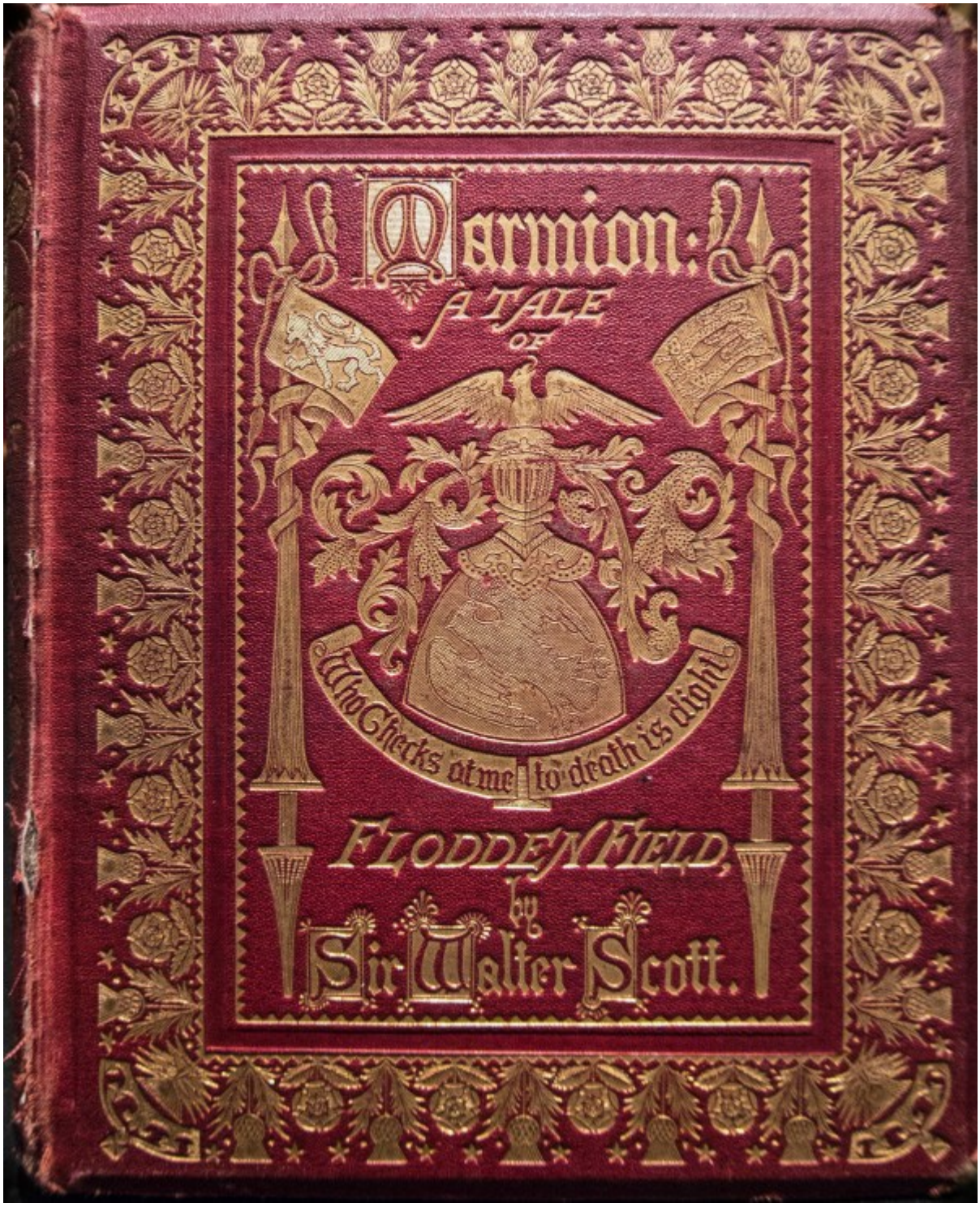
FLODDEN FIELD



Today is the 500th anniversary of Flodden Field – the battle near the village of Branxton in Northumberland, just south of the Scottish border.

