

The Border Reivers

This is an account of the history of the inhabitants and events of a unique area of Great Britain and the economic and political conditions that created murderous chaos and misery for its inhabitants. While a full appreciation of the history of the Borders would take us back to the time of the Roman occupation of Britain and the military clashes between Rome and the powerful local tribes of that region, the period most relevant to the turbulent activities of the Reivers was just over 300 years starting around 1286 and continuing through to the early years of the reign of James Stuart as James VI of Scotland and then (concurrently) as James I of England.

The Border Territory

The geographical area that was home to the border folk that begat and shaped the character and behaviour of these lawless reivers encompassed a swath of land on each side of what had been delineated as the border between Scotland and England going back to the early 11th century, with some changes (by force of arms) over about the next two hundred and fifty years. On the English side, it mostly included the land from Hadrian's Wall in the south - a line roughly joining Carlisle in the west to Newcastle upon Tyne in the east - to the border with Scotland just north of Berwick upon Tweed. It appears as roughly triangular in shape. The northern delineation of the Scottish side is raggedly defined partly by the meandering River Tweed and the land occupied by the bleakly beautiful Cheviot Hills. It stretches in a band from about twenty miles north of Berwick to (in places) about twice that distance in width as it crosses the central belt of the south of Scotland until reaching the more fertile valley of the River Nith a little over twenty miles north of the market town of Dumfries. By way of clarification, it should be noted that the current 'Scottish Borders' describes a slightly different geographical entity than its former marches, comprising Berwickshire, Peeblesshire, Selkirkshire and Roxburghshire.

As with its English equivalent, the Scottish border lands are comprised mainly of uplands, which in an era of predominantly agrarian living meant an emphasis more on animal grazing than on crop farming. These lands had been much more productive in Roman times and for nearly a millennium after that when the climate in Britain was considerably more temperate and would have supported larger rural populations. Unfortunately, there was quite a sudden change in climate that became apparent in the early years of the 14th century. The summer growing seasons became shorter and wetter and the winters colder, making it much more difficult to eke out a living from the land. Along with that, previously arable land became more boggy and mossy, with many areas being less accessible to the ordinary person. The resulting hardships and the devastation caused by frequent military incursions soon established the conditions for a violent and rapacious history that can reasonably be described as unique within Europe.

The Early History

The story of the Reivers and the border between Scotland and England might have merited no more interest or historical attention than one might have expected anywhere in the world where the territories of two mutually distrustful neighbours conjoined. In

such circumstances, threats and skirmishes and even an occasional invasion or battle would be all but inevitable, but nothing like the maelstrom of military devastation and lawlessness that plagued this rugged strip of British countryside for so long. And yet, other than a few periodic dustups during the period of about two hundred years following the Norman Conquest, for the most part the two nations did manage to avoid major conflicts. But that ended abruptly following the tragicomical event of the death of the good and (at other times) wise King Alexander III of Scotland.

On a particularly '*dark and stormy night*' in March 1286, Alexander found himself many miles apart from his beautiful new wife, Yolande de Dreux. At age 45, and having lost his first wife and three children, Alexander was without an heir and hence the importance and urgency of his betrothal to the young French noblewoman. Whether to attend to the business of the succession or just out of a longing for her company, we know that he was determined to join her, storm or no storm. Much against the advice of his advisors who pleaded with him to wait until the following morning before taking to the road, he ignored them and rode off with libidinous abandon only to end up plunging from his horse to his death over a cliff. What a price to pay for a night of wedded bliss, cruelly denied! But the real losers were his subjects, particularly those of the border region.

What followed directly from this petty folly and the lengthy and ongoing problems of installing a successor to Alexander was the so-called Wars of Independence that lasted from 1296 to about 1328. It is a saga of the struggles over royal succession and its impact on Scotland's sovereign independence, including a threat to that independence by Edward I, the fierce Edward 'Longshanks', who took advantage of the internecine wrangling to have himself declared Lord Paramount of Scotland. These events played a vital role in shaping the history of the Scottish and English border regions over the next 300 years, and strongly influenced the character and motivation of the redoubtable border reivers themselves.

The unexpected and ill-timed death of Alexander called for the speedy settling of his successor. His heir was his three-year-old granddaughter, Margaret, Maid of Norway, who at the time of his death was still being raised in Norway. Because of her age, between 1286-1292 Scotland was ruled by no less than six *Guardians* of Scotland. Upon reaching the age of seven Margaret was made ready to travel to Scotland to be crowned, but sadly died in Orkney. Edward Longshanks had already entered into a tentative treaty with the Scottish nobles to betroth Margaret to Edward's son and heir, the future Edward II, but her demise called for a radical change in his plans.

