

Interpretative Notes to “The Battle of Philiphaugh”

The ballad’s subject is the battle fought at Philiphaugh in 1645. It discusses some aspects of the battle, but it must be remembered that the ballad is strongly biased in favour of the Covenanting troops.

The places mentioned in the ballad, with the exception of England and Glasgow, are all local to Philiphaugh.

Verse 1 |

“The Scots out o’er the Graemes they ran”

This line misrepresents the two forces. While the Covenanting force was Scottish, Montrose’s force was predominantly Highland and Irish troops. It should be noted that there was still a great fear and mistrust of the Highland Scots from the Lowland inhabitants: Highlanders were considered barbarian and often considered less than human.

In this case, the “Graemes” may refer to the forces of James Graham, Marquis of Montrose.

Verse 2 |

“Sir David frae the border came”

Sir David Leslie was a noted general of the Covenanting forces. He may be referred to as Lesley, and in these cases, care must be taken not to confuse him with Alexander Lesley, a Covenanting commander.

Lesley did indeed march from England into Scotland. At this point in the Covenanting struggle, the Scottish forces were liaising with the English Parliamentarians.

Verse 3 |

“Wi’ him three thousand valiant men”

It is estimated that Lesley had at least 4000 men with him, the majority of whom were seasoned campaigners.

“A cloud of mist”

There seems to have been an early morning mist. Which may have helped cloak at least some of Lesley’s forces.

Verse 4 |

“I think it is convenient,
That we should sing a psalm.”

Psalm singing seems to have been an important part of the Covenanting force's preparation for battle. This was seen as a declaration of faith, and in terms of the ballad, it is intended to show how devout the Covenanting side.

Psalms may also have been sung when the Covenanting forces were going into battle, but in this case, they may have been used in the same way that war slogans were - i.e. to unsettle the opposition.

Verse 5 |

“They spy'd an aged father”

The inclusion of the character of an old man comes from traditional ballad convention. The character is usually used to provide a main character with information that they otherwise could not know, such as the location of another character.

In this case, he informs Lesly of the enemy force's numbers and suggests a tactic to defeat them. Later on in the ballad, the character of Lesly offers a standardised ultimatum to the old man: if he tells the truth, he will be rewarded, but if he lies he will be hanged. However, this ultimatum is usually used toward “bonny boy” characters.

Verse 8 |

“there's fifteen thousand armed men”

This vastly inflates Montrose's numbers, and is a good example of propaganda: the suggestion is that Lesley's forces win, despite being outnumbered.

“Ye'll never be a bite to them” translates as “You'll never be a problem to them”

Verse 9 - 11 |

The ballad affords an approximation of Lesley's tactics to this supporting character.

Verse 12 - 13 |

A great deal of poetic license has been taken in these verses. The character of the old man claims to have been both at “Solway flow”, which refers to Solway Moss, “where we were all betray'd” and at “curst Dunbar”.

The Battle of Solway Moss was fought in 1542, under King James V, almost 100 years before Philiphaugh. The Battle of Dunbar did not occur until 1650, some five years after the Battle of Philiphaugh.

You can read about the Battle of Solway Moss at <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/imported-docs/p-t/solway.pdf>

You can read about the Battle of Dunbar at <http://www.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/medieval/battleview.asp?BattleFieldId=61>

Verse 15 |

“Montrose has plunder'd me”

This may refer to the fact that Montrose brought his Irish levies with him, and, like the Highlanders, they had a fearsome reputation among the Lowlanders.

Verses 16 - 17 |

These verses repeat the tactical manoeuvres mentioned in verse 9 - 11. While Lesley did split his forces, some current opinion suggests that the flanking force moved South and then towards the Royalist troops.

Verse 18 |

The biased nature of the piece is reiterated in the last line, for while Montrose is referred to a “great Montrose”, he is “Our cruel enemy.”

Whatever his faults, Montrose seems to have managed to escape without any overtly damning attributes being placed upon his character by the Covenanters, unlike John Graham of Claverhouse, “Bluidy Clavers” and General Tam Dalyell, “Bluidy Dalyell”, neither of whom, it was claimed, could be killed with anything but a silver bullet.