The wider European context surrounding the Battle of Linlithgow Bridge, 1526

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My first encounter with this period was in secondary school, when pupils were still force-fed the works of Sir Walter Scott. One prescribed text was his long narrative poem 'Marmion', culminating in the Battle of Flodden and the violent end of James IV. 'Marmion', I may say, has a plot of lusty knight and at least prospectively naughty nun, which we teenagers found disappointingly short on detail. Flodden, fought for the sake of France, is often seen as the calamity that undermined the Auld Alliance, but this is questionable. By the 1560s Scotland would indeed have parted company with an overbearing France; but in 1513 that wasn't an option. The mood was more 'Keep Calm and Carry On', after one more defeat at English hands, albeit a heavy one. James I, James II and James III had also died untimely, so it meant the old story of weakened royal authority and noble faction.

Though Scotland would eventually embrace both the Reformation and friendly, if edgy, relations with the England of Elizabeth I, that future was unknowable. Hindsight is hazardous. Ponder James V's English blood – his mother being Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII – and we readily leap to the fatal pretensions of his daughter Mary Queen of Scots and the eventual Union of 1603 whereby his grandson James VI succeeded to the English throne. We don't dwell on the might-have-been's of the 1520s, when Henry, though wed for more than a decade, had but one direct heir – *his* daughter Mary Tudor. Not yet enamoured of Anne Boleyn, he contemplated the risky fall-back plan of legitimating his bastard son, while marrying Mary to her Scots but half-Tudor cousin was potentially another solution, presaging a much earlier Union. Moreover, the widowed Queen Margaret's second marriage, besides complicating Scotland's internal quarrels, had quickly produced James V's half-sister Margaret Douglas (b.1515), likewise with a reversionary place in the Tudor succession. All this figured in the calculations both of other contemporary rulers *and* of the Scottish nobles who competed to control or influence their young king. Remember, too, the divisive choices of the Rough Wooing, after James's death in 1542, when England aimed to secure the infant Scottish queen and orchestrate her eventual marriage – which Scotland countered by sending her to France. The consequences, in either case, were at the time imponderable.

Though Martin Luther's assault on the Catholic Church began in 1517, this was not yet 'the Reformation'; the term 'Protestant' had not been coined; and the clash of hard-line Calvinism and reinvigorated Catholicism lay some 30 years in the future. The immediate threat was another schism, confined to Germany and Scandinavia. That was serious enough, recalling the scandalously divided Church of a hundred years earlier; but the 15th century Conciliarists had succeeded in restoring unity, and fresh resort a General Council of the Church might have reconciled the Lutheran schismatics. Tackling glaring *defects* and postponing *redefinition of doctrine* seemed the pragmatic road to reconciliation. Only from the 1550s would that road be finally closed – when the Council of Trent restated Catholic theology in 'take it or leave it' fashion while, across the religious divide, John Calvin's militant Protestantism increasingly prevailed.

In 1519 we encounter Charles V, the newly chosen Emperor. (Holy Roman Emperor, or German Emperor, if you prefer.) Titles and possessions had accrued to this young Habsburg prince – of which more later. That Pope and Emperor should preside jointly over western Christendom was a threadbare formula. Nevertheless, it had outlasted the misfortunes of the late medieval Papacy and the reduction of *effective* imperial authority, since the mid-13th century, to an unsure overlordship of Germany. Obliged to come to terms with secular rulers, the Renaissance Popes found their freedom of action reduced, while Emperors did not *inherit* the imperial title – they were *elected*, by their fellow German princes, and their power, even within Germany, usually depended on their own resources.

Late medieval heresies – for example, Lollardy, haphazardly persecuted in 15th century England and not unknown in James IV's Scotland – were scarcely proto-Protestant. They testify to the desire for a more meaningful religious experience but exhibit little worked-up theology. Surely a further sign of spiritual hunger, religious matter became the principal output of the multiplying printing presses; but it's too large a claim that the Reformation inevitably followed from this new technology, which served Christian Humanists and other would-be Catholic reformers equally well. Discontent there was, but examples of religious renewal are not lacking and orthodox expressions of piety – endowing a new foundation or becoming a pilgrim – had not lost their relevance. (That late medieval pilgrimage took on some of the qualities of the modern package tour is beside the point.) We might note in passing how the printing press spread the scurrilous, even obscene, imagery into which 16th century religious conflict later descended. In my chosen example, from Luther's Bible, the Pope appears as the New Testament 'Whore of Babylon.'

Making Popes accountable to regular General Councils might have produced reform sufficient to save the day, while Charles V was duty-bound to address the Lutheran challenge – which, in any case, endangered his own position. But much depended on his bringing to bear on Germany the resources of his other domains; and in the end the German princes proved determined, Protestant and Catholic alike, that he should not prevail – whence came the compromise Augsburg Settlement of 1555 and a qualified recognition of the Lutheran faith. Papal fears of being coerced into a General Council outwith their control are reflected in the choice of Trent as venue in 1545 – in imperial territory but on the Italian side of the Alps and open to papal influence.

