

The Borderland

Nearly two thousand years ago the Roman emperor Hadrian defined the outer limits of his empire with the biggest civil engineering project then undertaken, -- The Roman Wall. He chose the line from Solway to North Sea as the place where he could say "this is where empire ends.

For hundreds of years after the departure of the Romans, the area in what is now Cumbria, see-sawed between various Kingdoms, principalities and petty warlords. The Scots would have everyone believe that it was part of Scotland but in fact it was part of Strathclyde, a kingdom in its own right that eventually became part of Scotland.

When William the Conqueror hi-jacked the English Crown, he drew his boundary a long way to the south, around Kendal, and it was left to his son William Rufus to push north and define the boundary between England and Scotland in more or less the position it holds today.

Apart from a period in the mid 12th Century when Scotland once again held sway in the region as a tenant of the English King, the area was always English. However, being so far away from the seat of power it was neglected and almost forgotten (things don't change that much in 900 years). The Borderland was coveted both by England and Scotland. Any dispute between the crowns of England and Scotland saw invasion, rape, plunder; both sides being guilty.

This then was the breeding ground for a unique race of people to develop. A race with its own customs, its own law and its own way of life, almost a kingdom within a kingdom yet a kingdom without a titular head. Because the area had been fought over again and again, with scant regard for the inhabitants, their allegiance changed from the state to the family.

The family was the one dominating influence on both sides of the border. The families had been hardened and damaged by years of incessant squabbling between the two crowns and they saw how rampaging armies sacked and plundered wherever they went. And as many of the men of the family would be pressed into military service for one king or another, it is little wonder that this became a way of life. To these people strife and warfare were the norm.

In the times of relative peace, the border folk had to survive. Their land, generally, was tough and difficult to cultivate. So what better way to "keep the wolf from the door" than to do what the armies did? Nip across the Border and do a bit of plundering.

Thus were born the Border Reivers

Today it is difficult to conceive the scale of the plundering and depredation that went on. It mattered very little to the reivers what the two countries were doing. They had little regard for the authority of either crown and they had to fend for themselves. Their first allegiance was to the family and their kin. So strong were the family ties that injury to one member of a family was seen as an injustice to the whole family and this inevitably led to family feuds, one family pitted against another.

So how did the reivers go about their business?

There was a reiving season, usually after the harvests had been gathered and the nights were longer when darkness afforded better cover for the nefarious activities. A band of anything from half a dozen men to 200 to 300 would cross the border by little known tracks and byways. In the darkness, their knowledge of the treeless wastelands, bogs and ravines of the Borderland was unparalleled. With their doughty little fell ponies they could ride forty miles in a night to a spot, rustle the cattle, plunder the house and then high tail it back across the border with all the booty and the livestock. If they left no clues or did not let a name slip, they were pretty much untouchable.

However if they were identified they could be followed across the border by pursuers under a convention of the Border Laws called "Hot Trod". The only stipulation was that the pursuers had to mount a burning turf on a pikestaff to identify them as being on Hot Trod.

The men on the hot trod could arrest the reiver, if they found him and bring him home to face justice in whichever country the pillage had occurred.

To administer justice in this lawless area both kingdoms split the border into three sections called marches, west, middle and east. To each march was appointed a warden who was the king's representative in the area but in some instances was the biggest reiver of all.

An incident between Annan and the order possibly highlights the scale of depredation and the connivance of government officials. The Warden of the English West March on a reiving raid was intercepted by the Scottish King. Here was the classic dilemma for any Reiver. His band had 8000 cattle and 20,000 sheep rustled from Dumfriesshire. Should he stop and fight the Scottish monarch or make a run for the Border with the booty. Yes, you've got it right. Half his men skirmished with the king while the other half got the animals safely back to England.

However it was these same men who were charge by the respective monarch to administer justice. On set "truce days" the Warden and his counterpart from the other country would meet at an appoint place and people from both sides of the border could air their grievance. The allegation might be made that Walter Elliot of Copshaw had raided the home of John Little, raped his wife and stolen six cattle. If the wardens considered there was a case to answer, the miscreant would be hand over to stand trial. All very civilised, these days were riddles with intrigue and deceptions.

On such a day of truce, one Kinmont Willie was riding home on the Scottish bank of the river Liddel, probably insulting the Englishmen on the other bank. Tired of the insults and probably the worse for wear through alcohol, the English crossed over the river and captured Kinmont, one of the most notorious reivers on the border. They took him back to Carlisle Castle with great jubilation. But their actions caused an international incident. Kinmont had been taken on a truce day when all persons were given safe passage.

James, King of Scotland, demanded his release, while Elizabeth of England squirmed with embarrassment but she could not let a man of such notoriety go Scot free. (Hence the saying) In the end the matter was resolved by one of the first commando style raids in history when an intrepid band of about 30 Scots entered Carlisle Castle at night and freed Kinmont before the English knew what was happening. Or did they? Was this the easy way out of a difficult situation for the English crown? We will never know.

In these hard and uncompromising times everyone still had to pay rent or Mail as it was known to their landlord. However local cottagers and tenants also had to pay protection money to some of the more notorious gangs or clans of this letter to a term which today is used in everyday English, blackmail or the black rent.

The reivers were not always plundering and pillaging but it was always near the surface. They enjoyed their sport and the earliest recorded international football match was between lads from Copshaw in Scotland and Bewcastle in England. Just as today, a dispute arose which ended with one of the Scottish lads being knifed in the belly "so that his guttes fell out". But they put them back in and stitched him up so that he could walk back home. (Premiership prima donnas please note).

The reivers were not without their humour. There is the famous tale of the Scottish King coming to the god forsaken wilds of Liddesdale and being unable to find a church in which to pray, asked if there were no Christians thereabout. The answer: "Naw, only Armstrong and Elliots."

And then there was the case of the reiver sentenced to death by the Scottish King who asked to be spared long enough to read the wondrous book that he had discovered called The Bible. Much impressed by his piety and repentance, the King granted his wish. With typical reiver cunning, he had the nerve to tell the king that first he would to be taught to read.

However as Elizabeth the first aged the reivers knew once James of Scotland inherited the crown, there would be no hiding place. For centuries they had hopped from one side of the border to another to evade justice. This led to a frenzy of reiving in the final years of the reign of Elizabeth. After her death, the fears of the reivers were realised and all the worst criminals had been rounded up by James and hanged and families or clans were cleared out.

The 600-strong Graham clan was reduced to about half a dozen individuals within a few years of James's reign. And where did they send them. As far away from James as humanly possible, to Northern Ireland, where they couldn't cause trouble. (?)

The reiving families must have known that the game was up but they did not slip quietly into the long goodnight. They reappeared with the moss troopers of the late 17th century and there were various outbreaks of lawlessness for over a hundred years before the reiving passion was finally quelled.

The families are now spread all over the world and as George MacDonald Fraser points out in his truly memorable book *The Steel Bonnets*, when the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong, was greeted by US President Richard Nixon, the embrace of an Armstrong by a Nixon would have been unthinkable 400 years ago..

Do you want a list of the reiving families?