The expedition gathered at Dunkirk, but it soon became obvious that it was not only the French who had their spies, and before long a British squadron of men-of-war under Admiral Byng was anchored off Gravelines, just seven miles from Dunkirk. On 6th March 1708 Prince James, now twenty years old, arrived at Dunkirk to join the French troops. He had recently caught measles from his little sister, and he was very ill. The weather too was ill, with spring gales raging in the Channel. Nevertheless the French fleet set sail that evening in atrocious conditions, and after seeking shelter from the storms off Ostend, they eventually managed to evade the British squadron and set sail northwards. In the morning of the 13th March the French fleet was seen near to the Isle of May, just off the south coast of Fife, but they seem to have overshot their original target of the Firth of Forth, and by the afternoon they were off Montrose.

A Jacobite welcoming party waited in vain at Burntisland, on the south coast of Fife, with their intention having been to join up with the French troops and advance on Stirling. The Royal Navy squadron under Byng’s leadership had successfully shadowed the French ships,

² James Grant (ed). Seafield Correspondence. Scottish Historical Society Vol 2 No 3, 1912, Edinburgh

and moved into the attack on the evening of the 13th, off Bervie, before any of the troops could be landed.

Most of the French ships escaped, but a few of them seem to have continued northwards towards Aberdeen and into the Moray Firth. Despite the Prince's plea to be put ashore, alone if necessary, despite the £5000 bounty on his head, Admiral de Forbin decided to abandon the enterprise and sailed back to Dunkirk. After yet another stormy voyage Prince James landed back at Dunkirk on the day before Easter, the 7th April 1708. He had not even managed to set foot on his native soil, and the rising of 1708 was over before it had even begun.

The Moray and Banff Perspective

For some weeks before the French invasion fleet left Dunkirk the rumours of war and invasion were spreading across Scotland, and all of the intelligence which had been gathered by the British spies suggested a landing in the Firth of Forth, on the Aberdeenshire coast, or in the Moray Firth. Although the main Jacobite forces had mustered at Burntisland, this being the most convenient place from which to march on Stirling, a landing further north, for example in the Moray Firth, could have called upon the support of the Highland Clans.

Correspondence flowed between gentlemen in London and Edinburgh and their friends, relatives and business contacts in the north. It is fortunate that some of the letters have survived as part of the Seafield Muniments in the National Archives of Scotland (GD248 series), which gives a flavour of the feeling at the time.

A letter³ was written by John Philp in London to William Lorimer, Chamberlain to the Earl of Seafield at Cullen, on 25th February 1708 (*see page 32*);

“D. Cousine,

My Lord has written you fully about his private business, and I am to tell you that wee are allarmed with a ffrench invasion from Dunkirk. They say about 12,000 men are to be embarqued and twice as many stands of arms with 2,000 horse”

By 2nd March James Steuart, the Lord Advocate, had reduced these estimates to 6,000 men, a force which he refused to take seriously, suggesting it was *“rather a design for amusement and diversion than for a solid invasion”*.

On 6th March the Lord Advocate again wrote to the Earl of Seafield;

“May it please your Lop – In yours to me about this threatened invasion, you appeared solicitous that Presbyterians, especially their ministers, should shew their zeal against it: and I must confess that tho’ many of them be but ill affected towards the Union, yet I never apprehended that any of them would be so desperat as to joyn with a French Popish party to the overthrow of religion and liberty and all deer to men”.

³ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD248/560/41/16

Two days later the state of alarm was increasing, as was, again, the supposed size of the French forces. In a letter⁴ to William Lorimer dated 8th March 1708, probably again from John Philp, we read;

“Dear Cousine,

Wee have now certain information that the ffrench design ane invasion upon Scotland. They have brought eleven men-of-war from Brest to joyn those at Dunkirk and the pretended Prince of Wales is there to come with them with 10,000 armed men and a considerable quantities of ammunition and arms. The ffrench fleet will be near thirty-two men-of-war besides transports and privateers, but I hope in God the English and Dutch ffleett, quich are above forty men-of-war, will stop their project.....

