

Notes for “The Raid of the Reidswire”

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 does not look like many of the others in the *Minstrelsy*, as it is presented in 8-line stanzas, rhyming ababbcbc rather than the more common 4-line stanza rhyming abab. Scott may have simply decided to retain the layout which was used by his sources. “The Raid of the Reidswire” reads very much like a witness account, presented as it is in the first person from the Scottish perspective, and it contains asides and personal remarks. The ballad recounts the notorious actions of the 7th of July 1575, when a run of the mill Warden’s meeting was arranged between John Carmichael, the Keeper of Liddesdale and Warden of the Scottish West March, supported by George Douglas, and Carmichael’s equivalent on the English side, Sir John Forster, who was supported by George Heron, Keeper of Redesdale, who was killed there (and who is presented sympathetically despite being on the other side from the narrator). The meeting descended into violence, and the skirmish seemed to have gone the Scots way due to the the fact that the English fought with bows and arrows, but the Scots were armed with guns. This skirmish is often cited as was the last battle between Scottish and English forces.

Verse 1 |

“Our Wardens they affixed the day”

The area now known as the Borders was divided into six Marches – three on the English side and three on the Scottish side: they were known as the East, Middle and West Marches. Each March had a Warden, who was effectively his monarch’s representative, and the highest ranking officer of the law in the area. In addition, Scotland had a Keeper of Liddesdale, as the area of Liddesdale was considered so lawless that it required an officer of its own. Wardens communicated frequently, not only with those of their own side, but also with their opposite number. Arranging Truce Days for Warden Meetings were a normal part of their responsibilities.

Alas! That day I’ll ne’er forgett!

The use of the first person in the opening verse helps to suggest that the listener (or reader) is part of the entire tale, and also helps to align the listener to the Scottish side.

Verse 2 |

“Carmichael was our Warden then”

Sir John Carmichael was actually serving as the Keeper of Liddesdale, when the Reidswire skirmish occurred. There was no equivalent post in England, and so the Keeper met with the English Wardens. The perceived inequality between the posts may have been one of the aspects which helped fire the antagonism between the Scots and the English officials.

John Carmichael did serve as Warden of the Scottish West March on more than one occasion. He was considered to be one of the most even-handed and least partizan of the Wardens. He was assassinated by a faction of Armstrongs in 1600.

Scott notes that he was the Middle March Warden, but this is inaccurate. However, John Forster was the Warden of the English Middle March.

“And the Laird’s Wat, that worthie man”

Scott offers some debate over whom is meant by this line, and suggests that it is Walter Scott of Buccleuch.

“The Armestranges, that aye hae been
A hardie house, but not a hail,”

As Scott remarks his notes, the Armstrongs were seen as not being whole (or hail) , but as being “broken”, as many of the Armstrongs were “broken”men, meaning outlaws. In addition, there was no single overall chief of the Armstrongs.

Verse 3 |

“The Rutherfoords, with grit renown,
Convoyed the town of Jedbrugh out.”

Border landowners, as with other Scottish landowners, could raise a number of men to attend them or to fight for them. In the case of the Borderers, there was often a sense of family loyalty, kinship ties, or legally-binding agreements, when one family agreed to be bound to another: various Armstrongs made such arrangements with the Buccleuch Scotts.

Verse 4 |

“of other clans”

The Border families were also considered clans, although they operated differently from the Highland clan system.

This language in this verse is very leading, in terms of emotional bonding with the ballad tale: the narrator’s voice is heard - “I cannot tell” - and the listener may find himself or herself drawn into the tale by the use of “we” .

Sir John Forster

Sir John Forster was one of the most notable officials who served as March Warden. He served for over 60 years, was involved in a number of notable incidents, and was often suspected by his fellow Wardens of being a key player in illegal activities. He was Warden of the English Middle March between 1560-86 and 1588-95. Early in his career, he fought at Solway Moss. In 1575, he was captured at the Redeswire. He served as Sherrif of Northumberland 1549-50. He died at Bamburgh 13/1/1602.

