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## **An Irish context to a Scottish disaster: James IV, the O'Donnells of Tyrconell and the Road to Flodden**

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## Introduction

On 9 September 1513 the Scots suffered one of their most catastrophic military defeats. At Flodden Field an army of 30,000 men under the command of James IV of Scotland was decimated by a smaller English force led by Thomas Howard (d.1554), earl of Surrey.<sup>1</sup> The cream of the Scottish nobility was wiped out that day including King James, three bishops, eleven earls, fifteen lords and thousands of rank and file pike men.<sup>2</sup> English losses were minimal in comparison.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, Flodden has been regarded as something of a fool's venture and that James IV's strategy for invading England extended little beyond taking advantage of Henry VIII's absence in France.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, most historians have tended to view developments in England and the continent as the main dynamics driving the course of Anglo-Scottish relations during this period.<sup>5</sup> Aside from a few notable exceptions, very little has been undertaken on the broader Gaelic dimension underpinning James IV's Flodden campaign.<sup>6</sup>

Over the course of the later Middle Ages the wider Gaelic world, or *Gaeltacht*, came to encompass nearly fifty percent of the British Isles. Despite this profound geopolitical recasting of much of late Medieval Britain, the broader impact of the Gaelic resurgence has featured little within the historiography of late medieval Ireland, England, and Scotland. Unfortunately a short essay such as this is not the place for a detailed reassessment of how the resurgence of Gaelic power impacted upon the political development of late Medieval Britain and Ireland. The case study of Flodden however, is useful as it allows for a thematic overview of how the Stewart monarchy, during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, was able to draw upon considerable support from the Gaelic world; support which in turn could be used against England.

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<sup>1</sup> D.H. Caldwell, 'How well prepared was James IV to fight by land and Sea in 1513', *Journal of the Sydney Society for Scottish History*, 14 (2013), 36-7.

<sup>2</sup> J. Wormald, *Court, Kirk and Community: Scotland, 1470-1625* (Edinburgh, 1981), 7.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview of the battle, see G. Goodwin, *Fatal rivalry: Flodden 1513 - Henry VIII, James IV and the battle for Renaissance Britain* (London, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> A. MacDonald, 'Triumph and disaster: Scottish military leadership in the Later Middle Ages' in A. King and D. Simpkin (eds.), *England and Scotland at war, c.1296-1513* (Leiden, 2012), 255-82.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see N. MacDougall, *An antidote to the English: the Auld Alliance, 1295-1560* (East Linton, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> The exception being Stephen Boardman's work on the Campbells of Argyll, see S. Boardman, *The Campbells, 1250-1513* (Edinburgh, 2005), chapter 12 and Idem., 'Highland Scots and Anglo-Scottish warfare, c.1300-1513' in A. King and D. Simpkin (eds.), *England and Scotland at war, c.1296-1513* (Leiden, 2012), 231-54.

## The origins of the O'Donnell-Stewart alliance

Over the course of the late fifteenth century the O'Donnells of Tyrconnell established themselves as one of the most powerful Gaelic dynasties within the wider Irish Sea world.<sup>7</sup> Under the leadership of Aedh Ruadh (d.1505) and his son, Aedh Dubh (d.1537), the O'Donnells created a large hegemonic empire spanning much of Ulster, Connacht, and northern Leinster. The strategic position of the O'Donnell lordship on the North-West coast of Ireland, coupled with the O'Donnells' ability to raise considerable military and maritime resources made them ideal allies for the Stewart monarchs.<sup>8</sup> On one level the O'Donnells served as a counter balance to the MacDonald lordship of the Isles. During the fourteenth century the lordship of the Clan Donald emerged as a powerful, autonomous force in western Scotland.<sup>9</sup> Holding lands on both sides of the North Channel, in Antrim and the Hebrides, and often courted as allies by the Plantagenet kings, the lords of the Isles posed a significant threat to Scotland's western seaboard.<sup>10</sup>

