Generals

Ten British Commanders Who Shaped the World

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Extract

George Monck

1608–1670

The heaviest man in the world, but stout and honest to his country.
SAMUEL PEPYS

THE HAMMERING OF CARPENTERS could be distinctly heard above the cacophony of battle in the streets of Stirling. Lieutenant General George Monck went to inspect the work, eyeing the arcs of fire, conferring with his gunners, and chewing on a quid of tobacco so that he might ruminate well on the problem at hand.

It was 12 August 1651. Little more than a week had passed since Oliver Cromwell had begun his march back into England, delegating the command in Scotland to Monck. Cromwell had dealt a heavy blow to Parliament's enemies in battle at Dunbar, but most of the land was still in open revolt. An unholy alliance of Scottish Presbyterians and Royalists declared themselves loyal to Charles II, the exiled monarch, and Stirling Castle was one of their strongest outposts.

The general was a stout, barrel-chested man. He spoke with the accent of his native Devon. His straightforward manner and reputation for doing exactly what he said he would do appealed to many, making him an early archetype for the British soldier. A kinsman gave the following testament of Monck:

> he was a plain downright Englishman, a rough soldier bred in camps, unskill'd and detesting the servile arts practised in courts . . . he was not a man of what is commonly understood by quick parts: but if he was slow in considering, he was sure in acting: Solidity of judgement, indefatigable industry and intrepid courage were the qualities best adapted for the work he was performing.

Monck's campaign might have been only a few days old, but he was determined to prosecute it with all due dispatch. He had been a professional soldier for twenty-five years and knew that fortresses had to

be taken swiftly and without reverses, or his men's fighting spirit could collapse: 'the malice of a great army is broken, and the force of it spent in a great Siege'. For this reason, Monck eyed his wooden gun platforms with some satisfaction.

Inside Stirling's walls, the governor, William Cunningham, was confident. There were 300 determined men under his command, a castle of great strength, 27 cannon, hundreds of barrels of powder and victuals for months. They had other, more symbolic, reasons to hold out, too: the regalia and records of the ancient kings of Scotland had been lodged in the fortress and, as every Scot knew, English arms had been humiliated before at Stirling. But Cunningham did not understand what Monck had in store for him.

So it was that when Monck sent a messenger forward, that afternoon of 12 August, to request the garrison's surrender, he received a defiant reply from Cunningham. The governor told his attackers that he would hold out as long as he could.

That evening, four great guns and two mortars were brought onto their wooden platforms outside the castle. Parliament had hired the services of a Dutch master gunner, Joachim Hane, but Monck was an expert artillerist himself, having been given overall command of the Ordnance by Cromwell. Cunningham's men studied the scene from the battlements as the great metal destroyers were hoisted onto their firing platforms with cranes, block and tackle. All of the principal players – Cunningham, Monck and Hane – knew that the English guns, though powerful, would take many days to batter breaches in Stirling's thick walls. But those inside had no understanding of what the two great mortars could do. Although such weapons had been used in various continental sieges, there were few soldiers in Britain who had ever seen then in action.

Not long after daybreak on the 13th there was a terrific crump as the first mortar fired. Its shell took a quite different trajectory to the cannon balls of the four siege guns: the 1.75-pound metal sphere soared upwards at a steep angle, sailing high over the walls, before dropping and exploding. Hane noted the distances, performed his calculations and prepared a second shell.

As the great granado travelled up into the sky, the eagle-eyed might have spotted the burning fizz of its fuse. A skilful master gunner would trim its length with such fine judgement, matching the time of flight and burning speed of the igniter, that the powder inside would be

detonated just above the targets' heads, showering them with lumps of the shell's iron casing. And that was precisely what happened. The second English shell plunged into the castle courtyard, exploding just a few feet above the ground, cutting down thirty men with its terrible blast.

