

#### IV.

#### THE CAMPAIGN AND BATTLE OF CULBLEAN, A.D. 1335.

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It is not always realised, even by professed students of British history, how long the cause of Scotland's independence remained in jeopardy during the fourteenth century. Popularly it is no doubt supposed that the question was decided, once for all, on the field of Bannockburn in 1314; but the Treaty of Northampton, which closed the First War of Independence, was not signed until 1328; and what is not usually understood is that the death of the great King Robert a year later was the prelude to a second bitter struggle with unrelenting Plantagenet imperialism, in the course of which Edward III. achieved at one time a much greater measure of control over Scotland than his grandfather had ever enjoyed. In 1336 the English king penetrated as far as Lochindorb; his puppet, Edward Balliol, had been crowned in due form at Scone as Edward I. of Scotland, and had sworn fealty to his English namesake on the most degrading conditions; meantime young King David had been removed safely out of harm's way to Château Gaillard in Normandy. None but children in their games, says Wyntoun, dared call David Bruce their king. The same chronicler describes how completely the English had the country in their administrative grip, and how in 1335 the Cross of St Andrew still flew over no more than five places of strength in all Scotland, namely the castles of Dumbarton, Lochleven, Kildrummy, and Urquhart, and the peel of Loch Doon:

“Thai maide bailzeis, schirraffis, and iustis  
And officiaris on syndry wisse.  
Throw al Scotland brade and wide,  
All worthit Inglis men in that tyde,  
Outtane foure castellis and a peyl.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Original Chronicle*, ed. F. J. Amours, vol. vi. p. 17. According to Bishop John Leslie, *De Origine, Moribus, et Rebus Gestis Scotorum*, 1578, p. 253, the defenders of the four castles enjoyed pecuniary aid from France.

All these castles were in a state either of active siege or of more or less continuous blockade. Kildrummy in particular was hotly assaulted by David de Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, who like many other Scottish nobles had thrown in his lot with Balliol—from his mother, a Comyn, he inherited that ill-used family's mortal quarrel with the House of Bruce. The Donside castle, however, was gallantly maintained by its captain, John of the Craig, the defenders being greatly heartened by the heroic demeanour of King Robert's sister, Dame Christian Bruce, who at that time was resident in the castle. Animated by her spirited example, Wyntoun tells us, the garrison

“Maid stout and manly resistens  
And wichtly set for hir defens  
And oftare chasit thaim without  
Than thai did thaim within, but dout.”<sup>1</sup>

At the headquarters of the Regent, the gallant and capable Sir Andrew de Moray, who at that time was in Lothian, the danger to Kildrummy Castle was regarded as so serious that it was determined to make a special effort to relieve it. Should it fall, all Scotland north of the Mounth and east of the Great Glen, we may imagine, would be lost to the national cause. Moreover, the lady besieged in Kildrummy was the Regent's wife, so that knightly honour and conjugal duty went hand in hand with high considerations of strategy in pointing the need for a bold intervention benorth the Mounth. And so the Regent, accompanied by the Earl of March and the famous “Knight of Liddesdale,” Sir William de Douglas, gathered around him the chivalry of the country south of the “Scottis Se”—that is, the Firth of Forth—and, no doubt also drawing in the local levies of Strathmore as he marched, passed with the speed of life and death<sup>2</sup> across the Mounth into Cromar. We are not told which of the Mounth passes he used, but the fact that his march took him to the east end of Loch Davan makes it reasonably certain that he crossed from Glenesk and Tarfside by the Fir Mounth, passing the Dee by the well-known ford and ferry of Cobleheugh at Dinnet<sup>3</sup> (see map, fig. 1). This, of course, would be the most direct route for an army in a hurry wishing to reach Kildrummy from Strathmore, and having in view the possibility of requiring to intercept a retreat of its besiegers

<sup>1</sup> Wyntoun's account of the siege of Kildrummy and the campaign and battle of Culblean will be found in *op. cit.*, vol. vi. pp. 58-71.

<sup>2</sup> “*Diris cruciatibus plebei pessumdata ex corde compatientes, magis elegerunt mori in bello quam videre mala gentis suae; atque uno consensu et concupiscenti animo, pro redemptione servitutis, se dantes periculo, quasi ursi vel leones raptis catulis saevientes, ad praelia properabant.*”—*Joannis Forduni Scotichronicon*, ed. W. Goodall, vol. ii. p. 321.

