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James Means

Robert Blair to Henry Baker: A Report on the '45



During the last year of his life, Robert Blair, minister of the Church of Scotland and author of *The Grave*,¹ witnessed an important phase in the final Jacobite rising—that of 1745. From his vantage-point in his parish at Athelstaneford in East Lothian,² only some thirty kilometers from Edinburgh, Blair witnessed (or received eye-witness accounts of) several important events: the infamous flight of the King's troops from Edinburgh on the 16th September (known as the "Coltbrig Canter"), the Pretender's triumphal entry into the city early the next day, and the resounding defeat of the loyalist army at Prestonpans on the 20th.³

¹Blair was ordained minister of the parish of Athelstaneford on January 5, 1731. He resided in this parish until his death in April, 1746—three months after writing this letter. Blair began writing *The Grave* around the time of his ordination and tinkered with it for more than a decade. In 1742, he enlisted the aid of Dr. Philip Doddridge, the eminent nonconformist divine, who subjected the manuscript to a final revision and arranged for its publication, which occurred in March, 1743. See my article, "The Composition of *The Grave*," in *SSL*, 10 (July 1972), 3-9.

²Athelstaneford (so small a hamlet that some reputable atlases do not show it) is located very near the larger village of Haddington.

³My authority for these events and their interpretation is David Daiches' excellent bi-

These important events, along with his reflections on them, form the bulk of Blair's New Year's day letter to his London friend, Henry Baker.⁴ Blair's account is supported by modern historical studies. The erstwhile defenders of Edinburgh—two regiments of Irish dragoons and a few hundred civilians of the Town Guard—withdrew in panic upon hearing of the approach of the Highlanders, just as Blair reports. They rode to the small town of Musselburgh, located now at the extreme Eastern limit of Edinburgh, leaving the city virtually undefended. During the early hours of the next day—on the 17th September 1745—Prince Charlie and his Highlanders entered the city gates unchallenged.

Meanwhile, the terrified dragoons (whom Blair mentions with withering contempt) had retreated some ten miles further east to the village of Prestonpans, where on the 20th they were to meet and be defeated by the Highlanders. One of the King's officers was the deeply religious Colonel James Gardiner, who resided at Prestonpans and who was an intimate friend of Blair's.⁵ When most of his troops fled the field, Gardiner fought alongside his few loyal men, until—having received several serious wounds—he was felled by the blow of an axe. Blair pays tribute to this brave man in his letter.

ography of the Young Pretender, *The Last Stuart: The Life and Times of Bonnie Prince Charlie* (New York, 1973). Professor Daiches outlines the course of the rebellion in great detail.

⁴George Reuben Potter, in his article "Henry Baker, F.R.S." (*Modern Philology* [February 1932], 301-321), lists sixteen letters to Blair in Baker's "Literary and Scientific Correspondence, 1722-1770," a collection which was sold at auction in 1859.

This present letter is preserved in the Charles Roberts Autograph Collection in the Haverford College Library. I should like to express my gratitude to the College for permission to publish and also to the Curator, Edwin B. Bronner, Esq., who very kindly supplied me with a photocopy of the original.

For details of Baker's life, see the *DNB*. Born in 1698, Baker first built his reputation (and a considerable fortune) from an original method of instructing deaf-mutes. In 1727 he published a lengthy "physico-theological" poem, entitled *The Universe*, which was regularly reprinted throughout the century. But it was as a natural scientist that he achieved renown. In 1740 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and in 1743 published *The Microscope Made Easy*, a popular handbook which became widely known and acclaimed. Like Blair, Baker was an enthusiastic virtuoso and collector of natural rarities. Robert Chambers, in his *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*, suggests the possibility of another shared interest in his article on Blair: "[He] was ... conversant in optical and microscopical knowledge, on which subjects he carried on a correspondence with some learned men in England." Thus, the two men were bound together by several shared interests.

⁵For details of Gardiner's life and military career, see *DNB*.

