In July 1411 a great battle was fought at Harlaw a few miles from Aberdeen, the most important royal burgh in north-eastern Scotland. At one level the battle represented a particularly bloody episode in a long-running territorial and political dispute between the leaders of the two armies involved, Donald, Lord of the Isles, and Alexander Stewart, earl of Mar.1 However, the confrontation soon acquired a deeper significance in Scottish historical writing, where it was presented as a clash of opposed cultures and language groups and the contrasting social values they supposedly embodied. The Lowland chronicler Walter Bower, abbot of Inchcolm, writing in the mid-fifteenth century, saw Harlaw as a struggle that pitched the burgesses of Aberdeen and the gentry of Buchan and Mar against the wild and rapacious men of the Isles and Ross in the service of the Lord of the Isles. Donald’s aim, according to Bower, was to sack Aberdeen and then ‘subject to his authority the country down to the river Tay’.2 Donald’s army was fought to a standstill and Aberdeen saved from the flames, but at a terrible price. Abbot Walter estimated that the dead ‘on our side’ (a telling phrase) exceeded 500, a toll that included a number of prominent north-eastern knights and Robert Davidson, the provost of Aberdeen, who had led a contingent of the town’s burgesses to the field.

Bower’s portrayal of ‘Red Harlaw’ as a stand against an ‘alien’ foe who threatened the very integrity of the Scottish realm should be treated with some care, for the abbot’s work was littered with indications of a profound personal dislike of the culture and society of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland, an outlook that found expression in a systematic rewriting of his sources to reflect badly on the Gael. Nevertheless, a sense of the iconic importance of Harlaw was not confined to the Scotichronicon. Short chronicles produced in Scotland during the fifteenth century tended to commemorate the conflict alongside the major battles of the Anglo-Scottish wars; Lowland families preserved with apparent pride the memory of ancestors who had fallen on the field; the chroniclers of medieval Ireland knew of

1 Bower, vii, 74–77.
2 Ibid., 74–77.
the fight and saw it as a battle waged by Donald of the Isles against the
*Goill* (foreigners, i.e. non-Gaels) of Scotland; mangled reports on the con-
flict found an interested audience in fifteenth-century England; and later
in the century the schoolboys of Haddington grammar school amused
themselves by forming ‘opposite sides’ to ‘play at the battle of Harlaw’.³
Almost two centuries after the battle, it could still be remembered in a
report on the Hebrides for the English Crown as an example of the historic
power and presumption of the by then long-ruined Lordship of the Isles.⁴
The wide awareness and commemoration of the conflict were no doubt
partly a reflection of the scale of forces, and casualties, involved and the
ferocity of the encounter, but they were also a product of a view that saw
Harlaw almost as a ‘frontier’ battle that had significance for the historical
definition and preservation of the late medieval kingdom.⁵

After Harlaw, the notion that the military capacity of Gaelic lords was
an implicit threat to the realm and an obstacle to the Scottish Crown’s
political and territorial control would seem to have been reinforced by a
number of subsequent encounters between royal forces and those of the
Lordship of the Isles. At Inverlochy in 1431, for example, an army com-
manded once again by the earl of Mar was disastrously defeated by
Hebridean forces led by Donald *Ballach*, a kinsman of the Lord of the
Isles.⁶ A critical factor in the success of Donald’s men was the tactical
manoeuvrability that came with the ability to move large numbers of men
long distances, at speed, on galleys. Donald *Ballach* would give the Scottish

---

³ *Registrum de Panmure*, ed. John Stuart, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1874), ii, 230; *Annals of
Connacht*, ed. A. Martin Freeman (Dublin, 1970), pp. 410–411. It seems likely that the vocab-
ulary used to describe the battle in the annals reflected a distinctly Irish interpretation
of the significance of the event and the ready use of the language of cultural animosity and
conflict between Gaels and *Goill* in annalistic accounts of the affairs of Ireland; *William
⁴ *Calendar of the State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots 1547–1603*, ed.
James Bain, et al., 13 vols (Edinburgh, 1898–1969), xii, 202, i.e. ‘The Dean of Limerick’s
account of the Western Isles of Scotland and the Descent, Connexions, etc., of the Islanders’.
⁵ The official rhetoric employed by those acting on behalf of the duke of Albany’s gov-
ernment in the years around and after 1411 sought to portray the struggle against the
‘Islesmen’ as one waged in defence of the kingdom. In 1416, for example, supplies levied
from the burgh of Inverkeithing for a northern campaign against the ‘islanders’ were said
to have been expended ‘pro defensione patrie’ in a context where ‘patria’ must have indi-
cated the realm rather than a region; *ER*, iv, 265. The anxiety that large areas of the kingdom
in the north lay outside the settled control of Albany’s regime may explain the terms of
Anglo-Scottish truces of 1416 and 1418 where the areas west of Spey (1416) and ‘north’ of the
river Beauly (1418) were excluded from the agreements; *CDS*, iv, nos. 823, 1167.