

The Story of Black Agnes, Countess of Dunbar (1312 – 1369)

From *Scottish Heroes and Heroines of Long Ago*, Eileen Dunlop, Antony Kamm, 1984.

Even after the execution of William Wallace, Scotland and England continued to be at war. Then in 1314 the Scottish hero-king, Robert the Bruce defeated the English at Bannockburn and raided England until Edward III agreed to sign a treaty that Scotland would now be recognised as a separate kingdom. But the uneasy peace lasted only a short time. By 1332 the English were back again in Scotland. They won 2 crushing victories, and captured the town of Berwick, which today still belongs to England. The Scottish army retreated to the north. Castle after castle fell to the invaders.

With the Scottish army was the Earl of Dunbar, whose castle stood on the very edge of the coastline above Berwick. He left his wife, (known as Black Agnes because of her dark skin) with a band of men to hold the castle in his name. On 13 January 1338, the attack came. The English, led by the Earl of Salisbury, began by firing vast catapults. Agnes and her maids, all dressed in their best clothes, went round the battlements, wiping with dusters the marks that the stone & lead balls had made. Then Salisbury called up his secret weapon, a battering ram on wheels, with a wooden roof to protect the soldiers from missiles. At a signal from Agnes, a huge rock prepared for this purpose, was dropped from above, crashing through the roof. As the English soldiers scattered from the shower of stones and arrows following, Agnes shouted scornful remarks down at them.

Soon after that, Salisbury had another fright. As he was riding round the castle, one of the defenders shot an arrow at him. It missed the Earl but hit his companion in the chest, going through three layers of chain mail and a thick leather jacket. As the man fell dead, Salisbury said "Black Agnes's love shafts go straight to the heart!" Spring came. Salisbury decided to starve the defenders out. He called for warships to prevent supplies reaching the castle from the sea. However a gallant band of men got through at night with several boatloads of provisions. To celebrate and to show her contempt, Agnes sent Salisbury white bread and wine as a gift.

In return Salisbury had Agnes's brother, the Earl of Moray, who had been captured in battle, brought to Dunbar. Then he led him in chains to the foot of the castle wall and shouted up that unless Agnes surrendered, Moray would be executed.

Agnes replied. "The castle belongs to my husband. I shall not surrender it till he tells me to. And if you kill my brother, then I shall ascend to the Earldom of Moray", (For her brother had no children). Salisbury did not carry out his threat. Moray was sent back to prison and the battle went on. Then finally after 5 months of siege, Salisbury gave up. As his troops retired, they made up a verse:-

*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.*

Agnes was the second wife of the Earl of Dunbar, and as they were cousins, they had to get the Pope's permission to marry. The Earl lived to be well over 80, and he and Agnes probably died in the same year. They had no children.

There are 15 such stories in this little book.

Black Agnes was voted one of the top 100 Women of the Millennium.

Eileen Dunlop has written many books of history and myths about Scotland, still available for purchase new or second hand.

