TRIUMPH AND DISASTER:
SCOTTISH MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

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This paper attempts to explore seemingly radical variations in the effectiveness of Scottish military leadership taking a long view (1296–1513) and focussing on the dominant external foe, England. It is tempting, on some levels, to regard Scottish generalship as fundamental to a great military success story. From 1296 strenuous efforts were made by English kings to conquer Scotland. But the Scots triumphantly maintained their independence against their far more powerful neighbour. Nor were the Scots content to cower on the defensive in the long wars with England. Cross-border raiding was from the beginning a key component of the Scottish war effort, undertaken to such effect that at times the Scots were able to exercise a striking military ascendancy in northern Britain. For much of the later Middle Ages it was the Scots who were the aggressors in war against England, a clear demonstration of military self-confidence at odds with the relative resources available to the two realms. Scotland's military performance, it would seem, was exceptional. But such a sweeping verdict can easily be contradicted by looking at the same circumstances with a different emphasis. The Scots were repeatedly defeated in major battlefield encounters, their leaders, including reigning monarchs, captured or killed in the field. Only the help of foreign allies and the fact that the English state's core priorities lay firmly elsewhere saved the Scots from lasting conquest. Even so, large tracts of the Scottish realm were taken into English hands and held for long periods, some parts, including Scotland's largest antebellum town, Berwick, permanently. Meanwhile, it might be argued that Scotland's wars of aggression from the 1330s achieved nothing. In these divergent views there is scope for very varied judgements of the competence of Scottish military commanders. The present paper seeks to investigate this issue with a view to reaching conclusions about the potentialities and limitations affecting Scottish military endeavour in the period.

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1 Some of the material that follows was aired in the conferences ‘The First English Empire?’ at Trinity College, Dublin in 2007 and ‘England’s Wars, 1272–1399’ at the University of Reading in 2009. I am grateful for the constructive comments and suggestions made to me on these occasions, and to David Ditchburn for commenting on a draft.
The most enticingly obvious way to examine the issue of leadership is to focus on the personal. On a surface view this might very well explain some of the contrasting fortunes experienced by the Scots at war. The most radical shift in this regard was the very rapid transition from highly effective military activity conducted during the reign of Robert I to the military disasters that occurred in 1332–1333, after his death. By that time not just Robert I but his most able subordinates, Sir James Douglas and Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray, were dead. The new military leadership of the Scots appears, by contrast to the recent past, to have been suddenly incompetent.2 Similarly, the Scots enjoyed a period of sustained military success in the 1370s and 1380s, but suffered a number of reverses in renewed conflict from 1399 culminating in large-scale defeat at the battle of Humbleton Hill in 1402. It is tempting to link this pattern to the defection to English allegiance in 1400 of Scotland’s greatest soldier of the time, George Dunbar, earl of March.3 Issues of generalship must surely be a factor to consider, moreover, in contemplating James IV’s defeat at Flodden in 1513, especially since the Spanish diplomat Pedro Ayala observed his shortcomings in this regard years earlier.4

Little explicit debate has focussed on the capabilities of individual military leaders. The two most likely candidates for such attention are the Scottish medieval commanders by a distance most well known: William Wallace and Robert I. A case has been made for Wallace as a military genius, although perhaps more plausible is the verdict that he was a capable and determined, if limited, commander.5 Offering battle to Edward I’s forces at Falkirk in 1298, meanwhile, has justified a far more negative view

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3 Alastair J. Macdonald, ‘Dunbar, George, ninth earl of Dunbar or of March (c.1336–1416?)’, ODNB.