Competition to fill the vacant Scottish throne was fierce, Robert the Bruce being one of the leading contenders. Civil war threatened, prompting the Scottish nobles to invite Longshanks to act as arbitrator in the process. Edward was determined that the new king would be *his* choice, and one that would act as his loyal Quisling, allowing him effectively to rule Scotland as a vassal state. Edward chose John Balliol (aka Jean de Bailleul), who was crowned in November 1292. However, caught between the

headstrong nobles of Scotland and his English overlord, Balliol fell out of favour with both sides and was deposed by the Scots in July 1296.

This was the excuse Edward needed. He invaded Scotland with a massive army and naval forces. His first action was to attack the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, carrying on later to inflict further mayhem as far north as Edinburgh, but Berwick suffered a virtual genocide. It had been a major strategic Scottish town since the Battle of Carnham in 1018, and while the events were not accurately chronicled at the time, it is believed that Edward began by slaughtering every adult man and teenage male of fighting age. As for the others, he is alleged either to have forced all the women and children to flee north, or he put all of them to the sword as well. The resulting death toll has been estimated at between 7,000 and 17,000, depending on which of these two scenarios really took place. Either way, it was a shockingly cruel campaign which ensured a lasting bitterness between the two nations that was unprecedented up to that time.

The throne of Scotland remained vacant for a further ten years, and Edward helped fill the void by launching regular military incursions, demanding fealty and the proceeds of rents and taxes he had imposed for the purpose. Meanwhile, William Wallace and the young Robert the Bruce harried the English forces, mostly employing guerrilla tactics, but also in two major battles - the Scottish victory at the Battle of Stirling Castle and her rout at Falkirk. Wallace was eventually captured and dragged off to London where he was brutally hung, drawn and quartered under the warrant of Edward I in 1305. Bruce was crowned King of Scotland on March 25th, 1306, but it took several military victories over the English to cement his control of Scotland, particularly at Loudoun Hill in 1307 and later more decisively at Bannockburn in 1314. In political terms, the *Declaration of Arbroath* in 1320 - which benefitted from the approval and endorsement of the Pope - helped to establish Scotland's independence from England as a sovereign nation.

These various events and the turmoil they created directly affected the border area and its people. The stage was then set for a series of wars and bitter conflicts with the borders at the forefront, where order and civilization would all but evaporate for over 300 years.

The Marches and Establishment of the Warden System

The Borders were a comparatively lawless zone even before the beginning of the Wars of Independence. Cross-border raids were a common hazard for the long-suffering population, although they were less frequent than those that immediately followed Alexander's demise. In 1249 the two nations, acting together to suppress the banditry, entered into an agreement to set up administrative areas described as 'Marches' and enacted a codex of laws uniquely applicable to the borders, known as March Law. These laws were added to in 1297. More-or-less mirror image east, middle and west marches were established on opposite sides of the border, each one having a March Warden appointed (although the first not until 1297) mainly to administer a judicial and military regime that would tame the recently emboldened bands of reivers. Predictably, the wardens were usually not provided with enough resources to maintain the intended state of peace, although various castles and military outposts were built or

recommissioned to house the thinly spread forces needed to confront at least some of the raiding parties. The latter were too numerous, persistent and knowledgeable of the rugged terrain to be substantially thwarted, but the military presence and interventions did go some way towards limiting their operations. More about the wardens below.

The Clan Names

So, what of the reivers themselves - how they were organized, armed and led? To answer that, we can start with the 'names', or perhaps more descriptively the clans that largely predated the heyday of raiding. Listing all of the approximately one hundred reiving families that inhabited the border regions would involve too much detail for this short account, but a few of the more prominent were:

In Scotland's East March we have *Home/Hume, Dixon* and *Cranston* and on the English side: *Forster, Gray* and *Dunn*.

In Scotland's Middle March: *Scott, Kerr, Douglas, Armstrong, Elliot, Nixon, Croser* and *Henderson of Liddesdale*. On the English side: *Reed, Hall, Thomson, Robson, Fenwick* and *Jamieson*.

In Scotland's West March: *Maxwell, Irvine, Johnstone* and *Moffat*. In England: *Graham/Graeme, Hetherington, Dacre, Musgrave* and *Routledge*.

(As a curiosity, among the lesser names was Blackadder. They owned significant lands in the border area, along with the Castle of Blackadder. Under a plan to usurp their lands, they were eventually subsumed into the Home of Wedderburn clan by force of arms and through forced marriages. There is still a village of that name. But Rowan Atkinson doesn't live there!)

Most of the families entered into alliances with other clans, finding it of mutual strategic benefit to work with, or give support to, one another, and not only with those living on the same side of the border; some of the families shared kinship with their cross border 'cousins'.

The Origins of Border Culture

The borders were populated by a people who as far back as Roman times were recognized as cut from a different cloth than most other Britons. Hadrian's very costly wall was built to hold back the fierce, hardy warriors immediately to the north that even the highly trained and equipped Legions could not contain. They were similarly feared by other Britons in the late medieval period and early Middle Ages. Recent historians believe that like their Highland, Irish and Welsh cousins, the border dwellers were close descendants of the Celtic race and had retained much of that culture's philosophy and aggressive spirit. This may explain their fierce warlike posture, their superb horsemanship and their great skill in the use of arms that made them highly valued by military commanders as mounted warriors in battle, and much feared and respected if they happened to be fighting for the other side. If only it hadn't been for their thieving ways!

