

by Jim
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AN eerie wail silenced the men of Dundee and Caithness. In the narrow glen, the mystified and apprehensive warriors halted, unaware that the melancholic drone of a hunting horn was about to herald the strangest and most obscure battle ever fought by an army of Scots.

The sound faded, replaced by the thunder of tree logs and boulders crashing down the mountainside, trapping them between the debris. The way ahead was closed, retreat was impossible, surrender was unthinkable. They braced themselves.

A single shot rang out, felling their commander, the illegitimate but adventurous son of a Highland nobleman. Crossbow bolts rained down and then, with a furious roar, the enemy, wielding axes and spears, emerged from hiding to wreak havoc on the 1,000 Scots.

The Battle of Kringen was as swift as it was decisive. In little more than an hour, the burn running through the glen ran red with Scottish blood and – 400 years ago this week – the long forgotten ‘invasion’ of Norway was over.

Few Scots have even heard of the ill-fated expedition which came to a bloody end when a militia of Norwegian peasants intercepted a Scots army that was on its way to fight for the King of Sweden in a long-running conflict between that country and Denmark-Norway.

But for the next week, the descendants of the Norwegians from the mountainous region of Gudbrandsdalen will celebrate what they regard as the most iconic battle in their history – and a lasting reminder of their nation’s fledgling fight for independence.

The musician and writer Dr Sally Garden, an honorary research fellow at the Centre for Scandinavian Studies at Aberdeen University, says: ‘The story of the Kringen has mythic status in Norway as a symbol of how the peasants first made an independent stand for their nation.

‘Sweden was the real enemy but the Scots found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time – and there will be much celebration to mark this special anniversary, albeit with “peace, reconciliation and cultural collaboration”.’

THE forgotten story of Kringen began in the July of 1612, when two Scottish ships sailed from Dundee and Caithness, foregathered at the Orkney Islands and headed for Scandinavia. Sea routes to Sweden had been blocked by Danish ships and the Scots, commanded by Colonel Alexander Ramsay, the illegitimate son of the Earl of Caithness, and Colonel George Sinclair of Stirkoke, decided to land in Norway and march into Sweden.

It was an ill-fated decision. The ships landed in Isjforden and the Scots set out up the Romsdal Valley but, as they progressed peacefully southward, without any intention of engaging the Norwegians, they were followed by local scouts.

Having been warned of the ‘invasion’ and inflamed by the recent massacre of Norwegians in what history now calls the Kalmar War, the farmers and peasants of the area mobilised a makeshift fighting force.

Lars Gunnarson Haga, the sheriff of the region, strode into the church in Dovre with a battle axe, embedded the blade in the floor, and shouted: ‘Let it be known – the enemy has come to our land!’

When he left the church service, there were 500 Norwegian ‘militia’ at his back, armed with swords, spears, axes, crossbows and a few muskets.

Ian Laird, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, says: ‘The Scots were passing through the valley intent on reaching Sweden, which was then at war with Norway-Denmark over the territory of Kalmar in the south of Scandinavia.

‘Their passage had been peaceful since they landed at the Isjforden. They could not have anticipated what awaited them at Kringen.

‘They did not know that young men conscripted from the valley had been massacred in the Kalmar conflict and that the farmers from

Gudbrandsdalen were determined to resist.

‘Plans were laid for an ambush, to be triggered by local girl, Guri, who was to watch the column as it made its passage along the old King’s road.

‘To further distract the Scots from the ambush preparations, a man rode, sitting backwards, on his horse.

‘Once the right moment arrived, Guri, watching from the mountain above, blew a blast on her lur, a traditional wooden horn.

‘Sinclair was, it was said, felled with a silver bullet from a single musket shot fired by a man called Berdon Sejelstad.’

The shot signalled a massacre. The peasants fell on the Scots with axes and scythes and a fierce hand-to-hand conflict ensued.

‘Tradition has it that the ambush started with logs and rocks crashing down on the Scots from the steep mountainside and blocking the road preventing advance or

withdrawal,’ adds Mr Laird. Little more than an hour later, only 134 Scots were alive. The farmers lost only six men.

The Scots had been hampered by a lack of weapons which were still in the baggage train. The Scots had not expected to need them until after their arrival in Sweden.

SURVIVORS were taken prisoner and led to the village of Kvam, where the plan was to send them on to be imprisoned in the capital Oslo. But the farmers were not full-time fighting men – and they had crops to harvest.

The demands of day-to-day life was a death sentence for the surviving Scots.

Although the ‘battle’ and its aftermath would become a side note to the war, the Battle of Kringen remains a noted military event.

Dr Garden adds: ‘It is considered that the battle constituted a defence of Norwegian sovereignty and it was historically interpreted that way when the patriotic movement arose years later.

‘A number of places were named after the Scottish incursion, notably along the route.

‘The barn was destroyed by artillery fire during the intense British-German hostilities at Kvam in 1940.

