

RATTLIN ROARIN WILLIE — WILLIE

Rattling, Roaring Willie. By the late SIR WALTER ELLIOT, K.S.C.I., etc., etc., of Wolfelee. With additional Notes by W. ELIOTT LOCKHART, Esq.

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[The original's footnotes are reproduced here in square brackets following the text to which they refer.]

It will be in the recollection of those who were present at the meeting of the Club at Branxholm in September, that the spot which marked an important incident in the life of the old Border Minstrel known as "Rattling, Roaring Willie," was pointed out in the immediate vicinity — an incident which brought his tuneful career to a close.

At the end of the Fourth Canto of the "Lay of the Last Minstrel," Sir Walter Scott makes the old bard refer to his master and instructor in song, as his authority for describing the combat between Richard Musgrave and Lord Cranstoun. Sir Walter, in a note on this passage, states that the person here alluded to as the "Jovial Harper," was one of our ancient Border Minstrels known as "Rattling, Roaring Willie," and author of the popular song which passes under the same title. He goes on to give the only particulars that seem to be known regarding him. Having quarrelled with a brother poet, known by the sobriquet of "Sweet Milk," "from a place on Rule Water so called," (but this is a mistake), while drinking at Newmill, they crossed the river to an open field [Now No. 10 Ordnance Survey, 25" scale, Teviothead parish. — W.E.L.] behind Allanpeel, about a mile above Branxholm, to settle their dispute with the sword. The result was that Willie slew his opponent at a spot long marked by a thorn tree which has now disappeared, but had been in existence within the memory of persons still alive. [Since the above was written, James Miller, Lochburnfoot, Allan Water, a retired gamekeeper in the employ of the Duke of Buccleuch, and one of the very few who remembered the thorn tree, died on the 5th January 1887, in his 90th year. — W.E.L.] Willie absconded, but having incautiously appeared at Jedburgh during the Rood Fair, he was tracked to his hiding place in Oxnam Water, and there seized by "Sir Gilbert Elliot and young Falnash," by whom he was made over to the Sherriff for trial. He was arraigned before the Court of Justice and Aire at Jedburgh, condemned, and executed. This is all that was then known of his fate.

The fact seems to be that in those days a duel was looked upon as a legitimate mode of settling a difference, and therefore no proceedings appear to have been instituted against him by the regular authorities. The matter however was taken up as a "blood feud" by the clan, and seems, as was usual at that time, to have been deemed an act of moral delinquency, bringing it within the cognizance of the Kirk Session.

Some time ago I had the opportunity of examining the Records of the Presbytery of Jedburgh. In these I found an entry connected with the parish of Cavers, which cleared up the obscurity in which this transaction was shrouded.

"On the 25th April 1627, the Rev. Walter McGill, minister of the parish, represented to the presbytery that William Henderson in Priestthaugh (a farm at the base of Skelfhill pen) parochiner [In the Act 1572, c. 54, parochiner is held to mean an owner of landed property,

i.e. heritor – W.E.L.] of Cavers had committed a fearful and cruell slaughter in slaying William Elliot called Sweet Milk, quho being summoned and not compeiring, the minister [was] ordained to caus summon with certification. On May 9th William Henderson being duly summoned compeired not, and the minister was ordained to enter ane process against him.” On the 16th, 23rd, and 30th, Mr McGill reported that he had repeated successively the admonition to Wm. Henderson for his slaughter, but without effect; and on the 27th June, that he had finished the process against him, still without success; finally that on the 12th December 1627, sentence of excommunication had been fulminated against him and several other persons.

This enables us to fix approximately the date of Willie’s execution, for, having failed to comply with the summonses of the Kirk Session in May and June, he remained in concealment until September, on the 25th day of which, or the first Tuesday after, the Rood Fair is held in Jedburgh. The Autumn Session of the Circuit Court of Justiciary is held in September or October, and the prosecution of such an offence at the instance of Elliot of Stobs, was probably short and decisive. We may therefore conclude that Willie’s trial and execution took place before the end of the year.

[The Sir Gilbert of the ballad was no doubt the first laird of Stobs, who rejoiced in the sobriquet of “Gibbie wi’ the gowden garters.” He was the son of William Elliot of Larriston, and Mary, daughter of Sir Walter Scott of Buccleuch. He married the daughter of Scott of Harden. Though a man of great influence, he is only called *Sir Gilbert* in the ballad. It was his grandson who was created a baronet of Nova Scotia in 1666, but his son was dubbed a knight bannaret at the Battle of Scone in 1643. As his death occurred between 1632 and 1637 (the exact year is not known), it is clear that he was the individual named in the ballad.

In the foot-note Sir Walter makes the “young Falnash” a Scott, but this also is an error. The estate of Falnash belonged to the Elliots from an early period. They appear in the Register of Privy Council under the name of “Ellot of Fallinesche” in 1569, and continue to be summoned in subsequent years to keep the peace of the Borders up to 1602. Falnash did afterwards pass into the possession of a Scott, but this was long subsequent to the transaction with which we are dealing – and thence into the estate of Buccleuch, but the exact date is not clear. In the Retours it is entered in the name of “Archibald Ellot of Falnesche” up to 1675, but in 1690 the entry is in the name of Walter Scott of Langshaw.

