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# DEFENDING THE BURGH: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN EARLY MODERN EDINBURGH'S DEFENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

AARON M. ALLEN

IN THE EARLY MODERN Scottish burgh, security was a responsibility shared by all the burgesses. There was no standing army or police force, so defence and protection of the burgh was the civic duty of each burgess. The notion of these responsibilities was broadly called the 'common weal', and was intended to bring prosperity and security to the whole burgh. There were several duties required of all the able-bodied burgesses. They were expected to labour at the building and upkeep of the town's fortifications. They were to keep arms as a militia, and participate in musters known as

'wappenshaws', or weaponshows. They were to man the night watch. Throughout the early modern period, Edinburgh shifted away from amateur burgess-based defence towards a professional standing army and watch, though the militia system did survive.

## DEFENSIVE STRUCTURES

The first of the burgess duties was the building and upkeep of defensive structures. Smaller burghs, such as Inverkeithing and Haddington, did not have such a grand fortification as a castle, but Edinburgh's was its

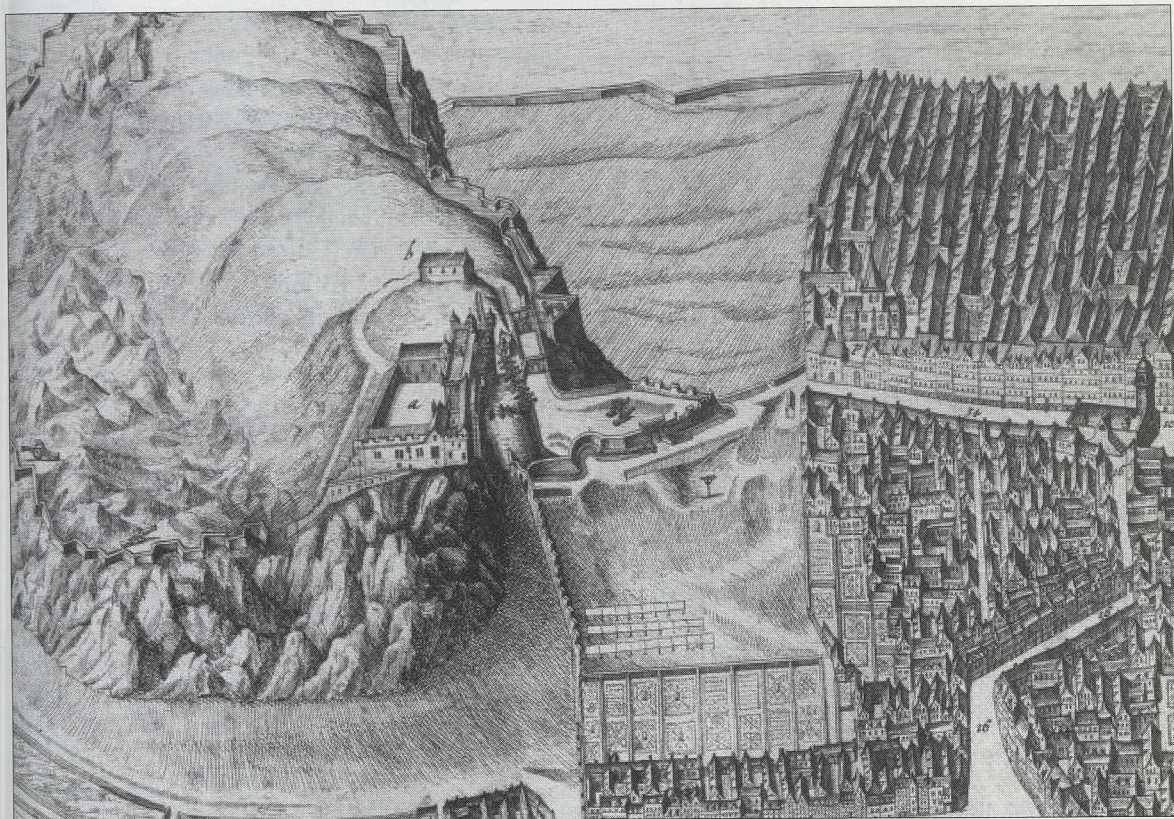


Fig. 1. Edinburgh Castle. Note the triangular 'Spur' in the centre where the Esplanade is today. (James Gordon of Rothiemay, *Map of Edinburgh*, c. 1647. Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland, [www.nls.uk/maps](http://www.nls.uk/maps).)

