

Notes for “Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead”

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 supra-narrative 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 |

This ballad may seem a little off-putting when viewed on the page. It appears rather long, there seems to be a lot of coming and going, and the subject matter - cattle theft - may not seem nowadays to be terribly exciting. However, cattle were a way for a family to measure their wealth, and the loss of even part of a herd, however small, could be the difference between surviving and not surviving a winter. The language is a blend of Scots and English.

Verse 1 |

It fell about the Martinmas tyde,
Whan our Border steeds get corn and hay,

Martinmas was originally celebrated on 11th November. It was one of the Scottish Quarter Days, which was used to hire and dismiss servants, to settle interest on loans and to pay ministers’ stipends. In 1886, this date was officially changed to the 28th of the month, when all the term dates for Scotland were changed to the 28th of the relevant months – those being February, May, August and November.

Martinmas was generally considered to be the end of the riding season. The English Warden Robert Carey discussed the riding season with Cecil, in a letter dated 5th

November 1599, as it seems that Queen Elizabeth had misunderstood the months which constituted the riding season:

She [the Queen] is not well acquainted with their chief time of stealing: it is not the dead of winter as she says, for then the ways are so foul, and cattle so weak that they cannot drive, or carry anything off. Their chief time is always betwixt Michaelmas and Martinmas : " then are the fells good and drie and cattle strong to dryve " : which time is now past with great quiet and little or no stealing.

The Captain of Bewcastle hath bound him to ryde,
And he's ower to Tividale to drive a prey

The Captain of Bewcastle was one of the English Border officials. During the mid-to-late 1500s, this post was held by various members of the Musgrave family. However, in Scott's own notes, he repeats the statement in the Glenriddel MS, that the Nixons were hereditary captains of Bewcastle. By the 1500s, this was certainly not the case. The Nixons appear in musters and lists of complaints in the Calendar of Border Papers, but not in any official capacity.

It was not unknown for Border officials to be involved with criminal activities.

The phrase "to drive a prey" appears several times in *The Historie of Scotland* by John Leslie, Bishop of Ross. He stated that the reivers would "dryue away prayis of horse, oxne and scheip behind baks" (Leslie (ed. Cody 1888) I: 97). He also noted that they:

"delyt mekle in thair awne musick and Harmonie in singing, quhilke of the actes of thair foirbearis thay haue leired, or quhat thame selfes haue inuented of ane ingenious policie to dryue a pray and say thair prayeris. The policie of dryeng a pray thay think be sa leiuessum and lawful to thame that neur sa feruentlie thay say thair prayeris, and pray thair Beidis, quhilkes rosarie we cal, nor with sick sollicitude and kair, as oft quhen thay haue xl or l myles to dyue a pray. (Leslie (trans. Dalrymple, ed. Cody 1888) I: 102-3)

"Tividale"

This represents Teviotdale

Verse 2 |

The first ae guide that they met wi',
It was high up in the Hardhaughswire,
The second guide that they met wi',
It was laigh down in Borthwick water.

A variety of people used guides on both sides of the Borders. Some of these guides were hired for legitimate business, such as the guide referred to by Lord Willoughby for Lord Oliphant in a "passport" letter, which authorised "the bearer hereof thee Lord Olyfant Scochman," presently travelling to the Court, with 3 servants, to be provided with 4 "sufficient able posthorses and a guide." Berwick. Signed: P Wyllughby" (CBP II: 581).

However, there were frequent complaints regarding guides being used by riders to locate victims. Ralph Eure, writing to Lord Burghley, remarked that “As for entertaining ill disposed men in the Queen's pay, it will be found on due inquiry, that few or no fit guides to the waste are to be found in Redesdale, who are not in danger of the law” (CBP II: 347).

