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The Siege of Gloucester, 1643

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By A. R. WILLIAMS

WHEN Charles I raised his standard at Nottingham in August 1642, England was ill-prepared for war. There were no armies and few commanders. Some had learned their trade on the Continent but found conditions very different in their homeland. There were no feudal hosts, no Wallensteins; town walls were dilapidated and most castles were anything but impregnable fortresses. Men who were simply farmers and shopkeepers began to train together in clumsy and confused groups. Some polished and prepared suits of armour which had last been worn in the Wars of the Roses, more than a century before. When they realised that they were at war, King and Commons also found that they were completely unequipped to campaign. It was months before convincing plans of strategy emerged. This amateur spirit lasted throughout the wars and enabled England to escape the savage devastation which mercenary armies inflicted on Continental countries.

During the winter of 1642-3, which he spent at Oxford, King Charles had time to reflect and plan. There were large areas of the country loyal to him but London, the heart of England, of outstanding and dominating importance in administration, commerce, religion, law and all other aspects of government, was commanded by Pym. Charles must have known that Pym himself had serious problems. London did not want a long war. While Pym was as determined as Charles not to surrender, others were less extreme and stubborn in their opinions. They feared the disruption to trade that war would bring, possibly even social anarchy. Several times the turbulent London mob erupted to demand peace and Pym had to bend to popular pressures. During the first four months of 1643, reluctant, desultory negotiations were opened with the Royalists. Neither side hoped for much; they were not disappointed. At the same time King Charles and King Pym tried to reorganise their administrations. Officials who had gone over to the enemy had to be replaced; taxes had to be levied, men raised and plans hatched.

Charles lacked military experience and, although not short of courage, he was to display no talent for war. His nephew, Prince

1 S. R. Gardiner. *History of the Great Civil War, 1642-9*. Vol. 1, 1894, p. 194.

Rupert, to become Lieutenant-General of all the King's armies, showed more verve and liking for war. Only 23 years of age when the war opened, he had already served in Germany and the Netherlands. He led his men, especially the cavalry, with daring but often, unfortunately, with a lack of restraint. On the Parliamentary side stood the Earl of Essex, son of Elizabeth's favourite, but completely unlike his father in nature. Although he too had fought in the Low Countries, he showed no capacity for leadership as long as he was in command of Parliament's armies.

King Charles decided on the capture of London as his immediate target in 1643. He had three armies in different parts of England and they would converge simultaneously on the capital; in the west was a force commanded by Hopton and the Marquis of Hertford, in the north were Newcastle's troops and from Oxford Charles himself could lead an army along the Thames valley, pinning down the Earl of Essex. The hopes of the King and his supporters must have risen high during that summer. June and July were disastrous months for Parliament. Waller's army in the west was destroyed by Prince Maurice, Rupert's brother, at Roundway Down. Newcastle devastated Fairfax's army at Adwalton Moor and now controlled the West Riding of Yorkshire completely; only Hull was held by the enemy. Rupert shook Essex's forces at Chalgrove Field between Reading and Oxford. There were some strongholds still resisting—Hull, Plymouth and Bristol, but these were isolated in areas under complete Royalist domination. On July 26, Prince Rupert stormed Bristol and the second port in the country fell to the King. The most important Parliamentary stronghold in the west was gone and other garrisons fell like dominoes. Without exaggerating, one could maintain that this was the Royalists' greatest success of the war. The victories at Roundway Down and Bristol seemed to deliver the west of England firmly into the King's hands; Gloucester stood alone.

This was a critical point in Charles's fortunes. The question was whether to ignore Gloucester and march on to London, as the Queen advised, or whether to consolidate his successes by taking Gloucester. His military advisers were cautious; they disliked the idea of a Parliamentary stronghold, especially a port, in their rear. Charles delayed his decision—as it turned out, the delay may well have been fatal to his cause. His commanders urged him to clear a way for the army he had in South Wales under Lord Herbert, which would not cross into England until the obstruction of Gloucester was clear. Such a reluctance to march far from their base was to be typical of

