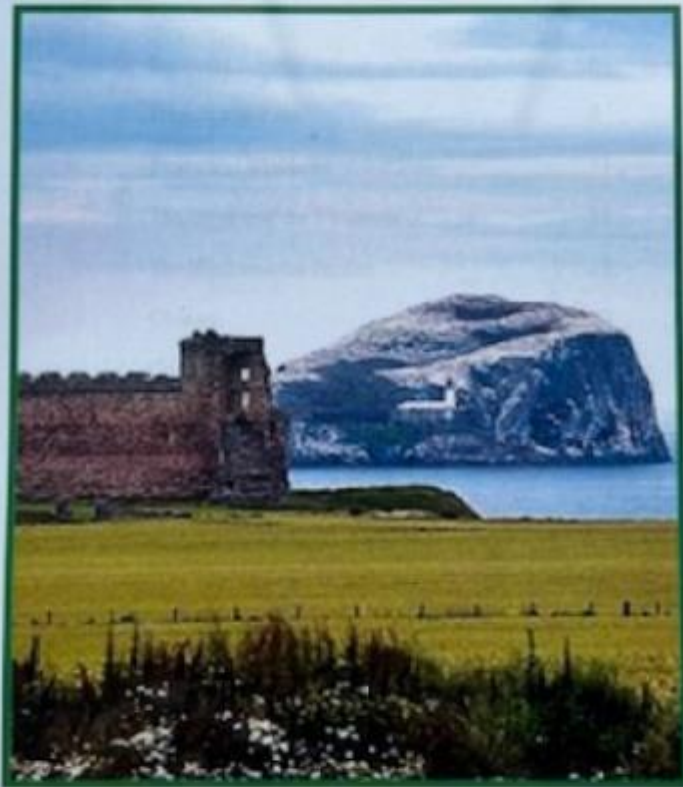


THE SIEGE OF BASS ROCK

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This short account is

Dedicated to

Captain Michael Middleton

In admiration of his enterprise and steadfastness

R.I.P.

INTRODUCTION

Over thirty years ago I explored the bulky island of Bass Rock alongside one of its lighthouse keepers who told me about the seventeenth century siege. His fascinating story of a handful of Jacobites holding out for three years against the regime of William of Orange came alive for me as I marvelled at one of their cannon, the largest I have ever seen: a cannon royal, of 58 pounds' worth of powder, point-blank range 300 yards, extreme range 3000 yards. The defenders of the Bass fully expected the exiled James II to return and repossess his kingdom, with the assistance of a French fleet, via the Firth of Forth, which they now entirely commanded by being able to wreck ships or else guide them safely to harbour just as they chose. The Stuart monarch never would set foot in Scotland again, but the Bass was indeed the last part of Britain to submit to William III.

I thought this story amazing and checked the Encyclopaedia Britannica upon my return home. Its original single sentence about the coup has been paraphrased in many volumes of Scottish history over the years (where the siege features at all) e.g. "Four Jacobites imprisoned here in 1691, overpowered their guards and held the rock for King James II until 1694." (Donaldson and Morpeth, 1977, p.17).

It would appear that this is a neglected episode in the history of the Jacobite wars, merely referred to in passing by writers such as Petrie. Hence for most people the important dates for Jacobite rebellions are those of 1715 and 1745, and the Stuarts concerned are respectively the Old Pretender and Bonnie Prince Charlie. It is widely assumed that the Glorious Revolution and William of Orange's accession to the throne, when the Battle of the Boyne saw James II's Irish army defeated and he fled for the second time to France, did indeed put an end to Jacobite resistance for a quarter of a century. The Bass Rock coup is proof that all the King's followers did not just accept defeat, disperse, or follow him meekly into exile. For over three more years there existed a Jacobite stronghold in Scotland, right where it could be most effective if its garrison were to be called upon to aid James II regain his crown. A thorn in the Government's side, and a perpetual aggravation to the Edinburgh Privy Council.