The O'Donnell-Stewart alliance largely derived from this situation, and connections between the O'Donnells and the Stewarts can be traced to the late fourteenth century.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note

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<sup>7</sup> For a broad overview of O'Donnell expansion in this period, see D. MacGettigan, 'The renaissance and late medieval lordship of Tír Chonaill, 1461-1555' in W. Nolan, L. Ronayne and M. Dunlevy (eds.), *Donegal: history and society* (Dublin, 1995), 203-24; K. Simms, 'Late Medieval Donegal' in W. Nolan, L. Ronayne and M. Dunlevy (eds.), *Donegal: History and Society* (Dublin, 1995), 183-202.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of O'Donnell maritime power, see S. Egan, 'By land and by sea: The role of the maritime landscape in the expansion of O'Donnell power, c.1380-c.1500', *Journal of North Atlantic Studies* (Forthcoming, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> The last number of decades has witnessed a growing interest in the Clan Donald and the lordship of the Isles. For which, see A. Grant, 'Scotland's 'Celtic fringe' in the late middle ages: the MacDonald lords of the isles and the kingdom of Scotland' in R.R. Davies (ed.), *The British Isles, 1100-1500: comparisons, contrasts and connections* (Edinburgh, 1988), 118-41; S. Kingston, *Ulster and the Isles in the fifteenth century: the lordship of the Clann Domhnaill of Antrim* (Dublin, 2004); Idem, 'Trans-insular lordship in the fifteenth century', in T.M. Devine and J.F. McMillan, *Celebrating Columba: Irish-Scottish connections, 597-1997* (East Linton, 1999), 35-44; S. Boardman, 'The lost world: post-medieval accounts of the lordship of the Isles' in S. Duffy and S. Foran (eds.), *The English Isles: cultural transmission and political conflict in Britain and Ireland, 1100-1500* (Dublin, 2013), 151-74; N. Murray, 'A house divided against itself: a brief synopsis of the history of Clan Alexandair and the early career of 'Good John of Islay', c.1290-1370' in C. Ó'Baoill and N.R. McGuire (eds.), *Rannachadh na Gáidhlig 2000* (Aberdeen, 2002), 221-230.

<sup>10</sup> For the Clan Donald's negotiations with the English crown in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, see J. Munro and R.W. Munro (eds.), *Acts of the Lords of the Isles, 1336-1493* (Edinburgh, 1986), 1-12; D. MacPherson (ed.), *Rotuli Scotiae, 1292-1516* (2 vols; London, 1819), ii, 11, 45, 94-5, 155-6; The National Archives of the United Kingdom E 101/315/23; T. Rymer (ed.), *Foedera* (20 vols; London, 1727-35), vii, 592, 622-29, 639-40, 656-8, 714-16, 777, 824; viii, 146; R.C. Folwer *et al* (eds.), *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1405-8* (London, 1891-1916), 361, 487.

<sup>11</sup> During the 1380s petitions from Tyrconnell were being sent to Avignon via Robert II of Scotland, see W.H. Bliss (ed.), *Calendar of entries in the Papal registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: petitions to the Pope, 1342-1419* (London, 1896), 559, 575-6. I am grateful to Mr Kenneth Nicholls for drawing my attention to this reference.

that the earlier Stewart monarchs, Robert II (d.1390) and Robert III (d.1406) were highly attuned to the cultural and political nuances of the Gaelic world.<sup>12</sup> Originally hailing from the west coast of Scotland, these kings enjoyed considerable support from the Gaelic Scottish nobility; their chief supporters including the Campbells of Argyll and the Clan Donnchaidh of Atholl.<sup>13</sup> These cultural and dynastic ties with Gaelic Scotland provided the Stewarts with a bridge into Gaelic Ireland, with which they could encircle the Clan Donald. Source material relating to Hiberno-Scottish connections for this period is often infuriatingly fragmentary. Nonetheless, it does appear that Clan Donald became increasingly concerned about the Stewart monarchy's influence with the O'Donnells during the first half of the fifteenth century. This is perhaps most obvious during the reign of James I (d.1437).

