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Of bairns and bearded men: James VI and the Ruthven Raid

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Abstract

The Ruthven Raid was a 10-month coup d'etat that comprised the seizure of James VI by a coalition of nobility at the end of August 1582 and his forcible captivity, first outside Perth and then in Stirling and Holyrood, until the end of May 1583. This chapter is the first ever detailed exploration of this major event in James' early reign, and looks at who the Raiders were, what triggered them to act, and how they governed Scotland. Using previously unpublished archival evidence from the royal household accounts and Treasurer's accounts, it argues that perhaps

the most important motivation for the Raid was financial, as the main ringleader (William Ruthven, first earl of Gowrie) was liable for crown debts which had rapidly spiraled during the ascendancy of Esme Stuart, Duke of Lennox (September 1579-August 1582). Gowrie took a series of steps to systematically reduce the deficit and protect himself from pursuit of debt before relinquishing control over the young king, a fact which further challenges the idea that the raid was simply about removing Lennox from the king's inner circle as a potential pro-French and pro-Catholic influence. More significantly, the chapter argues that although James was only 16 when the raid occurred, he negotiated his way to freedom using the arrival of French ambassadors to court in early 1583 as a form of political leverage against the Raiders and their supporters in Elizabeth I's government. The major conclusion of the piece is that James had far more political agency and ability in the earliest years of his reign than we have previously assumed, and invites a further re-assessment of his 'long apprenticeship' between 1578 and 1585 as he gradually took full control of Scottish political life.

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