The Reivers - Their Tools of the Trade

When embarking on a raid, they were typically well protected in their (usually) homemade armour, most donning the iconic 'steel bonnets' which were often knock-offs made by the local blacksmith. The earlier versions were much like an upside-down salad bowl, but later improvements included a curved brim, and even earpieces. Some wore traditional mail coats over their shirts, but those were pricy, so more often they wore a 'jack' of quilted leather sown with plates of metal, or horn, for better protection. The jacks were much lighter than mail or metal plate. Leather boots and breeches gave some protection to the lower regions. His horse would typically be a *hobbler*, or *hobby*, from which the name hobbyhorse almost certainly derives. The Galloway Pony was the most popular breed employed. This was relatively small, but bred over a long period of time from continental stock for strength, stamina and low maintenance. It was said that they could handily cover seventy to eighty miles a day, even over rough terrain.

By the mid-sixteenth century the weaponry of war was changing. With the invention of gunpowder, reliance on the longbow was giving way to the arquebus and other firearms that as yet were crude and dangerous to the user. The border reivers were slower to give up on the traditional bow, continuing to use one that was small and light, known as a *latch*. They did gradually adopt the arquebus as well as a heavy handgun, and later on the musket. They also relied heavily on their long piercing lances, daggers, short cutting swords and the Jedburgh Axe. Armed to the teeth and deadly!

The Reiving Trade

The point of reiving was to benefit financially from stealing, mainly targeting cattle, sheep and horses; in the parlance of the American wild west, first and foremost they were rustlers. In addition to organized or spontaneous raids, opportunistic reiving was often carried out during military/political expeditions, for example by troops sent by monarchs or wardens to punish or subdue the opposing cross-border population. But in the primarily 'for profit' ventures there were many recorded instances of seemingly needless murders and maiming, of ransacking and smashing the contents of poor folks' homes for little profit, and even the burning of their homes. But in fairness, this renegade behaviour was not common. In the historical records - but more particularly in the novels and ballads written mostly after the era of reiving - the activities of the border reivers have been romanticized after the myth of Robin Hood and his Merry Men. Unfortunately, few of the leaders of these raids were motivated by anything other than rapacious greed, and their willing mounted troopers may have been merry enough among their own throng but, as noted, sometimes did exhibit cruel and ruthless behaviour. But their trade was lucrative, sometimes spectacularly so, which may have dulled the conscience of men who would return home to loving and dutiful lives with their families...until the next raid!

The results of these reiving expeditions ranged from total failure (and perhaps capture and a date with the hangman) to bountiful reward. Failure might result upon being confronted and outnumbered by a posse of government men or the angry, victimized pursuers, or just that the 'haul' was scarcely worth the effort. But records tell of quite

spectacular successes. In his book 'The Steel Bonnets', George MacDonald Fraser describes a few such examples including the following:

'Figures are available for the forays run by the Elliots over a decade from the early 1580s; they are almost certainly conservative figures, since they take account only of actual raids complained of and recorded. And they include only raids in which the Elliots were in a majority; other forays in which the Elliots took a hand, but were not the ringleaders, have been excluded. There were more than forty of these "exclusively Elliot" raids, and the total score, at the lowest estimate, was more than 3000 cattle stolen, over £1000 worth of insight taken, sixty-six buildings destroyed, fourteen men murdered, and 146 prisoners kidnapped.'

The 'insights' referred to here were general household goods or other portable items of personal property seized in addition to the livestock. The kidnapped prisoners would generally be ransomed, sometimes for considerable sums of money if the captive was from a monied family or a clan that could afford the ransom. Some of the murders committed seem to have been gratuitous or spiteful, perhaps where victims were just defending themselves or their families, or not behaving as docilely as they were expected to. And there were instances where women were abused in a cruel manner, including rape or being made to watch their husbands or sons being slaughtered, and left destitute. The burning of dwellings and farm buildings seems unnecessary; perhaps it was done just for the fun of it, or in some cases as part of feuding payback.

The Elliots were middle march Scots, but their counterparts on the English side were no less active or ruthless. The records of plunder that exist are far from comprehensive, but it seems likely that the English reivers profited considerably more – as measured in total plunder - from their raiding than the Scots. That might be explained by the fact that the population of English borderers was close to three times greater than that on the Scottish side.

Reiving as a Living - A Dangerous Business

While some reivers earned their living primarily from that profession, most had day jobs back on their farms or in their villages. The number of raiders could vary from a single individual to fifty, a hundred...or more. When multiple in number, most typically were of the same family, but they would often draw on trusted associates from other clans. The larger the number of horsemen the more planning would be involved, and, like a military campaign, it would be meticulously detailed, with the input of expert guides who knew every knoll, pathway and watering-hole, as well as most of the more obscure routings unfamiliar to many of their pursuers. Raids were usually planned to take place at night. Moonlit nights were sometimes preferred, but for experienced men darkness was generally most advantageous.