Jane Lane had published a novel in 1950, "The Fortress in the Forth", which contained a superb pictorial map showing 'The Bass in its Fortified State in 1690'. She was a respected historian of the Stuart period, and upon publishing her book she already had three biographical works plus several historical novels to her credit. Admittedly she had added to the romance by introducing to the rock a young woman, a love affair, and a suicide, but her Author's Note states:

"All the main events in this story really happened. The Bass Rock was captured, held, and eventually surrendered, in the manner described in the foregoing pages, and the terms obtained by the garrison were in substance those I have given." (Lane, 1950, p.261)

Her account of events is reliable because the historically recognised sources of Crichton and Hill Burton are clearly where she obtained her material; her knowledge of the fortress layout and the rock itself is sound because she had walked the ground as I have. Since her death the Internet has come into being as another, and more readily accessible, resource. Perhaps one day the siege of the Bass will receive the full attention it merits, and an authoritative book will at last be published giving this event its rightful place in Jacobite history. Meanwhile let me tell you what happened.



PRISONERS

Four men guarded by twenty-four, on a 350' high rock, one mile in circumference, set in the mouth of the Firth of Forth. Their nearest neighbour the hostile garrison at Tantallon Castle on the mainland, a mere mile away.

The prisoners, Middleton, Roy, Dunbar, Halyburton, were Jacobites. Dundee's men, they had lost their great leader in the victory at Killiecrankie, only to find themselves imprisoned after the Cromdale skirmish in April 1690. They had been stowed on Bass Rock for more than a year. Who was to lead them now? Their king – the Catholic James II of England, VII of Scotland – was living in exile in France. His Protestant daughter Mary and her Dutch husband William of Orange ruled over his kingdoms. The future was unthinkable when each day seemed aimless and endless.

The Bass Rock lies two miles east of North Berwick. It is a natural fortress. Three sides are sheer cliff, with a gentler slope to the south affording a promontory upon which are ramparts shielding the buildings – Governor's House, soldiers' barracks, prison – and leading to a slippery landing place only useable at high tide. Pierced by a natural tunnel through the rock, it has a freshwater spring, vegetable garden and seven acres of good grazing sufficient to support twenty-five sheep. For nine months of the year it is home to a huge colony of gannets, or solan geese, the largest seabird in the North Atlantic. An adult is three feet long with a wingspan almost twice that. (Beautiful birds, they are incredibly noisy, reek of fish and have a beak like an ice axe.) The young gannet is edible and is said to taste of anchovy.

'... And at the same time geese awaken and begin crying about the top of the Bass. There is just the one crag of rock as everybody knows, but great enough to carve a city from. With the growing of the dawn I could see it clearer and clearer, the straight crags painted white with the seabird droppings like a morning frost. The sloping top of it green with grass, the clan of white geese that cried about the sides and the black broken buildings of the prison sitting close on the sea's edge.'

Robert Louis Stevenson

'The Tale of Tod Lapraik' in 'Catriona' (1893)

In summer the Bass can be pleasant enough. Always allowing for the constant shrieks and stench of the gannets and the eternal souging of the sea through the channel at its core. In winter or stormy weather exposed as it is, conditions are atrocious. Dangerously windswept and bitterly cold with the sea thundering and tugging at its base, in 1690 the waves were sometimes thrown as high as the fortress itself, and poured into the court fronting the actual prison cells. Some of the damp, dark and narrow cells had one small window set so high nothing could be seen. Others looked out onto a strip of pavement set between two walls, which was patrolled by a sentry. The lowest dungeon remained icy cold always from continuous sea spray, and in winter all the cells often filled up with smoke. (Smellie, 1903, p. 392.) Prisoners were exercised in pairs, being walked past the old chapel to the top of the Bass where the standard of William of Orange flew proudly set on a cairn of stones. Prisoners with insufficient funds to purchase food and drink found their main

diet was fish; and only guards had fresh barrelled water. The captives depended upon rock puddles in which the water was often putrid. Sucking it through porridge oats made it minimally more palatable. In really bad weather prisoners simply starved until calmer seas permitted boats to land provisions.

