

The Debatable Armstrongs and their Graham Relations

For most of the 16th century, the Debatable Land was dominated by two families: the Armstrongs on the Scottish side and the Grahams on the English side of the Anglo-Scottish Border. While it might be expected that these great reiving families would be natural enemies, they actually had more in common than their Scottish roots. Evidently, to the chagrin of both of their governments, there was more collaboration than conflict. The most important means by which this was achieved was, of course, intermarriage. Whether mutual respect and, at times, intimidation factored in their association, historical records indicate the alliance of these families produced significant impacts on the relations of the two kingdoms prior to the 1603 Union of the Crowns. We should be most grateful to Queen Elizabeth I's Chancellor, Lord Burghley, and his lifelong obsession with these families, and to Joseph Bain who published the Calendar of Border Papers in 1894-96.

It is generally thought that the Armstrongs moved into the Debatable Land, from adjacent Liddesdale and Ewesdale, around 1518 while Scotland was still recovering in the aftermath of the death of King James IV and some 5,000 Scots at Flodden Field in 1513. "Lang Will" Graham likely came from Hutton Parish, northwest of the Debatable Land, from a place called Moskesso or Maskesswra. He arrived with his eight sons in the English Debatable Land about 1516, according to Queen Elizabeth's Chancellor Lord Burghley, having been banished out of Scotland. They settled mostly across the Esk from the Debatable Land. At least one other Graham family likely preceded them in the area – living in nearby Nichol Forest. Neither of these families was known to be closely related to the Prior George Graham, and his brother 'Priors John' who lived in Canonby, in the heart of Scottish Debatable Land in the middle of the century.

Johnnie Armstrong of Gilnockie built Hollows Tower by 1526, and it became a cause of dispute between England, who claimed it to be illegally built within the Debatable Land, and Scotland, who refuted that. In 1528, English West March Warden Lord Dacre proceeded with an army of 2,000 into the area, attempting to clear it of buildings and inhabitants and destroy the tower. But he returned home that night to find his town of Netherby ablaze, courtesy of Gilnockie who had evidently been tipped off! Richard Graham of Arthuret (later of Netherby), accused of betraying the plans to Sandy Armstrong, was detained, but escaped and fled with his father and brothers into Scotland. The actual informant was found to be a Storey. This family then escaped to Northumberland, later losing their holdings to Lang Will's Grahams.

After the betrayal and hanging of Gilnockie and his retinue at Carlenrigg in 1530 by James V, many Armstrongs exiled themselves in the nearby English West March for some years. Perhaps this became an opportunity to further acquaint themselves with their Graham neighbours. TJ Carlyle stated that there were a few Grahams executed with Gilnockie.

In 1537, a desire by both realms to clear the Debatable Land of malefactors gave rise to a proposal submitted to their respective crowns by both West March Wardens and their Deputies which read (in part, modernized spelling):

"... that all Englishmen and Scotsmen, after this proclamation made, shall be free to rob, burn, spoil, slay, murder and destroy all and every such person or persons, their bodies, buildings, goods and cattle, as doth remain or shall inhabit upon any part of the said Debatable Land, without any redress to be made for the same, except between sunrise and sundown, as ancient use and custom hath been to all others Englishmen and Scotsmen that inhabit not there without a 'stobe or stayke' [established abode claimed]."

Suffice to say, this did not bring peace to the region, nor endear the wardens to their subjects! In fact, it probably did little but foment trouble - those affected were likely displaced into their already overcrowded neighbors lands. Many were 'broken men' with little to lose. Perhaps this had something to do with the feud which erupted between the Grahams and their Armstrong counterparts in 1541.

In the State Papers of Henry VIII (vol. V, p.193) a letter is found from his nephew, King James V, complaining that on May 29, 1541, six sons of Lang Will Graham (Richard, Thomas, Fergus, Will, John, and Hutchin), along with about 50 others, on an open day foray came to Auchinbadrig, in the lands of Logane, in the parish of Kirkpatrick and there murdered brothers Thomas, Rolland, and William Armstrong, sons of David Armstrong. The accused then brazenly appeared the following Tuesday at a day of truce held by the Scottish West March Warden, Lord Maxwell, and his English counterpart, Sir Thomas Wharton, with the blood of the slain still on their hands, faces, and clothes. Maxwell was rebuffed when he asked for redress.

