POEM

<><><><>

THE BATTLE OF BANNOCKBURN

By

WILLIAM BASTON

An English Carmelite Friar

Translated by R. Culbertson M.A.

High School Dunfermline.

Introduction Notes by
W. McMillan. Ph.D. D.D.
St Leonard's Church Dunfermline.

Reprinted from "Dunfermline Press."

8th January 1938.

BASTON'S POEM ON BANOCKBURN

English Translation of a Rare, Historic Production.

When Edward II invaded Scotland in 1314 with the largest army which up till then England had ever put into the field, he brought with him on William Baston, a Carmelite Friar, who had a reputation as a poet and who was to commemorate in verse the expected triumph of the English arms over the Scots.

At Bannockburn, the English forces met with one of the most disastrous defeats ever inflicted upon them, and among those taken prisoner by the Scots was Baston. King Robert some-what humorously decided that the Friar's ransom should be a poem celebrating the victory of the Scots over their Southern foes.

The poem – in Latin verse – was duly written and Baston set at liberty. This poem is rarely met with, and though quotations from it are sometimes found as footnotes in books relating to Scottish history, the poem itself does not seem ever to have been printed as an individual publication. Indeed the writer has only seen one printed copy. This occurs as "Historia Majoris Britanniæ' printed in Edinburgh in 1740 from the Paris edition of 1521. This work was issued by "Robertus Fribarnius" or Robert Fairbairn, and bound up with it is Baston's poem (I).

The latter forms a section by itself, and it may have been intended to issue it as a separate publication, for it has a title page of its own. On this it is described as "Metrum de Prælio apud Bannockburn. Auctore Gulielmo Baston Monacho Carmelita Anglo." The pages are numbered one to eight, and the pagination has no connection with what precedes or follows it. The poem consists of about one hundred and thirty lines in Latin hexameters. In addition to the Latin metrical form the poet has also introduced a certain amount of rhyme into his verses. Thus the first line ends in "nudo," and the second in "ludo." In the body of the poem we find quite a number of other examples such as "istis," "tristis"; "jura," "futura"; "sanguis," "unguis."

Opinions differ as to the quality of Baston's lines. George Buchanan speaks of them as "rude indeed and barbarous," and certainly they are somewhat crude when compared with Buchanan's own exquisite Latin verses. But it has to be remembered that Buchanan was himself one of the finest Latin scholars of his age, and a rather severe critic of other men's works. Even Buchanan can, however say that the lines of the older poet were "not unpleasing to the ear of the age."

The nature of the subject compelled Baston to use expressions, and words "that would in spite of this there are lines which show that he had in him something of the skill of the old makers. He refers with feeling to the death of Sir Giles de Argentine, who, when the battle

had been lost accompanied Edward a short distance on his flight from the field, and then returned to die in conflict with the Scottish spearmen.

"Nobilis Argenten, pupil inclyte, dulcis Ægidi,
Vix scieram mentem cum te succumbere vidi."

"Few leonine couplets," says Lord Hailes, can be produced which have so much sentiment." There are lines in which one can almost hear the crash of arms on arms; while, in others, he contrives with considerable skill to portray the confusion and noise of the actual fight.

From the historian's standpoint, the least satisfactory thing about the poem is that it says so very little about the details of the fight. One cannot gain much information regarding Bannockburn from its lines. The only leader on the Scottish side that he mentions is King Robert himself, whom he shows exhorting his army to valiant deeds. It is possible that he refers to the use by the Scots of caltrops, which were iron balls with projecting spikes and which were meant to lame the horses of the enemy. The reference is not altogether clear; but we know from other sources that such were used that day. The Scottish family of Drummond still have calthrops on their armorial bearings, and tradition allege that these are so worn because it was a Drummond who advised Bruce to use them on that eventful day. Similarly the motto of the family, "Gang warily," commemorates the same incident. Baston refers also to the pits dug by the Scots and covered with brushwood in order that the English horsemen would be thrown into disorder if they attempted to charge across them.