Satchells, who lived till nearly the end of the 17th century, writes:

“The Elliots, brave and worthy men,
Have been as much oppressed as any name I ken,
For in my own time I have seen so much odds,
No Elliot enjoyed any heritage, but Dunlibire, Fanash, and Stobs.”]

A careful search has been made for the proceedings on the trial in the justiciary records in Jedburgh, but without success – none such being preserved there. Pitcairn’s “Criminal Trials” only go down to 1624, and Dr Dickson of the Register Office informs me that after the close of the 16th century, it was the custom to write the minutes of the itinerary courts on separate fasciculi, and that many of them have been lost. A special search has been made by a skilled expert in the justiciary records preserved in the General Register House from 1625 to 1629, without finding any trace of the trial. The proceedings of the Circuit Courts are given in full at that period as far as they go, but it is added that “some of them are not entered at all, for there are references to various circuits simply on the margin.”

As to Sweet Milk, it is difficult to say who he was. The sobriquet occurs twice, as the “to-name” of individuals brought to the notice of the Privy Council, e.g. – Gib Elliott, in a list of Border delinquents, who had failed to appear before the Justice Court at Jedburgh in 1586-7; Dandie Elliott, said to be a follower of the Laird of Branxholm, as a marauder in certain plundering forays between 1598 and 1600. It was doubtless, therefore, one of the epithets or “to-names” in general use at the time, to distinguish the many clansmen with the same Christian name from each other.

Whoever he was, he appears to have been a man of the same kidney as his opponent, and probably they were friends and boon companions before the quarell which terminated so fatally for both. By the parish records he appears, under date October 1623, as “William Sweet Milk, parochiner in Cavers,” for immorality, and again in September 1624, with Robt. Scott and Helene Langlands of the same parish, on a similar charge. Several families of the name of Elliot are noted as residents in Cavers parish at this time, but in none of them can we trace any connection with our Sweet Milk.

The above is all the information I have been able to procure regarding the personality of Henderson. The attempts to trace his compositions are even more difficult. Transmitted from mouth to mouth for nearly two centuries, they must have lost much of the original character imparted to them by their author.

This extract forms just under a quarter of Sir Walter Elliot’s paper, which was continued by W. Elliott Lockhart, Sir Walter having unfortunately died before he had completed it. The rest of the paper examines and gives in full all the song and ballad texts which Sir Walter Elliot “collected with considerable difficulty from every available quarter,” and concludes with W E Lockhart’s discussion of those musical texts he knew of.

Sir Walter included all the songs and ballads already given here in *THE SONGS — I*. The many additional ones he collected are given below in *THE SONGS — II*.

In his continuation and conclusion W E Lockhart discusses (but does not include, nor analyse) some of the musical texts which I had already explored before reading the paper, as well as some I had not yet seen. While most of the rest of this article represents my own thoughts in my own words, there is still much to quote from these esteemed gentlemen, so we will distinguish them by the initials WEW (Sir Walter Elliot of Wolfelee) and WEL (W. Elliott Lockhart).

A note on Sweet Milk

As WEW notes, the name Sweet Milk does not refer to a place but was a “to-name” used by the Elliots. Neither of the Sir Walters has anything to say about its meaning. The expression “sweet milk” does not have the familiar ring of “milk-white steed” but it does occur in three ballads collected by Francis J Child (*King Arthur and King Cornwall; Lamkin; Bonny Baby Livingston*, Nos. 30, 93 and 222 in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1882-1898). The phrase has passed from common use but it simply means “fresh milk”,

rather than sour milk, buttermilk, fromage frais *etc.*, and as such is in the memory of people still living, both in Scotland and the southern United States.

A note on Place Names

A near-contemporary (1654) map of Teviotdale by Joan Blaeu is on the National Library of Scotland website and is well worth a look:

<http://www.nls.uk/maps/early/blaeu/page.cfm?id=122>

Most of the places mentioned in the narrative lie close to the Teviot and to the Hawick-Langholm road, now part of the A7, but with a history redolent of Bob Dylan's Highway 61.

The Allan Water joins the Teviot at Newmill, where there are ford crossings over both.

Cavers is southwest of Denholm off the Hawick-Jedburgh road.

Jeddart is still the local name for Jedburgh.

Falnash, sometimes pronounced Fanash, is a farm close to Carlenrig, where Johnie Armstrang and his followers were executed without trial by James V.

Ousenam (Oussnam on the map) has also been Oxenham and is now Oxnam. Oxnam Water joins the Teviot at Crailing, on the Jedburgh to Kelso road.

Priesthaugh, pronounced Priestoff, formerly a possession of Melrose Abbey, is a farm 3 miles south of the A7.

Stobs estate is just south of Hawick on the Newcastleton road.

Wolfelee or Wolflee is south of Hawick near Bonchester Bridge.