.... It’s reported they designe to land in fforth [Firth of Forth] or att Aberden – but whatever happen you may have my Lord Seafield’s papers in such a readiness that they may be secured in some safe place, if there be any hazard in that part of the countrey, for where they land they will doe damage to the countrey and lands”.

Two letters dated the 9th March refer to the presence of French spies in the area. A letter to the Earl of Seafield from Anna Seafield on that day reads;

“Dearest Heart,

..... we are migitly alermed hier with the invation from France..... it is said the Leard of Boyn is Colnall...”

[James Ogilvie, younger of Boyn, was a broken and landless man whose estate had fallen into the hands of his relative the Earl of Seafield. Hence the worries that he may re-appear at Cullen House. His only hope of advancement lay through a successful Jacobite rebellion, and he delved deeply into Jacobite intrigue, passing frequently between France and Scotland arranging for the French landings and a Jacobite rising in Scotland.]

On or about the same date Alexander Gairden, the Laird of Troup, with a clear plea to remain anonymous in these troubled times, was probably also referring to James Ogilvie when he wrote to ‘*Nicholas Dumbar of Castellfield, Shirreff dpt of Bamf*’,

“No doubt you have herd of the gentilman hes set ashor heer from Franc and who is gon to Boynd and thence to the Hichlands and thorrow ye kingdom. He wes all nicht the 29 February in William Hards at Nethermiln, and went away the first of March befor the sun tuo hours, he landed about 6 hours of even. He passed for an Edinburgh merchant. The ship wes about ten or twentie guns, seventy to ninentie men. Giv not me for your author”.

Realisation was dawning that events were now beginning to move fast, and on the 11th March Robert Fforbes in Edinburgh wrote to the Earl of Seafield;

“...we now begin to believe ane invasion is designed, and upon my word the enemy could not have hade a fitter opportunity since the revolvone for their is nothing heir to withstand a very small force...”

[Robert Forbes was Clerk to the Scottish Privy Council, an establishment which was about to disappear following the Act of Union].

⁴ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD248/560/41/23

On 13th March the French and British fleets were seen off the east coast. A very hasty letter⁵ from Alexander Ogilvie in Glasgow to the Earl of Seafield was written during the day, conveying the news which he had heard;

“Montroas [Montrose] ... cuming from the north appeared fortie ships and about the sam tym at Berrich [Berwick on Tweed] twentie eight, the first haveing a flag. Qtt they are is not knouen”.

A second letter⁶ followed from Alexander Ogilvie, now in Edinburgh in the evening;

“8 at night... Since the last express sent of at three acloack the accompts beare that from Dunbar ane hundreth saile of ships have bein sein passing to the north, and just nou there is one express from Eyllle [Elie] beares that they ware sein pass by this evening”. [A later message reduced the number of ships to twenty].

On the evening of the 13th March, a sea battle took place off Bervie, near Montrose. In a letter⁷ the following day from the Earl of Leven to the Earl of Seafield he notes that;

“Sir George Byng with thirty men-of-war under his command came up and attacked the French squadron off Montross yesterday the 13th instant betwixt the hours of four or five in the evening but the French retired so fast that the best half of Sir George his squadron could not come up with them”.

A letter⁸ was written from Feteressie on the 14th March, to the “Right Honourable My Lord Forglen at Edr, these heast;

My Lord,

Since that from Montross I gave your Lo. som small accompt of a fleet of great ships seen off this coast on Saturday last, I’ll give yo the trouble of reading what further accompts I have heard and seen of ym. As they cam by Montross, that toun, I told your Lo., was in great dread of ym and I stayd yr till they were past the toun and horsed yn, qch gave me occation to see the whole ingagement as I went on the road.....