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the royalist soldiers. In the north, Newcastle could not overcome the misgivings of his men while Hull stood, and Charles himself proved sadly incapable of instilling a sense of urgency into his men. S. R. Gardiner considered that this period was crucial for the King. If Charles I had acted more forcefully, the outcome of the war might well have been very different. “. . . The first week in August (marked) the instant when a virile resolution on the King’s part would probably have changed the fortunes of the war.” Nevertheless, the decision was made at last and the royal host moved in its slow and cumbersome manner to surround Gloucester. Clarendon explained the King’s reasons for embarking on the siege. “It was the only garrison the rebels had between Bristol and Lancashire, on the north part of England, and if it could be recovered, his majesty would have the river of Severn entirely within his command, whereby his garrisons of Worcester and Shrewsbury, and all those parts, might be supplied from Bristol; and the trade of that city being so advanced, that the customs and duty might bring a notable revenue to the King; and the wealth of the city increasing, it might bear the greater burden for the war If Gloucester were reduced, there were needed no forces to be left in Wales, and all those soldiers might be then drawn to the marching army, and the contributions and other taxes assigned to it.”² Charles arrived at the city on August 10. Bristol had fallen more easily than expected; surely Gloucester would not resist for long.

Gloucester was a city of some importance; a centre of the rich Cotswold wool trade, it also occupied a commanding position on the River Severn. It was a port through which the royalists could pass valuable supplies, or it could be a dangerous impediment to those supplies. Its Parliamentary sympathies had been made plain in 1640. In that year, Thomas Widdowes had been deprived of the mastership of the College School because of his royalist loyalties. In the same year the indefatigable Puritan, Alderman Thomas Pury, had been elected as one of the city’s Members of Parliament, and became a strong supporter of the Root-and-Branch Bill which aimed at the abolition of episcopacy. In February 1641, the citizens of Gloucester complained in a petition that in eight parishes there were no godly preachers. It is no wonder that Richard Baxter, the Puritan divine, approved warmly of them after a visit to the city.

The Governor was Colonel Edward Massey. The son of a Cheshire gentleman, he was young, only 23 years of age. In 1640 he had joined

² Clarendon. *History of the Great Rebellion*. Vol. 2.

the King's army during the Scottish war but had later left Charles's service. His friends explained that he had disliked seeing Catholics receiving so many favours from the King; his enemies accused him of opportunism. Some of them relied on this presumed trait at the beginning of the siege and were sure that he would surrender the city. However, he remained firm. Plans had already been made to fortify Gloucester. In January 1642, Parliament ordered that "the city and county of Gloucester do detail five hundred pounds . . . to be laid out upon the fortifications and other provisions for the defence of the said city and county." Following the loss of Bristol, Waller was commanded to despatch troops to help the city and the Commons undertook to send £1,700 but there is no sign that any of this help reached its destination. The inhabitants could not avoid alarm and despondency. After the many Royalist successes of that summer, there seemed to be few convincing reasons why Gloucester should stop the rot.

John Corbet was the Governor's chaplain at the time of the siege and had an active interest in the city's fortunes. A keen critic of the King, he saw the struggle as a "defensive war"; compared with the Wars of the Roses it was "undertaken upon higher principles, and carried on to a nobler end." He was in Gloucester throughout the testing days and gave a vivid description of the city and its citizens under pressure.³ "That sudden surrender of Bristol, which was almost beyond our feares, brought forth a dark gloomy day to the city of Gloucester. The mindes of people were filled with amazement, and the failing of such a promising government made most men infidels, or at least to question all things. But here was the greatest mischief of all; many were not wanting to debate upon the maine cause of the Kingdome; malignant spirits took the advantage of our misery, and unstable minds, who beholding only the surface of things and led by the common voice of their equals were flushed in prosperous times, now became crestfallen, and . . . questioned the passages of state, conceiving each miscarriage a fundamentall error, and accounting their present sufferings not for religion and liberty, but some scruples of state policy. The state of things required strong resolution, the usuall posture could not pretend to the safety of the place."

Colonel Massey sent an urgent appeal for help to Parliament on August 1. "Our wants are so great, and this city so averse to us, that our power cannot enforce men beyond their wills, which I had done,

³ J. Corbet. *The Historical Relation of the Military Government of Gloucester.*

and would do, if our regiment might have equalled the city in strength; but now, what with the general discontent of both, of the city soldiers and our own, we stand at present as betrayed unless speedily your care prevent it. Alderman Pury and some few of the citizens, I dare say, are still cordial to us, but I fear ten for one incline the other way. If your supply come speedily you may have hopes to call Gloucester yours; if not, I have lost mine, for above ourselves we cannot act." S. R. Gardiner believed that this appeal was made as an alibi for Massey's intention to surrender the city but there are no grounds for believing this. Some royalists certainly hoped that he would deliver the city into their hands but he undoubtedly made efforts to raise the morale of the threatened outpost and to improve its defences. During the siege there was no talk of surrender and Gloucester fought to its last three barrels of gunpowder. Corbet, although a partial witness, may be believed when he described the efforts Massey made to encourage the civilian population.