Robert Carey, writing about the state of the English Middle March in September 1595, noted that “the Scots already claim and enjoy 3 or 4 ‘meilse’ of English ground, and will encroach further if suffered. The men of account (except 3 or 4 as above) have Scotsmen dwelling in their houses, who are chief guides for the spoil of the poor.” (CBP II: 57). If a party or a band of riders were moving through different areas, they may have needed several guides with specific local knowledge.

This verse contains a basic example of a balancing formula, common in traditional ballads. In the second line, there is a reference to a meeting “high up” and this is balanced by the reference to another meeting “laigh down”. The “high up – laigh down” balance is primarily an aesthetic process, rather than any suggestion of actual geography.

Hardhaughswire was a pass from Liddesdale to the head of the River Teviot in Scotland. Borthwick Water is a water course which feeds into the River Teviot.

Verse 4|

“Right hastily they clam the peel”

The peel refers to a palisade, or a fence made out of stakes.

Verse 6 |

The Captain turned him round, and leugh

This is an example of a supra-narrative ballad formula. In short, this line provides information about the character’s emotional state, rather than simply presenting a physical act.

This formula family was identified as the “He looked over his left shoulder” formula family by Flemming G. Andersen. The formula can represent an active, aggressive stance by a character, or if the character is subordinate to another, it can represent their despair and inability to defend themselves, either in words or deeds. Very rarely, it can be used to indicate contentment, but it is more frequently associated with tense, dangerous or aggressive situations. Either way, it appears within ballads at a pivotal moment of personal confrontation.

Here, the Captain is the dominant character and he turns round and mocks Jamie Telfer, who can do nothing to defend his property but plead for its return. The formula is effective here, as it reinforces the dismissive nature of the Captain towards Jamie Telfer.

The passive version of the formula appears further on in the ballad, and is associated with the character Jamie Telfer

Verse 7 |

“the gryming of a new fa’n snaw”

This image indicates a scattering of snow, and it fits well with the season of Martinmas.

“Stob’s Ha”

Stobs Hall or Castle was one of the Elliot strongholds, certainly from the late 16th century. However, it was not in the control of a Gilbert Elliot until the 1600s.

Verse 10 |

“Gae seek your succour where ye paid black mail”

Blackmail was paid as a form of protection money, to avoid raids being perpetrated upon a household. Christopher Dacre remarked upon the practice in a letter to Lord Burghley, noting that “there has been no redress for Liddisdale for 14 years and more—that they do a great deal more damage to their fellow subjects of Scotland, and levy “a blacke male” yearly from them—intending to do the like to the English. And as the King does not redress his own subjects' wrongs, it is not likely he will do any thing for her Majesty's.” (CBP I: 396)

In June 1596, Scrope brought up the various crimes of Ritchie Graham of Brackenhill in a letter to Lord Burghley, and included “charges of ‘koyninge,” taking blackmail for protection of men and their goods, subornation or maintenance of theft and murders” (CBP II: 134), and in further letters, he managed to procure a witness – one Jeffraye Bell – to testify. This witness offered some interesting information:

He also deposeth that he this “examynent,” Jeffraye Bell of the Parke noack, 4 of the Queen's tenants of Dassoglen and all the tenants of Burthalme belonging to Leanercost, saving one Widow Smyth there, who paid blackmail, had all their goods spoiled and carried off by the nephews and kinsmen of said Richard Grame, Scotsmen, for refusing it, and is rather moved thus to depose, for he knows that these Scots kinsmen, before the robbery, inquired where the widow who paid blackmail dwelt, and then harried the except her” (CBP II: 136)

Many people seemed to have viewed paying blackmail as the only means of assuring any protection or redress, as noted in a letter between Fletcher and Lord Burghley, where he noted the Grahams response to the charges laid against Ritchie Graham and others:

Touching blackmail “(which as they define it as nothing ells but a protection money or a reward pro clientela),” they deny receiving any but in satisfaction of money they laid out in redemption of the tenants' goods with their own consents, which could be recovered no other way for want of a warden in the Scottish Middle Marches. (CBP II: 144)

Here, the Grahams maintain that the money paid to them was a fee paid willingly to them for their part in returning stolen goods.

