

V.

NOTICE RESPECTING FRANCOIS THUROT, A FRENCH NAVAL OFFICER,
BURIED AT KIRKMAIDEN, WIGTONSHIRE, IN THE YEAR 1760. BY
GEORGE CORSANE CUNINGHAME, Esq. COMMUNICATED BY DAVID
LAING, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

Francois Thurot, an eminent French naval officer, was born in the year 1727, at Nuits in Burgundy, of poor but respectable parents, who cultivated with their own hands a small hereditary property. When about fourteen years of age, he was placed in the College of Jesuits at Dijon, with a view to his following the medical profession; but before the necessary studies were completed he left the College and embarked as surgeon in a private ship of war then fitting out at Havre. He was unfortunate in his first voyage: the ship was captured by an English cruiser, and carried into Plymouth. Thurot, however, escaped from prison, and abandoning the medical profession, entered as a common sailor on board a privateer belonging to St Malo.

In a short time Thurot was appointed pilot, and soon after captain, of the vessel, and in it he cruised in the Channel with so great success, that some merchants of Dunkirk engaged in privateering offered him the command of an armed ship which they were then fitting out. He accepted the offer, and speedily enriched his employers, at the same time establishing for himself a high character for courage and conduct, by the capture, after sanguinary struggles, of several British vessels. The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle put an end for a time to his privateering life; and the command of a merchant vessel, which he accepted, added little to his

fortune or fame. When war broke out in 1750, his former patrons induced him again to take the command of a privateer, in which he cruised with great success in the North Sea.

In a memoir of Mr Joseph Train, a gentleman who collected and furnished to Sir Walter Scott much traditionary information relating to Scotland, and especially to Galloway, some notices of Thurot occur, which differ considerably from the French accounts, by representing Thurot as engaged from the age of fifteen to that of thirty (that is, from the year 1742 to 1757), not in privateering, but in the scarcely less infamous occupation of the smuggler. There is probably a proportion of truth in both accounts.

Thurot's reputation now stood so high that in 1755 he was offered employment in the royal marine of France; and in 1756, being intrusted with the command of "Le Fripon," a corvette, and ordered to cruise in the Channel, he distinguished himself so much as to attract the notice of the Marischal de Belleisle, by whose influence he, in 1757, was placed in command of a squadron consisting of two frigates and two corvettes. Having carefully fitted them out, he sailed from St Malo on the 12th of July, with the intention of waylaying and capturing a convoy of merchantmen bound from Archangel to London, with valuable cargoes. In this he did not succeed, though he made numerous other prizes. During this cruise the squadron suffered so much from bad weather that, on the approach of winter, Thurot was forced to put into Gothenburg to refit. He left that port early in May of the following year, and cruised off the eastern and northern coasts of Scotland, where he captured many vessels and occasioned great alarm.

On the 26th of May 1758, being in the Firth of Forth, and only a short distance from Edinburgh, Thurot perceived and bore down on four vessels which he supposed to be merchantmen. Though two of them proved to be British frigates of force superior to his two largest vessels, he did not hesitate to attack them; and an obstinately contested action ensued, in which both parties suffered severely, but there was no decided advantage on either side. Of the captains of the British frigates one was killed, the other dangerously wounded. Thurot's vessels were so much injured that he was forced to bear up for Christiansand in Norway, where he was detained, in order to effect necessary repairs, till the 12th of July.

His enterprises had been so daring and his success so great that several men-of-war were sent to sea by the British Government for the purpose of intercepting him. He therefore adopted the unusual route of proceeding homewards by the Pentland Firth; and after making numerous captures on the coast of Islay and in St George's Channel, he entered the port of Dunkirk on the 3d of December 1758, having in a great measure swept the North Sea.