Raids took place throughout the year, but early winter was prime when the cattle were recently back from their summer grazing in the high country and still strong and easily hard-driven after being rustled. The nights were long, which made detection and tracking more difficult for the 'hot trod' pursuers, and foul winter weather over rugged

terrain was more of an advantage to the raiders, except to the extent that herding animals would slow their pace.

Effectiveness of the March Warden System

The march warden system over most of the 300 years it was in place had limited effect in curtailing the reivers, although some wardens were conscientious enough to make a real difference. They acted like regional Governors, their authority deriving from their royal appointments, and the special provisions of March Law.

As noted previously, there were three wardens on each side of the border, each responsible for a march territory - east, middle and west; there was a fourth second-tier appointment on the Scottish side to administer Liddesdale, so infested with cells of hyperactive reivers that it was seen to merit its own separate overseer, with the title of Keeper of Liddesdale. The role of the wardens was to maintain law and order and to defend the border between Scotland and England, at least in times of peace. They filled the roles of Chief of Police, Chief Prosecutor, Judge, Commander-in-Chief of military operations and Head Diplomat, the latter function mainly involving liaising with the other wardens on both sides of the border. Their biggest single goal was to police the gangs of reivers and bring to justice those found breaking the law...simply stated, but virtually impossible to achieve with the resources normally available to them to do the job.

And yet these appointments were much sought after. The nominal stipends were not especially attractive, but the prestige and power of the positions was all the compensation many of the candidates craved. That and the opportunities to enrich themselves indirectly through acquiring the proceeds of confiscated property of convicted criminals, the occasional acquisition of land grants and other incidental emoluments, whether legally sanctioned or not.

An unfortunate reality of their positions was that there was little trust among wardens, particularly between those on opposing sides of the border. They represented different and often hostile governments that periodically invaded one another's territory, with all manner of military, political and diplomatic conflicts stirring the pot. They often operated espionage networks to spy on their cross-border colleagues and pass on whatever secrets they could discover to their central governments. To add mutual insult to mutual insult, wardens would also occasionally head up raids across the border ostensibly to pursue a gang of reivers when an altogether more devious purpose might be the real reason. There certainly were occasions when the wardens were doing some reiving of their own or attempting to achieve a military objective in times of peace. It is little wonder that the Scottish and English wardens had scant reason to trust one another, and this impaired the effectiveness of their shared purpose of maintaining order across their jurisdictions.

There was one notable exception to this collective poor performance of the wardens over much of the reiving times, which is not to suggest that all the others were self-serving or inadequate. On the English side in the 1550's the indomitable Lord Thomas Wharton, at that time Deputy Lord Warden General of the English Marches, took

matters in hand in a concerted effort to substantially curtail border lawlessness. First, he replaced the three then-current English wardens with more capable incumbents, then strong-armed the local gentry into providing up to 1000 armed horsemen to form roving patrols right across the border from Berwick to the Solway. His main focus was on beefing up the 'watches' at the 39 most frequently used passages - mainly river crossing points, especially fords - of the invading reivers, particularly during the troublesome winter months. A system of communications involving beacons on hilltops and the roofs of towers and other signaling methodologies was put in place to give the alarm when reiving parties were spotted. Packs of 'slew-dogs' were also trained to help track down the raiders, and they proved very effective. With encouragement from Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots authorized her half-brother - Lord James Stewart - to enforce order on the Scottish side. This envisioned the setting up of a similar system of vigilance, policing and pursuit on the Scottish side of the border. But Stewart's cruder and less effective approach was that of summary lynching or dragging offenders off to Edinburgh for trial, almost always ending up in public hangings.

Wharton also reintroduced regular Truce Days that were first instigated in 1249. These were part of a formal system of legal redress for victims, but made available only infrequently in later years, particularly during the more turbulent 1540's. This process is described more fully under '*The Cold Trod*' below.

In spite of these measures, all too often the raiding parties continued to evade the patrols and circumvent the watches, but at a curtailed level that helped to ease the misery inflicted on the peaceful residents of the marches.

Righting the Wrongs - The 'Trod'

There were two main legal avenues of redress, one generally requiring ready access to a large pool of mounted fighters, the other involving registering a complaint with the warden. The first of these was the right to organize an armed pursuit within six days following the reiving. It was referred to as a 'hot trod' which sanctioned the forcible recovery of the stolen property and arrest of the perpetrators. After six days, the only option was the *cold trod* that relied upon action by the march warden.