Aside from its obvious value as a historical document, this letter testifies to the friendship that existed between Blair and Baker, kindred souls who shared a love for piety, poetry, and natural science. In the past I have written about Blair as a Christian poet; on this occasion I am glad to let him paint his own portrait.

Dear Sir

I acknowledge the receipt of your last, and Return you my hearty thanks for your affectionate Concern about me, in these times of publick danger & distress. It was indeed a pityable case, to lye as We of this Country did, for severall weeks together, Entirely att the mercy of the Enemy: However as to my own particular, I have reason to be thankful, I have been more frighted than hurt.

It is truly surprizing to think, what mighty mischeifs will sometimes spring from small & despicable beginnings. Who would have thought that a Cloud formd in an obscure corner, & for some time no bigger than a mans hand, should have Engendered a Storm so dreadful, as to be able to shake the whole Island.⁶ Well—it must be acknowledgd, the Pretender & his Freinds, have nickd the opportunity that has been offred them; & perhaps it is scarce possible for a Combination of the like favourable hitts to meet together again in an age. The Action att Preston was as Shameful as it was Unfortunate. Never was I more Confounded in my Life, than upon the morning of the Engagement, to hear that the Kings Army was Entirely Defeated, & that their Artillery baggage &c. had faln into the Enemys hands. How far the General officers did their duty, it is not my business to Enquire: If their Conduct is aprovd of by their Superiours, it do's not become private persons to find fault. However I canot Help thinking, If all of them had behavd as did my worthy Friend & Gallant Countryman Collonell Gardner:⁷ this present Rebellion had never Arivd to such a head as it has done. The 2 Regiments of Dragoons who were Generally lookd upon as the main Strength of Sir Jo. Copes⁸ Army behavd scandalously ill; And indeed what better could be Expected from them after their Ignominious flight, that night the city of Edr [Edinburgh] was taken:⁹ When upon the news of the approach of the Highlanders (who by the bye att that time had never a horse to

⁶“Cloud...no bigger than a mans [sic] hand...a Storm so dreadful...” see I Kings 18: 44-45. See also Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* (1849), Ch. XXV, where one finds “A little cloud like a man's hand arose in the west.”

⁷For details of Gardiner's life, see the *DNB*.

⁸For details of Sir John Cope's life, see the *DNB*. I ought to mention that a military board of inquiry, appointed to look into the rout at Prestonpans, “unanimously absolved him [Cope] from all blame.” (*DNB*)

⁹Edinburgh capitulated to the Jacobite forces on the morning of 17 September.

pursue them,) they Gallopd off directly,¹⁰ without making a halt, till they were att the distance of a days march from the City: leaving all the road where they had Travelled strewd with hatts gloves Scullicaps &c. which were found by the Countrypeople next morning. It has been observd here, that the Panic, (a Scurvy Ailment Youl say for a Soldier) is what these Irish Dragoons are not a little Subject to; and there is a particular misfortune attending this distemper, that Relapses are allways to be feard: & very often, there is but as hort Intervall betwixt the fitts.

I can Assure you, it gives me Joy that the Rebels have been Chasd out of England: tho We that live in the Southern Countys of Scotland, must thereby (till such time as Sufficient Succours arrive) be in a worse condition than ever: being Exposd to an Enemy, more than ever Exasperated, with long & laborious marches & disapointments yett more provocking. As to the Chiefs of this Rebellion: they are certainly Criminalls of the first size. Upon them must be chargd the ruine of thousands; & indeed it is in this light only, that they are Considerable: I mean in their power of doing Mischeif, for with respect to property, they are little beyond what you can Imagine. I verily beleive there are Single Commoners¹¹ even in Scotland, that have as much reall property in the Country, as the Whole of them putt together. But as to the Comon Herd of Highlanders, I confess I cannot help pitying them. It is true they have the hapiness to be born free: but alas! this is a hapiness that many of them, especially such as live in remote corners, have scarce been allowd to taste of, & that but very sparingly. Poor Creatures! they do not know what it is to think or act for themselves; like Straws upon the water they do not goe but are carryd: & carryd by the meer arbitrary will of a petty Tyrant, whose Interest it is, to keep them chaind down forever, (if he can) like Galley slaves to the Oar. Besides, it is very Certain, not a few of them have been forcd into the service, in order to avoid a very dreadful present evill, of having their houses burnt about their Ears; which I am told has oftener than once been executed with rigour. But I am sensible I must have tyrd you. May Kind Heaven! scatter the disturbers of our Tranquillity both att home & abroad, And may our Dear Country become once more a Quiet & a peaceable Habitation.