<sup>3</sup> See G. M. Fraser, *The Old Deeside Road*, pp. 167-96. What I have written on the subject of Atholl's route in *Proceedings*, vol. lxiii. p. 130, must of course be corrected.

towards Atholl. On the evening of 29th November 1335 the Regent, says Wyntoun, pitched his camp at the "Hall of Logy Rothwayne." To Mr G. M. Fraser, the Aberdeen City Librarian, belongs the credit of identifying this place with the mediæval moated homestead site on the north-east shore of Loch Davan. "This ancient fort," he writes,

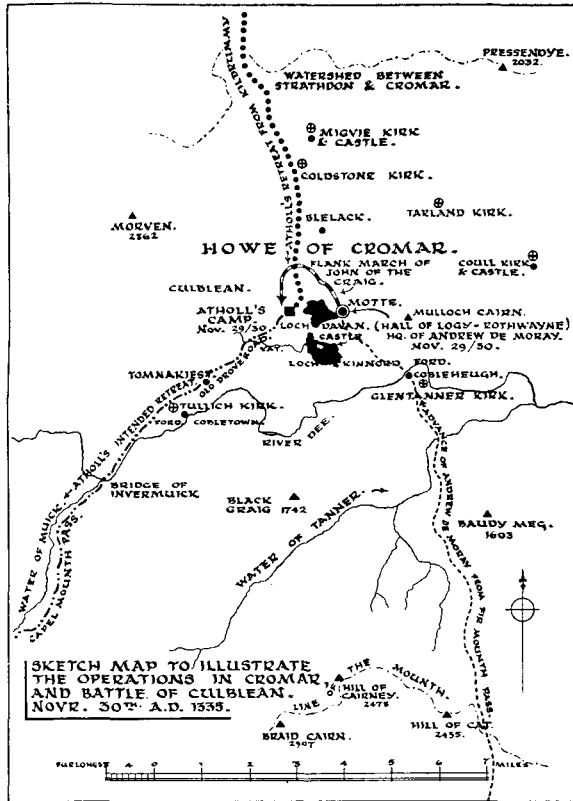


Fig. 1. The Campaign of Culblean.

"is situated in the old parish of Logie (conjoined in 1618 with the more northerly parish of Coldstone to form the existing parish of Logie Coldstone). The Mains of Logie and Mill of Logie are in the neighbourhood of the fortress, on the same side of the Dinnet-Strathdon road, while Ruthven (Nether and Upper) is also in the neighbourhood, on the opposite side of the road."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Loch Davan and its Moated Fort," in *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 9th September 1925.

Learning of the Regent's approach, Atholl had hastily broken up the siege of Kildrummy and marched south. On the same day, apparently, when Moray reached Loch Davan, Atholl pitched his camp in the highway at the east end of Culblean, so Wyntoun tells us explicitly. Evidently Earl David was making for his own country of Atholl: from Kildrummy his most speedy way thither would take him by the Boltinstone pass into Cromar, thence by Coldstone and Blelack he would strike into the well-known old drove road which leads from Tarland along the north shore of Loch Davan, and so over the shoulder of Culblean and through the overflow channel between Culblean and Cnoc Dubh<sup>1</sup> to Tomnakiest and Tullich,<sup>2</sup> where the important ford and ferry over the Dee at Cobletown<sup>3</sup>—or still farther west, the bridge at Invermuick<sup>4</sup>—would offer him immediate access to the Capel Mounth Pass leading directly into Atholl. Wyntoun tells us that Earl David's camp on this Culblean road was pitched at its east end, and that "right before" him, *i.e.* right opposite, lay the Regent at Logie Ruthven. Atholl's position must therefore have been near the west shore of Loch Davan; and the ford where Sir William de Douglas made his frontal attack during the battle, and where Sir Robert Brady was killed, will have been on the little burn that flows into Loch Davan at Marchnear, rather than a ford on the Burn of Vat farther to the south-west, which must have been in Atholl's rear. A site on the north side of the Burn of Vat was indicated as the "supposed battlefield" in the 1870 edition of the Ordnance Survey Map (6 inch, Aberdeenshire, Sheet LXXXI., S.W.), but this identification seems to have had no more valid authority behind it than the group of prehistoric tumuli on the hillslope to the north. In the revised (1902) issue of the Ordnance Survey it is satisfactory to note that the "supposed site of the Battle of Culblean" has been transferred to a position west of Marchnear, in harmony with Wyntoun's explicit statement.

