

Verse 1 |

“It fell about the Lammas tide”

Lammas fell on the 1st of August, and was one of the four Scottish Quarter Days. The battle was fought on the 5th August 1388.

“muir-men”

This can be directly translated as moor-men, but indicates farming men

Verse 2 |

And he has burn'd the dales of Tyne,
And part of Bambrough shire
And three good towers on Roxburgh fells
He left them all on fire.

Tynedale lies in Northumberland, and is named after the River Tyne. Bambroughshire was the area around Bambrough, on the eastern coast of Northumberland. Roxburgh is most probably a mishearing or misreading, as Roxburgh lies within Scotland. In other versions of the ballad, towers on Redeswire fells are set on fire.

Verse 7 |

“Shod with the metal free”

Shod refers to a spear which has been fitted with a metal tip. The use of “free” may indicate keen or sharp. The phrase is poetic, and is not in common usage.

Verse 8 |

While Percy may “fa”, he has not been killed.

Verse 9 |

The Douglas is suggesting that had they met without an audience, then he would have killed Percy.

Verses 12 |

Kale is a winter-green vegetable, but the word can also be used to mean cabbage.

In this situation, “fend” mean to support or maintain.

Verse 14 |

“our lady” refers to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Verse 15 |

The lighted high on Otterbourne,
Upon the bent sae brown;
They lighted high on Otterbourne
And threw their pallions down.

From the Dictionary of the Scottish Language / Dictionar o the Scots Leid comes the definition for "bent". "A strong, coarse, or wiry variety of grass (esp. the sea reed-grass), growing upon moorlands or links; formerly used for strewing on the floors of houses or other buildings.

It can also mean an area of moorland covered with this grass.

A pallion is a pavilion or tent. The suggestion is that they swiftly made camp - they did not literally throw the tents down.

Verse 16 |

Knights did not travel towards battle alone. They took an entourage with them into battle, including squires, cooks, servants, and grooms for their war horses, which were valuable commodities. The bonny boy here refers to a young servant.

The bonny boy is a stock character in the ballad tradition. The character is used to advance the plot by relaying an important piece of information which indicates an advancement of the plot. Bonnie boys may be loyal or treacherous.

Those riders who were not so noble, would have to tend to their own animal. In the Scottish army that Douglas led, there were regular mounted soldiers.

Verse 18 |

"Ye lie, ye lie, ye liar loud!
Sae loud I hear you lie:"

This is a standard ballad phrase, and is a good example of triadic repetition.

Verse 19 |

Prophetic dreams appear in ballads, although they are more usually associated with the death of a lover. They inevitably come to fruition, as in here, where the Douglas is killed.

Verse 20 |

There is a tradition that in his rush to counter the ambush upon the Scottish camp, Sir James Douglas forgot to put his helmet on. The ballad may be referring to this, or it may be that the ballad is one of the sources of the legend.

Verse 27 |

Tradition would have it that the Douglas's death was concealed from his men. However, the suggestion his death was not discovered until the morning seems equally viable. It would have been almost impossible to determine where individuals were due to the night-time conditions of the battle.

Verses 30 - 35 I

The ballad addresses the concept of the battle in these verses, but presents it, once again, as a hand-to-hand combat, this time between Hugh Montgomery and Percy. It is fought along chivalric lines, with one man allowing the other to yield, but insisting that he submit to the bracken bush.

This final combat provides a triadic structure to the fight scenes: Douglas bests Percy at Newcastle; Percy bests Douglas at Otterbourne; Montgomerie bests Percy at Otterbourne.

In reality, capturing an enemy knight was a way to gain money by ransoming him. Regular soldiers, if captured, were often killed if they had no perceived monetary value.