Beyond what has been written above we know practically nothing of Baston. He is said to have been an Englishman – some of the Friars were foreigners – and from his poem it is easy to infer that such was his nationality. His sympathies were entirely with the English, and though he had to celebrate a Scottish victory, there is little of praise of the Scots in the poem. The only soldiers he mentions by name are English knights, and one has no difficulty in thinking that a considerable part of the poem was written before the battle and afterwards adapted to fit the facts.

The Friars of our Lady of Mount Carmel, to which order Baston belonged, were popularly known as the White Friars. They had a number of houses both in England and in Scotland. In the latter country such were to be found before the time of Bannockburn at Perth, Linlithgow, Dunbar, and Berwick. It would be interesting to know whether the poet enjoyed the hospitality of one or more of these before he got safely home to his own quarters in England. The translation from the original Latin of the poem and of Fairbairn's introduction to it has been made by Mr R. Culbertson, M.A., classical department High School, and Dunfermline.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

(Probably by Robert Fairbairn.)

As John Major in his History BK, v., chap. 3, mentions a poem composed in the year 1314 concerning the Battle of Bannockburn but himself quotes only the first two verses of it, I hope that it would give pleasure to readers if the poem were presented here in its entirety, especially as it contains certain points which, however much they may be worth knowing in any case, must be reckoned of the highest importance in respect of the fact that they are recorded by an eye-witness and by an Englishman, that is by an enemy. For it is generally the practise of English historians, when they come to this disaster, to pass the matter over with slight comment.

The author of this poem was William Baston, a Carmelite monk, who was at that time, it is reasonable to suppose, the first poet in England (2) inasmuch as he seemed to his countrymen the most suitable man to be taken to this battle, to celebrate by his verses the victory which imagination led them to take for granted. He was, however, taken prisoner and compelled to sing of their defeat. The work indeed is severely criticised by our Major, who pronounces it unpolished and unworthy to be read. Yet it accords with the canons of that age, and, if anything ever proceeded from its author against his natural bent, this assuredly did so. For the rest, the man who desires to gain information regarding the manners and customs of that time will be little concerned about fitness of language; and to one who reflects on the unusualness of the whole affair, the little work will seem worthy to be preserved for all time.

POEM ON THE BATTLE OF BANNOCKBURN.

Woe is the burden of the lay
I frame with strains uncouth,
Such theme compels me to display
No mirth but simple truth.

The Ruler of Heaven, who brings comfort to those in sadness, is a true witness; who can bring prosperity to men whom fetters bind and who in place of fine robes wear mean apparel. I mourn mid these events those whom the burning scourge destroys. War's preparations I bewail, lamenting under the canopy (3), though which king is responsible I know not, God be my witness. The kingdom is twofold and both parts desire to hold the mastery; but neither will humble itself to own the other's superiority. While thus they vaunt themselves, as they drink and jest disdaining thee with boastful words. They sleep, they snore, whom idle dreams transform; they imagine themselves brave, they change the frontiers of their fatherland. They host unfurls its gleaming standards o'er the field; presently they are scattered, their valour is not great enough. The herald launches his lightning summons to the fray, loudly proclaiming the dread announcement; honey is turned to gall, while such a hurricane endures. Now they set forth the various functions, of the soldiers, that England may make full use of their forces. Do thou bear the banner whereby the Scots may be terrified; the army will follow after it in accordance with the practice of warfare; archer bend thy bow and, prithee, be not sparing in thy service; in yonder position do thou speed across they shafts destroying the foe. There, do thou launch thy darts, like lightning be thine exertion; to light. This man will oppose the foemen yonder with slings and stones opening a furious attack rendering hollow places level; and do thou fix stations where the war engines may be working effectively. Grim is the struggle threatened by such a host.