Returning to Scotland in 1424 after eighteen years captivity in England, James sought to establish strong, personal rule over his kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Following the forfeiture and destruction of his kinsmen, the Albany Stewarts who ruled Scotland during his absence, James turned his attention westwards.<sup>15</sup> During the first two decades of the fifteenth century the Clan Donald had expanded their territory across much of northern Scotland, most notably in the earldom of Ross. James unsurprisingly sought to reduce their hold on the earldom. Following a series of battles in 1429 and 1431 neither James nor the lord of the Isles, Alexander (d.1449), were able to gain the upper hand. Based on evidence contained in Scottish and English chronicles and other governmental sources, it appears that James sought assistance from the then lord of Tyrconnell, Niall Garbh O'Donnell (d.1439).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> S. Boardman, 'The Gaelic world and the early Stewart court' in D. Broun and M. MacGregor (eds.), *Mìorun Mòr nan Gall: 'The great ill will of the Lowlander?': Lowland perceptions of the Highlands, medieval and modern* (Stornoway, 2006), 83-109.

<sup>13</sup> Boardman, *The Campbells*, chapters 4-5; Idem, *The early Stewart kings: Robert II and Robert III* (East Linton, 1997), 7-10.

<sup>14</sup> For the best account of the kingship of James I, see M. Brown, *James I* (East Linton, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> For a reassessment of the governorship of the Albany Stewarts, see K. Hunt, 'The governorship of the duke of Albany', in M. Brown and R. Tanner (eds.), *Scottish kingship, 1306-1542: essays in honour of Norman MacDougall* (Edinburgh, 2008), 126-54.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of Niall Garbh's career, see K. Simms, 'Niall Garbh O'Donnell, king of Tír Conaill, 1422-39', *Donegal Annual*, 12 (1977), 7-21. For expansion into Connacht and Leinster during the 1420s and early 1430s, see, M. Freeman (ed.), *The Annals of Connacht, 1224-1554* (2 vols; Dublin, 1970), (hereafter referred to as AC), 1422-1430 (all annals references are given as the year as opposed to page number); J. O'Donovan (ed.), *Annals of the kingdom of Ireland: from the earliest times to the years 1616*, (7 vols; Dublin, 1990) (hereafter referred to as AFM), 1422-1430; W.M. Hennessy (ed.), *The Annals of Loch Cé: a chronicle of Irish affairs from 1014 to 1590* (2 vols; London, 1939) (hereafter referred to as ALC), 1422-1430; W.M. Hennessy (ed.), *Annals of Ulster: a chronicle of Irish affairs from A.D. 431 to A.D. 1540* (4 vols., Dublin, 1887-1901) (hereafter referred to as AU), 1422-1430. See especially Niall Garbh's subjugation of the kindreds in northern Leinster and subsequent attack on the Pale in 1422 (AC, 1422; AFM, AU, 1423).

In 1433 Niall Garbh moved eastwards against the MacDonald lands in Antrim.<sup>17</sup> Alexander and his kinsmen in Antrim were nonetheless, quick to act. Allying with Eoghan O'Neill (d.1455), the lord of Tyrone and main regional rival of the O'Donnells, Alexander routed Niall Garbh's force in eastern Ulster before launching a dual-pronged attack on Tyrconnell.<sup>18</sup> Eoghan's force marched into Tyrconnell while Alexander's fleet landed at Inishowen. In the face of overwhelming numbers the O'Donnells were soon defeated. The hegemony that Niall Garbh had built across Ulster and Connacht collapsed shortly afterwards in favour of the resurgent O'Neills. With his Irish option exhausted, James I had little choice to make peace with Alexander and by 1436, the king had elevated Alexander to the coveted earldom of Ross, acknowledging Alexander's dominance in northern Scotland.<sup>19</sup> For the next few decades the Clan Donald remained pre-eminent in the west while the O'Neills emerged as the main power in Ulster. It is perhaps unsurprising that Edward IV of England (d.1483) viewed both these factions as potential allies for their ability to bolster English influence in regions where it was effectively non-existent.<sup>20</sup>