This was the start of a series of raids by the apparently emboldened Grahams into the Scottish West March:

July 24 – Lang Will's sons and others raided Ewesdale, killing Roger Wauch, Willie Thompson, and Bartholomo Bell, and stole horses.

July 26 – houses of Kirkhill, Whisgillis and Stanegill belonging to Christopher, Simon, and Jenkin Armstrong were burned. And on another day in July in Eddleton parish, Richard and other Grahams were said to have killed David Turner.

Note that these daytime summer forays were in stark contrast to typical raids, which were usually winter affairs by moonlight. The feud was on.

Sept 2, 1541, 1541 Sir Thomas Wharton wrote to Henry VIII:

“where there was great reпреifes borne by the Grahams Englishmen and the Armstrongs Scottishmen upon Friday the 26th of August last before the Lord Maxwell and me at our meeting, the same day as I did advertise you by one of my deputies, I had knowledge that the Armstrongs would send a challenge into England thereupon, and I devised with the Grahams that the Armstrongs would be challenged at the same present. Whereupon such writings passed as ye may perceive by the very same writing sent from the Armstrongs and by the copy sent from the Grayms hereinclosed. The Armstrongs haith maide no answer”

Sept 3rd, English Privy Council to Sir Thomas Wharton:

“And as touching the challenge made by the Armstrongs against the Grames, his highness is contented that the same shall be performed so as his majesty be first advertised of the circumstance thereof, and that it be done in an indifferent place before the wardens of both Marches.”

John Graham, in his 1905 “Condition of the Border at the Union: Destruction of the Graham Clan” claims that: “On receipt of the royal sanction, the two clans gathered up their whole fighting strength for the great duel, which was to decide the question of future masterdom in Canonbie. They met on the banks of the Esk, near Hollows, where the encounter was prolonged and bloody. Great numbers were slain on both sides, but finally the Armstrongs were victorious, the Grahams being driven down Eskdale over the border into Cumberland ..”

No date is given and, unfortunately, there is no official record of such a combat having taken place. In fact, tensions continued to mount along the border.

October brought a series of Warden raids on Liddesdale, led by Deputy Warden Thomas Dacre, with much livestock taken, crops and houses burned in Quhisgillis, Dalferno, Dalquhairney holme, Myddlee, Flatt, Cristyhill, Mangerton, and Copshawholm, and Andro Armstrong was slain. When redress was not obtained, some Armstrong brothers "Archibalde, Ringen, Symon, [and] Jenkyn and other Scottishmen with theym, cruelly slewe and murdered Arthure Game, Englishman", according to Wharton's complaint in December of that year. Upon hearing this, King James V, apparently trying to placate his uncle Henry, was so outraged that he came to Liddesdale in person intent on punishing the Armstrongs further!

So it is clear that the Armstrongs did not have the protection of their own warden or government. James V might later have regretted this in the wake of his army's loss at Solway Moss, the 1542 battle in Graham territory near Arthuret from which the Armstrongs wholly absented themselves. In its aftermath, the English took control of most of the West March including Canonbie, Scotland's repudiation of the 1543 Treaties of Greenwich, which betrothed the infant Queen Mary to King Henry's Prince Edward, led to the Hertford Invasions, aka 'The Rough Wooing'. Likely, for the sake of survival, many Armstrongs were forced to swear allegiance to the English crown at that time.