In the fourteenth century, and until very much later, the hillside of Culblean, now an open moor (fig. 2), was densely covered with forest.

Such being the situation on the evening of 29th November, a modern strategist will doubtless comment that it was still perfectly possible for Earl David, with Loch Davan between him and his enemy, to out-

<sup>1</sup> For this remarkable geological feature see A. Bremner, *Physical Geography of the Dee Valley*, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> This ancient track is described by Mr G. M. Fraser, "An Old Drove Road over Culblean," in *Aberdeen Free Press*, 7th June 1921.

<sup>3</sup> Fraser, *Old Deeside Road*, pp. 177-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. lxxiii. p. 116.

march the Regent and gain the Capel Mounth pass in safety. Mediæval etiquette, however, demanded a battle under such conditions, and there is no hint that Atholl wished to shirk the issue. His army at the siege of Kildrummy, according to Wyntoun, had numbered three thousand—though the figure is given with reserve: “men said.” As to



Fig. 2. The Howe of Cromar, looking west from Mulloch.

*From Michie's "Loch Kinnord," 2nd ed., by courtesy of F. C. Diack.*

Loch Kinnord is seen to the left, Loch Davan to the right. Behind Loch Kinnord are Craigendarroch and the Pass of Ballater. In front and to the right of Craigendarroch is Cnoc Dubh, to the right again is Culblean, both standing out against the Crannach Hill ridge behind. Between Culblean and Cnoc Dubh is the “slack” through which passes the old drove road to Tullich. The high summit to the right is Morven (2862 feet). The crannog in Loch Kinnord is clearly visible: the castle island is not distinguished against the shore behind.

the Regent's strength, the only information we have is that in Lothian he had gathered for the enterprise “weill aucht hunder of fechtand men.” This number is of course absurdly small; but if we may regard “fighting men” as a translation of *milites*, *i.e.* knights, then by the ordinary proportion in a fourteenth-century army his total force would have been about four thousand.<sup>1</sup> That this solution is correct is

<sup>1</sup> See J. E. Morris, *The Welsh Wars of Edward I.*, p. 299.

suggested by the fact that Wyntoun describes these eight hundred as "the floure of the South half the Scottis se," phraseology which indicates that he was counting the chivalry and took no reckoning of the rank and file—particularly as he makes specific mention of the "commonis" in his narrative of the battle. Fordun's continuator, who seems to know no other authority than Wyntoun, translates *octingenti electi*.<sup>1</sup>

At this critical juncture who should march into the Regent's camp but the gallant defenders of Kildrummy,

"Thre hundreth wicht men and hardy  
That comfort him in mekle thing;  
For he wes glaid of thar cummyng."

At their head was John of the Craig, who now would show that he was not merely a "bonnie fechter" on the guarded walls of a castle, but also that he was a tactician of genius with a keen eye for ground, and in particular with a thorough knowledge of the topography of the present scene of operations (see Map, fig 3). For John of the Craig told the Regent that he knew of a forest path by means of which Atholl's position could be turned and a disastrous attack launched against his flank. The whole tactical situation, not least in the forest nature of the ground, reminds us of Jackson's march at Chancellorsville in the American Civil War. Eagerly the gallant Moray caught at the bold proposal, and two columns of assault were formed, of which one, under Sir William de Douglas, was to deliver a frontal attack, while the other, under the Regent in person, and guided by John of the Craig, would make the flank march and fall upon Atholl's army pinned to the battlefield by the attack in front. Both columns, knights and all, marched on foot, as indeed the nature of the ground demanded.

