When Scotswoman Bessie Hamilton and Englishman John Hobkirke married, they committed treason. Like the many other cross-border couples, they perhaps did not know, but more likely did not care, that the laws of both realms forbade such unions as politically dangerous. The borders were a region apart; not perhaps geographically, as numerous crossing points traversed the line formed by the waters of the Tweed and Solway, and enough rivers and passes ran north-to-south to complicate any simple division. Politics, rather than geography, gave the region its significance and such coherence as it had. Yet, centuries of effort from both Scottish and English authorities had failed to impress upon the borderers a due sense of the primacy of national loyalties. To be sure, many who ignored the border did so only long enough to rob and harry those on the other side, and then quickly claimed it as a shield from prosecution. The notorious groups of border reivers routinely found participants and victims from both countries. Sixteenth-century borderers have long suffered from a reputation for primitive violence, in ways either dangerous or romantic depending on the temporal distance of the judge. Yet, ties other than reiving existed. In addition to cross-border trade, Scots and English frequently lived along the frontier as spouses and neighbors. Lord Hunsdon reported that some 2500 Scots resided in England’s East March in 1569, in some areas in fact outnumbering the English, and few of them with the benefit of such formalities as letters of denization. While the north was neither so dangerously backward nor violent as they sometimes claimed, border officials had ample reason to complain of a people “that will be Scottish when they will, and English at their pleasure.”

It was to the people of the border region that the rebel leaders turned in the final days of 1569. Perhaps they fled to Scotland simply for
safety in defeat, but some people at the time thought the rebels planned only to pass the winter before returning south in the spring. Nicholas Sander believed they awaited the pope’s excommunication of Elizabeth; if Pius V would release her nobles from their obedience, and incidentally allow them to keep any church property they had acquired, then the rebels could renew their effort with overwhelming support. But Scotland was not just to be a safe place to hide or wait: it also offered aid. Already during the rebellion the earl of Northumberland and at least one of the Scottish border lords, Alexander Hume, had discussed cooperation. In some respects, the earls’ flight to the north marked not the end of the rebellion, but the opening of a new phase. While the many followers they had abandoned in England now faced a marauding southern army and the vengeance of an angry Queen, the rebel leaders sought to revive their revolt in a new place and a new guise. In seeking to effect this cross-border confederacy, they drew aid from the borderers’ longstanding ambivalence about the central feature of their political landscape, and also from Scottish lords who backed a “British” project of their own: the restoration of Mary Stewart to her throne, and her recognition at least as the heir to the English throne, if not as its rightful occupant.

Fight or flight?

The Scottish regent, James Stewart, earl of Moray, had certainly recognized the threats posed by the rising and by the prospect of the rebels’ flight across the border. He had cultivated his own cross-border ties for reasons both principled and pragmatic: to preserve the nascent Protestant Kirk and his own tenuous hold on power. Since having engineered Queen Mary’s abdication in 1567, the regent had desperately sought to assert his authority, rein in Mary’s adherents, and maintain Elizabeth’s support, now more necessary than ever. Over the past year, Moray had enjoyed a number of promising victories: the leaders of the Marian party had submitted or been incarcerated and he had made impressive judicial forays into the disordered borders and Highlands. Yet, he had angered Elizabeth by rejecting her proposals for Mary’s return to Scotland. Elizabeth continued to make troubling signs of coming to an agreement with Mary, and had not exempted him from her suspicion upon learning of the Norfolk marriage plan, in which he had played an early part. Thus, for his own security and to retain Elizabeth’s support, Moray quickly offered his assistance against the northern rebels. He promised Elizabeth the whole power of his realm, noting that the affair touched