Legal as the hot trod may have been, it was fraught with danger and uncertainty as to outcome. The aggrieved pursuer would usually need to muster a large mounted force of experienced fighting men. Very occasionally the warden might assist, but more often the posse would be made up of clan members and other sympathetic volunteers. They would have the advantage of speed in being able to catch up with the marauders who might be slowed down by the need to herd the livestock, but if the latter had employed experienced frontiersmen they would likely be able to evade detection through the use of obscure escape routes. They might also be well protected by expert fighters. If the hot troders were successful they could take the captives back to their warden for justice to be done or hold them for ransom...or just execute them on the spot. This was illegal, but hot troders were rarely held to account for carrying out such frontier justice.

If the thieves reached home base ahead of the chase, they would be unlikely to corral the livestock on their own land, but instead would usually either sell it on to '*recettors*' located many miles away, or have them keep the animals and other identifiable property until the heat was off. Border laws allowed pursuit across the border, but there were strict rules as to how the posse had to conduct itself in carrying out the chase.

The 'Cold Trod' and 'Days of Truce'

The *cold trod* option was available to victims who either could not command a troupe of armed pursuers or who were uncertain as to the identity of the offending reivers. Border law allowed for a complaint to be made to the warden in the march where the raid took place, and he was expected to investigate the crime and try to identify the offender. If the warden succeeded in doing so he would issue a *Bill of Complaint* and make contact with the warden of the culprit's home turf with a request to arrest him and bring him forward at the next 'Truce Day' for trial which, if guilt was proved, would emphasize restitution in money or kind rather than prison or hanging.

Truce days were intended to be held monthly but seldom were; the wardens had many reasons, or excuses, within their discretion to delay the assemblies. Success to a large extent was dependent on a reasonable level of trust and amity between the opposing wardens, and that was lacking in many instances. Typically, the two wardens and their considerable armed entourage would approach the pre-arranged meeting place with great caution. They would stop and spend a good deal of time sizing one another up to gauge the level of aggressiveness or treacherous intent. Fighting frequently did break out during these parleys, usually as a result of misunderstandings or pre-existing inter-clan feuds. There were so many obstacles that could frustrate or deny proper judicious resolution, including the state of politics at the time, the personal relationship between the wardens, conflicting vested interest, clan affiliations or enmities, and so on. But the process did go some way towards providing equitable resolution and reducing the potential for feuding and violent tit-for-tat.

Liddesdale - The Cockpit of the Borders - and The Debatable Land

Two areas of the marches deserving of special mention are Liddesdale and the Debatable Land, infested as they were by clans who earned a reputation as the worst of the worst in border reiving. Liddesdale was one of the most dangerous places in Europe in the 1500's, especially for strangers foolish enough to wander through the rough landscape of its lawless territory. At the height of its power there were around seventy defensive Peel Towers dotting the landscape, with the most important fortification being Hermitage Castle, built in 1244 and still standing. It is the oldest surviving castle in Scotland.

Liddesdale is a small strip of land located about 15 miles north of the border and 25 miles from Carlisle, within the middle march in the valley of the Liddell Water. It occupies an area of just 17 by 12 miles. Today it encompasses the village of Newcastleton, most of the remainder being farmland. But in the 16th Century 3000 mounted reivers could be mustered on very short notice, indicative of a very much larger population at that time. It was home to the Armstrongs and the Elliots. These

were rapacious clans who were feared, detested and perennially in feud with the surrounding clans. Some of the most notorious bandits of the era were either Armstrongs or Elliots, including Jock Elliot of the Park and Kinmont Willie Armstrong. Willie established himself in legend when, following his capture by the English in 1596, a bold rescue broke him out of the almost impregnable Carlisle Castle.

After King James V led a force into Liddesdale in 1530, hanging and burning over a score of the local rebels, the Armstrongs and Elliots disavowed any allegiance they might have had to the Scottish Crown. They carried out incessant raids, usually into England (on one occasion making off with 3000 head of cattle), but often into the territory of their Scottish neighbours. The devastation they wrought was so great that in 1569 the boroughs of Berwick, Peebles, Selkirk and Roxburgh entered into a written pact *'never to intercommune with any of the said thieves, their wives, bairnes or servants, or give them meat, drink, house or harbour'* along with a long list of other proscribed forms of contact or business dealings, unless (not likely) they would reform their wicked ways. This manifesto of the weak had no effect on the Liddesdale hordes who continued in their old ways until - as described later - they were brought to heel by James VI after 1603 when many paid the ultimate price or suffered banishment and hardship.

Bordering Liddesdale to the south-west just north of Carlisle was the **Debatable Land**, so named at least as far back as the 13th Century. Like Liddesdale, it is a narrow strip of land just 4 to 5 miles wide by 12 miles in length. The territory was claimed by both Scotland and England and as such no settlement was tolerated by either government, but as open, fertile land, squatters could never be excluded for long; when their homes or other buildings were burned, they would return to re-build within days. The two countries set up a Commission to reach agreement on legal sovereignty, with a final settlement being achieved in 1552. Scotland was awarded close to two-thirds of the land, England the remainder. The division was marked by a trench and bank built to mark the frontier named the Scots Dyke. It is still visible to this day.