After a year of regularly treading the Bass the four Jacobites surely felt they knew every scant feature of it. Captain Michael Middleton truly did. From the three rough terraces cut into its southern side with the fortress on the lowest of these; down to the landing place useable only in calm weather, Westward of that, a sheer cliff 50' high topped by the crane bastion, battlemented and mounted with cannon. The rough stone steps that ascended from the landing place were not sufficient in themselves – a rope had to be thrown down from the fortress to assist any visitors. Clinging to this, crawling on hands and knees to reach a steeply winding path and hence eventually the outer gate of the fortress, no one scaled the Bass with any ease or dignity. This was the only way to enter its stronghold. Beyond the first outer gate lay two more, each approached by stairs. Middleton knew the Bass and its strengths, from its perilous jetty to the tip of that mocking flag.

He watched the sea in all its moods. He studied the weather – the prevailing wind and the mist, which generally obscured the nearest land. He marked the daily routines of the garrison, the minor innovations made by its new Governor, Fletcher of Saltoun.

Perhaps he knew of the last letter James II had written on English soil just before he followed his wife and baby son into exile in St Germain-en-Laye two and a half years earlier. Addressed to the Earl of Middleton (no relation) it stated unequivocally:

“I have thought fit to withdraw myself, but must not tell you where it shall be; if honest and loyal men will declare for me, and stand by me, I shall soon come to them.” (Petrie, 1948, p.5)

Did Captain Middleton know anything of this promise to his namesake? If he did, then it was another thing he pondered.

BREAKOUT

On 15th June 1691 Fletcher of Saltoun, the new Governor, with half of his men, was at Tantallon Castle a mile away on the mainland. The Bass garrison was hence reduced to a mere dozen guards. In the evening the coaling brig arrived from Castleton with its monthly supply of coal. The tide being not at its fullest, and with a summer storm brewing, landing upon the rock proved hazardous; so that besides the two soldiers required to work the crane and lift the sacks of fuel up into the courtyard, the other ten were all needed down at the jetty to help with the actual business of unloading.

Captain Middleton had somehow won over the two soldiers on duty at the crane; the gunner Swan and sergeant La Fosse; one of whom had agreed to unlock the prison door.

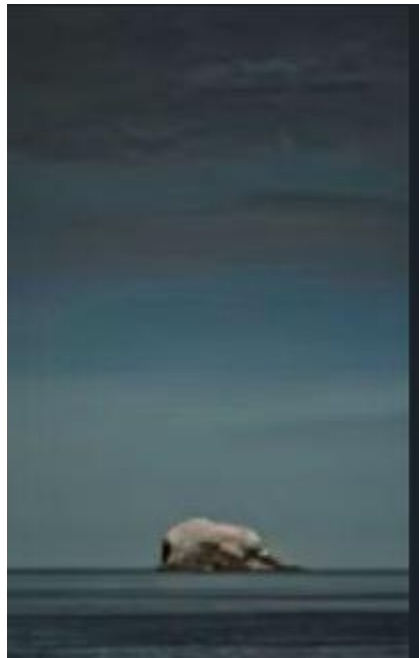
So the four Jacobites waited and listened to the wind, the screaming gannets, the postern gate opening, soldiers passing on their way to the awkward steps and the outer gate, then the crane creaking into action, followed by the thump of heavy sacks outside in the courtyard; and finally the expected quiet footsteps and at last the sound of the great key scraping in the lock of their prison.

Swiftly in single file they ran, two to the crane court with its cannon, and two for the stout, nail-studded outer gate with its two leaves hung between posts of skilfully dressed and laid stone. Superbly crafted and minus any mortar these were quite impervious to any bombardment; and all the garrison – bar Middleton's two accomplices – were down and drenched at the landing stage. The solid gate was shouldered shut and its bar dropped safely home.