Where Lutheranism was Erastian and 'rendered unto Ceasar' (part of its attraction for the German princes and the rulers of Scandinavia), the Stewart monarchy, like the Valois monarchy in France, had already achieved an advantageous 'understanding' with the Papacy and a vested interest in an *unreformed* Church. Nothing suggests that James V was personally inclined to Protestantism. On the other hand, he could not ignore the blandishments of his uncle Henry VIII, after the latter, for his own very personal reasons, had broken with Rome, veering thereafter between traditional practice and idiosyncratic innovation. Inseparable from the problematic Tudor succession, all this became more combustible when Calvin's radical message began to penetrate both France and the British Isles. Had James's reign continued into, say, the 1560s, how would he have addressed what historians call the 'second phase of the Reformation', with Calvinism ranged against

Tridentine Catholicism? How would he have responded to England's distinctly Protestant turn under Edward VI, to the Marian Catholic reaction afterwards, or to Elizabeth I's deliberately fudged religious settlement?

This is might-have-been territory – very easily overdone. (The fancy name for 'might-have-been' in historian-speak is 'counter-factual', which I've always found an excellent conversation-stopper.) But hindsight is both privilege and snare. Events now long in the past were once in the future. Moreover, History, if unpackaged and undebated, is mere *chronicle* – one damn thing after another, as is so often said. Though periodisation – and that's *packaging* – is necessary, have a thought as to the compartments to which we consign the Past and the labels, generally *hindsight* labels, we apply to them. Think '100 Years War'. Think 'medieval' – *our* middle ages, not *theirs.* For all that, there *were* those alive at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries – a tiny, literate minority – who spoke of a 'Renaissance' much as we do.

'Counter-Reformation' is a misleadingly negative term, coined by 19th century scholars. There could have been no successful Catholic fight-back in the mid-16th century without the *positive* 'Catholic Reformation' begun at Trent, and historians now rightly prefer the latter expression. 'Rough Wooing', though apt, is a 19th century coinage too, and in fact English policy towards Scotland after James V's demise was anything but coherent. There's 'Exploration and Discovery', seen as contemporaneous with the Renaissance; and that's nowadays a very non-pc label, condemned by the earnestly Woke, as implying that people and places beyond Europe's ken were of no account until Europeans had 'discovered' them. Derived from the rape of Europa in classical legend, the very word 'Europe' is arguably just a Renaissance affectation which happened to catch on. Though beset by Catholic:Protestant civil war, the venerable usage 'Christendom' certainly long endured alongside 'Europe'. Not before the 17th century was international conflict perceived primarily in balance of power terms, with religion a secondary consideration. Contradiction or not, Charles V and his son Philip II of Spain, both prime enemies of the Reformation, were still regarded by Catholics *and* Protestants as Christendom's defenders against the Ottoman Turks.

Turkish pressure on the Christian West dated from the 14th century, and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 had been 'when' not 'if'. Kings (Scotland's James IV among them) might still declare in the language of the Crusaders how they yearned to restore a Christian presence in the Holy Land; but the reality for much of the 16th century would be Christian *retreat*. Turkish pressure in the Mediterranean increased, while Turkish victory at Mohacs in 1526 – the year of *our* battle – exposed the entire Danube valley. (The final Turkish siege of Vienna comes as late as 1683.) If the 16th century opened a wider world to Europeans, it also held the nightmare of warring Christians pushed to the Atlantic margin. And dynastic rivalry frustrated a common front against Islam – notoriously so when His Most Christian Majesty, the Valois king of France, permitted the Ottoman galley fleet to winter in Toulon, thus spiting the Habsburg Emperor.

Anglo-French conflict had been late-medieval Europe's central quarrel. By textbook convention, the 100 Years War ended in the 1450s, leaving England only Calais, and

thereafter the internecine Wars of the Roses precluded serious re-engagement. Nonetheless, both the Yorkist Edward IV and the first Tudor, Henry VII, made threatening noises – thereby turning their nuisance value into a cash pension from the French victor; and what really limited English options was the collapse after 1477 of semi-independent, 'almost a kingdom' Burgundy, stretching from the Low Countries to the Alps. When Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, at odds with the Swiss confederacy, died in the Battle of Nancy, he left no male heir. A Burgundian alliance had guaranteed England's hold on northern France into the 1430s. After Burgundy changed sides, the English cause had steadily declined. Duke Charles, seeking any path to kingship, might have resumed an English partnership but his ambitions ended on the field of Nancy, in a two-day search for his mutilated body.