Here is what I wrote about the site on a visit back in 2007 [Link]

In the tracks of northern antiquaries, summer 2007

September 9 1513: in the low rolling hills of north Northumberland an invading Scottish army was defeated in the bloodiest ever encounter between England and Scotland. James IV, King of the Scots, nine of his Earls, fourteen Lords of Parliament, five Highland Chiefs and more than 10,000 men at arms fell between 4 and 6 o'clock that afternoon.

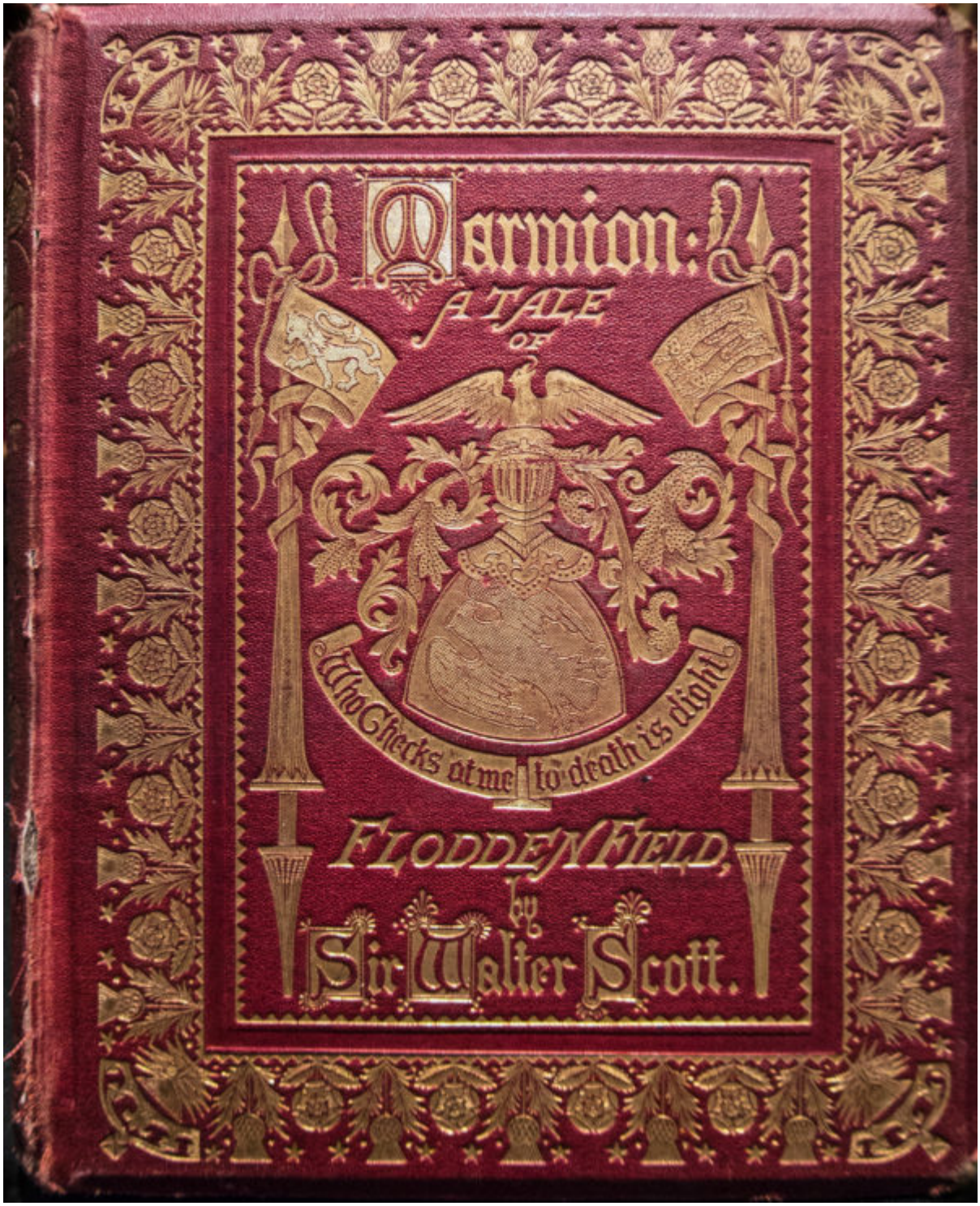
We'll hae nae mair lilting, at the yowe-milking,
Women and bairns are dowie and wae.
Sighing and moaning, on ilka green loaning,
The flowers of the forest are all wede away.

