

Interpretative Notes for “The Lads of Wamphray”

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 presents an account of a failed raid on the Crichtons, and the repercussions the Johnstones wreak upon them. This is a pro-Johnstone ballad.

Verses 1 - 4 |

The locations mentioned all lie in the Annandale heartland of the Johnstones’ land. The types of activity the Johnstones engaged in is recalled in the verses.

In verse 3, the “broked cow” refers to a cow that is coloured like a badger – i.e. With black and white stripes, spots or speckles. The “branded bull” is a brindle-coloured bull, that is a brown animal with dark markings or striping.

Verse 5 |

Nithsdale was not in Johnstone territory. Indeed, it was Maxwell land, and therefore “enemy territory” for the Johnstones for over 100 years.

Verse 6 |

The epithet “gentle” was ironically attributed to the Johnstones. It may have originated with Scott, however.

Verse 8 |

A saugh bush is a willow, or a sallow (commonly known as pussy-willow) bush.

Verse 9 -10 |

There is an example of triadic emphasis in these two verses, where the Galliard tries to barter for his life.

Verse 12 |

Mention of the colour blue may be misleading here. In other ballads it is used to indicate those on the Scottish side, or the Covenanting side. However, it may be used here to indicate fine clothing, as blue dye was an expensive commodity, just as blue was an expensive pigment for artists.

Verse 13 |

The mention of the Wellpath-head is interesting, as it indicates one of the most easily navigable routes in the area, and suggest that the Johnstones have followed the Well Path towards their target.

Verses 14 - 15 |

Bidhouse burn and Bidhouse Knowe are located close to a spot known as Simon’s Knowe, where, traditionally, it is said that the fight between the Crichtons and the Johnstones took place. It is impossible, however, to ascertain if the one (local tradition) influenced the other (the ballad), or vice versa.

The Johnstones state “We’ve done nae ill”. The “lifting” of the cattle may be viewed as a suitable compensation for the loss of the Galliard’s life.

Verses 16 - 18 |

The armed fight between the Crichtons and the Johnstones is condensed into verse 17. Verse 16 provides the moments before the battle, with Willie of Kirkhill gearing up his men to fight, while verse 18 presents the consequences: the Johnstones are the victors and many Crichtons have been killed.

Verse 20 |

The final verse is a celebratory toast to the Johnstones, continuing the partizan feel of the entire ballad.