With a Lancastrian ancestry through Joan Beaufort, wife of James I, the Stewarts had a personal interest in the intermittent York:Lancaster struggle, besides opportunities to affect the outcome. Scotland benefitted in that a weaker England chose coexistence, ultimately concluding the Thistle-and-Rose marriage of 1503. Measured against other dynasties of the late 15th century, the Tudors had been insecure parvenus. By contrast, James IV's ambitions to cut a figure on the European scene had been taken seriously. These ambitions, however, led to Flodden – which needs a little explanation. Charles VIII of France and his successors, further strengthened by the good fortune that saw several great fiefdoms (ducal Burgundy included) revert to crown land, had gone adventuring in Italy. They set less store by the Auld Alliance – until in 1512-13 Louis XII, under pressure and facing English resurgence, appealed for Scottish assistance. James, who might have bided his time, chose intervention on France's side, his Tudor marriage notwithstanding – with the consequences we know.

Spain was an emerging European power, loosely united from 1469 when Ferdinand of Aragon married Isabella of Castile. Their conquest of Moorish Granada made a rare and prestigious Christian triumph. It was not the anciently disputed Pyrenean frontier but Aragon's stake in Naples and Sicily that drew Spain into the Italian Wars begun by France in 1492; and for the eager young Henry VIII (king from 1509) the Spanish alliance personified in his wife Catherine of Aragon meant the opportunity to reopen hostilities with England's old Valois enemy. He was urged on by his wily father-in-law Ferdinand, who soon left him in the lurch; and victory at Flodden, fought during Catherine's regency with Henry absent on campaign across the Channel, could not be accounted his personal triumph. All this pointed to the years ahead, when Habsburg aggrandisement had turned Franco-Spanish rivalry into something much bigger, with England just an occasional player, of lesser account.

Austria was the Habsburg heartland, but archduke Maximilian (b.1459) gained immensely from the unravelling of 'greater Burgundy'. He married Charles the Bold's heiress Mary, with the Netherlands a rich prize. In 1496 came his second coup, when Philip, son of Maximilian and Mary, married Joanna, the heiress of Spain, where Ferdinand ruled alone after Isabella's death. Habsburg Philip, who might have claimed Castile in Joanna's right, died young in 1506, while Joanna, grief-stricken, became a recluse. Ferdinand died in 1516. Maximilian, Emperor from 1508 and certainly the builder of a *family* empire, lived to 1519. *Enter the elder son of Philip and Joanna – the Charles V of this presentation.* Born in Ghent in 1500, he was titular archduke of Burgundy and ruler of the Netherlands, heir to ducal Austria, heir

also, in his mother's right, to Aragon and Castile. And, as we've seen, he was elected Emperor, succeeding his paternal grandfather.

Southern Italy, a Spanish interest, thus became a Habsburg one. French designs on *northern* Italy, in theory imperial territory, had already created Franco-Habsburg strife and the Habsburg claim to ducal Burgundy, repossessed by France, continued to fester. Charles V's multiple territories did not *literally* 'encircle' France, but the Valois monarchy under Francis I, who succeeded in 1515, faced the same rival on several fronts. (Francis, boldly but in vain, contested the imperial election of 1519, as, hubristically, did England's Henry VIII). At the Battle of Pavia in 1525 the French king met with overwhelming defeat, and Italy came more-or-less under Habsburg control. (It was, incidentally, an encounter notable for the increased deployment of firearms and artillery – another sign of changing times.) That Francis sought to reverse the verdict of Pavia, while successive popes struggled to escape Habsburg clientage, bears on the progress of the Reformation in the 1530s, when Lutheran Protestantism might otherwise have faced a more united opposition. The situation also allowed Henry VIII to defy the old Church without too much risk of external intervention when a new marriage became his urgent goal. Neither Charles V, the nephew of rejected Queen Catherine, nor Francis I wanted to push England into the opposing camp.

In cultural tastes and political inclination, James V remained Francophile – and he married accordingly. The Auld Alliance thus appeared alive and well, save that the number of Scots inclined to identify with England and Protestant reform was increasing. Only after James's death did it become clear that in the new era of Franco-Habsburg confrontation, the two principles wanted tame and biddable dependents not allies with interests of their own. The 1550s and '60s were to demonstrate how, amid religious conflict and succession uncertainties, the British Isles were in real danger of becoming another Italy – another Franco-Habsburg battleground. For both Scotland and England, the message, it might be said, was 'Hang together or hang separately'.

This broad-brush paper was accompanied, very necessarily, by the detailed and down-to-earth narrative of my fellow-speaker, Bruce Jamieson. Likewise broad-brush, a textbook of my student days described the Battle of Linlithgow Bridge as merely 'a skirmish along the river' and Bruce has shown how misleading that is. Historiography is not static, and an important development of the last 50 years has been the better integration of local research into the bigger picture.

Dr John McGregor, 18 May 2026