

Agnes Randolph, Countess of Dunbar

“Black Agnes”



Agnes Randolph (c. 1312–1369), known as “Black Agnes” for her dark complexion, was the wife of Patrick, 9th Earl of Dunbar and March. She was the daughter of Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, nephew and companion-in-arms of Robert the Bruce, and Moray’s wife, Isabel Stewart, herself a daughter of John Stewart of Bonkyll. Agnes became renowned for her heroic defense of Dunbar Castle in East Lothian against an English siege led by William Montagu, 1st Earl of Salisbury, which began on 13 January 1338 and ended on 10 June the same year during the Second War of Scottish Independence from 1331 to 1341.

Back story

Despite their defeat in 1314 by King Robert the Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn, English forces returned to Scotland in 1338 intent on conquering those pesky Scots. On 13 January they arrived outside the mighty gates of Dunbar Castle near the fallen town of Berwick.

This should have been a reasonably easy castle for them to take as its lord, Patrick Dunbar, Earl of Dunbar and March, was away with the Scottish army fighting an English army in the north.

The castle was under the command of Dunbar’s wife Lady Agnes Randolph, Countess of Moray, nicknamed “Black Agnes” for her dark hair and complexion. With only a handful of men left behind by her husband, Agnes had pledged herself to defend the castle.

Siege of Dunbar

On 13 January 1338, the English laid siege to Dunbar Castle, where Lady Reynolds was in residence with her servants and a few guards. However, she was deter-

mined not to surrender the fortress. Women were known to take charge of castle or manor business while their husbands were away in the Middle Ages and defend it if need be, but the stand of Lady Agnes is one of the best remembered instances.

In response to a request to surrender she replied:

*‘Of Scotland’s King I haud my house,
He pays me meat and fee,
And I will keep my gude auld house,
While my house will keep me.’*

Salisbury’s first attempt at taking the castle centered on catapulting huge rocks and lead shot against the ramparts, but this was met with disdain by Lady Agnes. Between these attacks, and in clear view of the English, Agnes sent her maids dressed in their Sunday finest onto the ramparts to dust and clean the marks of the shot from the walls with their dainty white handkerchiefs.



“Dusting of the ramparts”

The English employed a huge battering ram or ‘sow’, with a wooden roof to protect the men underneath. Agnes was ready for this and signaled for large boulders to be dropped from the ramparts. They crashed through the roof splintering it into pieces sending the surviving Englishmen fleeing in every direction. The countess simply advised Salisbury that he should “take good care of his sow, for she would soon cast her pigs [meaning his men] within the fortress.”

When one of the Scottish archers struck an English soldier standing next to Salisbury, the earl cried out, “*There comes one of my lady’s tire pins; Agnes’s love shafts go straight to the heart.*”

Unable to make progress through arms, Salisbury turned to craft. He bribed the Scotsman who guarded the principal entrance, advising him to leave the gate unlocked or to leave it in such a manner that the English could easily break in. However, the Scotsman, though he took the Englishman's money, reported the stratagem to Agnes, so she was ready for the English when they made entry. Although Salisbury was in the lead, one of his men pushed past him just at the moment when Agnes's men lowered the portcullis, separating him from the others. Agnes, of course, had meant to trap Salisbury, but she moved from stratagem to taunt, shouting at the earl, "Farewell, Montague, I intended that you should have supped with us, and assist us in defending the Castle against the English."

At one point, having captured Agnes's brother, John Randolph, 3rd Earl of Moray, was brought to within sight of the castle and forced by Salisbury to call to Agnes to surrender the castle or he would be killed. The English threw a rope around his neck and threatened to hang him if Agnes did not surrender the castle. However, she merely responded that his death would only benefit her, as she was his heir. She was not in line for the earldom but was the heir to his lands along with her sister. Salisbury quickly recognized the flaw in his argument and let the Earl live.

When supplies for her garrison began to run low after several months being cut off, Sir Alexander Ramsay of Dalhousie, who had earned a reputation for being a constant thorn in the English king's side, moved from Edinburgh to the coast with 40 men. Appropriating some boats, Ramsay and his company approached the castle by the sea and entered the castle via a half-submerged concealed doorway.

Charging out of the castle, the Scotsmen surprised Salisbury's advance guard and pushed them all the way back to their camp. It is said that the following morning Agnes sent a freshly baked loaf and some fine wine to the English commander and had the 'gift's arrival proclaimed loudly'.

Finally, on 10 June 1338, after five months of trying, Salisbury realized that he would never get the better of Agnes. The triumph of a Scotswoman over an English army was written into a ballad. As the mighty conquerors marched away the men made up a song:

'She makes a stir in tower and trench,
That brawling, boisterous, Scottish wench;
Came I early, came I late.
I found Agnes at the gate.'

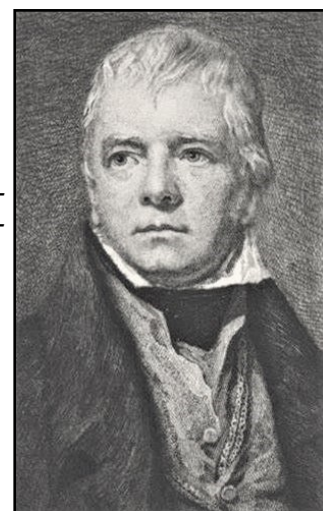
The failed siege of Dunbar had cost the English crown nearly 6,000 English pounds and they had gained nothing from it.

For centuries afterwards, Agnes' defense of Dunbar Castle caught the attention of contemporary chroniclers and Scottish historians due to her bravery and might

Some accounts describe her as Countess of Moray, on the assumption that she inherited the earldom when her brother John was killed at the Battle of Neville's Cross in 1346. However, the earldom actually reverted to the crown. But in 1371/2, Agnes' nephew, John

Dunbar, was created Earl of Moray by Robert II, his father-in-law.

Agnes's family was active in Scottish resistance against the English attempts to conquer Scotland in the 14th century. Her father, Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, was appointed regent from 1329 to 1332. Her brother became joint regent in 1335, but was captured by the English shortly afterwards. In 1324, Agnes married Patrick, ninth Earl of Dunbar and March, governor of Berwick. After the Scottish loss at the Battle of Halidon Hill, Patrick was forced to make peace with the English surrendering Berwick which was in his charge. He was ordered by the English to refortify Dunbar Castle. However, by the following year, he had returned to his natural allegiance to Scotland, fighting the English partisans wherever possible. It seems that there were no surviving children of the marriage between Agnes and the earl. Their estates were left to children of the marriage between the earl's cousin John de Dunbar of Derchester and Birkynside, and his wife, Isobel Randolph, Agnes' younger sister.



Sir Walter Scott said,
'From the record of Scottish heroes, none can presume to erase her.'

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