most prominent feature.<sup>1</sup> The defensive location on which the castle sits is probably the reason the town was built where it was. Evidence of fortified settlement on the Castle Rock goes back as far as the prehistoric period.<sup>2</sup>

By the early modern period, there was an aging but strong stone castle. The burgesses of Edinburgh were often called on to strengthen the castle's fortifications. In 1650, after eleven years of war, the English army was approaching Edinburgh with hopes of taking the strategically important castle. Work had been done on Edinburgh's defences since the Bishops' Wars, but with news of the English attack on Scotland, efforts were increased. In June and July the burgesses in the north-west quarter of Edinburgh were obliged to bring spades, mattocks, shovels and other such implements to the Castle Hill to demolish the 'Spur' of the castle, which was a sixteenth-century Italianate feature of the castle's fortifications (fig. 1). Each day men from a different quarter of the burgh were to come and work on the demolitions so that more modern defences could be erected.<sup>3</sup>

The burgesses were also responsible for repairing the town wall. The burgh had been given permission by the King to fortify the town in 1450.<sup>4</sup> The well known Flodden Wall was an upgrade and enlargement of the previous walls and was built by burgesses after the defeat at Flodden in 1513.<sup>5</sup> It was possibly started around 17 March 1514, and was still being 'bigged' (built) in 1560.<sup>6</sup> By the 1640s the wall was in disrepair and, with the English army in Scotland, the burgesses set about trying to strengthen it. On 22 July 1650, timber was brought up from the lumberyards of Leith and Fisherrow for making scaffolding to reach the tops of the walls.<sup>7</sup> George Wauchop, the treasurer of Heriot's Hospital, was instructed to 'big up the back yett' (gate) of the town's wall in Heriot's yard.<sup>8</sup> Houses that were inconveniently placed by the wall were taken down and their stones brought into the burgh for use in other places.<sup>9</sup> John Mylne, the master mason, was in charge of the town defences. His apprentice was Robert Mylne, who in 1690 built Mylne's Court in the Lawnmarket.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from having the burgesses repair the town wall, Mylne was also busy preparing the defences for Leith.<sup>11</sup> Working on the town's defences took valuable time out of the working day: the soldiers

were paid to work, but the burgesses were obliged to work free. In 1649 the work had been going so slowly that the council had Patrick Henderson tell the ministers of the burgh to deplore the 'neglect of the servants' who should have been working at Leith. That Sunday, the services in Edinburgh kirks included a message that stressed the necessity of the fortifications to the parishioners.<sup>12</sup> This effort, started around the time of the Bishops' Wars, would culminate in an unfinished line of defences running from Holyrood to Leith that were formidable enough to keep Cromwell's army at bay.<sup>13</sup> On 2 September 1650, the day before the defeat at the battle of Dunbar, the Council decided that the whole town should be completely surrounded with modern fortifications, as were London and Oxford.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, it was too late for such grand measures. With the destruction of the Scottish army at Dunbar and the retreat of the remnants to Stirling, Edinburgh had no choice but to surrender to Cromwell.

Perhaps if Edinburgh had built fortifications as impressive as London's, the capital of Scotland might have been able to hold out against a renewed English siege. This would have been dangerous though, as according to the etiquette of the day, if a town resisted a siege, the attackers did not need to give quarter.<sup>15</sup> Trade would have been disrupted even further and valuables plundered. Even if the burgesses had erected more modern defences, they still did not have the manpower or morale to resist after Dunbar.