In the crane court one of the lighter cannon had already been turned upon the force at the jetty, and Middleton made prompt claim on behalf of himself and his three companions to be in possession of both island and fortress of the Bass, together with their intention to hold these for their lawful king. He told the garrison to

board the coaling brig and sail to the mainland. If they did not, he said he would fire upon them since the entire Bass armoury was now in his hands. He gave them five minutes to make their decision. It took no longer. They went. (Lane, 1950, pp. 38-42)

“For Scotland’s royal, loyal, joyal,
Jemmy’s our joy, the whigs we defy all,
We mighted him, righted him
When England flighted him,
Tan ra ra ra, boys, now we’ll delight him.”
Auld song



FRIENDS AND FOES

Inventories were speedily taken. The stores included plenty of dry goods, butter, pickled mutton and herrings, candles, ale and two cases of brandy. Besides the weapons on the crane bastion, which included no less than five cannon-royal and five demi cannon of the same range, the armoury held four dozen muskets, three and a half dozen pistols, bayonets, pikes and a case full of various swords. Powder, grenades, smallshot were all in good supply. Middleton's men were also now the possessors of a small boat.

The Bass could never be attacked from north, east or west because of the height of its sheer cliffs and the impossibility of landing. Only its south side necessitated sentry duty. Situated as they were, these Jacobites could certainly hold the door to Scotland ajar for King James' invasion, which they confidently expected would happen soon, given the ready assistance of his French host, King Louis XIV. Middleton wrote a proud letter of loyalty and explanation to the exiled Stuart monarch. He included the detail that the erstwhile prisoners had, with all due ceremony, struck the hated standard of William, Prince of Orange and had taken the greatest pleasure in doing same.

Three days later, having heard of the Bass breakout, Crawford, Laird of Ardmillan, together with his servant and two Irishmen, arrived in an eight oared boat

to offer their services. He brought cases of raisins and figs and the fresh carcase of an ox.

Two boats of soldiers patrolled throughout one night but rough seas prevented them approaching close to the rock. If intended as a preventative measure against supporters sending provisions to the Jacobites, it was not a very practical one. It would take a fleet to police the wide expanse of sea.

Middleton himself, taking Ardmillan and his servant, now journeyed to the mainland to find an Edinburgh merchant of known Jacobite sympathies called Trotter. He wanted local supplies to be delivered regularly to his garrison as soon as ever the nights grew dark, and this was arranged. Meanwhile the party returned laden with food, including live hens; and yet more ammunition. Middleton's last act before returning to the Bass was to entrust to another friend his letter to King James II in St Germain; and he remained confident that more supplies would soon be forthcoming from that direction.

On 1st August a boat full of dragoons approached the rock offering an indemnity to its holders if they would promptly surrender the island. Middleton lured the boat within musket range by simply pretending that he could not hear the shouted terms. The dragoons were then forced to land and promptly found themselves in prison. A second boat arrived the next morning. This time it kept well out of musket range (being so low in the water the cannon were no threat). The officer used a speaking trumpet to demand the return of the dragoons and their boat. Middleton readily agreed to release his prisoners but claimed the boat as a lawful prize. When the officer argued, he indicated that he was willing to hang a prisoner from the crane instantly – the luckless man was already noosed. At this the lieutenant capitulated and was then forced to throw overboard all the weapons in his boat, and to have it rowed into the very foot of the cliff. The prisoners were then lowered singly by the crane, for Middleton had no intention of opening the outer gate. The boat finally turned away, leaving the ten-strong Bass garrison now possessed of a twelve oared boat in addition to the two smaller vessels.

One month later and William III's Government belatedly realised what real damage the small force on the Bass had the power to inflict. It also recognised the holding of the great rock to be a gross insult to the Prince of Orange. Two heralds, pursuivants and trumpeters arrived on 8th September, 1691. This time the object was to deliver a formal summons to surrender. The sea was calm and, the trumpets sounding a parley, the boat came confidently within musket shot. Middleton and his men were ordered to deliver up the Bass within seven days upon pain of treason, their lives otherwise to be forfeit with all their lands, titles, goods, etc. A proclamation followed promising a reward of fifty Scots pounds to any member of the garrison who would desert. Middleton replied determinedly that he held the Bass for his and their lawful King and would hold it to the death. He adjured them not to call loyal subjects traitors, nodding at one of his men to fire a shot over their heads. At this defiance the boat with its solemn occupants duly departed.