The problem of blackmail comes up several times in officials' letter throughout 1595 and 1596, and but it fell to an unnamed reporter, listing the "decay" in the Marches, to note that:

The Borders being in great "pennrie" of silver, pay rent in meal, com, &c.
"Soe that this bribenge they call Blackmeale, in respecte that the cause for which yt is taken is fowle and dishoneste : (accordinge to the sayeng of the civill lawe : pacta turpia sunt quae turpem causam continent) and is paid in meale corn or victuall." (CBP II: 164)

Border blackmail, then, is a fee paid to assure protection, rather than money paid to an individual to conceal a crime or misdemeanour.

Verse 11 |

Jamie has turned him round about,
I wat the tear blinded his e'e –

This is the passive version of the "He looked over his left shoulder" formula. Jamie Telfer's plea for help is rejected by Gibby Elliot. The character of Jamie Telfer is presented as the less dominant of the two, as he cannot offer a retort to Elliot's rejection. Instead, the formula indicates despair, which is expanded in the following lines and verse.

Verse 16 |

For I was married on the elder sister,
And you on the youngest of a' the three."

Kinship – that is, familial ties – often counted for much more than national considerations. This became more of an issue when Scotland and England were at war or in the midst of political posturing which could lead to war. The Border Wardens were keenly aware of the cross-Border ties which existed between some families: many of the Liddesdale Armstrongs were married to English Grahams, and the Wardens were aware that the men would put the considerations of the father-in-laws, brother-in-laws, and wider extended family before their national identity.

Here, having been disappointed by the Elliot whom he has paid blackmail to, Jamie Telfer has turned to his family for help.

Verse 17 |

Then he has ta'en out a bonny black,
Was right weel fed wi' corn and hay

As stated, this is a healthy, well fed horse. By Martinmass, any animal relying on basic grass fodder would be in a weaker state. Along with the weather, the ability to feed a horse well could be a deciding factor whether a reiver rode out in the winter months. As Robert Carey noted, the stock animals needed to be in a condition where they could be driven at a decent speed if they were being stolen. Similarly, the horses being used by the reivers also needed to be in a healthy enough condition to be able to move swiftly and to cope with the rigours of the landscape.

Verses 20-22 |

William's Wat helps Jamie Telfer as Jamie has always shown hospitality to him. It may also be the case that William's Wat provides an easier access to the Scott laird auld Buccleuch. Wat – or rather Walter – was one of the first names which the Scott family preferred, with William being another. The inference here may well be that Jamie Telfer has gone to another, lesser member of the Scott clan as an intercessionary, as William's Wat and his sons all ride with Jamie Telfer, and they all call to wake the household at Branksome Hall.

Verse 25 |

“Gar warn the water, braid and wide,
Gar warn it sune and hastilie!
They that winna ride for Telfer's kye,
Let them never look in the face o' me!

In going to Branksome Hall, Jamie Telfer and his supporters are following the accepted process to raise a hot trod, which was similar to a Wild West posse. The Scotts of Buccleuch held various Border official posts throughout the decades of the 16th century. The family was also one of the most dominant clans of the Scottish Middle March. So, whether this is viewed as the beginning of an official or unofficial rescue attempt, the warning which auld Buccleuch gives is valid: no-one was meant to refuse joining an official hot trod, and conversely, if it is not official, Buccleuch indicates that there may be repercussions for those who do not help.

Verses 26-27 |

These verses are effectively a muster roll of Scott families, along with their allies. The place names represent the individuals who owned the land or property, and this was one of the common ways of identifying individuals, many who may have shared the same surname or, indeed, the same first and second names.

Individuals can be identified through entries in the Calendar of Border Papers, and also from inclusion in Walter Scott of Satchells' *A True History of the Right Honourable name of Scott*, first published in 1688, which is a romantic account of the origin of the Scott family and its various cadet branches, all in verse. It is a celebration of the Scott family, and as well as listing individuals, he also refers to important incidents, such as the rescue of William Armstrong of Kinmont.

