

Interpretative Notes for “Kinmont Willie”

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 |

The ballad celebrates the rescue of William Armstrong of Kinmont from Carlisle Castle by a groups of riders led by Walter Scott of Buccleuch - The Bold Buccleuch. The raid was made on the 13th April 1596 and was considered an audacious act, as indeed it was.

The ballad is carefully constructed. It does not ever state that Kinmont Willie is an innocent man – historically, William Armstrong of Kinmont was notorious reiver. Instead, it emphasises the fact that he was taken after a Warden Meeting on a Day of Truce, which relied on a 24-hour amnesty for everyone attending the meeting (and, it was argued by some Wardens, for everyone in the respective Marches). The meeting was between the deputy Warden of the English West March, Thomas Salkelde (called Sakelde in the ballad) and the Keeper of Liddesdale, Walter Scott, the “Bold Buccleuch”. William Armstrong of Kinmont had attended as a witness and was returning home when he and other riders were pursued and he was captured by Salkelde, who most probably could not resist the chance to capture such a notorious rider.

The rescue was effected by a group of riders, who numbered Scotts, Armstrongs, Grahams and Elliots among their company. It seemed to have been planned during meetings at a horse race and over dinners. They were also aided by the brothers Lancelot and Thomas Carleton: Thomas had recently been in the employ of Scrope as a constable, but had been dismissed.

The ballad is biased in favour of the reiver and his rescuers, and by interspersing the piece with first and second person personal pronouns throughout, it effectively engages directly with the listener and creates a sense of immediacy and inclusion by doing this.

Verse 1 |

By opening with two questions, the listener is drawn into the ballad narrative and there is a sense of inclusion and collusion between the listener and the narrative of the ballad. The opening lines are dramatic, biased, and urgent: it is stated that Sakelde is “fause”, and that Kinmont Willie is facing death.

Verse 2 - 4 |

These verses linger over the capture of Kinmont Willie and move the action from the capture of the reiver to a confrontation between Kinmont Willie and Lord Scroope in Carlisle Castle.

Verse 5 |

This verse presents two ballad formula structures: there is a balance of opposites – Kinmont Willie’s hands are tied, but his tongue is free; and there is a triad of questions.

This verse is also part of a triadic pattern of demands and retorts, presented in verses 5, 6 and 7. Because the two characters are equally dominant, neither of them appears in despair or overtly in command of the situation. Scroope is aggressive, but Kinmont Willie is dismissive of the threat of death.

Verse 7 |

I never yet lodged in a hostelrie,
But I paid my lawing before I gaed

Kinmont Willie states that he has never yet stayed in an inn without paying what was owed. In stating this, Kinmont Willie offers a veiled threat to Scroope, which is in response to Scroope’s own threat that Kinmont Willie shall “take farewell” of him before he crosses the castle’s gate. This is a reference to a “last farewell”, the phrase often attributed to a felon’s final words before execution.

Verse 8 |

That Lord Scroope has ta’en the Kinmont Willie,
Between the hours of night and day.

The time is specified in this verse as part of the debate over the capture of Kinmont Willie was the timing of it: he was captured after attending a Warden Meeting on a Truce Day. On

the Days of Truce, an amnesty was meant to be in place, allowing anyone attending a Warden's Meeting to return home without danger of attack or capture, irrespective of whether the meeting took place of the Scottish or English side of the Border.

Verses 9 - 15 |

In these verses, the fiery nature of the character of Buccleuch is emphasised through a series of "lingering" verses but he is also presented as being honourable, as he states that:

"But since nae war's between the lands,
And there is peace, and peace should be;
I'll neither harm English lad or lass,
And yet the Kinmont freed shall be!" –

Verse 16 - 19 |

The ballad states that Buccleuch brought together 40 men, almost all of the name of Scott. They ride in bands of ten: ten appearing like hunters; ten appearing like Warden's men - that is official riders; ten dressed like masons, carrying ladders; and ten like reivers.

There were several accounts of the rescue party. While Scrope initially claimed that around 500 men, led by Wat of Harden, rode to rescue Kinmont Willie, the names which were included in a letter from an informant, numbered nearer 40.

"spur on heel and splent on spauld"

Spurs are worn on the heel of a boot. They are for encouraging a horse to move faster. "splent on spauld" translates as "armour on shoulder"

Verse 20 - 25 |

In verse 20, the narrative changes from being a third person report to an account in the first person plural. The use of the personal pronouns at this point helps, once more, to associate the listener with the rescuers and pit them, aesthetically at least, against the character of Sakelde.

Verses 21 - 24 linger on the meeting between Sakelde and the rescuers and present a series of questions and answers, presented in turn to the "hunters", the "marshall men", and the "masons", who respond with ambiguous answers. After questioning the "broken men", Sakelde is killed by their leader, Dickie of Dryhope.

The inclusion of Dickie of Dryhope negates the earlier statement that all the riders were kinsmen of Buccleuch, barring Sir Gilbert Elliot. Dick of Dryhope was an Armstrong, and does appear in the extant lists of the rescue riders. However, the inclusion of the death of Sakelde is entirely fictional: Thomas Salkeld was not injured in any way during the rescue.

Verse 26 |

In all of the Armstrong rescue ballads published in the Minstrelsy, there is a river in spate. However, it is only in Kinmont Willie that the riders have to pass a river in spate both on their way to and their return from the rescue.

Verse 27 |

The 17th century account of the rescue in Scott of Satchells mentions Buccleuch leaving half of the force nearer the river and having the men dismount “ And left the one half of his company, /For fear they had made noise or din”

Verse 28 - 34 |

The attempt on the castle is recounted in these verses. The action is presented as if the narrator had been part of the rescue party.

