REVIEW

Ian A. Olson. *Bludie Harlaw: Realities, Myths, Ballads*. Edinburgh: John Donald, 2014. Pp. 174. ISBN 978-1-906566-76-0. £14.99.

The Battle of Harlaw, fought between Donald Lord of the Isles and Alexander Earl of Mar on 24 July 1411 over the succession of the Earldom of Ross, had no decisive winner. The only certain outcome was that Donald failed to obtain the Earldom of Ross. The battle is steeped in myth and often depicted in highly romanticized terms. In this work, Ian Olson set out to classify and clarify the resulting accounts of the battle and later histories. He analyses contemporary records from chroniclers, near contemporary and later ballads, and histories dating from around 300 years after the battle. Olson provides transcriptions and translations for all of the source material discussed.

Olson lays out the general myths that surround the battle for exploration later in the book, including: who actually won; the role of Sir Alexander Irvine and his many battle stories in later histories; and post-Jacobite historians' notions that the battle was between Celt and Saxon for rule of Scotland, and that Donald invaded mainland Scotland for more than the Earldom of Ross. The work has a bit of a shaky start with excessive direct quoting, and a few incorrect historical facts, but the core substance of the book is well done.

Olson presents the accounts of the Battle of Harlaw beginning with early "Highland" accounts and proceeding to early Lowland accounts, mainly chronicles. The chronicles are compared and contrasted for their content, likely places of source borrowing, and where the accounts build on one another. Olson provides excerpts in their entirety when possible, and brief backgrounds of the creation process when known. He highlights where each account adds new information and created a very helpful table (pp. 29-30) to illustrate which contemporary sources contributed different parts of the story that served as the foundation for later accounts of the battle. Olson demonstrates well how the

information in later sources builds upon the scanty information available in the early sources.

One of the unique aspects of this work is the incorporation of ballads as sources for history. Olson treats the ballads discussed with the appropriate care to separate fact from fiction. For instance, he concludes that when the more fanciful portions are omitted, “The Ramsay Ballad” (c. 1530-1548) likely drew heavily on the Scots translation of Boece’s chronicle due to similarities in content and omissions, and that the author of the “Battle of Harlaw” (c. 1780s) was unaware of any of the medieval chroniclers given that ballad’s wild inaccuracies (however, the “Battle of Harlaw” does provide insight into the Jacobite rendering of the battle).

Olson details many other accounts of the battle including family histories such as that of MacDonalds, descriptions in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century histories of Scotland, and literary representations like that of Sir Walter Scott. For the many accounts, Olson highlights differences and tries to find the roots of their representations, showing the similarities and contextualizing each account in its own time period. The presentation of the sources for the history of the Battle of Harlaw is impressively done.

Bludie Harlaw attempts to clarify and find the roots of common myths about Harlaw rather than present many hard conclusions about the battle itself. For example, rather than reach a conclusion on the validity of the Alexander Irvine stories, Olson recaps the stories and gives a timeline to their appearance allowing the reader to see how the myth arose well after the writing of the contemporary sources. Olson does provide some concrete conclusions, such as disproving the myth that the battle pitted Celt against Saxon. Olson definitively demonstrates how this notion was developed after the Jacobite risings, and that contemporary chroniclers viewed the battle more as a family feud between the Lord of the Isles and the Albany Stewarts.

Olson ends his work with a brief discussion of whether or not Donald Lord of the Isles submitted to the Duke of Albany, and why he invaded mainland Scotland in 1411. In doing this, he places the battle in the wider context of Scottish history and attempts to discuss whether this battle was a clash between barbarism and

civilization, which seems like a rehashing of the Celt-versus-Saxon discussion.

Overall, Olson presents the evidence and accounts of the Battle of Harlaw admirably with translations and effective analyses. The historical background and discussion of the myths leaves a bit to be desired, as parts are redundant in places, and some sentences and ideas are repeated word for word. This book is certainly a good starting place for a reintroduction or re-evaluation of the Battle of Harlaw and its place in Scottish history and literature, and paves the way for further research.

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