Next day, after twenty-four mortar shells had been fired, Stirling's garrison mutinied. The soldiers, Highlanders for the most part, had not seen modern warfare before and they were terror-struck. Just two days after his defiant refusal of terms, Cunningham had to surrender. The English general had cracked one of Scotland's toughest fortresses without having to ask his army to storm it. One of his admirers wrote: 'Monk shewed what was the difference between a Professor in the Art of War, well studied in all its rules, and a Fanatick Soldier that fights by inspiration.'

The wars that racked the British Isles from 1642 had certainly unleashed a startling array of fanatics – religious fervour infused Protestant dissenting sects, Royalist volunteers or Irish Catholic bands with murderous self-righteousness. It did not though provide most of them with the slightest clue about how to fight successfully. Monck had begun the Civil War as a Royalist general, but he had been captured, and the Parliamentarians had managed to turn him to their side by offers of cash and rank.

Thomas Fairfax, the general who brought organisation to the Parliamentary cause by creating the New Model Army in 1645, called Monck 'a man worth the making'. The two officers, cast initially on opposite sides in the war, had learned their profession together, fighting in the Netherlands in the 1630s. It was there that Monck picked up many practical skills in such arcane matters as siege warfare. He was not only practiced in his profession but understood soldiers very well, earning the accolade in Ireland, scene of one of his early campaigns, of 'the most beloved by the soldiers of any officer in the army'.

One week after reducing Stirling, Monck's army was off again, marching on Dundee. He could not dawdle, aiming to crush his enemy before winter. Cromwell had confided a sizeable force to his lieutenant: four regiments of horse, one of dragoons and ten of infantry. The marching regiments of foot were the core of his army, but with each success Monck had to leave detachments, and men were cast about in order to prevent further insurrection. He knew from campaigns in Ireland the importance of retaining a powerful army under his own

hand, without leaving too many soldiers on garrisons duty, and these considerations added urgency to his movements that August.

At this time, midway through the seventeenth century, the revolution in warfare brought about by gunpowder was still only half done. Each regiment that marched towards Dundee had to combine pikemen, often armoured with a helmet and breastplate, with other soldiers lugging great muskets. The firearms were inaccurate, difficult to load, and hardly usable at all in wet weather, when the slow-burning matches used to fire them might get drenched. For this reason, the pikemen, armed with 15–20-foot pikes, were there as a kind of insurance against mishaps, and to form a solid hedgehog in close combat against enemy horse or infantry.

Just as the pikemen fought in a way basically unchanged since the times of Alexander the Great, so too the horse were expected to charge into their enemies and run them through with cold metal. Only the dragoons, hybrid soldiers who rode between battles but often fought in them dismounted, using firearms, showed the advance of military science.

As to the human make-up of Monck's Scottish army, they were a diverse bunch, a product of their recruitment in several waves. Some were long-term survivors of the Parliamentary army, who had come into it nine years earlier, at the very start of the war, from the trained bands, militia forces of volunteers, often from quite educated or skilled backgrounds. Many in this category had joined in their teens, and seen battle many times. As the war progressed, though, volunteers dried up, leading the belligerent armies to use the press, or compel men to serve. This initially dragged in various unwilling farm labourers, servants and the like, but constables in the shires soon took advantage of the chance to empty their prisons. The men were therefore often serving unwillingly and could only hope that pay promised to them (but rarely delivered) would eventually give them some reward for their dangerous service.

When he summoned Robert Lumsdaine, governor of Dundee's fortress, on 26 August, Monck had many considerations on his mind. His siege train was moving very slowly, so he knew that he might not have at his disposal the same means that he had used at Stirling to bludgeon Dundee's defenders. Furthermore, the men were impatient for plunder and their morale might prove brittle if some precipitate attempt on the works was beaten back. So, concerned as he must have been, it can be

imagined that Monck was nettled when Lumsdaine replied cheekily that he would offer the English army one last chance to surrender and take safe passage out of Scotland.