The writer enclosed a copy of a letter for the Lord Marischall:

“My Lord,

The news your Lo. gott does not seem groundless. Caterlaine [a Kincardineshire Laird] is positive there was a skirmish att sea yesterday qch began off Bervy about 3 acloak, and he saw two destinck fleets, on consisting of about 26 saill the oyr about 30, and 4 ships att a distance from either. After some scattering single shots he saw five of the last fleet of great bigness and forse attack tuo of the first fleet about yr owen size, qch tuo mentained a running fight from betwixt 4 and 5 to eight, yt they gott out of his sight. He saw severall broadsides given on both sides and the water visibly rise wt the ball. He thought the tuo shot much sharper than the 5 who wer much blunter. He saw no boarding or disabling. The tuo had the advantag of the wind, and during the time they were in execise the fleet to qch the 5 belonged

⁵ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD248/560/41/27

⁶ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD248/560/41/28

⁷ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD248/560/41/29

⁸ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD248/560/41/30

mad the best of thar way off. [In the run-up to the battle the French had captured several seaman or fishermen from Montrose]. The Montross seamen are landed and tell strange stories. They say they were French who took them aboard, and that they were brawlie intertained that first night to witt Friday, but that when this oyr fleet cam up upon them they were in great confusion. The ship they wer in was not ingadged but had 500 men in hir. She and ane oyr who had as many lost the fleet, and are yett on the coast. They sounke ther boat and hes send 8 of them ashore, and keeps tuo to pillut them where they are bound, qch they say was to have been in the Firth [of Forth] yisterday if the fleet had not ingaged them. They tell that K. J. [King James] was in the fleet but they know nothing of the success of the ingagement, haveing been separat. The fleet we see to the northeast is certainly the fleet qch attacked, qch we take to be the English and Dutch. This is all I can learen. A short time will give us the certainties.... this of the 13th deat.

Back to the original letter;

I am told som of the abov mentioned fleets took tuo oyr boats wt six men in each qch are not as yett returned, and I am told that great shooting has been heard this night by a fleet that is farr off at sea. What accompts may be fourder had of these fleets tym will produce. It is werie probable the English abd ffrench have mett.... It was one o the most deverting shows I ever see to behold ther firing and ingaging on Saturday as I did... I am sure they fired sevrall thousand shott”

The signature of this letter is torn off, possibly for the protection of the writer.

A further, similarly anonymous letter⁹ reads;

“The fleets wer only about 2 or 3 miles or yrby of land, and when they cam up to Bervie they were not over halfe a mile from our view at which tym they began to fire fastest, and I thought ther wold have been near tuintie saill ingaged. At Bervie they mad out to sea and the smoke of ther gouns eclipsed seavrals of these lay furdest off... My Lady Anna [Lady Seafield] is werie feard lest the ffrench land neer hir”.

On 15th March, a letter from Alexander Ogilvie to the Earl of Seafield;

This afternoon the English fleet came in to the road of Leith the wind being easterly, and on Saturday's night the ffrench haveing outsailed save one ship... It is confidently reported young Boynd [the James Ogilvie mentioned earlier] landed in Angus.

A French ship, the “Salseburrie” or “Salisbury” was captured off Montrose by Captain Thomas Gordon, one of Byng’s commanders, “*There are a good deall of walouable goods in the Salseburrie, such as pleat [silver plate] and gold”.*

On 16th March a letter from James Steuart to the Earl of Seafield commented unfavourably on Sir George Byng’s decision not to chase the French ships further northward than Aberdeen, so allowing them to escape. The following day Alexander Ogilvie mentioned that “*Barks cum from Murray [to Leith] did not sie aney appearance of the French.* There was much discussion on 16th and 17th March as to whether the ships laying offshore [off Aberdeen] were English or French – the general conclusions being that they were English

⁹ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD248/560/41/31

vessels. The later evidence that on these dates the British fleet was lying in Leith Roads may indicate that it was, after all, French ships lying off Aberdeen, from where they ventured northwards to the Moray Firth. Sir George Byng was noted as being at Leith on the 16th.

On the 20th a rather ambiguous report notes that “*The fleet continues in Leith road. The Aberdeens report of the ffrench fleet seemed to be the English [how could the English fleet have been off Aberdeen when they were in Leith?], and we have noe accounts of the ffrench being seen on this coast since the chase*”.

The Garmouth ‘landings’

It appears that not all of the French ships returned immediately to Dunkirk. On 21st March the Countess of Seafield, in a letter from Cullen House, tells of the landing of a part of the French fleet at Garmouth.