"Chiefly the hearts of the people were to be held up, wherefore the governor appeared in publicke, rode from place to place with a cheerful aspect, and bearing before him no change in the sudden alteration of fortune. To them that enquired into his very thoughts, he gave assurance of safety, concealing the danger, or lessening its esteem. Fear did not beget confusion, but things were transacted in a calm and constant order. The presages of misery were exquisitely shunned, and the least shew of distraction and weaknesse forbidden. Money, plate, valuable goods, or any kinde of riches were not suffered to passe the gates, but here to rest as in a safe treasury, that the people might resolve upon a happy deliverance or an utter destruction. Neverthelesse, whosoever was weak and faint-hearted, had leave to depart the city."

The royal camp was at Tredworth, on an open hillside. King Charles lived at Matson House, of moderate size, but the largest house available, where he insisted on maintaining court etiquette. It was out of range of the enemy's guns but conveniently near to the siege. Charles's enemies accused him of cowardice, claiming that he never came to within two miles of the city, but the charge is probably untrue and certainly Charles never showed a lack of courage in other engagements of the civil wars. His nobles had less comfortable quarters, with the exception of Prince Rupert, who took over Prinknash Park. They had to live in the only houses available—small farm cottages, but some made the best of such a rural existence. When the siege was quiet, Dr Chillingworth, the mathematician who designed siege

engines, Falkland and Lord Spencer spent long hours discussing theology and dreaming nostalgically of peaceful times. The common soldiers lived in camps, or leaguers, which could be unhealthy and germ-ridden but this time the men were lucky. The weather held throughout the siege, except for one night's torrential rainfall which flooded the trenches and ruined the mines. When he arrived, Charles had perhaps 8,000 men under him. Reinforcements arrived in large and small groups until finally he commanded perhaps 25,000 soldiers.

Washbourn, in the Introduction to his collection of tracts dealing with the siege of Gloucester,⁴ outlined the dispositions of the royal troops. "A messenger was immediately despatched to Oxford with orders to bring down a reinforcement of foot with the battering train, and Sir William Vavasour, commander of all the forces in South Wales, was directed to draw his men to the right bank of the Severn, and there to complete the blockade by breaking down the bridges. Within two days the several divisions had taken up their posts. Forces from Worcester, afterwards joined by Vavasour, quartered in the north upon the Tewkesbury roads, in houses at Longford; and a leaguer, or regular encampment, was formed in two fields at Kingsholm, less than half a mile distant. Others were lodged in and about the hospital of Saint Margaret, on the London road. On the south, the Earl of Forth was encamped within a quarter of a mile, and pitched his general's tent in some grounds behind the priory of Lanthony, sheltered by a rise of land; this was the main leaguer. Sir Jacob Astley, who commanded a strong party on the eastern side, was lodged in a private house in Barton-street. Vavasour, before he crossed, left a guard at the Vineyard to close the passage over the Severn. These were their arrangements when the business began."

Rupert, in his usual forceful manner, advised Charles to assault the city with an overwhelming force of men but his uncle, cautious and remembering the heavy casualties he had suffered at the recent siege at Bristol, shrank from such a bold course and decided on the slower but less bloody methods of mining and bombardment. Rupert argued that the ground was too damp for digging trenches, and he was perfectly right. However, miners were brought from the Forest of Dean and steps were taken to cut off the water supply of a city almost surrounded by a river. The cavalry had nothing to do but forage and plunder the farms of the neighbourhood and the King's soldiers settled down to wait until the city would collapse into their hands.

⁴ *Bibliotheca Gloucestrensis*. 1825, pub. Gloucester.

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The siege was opened formally by a royal command to the city to open its gates. Two heralds rode from Charles's camp and during the two hours they waited for the citizens' answer their horses were fed and they were treated civilly. Two men were sent as a deputation to bear the inhabitants' answer to the King, one a civilian and the other a soldier. They were probably awed to meet Charles himself, the Duke of York, Prince Rupert and the high command of the royal army face to face and they certainly provided a moment of amusement for the royalists. "Two citizens from the town, with lean, pale, sharp and bad visages; indeed, faces so strange and unusual, and in such a garb and posture, that at once made the most severe countenances merry."⁵ Their answer, however, was resolute. "The town was held for the use of his majesty; but according to the sense of the houses of parliament." As the gates closed again the guns boomed and the siege had begun.