On the last day of that same month the Jacobites heard from their monarch. James had sent a French privateer bearing excellent provisions and a letter with a command for Middleton to hold the Bass in the King's name. James, as an experienced soldier, had sent two French cannoneers and his own Royal Standard for the empty flagstaff. Himself a Catholic, his final gift was that of a priest – so necessary should any member of the garrison be of the same persuasion. Middleton promptly returned the priest claiming he could not spare food for any man unable or unwilling to fight. His reply to James II also related the formal events of the 8th, and the fact that each man on the Bass would, if he were captured, now be hanged for treason. The company then with due solemnity hoisted the King's Standard and fired the cannon-royal in salute. (Lane, 1950, pp.95-99)

PIRACY AND MASSACRE

Despite having ample stores to hand, directly the nights set in the dozen Jacobites had to turn pirate and raid the coastal villages in order to lay insufficient provisions for the summer months when any crossing of the Forth would be hazardous indeed. From October Middleton's careful studying of maps, winds and tides bore fruit. Ardmillan, familiar with the coast, proved an excellent guide when showing a lantern was too dangerous. They would knock at doors, stating that what they did was in the King's name, and take food, canvas, nails, boats, whatever might prove of future use. Local folk were for the most part poor, but the Bass garrison could not afford scruples. They were a dozen men defying an army. They were of necessity a law unto themselves, and could dispense with popularity. (Lane, 1950, p.108)

Over that first winter they seized a pinnace, which proved its worth come summer when, on the 4th July, with the mounting of swivel guns, Middleton's force waylaid a Dutch vessel sailing between the Bass and Castleton. She patently knew nothing of the rock's new role, having somehow missed the patrols sent out by the Tantallon garrison to warn any approaching ships. She let the pinnace come within musket range without hailing it. Middleton told her captain to haul to, and prepare to be boarded. She had no guns, and hasty small arms fire from her bewildered crew went wide. Under fire herself she soon surrendered. Unusually there was no useable cargo so Middleton seized two hostages and the ship against a ransom, which was duly paid in stores.

In like manner the novice pirates also attacked Danish and Swedish vessels. The former was captured at night, and it was again ransomed. The latter, although she came within cannon range of the Bass, proved more difficult; calm water meant she could be rowed into Tantallon Castle, which defended her with its guns. The Jacobites managed to disable her utterly and she was laden with timber, which had to be thrown overboard to lighten her. The tide washed it into the Bass during the night. (Ibid, pp.132-134)

News of events in the larger world reached the rock sometimes via the garrison's mainland excursions, or else by means of Trotter, the friendly Edinburgh merchant. Thus it was the garrison learned about the Massacre of Glencoe, which had taken place the previous February. William of Orange had offered a pardon to all rebels, provided they took an oath of allegiance to him before 1st January 1692. Those who did not being threatened with 'the utmost extremity of the law'. Conscious of their honour, but anxious about they and their Clans' survival, the Highland Chiefs sent an urgent message to James II in France, asking to be released from their oath to him so that they might take another to his son-in-law. Four months passed without any response. On 21st December a messenger finally reached the Highlands bringing King James' discharge to the Clans:

“. . . We are informed of the state of our subjects in the Highlands . . . give leave to our said subjects . . . who have hitherto behaved themselves so loyally in our cause to do what may be most for their own safety.” (Prebble, 1966, p.115)

So little time and such inclement weather meant the old Chief of the MacDonalds of Glencoe arrived five days too late to swear the oath. The orders for the extirpation of his small clan had been approved by William of Orange and was executed by Campbell soldiers. Billeted in the glen for over a week that February they sampled true Highland hospitality, then rose in the night and proceeded to kill as many men, women and children as they could. Hundreds escaped into the hills where bitter weather continued the killing. As Murder under Trust it was the most offensive of crimes, and there was a general belief in Scotland that the deed would unite the Highland Chiefs, and that the Clans would all rise against William of Orange, despite the new oath.

But letters from France in June brought the bleak information that the previous month a French fleet sent to invade England had been utterly destroyed in the bay at La Hogue. Louis XIV was unlikely to lend his guest King James men or ships again.