Jean Elliot "Flowers of the Forest" 1755

I was there alone a few hours, not really taken to explore the battlefield archaeology, with just the skylarks, always sounding so distant, and the wind that shakes the barley –

(See also my comment on the memory of Ben Cullen, on the anniversary of his death last December – [Link])

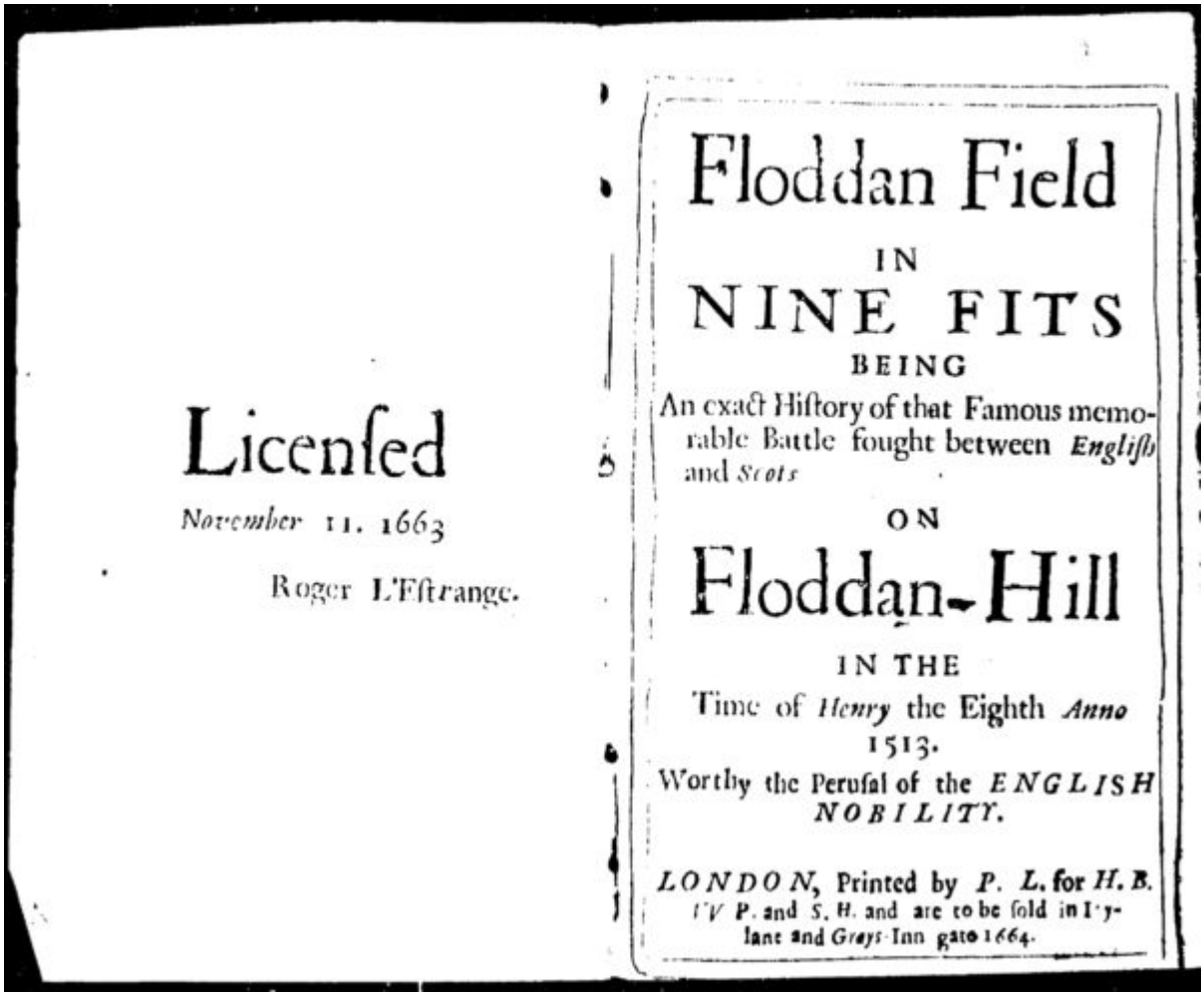
Since then I have become very taken by the way Walter Scott treated such events and themes. His poem *Marmion* is set in the days before the battle; it's a rich treatment of circumstantial detail, distracted from the great events of history, if now somewhat difficult to read, the verse running quite flat.