Walter Scot of Harden was cousin to Buccleuch and was one of his most senior officers. Walter Scott of Harden was one of Sir Walter Scott's ancestors.

Several of the names of the riders who are included in “Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead” can also be found in Scott of Satchells' *True History* and the “Post'ral”:

Of worthy Garrenberry, Rennal-burn and wall,
Todrick, and Gilmans-cleugh they were in my dream,
And good Grass-yards, and Adam in Delorian.
William in Milsinstoun, a gentleman of note,
And worthy Gaudy-lands, and Wauchops Walter Scot;
(Satchells, 1776, part II ll 43-47)

When referring to the rescue of William Armstrong of Kinmont, Satchells states that Gaudilands, described as Buccleuch's "uncle's son", Robert Scot of Gilmanscleuch, along with the Scotts of Harden, Stobs and Commonsides all rode on the rescue (*True History* pp. 12-14).

Satchells also lists "John Grieve in Garwold, He keeps both board and bed" (l. 90), "James Grieve in Lennup, / And the Grieves on Common side" (ll. 91-2), "George Currer in Hartwood-myres" (l. 101) and "John Scot of Gorinberry" (l. 213).

However, in 1596, after the rescue of William Armstrong of Kinmont, Scrope wrote to Lord Burghley and in the enclosed list of principal riders, "Will Elliot goodman of Gorrombye" is named (<http://archive.org/stream/borderpaperscaleo2grea#page/122/mode/2up>)

Without entering into debate, either of these names are acceptable, in relation to the ballad.

Verse 29 |

The Frostylee is a water course, which feeds into the River Teviot near Moss-paul.

Verse 31 |

I'se ware my dame's cauf's skin on thee!

This can be translated as "I'll wager my mother's calf's skin against you", indicating that Willie Scott is threatening to flog the Captain of Bewcastle: calf skin was used to make whips or flails.

Verse 33 |

Win to the Ritterford

"Win to" means to reach.

Verse 37 - 40 |

These verses are a good example of ballad "leaping" and "lingering". "leaping" is the term used when the plot narrative is advanced swiftly. Here, Wat of Harden calls for revenge at the outset of verse 36. By the end of verse 37, the skirmish between the two sides is over and the Scott contingent have won.

The opposite of "leaping" is "lingering", where a single detail or action is expanded on for several lines or verses. This occurs in Verse 38 and 39, where details of the battle is presented. These provide additional information, but are not integral to the plot.

Verse 43 |

I wad loured have had a winding sheet,
And helped to put it ower his head,

Ere he had been disgraced by the *Border Scot*,
Whan he ower Liddel his men did lead!

The portrayal of the Captain of Bewcastle's lady may not initially seem sympathetic to his plight. In this verse she states that she would rather have seen him dead than dishonoured, as she refers to his winding sheet: a winding sheet was what a corpse was wrapped in before burial. However, another reading of this would be that she is keenly aware of how humiliated her husband has been.

Verse 44 - 47 |

These verses add another aspect to the plot. However, they are not entirely necessary to the overall ballad plot and may be an insertion from another song or ballad. While the other characters have historical parallels with men active in the second half of the 1500s, Watty of the Wudspurs was the to-name (or nickname) of the grandson of Wat of Harden, but he was born in 1624, after the way of life on the Borders had been broken by James VI's policies.

Verse 49 |

“And he has paid the rescue shot”

It should be noted that the return of Jamie Telfer's goods requires payment, so the rescue is not merely a charitable act. It is a “recovery fee” of this sort that Ritchie Graham of Brackenhill claimed he received from inhabitants of Lanercost parish, rather than extorting protection money, or black mail, an accusation denied by him:

“Brackenhill as before, denies taking blackmail, only the money paid to redeem their goods from the Scots with their consent” (*Calendar of Border Papers* II: 156)