Monck brought cannon from some nearby ships, but they were simply not powerful enough to reduce Dundee's walls quickly. Time was slipping away; he needed a different approach.

His answer lay with a young boy who boasted that he could make his way in and out of the town at will. Monck employed him as a spy, and every day the urchin made a report to his new paymaster, often scampering over the works to the crack and whistle of musket balls fired at him by the defenders. Several more days elapsed, but when the siege guns finally arrived, Monck had what he needed to concert his plan. From his spy, he knew that the garrison were in the habit of getting blind drunk every night. He therefore resolved to attack in the morning, early enough to make the most of their collective hangover.

In the small hours of 1 September, the English army prepared its storming parties. Confusion reigned in such operations, so it was vital to be able to tell friend from foe. The usual procedure was to tie a strip of cloth around one arm. Monck's was a little different: he got the men to pull out their shirt tails, over their backsides. This system was all very well for the stormers as long as they kept going forward, but if a man turned to flee, there was no telling what might happen to him. As the Parliamentarians primed their pistols and burnished their swords, the password 'God With Us!' was whispered among them.

When the storm went in, Monck hit the town from two sides at once and resistance lasted little more than half an hour. Governor Lumsdaine received payback for the 'impertinent gallantry' with which he had received Parliament's summons and was put to the sword.

Dundee turned out to be packed with valuables, mostly the property of Lowland Royalists who had gone there for safety. For three days the English army sacked the place, stealing and boozing, before Monck could reimpose order.

In a campaign of just a few weeks Monck took several towns, captured enemy ringleaders and scattered resistance into the Highlands. He had successfully mopped up any organised remnants of the enemy army and, in doing so, made his reputation with Cromwell.

If Monck was a good general, his success in war did not match that of Cromwell. Yet it is Monck whose legacy was the greater for Britain

and its army. This judgement might seem perverse, but while Cromwell had been the leading light in the execution of King Charles I, and the master of many battlefields, when he styled himself Lord Protector in December 1653 his journey reached a political dead end. Even Cromwell understood that in seeking to fill the void left by the beheaded Charles he could not crown himself king and be done with it. His problem was that he ran out of inspiration in his struggle to restore viable relations between Britain's landowners, army and himself, as ruler. So the atmosphere became increasingly fraught, with extreme religious ideas flourishing, near mutinous regiments refusing to disband themselves and continuous unrest in the provinces. This period was characterised by many of those who lived through it as a 'state of nature'.

Not long after assuming the title of Lord Protector, Cromwell drew up orders to send Monck – whose duties had taken him elsewhere for two years – back to Scotland. He packed up his trunks, leaving the post of 'General at Sea', an arrangement under which he had successfully commanded a naval squadron during a short-lived outbreak of Anglo–Dutch hostilities, and returning to Caledonia. In Monck's absence, the rebels had become increasingly daring, and the Parliamentry army was suffering from poor morale and discipline.

Terms set out in the parchment presented to the Royalist officer turned Cromwellian troubleshooter in April 1654 gave him enormous authority. Appointing Monck 'Commander in Chief of the Army and forces in Scotland', Cromwell gave him 'full power to rule, govern and command against rebels and enemies of the public peace'. The attainment of this aim even entitled the new pro-consul to take measures to protect the 'true religion', Protestantism, gave him the ability to raise revenue through imposing new customs duties, and do everything necessary to keep his army in order. In short, Monck was a plenipotentiary who would take care of business north of the Tweed for a master with too many other demands on his time. Indeed, the job created for Monck gave him a situation that was in many respects more powerful and less complicated than that of the Lord Protector himself in London.

The English general and his wife even managed a modest form of court life in Edinburgh, and some of the gentry, at least, were willing to be patronised at their table. Monck's wife, Ann, was eleven years his junior. They had met in 1644 while he was a Royalist prisoner in the

Tower, before he decided to switch his services to the Parliamentary cause. She is described, a little unkindly, in some accounts as a washerwoman who 'did' for the inmates. Small, shrewish and of volatile temper, one account calls her 'a lady of low origin, she having been formerly employed in one of the mercer's shops in the Exchange in London . . . her former station shows itself in her manners and dress'. Another states, 'Monk was more fearful of her than of an army. It is said she would even give him manual correction.'