But herein emerges the major difficulty in Wyntoun's account. According to him, John of the Craig's path conducted the Regent's detachment *along the River Dee*, and therefore by implication the flank attack must have been delivered *from the south*. The obstacles in the way of accepting this statement seem to me to be insuperable. From the Regent's camp at the *motte* on Loch Davan the nearest point on the River Dee is distant, as the crow flies, a mile and seven furlongs; thence along the course of the river to a point nearest Atholl's camp<sup>2</sup> would be fully a mile and a half; and from there to the camp itself must be at least another two miles. Allowing for the intricacies of the ground, this would presuppose a march for the flanking column of, at the lowest estimate, six or seven miles—an altogether unlikely distance

<sup>1</sup> *Scotichronicon, ut supra.*

<sup>2</sup> Dr Bremner has kindly informed me that the course of the river here is not likely to have materially altered since the fourteenth century.

to be traversed in the dark, through broken, marshy, and forest country, by a considerable force which, we are told, started "sone eftir the mydnycht," and was within sight of the enemy "sone eftir in the

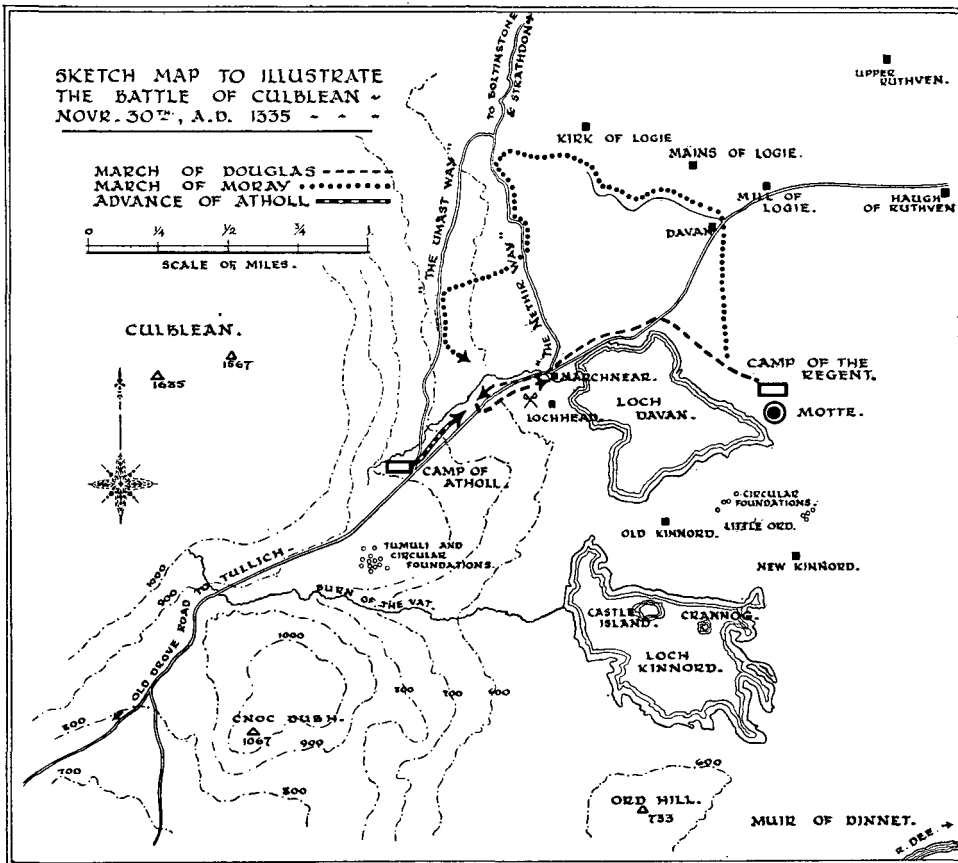


Fig. 3. The Battle of Culblean.

[J. F. Wyness, del.]

dawing"—which would have taken place about twenty minutes to nine o'clock.<sup>1</sup> It must of course be remembered that a considerable time would

<sup>1</sup> On this question Mr Owen F. T. Roberts, Lecturer in Astronomy at Aberdeen University, has kindly written me as follows: "November 30, 1335, would be December 8 (N.S.); the connection applied in 1752 was 11 days; but the Julian Calendar gets less in error as you go back. According to calculations which I made a couple of years ago, the sun rises at Aberdeen at 8.41 a.m. on December 8, and so at 8.44 a.m. at Loch Davan. A further correction of about 4 minutes is due to what is known as the Precession of the Equinoxes in six centuries, giving 8.40 a.m. as a good estimate. I should point out that the sun at that time of year rises at a nearly south-easterly point; and owing to the range of hills somewhere about Mt Battock, it would be invisible until perhaps 10 minutes later; but this may be of no importance."

be required to marshal the long straggling column for battle at the end of its journey. Moreover, such a march, coming up from the Dee along the west side of Loch Kinnord, would have brought the Regent's column into a position right in the rear of Atholl's army—would have produced not a Chancellorsville but a Sedan. Wyntoun, however, quite clearly indicates that the attack was a flank one: Sir Andrew's detachment, he says, "came in on the side." Now, as the right flank of Atholl's position was covered by Loch Davan,<sup>1</sup> the only way in which a force coming up from the Dee could have manœuvred itself into a flanking position would be by making a still wider and more toilsome divergence to the west, first rounding Cnoc Dubh, then mounting the Burn of the Vat, and lastly getting on to Culblean above the enemy. But why the flank attack at all, when an assault directly from the rear would have been so much more effective?