‘Captured Scottish weapons, including a pistol, a Lochaber axe, a broadsword and several basket hilt claymores, were put on display at the Gudbrandsdalen War Museum and there are regular re-enactments of the battle.

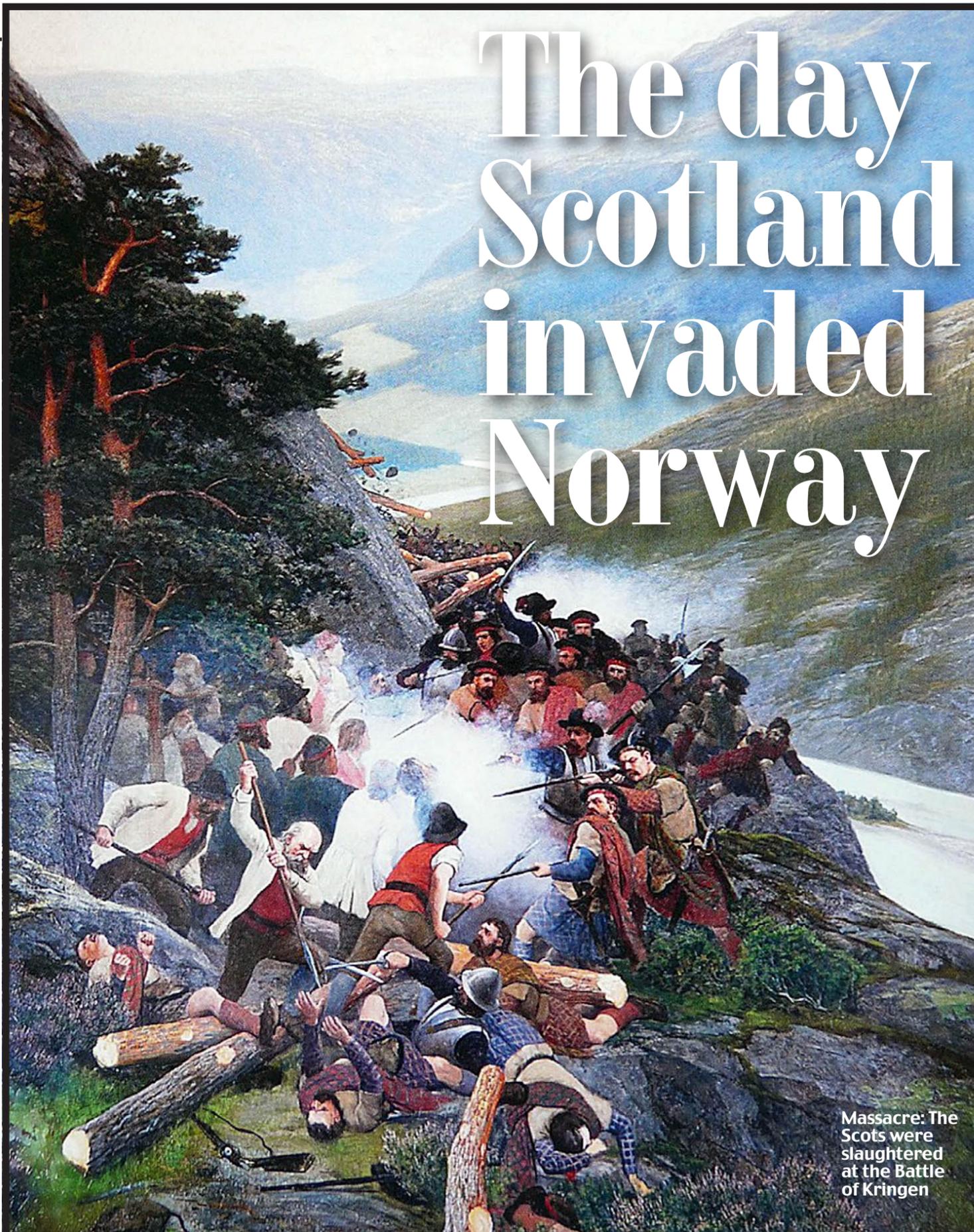
‘Sinclair’s grave is a local landmark and though the Norwegians at the time sought to desecrate his memory by burying him outside

the church walls, he is now revered in the area. Since then, there has been a historical connection between Norway and Scotland in general and Caithness in particular.

‘The battle has become a matter of shared history between the two peoples. Lots of fine paintings and poetry came out of it. And in 2009, for example, the Norwegian rock band Street Legal released an instrumental song called The Battle of Kringen on their album titled Bite the Bullet.

‘The Norwegians admit nowadays that the Scots marched peacefully through Norway and did nothing to merit ambush, except for the fact that they were en route to support the Swedish monarch.

‘So it was a pretty unhelpful venture on the part of the Scots – but since Norway has a great taste for Scots whisky, I imagine that the odd ‘skål’ will be raised this year in celebration of the 400th anniversary.’



Massacre: The Scots were slaughtered at the Battle of Kringen

How a trip to Scandinavia by a Scottish army ended in an inglorious bloodbath, now all but forgotten 400 years later