### The O'Donnell resurgence, c.1460-1500

Matters changed in 1461 when Niall Garbh's son, Aedh Ruadh, seized power within Tyrconnell.<sup>21</sup> A highly skilled politician and military commander, Aedh Ruadh was the mastermind behind the remarkable O'Donnell recovery. An alliance with the Clondeboy O'Neills drew the O'Neills of Tyrone's attention away from western Ulster, enabling Aedh Ruadh to lead a number of successful military hostings into Connacht.<sup>22</sup> Over the course of the 1460s Aedh Ruadh rebuilt his father's old alliance network, scoring a number of victories over the Burkes of Clanrickard, O'Connors of Sligo and O'Briens of Thomond as well as propping up the Burkes of Mayo and O'Connor Ruadh kindred in Roscommon.<sup>23</sup> By 1474 Aedh Ruadh had made peace with the O'Briens, marrying Fionula

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<sup>17</sup> *AFM, AU, 1433.*

<sup>18</sup> *AFM, AU, 1433.*

<sup>19</sup> For the background to this, see Brown, *James I*, chapter 7.

<sup>20</sup> For Yorkist alliance with the O'Neills of Tyrone, see K. Simms, 'The king's friend': O'Neill, the crown and the earldom of Ulster' in J. Lydon (ed.), *England and Ireland in the later middle ages* (Dublin, 1981), 214-36. For Yorkist alliance with the Clan Donald, see *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*, 110-1; *Foedera*, xi, 486; *Rot. Scot.*, ii, 405-7. For a recent re-assessment of Edward IV's treaty with the Islesmen, see J. Petre, 'Domnall Balloch, the treaty of Westminster Ardtornish and the MacDonald raids of 1461-3', *Historical Research*, 88/242 (November, 2015), 599-628.

<sup>21</sup> *AFM, AU, AC, 1461.*

<sup>22</sup> Aedh Ruadh married his daughter, Iníon Dubh, to Conn O'Neill, lord of Clondeboy c.1465 (for her obituary, see *AFM, AU, AC, ALC, 1494*). There is also evidence to suggest that Aedh Dubh supplied Conn with MacSweeney galloglass from Fanad, see *AFM, AU, 1470*.

<sup>23</sup> For hostings into Connacht, see *ALC, 1467; AFM, AU, AC, 1468*.

O'Brien, daughter of the clan chief, Connor.<sup>24</sup> The shifting balance of power in the west of Ireland formed the basis for further expansion into northern Leinster. In 1475 Aedh Ruadh marched eastwards, launching a devastating attack on the Pale and forcing black rent (tribute) from Dundalk.<sup>25</sup>

Similar developments were occurring in Scotland. Since the late 1460s the Scottish crown had pursued increasingly aggressive policies against the Clan Donald. Through the promotion of loyalist kindreds such as the Campbells of Argyll, James III (d.1488) hoped to break the power of the island lords.<sup>26</sup> The inability of John MacDonald (d.1503), the fourth and last lord of the Isles, to control his kinsmen weakened the cohesion of Clan Donald and allowed James III to declare the earldom of Ross forfeit in 1475.<sup>27</sup> The political disintegration of the lordship soon followed: various island kindreds descended into fractious infighting during the 1480s and early 1490s while the lordship itself was finally declared forfeit and seized by the Scottish crown in 1493.<sup>28</sup>

The extent to which developments in Ireland played in the collapse of the lordship of the Isles remains uncertain. The resurgence of O'Donnell lordship in the west can hardly have been welcomed by the Clan Donald who were becoming increasingly caught on two fronts as the Scottish monarchy pushed westwards. The English government in Dublin were certainly fearful of royal Scottish intervention in Ireland at this time. In a panicked report sent to Westminster in 1474, the council went as far to state that James III planned to 'reduce all thye land to the obeysuance of the king of Scotts'.<sup>29</sup> Though no such invasion occurred, the ascension of the Tudors eleven years later exposed Ireland to a far greater degree of foreign intervention.