Again, there is no intelligible reason why such an exaggerated *détour* into the Dee Valley should have been necessary at all. Had Moray intended to attack Atholl's position from the south, he would have led his flanking column through between Loch Davan and Loch Kinnord; or, if so narrow an access was thought dangerous, he could have passed round the south side of Loch Kinnord and over the northern skirts of Ord Hill, but in no conceivable circumstances would it have been necessary to go as far south as the Dee.

Lastly, if the flank attack had been delivered from the south, the direction of dispersal for Atholl's beaten army must have been to the north and west, into the fastnesses of Culblean and Morven. But Wyntoun tells us how the remnant of his smitten host found refuge in the island castle on Loch Kinnord—*i.e.* the refugees must have fled not backwards but forwards through the centre of the victorious army!<sup>2</sup> Obviously the fact that the survivors of the rout escaped to Loch Kinnord is totally inconsistent with the idea of a decisive assault on Atholl's position from anywhere in the Dee valley.

One is, of course, very properly reluctant to correct our oldest and only detailed authority; but, in all the circumstances as above set forth, I have become convinced that the Prior of Loch Leven, who probably was equipped with no local knowledge, but clearly had authentic materials at his disposal,<sup>3</sup> must have been misinformed in bringing the

<sup>1</sup> The west shore of the loch at this time probably came as far as Lochhead.

<sup>2</sup> One recalls the precisely similar absurdity of the flight of the English survivors to Stirling Castle after Bannockburn, as conceived on the old idea of an east-to-west battle front. See W. M. Mackenzie, *The Battle of Bannockburn*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>3</sup> For the Wyntoun connection with Kildrummy, and its possible influence on the writing of Wyntoun's chronicle, see *Memorials of the Family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, ed. Sir William Fraser, vol. i. p. 54; also *Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, vol. iv. p. 176, footnote.



Dee into his account at all,<sup>1</sup> and that the flank attack was delivered not from the south but from the north.<sup>2</sup> This seems the only theory that squares with the topography and also with the rest of Wyntoun's own narrative. John of the Craig would lead the Regent's party round by the north of Loch Davan on to the shoulder of Culblean, and would thus gain higher ground above and behind Atholl's camp, from which the decisive attack would be launched whose natural result was the driving of Atholl's beaten troops southward and eastward to Loch Kinnord. Wyntoun tells us that there were two paths through the wood—the "umast way" and the "nethir way." Earl David lay in the upper, while the flanking column advanced first by the lower and then crossed over to the upper. Of course it is hazardous now to attempt the identification of such minute details of an ancient topography, but two old hill-tracks, one below and the other above the 600-foot contour line, do in fact pass southward across the eastern slope of Culblean. Both start from a common point west of the ancient churchyard of Logie. The upper of these tracts enters the Tarland-Tullich road near the head of Marchnear Burn, where Atholl's camp was pitched. I conceive that the Knight of Liddesdale's column would follow the Tarland-Tullich road in order to deliver the frontal attack on this position, while Moray with John of the Craig would make his way by a wide detour to the north, probably by an old cross-country road leading from Davan by the south side of Mill of Logie and Mains of Logie to west of Logie churchyard, where it meets the two Culblean hill-tracks already mentioned. Wheeling to the south the flanking column would at first take the lower of these, and then would strike up to the right, in order to gain the upper track and higher ground from which to descend on Atholl's left rear.

The details of the battle may be read in Wyntoun's picturesque narrative. Evidently the tactical synchronisation was perfect. William de Douglas advancing along the Tarland-Tullich road first crossed the Marchnear Burn, and revealed himself at dawn in his enemy's presence; then he retired behind the burn, and by a show of irresolution, doubtless also by the fewness of his numbers, he enticed Atholl to leave his

<sup>1</sup> Possibly Wyntoun may have misunderstood some reference, in his original sources or in some verbal communication, to the crossing of the Dee by the Regent's army on his way to Logie-Ruthven.