Verse 5 |

Verse 5 |

This is one of the verses which presents the information primarily from the narrator’s point of view. This is a little at odds with the ballad tradition. Although some ballads contain narrative asides, this is usually presented through standardised lines, such as “An ill death may he die”, which may be directed towards a negatively presented character. Overall, however, the narrative of a ballad is usually presented in an impersonal way. There are notable exceptions, and “The Raid of the Reidswire” is a fine example of a tale interspersed with personal asides and personalised interpretation.

The listener (or reader) receives the plot information through a series of lines which contain a deal of personalised opinion, using asides such “I trow”, which translates as “I believe”. This presents the lines which follow (see below) into opinion from impersonal statement, which might have been expected within ballad conventions.

“It grieved him sair that day, I trow,
Wi’ Sir George Hinrome of Schipsydehouse”

The narrator then continues, suggesting that Sir John Forster did not consider the Scottish contingent to be any threat at all, due to their smaller numbers. The printed text uses italicised text to place emphasis on the word “he”, in order to contrast the differences in nature between the characters of Sir George Hinrome and Sir John Forster. There is also a sense of dismissive glee in final two lines of the verse, where the narrator reflects on Forster’s “cracking crouse” (talking big), and the fact that he regretted the events at the Reidswire – which in this context may also be interpreted as opinion.

Sir George was gentle, meek, and douse,
But *he* was hail and hett as fire;

And yet, for all his cracking crouse,
He rew'd the raid o' the Reidswire.

Sir George Heron was killed at the Reidswire. His death was the cause of many letters in the years and decades after he had died, as there was strong opinion that no settlement had been made for it.

Verse 6 |

Verse 6 operates as a balance to verse 2 and 3, as it lists part of the English contingent which attended the Reidswire meeting. It includes:

Tindaill: Tynedale
Reedsdaill: Redesdale
Coquetdale: Cocketdale
Hebarime: Hebron
and Northumberland

Verse 7 |

The clark sate down to call the rowes.
And some for kyne, and some for ewes,
Called in of Dandrie, Hob and Jock –

The function of a Warden Meeting was to settle complaints regarding theft and other crimes. Monetary satisfaction could be made, or accused individuals handed over to account for their crimes. As well as the officials, there would be witnesses, onlookers and, of course, perhaps those accused of criminal acts. The reference to kyne (cattle) and ewes (sheep) refer to the list of accusations, which would have been discussed by the Wardens before the actual day of the meeting.

Dandrie, Hob, and Jock are all generic names which were in common usage on the Borders: Dandrie is a variant of Andrew - our modern equivalent would be Andy; Hob is a variant of Robert - our modern equivalent would be Rob; and Jock is a variant of John.

Verse 8 |

“With jack and speir”

A jack was a type of leather-based armoured jacket. Small pieces of metal would be sewn between the inner and outer layers of a short leather jerkin, or the metal could be sewn on the outside. It was much lighter than full armour, and while it did not afford the same level of protection, it was preferred by many Borderers, as it offered more flexibility and cost less than metal armour. A jack could also utilise the metal from broken armour.

Arriving at a Warden meeting armed with spears and protected by jacks, the Fenwicks appear more ready for a skirmish than any other characters previously mentioned in the ballad.

Some gaed to drink, and some stude still,
And some to cairds and dice them sped

These lines indicate the social nature of a Warden meetings. Not everyone who attended had direct business with the legal processes.

“Till on ane Farnstein they fyled a bill”

The name of the individual, who was declared fugitive does not seem to have been recorded in any of the official correspondence.

Verse 9 |

The argument between Carmichael and Forster, which arose after Forster claimed that a wanted criminal was fugitive - something not believed by Carmichael and his men - is suggested in this verse. It is very direct and detailed, including the direct manner in which Carmichael addressed Forster, and Forster’s dismissive response and his personal attacks on Carmichael’s social position. The ballad represents Forster standing up, stretching, and challenging Carmichael to a one-to-one fight.

At this point the ballad states that the Fenwicks released “a flight of arrows”, which initiated full-on combat.

Verse 10 |

“A Schaftan and a Fenwick”: this is presented as the slogan – or war cry – of the Fenwick clan.