Verse 28 |

Emphasis is placed upon the bad weather which accompanies the raid in the ballad. In his letters to Burghley and Privy Council, written on the day after the rescue, Lord Scrope commented on the bad weather:

“the watch, as yt shoulde seeme, by reason of the stormye night, were either on sleepe or gotten under some covert to defende them from the violence of the wether” (Calendar of Border Papers II: 121)

Verse 30 |

“He flung him down upon the lead”

Th lead here refers to the lead upon a roof.

Buccleuch is presented as being honourable. While he throws the watchman down “upon the lead” - that is down on the roof, he does not kill him, but explains his reasoning: “Had there not been peace between our lands, / Upon the other side thou hadst gaed!”

Verse 31 |

“Now sound out trumpets!”

While it may seem strange to sound a trumpet call in midst of a rescue, Spottiswoode’s *History* does mention a trumpet being blown. However, in that account, the trumpet is sounded after the rescue to alert those waiting with the horses. (Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Oliver & Boyd, 1851): 2-3)
(you can read Spottiswoode’s account online - go to <http://archive.org/stream/historyofchurcho03spot#page/2/mode/2up>.

“*O whae dare meddle wi’ me?*”—

This is the title of a tune.

Verse 32 |

This verse mentions cutting through the roof to gain entry.

In his letters, Scrope mentions that the rescuers had tools which may have been used to break through walls or roofs. They had, according to Scrope “gavlocks, and crows of iron, handpecks, axes and skailing lathers”: Scrope to the Privy Council (Calendar of Border Papers II: 121)

Verse 33 |

In this verse, the ballad states that 30 men entered the castle, and sent 1000 men into confusion. In his first letters about the incident, Scrope wrote that there were 500 men, Spottiswoode states that there were 200 men on the rescue. However, only around 40 names were gathered and being directly associated with the raid.

Verse 35 |

“Upon the morn that thou’s to die?” –

There is no evidence to prove that William Armstrong of Kinmont was ever in danger of death. The nature of his capture, Buccleuch’s response to it, and Scrope's own sense of duty probably ensured that the reiver would never have been summarily executed.

This then, is a good example of poetic license.

Verse 36 |

Kinmont Willie indicates that he cannot sleep, and says that sleep has been frightened away (“fleyed”) from him: that is, he is too frightened to sleep. In all of the rescue ballads in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, the captive is in fear of his life and is in a state of fear or despair.

“Gie my service back to my wyfe and bairns”

This suggests that Kinmont Willie has a young family. William Armstrong of Kinmont was not a young man when he was captured; he was a seasoned reiver. His sons were also grown men and were part of the rescue party.

Verse 37 |

“Red Rowan” cannot be specifically identified. The Englishman “Red Rowy” Forster was active at the time, but there is nothing to place him at the rescue. However, Willie “Red Cloak” Bell certainly was implicated.

The carrying the prisoner to freedom, although he is still chained, is an image presented in other rescue ballads, such as “Archie o’ Ca’field” and “Jock o’ the Side”, both of which are also contained in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.

Verse 38 |

“Farewell, farewell, my gude Lord Scroope!
My gude Lord Scroope, farewell!” he cried –

–”I’ll pay you for my lodging maill,
“When first we meet on the border side.”–

There is a triad structure to the “farewell” Kinmont Willie offers. This is a commonly used in ballads, to emphasise a statement. Another common use of triadic repetition comes in lines such as “Ye **lie**, ye **lie**, ye liars loud, / Sae loud I hear ye **lie**!”

This verse also provides a balance to verses 6 & 7:

–”Now haud thy tongue, thou rank reiver!
There’s never a Scot shall set ye free:
Before ye cross my castle yate,
I trow ye shall take fareweel o’ me.” –

–”Fear na ye that, my Lord,” quo Willie:
“By the faith of my bodie, Lord Scroope,” he said,
“I never yet lodged in a hostelrie,
But I paid my lawing before I gaed.”–

Verse 40 & 41 |

Kinmont Willie makes light of his rescue in these verses, referring to Red Rowan as a horse.

“I’ve pricked a horse out oure the furs,”

Kinmont Willie is recalling spurring a horse out over furrowed - that is ploughed - land.

“I nevir wore sic cumbrous spurs”

Kinmont Willie is referring to the fetters around his ankles.

Verse 42 |

This is the second mention of 1000 men in the ballad. In his letters, Thomas Scrope makes no specific mention of a pursuit force of any sort, let alone one numbering 1000 men.

Verse 44 |

“And at Lord Scroope his glove flung he –”

In doing this, Buccleuch is issuing a challenge to Scroope. The understanding is that if the individual who has been challenged picks up the glove, then the challenge is accepted. It should be noted that Scroope, perhaps too “astonished” is not presented as accepting any challenge.

While “throwing down the gauntlet” is perceived to be a mediaeval notion connected to one knight issuing a challenge to another, this may actually be the invention of a later time period. There is, however, evidence of a blow being used as the initial challenge to a duel.

In “The Duel of Wharton and Stuart”, which Scott published in the 1803 edition of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, Stuart strikes Wharton over the face. Faced with such an affront, honour demands that a gentleman responds. This ballad refers to a duel which was fought in 1609, and in which both combatants died.

The last fatal duel fought in Scotland was in 1826, between the linen merchant David Landale and the banker George Morgan was instigated by Morgan striking Landale about his head with an umbrella in Kirkcaldy. Landale felt that he had to issue a challenge, which was accepted. It was the first time Landale had ever been involved in a duel: he had never fired a gun before and had to travel to Edinburgh to buy pistols. Morgan, on the other hand, was an ex-soldier and was a practised hand with firearms. They met at the chosen spot and, according to the rules of a duel, stood 12 paces apart, turned and fired simultaneously. Morgan was shot dead.