Hopes raised so high and hearts sunk so low hardly made for even tempers on the island. But there came occasional light relief. On 5th November 1692 there fell the anniversary of the successful invasion by William, Prince of Orange, and the

Castleton garrison rowed two boats almost within range as they scattered dozens of oranges upon the sea intending utmost insult. Middleton had the King's Standard flown at half-mast as a sign of mourning and the trumpeter sounded a lament. He also had his force collect in as much of the fruit as was possible, fresh fruit being a winter rarity on the Bass. (Lane, 1950, p.135)

What is the rhyme for porringer?
What is the rhyme for porringer?
The King he had a daughter fair,
And gave the Prince of Orange her.

Nursery Rhyme

THE SIEGE AND THE STALEMATE

Long months passed and more sympathisers arrived to swell the garrison to some twenty men. Fortunately so did more consignments of food from James II. Nevertheless the raids began again over that second winter when the inhabitants of the Isle of May provided some sheep and much necessary coal. French privateers sent by their King might supply provisions and even delicacies but coal had to be locally obtained. In December life on the Bass was a strength sapping existence twenty-four hours per day. Lung infections and aching bones were only to be expected. By February the bitter conditions that had killed so many on the Glencoe hillsides the previous year were here linked to fierce sea gales. Nourishment and warmth were real essentials. The Jacobites' longing for summer must have come second only to their longing for the restoration of the House of Stuart, together with the restoration of their own freedom to return to a normal life and their own families.

“Their decision in March 1693 to intercept a bride and her maids en route for a wedding party led to dissension over the ‘want of pretty women’ by those who had not succeeded in forcibly securing a companion, and the defection of roughly half the garrison back to the mainland, in search of a more comfortable and sexually rewarding lifestyle.” (Callow, 2004, p.252)

When the long looked for summer did arrive it brought the siege. On the 17th June two ships flying the Prince of Orange's ensign opened heavy fire and bombarded the Bass for two full days. Broadside after broadside killed nothing but gannets and destroyed nothing but nests, the elevation of the fortress being just too high. Conserving shot, Middleton and his companions endured the battering noise until the 19th June when he finally gave the order to return fire. Within an hour both vessels were minus masts and too badly damaged to move. A great number of corpses floating in the sea testified to the Jacobite victory. An overnight wind drove the broken ships out of range but by morning it was obvious that the larger was on fire and the smaller had had to jettison all her guns overboard to stay afloat.

Middleton and his men busily collected up over five hundred cannon-balls, which had been fired at the rock and stored them for possible future use.

“Finding that it could not be bombarded by land, as the shore was too distant, and the cannon from the ships could not be directed with effect, by reason of its elevation” (Crichton, 1826, p.351) the Edinburgh Privy Council proposed that a frigate and a longboat should cruise constantly about the Bass, to prevent relief and starve them into surrender. This was done but

“notwithstanding all their vigilance, it was found impracticable to intercept relief. Besides their friends in Scotland, they had frequent supplies from France. In August 1693, a frigate of twelve guns came up the Firth, and having fired a signal to the Bass, she immediately came to anchor under their cannon. As none of the cruisers were of equal force, she was permitted to unload without disturbance.” (Ibid, p.352)

On 30th September two more Government frigates arrived and dropped anchor between the Bass and the coast, one to the east, one to the south. As no offensive ensued, Middleton realised their presence was to prevent any supplies being received or raids being made. He ordered the killing and pickling of a dozen sheep and promptly introduced the matter of food rationing to the rock. (Lane, 1950, pp.170-174) Over two months later the frigates were still securely in position, the Government’s sole purpose now being to starve the Bass garrison into submission.

That third Christmas as commanders of the Bass must have been a bleak one for Middleton’s force. They had surely realised by now that there was no hope of King James II ever leading another invasion; although they could not have known that – at sixty years of age – he had finally become resigned to his exile, and indeed his entire life was dedicated to his daily devotions and to praying for his own salvation. The blockade continued and it must have been obvious to all concerned that the next year would see the end of Bass defiance, and consequently the death by hanging of its handful of occupants. It would be Captain Middleton’s decision as to exactly when they surrendered, and he would not deliver up what he knew to be the last Jacobite stronghold in Britain without his God-ordained King’s express

permission. Starvation or hanging? Either way it appeared certain that their loyal enterprise could have no other end but a cruel death for the entire garrison.