Particularly prior to 1552, the land was almost solely taken over by the Grahams and the Armstrongs and likened to the Khyber Pass. The 'viperous' Grahams were found mainly in the southern portion and the Armstrongs to the north, the latter having infiltrated as the clan's population swelled. The incentive for the two nations to agree on a split of ownership was mainly to enable and empower each jurisdiction to enforce law and order within the territory. Post 1552, a start was made to accomplish that goal, but it would not be fully achieved until after the purges that began in 1603.

The Hellish 16th Century and the role played by the Monarchs

Peace did eventually come to the borders, but ultimately not until the early years of the reign of James I of England/VI of Scotland. There was a long and tempestuous run-up to this, the full account of which would take too long to detail here, but a short overview is essential to a fuller understanding of border reiving history.

The 16th Century was arguably the most violent and unruly period for the long-suffering inhabitants of the borders, and the rulers on each side played a major part in either recklessly stirring the pot through conflicts rooted in political, religious and monarchical rivalries, or through a lack of determination to confront the causes and pursue the appropriate remedies.

We can start with the reigns of James IV of Scotland and his nemesis, Henry VIII, and move on through the short interval of the reign of Mary Queen of Scots to the years immediately prior to the union of the crowns in 1603. In the roughly two centuries prior to this time, Scotland and England seemed to have been almost incessantly at each other's throats militarily and in large scale raids that were either sanctioned by the respective governments or were of more spontaneous origin. The greatest of these affrays was the mighty Battle of Flodden Field which took place on September 9, 1513. Scotland fielded a much larger force of soldiers and should have won easily, but she lost, and her king was slain. This defeat and the death of James IV and many hundreds of officers who largely accounted for the nobility and leadership of the nation (the 'Flower of Scotland') created the conditions for nearly a hundred years of even greater border chaos and violence than previously.

James V was just a year old when he succeeded to the throne in 1513. For the next 15 years Scotland was ruled by regents, but despite his youth James began to assert his authority in 1528 and almost immediately set out to tame the borders. In May of that year he led a force of 8000 soldiers and at least partially subdued the worst of the reiving families. But he and Henry VIII became bitter enemies, Henry ordering many large raids into Scotland carried on throughout the 1530's and '40's in what constituted a state of undeclared warfare. This created the chaos that allowed the clans on both sides of the border to once again exploit the dearth of forces of law and order to their benefit.

James's final undoing was his loss at the Battle of Solway Moss on November 24th, 1542. The English forces were led by the bold and very capable Thomas Wharton, later Warden Wharton. Although he had far fewer fighting men than the 12-14,000 Scots, through the sustained guerrilla tactics of skirmish and withdrawal, he nevertheless forced them into a panicked retreat at the river Esk. His forces were too small to pursue the fleeing Scots, but the Scottish border reivers - who despised James for his ruthless behaviour towards them - in a clear act of treason took their revenge and did the job for the English. It was a particularly bitter pill for James given that, like his father's at Flodden, his forces far outnumbered the English. Without going into the details, poor leadership in the field was the cause of Scotland's defeat, and James was not present at the battle. He died at Falkland Castle just two weeks later at the age of just thirty, probably as a direct consequence of his feelings of devastation. The Battle of Solway Moss has been described as the most humiliating military defeat in Scottish history.

Following the death of James V, the conflicts between Scotland and England carried on unabated, with several large military incursions into Scotland that had crushing effects. The worst of these was ordered by Henry VIII in 1544 which caused widespread

devastation. First Leith was attacked, then Edinburgh Castle, which fortunately withstood the attempt to breach its walls. But the long-suffering border areas were sacked and pillaged. It was a terrible assault, with 192 towns, villages, farmsteads and towers destroyed; Jedburgh being burnt to the ground. Tens of thousands of livestock were taken and much of the corn harvest, as well as the people's possessions. Several other attacks followed in the latter years of Henry's reign, including the torching of Dumfries and the devastation of the Nith Valley.

Again, as directed by Henry VIII, the warden of the English West March, Sir Thomas Wharton (victor of the Battle of Solway Moss), carried on a very effective campaign of mischievous harassment into Scotland for a number of years throughout the 1540's. He also encouraged the clans to fight among themselves, cunningly egging on the 'small' ones to attack the larger that including the Scotts, Kerrs and Homes. This had the effect of curtailing the Scottish reivers from raiding England's marches quite so frequently. Financed by the English Exchequer, Wharton bribed many Scottish lairds and minor aristocrats with 'assurances' that indemnified them against any personal losses, whether at the hands of the southern or northern raiders. However, later in the 1550's (as described above beginning on page seven) Wharton became more a part of the solution than the problem itself by putting in place a system of surveillance and policing that greatly curtailing the activities of the reivers and inspired the Scottish border authorities to follow his lead. Henry VIII died in January 1547, leaving his sickly ten-year old son Edward IV as his heir.