Verse 11 - 12 |

The ballad does not present the skirmish in a heroic way. It refers to the desperate situation the Scots found themselves in, being outnumbered, and suggests that Carmichael was almost killed:

And there we had out Warden lost,
Wert not the grit God he reliev’d him.

Another throw the breikes him bair,
Whill flatlies to the grund he fell:

This suggests that Carmichael took two arrows. The first, the ballad states, was from Henry Purdie, which “very narrowlie had mischiefed him”, but another arrow went through his breeches and resulted in him falling to the ground.

A useful contrast to this sense of confusion and is the presentation of the Battle of Otterburn in “The Chevy Chase” or “The Battle of Otterbourne”.

Verse 13 |

This verse states that Carmichael was not as “stout”, that is bold, proud or fierce, as perhaps Forster in general terms, but once he was angry, he was Forster’s equal.

This verse also presents some other forms of ordnance brought to the Reidswire. The ballad states there there was “gun and genzie, bow and speir”. The Reidswire skirmish was fought with a blend of traditional weapons (spears and bows) and what were more modern weapons (guns and pistols).

Scott glosses “genzie” as “an engine of war”, which is somewhat vague. It may refer to a crossbow, as the ballad is specific in its reference to other weapons.

Verse 13 contains two more slogans – “Tindaill, to it! Jedbrugh’s here!”. These could be used to intimidate an enemy, or as a rallying call

Verse 14 |

The difference in weaponry between the two sides seems to have been the deciding factor in the outcome. While the Scots were outnumbered, they had come equipped with firearms, which helped scatter the English force, although the ballad insists that the Tynedale men stopped their retreat and re-formed their lines. Again, the ballad presents the outcome of this stance in more realistic rather than heroic way: the narrator claims that the “merchant packs” which belonged to travelling merchants, helped to protect the Scottish fighters.

Verse 15 - 18 |

These verses give an account of those captured and killed on the day, along with those who acquitted themselves well. The death of Sir George Heron at the Reidswire is well recorded in State Papers and the letters contained in records such as the Calendar of Border Papers.

“Sir Francis Russell ta’en was their”

Sir Francis Russel was the son-in-law of Sir John Forster, who was also captured at the Reidswire.

“Proud Wallinton was wounded sair”

This refers to Henry Fenwick of Wallington

“As Collingwood, that courteous knight”

Sir Cuthbert Collingwood was Border official acting as a commissioner and also as deputy warden to Ralph Eure. Like Russell and Forster, he was captured and taken to Edinburgh. This was referenced again and again in the years after the skirmish. For example, an official missive concerning murders committed by Scottish Wardens and their associates notes that:

... At a public day of truce, Sir George Heron, Mr William Shaftoe, &c., murdered against assurance given: the Lord warden, Sir Francis Russell, Sir Cuthbert Collingwood and the chief gentlemen of the country taken prisoners to Edinburgh” (CBP II: 590)

(see: <http://archive.org/stream/borderpaperscale02grea#page/590/mode/1up>)

“Young Henry” may refer to Henry Collingwood, who is listed in letters in the *Calendar of Border Papers*. He was present at the Warden Meeting when Sir Francis Russell was shot and killed (see: <http://archive.org/stream/cu31924091786057#page/n241/mode/2up>) and “young” Henry Collingwood is specifically mentioned by John Carey with regards to false accusation at an assize. (see: <http://archive.org/stream/borderpaperscale02grea#page/794/mode/2up>)

“the Laird of Mow”

There is little historic evidence surrounding the Laird of Mow being at the Reidswire, but the ballad states that he was killed there.

“Beanjeddart, Hundlie, and Hunthill,
Three, on they laid weel at the last.”

It is recorded that the men of Bonjedward were late attending the Warden Meeting and therefore provided fresh reinforcements for the Scots at a pivotal time in the skirmish.

Verse 20 |

The concluding verses states that Sir John Forster was responsible for the skirmish. There is also a reference to the duration of the skirmish, and a statement declaring that it was the men of Tynedale who started in hostilities.