He was received with great honour at the French Court, and having planned a descent on the coast of England, he was appointed to the command of a squadron, consisting of the "Belleisle" of forty guns, four other frigates, and a corvette, which were fitted out at Dunkirk, and had on board 1500 picked men, under the command of Frobert, a brigadier-general of infantry. They sailed on the 15th of October 1759, and after a long detention at Ostend, passing along the coast of Holland and Jutland, they entered the Cattegat at the worst season of the year, and there encountered a continuance of tempestuous weather, during which three of the vessels were separated from the squadron, which they did not again rejoin.

On the 4th of January 1760, Thurot reached Carrickfergus in the north of Ireland, and immediately landing the troops, now numbering only 800 men, he invested the place, which capitulated in a few days. Being unable, with his weakened force, to undertake any further enterprise, he re-embarked the troops, and taking with him many prisoners and much plunder, proceeded homewards. According to the French accounts, another of the squadron was now separated from Thurot, so that when he was engaged by Captain Elliot they say that he had only one vessel in company; but by the English official reports there must have still been three French vessels when the British squadron engaged them.

Thurot had not long left the Bay of Carrickfergus when he perceived three sail bearing down on him. After a vain endeavour to escape, he was brought to action by the "Eolus," a British frigate of thirty-six guns, a vessel considerably inferior in size and armament to the "Belleisle," Thurot's ship, which, however, was in very indifferent condition. The British frigates "Pallas" and "Brilliant," of thirty-two guns each, engaged the other vessels.

The action was fought off the Point of Ayre, the northern extremity

of the Isle of Man, on the 21st of January, according to the French accounts, but from British official information certainly on the 28th of February 1760. It was contested by all the vessels with the utmost desperation for nearly two hours. About the middle of the engagement Thurot was struck by a cannon ball on the breast and killed instantaneously. Upon this the first lieutenant of the "Eolus" boarded, and after a murderous struggle carried the "Belleisle," whose colours were hauled down by the captors. The prizes were brought into Ramsay Bay, and it was found that above three hundred men had been killed in the French vessels.

The very name of Thurot had become so dreaded that the result of this action occasioned great joy in England, and the thanks of the House of Commons were voted to Captain Elliot and to the officers and crews of the "Eolus," "Pallas," and "Brilliant." The body of the brave adventurer had been thrown overboard during the action, with those of the less distinguished slain. Some time afterwards many corpses were cast ashore at Port William, on the south-eastern coast of Luce Bay in Wigtonshire, near to the ruined chapel of Kirkmaiden, and among them was that of the dreaded Thurot. It was identified by the dress and by other circumstances, one of which was that there was found upon it a dagger, upon the blade of which was engraven "a hound pursuing a pack of deer,"¹ the emblem which Thurot was known to have adopted. The weapon is now in my possession, but owing either to its having been long in the sea or to subsequent ill usage, the device can no longer be discerned. It, having then the engraving on the blade faintly perceptible, and on the lower part of the handle a silver ornament, now lost, was given above eighty years ago to a gentleman of high rank in the Customs, by an old man who had been a riding officer or tidesman in that service, stationed for many years at Port William.

He had been present when the body of this brave man was found and interred, and by him the place of burial was pointed out to Commissioner Reid, the gentleman alluded to, in whose custody the dagger remained till about or before the year 1812, when he gave it, relating the above circumstances and other particulars connected with it, to one who confided them to me (now presented to the Museum).

¹ Probably the maker's mark.

In 1812 or 1813 I happened to be at Port William, and on my expressing a wish to visit it, the spot was pointed out to me as traditionally known to be the grave of Thurot. It was scarcely distinguishable from the narrow mounds around it; but it must still be known and respected, for until lately, and perhaps even now, the memory of the daring deeds of Thurret (thus his name was pronounced), was preserved and extolled in Gallovidian song.

(The sketches which accompany this communication may assist any one who desires to pay the tribute of a visit to the lowly resting-place of an inveterate but gallant enemy. It may be added, that various details of Thurot's engagements and vessels captured will be found in the Scots Magazine for the years 1757 and 1759).