Lances are raised the leaders of their country hurry on; thus are the troops disposed, because many are the orders given by many men. The Scottish King arrays and draws up his dread battle ranks; horse and foot are there O what a wondrous throng! The King calls up and inspirits the Scots of nobler rank, he summons and invites to war the men of greater power; he views, he reviews the embattled lines that are ready for the fray; such are the mortal throngs he reckons overthrown. He speaks; he encourages the companies of the host as they come. He laughed, he laughed to scorn the covenant made by the English race. A brave leader to death, he trained their hands for war, he bade the fearless serving men give way to none (4). The throng becomes cheerful, you know by these murmurs, it will stand fast, it will fight thus England will become disconsolate. The King assembles his brave followers and assigns their proper functions to all whom he fortifies with arms, predicting the coming fray. By shower of arrows, let the blood from the groin be diminished by a deadly whirlwind let the javelin-thrower sting like a snake; let the shapely lance pierce the chieftains to the outpouring of their blood, (together) with swift missiles renewing their distress. Be it the task of the pole axe (5) to sever the body from the leg; the soldier will hurl darts, thus will he prevail if he steadfastly endure. The sword is exposed, naught that can avail for war remains concealed. The lot passes along to indicate the men whose duty it will be to fill the place of casualties.

A device full of mischief is fashioned for the feet of the horses – hollows armed with stakes – that they may not proceed without downfall (6). The common soldiers dig pits that the

horsemen may fall through them and that the footmen – should they see any pass across – may perish. The band that has just arrived is summond; the Scottish forces are numbered; the phalanx which is to form the van is linked together, the King accompanies (them). None of them will be able to mount their steeds; thus will a greater number become lords of other lords.

From both sides powerful men are sent out as scouts, many are the rumours they report to one another. A Sunday of ill omen (7) unfolds the beginning of the calamity, hence emerges for the youth of English birth a conflict of their own seeking (8). The dry land of Stirling wages the prelude of the fray, magnificent is the throng that strikes, but in the end it proceeds to utter abasement. There is anguish measureless, while the sum of anguish constantly increases; rage is kindled, while rage whets rage. The clamour grows, while shout strikes shout without a pause between; valour fades while valour baffles valour the heat of passion is intensified while passion consumes passion. The throng grows mad (9) while the lesser spurns the lesser. Perplexing din is heard while perplexity increased perplexity; the host is worn away while endurance destroys endurance. A roar goes up while bloody wounds are dealt incessantly now fear is known while endless fears prevail.

Disastrous Monday renews the baneful scourge, which by the power of fate Scotland makes grievous for the English. The English folk like those who dwell in heaven, in splendour shine; they that are high of soul like the meanest, rest beneath a cloud. The English host awaits and watches for those whom it may punish by death, even the Scots, who have moved up and are now not far distant from them. The common soldiers make a din and clamour; but those whom the meeting brings in contact now strike, and weaken the strength which they torment by blows. With all their magnificence, they are but mean opponents of the Scots. The victory will be able to be called that of a benevolent healer.

Foolish taunts are uttered by the magnificent array; many a sobbing cry breaks forth from the rampart of faces. Engaging in battle, gnashing their teeth, the Scottish host, striving on foot, defending selling their lives, yield them up as they deal dread recompense. This man seizes, this one captures, this one wears down (his opponent), this one strikes, behold the travail; thunderous cries arise, the ring of brass is heard, this man falls, this one pays (death's penalty). Just now the fight is close, this man wounds, this one slays, this one gives instructions, this one injures, yonder man is put to flight; this one hides, this one is exposed, this one presses hard, this one groans, this one is overcome, this one shrieks, this one trembles, this one is panic stricken, this one is on his guard; yonder man is being bound, this one selects his mark; this one shields, this one cuts down, this one attacks, this one is despoiled. The hunger bred by abstinence increases, bodies and estates are plundered (10). Alas women, soldier, and heir are involved alike.

Earl Clare, worthy of honour in thy fiery zeal, dweller in Gloucester, alas thou dies (11), thou dost perish amid the carnage; thus doth God become and avenger. Stern Clifford (12) thou art repelled by the point of the sword; thou fallest smitten with countless blows with thronging foes, on every side. Marshall William (13), thou that art a valiant soldier in the host, the callousness of the Scots for thee, unfolds the wounds of death.

Brave Edmund Manley, worthy knight,
Right manly in thy probity (14);
The foe o'ercomes thee in the fight
With all thy matchless piety (15).
Warrior of fame, by clear signs wrought,
Warrior like burning flame,
By signs clear wrought thy death Tiptot,
Now sword and mace proclaim (16).
Aegidius loved, Lord Argentye
Thee – fighter famed – I call,
Scarce had I known fate's destiny
When lo I saw thee fall (17).

