

The Auld Alliance

The special relationship between Scotland and France, acknowledged in the phrase 'The Auld Alliance', has formed a bond between the two peoples that survives irritations and misunderstandings.

It was first and always a military alliance against the common enemy, England. Joan of Arc's personal standard was painted by a Scotsman, probably called James Polwarth, and Scots fought under her command when she relieved the siege of Orleans and at the battles of Jargeau and Patay in 1429.

According to the most complete account of The Auld Alliance, Stephen Wood's book with that title, an un-named Scotsman, after returning to Scotland after Joan's execution, continued the chronicler Fordun's manuscript *Scotichronicon* when a monk in Dunfermline Abbey, and recorded how he had seen and accompanied 'the marvellous Maid' in her attempt to bring about the recovery of France'. By then the Alliance itself was almost a century and a half old.

It may be credited to one of the least distinguished of our Kings, John Balliol, known as Toom Tabard, who had become King of Scots in 1292, when Edward I of England was invited to determine who had the best claim to the vacant Scottish throne. Edward compelled Balliol to accept him as his overlord. In fact Balliol, as a great landowner in England and France as well as Scotland, was already a vassal of both Edward and of Philip IV of France, though not, of course, in his new capacity as King of Scots.

These things were confused in the Middle Ages, for Edward of England himself held lands in France and so was a vassal of the French King, too. But in 1294 he was, as King of England, at war with France and so the French King saw the advantages of a Scottish ally.

That was to be the pattern of the alliance. The Scots helped France and the French helped the Scots. The French always had more benefit from the Alliance. This was partly because mediaeval wars between France and England always took the form of an English invasion of France and partly because it was easier for the Scots to invade England than for the French.

Our willingness to do so resulted in some disastrous defeats, for instance Nevile's Cross, 1346 and Flodden, 1513.

The so called Hundred Years War, 1337-1453, between France and England cemented our relationship with France. It also gave numerous opportunities to adventurous Scots soldiers of fortune to carve out a career for themselves.

Their great period was the last stage of the long war, beginning after the French catastrophe at Agincourt, 1415, when the Dauphin of France (heir to the throne) begged Scotland for help 'in our great want and necessity'. The Scottish Parliament sent a force of 6,000 men, commanded by the Earl of Buchan, Archibald Douglas, Earl of Wigtown and Stewart Darnely. It was the Scots who gave the first check to the hitherto all-conquering English when they defeated them at Beauge in 1421.

Soon after this the Scots Bodyguard of the French king was formed and then Les Gendarmes Ecosaise a regiment of mounted knights. The most vivid account of these Scots in French service is given by Walter Scott in *Quentin Durward*, far from the best of his mediaeval novels. It was at this time that the French coined a proverb: 'fier comme un Ecosais' - 'proud as a Scotsman'.

The military alliance came to an end in the mid-16th century when the Reformation brought about a realignment of Scottish foreign policy. John Knox and other Protestant reformers favoured an alliance with Protestant England rather than Catholic France, even though the Queen of Scots, Mary, (herself for a couple of years also Queen of France as a result of her first marriage to Francis II) was herself half French and Roman Catholic - or indeed for that very reason. Even so, the Scots regiments remained in the service of the French king.

It is worth noting that the form of Protestantism that was established in Scotland followed the model set out by the Frenchman Calvin. So that most Scottish of institutions, the Kirk, has French roots.

If militarily, the French got more from the Alliance than we did, culturally the debt was the other way around. Most of the scholars of the 16th century Scots Renaissance studied in France. Moreover nothing shows the French influence more clearly - than the Scots domestic architecture of the 16th and 17th centuries. The Palace of Holyroodhouse itself is more like a French palais than any English house of the same period. The Union, making Scotland part of the United Kingdom, inevitably meant that Scotland, inherited English traditions of foreign policy; and so throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, when Britain and France were locked in a struggle for empire, Scots found themselves fighting their auld allies. But they might find themselves fighting fellow Scots at the same time, for there were still Scots in the French service and France offered a refuge for Jacobite exiles.

The Royal Ecosais remained a regiment of the French army. Indeed after the failure of the '45 Rising two other French regiments were formed from Jacobite exiles. When in 1759, by capturing Quebec, General James Wolf won Canada for Britain, the French officer who surrendered was a certain Roche de Ramsays, descendant of Scots Ramsays and the aide de camp was a certain Chevalier de Johnstone, who had fought for Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden.

Late, one of Napoleon's Marshals was Etienne Macdonald, son of a Jacobite from South Uist. Though the Alliance was chiefly military, the connection for the last three centuries has been largely civil.

A Scotsman, John Law of Laurieston, founded the Banque de France and attempted to put the French monarchy's chaotic finances on a stable basis in the 1720's, but his Mississippi project resulted in one of the most spectacular of financial bubbles. Perhaps the peak of Scots influence on France came in the years after Waterloo in 1815. The sight of Scots soldiers in the Army of Occupation and the poems and novels of Sir Walter Scott provoked a craze for tartan in Paris. The attractive and now immensely popular school of Scottish painters known as the Scots Colourists were all Francophiles and their art is inconceivable without the French example.

And what do the French think of the relationship? Well, in 1942 the greatest Frenchman of the 20th century, General Charles de Gaulle, then leader of the Free French, visited Edinburgh and made a speech which he thought sufficiently important to quote in full in the first volume of his War Memoirs. He began by saying: 'I do not think that a Frenchman could have come to Scotland at any time without being sensible of a special emotion - awareness of the thousand links, still living and cherished, of the Franco - Scottish Alliance, the oldest alliance in the world, leaps to his mind'.

He recalled some moments of that alliance and then said: 'In every combat where for five centuries the destiny of France was at stake, there were always men of Scotland to fight side by side with men of France and when Frenchmen feel that no people has ever been more generous than yours with its friendship...'

He spoke of the 'mutual influence of French and Scottish poets' of the philosophy of Hume, of 'what is common the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the doctrines of Calvin' of 'the influence which the great Walter Scott has exercised over the receptive mind of French youth' and of 'all the exchanges of ideas, feelings, customs and words so frequent between two peoples joined by a natural friendship'.

But, since it was wartime he returned to World War II on which we were then engaged and offered a most remarkable tribute: 'For my part, I can say that the comradeship of arms, sealed on the battlefield of Abbeville in May-June 1940, between the French armoured division, which I had the honour to command, and the gallant 51st Scottish Division under General Fortune, played its part in the decision which I made to continue the fight at the side of the Allies, to the end, come what may'. And he concluded by quoting the old motto of the Compagnie Ecosaise: 'omni modo fidelis' - 'faithful in every way'.

Nobody reading this speech can doubt the reality, and the deep roots, of the natural and special friendship between Scotland and France.

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