<sup>2</sup> The Rev. J. G. Michie, parish minister of Dinnet, the local historian, published two accounts of the battle of Culblean. One, in his *History of Loch Kinnord*, 1877, pp. 52-62 (revised issue, ed. F. C. Diack, 1910, pp. 39-47), is a mere paraphrase, not always accurate, of Wyntoun's narrative. The other account, contained in his *History of Logie Coldstone and the Braes of Mar*, 1896, pp. 18-20, is a very brief notice, but it is interesting to observe that in it the author makes the flank column adopt a northward circuit.

"herbery," and come down to attack him. Here, therefore, at the March-near ford a hand-to-hand conflict developed, in which Sir Robert de Brady was slain. Then suddenly the Regent's column, crashing through the undergrowth, broke in with irresistible weight on Atholl's exposed flank:—

"With that Schir Andro of Murraif  
Come in on syde sa sturdely  
With all thaim of his cumpany  
That in his cummyng, as thai say  
He baire doune buskis in his way."

Atholl himself was slain, fighting gallantly to the last—

"Thare by ane aik deit Erll Davy."

According to Boece, who is echoed by the seventeenth-century historian of the Gordons,<sup>1</sup> he was slain by Alexander Gordon, the successor to Atholl's forfeited Lordship of Strathbogie. The rank and file of his host had fled incontinent as soon as the flanking column appeared, and hid themselves in the forest; one of our two English sources suggests that their defection may have been due to treachery.<sup>2</sup> Those who stayed to fight it out were dispersed without much loss being inflicted on them; and part of the refugees found shelter with Sir Robert Menzies in his island castle on Loch Kinnord, where they surrendered next day.

The battle of Culblean, fought "on Sancte Androwis day," 1335,<sup>3</sup> was the turning-point in the second war of Scottish Independence, and therefore an event of great historical importance. John of the Craig, the hero of the day, would appear to be the earliest recorded laird of the Craig of Auchindoir.<sup>4</sup> As a vassal of the Earl of Mar he would be called upon to take his part in the defence of Kildrummy. That he was captain of its garrison, and that he led the "wicht and hardy" three hundred to join the Regent at Logie-Ruthven, we learn from Boece, who as an Aberdeen authority here carries special weight; he is followed

<sup>1</sup> *Hectoris Boethii Scotorum Historia*, ed. 1526, folio cccxxxi, verso; Sir Robert Gordon, *Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> *Sive ex timore sive in dolo—Chronicon de Lanercost*, ed. J. Stevenson, p. 284. The other account, in the *Anonimale Chronicle* of the Abbey of St Mary at York, 1333-81 (ed. by V. H. Galbraith, Manchester University Publications, No. 185, p. 5), is a mere transcript of the Lanercost Chronicle.

<sup>3</sup> Wyntoun, however, is doubtful whether the fight did not take place "on the ewyn, as thai say." Fordun, *ut supra*, gives the date as 30th November. The question is settled by an entry in the account of the Sheriff of Dumfries (Eustace de Maxwell) for 1335-6. *Nove escate: de baronia de Dalswynton que fuit David Comitis Athollie, ab ultimo die Novembris anno IX<sup>o</sup> quo die idem comes obiit, usque XIX diem Marcii proximo sequentem*, etc.—J. Bain, *Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland*, vol. iii. Appendix III., p. 318, if introduction, p. xlv.

<sup>4</sup> See my paper on "Craig Castle and the Church of Auchindoir," in this volume, *supra*, p. 54.

by his translator Bellenden, and also by Buchanan.<sup>1</sup> Curiously enough, Wyntoun does not mention John of the Craig in connection with the defence of Kildrummy, but his language none the less makes it clear that he came into the Regent's camp with the three hundred. After describing their arrival and the Regent's joy, he proceeds:—

“Sa in his cumpany was ane  
Johun of the Craige,” etc.

Wyntoun also tells us that John had been captured by Atholl earlier in the war, and had been liberated on promise to pay ransom, which debt fell due next day. If that is so, he had a most excellent Aberdeenshire motive to exterminate his creditor *quam celerrime*.

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