However, that winter to the delight of the starving force a privateer from Dunkirk appeared laden with rusk and other necessities. But the Jacobites were now all so weak

“that they had not hands enough to hoist up the rusk, but they were obliged to borrow ten sailors to assist them; and when they had got only seven bags into the garrison, the *Lion*, largest of the two ships bore down upon the privateer, who was forced to cut her cables, to prevent her being run down, so that the garrison was then in a weaker condition for holding out than before, having ten sailors added to their number, and only seven bags of rusk, which could serve but a short time; whereupon the governor was obliged to put each man of the garrison on the allowance of two ounces of raw rusk dough in twenty four hours.” (Crichton, 1826, pp.352-353)

The 14th January 1694 did indeed bring a cruel death. The Jacobites' firm friend, the merchant Trotter, appreciating their perilous situation and about to try to row in to the rock with food supplies, was captured. He was brought to the nearest point to the Bass, just west of Tantallon Castle, and a gallows was hastily raised. The intention was both to insult and cow the Jacobites.

Middleton ordered the cannon-royal to be loaded and fired and, thanks to King James' foresight in sending those French cannoneers, one of them was so skilful that he managed to set a cannon-ball actually amongst the execution party, which hurriedly dispersed. But the Jacobites' cheering was brief. Having had so many victories they could recognise a hollow one, and they all knew that a gallows would be speedily erected elsewhere and that the hanging of their old friend would proceed. (Lane, 1950, p.204).

Understandably low spirits revived somewhat the next day when John Scot, a surgeon with some medical knowledge, arrived to join the garrison. He had told an officer at Castleton that he was an attorney who had some urgent business with one

of the Jacobites; that all he required was the chance to communicate by shouting from a boat. He was permitted to attend the Bass guarded, and under a white flag. As the boat drew near the rock, Scot jumped into the sea and, although fired at by his erstwhile companions, he was unhurt as the garrison returned musket fire with alacrity. Once seeing that he was safely landed the guard rowed back to the mainland in chagrin. (Ibid, pp.204-5)

THE BLUFF AND THE PARDON

It was at this critical point that Middleton suffered another blow. His enemies managed to capture his brother, Major Robert Middleton, who had been sent by King James and was en route to advise and encourage the Bass garrison. "Condemned to death for high treason his only hope, as the authorities informed Middleton, was if he were to be exchanged in return for the fortress on the Bass Rock." (Callow, 2004, p.252)

"Tired, ill and half-starved, Captain Middleton still thought of his duty and wrote to James for permission to surrender the island, before opening up negotiations. With the naval blockade of the garrison holding firm and no other means of saving the life of a valued officer, the King . . . sadly gave his consent to the surrender of his last outpost in the British Isles." (Ibid, p.253)

Middleton, a man of foresight as well as courage, indicated he was willing to parley but that he would draw up his own terms of honourable capitulation. Two members of the Privy Council travelled to the Bass to receive these. Middleton had given instructions to his men to groom themselves well and to wear layers of clothing in order to disguise their gaunt frames. He told them that despite their hunger, they must on all account manage to eat sparingly of the fine biscuits and superb French wines which he had long secreted against just such an eventuality.

"The gallant little band kept up their original spirit to the last and concealed from the enemy the wretchedness of their position. Though reduced to starvation point, they had preserved some presentable remnants of provisions for the occasion, and received the messengers with an appearance of easy liberal hospitality." (Hill Burton, 1873, p.418)

By this means Middleton managed to convince his guests that the blockade was not as yet affecting the garrison and that the Bass could if necessary hold out for at least another year. He plied them with wine and brandy and said he was

certain the Government must have a better use for two frigates during the coming twelve months than to have them lying idle in the Firth of Forth; and then he stated his terms of surrender which included “absolute indemnity for life, liberty and fortune . . . free either to remain at home or to depart to France at the expense of the Government.” (Ibid, p.418)