Some suggest that Monck, through his long campaigning, knew little of the opposite sex, and that Ann was the only woman with whom he ever had, if the term is appropriate for an occasionally battered husband, a loving relationship. Reading between the lines, it is evident that some of Monck's military adventures provided welcome relief from Ann. Even so, he certainly loved her and was able to stand up for himself *in extremis*.

But if Monck did not always rule his own roost, he managed to run Scotland as a benign dictator: he used flying columns of dragoons and infantry to hunt down rebels; established a substantial network of informers; tried to put the nation's finances on a proper footing; kept his regiments in good military order; and checked some of the more radical preachers. However, the English Revolution made possible many new forms of religious worship, which gave the ruler of Scotland some insoluble problems. Cromwell believed strongly in this freedom, but Monck disliked many of the new groups, believing that the ideas flowing from various pulpits or meetings could allow extremists to foment social strife. He was concerned that firebrand preachers could subvert his soldiers and provoke conflict with Scottish Presbyterian ministers.

Monck could not completely suppress all these new sects – Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Anabaptists and Fifth Monarchy Men – because the Protector decreed tolerance. Thus, the Presbyterians were annoyed that the nonconformists were allowed to operate at all, while the sectaries despised the general because he occasionally sought to restrain some of their wilder agitation.

Monck's security operations made any overt displays of loyalty to the Stuarts impossible across most of the country. They also made Scotland, for perhaps the only time that century, a more lawful place than England. One contemporary (by no means friendly to Monck) paid this tribute to his administration there: 'As he was feared by the

nobility and hated by the clergy, so he was not unloved by the common people, who received more justice and less oppression from him than they had been accustomed to under their own lords.'

A little over one year after assuming his post, Monck decided that he had made sufficient progress in pacifying the country to begin reducing his garrison. This was an urgent necessity, since the cost of the army in Scotland was about double the revenue that the country itself could produce in various duties. But Britain's military rulers had reached a point where they could not afford to pay off the men. In Scotland, during the summer of 1655, Monck calculated his regiments' arrears at £80,000. They could not simply be sent packing, since they had campaigned for years in expectation of this money and would either mutiny or turn to crime if they did not receive it.

Monck applied the ingenuity that had served him so well at Stirling and Dundee to the disbandment problem. He encouraged soldiers to take jobs as mercenaries in Holland and France, or to emigrate to the colonies. He also cashiered some officers whom he believed had fallen under the spell of more radical sectaries. By these means, he managed a reduction of several regiments. Even so, the problem was only partially dealt with in Scotland, and even less so in England.

The ferment and ideological upheaval in 1650s Britain was such that it can easily be compared to France after 1789 or Iran after 1979. Fifth Monarchy Men and other millenarian sects were marching about, led by preachers who confidently asserted that Christ would make His second coming in England at any moment. Villagers fed up with being robbed by unpaid soldiers or set upon by thousands of 'fanatick' pilgrims formed armed groups, the Clubmen, who set upon any suspicious characters they met. Other factions, such as the Levellers and the Diggers, were advocating what we might now call a redistribution of wealth. The garrisons of what had once been a fine New Model Army could exert only a limited influence. In any case, many officers sympathised with the religious sectaries or Levellers, and the army was unhappy, owed huge amounts of money and refusing to disband itself. In short, it was holding the country to ransom.

