

## Interpretative Notes for “Lesly’s March”

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.

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This song is associated with a march tune played by the Scottish Presbyterian army under the command of Alexander Leslie. Leslie marched his troops into England to provide support for the English Parliamentarians. His forces fought at Marston Moor.

Military action and religious belief are intertwined throughout this piece and some background to the contemporary political and religious situations is required to understand the lyrics.

Verse 1 |

There are references to drill in the first few verses. The reference to “musketeers” helps to date the piece.

The reference to the English Border is reminiscent of battle ballads, but this army is March South in support of the English Parliamentarians - that is the parliament which is happy to see the approach of this army.

References to purging the kirk most probably refers to the wish to remove the imposed *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Book of Canons*. The Reformation in Scotland had seen church statuary attacked, defaced and destroyed if it was related to the deposed Catholic faith. There may be an oblique reference to this in “We’ll purge it ila room, / Frae Popish reliques, and a’ sic innovation”, although this is primarily concerned with the imposition of Anglican religious processes.

The partizan nature of the song is emphasised in the line “There’s nane in the right but we”.

References to the names “Jenny” and “Jock” is to suggest that the common people of the country, not the ruling classes, will bring about change. The names appear in 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry and song as stock representations of often rural characters.

The “kist-fu of whistles” refers to a church organ: many Presbyterian kirks did not have a church organ until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in some churches, such as the Free Church of Scotland, the resistance against an organ still prevails. Episcopalian and Anglican churches favoured them.

The reference to the piper may stand as a contrast to the ostentatious nature of a church organ, but a piper also suggests a return to military concerns. We know that the Covenanting army had pipers within their ranks, from letters such as that of William Kerr, Earl of Lothian, writing from Newcastle in 1641:

I cannot out of our armie furnish you with a sober fiddler; there is a fellow here plays exceeding well, but he is intollerably given to drink; nor have we many of those people. Our armie had few or none that carie not armes. We are sadder and graver than ordinarie soldiers, only we are well provided of pypers. I have one for every company in my regiment, and I think they are as good as drummers

(W. L. Manson, *The Highland Bagpipe: Its History, Literature and Music*. Alexander Gardner, Paisley & London, 1901. P. 1117)

<http://archive.org/stream/highlandbagpipe00mansgoog#page/n130/mode/2up>

“Busk up your plaids” recalls the fact that prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and certainly the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Feileadh Mòr* was the dominant mode of dress for Highland clansmen – the soldiers are being encouraged to make themselves presentable (remember, in this era, armies did not wear uniforms). “Cock up your bonnets” suggests, similarly, that they should adjust their hats.