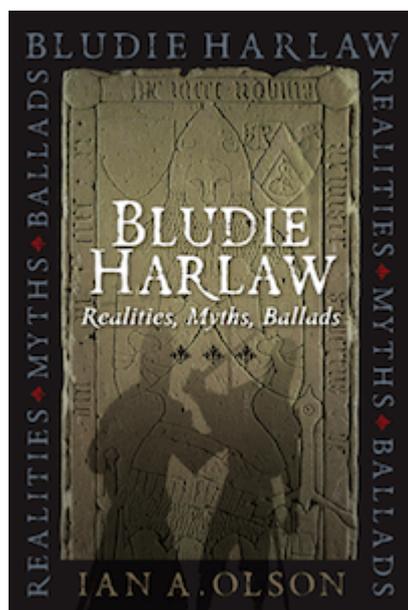


'Bludie Harlaw: Realities, Myths, Ballads' by Ian A. Olson

Review by David Cochran-Yu



Ian A. Olson's 2014 book *Bludie Harlaw* is a compilation and analysis of the existing corpus of material, from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century, concerned with the historical actions between Donald, lord of the Isles, and Alexander, earl of Mar, that culminated in the famed battle of Harlaw in 1411. Olson compares these sources, attempting to find common themes from which to derive a better understanding of the historical value of the various accounts. The scope of Olson's study is broad in terms of sources; the chronological breadth of material is complemented by the variety of literary forms, and

sources include late medieval chronicles, clan genealogical histories, poetic verse, musical composition and oral traditions.

After introducing his subject, Olson opens Part One of his research, starting with Chapter two, by giving a brief historical context of the primary leaders opposing each other at Harlaw: Donald, lord of the Isles, and Alexander, earl of Mar. This is followed by a third chapter which begins the analysis of the earliest sources. Olson uses a straightforward chronological approach to studying Harlaw. He begins this chapter with the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources, focusing first on what he classifies as 'Early Highland' sources which are predominantly Irish, consisting of the Irish annals of Loch Cé and a politically charged account by the dean of Limerick (a Campbell) in 1596. In an attempt to supplement this dearth of early Highland material Olson introduces a poetic *Brosnachadh*, that he himself admits could have been unrelated to Harlaw in origin, and a *pibroch* supposedly written in honour of Harlaw but which likely was written at some far later date.

The chapter then centres on the late medieval Scottish chronicles that mention

Harlaw: the fourteenth century works, namely Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*, and *Liber Pluscardensis*; and the sixteenth century chronicles: John Mair's *Historia Maioris Britanniae*, Hector Boece's *Scotorum Historia*, and George Buchanan's *Rerum Scotticarum Historia*. Olson gives brief introductions to each of these before providing their accounts of Harlaw as English translations. At the end of this chapter, Olson gives a helpful comparison chart of the chronicle accounts which highlights the similarities and differences between their depictions of the battle.

Chapter four focuses on the Ramsay ballad, a song that Olson seeks to establish as a product of the sixteenth century through comparing the ballad's segments with sixteenth-century chronicles. Olson comes to the conclusion that the ballad was particularly influenced by the work of Hector Boece, and was politically motivated to curry favour with James V who in 1531 was seeking the subjugation of Hebridean magnates. This chapter ends Olson's exploration of pre-seventeenth-century sources, but Olson offers appendices that give the Latin versions of accounts and the orthography of the Ramsay Ballad.

Part Two of *Bludie Harlaw* consists of material ranging from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The format is similar to Part One; however, Olson analyses these by examining how they differ from the late-medieval material. Chapters five and six explore the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts which predominantly draw on genealogical histories of the MacDonalDs, MacLeans, and MacLeods. Olson closes this section with an analysis of the late-eighteenth-century Forbes sources which include an inspection of a Forbes ballad, sources that extol chivalric glory with little historic value. Chapters seven and eight advance the chronology to the nineteenth century with an emphasis on the legacy of inaccuracies perpetrated by authors, particularly Walter Scott and Patrick Tytler. Olson demonstrates that many writers tended to aggrandise and romanticise the battle, while exaggerating perceptions of superficial racial divides. This has facilitated the inevitable evolution of Harlaw myths.

Once finished recounting the various accounts and traditions, Olson attempts to draw forth the motivations underlying the events of 1411. However, after briefly discussing possibilities, Olson identifies the difficulties in doing so, and uses the 1914 inauguration of the Harlaw Monument as an illustration of the legends that have built up around the battle, becoming treasured traditions. In his conclusion, Olson is careful to note the lack of reliable information regarding Harlaw, but

does seek to address the errors of the old Highland/Lowland division and perception of 'Wild Scots' espoused by Walter Scott and others in the past. This is in line with other recent scholarship which deconstructs the myth of the Highlands as being culturally separate from the rest of medieval Scotland.

Olson uses the earlier chronicle accounts of Harlaw as the basis for analysing the later sources. While a valid method, there is little analysis of the chronicle accounts themselves. This permits the reader to assume that these sources are more or less accurate, despite the variance amongst them. Indeed, there is an emphasis on the later sources, as Olson aims to dispel the mythology attached to Harlaw.

Olson attempts to be comprehensive in his study of Harlaw. However, there are several widely used sources by historians that are curiously absent. Perhaps the most prominent sources missing are Sir Robert Gordon's 1639 *Genealogical History*, Sir George MacKenzie's *History of the Family of MacKenzie* published in William Fraser's *The Earls of Cromartie*, and James Fraser's mid-seventeenth-century *Wardlaw Manuscript*. The first two of these sources are highly utilised sources by historians, while the *Wardlaw Manuscript* gives a Clan Fraser perspective that could enhance Olson's attempt to understand that clan's involvement in the events that shaped Harlaw. Nevertheless, Olson does study a broad range of material, and is ambitious in an undertaking that examines the comparative value of traditions, poetry, chronicle, and genealogical history sources.

The strength of Olson's *Bludie Harlaw* is its ability to draw together multiple sources concerned with the battle of Harlaw, demonstrate their significance and inaccuracies, and subsequently create a thesis regarding the battle. Indeed, the book functions as a case study for studying a medieval Scottish battle through the medium of contrasting literary sources. Equally important, Olson's book successfully demonstrates how perceptions concerned with one event can change in the telling, yet also retain some consistencies, over centuries of transmission.

Bludie Harlaw: Realities, Myths, Ballads by Ian A. Olson is published by John Donald (an imprint of Birlinn Books), 2014.