Gloucester's defences were still weak. On the west and north there were no walls, merely small works, but the ground was marshy. On the east and south the old walls still stood but could have inspired little confidence. Around the south and west flowed the river. There were eight large gates and two smaller ones, all well secured. Massey had about 1,500 men under him, certainly not enough to man all the works and the walls. It was impossible to keep more than a handful in reserve and all had to be on duty 24 hours a day. The defence was directed from the cross roads in Southgate street, where the reserve of 120 men was kept. The principal magazine was moved from St. Bartholomew's hospital, too exposed a spot, to the Crypt Church, probably to the cellars. King Charles had also taken over an old church near Matson House as his magazine. There was plenty of food and water in the city. Lead had been brought from a ruined palace nearby (the Vineyards) and made into bullets and two powder mills produced three barrels of gunpowder a week, an invaluable help which, in the end, may have tipped the balance of the struggle. When the city was relieved, the defenders were down to their last three barrels of powder.

The besiegers kept up their barrage of guns, cannon, demi-cannon and culverins. Hauled slowly to an engagement by large teams of horses or oxen, their range was up to a thousand yards. To diminish the damage to walls and earth works, the defenders of Gloucester protected and padded the defences with mounds of earth, wool packs and even cannon baskets. The Royalists also began the long and

⁵ Clarendon, *op. cit.*

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arduous task of digging trenches, concentrating their attack on the east and south-east. Mines were sunk and counter-mines crept out from the garrison, but, as Rupert had envisaged, the ground was too wet and there were too many springs close to the surface for mining to be successful. Siege engines were used but without any success. "Besides their mine and battery, they framed a great store of those imperfect and troublesome engines to assault the lower parts of the city. Those engines ran upon wheels, with planks musket-proof placed on the axel-tree, with holes for musket-shot and a bridge upon it, the end whereof (the wheels falling into a ditch) was to rest upon our breast works."⁶

Massey tried to keep the enemy off balance by sallies, destroying guns and trenches. Such attacks, usually by night, were not always successful but the beleaguered men could feel that they were hitting back at the enemy. "Then we found that they had sunk a mine under the east-gate; whereupon the governor commanded a countermine in two places, but finding the springs, left off, conceiving for the same reason the endeavour of the enemy to no purpose. To discover or interrupt this work, a serjeant with five daring men were put forth at a port hole in the dungeon at the east gate, came close to the mouth of their mine, took off the board that covered it, and for a while viewed the miners. One of them cast in a hand-grenado amongst them, while the four musketers played upon them as they ran forth, and with the noise of our men from the walls gave the whole leager a strong alarm, and crept in at the post-hole without harm."⁷

On a number of occasions, Massey sent out far more than a small handful of men to dislodge the enemy. "Three dayes after the siege laid, an hundred and fifty musketers commanded by Captaine Gray, sallied over the works upon the Worcester forces, . . . fell into their quarters, marched up to the maine guard, killed a captaine with eight or nine common souldiers, tooke five prisoners, divers armes, burnt their guard, and retreated without the losse of any . . . Upon the sixteenth of August an other party of an hundred and fifty musketers, commanded by Captaine Crispe, sallied forth at the north-port, fell into their trenches under the town wall on the east-side, marched above halfe way through them, performed gallantly, killed above an hundred men as was confessed by some of the enemy, wounded many, beat them out of their workes, and by the helpe of our musketers from

⁶ J. Corbet, *op. cit.*

⁷ J. Corbet, *op. cit.*

the wall, retreated without the loss of any, only two wounded after a very hot skirmish, for the space of halfe and houre, the cannon and musquets on both sides playing most furiously."⁸

At other times, life could go on fairly normally. Cattle grazed in the fields outside the city, guarded by soldiers and driven back within the gates every night. There were even occasional compensations. John Dorney, the Town Clerk of Gloucester, wrote shortly afterwards that "a cannon-bullet, its force being almost spent, running along the ground strucke down a pigge, which our soldiers eat, and afterwards well jeered the enemy there with."

The siege wore on and the Royalists' confidence in another swift victory began to fade. Falkland, "sitting amongst his friends often, after a deep silence and frequent sighs, would with a shrill and sad accent ingeminate the word 'Peace! peace!' and would passionately profess that the very agony of the war, and the view of the calamities and desolation, which the kingdom did and must endure, took his sleep from him and would shortly break his heart."⁹ On August 24 King Charles offered Massey his last chance of surrender. It was refused and it was refused with a little more confidence because beacon fires were now bringing Gloucester hopes of relief.