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<sup>24</sup> *AFM*, 1474.

<sup>25</sup> *AFM*, *AU*, *AC*, 1475.

<sup>26</sup> For an insightful overview of the crown's policy towards the lordship of the Isles, see Boardman, *The Campbells*, chapters 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707*, ed. K.M. Brown *et al* (St. Andrews, 2007-2010; online resource, at <http://rps.ac.uk>) [date accessed 13 May 2016], 1475/26.

<sup>28</sup> *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*, lxxii; Boardman, *The Campbells*, chapter 10. John, the last lord of the Isles, was forced to surrender himself, becoming a crown pensioner and dying in ignominy in 1503.

<sup>29</sup> The National Archives of the United Kingdom, C 47/10/29.

## James IV and Ireland

In the summer of 1495 Aedh Ruadh travelled to Glasgow. Upon arrival, he was greeted by the young king of Scots, James IV, and both men promptly entered into what the *Annals of the Four Masters* have dubbed a 'comhaontu', or alliance.<sup>30</sup> It is very likely that the issue of the Yorkist pretender, Perkin Warbeck (d.1499), was discussed during this meeting.<sup>31</sup> The threat of Yorkist pretenders such as Warbeck (and Lambert Simnel in the late 1480s) struck at the very heart of the fledgling Tudor dynasty. Though little became of this venture, Warbeck had for a time enjoyed the support of James IV, Margaret of Burgundy (d.1503), the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I (d.1519), and Maurice, Earl of Desmond (d.1520).<sup>32</sup> The fact that Warbeck had been able to move freely in Ireland throughout the 1490s highlighted the severe limitations of Tudor power in Ireland and the potential for foreign meddling therein.

Warbeck's capture in 1497 and execution in 1499 did little to reduce the security threat posed by developments in Ireland. During this time Henry had grown increasingly suspicious of his Irish lord deputy, Gearóid Mór FitzGerald, eighth earl of Kildare.<sup>33</sup> A known Yorkist sympathiser, Kildare had previously supported Lambert Simnel in 1487. Kildare was arrested in 1495 at the height of the Warbeck crisis and, following a brief period of captivity in England, was released, returning to office in Ireland in late 1496.<sup>34</sup> Kildare however, did little to actively increase the power of the Tudors in Ireland and there is evidence to suggest he entered some form of league with O'Donnell, placing his second born son, Henry (d.1514), into fosterage with Aedh Ruadh in 1499.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, following Aedh Ruadh's death in 1505, Kildare maintained this connection with his son and successor, Aedh Dubh.<sup>36</sup> Such was the ineffectiveness of Kildare's deputyship that by December 1506, Henry VII (d.1509) considered leading a full military intervention to Ireland.<sup>37</sup> Only the fatal deterioration of his health prevented him from doing so.

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<sup>30</sup> *AFM*, 1495; T. Dickson and J.B. Paul (eds.), *Treasurers Accounts: Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer* (4 vols; Edinburgh, 1877-1902), i, 227, 242.

<sup>31</sup> MacDougall, *James IV* (East Linton, 1997), 116-17.

<sup>32</sup> For an overview of Warbeck's unfortunate career, see I. Arthurson, *The Perkin Warbeck Conspiracy: 1494-1499* (Stroud, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> D. Bryan, *The Great Earl of Kildare (1456-1513)*, *passim*; D.B. Quinn, 'The hegemony of the earls of Kildare, 1494-1520' in A. Cosgrove (ed.), *A New History of Ireland II: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534* (Oxford, 1987), 640-1.

<sup>34</sup> *AU*, 1495; A. Conway, *Henry VII's relations with Ireland and Scotland, 1494-1498* (Cambridge, 1932), 80-102.

<sup>35</sup> *AFM*, *AU*, 1499.

<sup>36</sup> For example, see *AFM*, 1507, 1510; *AU*, *AC*, *ALC*, 1510.

