

Shortest Battle in History

In Wesley's Day

TWO hundred years ago was fought—if that is the correct word, for it was more of a race than a fight—one of the shortest engagements in history, lasting a little over five minutes. The victorious leader, Bonnie Prince Charlie, speaks of it as "ye battle of Gledsmuire, fought ye 21st of September, which was one of ye Most Surprising action that ever was." It certainly was surprising—to both sides. The *Gentleman's Magazine* for October, 1745 gave full eye-witness reports of the battle, one by a captured English officer, another from the rebel point-of-view lifted from the *Caledonian Mercury*. It also presented its readers with a sketch-map and key to "the battle of Gladsmuir," which was to be known to history as the Battle of Prestonpans.

September 20, 1745, saw the Young Pretender's well-known romantic gesture. Flourishing his sword in the air, he cried, "My friends, I have flung away the scabbard!" This speech was greeted with "a cheerful huzza." That night a local snipe-shooter led the rebel army through General Cope's strongest defence, a supposedly impassable bog. They went three abreast, wet to the knee. Cope heard them coming, ordered his army to wheel round to face an attack. A thick mist shrouded the Highlanders' movements, however. Both sides had exaggerated ideas of each other's strength—actually their numbers were about equal. But the rebels had the advantage of surprise and

of unconventional tactics. Pulling off their bonnets, they "made a short prayer," ran forward, discharged their muskets, and promptly threw them away. Then—

"drawing their broad swords (they) gave a most frightful and hideous shout, rushing most furiously upon the enemy; so that in seven or eight minutes both horse and foot were totally routed and drove from the field of battle."

Prince Charlie gleefully wrote to his father that they "escaped like rabbits." The captured English officer maintained that—

"to being struck with a most unreasonable panick, and to no one thing else, the disgraceful event was owing. The ground was to our wish, the disposition was unexceptionable, and we were fully formed."

The evil news reached Newcastle the same day. Hither John Wesley had come at the first rumour of danger, in order to shepherd his Methodist flock there. The Methodist Orphan-House stood outside the city walls, behind which all suburbanians were rapidly scurrying for shelter—all except the Methodists. On the 22nd Wesley snatches time to scribble a brief note to his brother Charles:—

"I have only just time to inform you that, since the account is confirmed by an express to the Mayor that General Cope is fled and his forces defeated (all that did not run away), the consternation of the poor people is redoubled. The townsmen are put under arms; the walls are planted with cannon, and those who live without the gates are removing their goods with all speed."

There is real pride in the second half of the letter, describing the little Methodist colony, actually threatened by the city's cannon as much as by the enemy:—

"We stand our ground as yet, glory be to God, to the no small astonishment of our neighbours. Brethren, pray for us, that, if need be, we may—

"True in the fiery trial prove,
And pay Him back His dying love
Adieu."

F.B.

“Shortest Battle in History.” *Methodist Recorder* (September 20, 1945): 1

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And pay him back his dying love.¹

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F[rank] B[aker]

¹A paraphrase of two lines from a Charles Wesley hymn; see *HSP* (1742), 25; stanza 5b.