#### KEEPING ARMS:

##### WAPPENSHAWES AND TOWN COMPANIES

Another civic duty of all burgesses was keeping arms and armour. Until the 1660s, there was no standing army.<sup>16</sup> The men of the town therefore had to be a militia in times of trouble. Burgesses were expected to keep weapons in their homes or booths. In 1318 a parliament held by Robert the Bruce decided that men worth £10 were to have a sword, spear, gloves of plate, aketon (a type of padded jacket), and some type of helmet. Those men who were only rich enough to own a cow were to keep a spear or bow.<sup>17</sup> By the early modern period keeping arms became a constant practice. In 1494 and 1498, acts of the Town Council



Fig. 2. Pikeman in a corslet. (From Jacob de Gheyn, *Wapenhandelinge van Roers, Musquetten ende Spiessen*, 1607, reproduced in D. J. Blackmore (ed.), *The Renaissance Drill Book*, London 2003, p. 233. Courtesy of Greenhill Books.)

declared that all 'neighbors and inhabitants' of Edinburgh, 'both merchantmen and craftsmen', were ordained to keep arms and armour at the ready — 'at least ... ax or sword, with sellat [headpiece] and gloves of plate' — to come to the aid of the magistrates whenever trouble arose.<sup>18</sup> In 1529 they were also to arm their servants with axes.<sup>19</sup> If a burgess failed to show up for the town's defence, he was fined 40 shillings.

To ensure that its burgesses were properly armed, the Council made use of another burgh institution known as the wappenshaw, or weaponshow. Various pieces of legislation over the years set out how often wappenshaws were to be held. Sometimes they were twice a year, sometimes four. In practice they were sporadic at best.<sup>20</sup> They were held somewhat more regularly in the early 1600s; from 1607 to 1637 they were held annually, usually in June.<sup>21</sup>

Wappenshaws were notable events. One can imagine the townspeople lined up to watch the parade of pikes and shining armour, as it marched out

of town. Every fencible burgess man was expected to take his armour and weapons either to the Burghmuir, Greyfriars Kirkyard, or the Links at Leith. The Edinburgh standard would be borne through the town in a procession of the armed men. Trumpeters and musicians accompanied them.<sup>22</sup> Once at the meeting place, the men would be formed up into the latest military formations, and for the whole day the burgesses swaggered about, pretending to be a great army.

By the middle of the 1500s military formations were evolving to suit new technologies. While the pike had been used since the time of Robert the Bruce to offset the advantage of heavy cavalry, by the sixteenth century firearms were increasing in importance and eventually they superseded pikes. New weapons and new tactics had to be taught. This was part of the purpose of the wappenshaw. By the time of the Bishops' Wars of 1639 and 1640, the military formations of Sweden were entering Scotland through Scots returned from military service in the Thirty Years War.<sup>23</sup>

From the 1570s to 1644, the burgess rolls for Edinburgh listed their weapons after the names of men attaining burgess-ship as proof that they were 'sufficiently armed'.<sup>24</sup> Up to 1627 the entries were generally of a hagbut, which was a type of firearm. From 1625 to 1644 it was usually a musket — a more advanced version of the hagbut. Guild brethren were listed from 1596 to 1644 with a corslet, a stand of armour that covered the torso and upper legs.

Contemporary prints in military manuals illustrate that the corslet was traditionally used by pikemen (fig. 2); musketeers did not wear armour, save helmets.<sup>25</sup> This might have been due to the cost of armour, compared to the cheaper musket. The burgess rolls between 1572 and 1644 list a total of 3404 firearm entries, 1071 corslets and 71 other weapons. The Civil Wars would see the virtual abandonment of pikes in favour of muskets. The cheaper firearms were replacing the more expensive traditional military technologies.