I am exceedingly obligd to you for your very kind & generous offer of helping forwards my Collection of Natural Raritys. I Expe c ted I should have been able before this time to have sent you some Samples of Such as this Country affords: but the truth is, these distracted times have almost blockd up all Communication betwixt freinds here, or rendered it very precarious. I must therfor wait with Patience. I have Just now by me some odd enough kind of petrifications viz. roots of trees, mosses, fungus's, together with some other trifles: but I did not Choose to send them till the arivall of Such presents as I Expect from my Freinds.

¹⁰Blair is referring here to the "Coltbrig" (or "Coltbridge") Canter. For a full account of the panicky flight from Edinburgh, see Daiches, *op. cit.*

¹¹By the phrase "Single Commoner," I assume Blair simply means a private landowner, below the rank of a peer, as in *OED*, 2.

As you desird me, I Signifyd your respects to Mr. Robertsons¹² Who writes me in return: that he cannot but putt a value upon the Smallest expression of regard from a Gentleman for whom he has a very hearty Veneration: that he has long wisht for an opportunity of testifying his high esteem of you & your writings, & thinks himself obligd to me for this opportunity.

I presume to give you the same trouble I once did before, of bespeaking from Mrs. Morris¹³ a hogshead of red Clover for a neighbour of mine Mr Whyte of Garlton. I make no Question but it shall be good. Mrs. Morris is Desird to putt it aboard of the first vessell that sayls for Berwick (as there are none of our ports that are open)¹⁴ Directed to the care of Mr. George Douglass att Berwick¹⁵; And as soon as a Note of the price Comes to my hand, a bill for the money shall be sent. I begg your forgiveness for taking up so much of your time, & wishing you a Good new year & many of them I am

Very Dear Sir

Your Most obliged & most
Obedient Humble Servt

Robert Blair

Athelstanford 1 Jan. 1746

I thank you for the bark of the Lagotto¹⁶ which is very pretty.

Pray be so Good when you have Receivd this letter, to lett me know so much, being att somewhat of an uncertainty whether it shall reach you.

¹²"Mr. Robertsons" remains unidentified.

¹³"Mrs. Morris" was probably a corn-factor, but I am only guessing. Mr. White is also unidentified.

¹⁴As Blair explains, all the Scottish ports were closed (mainly to prevent the landing of troops and supplies for the Jacobites). Berwick-upon-Tweed was, therefore, the English port closest to Blair.

¹⁵"Mr. George Douglass" remains unidentified.

¹⁶I am puzzled by *Lagotto*, which has eluded my researches. However, I will hazard a guess. *Lagarto* is the Spanish word for alligator or crocodile and was, apparently, used by Englishmen of Blair's time (see *OED*). Moreover, "bark" may be used to mean "(human) skin" (*OED*, 4). I would conjecture, then, that Blair simply misspelled "Lagarto," turning it into "Lagatto" and that he is thanking Baker for a specimen of crocodile or alligator hide.

This moment we are alarmd with the news of the Highlanders being within a few houers march of the city of Edinburgh, from the west. What a pity is it that we have so few regular forces in this poor unfortunate Country.¹

North Little Rock, Arkansas

¹Daiches, *op. cit.*, (Ch. 12), points out that the Jacobite forces took the westward road through Scotland on their retreat from Derby. They passed through Glasgow, not Edinburgh. However, the two cities are so closely situated that as the Jacobites approached Glasgow from the South, the people of Edinburgh might rationally have feared another occupation.