

BATTLE OF THE QUEENS: KATHERINE OF ARAGON & MARGARET TUDOR

The battle of Flodden, which took place in Northumberland over five hundred years ago, is not only a story of fighting men. It is also a tale of two Queens. Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots, who lost her husband in the battle on 9 September 1513 and Katherine of Aragon, Queen, Captain General of the English army that killed him. It is a story of a devastating defeat, but also of ultimate triumph.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

For Margaret Tudor the battle of the queens began in August 1513, when she bid her husband James IV of Scots, farewell at Linlithgow palace, West Lothian. Legend has it that she begged her husband not to leave her, and was angry that he intended to make war on her brother, Henry VIII. In reality, her chief concern was for her husband's life. Born an English princess, she was, as she often asserted, 'a Scotswoman now'.

The relationship between the royal brothers in law had broken down after Henry VIII had claimed he was the rightful overlord of Scotland. A furious King James was determined to punish him, and when Henry had led his army into France in June 1513, looking for glory in a continental war, James had decided to plan his own invasion – of England. Having parted from Margaret Tudor, James crossed the border into Northumberland on 24 August at the head of the greatest army ever gathered in Scotland.

Fortress after fortress fell to the Scottish king. But Henry VIII was certain his wife, Katherine of Aragon, would be a match for James. She was the daughter of Queen Isabella of Castile, who had thrown the Moors out of Spain. He had made her Captain General of his armies in England in his absence, and Katherine, busy organizing artillery

and gunners, wrote to re-assure him that she was ready for a fight and, 'My heart is very good to it'.

Not that Katherine underestimated James. The French had trained large numbers of his men in the use of the Swiss pike: fearsome weapons, eighteen to twenty-two feet long, that could stop a cavalry charge in its tracks. When her battlefield commander, the Earl of Surrey, reached James's army at Flodden, Katherine was already preparing a defensive line further south, in case Surrey lost to the Scottish king.

The battle of Flodden began after days of appalling weather, with the Scots pikemen advancing down Branxton hill. The wind and rain battered them and the soft ground broke up their formation, but they remained in good order, walking in eerie silence. The English described them as 'Germanic'

At Linlithgow palace Margaret Tudor could only await news from the battlefield. A room in the northwest Tower, with sweeping views across open countryside, is that, at which, in romantic tradition, Margaret scanned the horizon for the expected messengers. Rumours of many dead reached Edinburgh on 10 September and it was not long before Margaret learned the full, and terrible, story.

The English had counter attacked the pikemen on foot, using the bill, a simple hook on the end of a pole. This allowed them to strike the Scots at close quarters. But, one Englishman complained, the Scots were 'such large and strong men, they would not fall when four or five bills struck them'. A desperate struggle had been fought 'with great slaughter, sweating and travail' on both sides before the battle had ended in defeat for the Scots. Ten thousand of them lay slain: 'The prime o' our land.. cauld in the clay..' is how they are remembered in the pipers lament 'The Flowers of the Forest', played today at the funerals of fallen servicemen.

The dead included earls, lords and even bishops. But the most significant was Margaret's husband. His body had fallen near the royal Scottish banner of the red lion rampant. King James's left hand was almost severed, his throat gashed, and an arrow

was shot through his lower jaw. The English commander, Surrey, was rewarded for the English victory over James with the restoration of the family title, Duke of Norfolk and chose a new augmentation to his heraldic arms. Still used by the family, it recalls the spectacle of James's corpse: a red lion rampant, with an arrow through its head.

That night the English soldiers, who had lost 4000 of their countrymen, toasted their victory with Scottish beer - which they commented was surprisingly good. Katherine of Aragon, meanwhile, wrote to her sister in law to assure her, 'The Queen of England for the love she bears the Queen of Scots would gladly send a servant to comfort her' in her grief. But to Henry, Katherine expressed a rather different emotion - pride that she had helped to kill a king.

Katherine had wanted to send James's head to France, 'but' she complained, 'our Englishmen's hearts would not suffer it'. Instead she sent Henry the chequered surcoat taken from James's body, which she suggested he use as his banner. Looking at it, 'rent and torn with blood' Henry said James had, 'paid a heavier penalty for his perfidy than we would have wished'. And years later, when Henry planned to divorce Katherine and marry Anne Boleyn, he still recalled with trepidation her ability to 'carry on a war' as 'fiercely as her mother had done in Spain'.

James's body was brought to London from Flodden and paraded through the streets slung over a horse. Katherine received it at the Carthusian Monastery at Sheen, and later, at Henry's request, the Pope gave permission for it to be buried at St Paul's. But, for whatever reason, Henry never buried James, and in the reign of Henry's daughter, Elizabeth I, the body was still at Sheen, where it was found cast, 'into an old waste room, amongst old timber, stone, lead, and other rubble'.

Later some Elizabethan workmen cut off James's head 'for their foolish pleasure'. It still had his red beard when a Londoner rescued it, keeping it in his house, saying it smelled nice. Eventually he had it buried at St Michael's Church, Wood Street, in the

City of London. The Church burned down in the Great Fire of 1666 and today a pub marks the burial spot of the last king to die in battle on British soil.

Margaret Tudor's life after her husband's death was not to be an easy one. Under the terms of James's will his 'most dearest spouse', became regent of Scotland for their infant son, making her the first Tudor woman to rule a kingdom. But it was a position from which she was soon ousted. The Scots never really forgave her for being English born. It was through Margaret, however, that the Scottish crown would eventually triumph over that of England, for in dynastic matters having children was still more important than winning battles.

It was Margaret, and not Katherine of Aragon, whose heirs would carry forward the royal bloodlines of England, as well as Scotland. In 1603, on the death of Elizabeth I, Margaret's great-grandson united the crowns of England and Scotland as James VI & I. The ghosts of the Flodden were laid to rest at last, with peace between the once warring kingdoms, a victory for all.

If you are interested in reading more about Margaret, Katherine or any of the Tudors their stories are all covered in my best selling biography of the dynasty, called simply Tudor. And do feel free to ask my questions via my website, facebook or twitter