The burgesses would have carried their weapons through Edinburgh on the way to the Burghmuir. Once there, a roll call would probably have been taken and those missing fined. With that out of the way, the town would then have begun practising formations and drills. Both pike and musket had their

own set of 'postures', which were a series of choreographed motions to be learned and copied by all for loading and firing a musket, or handling of pikes in a co-ordinated and efficient manner. If the burgesses could be taught to make all the same movements gracefully and dexterously, in unison, then they would be effective in the field. Considering how little they practised, it is doubtful whether the burgesses were much of a defence.

A pikeman had to learn eighteen different postures.<sup>26</sup> With these they could manoeuvre and change directions fluently, as a unit, producing a moving wall of spears. If they were not all in unison, there would be holes in the line where the enemy could break through. A musketeer had to learn thirty four postures.<sup>27</sup> In this way, all men in one line fired at the same time, retired, reloaded and stepped forward to shoot again, all in unison. With each line firing at once, continuously, the volleys became a constant battering of lead. At wappenshaws, when all pikemen and musketeers did the same motions over and over, with the man to the left and right of them doing the same, learning, courage and discipline were all promoted. The problem was that an amateur militia was drilled only once or twice a year at best, while standing armies trained continuously.

Occasionally, the wappenshaws were used for conscription during war. In 1643 the Estates decided to assist the Parliamentarians in England. Wappenshaws were held throughout Scotland and rolls of fencible men were taken. Copies of these rolls were sent to the central government, who then decided which areas to take men from to fill the levies. Every fourth and eighth man was to be conscripted for service in the army, while the rest stayed at home and continued their crafts or professions.<sup>28</sup>

With the knowledge from the wappenshaw that its burgesses were sufficiently armed, Edinburgh had it in its power to raise a militia for defence. One example of the need for this was the 1544 Hertford raid on Edinburgh, during the 'Rough Wooings'.<sup>29</sup> In the midst of the defence was the deacon of the Incorporation of Hammermen, Thomas Schort.<sup>30</sup> Schort, along with other burgesses, found himself in arms trying to fight off the English invasion at the Netherbow Port, where he died. Apparently the burgh was sacked and burned, but in 1546 Schort's widow

was listed in a roll of masters. This would indicate that his servants kept working after his death, in the employment of his widow.<sup>31</sup> While damage was done to the town, trade did resume and the burgh kept going. A poorly trained militia was better than no defence at all.

With the Union of the Crowns in 1603 there was peace between Scotland and England, and Edinburgh's arms became antiquated. The burgesses wanted to pursue their trades, instead of watching for an enemy that was not coming, so the Council hired a watch. This paid group was formed in 1607 and lasted until 1625.<sup>32</sup> With Scottish involvement in the wars of the continent, such as Scots being sent to relieve French Huguenots at La Rochelle in 1629, there was a real new danger of invasion from continental Europe.<sup>33</sup> Several Edinburgh burgesses were sent with the Duke of Buckingham's forces to occupy the Isle of Ré, by La Rochelle. The burgess rolls mention two tailors, a stabler, a cordiner and a 'post' who all received burgess-ship gratis for 'service done in his Majesty's wars'.<sup>34</sup> In January 1626 it was realised that the burgh would have insufficient armour to resist a foreign invasion.<sup>35</sup> The Council decided to revamp their old system of armed burgesses. The various wars which had been raging on the continent since the Reformation had brought new ideas in military technology, many of which had been published in military training manuals. Many Scots had fought as mercenaries on the continent. Examples of the new technologically advanced arms could be obtained through merchants in the Low Countries, and then be replicated by Edinburgh craftsmen.<sup>36</sup> In order to keep the burgh secure, the Edinburgh Council decided to progress along the new European lines of military technology.