<sup>37</sup> G.C. Bayne, *Select cases in the council of Henry VII* (London, 1958), 46-7.



The ambitions of his son, Henry VIII (d.1547), for reviving Henry V's English empire in France exposed the Tudors to further continental intrigue.<sup>38</sup> Fearing a French victory in the Italian Wars of the early sixteenth century, Pope Julius II (d.1513) created the Holy League, aligning the English, Venetians, Spanish, Swiss cities, and the Holy Roman Emperor against Louis XII of France.<sup>39</sup> Over the course of 1512 Henry VIII became increasingly entangled in continental diplomacy, eventually committing to a full scale invasion of France in the summer of 1513. Though James IV had renewed his alliance with Louis in 1512 and promised to attack England, the scale of the Scottish king's ambitions became clear in 1513. In the early summer of 1513 Aedh Dubh travelled to Edinburgh for a council of war with the Scottish king.<sup>40</sup> On 26 June both men entered into a military alliance. Traditionally historians have regarded James' treaty with Aedh Dubh as little more than a sideshow to James' grander, continental schemes.<sup>41</sup> Surviving Irish sources however, suggest otherwise. The contemporary *Annals of Ulster* suggest that James IV originally planned a large military intervention in Ireland and that it was only on the advice of O'Donnell that James reconsidered.<sup>42</sup> Instead a diversionary attack was launched against Carrickfergus in eastern Ulster while James prepared his host for war in northern England.

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<sup>38</sup> For an overview of Ireland's place in Tudor foreign policy, see W. Palmer, *The problem of Ireland in Tudor foreign policy, 1485-1603* (Woodbridge, 1994), chapter, 2.

<sup>39</sup> For context of Italian wars, see M. Mallett and C. Shaw, *The Italian Wars, 1494-1559: war, state and society in early modern Europe* (London, 2012), 120-22.

<sup>40</sup> *AFM, AU, AC, ALC, 1513.*

<sup>41</sup> MacDougall, *James IV*, 266-70; Goodwin, *Fatal rivalry*, chapters 12-18; Wormald, *Court, kirk and community*, chapter 1; J. Dawson, *Scotland Re-formed, 1488-1587* (Edinburgh, 2007), 83-5. It is completely overlooked by Alastair MacDonald, see MacDonald, 'Triumph and disaster', 255-82. For a more balanced view, see Boardman, *The Campbells*, 330-2.

<sup>42</sup> *AU, 1513.*

## Conclusion

Why O'Donnell cautioned against an intervention in Ireland remain uncertain. It is perhaps fair to suggest that both James and O'Donnell were confident that an invasion of England would prove successful. By early September it very much appeared that the Scots were in the ascendancy and that the English were surrounded on numerous fronts. Henry VIII was bogged down in an unsuccessful invasion of France while King Louis had provided the Scots with arms, munitions, money and the promise of further aid.<sup>43</sup> French military advisors had been sent to train James IV's army in the art of continental pike warfare while the Scottish navy, one of the most advanced in northern Europe, posed a serious challenge to English sea power.<sup>44</sup> In Ireland, one of the most powerful Gaelic magnates stood poised to assist the Scots. For the first time since Robert Bruce, a Scottish king posed a serious challenge to English power within the British Isles. The O'Donnells had played no small part in this.

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<sup>43</sup> MacDougall, *James IV*, 270.

<sup>44</sup> Though the level of Scottish proficiency in pike warfare remains debated, see MacDonald, 'Triumph and disaster', 280-1. For Scottish naval power, see N. MacDougall, 'The greatest schein that ever sailit in England or France': James IV's 'Great Michael' in N. MacDougall (ed.), *Scotland and war: A.D. 79-1918* (Edinburgh, 1991), 36-60; S. Murdoch, *Terror of the seas? Scottish maritime warfare, 1513-1713* (Leiden, 2013), chapter 1; Goodwin, *Fatal rivalry*, chapter 13.

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