The coat of arms on the cover of this edition of mine from 1866, with photography by Thomas Annan, is that of Marmion, the flawed hero of the poem. Caught up in romantic intrigue and an anachronistic world of chivalry, he dies on the battlefield (“O what a tangled web we weave, When first we practice to deceive!” (Canto VI, XVII).

The legend or motto for the coat of arms is an example of Scott showing off his

antiquarian erudition. “Who checks at me” is an archaic term of falconry, appropriate to Marmion’s emblem of a falcon – “Checke, or to kill Checke, is when Crows, Rooks, Pies, or other birds comming in the view of the Hawke, she forsaketh her naturall flight to flie at them.” (Latham’s *Falconry*, 1615). “To death is dight” is most probably a reference to a line from an anonymous poem of 1644 – *Floddan Field* “For unto death till we be dight I promise here to take thy part.” (Fit viii 78) – to dight to death is to put to death. So woe betide anyone who distracts Marmion from his purpose (which, for Scott, is not perhaps what it might or should be).



Licenſed
November 11. 1663
Roger L'Eſtrange.

Floddan Field
IN
NINE FITS
BEING
An exact Hiſtory of that Famous memorable Battle fought between *Engliſh* and *Scots*
ON
Floddan-Hill
IN THE
Time of *Henry* the Eighth *Anno* 1513.
Worthy the Peruſal of the *ENGLISH NOBILITY.*
LONDON, Printed by *P. L.* for *H. B.* *W P.* and *S. H.* and are to be ſold in Ivy-lane and *Grays*-Inn gate 1664.

At the 400th anniversary in 1913 Lord Rosebery, unveiling the Fletcher Memorial Cross erected on Flodden Hill by public subscription, preciently said

> The abiding lesson to be drawn from the battle was that of the triviality of the causes that led to the war …

At this moment all over Europe we see nations armed to the teeth and at a moment’s notice they might find themselves involved in war compared to which even Flodden would be child’s play.

[Link] – *The Guardian* September 5
[Link] – *The Guardian* August 31

Thomas Annan’s albumen print of Norham Castle at the beginning of *Marmion*

THE POETICAL WORKS OF SIR WALTER SCOTT, BART.

VOL. 7.

J. M. W. Turner, R.A. J. Horsburgh.

Ashestiel.

EDINBURGH, 1833. PRINTED FOR ROBERT CADELL; & WHITTAKER & Cº. LONDON.

Ashestiel, where Scott wrote the poem *Marmion* in 1806 and 1807, the title page engraving from Volume 7 of the Turner edition of Scott’s poetry, 1834