A letter to the “Right Honbell the Earell of Findlatur at Edr;

My Lord;

No doubt you have hird of 3 French shipes being at Spaymouth and Buky [Buckie] in great foras and an littel on(e) which had about 24 guns which cam and wint with them as apired with inteligans They wind of the 20 in the mornen but war seen afar of today agenest the Carnose [Scarnose near Cullen]. It is said thar were twall mor seen of Spaymouth as it war from Cromartie.

A letter¹⁰ of 26th March (*see page 33*) records that “*They [the French] were seen about Speymouth and that some of them landed, diverted themselves, drank with severall people thereabout, told them King James was at sea, had beat the English fleet and would shortly land*”.

Another commentator writes in a similar vein;

“Edinburgh 8 at night.... Friday last sum of them landed at Garmoch, did no harm, dyned, payed weill and weint aboard.

Through almost all of the days following the attempted invasion the wind continued to blow from the east, frequently quite strongly, which did not allow Byng’s ships to leave the roads at Leith, although between 27th and 30th march they did patrol the mouth of the Firth of Forth. They were joined by Admiral Baker with nine men-of-war on 3rd April.

Two days before this, on 24th March, a rising had commenced in Stirling, in which Stirling of Keir, Seaton of Touch, Stirling of Carden and Lord Nairn, with some mounted followers, had commenced a march on Edinburgh. The previous day, 23rd March, it was recorded that the Duke of Marlborough was rapidly concentrating an English army on the Scottish border.

¹⁰ National Archives of Scotland, Seafield Muniments GD 248/560/41/46

Postscript

The retributions soon began. It was noted that “*The French landing at Garmouth had rendered many in the County of Banff [and probably also Moray] suspect, and Colonel Grant had been sent north and had arrested some who were said to have consorted with the French*”. Thirteen interrogators were prepared for the prisoners put in Edinburgh Castle relative to the invasion, and following this the prisoners were to be sent south to Berwick, and thence onwards to London. The list of those who had been arrested gives some idea of the number of important people in Scotland who were suspected of being involved, either practically or in spirit, with the attempted invasion.

A letter from Richard Dowdswell, Excise Office, Edinburgh, to George Tilson in the Secretary’s Office, Whitehall, London, dated 27th April 1708 notes that;

... also the Marquis of Huntly, Earls of Errol, Marshall, Seaforth and Nithsdale, Lord Drummond, Viscounts Stormouth and Kilsyth, Lords Nairn and James Murray, Sir George Maxwell, Stirling of Keir; Murray of Pomeas, Seaton of Touch, Stirling of Carden are all to be at Berwick the 1st May under a guard of Scots dragoons in their way for London. The remove of these people makes many here very uneasy.

It appears that the prisoners were dispatched to London in two groups, one leaving on Friday 30th April and the other on 7th May. A subsequent communication gives more detail¹¹;

8th May 1708. The prisoners following set out for London viz; on Fryday 30th April, Marquis Huntly, Earl Seaforth, Viscount Kilsyth, Earl Nithsdale, Lord Drummond, Lord Nairn, Murray of Pomeas, Sir Donald McDonald, Viscount Stormont, Sir George Maxwell, Stirling of Keir, Stirling of Carden.

Yesterday [7th May] Duke of Gordon, Viscount Kenmure, Lord James Murray, Fotheringham of Pourie, Lyon of Auchterhouse, Robertson of Strowin, Gordon of Gollachie, Seaton of Touch, Stewart of Tannadine, Ross of Kippendavie, Newton of Edmestoun, Mackdonald of Keppoch. The Duke of Gordon would not provide himself with coach or horse for his journey, so that one of the troopers was forced to be dismounted and he exalted on the outside of the uncouth beast. The Dukes friends did not admire his fancy. The carrying up of these gentlemen occasions too much uneasiness here.

The eventual punishment, if any, of these gentlemen, has not been researched, but it is evident that their involvement in this abortive episode would not have endeared them to the authorities who, only seven years later, supervised the Forfeited Estates following the Rebellion of 1715.

¹¹ James Grant, loc cit.