After the town's hostellers and lodgers had been reminded to notify the bailies of each stranger entering the burgh, as 'there can be small difference had betwixt civil and evil disposed people', there was a review of the fencible men of the burgh. It was decided that it would be expedient for the whole inhabitants of Edinburgh to be divided up into eight companies of 200 or more men each, with two companies coming from each quarter of the burgh. A company of youth and two companies from Leith were added later in the year. Leadership and training of the town companies was of concern to the Council,

as they did not want to appear to favour either the merchants or the craftsmen. To resolve this, each company was to be led in token by two persons — one craftsman and one merchant, with the one who trained the company as actual leader. In practice few burgesses were qualified to train an army, so professional drillers were later employed. Each company was to have an ensign, or flag-bearer. It was a great honour to carry the ensign, so four companies had craftsmen as ensigns and four had merchants. Each company also had a surgeon assigned to it.<sup>37</sup>

Once the quarters of Edinburgh had been divided up into the eight companies and the Council had elected the eight merchants and eight craftsmen who were to lead the companies, these officers set about their work. They first had to visit every house of every man in their company to make note of their arms and armour for the bailies. With this information they redistributed the weapons and armour according to stature.<sup>38</sup> Larger men were put to the corslet and pike. Pikemen had to be able to hold a fifteen to eighteen foot long spear for long periods of time, which demanded a strong upper body. Men of smaller stature were given the hagbuts or muskets. In 1625, the first Edinburgh burgess was recorded as

having a musket instead of a hagbut. By 1627 all firearm entries were muskets, showing the adoption of the latest technology. In the early 1590s many burgesses had been entered into the rolls with the older and cheaper 'jack and spear' (fig. 3). This was replaced by corslet and pike as early as 1596.<sup>39</sup> The new town companies would standardise their weaponry and training, either in corslets with the latest pike manoeuvres, or as musketeers with the latest musketry drills. The convention on the continent was musket and pike, so Edinburgh was following suit.

#### WATCH AND WARD

As well as being part of the town's militia, the burgesses were also expected to share in policing the burgh. The terms 'walk and ward', and 'watch and ward', were used to describe the practice of burgesses forming the nightly town watch, a practice dating back at least to the reign of David I (1124–53).<sup>40</sup> In the earlier days, when there was a knock on a burgess's door, a watchman was to go immediately with two weapons to watch the town from curfew till dawn.<sup>41</sup> Later the watch met at the market cross. In the second half of the sixteenth century, a house by the town wall was set aside as a watch house, providing a municipal focal point, as well as shelter and storage space. At times it was deemed necessary for men to be put to watch on the town wall and in church steeples.<sup>42</sup>

In 1442 the town was walked each night with watches of six men, taken and set by the town bailies at the cross.<sup>43</sup> On 12 October 1547 the number was increased to twelve, but by 3 January it was increased to as many as the bailie of each quarter pleased.<sup>44</sup> In 1568 it went as high as 100 men walking the town at night. Walk and ward applied to all able men of the town under the age of sixty.<sup>45</sup> Each night at curfew, the ports in the town wall were closed and locked. From 8 pm till the ports opened in the morning, the town was watched as a deterrent against crime and enemies coming up to the town by stealth.<sup>46</sup> The arrival of strangers was noted by the watch and reported to the bailies. Discipline was threatened, to keep the men of the watch from bothering honest burgesses, and fines were issued to those who failed to make the watch. At times the watch had musicians

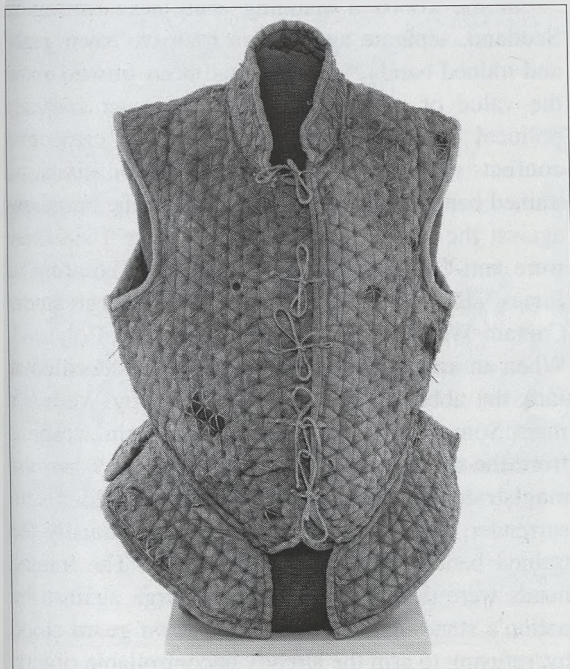


Fig. 3. A Scottish jack. (Courtesy of the National Museums of Scotland, image no. 12960.)