Perhaps trying to set an example to their kingdoms, some key Graham marriages to prominent Armstrongs probably took place within this period:

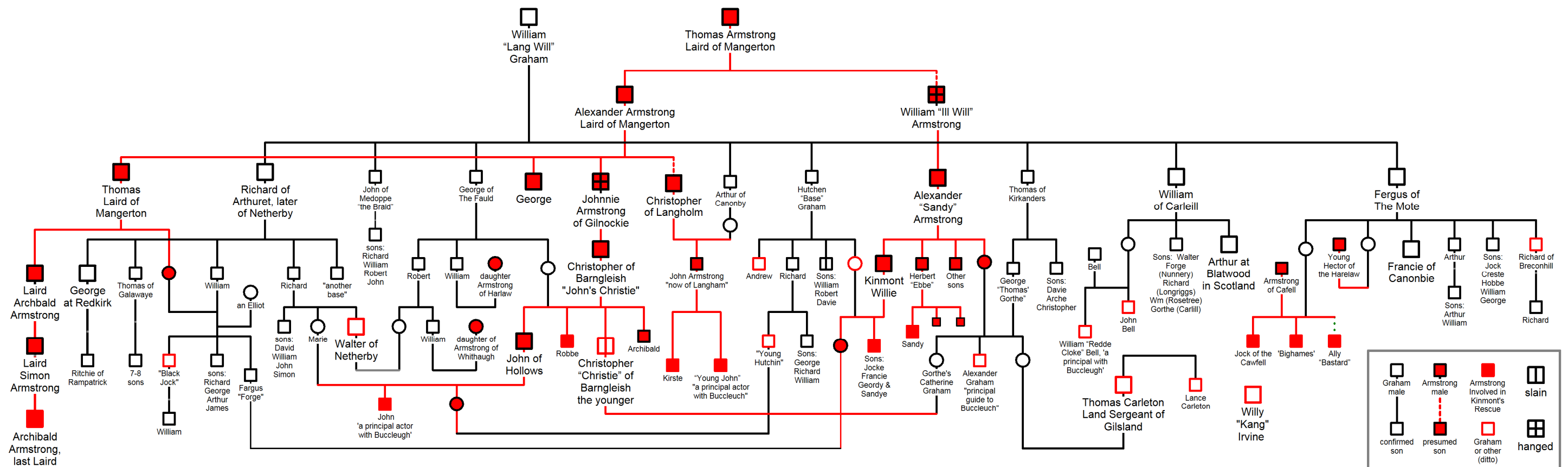
- A daughter of George Graham of the Fauld married Gilnockie's son, Christopher of Barngleish
- A son of the same George married a daughter of a Harelaw Armstrong
- A grandson of the same George Graham married a daughter of the Armstrong Laird of Whithaugh
- Richard of Netherby's son, William, married the daughter of Laird Thomas Armstrong of Mangerton

With the main branches of the Armstrongs now united with Lang Will Graham's descendants, it is not surprising that one is hard-pressed to find more than isolated records of raids of one family against the other throughout the rest of the century. Many more marriages took place in the subsequent decades, apparently relatively unaffected by belated proscriptions of both governments. From a statute of the Acts of Parliament of Scotland, dated July 8, 1587:

Item, since experience declares that the marriage of the king's majesty's subjects upon the daughters of the broken men and thieves of England is not only a hindrance to his majesty's service and obedience but also to the common peace and quietness between both the realms, it is therefore statute and ordained by our sovereign lord and three estates of this present parliament that none of his subjects presume to take upon hand to marry with any English woman dwelling in the opposite marches without his highness's express licence had and obtained to that effect under the great seal, under the pain of death and confiscation of all his goods moveable; and that this be a special point of dittay in time coming.

During the mid-1540's, some English Grahams began to move into the Scottish West March – eg. Arthur of Blaatwood, a son of William of Carlisle, and George of Redkirk, a son of Richard of Netherby, eventually become Scottish subjects. Both Redkirk and Blaatwood were located to the west of the Debatable Land. Arthur later took his claim over Barngleish to the Privy Council in 1583-4, which caused conflict with the incumbent Christopher of Barngleish, then in Langholm.

Border division occurred in 1552, after the scorched-earth policy of the 1550 Treaty of Norham could not provide a lasting solution. But while the Grahams had tenure on English side, the Armstrongs were increasingly caught between feuding Lords Maxwell and Johnstone, and the succession of Wardens. Canonbie Priory was alleged by some to have been destroyed by Wharton after Solway Moss, but it was more likely suppressed in 1544, under Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. A dispute between George and his brother John Graham, who had been given control over this land that year, went to the Privy Council in 1561. The church lands upon which some Armstrongs lived without tenure, eventually came under a series of owners from Hume in 1587, through Kerr and, finally, to Scott of Buccleuch.



