

## Notes for The Fray of Suport

There are several levels of information contained within language used in traditional ballads. Much is that of the narrative, but there may be other important points of information which can refer to cultural or historic practices, or may refer to the emotional condition of the characters.

Literal statements may actually indicate a different action, which cannot fully presented due to the constraints of ballad language and the invasive nature a full description would have on the actual narrative of the story within the ballad.

Developed euphemisms may be used to indicate but not state a more visceral event than that which seems to be referred to. In the *Minstrelsy*, Scott seems to have resorted to at least one of these, and may have invented it.

Sometimes, such information may be presented through the use of supranarrative functions, which operate as an effective shorthand code, implying actions, emotions or the likelihood of a certain outcome, which would not be easily described concisely or within the bounds of a ballad's verses.

Several forms of these language structures, formulas and formulaic language have been developed within the tradition, in order to contain a full emotive response from a listener, who would often share the knowledge with the singer. To help interpret the subtleties which exist within some ballads, we have provided a list of interpretative points to help pinpoint important moments of action or response within these ballads, or to better explain certain phrases within the narrative or the dialogue

And remember, if words ever seem confusing on the page - always try reading them aloud.

### Overview |

The language of this ballad is arguably the most confusing of the *Minstrelsy*. Scott himself admitted that he had cobbled together the ballad from various fragments. We know he and his colleague Robert Shortreed collected one version from a man who became unconscious thanks to the amount of brandy they plied him with. This may explain some of the incongruous language, but what we must remember is that versions of ballads were written down as people were singing them. There was no form of recording a single live version. Collectors had to rely on their memory and their notes, which could be misread at a later date.

### Verse 1 |

Sleep'ry Sim of the Lamb-hill,  
And Snoring Jock of Suport-mill,

The names of the characters in the opening verse make an ironic reference to the type of nickname commonly used on the Borders to identify individuals.

Verse 2 |

A euphemism is used in this verse. The verse refers to “the thick of the thie”. Scott admits to creating this euphemism for a similar injury in “Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead”. Even then, he cannot bring himself to state the actual injury in English, so, to spare his readers, he resorts to Latin. The indication is that the victim is wounded in his testicles. The wounding in “The Fray of Suport” also included a damaged knee-cap, and it states that the bone marrow of the man’s shin bone is running down his leg on to the leather that keeps his spur on his boots.

Verse 4 |

Reference is made to Cuddy’s brock-skin bag. This is a bag made out of badger skin. The indication is that the bag is an ammunition bag. The exhortation is therefore to empty the bag of shot - which should be directed at the reivers by Cuddy.

Verse 7 & 8 |

These verses include reference to a number of fords - or crossings - on Liddel Water, a stretch of which delineates the boundary between Scotland and England. The intention is if the fords are guarded, then the reivers will have to take their chances in the dangerous, deep water in order to return home to Scotland.

The inclusion of the character of John Forster indicates that this is a official, valid attempt to recover stolen goods. John Forster was the English Middle March Warden for over 30 years. A warden had to be informed of a raid and be part of a recovery party -either directly or through his deputies - to make it legal. The “bufft” coat may refer to a “jack” - a short, padded, leather jerkin, which could be reinforced with tags or bosses of metal, which was typical reiver “armour”.

Verse 9 |

A sleuth dog is a type of trail hound. The precise breed characteristics are now a point of some contention.

Verse 10 and 11 |

The mention of the Captain of Bewcastle and Captain Musgrave again emphasise the legal nature of the rescue attempt. The position of the Captain of Bewcastle was held by several members of the Musgrave family in the mid to late 16<sup>th</sup> century, so these two references may refer to the same character.