and drummers, no doubt to the chagrin of the sleeping burgesses.<sup>47</sup>

In times of trouble, such as after the Ruthven Raid, or after Flodden, or during the Bishops' Wars, the watch would be increased, often watching the town night and day.<sup>48</sup> When factious nobles were causing problems for the nation, or the pestilence was raging, the watch was called on to increase their efforts. The watch was once told to prevent the people of Leith from entering at the West Port, probably due to their anger at subjugation to their powerful neighbours.<sup>49</sup> In much the same way that the civic duty of keeping arms led to the formation of the town companies in 1626, the practice of watch and ward eventually developed into the provision of a formal town guard.

#### CHANGES

Over the early modern period the government of Scotland became more centralised, and control over violence was increasingly monopolised by government institutions. There was a decline in the use of civilian wappenshaws. There was an increasing shift from private weapons to public weapons held in the town armoury.<sup>50</sup> In 1644 burgesses and guild brethren stopped providing themselves with muskets and corslets and started paying arms money for the burgh to fund the existing soldiers instead.<sup>51</sup> With the Civil War, military experience was visible in the veteran soldiers; militias who had attended a few wappenshaws were not as useful as the provision of money to buy arms. The wappenshaws and town companies did survive, but a permanent standing army and watch were in the ascendancy. With the Cromwellian invasion of 1650, there was probably an unofficial wappenshaw to prepare for the defence of Edinburgh, but after Scotland fell to the English, they seem to have disappeared from the records.<sup>52</sup> With the Restoration in 1660, the wappenshaw was revived. On 5 June 1661 a proclamation stated that all fencible persons were to provide themselves with sufficient arms and attend the musters, or wappenshaws.<sup>53</sup> As Edinburgh was rid of the English army, the town companies were revived. Somewhere in the mid seventeenth century they began to be known as the 'trained bands' — the London equivalent — indicating a shift

towards a more British identity in Edinburgh's defence infrastructure.

By 1648 a permanent standing watch was set up in Edinburgh.<sup>54</sup> It originally had sixty men under one captain, but as time progressed it grew. In 1690 William and Mary confirmed the professional town guard and relieved all inhabitants and burgesses of the duty of watch and ward, without prejudice to the Council's right during extraordinary occasions and emergencies of calling out the militia for watching as they saw fit.<sup>55</sup> By 1736 the town guard had a hundred men, as well as sergeants and captain-lieutenants.<sup>56</sup> This previously militia-based watch became the standing town guard, with professional soldiers in uniform. The trained bands, separate from the new town guard, continued as a burgh-based militia, whose captains formed themselves into the Society of Trained Bands in 1663. An act in the minute books of the Incorporation of Hammermen in 1682 states that when burgesses became freemen of the Hammermen they had to provide a sufficient firelock and bandolier made by an Edinburgh gunsmith for use of the Incorporation.<sup>57</sup> While militias continued, weapons were increasingly centralised and less often in the hands of individuals.

In the 1660s a standing army was formed in Scotland, separate again from both the town guard and trained bands.<sup>58</sup> Lessons had been learned about the value of professional soldiers in an unsteady political climate. When burgh interests came into conflict with national interests, the militia-based trained bands were called on to defend the burgesses against the standing army. In December 1688 there were anti-Catholic riots in Edinburgh. The army of James VII, a Catholic king, was in Edinburgh, under Captain Wallace, guarding the Abbey at Holyrood. When an armed gang of sectarian youths decided to sack the abbey, they were fired upon by Wallace's men. Some of the rioters tried to obtain weapons from the town guard, who refused them. When the magistrates tried to get Wallace's soldiers to surrender, more shots were fired and eventually the trained bands had to overpower them. The trained bands were defending the riotous burgh against the nation's standing army, while the town guard stood by, refusing to arm the already uncontrollable rioters. The professional soldiers of the town guard probably sympathised with the professional soldiers of the

army, while the burgesses of the trained bands probably agreed with the rioters.<sup>59</sup>