During the five and a half years that Monck ruled Scotland, he tried to reconcile competing religious, military and budgetary demands. His solutions were subtly different from those in England. There was less religious tolerance in Scotland under the period of military rule, and certainly those members of the garrison who fell in with the Quakers

or Fifth Monarchy Men often found themselves being dismissed from the army. Monck sought to maintain the military effectiveness of his regiments by curbing religious politics within their ranks, straining every sinew to pay them regularly and keeping them under command of trusted subordinates. All the while, he tried to protect himself against nasty political surprises by retaining a network of correspondents in London, his native Devon and the garrisons of Ireland and England – people of like mind, many of them professional soldiers.

At times, Monck tired of his burden and sought to resign, but Cromwell wouldn't let him. The Lord Protector had become such an admirer that he even preferred to overlook the ways in which Monck had subverted his Puritan experiment. Some of those black-suited ideologues who did not like what they heard from Edinburgh tried to convince Cromwell that Monck's heart remained true to the Stuarts and that the general was one of those who sought to restore Charles II to the throne.

Writing to Monck in August 1655, Cromwell referred to these rumours, going as far as to make a joke of them: 'There be some that tell me that there is a certain cunning fellow in Scotland called George Monck *who* is said to lie in wait there to introduce Charles Stuart; I pray you must use your diligence to apprehend him and send him up to me.'

Why did Cromwell leave him in Scotland, at the head of one of the few effective garrisons left in the army? The Lord Protector knew his general well enough to realise that the sense of military honour that bound Monck to serve, after having agreed to take up the Scottish position, would be sufficient to prevent him betraying the Commonwealth's trust. It was a sound judgement, and indeed was exactly the same one reached by a Royalist peer in considering whether Monck might be turned to the Stuart cause. The leading Stuart supporter put it thus: 'The only ties that have hitherto kept [Monck] from grumbling have been the vanity of constancy to his professions, and his affection to Cromwell's person.' In this last comment the Royalist had realised something that the Lord Protector apparently had not. Monck respected Cromwell as a general and as a strong hand, holding the country back from even worse confusion and Puritan zealotry.

When Cromwell died, in September 1658, the country reached a crossroads. For a few months, his son Richard was able to rule, but challenges to his authority began appearing almost immediately. The

ties between Oliver Cromwell and his generals had been dissolved. They began vying for power and, increasingly, Richard became a marginal figure. As Monck's correspondents in London told him of each new twist and turn, he decided that he could not remain indifferent in the power struggle. He prepared to hurl himself out of Scotland, exploding with all the force of a political mortar bomb.

It was late in the evening of 8 December 1659 when Monck and his party arrived in Coldstream, a small village on the Scottish side of the Tweed. The ground was blanketed with snow, and stones in the stream that marked the English border were wreathed in ice. Several regiments of Monck's Scottish army had already billeted themselves on the locals, having marched there on the general's orders. At a time of night when the embers in Coldstream's hearths would normally have been dying, smoke billowed into the crisp night from its chimneys, bearing witness to the many rough soldiers who had been packed into each home or barn.

One of Monck's party recalled their arrival at 11 p.m.: 'The honest Red-coats did bid us heartily welcome, but the Knaves had eat up all the Meat, and drank all the Drink of the Town . . . the General lodged, falling to his good Cheer, which was his chewing tobacco (which he used to commend so much).' Monck and his people finally found beds for the night at a house just outside the village.

Monck's days in Coldstream were the most fateful of his life. For it was there, gripped in the depths of the Scottish winter, that he had to decide whether to cross the Tweed, march to London and seize power. Ann appeared on a couple of occasions, but Monck packed her off the following morning. He did not want her there as he approached his moment of decision.

Fifteen months had passed since Oliver Cromwell's death. His son Richard had inherited the title of Lord Protector but immediately it had become apparent that he did not have either the strength of character or the army following to wield supreme power. Certain warlords – veteran army commanders – soon decided to ignore Richard and took steps to dictate their terms to what remained of Parliament.

Cromwell's side in the Civil War had, of course, fought in the name of Parliament, but by 1659 that assembly was a shadow of its former self. Its remaining members were those who had survived the 1648 purge of 231 Royalists and the following year's abolition of the Lords.