Why should I joy in long detail? Why do I sing of such a slaughter? Scarce will tragedy be able to unfold the bereavements wounds have wrought. My wit suffices not to enumerate the names of the warriors; nor to tell their number, or what they were, or how much harm death knew there to inflict. Many are overthrown, many are pierced by darts, many sink down, and many are captured alive. They are bound by fetters, and many ransoms are asked for. Soon are men enriched and made great through those who are first had been laid low as though their lives were forfeit.

Throughout the length and breadth of the field the space is heaped with plunder; words that are full of menace are annulled, and the speakers enriched in consequence of the overthrow of their opponents. I know not what to say, I reap a crop I did not sow, I abandon the tangled web of guile, and I pay homage to peace, the friend of justice. Let him, who would fain hear more, take unto himself the task of writing. My wit is rude, my speech uncouth, my errors are of the lowest type.

A Carmelite am I – Baston is the name I bear – who count it pain to live, survivor as I am mid such a butchery. If aught I have left undone, if aught I have left unsaid, let it be added by those who have no spiteful word upon their lips (18).

NOTES.

(1) The writer is indebted to Dr Mair, St Andrews, for the loan of the volume containing the poem.

(2) Whether Baston was regarded as a great writer in 1314 cannot now be decided. He is quite unknown in history except in connection with his capture at Bannockburn.

(3) The word "canopeo" is unknown to classical Latin.

(4) Possibly we have a reference here to the action of the gillies or serving lads who appeared at the critical moment arrayed in order as if they formed another army.

(5) The word "timba" is probably an invention of the author. It is here translated "pole."

(6) "Coneava cum palis" may refer to the calthrops, "balls with spikes." On the other hand, we know from recent discoveries that stakes, were actually put in the pits dug by the Scots. The writer has handled one which was found about fifteen years ago. It had been burned at the end to harden it.

(7) Here Baston is referring to the disaster which befell Sir Henry de Boune, who was slain by Bruce the day before the great fight. It was on the same afternoon that Clifford's party suffered defeat at the hands of Randolph, Earl of Moray, The King's nephew.

(8) Literally "proceeding from their own effrontery."

(9) The word translated "mad" is "demesnes," another non-classical form.

(10) "Corpora praedia diripiuntur" perhaps "bodies that represent estates."

(11) The Earl of Gloucester, with the Earl of Hereford, commanded the vanguard of the English army. He was killed at a place called the Bloody Folds, about a mile from the scene of the fighting, when attempting to rally his men. The Scots would gladly have saved him but, as he did not wear his surcoat bearing his arms, his identity was not known until after he was slain. Bruce is said to have been much grieved over his death and had his body sent back to England for burial.

(12) Sir Robert de Clifford was a soldier who had often measured his arms against the Scots. His body also was sent back to his home for burial.

(13) I have been unable to discover who "Marshal of England was at this period held by the Bigods, Earls of Norfolk, but the then Earl was not killed at Bannockburn.

(14) "Manley" may be a misprint. The name is usually given as "Mauley." He was Seneschal, or High Steward of England.

(15) Another version:

Brave Edmund Manley, worthy knight,
Of manly probity;
The foe o'ercomes thee in the fight
With thy great piety.

(16) In the original there is an interesting play on the words insignis famous; ignis, fire; signis, by signs.

(17) Sir Giles de Argentine was one of the great soldiers of the period. In popular estimation the Emperor Henry, King Robert Bruce, and he were considered, the three best knights in Christendom at that time. He had served as a crusader and distinguished himself greatly against the Saracens. Hector Boece, who wrote in the 16th century, tells us that Bruce was well acquainted with Argentine and held him in high regard.

(18) Mr Culbertson gives another translation of the last four lines of Baston's poem.

Baston, a Carmelite am I,
Who count life misery;
Far better had it been to die
In such a butchery.

If aught here I have left untold,
If aught more should be said by me;
Let those in full the tale unfold,
Whose speech from partial word is free.