In the 1690s there were other riots and attacks on the town guard, who as professional soldiers were seen as outsiders in the burgh. At one point, the Council disbanded the town guard, only to realise that the militia-based trained bands could not fulfil the burgh's security requirements. They had jobs or trades themselves and could not be constantly on militia call throughout the day and night. As Houston commented in *Social Change in the Age of Enlightenment*, the trained bands were less likely to provoke antagonisms because they were 'of the community', but this also made them less effective.<sup>60</sup> As time progressed, more emphasis was put on professional soldiers and a standing army.

In 1745 when Charles Edward Stuart's army threatened Edinburgh, the trained bands were no longer as prominent in terms of security, being

merely a supplement to the professional soldiers of the now British army. Edinburgh burgesses, along with about 400 students, volunteered to assist in the defence of the town against the Jacobites. They formed up in the College Yards one Sunday morning and marched to the Lawnmarket, where they cheered on the dragoon regiments ordered to meet the Pretender's army. The students served as a watch in the area where the town defences were weakest, at Leith Wynd.<sup>61</sup> The town guard was also increased by thirty more soldiers and, in a range of high to melancholy spirits, the town prepared to resist the Jacobite rebels (figs 4 and 5).<sup>62</sup> One of the student volunteers recorded that another student in the 'company' compared the situation to 'a passage in Livy when the *gens fagii* march'd out of Rome to prevent the Gauls from entering the city and the whole matrons and virgins of Rome were wringing their hands and loudly lamenting the certain danger'.



Fig. 4. A gate in the City Wall, Edinburgh's last bastion against the Jacobite menace. One of the Penicuik drawings of the Edinburgh volunteers in 1745. (From Iain Gordon Brown and Hugh Cheape, *Witness to Rebellion*, East Linton, 1996, p. 61. Courtesy of Sir Robert Clerk of Penicuik, Bt.)



Another student pointed out that the Roman militia was slain to a man.<sup>63</sup>

When the Hanoverian army retreated to East Lothian for tactical purposes, the Lord Provost decided to surrender the burgh to the Jacobites without a fight. The company of student volunteers surrendered their arms to the castle and went their separate ways.<sup>64</sup> The Jacobites took the town by stealth, without resistance, and so ended the martial glory of the burgh militia. The Jacobites were in time dealt with by the professional army at Culloden.

Throughout the early modern period there was a trend towards professional, standing protection. The town turned away from armed burgesses towards the more organised trained bands, which in turn gave way to a standing army. They went from nightly burgh watches to a paid town guard. As government became more centralised, so did burgh defence.



Fig. 5. Another of the Penicuik drawings showing Edinburgh volunteers in 1745. (From Brown and Cheape, *Witness to Rebellion*, p. 66. Courtesy of Sir Robert Clerk of Penicuik, Bt.)

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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A number of references are from the published series of *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh*, the volumes covering 1403–1589 edited by James D. Marwick, 4 vols and Index vol. (Edinburgh 1869–92), and continued for 1589–1665, edited by Marguerite Wood, 5 vols (Edinburgh 1927–40). For convenience, references to these are cited as *Extracts*, with the dates covered by the specific volume, and the page number. Spelling has been gently modernised.

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- 40 Marwick, *Edinburgh Guilds* (note 18), pp. 74, 154–155.
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- 43 *Extracts, 1403–1528*, p. 6.
- 44 *Extracts, 1528–57*, p. 131.
- 45 *Extracts, 1557–71*, p. 249.
- 46 *Extracts, 1528–57*, pp. 131–132.
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