Pedigree of the Grahams of Esk and their Armstrong Relations on the Anglo-Scottish Border in the 16th Century

Sources: Calendar of Border Papers I & II and Register of Privy Council of Scotland

In 1583, Thomas Musgrave reported to Lord Burghley, presenting a detailed and invaluable catalogue of the occupants of the West Marches and their relationships along the border. Burghley's map of 1590 shows some Graham towers in the Scottish portion of the Debatable Land: 'Francie of Canobie' is located approximately at the site of the former Priory, and 'Priors Johns' in the vicinity of Bowholme, the location of part of the present day village of Canonbie.

Lord Herries complained of the presence of the English Grahams in the Debatable Land to the Privy Council of Scotland in 1578, and that the Scottish borderers were marrying their daughters without dowries. In 1592, Lord Maxwell (see Calendar of Border Papers vol. 1, no. 793) complained to England against Walter Graham of Netherby, Grahams of Moat, and Richard of Beckonhill for occupying Canonbie and Harelaw, collecting duties and pasturing their cattle there over the past 25 years. Complaints from the Armstrongs, however, do not seem to appear.

The notorious abduction on a Day of Truce of well-known reiver Kinmont Willie Armstrong and his imprisonment in Carlisle castle in 1596 produced a major diplomatic crisis between Scotland and England. This was fortunately resolved before he could be hanged, but only by a collaboration of the Armstrongs and their Scottish allies under the leadership of Scott of Buccleuch, aided by some Armstrong in-laws – the English Grahams. Why were the Grahams involved? Kinmont's wife was the daughter of Hutcheon Graham. She disclosed the plan to him shortly before the escapade by the delivery of Buccleuch's ring during a prison visit. The perfectly executed prison break on a dark and stormy winter night has been the source of stories for centuries. Buccleuch candidly admitted on June 12, 1597 (Calendar of Border Papers vol. 2, no. 692):

I could nought have done that matter without great friendship of the Grames of Esk, and specially of my guid friend Francis of Canonbie, and of his brother Langton; and of Walter Game of Netherbye.

In unravelling the plot, Burghley's detailed knowledge of the pedigree of the Grahams, published in 1897 as an appendix to CBP vol. 2, led to the resignation of Buccleuch from his office as Keeper of Liddesdale and his surrender to English authorities. The above chart is derived from this, the earlier works of Musgrave, and a list provided by Richard Graham of Netherby to Lord Dacre in 1561, along with genealogical reference found in the Register of the Privy Council of Scotland.

The occasion of death of Queen Elizabeth and the Union of the Crowns in 1603 brought 'Ill Week', in which Armstrong and Graham individuals apparently celebrated by participation in numerous raids before the border was erased by King James. Retribution was swift, and the Pacification of the Borders followed. The Grahams, who now numbered over 1000 individuals, had been identified as having long-expired leases and were brought to account with deportation of many families to Ireland. Executions with or without trial, forced conscription, or banishment awaited many Armstrongs. Only a few fortunate Armstrong and Graham families remained in the Debatable Land and surrounding areas.

As a post-script to our previous series of articles on Christie's Will, we have a final romantic story of the Graham family's assistance provided to the Armstrongs, thanks to Sir Walter Scott, who has been suspected of wholly writing the ballad called 'Christie's Will'. William allegedly kidnapped Lord Durie, Lord of Session, 1621-42, at the instigation of the Earl of Traquair, the Lord High Treasurer, and detained him for three months at an uninhabited tower. According to the ballad:

"Willie has hied to the Tower of Game;
He took auld Durie on his back,
He shot him down to the dungeon deep,
Which garr'd his auld banes gie mony a crack."

The Tower of Grahams of Gillesbie, in Dryfesdale, Scotland is the purported place of this event. These Grahams, were descended from the Grahams of Moskesso (or Maskeewra), according to RC Reid who studied their family history. So, if the premise that Christie's Will was the son of Christopher of Bargleish, the Younger, is correct, then his mother would have been a Graham descended from Lang Will, who had the same ancestry of the Grahams of the Tower where he hid the Lord of Session!