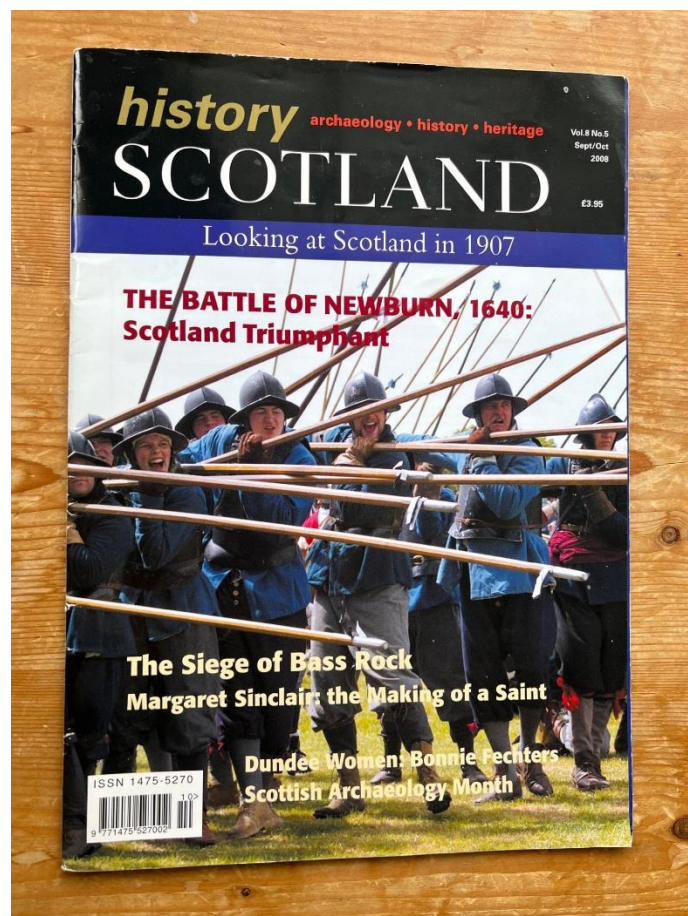
After some discussion the messengers agreed they would advise the Council to accept Middleton’s audacious terms of honourable capitulation, which also included the demand for a payment of two hundred pounds for expenses to be made to himself and to each of his men.

The Council did indeed accept his conditions and on 18th April, 1694 the Bass garrison finally surrendered the fortress of Bass Rock; with drawn swords, taking with them their King’s Standard, unfurled, they finally marched out with the full honours of war. (Lane, 1950, p.260)

CLOSURE

For thirty years I had wondered about him. Captain Michael Middleton was too extraordinary a man not to have had a further career of some nature. He must surely have joined his grateful monarch in France, so what had happened to him? Of course, his health was broken by those years on the Bass so he might well have died prematurely, but surely his stubborn defence of the fortress would bring him approval, new friends and some celebrity?

He and his brother had indeed settled in St Germain, and this year I discovered that only eight months after his triumph in saving the lives of his men – sometime in December 1694 – they were both of them involved in a nationalistic quarrel with some of Louis XIV's guards and fell, after a running battle with drawn swords, "to a barrage of blows and savage kicks." (Callow, 2004, p.253)



CONCLUSION

The extraordinary events that occurred on Bass Rock 1691-1694 under the command of Captain Michael Middleton have been mostly ignored for over three hundred years. This soldier assuredly dreamed big but then he lived large, too. That his plan to assist in the restoration of the Stuart monarchy came to nothing was in no sense his fault. After the destruction of the French fleet at La Hogue even Louis XIV's support for the Stuart cause flagged; endeavouring to reclaim James II's throne for him was proving much too costly.

Had the King been younger or had he possessed one half of Middleton's strength of purpose, then British history might well have turned out very differently. But already in 1691 James II was fifty-eight years of age, and the loyal service of a few individuals of Middleton's calibre could not make restitution for all the former heartbreaking betrayals of him by his immediate family and closest friends. Both as a monarch and leader James was truly a broken reed, and over the next year or two his religion and achieving the salvation of his own soul became the single most important cause in his life.

Middleton lies in France, and I doubt if he ever prayed for his own salvation, but – having spent time there – for me at least some part of his spirit will always be

“Near to that place where the sea-rock immense,
Amazing Bass, looks o'er the fertile land”

Hume
'Trag. Of Douglas'

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