A note on the construction of border homes and defensive structures

With the regular pillaging of border homes and farm outbuildings, it is not surprising that the worst affected villagers and farmers learned how to limit the disaster of repeated burnings by armed soldiers on punitive expeditions or reiving parties. Particularly in the worst of times, many poorer families resorted to the improvisational building of crude turf cabins that could be re-erected in a matter of a few hours with materials near at hand. In less conflicted times some would invest in a more solid structure designed as much for defense as shelter.

One such design was the Bastle House. It was two-stories high, with the animals being kept in the lower level. The people lived on the upper floor which was reached by a ladder on the exterior that could be hauled up if an attack was expected. The stone walls were up to three feet thick and the roof was built using either slate or stone tiles. This rendered the structure at least fireproof, and while they were not impregnable, it would take determination and siege to dislodge the terrified residents; but they could be smoked out. In exceptional cases of invasion - such as an expected punitive military campaign - the residents could flee to safety, but in order to minimize the possibility of the building being blown up with gunpowder, they would sometimes pack the lower level with smoldering turf. More wealthy families had the option of building a mainly defensive three-storey tower that (like some Bastle houses) could be encircled by a 'barmkin', or stone wall, that acted as an enclosure where livestock could be corralled overnight.

Unfortunately, in the late 1550's political tensions re-erupted between England and Scotland and Warden Wharton's commendable reforms and initiatives began to give way to the same old, same old as raiding and lawlessness picked up and roared on unabated through to the early years of the 17th Century.

On the death of her father, Mary Stuart (later known as Mary Queen of Scots or Mary I) was only six days old. She formally succeeded him in late December 1542, but Scotland was again treated to many years of regents jostling for power. After the death of her first husband (the Dauphin and then - very briefly - King of France) Mary returned to Scotland in December 1560. She married her ill-fated cousin, Henry Stewart - Lord Darnley - in 1565 and had a son, James, a year later. Rightly or not, Mary was implicated in Darnley's murder in February 1567. She was imprisoned and forced to abdicate in July of that year. Her continuing conflict with England's Elizabeth I is well known, leading to her lengthy incarceration and long-delayed execution in 1587.

James VI succeeded Mary upon her abdication in 1567 when he was just one year old, finally assuming royal authority seventeen years later in 1584. Throughout the intervening years Scotland was ruled by four unlucky regents, all of whom died - two by assassination and one being executed. In 1582 James was the victim of a coup led by the Earl of Gowrie and imprisoned. He escaped in June 1583 while being held at St. Andrews. He gathered supporters around him and captured and executed the 'traitor' Gowrie. During the two years following the coup and the probably-unjustified execution of the final regent, Lord Morton, the governance of Scotland could only be described as dysfunctional, creating even greater opportunities for reiving activity. But James began to display the nascent skills of a canny politician that he would continue to hone over the next couple of years and beyond.

With a threat that Scotland might succumb to renewed overtures from the French, Elizabeth sent an emissary to take the measure of James and try to have him use his new-found authority to do something about the resurgent border invaders. In their brief meeting he conveyed little enthusiasm for that crusade, but by 1585 the two monarchs did seem to agree that it was in both their interests to tame the borders and enact a peace treaty. We might assume that the beheading of his mother (but whom he hardly knew) caused James some sadness, although given their long-forced separation, probably not a great deal. There was the consolation that it helped to solidify his role as king but given that the execution of his mother was ordered by Elizabeth, it did seem to place their accord on shaky ground.

A note on the weather:

The history of the period of these goings on highlights a problem with the weather, with many serious storms affecting the movement of troops etc. The mid-16th Century suffered from the miserable effects of the onslaught of a new phase of the 'little ice age' that is believed to have started in the 1300's and continued to afflict Britain and northern Europe well into the 18th century. The winter of 1565 was held to be the coldest in living memory by contemporaries who had to shiver their way through it. For years following, and well into the 1570's, the frequent tempestuous winter storms had the salutary effect

of slowing down both armies and reivers alike, at least into the early 1580's (when other political events ignited a storm of activity), and while not stopping these conflicts, the carnage that would otherwise likely have carried on unabated was at least somewhat tempered. A silver lining of the time!

The beginning of the end

Feuding between the clans and the ensuing devastation it wrought had long been the curse of the borders, particularly in Scotland. After about 1580, reiving activity went into overdrive, among other events exacerbated by a renewal of long-festering enmities between two of the most powerful border families, the Maxwells and the Johnstones. The two clans constantly competed for wardenship of the west march, proof that on the Scottish side of the border clan power was more a qualification for appointments as warden than integrity and duty, or even ability. Each changeover was almost always followed by murderous fighting begun by the angry losing side, as it did in 1581. Being a centre of the Maxwell clan, the town of Dumfries was frequently a target for invasion and pillage throughout the 16th Century, not just by the Johnstones, but also other marauding reivers and English invading armies. The town was also the focus of reprisals after Maxwell raids, usually into England, but also closer to home. In 1588 James VI himself led an army against Dumfries and the Maxwells.