Gloucester had asked the Commons for help before the siege began but little was forthcoming. On August 1 Massey had advised Parliament that failure to send help would mean the downfall of his garrison and he had repeated this in another message four days later. The possibility of assistance, even at that point, must have seemed remote. During that summer there was confusion at Westminster. The King's advance and their own bitter rivalries paralysed the Parliamentary leaders. Pym's position was insecure and Essex might have lost his place as military commander to Waller. However, the news that Gloucester was in no mood to surrender united London. The capital prepared for another war effort. A month previously, Henry Marten's attempt to raise a force had failed dismally; now men were ready to join the trained bands. New regiments were raised, sermons of encouragement were preached and money donated. Pym and Essex were once more in control. On August 22 Essex met his army at Hounslow Heath; the infantry regiments had been brought up to strength, there were even three new ones, as well as a new cavalry regiment. The soldiers had basic supplies for a week. But Gloucester

⁸ J. Corbet, *op. cit.*

⁹ Clarendon, *op. cit.*

had already been under siege for twelve days and many must have predicted that Essex would be too late.

The march was not easy. Many soldiers were untrained, the Royalists would obviously try to hinder them as much as possible and supplies might run out. Conditions were bad, especially as they crossed the exposed Cotswolds, trying to avoid the Royalist scouts. Henry Foster, a tough, experienced sergeant, described the hardships of the army in "A True and Exact Relation of the Marchings . . ." (1643). "Our regiment . . . were constrained to lye all night upon the top of this mountaine, it being a most terrible tempestuous night of winde and raine, as ever men lay out in, we having neither hedge nor tree for shelter, nor any sustenance of food, or fire: we had by this time marched six daies with very little provision; for no place where we came was able to releeve our army, we leaving the rode all the way, and marching through poore little villages: our souldiers in their marching this day woulde run halfe a mile or a mile before, where they heard any water was, such straits and hardships our citizens formerly knew not." Wilmot tried to stop them at Oxford with his cavalry, as did Rupert at Stow-on-the-Wold, but their advance continued. At last, on September 5, Essex and his tired army stood on the high edges of the Cotswolds, seeing before them the rich Severn Valley and Gloucester still secure. It was too late in the day to move down the steep hillsides and they made camp there, thinking perhaps that the next day they would have to dislodge the enemy by force. When daylight came again, King Charles and his army had disappeared, leaving behind them only litter and some heavy equipment.

Estimates of casualties vary but the King may well have lost up to a thousand men, the city almost certainly lost no more than fifty. Only one officer and three private soldiers deserted to the King but the number of private citizens who left the city is unknown. In his report to the Commons Essex was full of praise for Massey's handling of his small force. "Upon Tuesday in the evening, the King's forces, seeing us approach, raised their siege before Gloucester, whither it pleased God we came very seasonably; for the governour had not above two or three barrells of powder left; yet had he managed his business with so much judgement and courage, that the enemy, not knowing of such want, had but small hopes of attaining their desires." In gratitude to the governor, the Commons resolved on September 15:

"RESOLVED—That Colonel Massey shall have a thousand pounds bestowed upon him, as a reward, and an acknowledgement of his service; whereof five hundred pounds to be paid in present: and that it be recommended to my Lord General to advance

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him to some place of honour and profit. And it is especially recommended to the committee for advance of monies to take care that this thousand pounds be paid with all convenient speed.

RESOLVED—That the arrears to the garrison of Gloucester shall be forthwith paid upon account made; . . . and that the officers and men of that garrison shall have a month's pay bestowed upon them as a reward of their service . . ."

For years afterwards the citizens celebrated September 5 as Gloucester Holiday and, when they rebuilt the damaged South Gate, they carved on it, "A City Assaulted by Man but Saved by God."

The siege was of vital importance to the outcome of the war; Gardiner argued convincingly that a more positive approach by the King might have achieved a very different result. Certainly all the King's actions were marked by caution and hesitation. Slow in decision and slow in execution, he did not order his soldiers to even one assault on the city. From then on his hopes of victory faded. As he lingered outside the walls of Gloucester, Parliament and the Scots were agreeing to the Solemn League and Covenant, a deadly alliance. By the end of 1643 Charles's enemies were gathering strength; the Eastern Association was growing more powerful and the Scots were on the move to tear the north of England out of his hands. Gloucester's three weeks' ordeal had played its part, and not an unimportant part, in the decline and fall of the King's fortunes.

FURTHER READING

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