There were so many incidents of raiding and internecine conflicts throughout the late 1580's and 90's, many of which did alarm James VI and attracted his direct involvement. But a series of events in early 1603 following the death of Elizabeth I may have proved the last straw for James. Among the Grahams, the Armstrongs and the Elliots, the Queen's death seems to have signaled either the all-clear to ramp up the thieving forays into England or it was seen as a last chance before the expected clamp-down. In one week, that became known as the 'ill week', 5000 cattle were taken from Cumbria and raiding extended as far south as Penrith. It must have seemed like a frenzy of lawlessness that just had to be ended.

James VI/I - The Final Solution

The union of the crowns in 1603 resulted in the virtual cessation and defeat of reiving and the bloody, destructive military incursions on both sides of the English-Scottish borders. For that, the unalloyed credit goes to James Stuart, King James VI/I. With his accession to the throne of England (which technically included Wales) in early 1603 he now separately wore the crowns of both north and south Britain. He referred to himself as King of Great Britain, a reflection of his ambition to unite the two nations politically under a single Crown. But much as he tried, he failed to achieve that goal. The union of the parliaments would not be enacted until 1707 under Queen Anne.

Nevertheless, as sovereign of both lands, he was determined to bring Scotland and England together as one in amity and peace. And to achieve that, his priority was to bring order to the borders and eliminate the need for the marches and March Law, which, quite incredibly, he substantially managed to do within a span of just seven years. His methods were forceful and uncompromising; brutal in fact, but few would disagree that his tactics were the only ones likely to succeed and most of those who

would pay the hangman's fee as the price for law and order deserved little mercy or sympathy.

Long before James had even reached London on his journey south to claim his orb and crown, a declaration of his imminent intentions quoted in Alistair Moffat's **The Reivers** announced:

To his messengers, sheriffs and others, the late marches and borders of the two realms of England and Scotland are now the heart of the country. Proclamation is to be made against all rebels and disorderly persons that no supply be given them, their wives or their bairns, and that they be prosecuted with fire and sword.

A few weeks later, a further declaration was issued from London requiring those who had participated in the outrages of the 'ill week' to turn themselves in to face justice...or else! The Borders were to be renamed the Middle Shires and all strongholds in the former borders other than the habitations of the nobility were to be razed to the ground. In place of the wardenships, a Lieutenant was appointed on each side of the border line and supplied with a large force of support personnel, mainly professional soldiers. So, let the hangings begin! And they did, hundreds being rounded up and dispatched without much legal process, if any. Mass executions were the order of the day, especially in Dumfries, Jedburgh and Carlisle. Among the clan leadership, cooperation was their best ticket to survival and the non-confiscation of their lands and property. Some sought sanctuary on the continent until the purges had passed.

In 1605 a Border Commission was set up with five Scottish and five English commissioners working out of Carlisle Castle. Cases involving alleged criminality were referred to the Commission, with almost all the accused ending up on the end of a rope. By 1610 there were very few incidents of reiving on either side of the Scottish/English border; the Border Commission had carried out its grizzly brief with great efficiency and success. Men of the borders were prohibited from bearing arms and could not own a horse valued at more than £30 (that surely must have equated to a very tidy sum in today's currency. Would a fellow not have to steal and pillage to own one?) After several hundred years of unbridled reiving, destruction and bloodshed, peace and order had been restored to the same standards that applied generally throughout most of the two kingdoms. And that included many of the Highland and Island areas of Scotland where not dissimilar lawlessness had flourished for hundreds of years until purged in a parallel move to action. And kudos go almost entirely to James Stuart. 'He done good', his proud mum might have proclaimed...while cradling her head under her arm.

It might be appropriate to end the account of this long saga, so filled with dastardly deeds that were often couched in heroic hyperbole in their own time, or not many years following. The raiders were criminals motivated largely by greed, and on many occasions committed murderous atrocities that seemed more gratuitous than expedient. And yet - perhaps predictably - these scoundrels and their deeds were romanticized in novels and ballads. The novelist and poet, Sir Walter Scott, was more responsible than any other for the awareness and (to a degree) popularity of the border ballads through his collecting, editing and publishing of a large anthology of border ballads in the **Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border**. His friend - James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd -

authored a poem/song, 'Lock the Door Lariston', that describes a swashbuckling border marches incident. While it may not be historically accurate, it is a rich source of the names and clans active at the time. Many of the ballads glorify, or at least endear, the 'hero' of the piece, such as the clever and very capable Kinmont Willie, who despite being the toast of his contemporaries, was no less a murderous, thieving rascal than most of the other reiving fraternity.

But I shall leave it there and not make any attempt to tarnish the rich tradition and minstrelsy that serves as a cultural companion to the history of border reiving, regardless of the villainy of its individual members.

Jim McLaughlin, for the Calgary Burns Club 'Bob Carnie Group'.
September 2019.

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