

THE BATTLE OF DRYFE SANDS, 1593

The feud between the Maxwells and the Johnstones was one of the most bitter in the history of Scotland. In the second half of the 16th century, the heads of both families were at different times Wardens of the West Marches, each holding the office several times. Often the appointment came after a period of rebellious activity such as the weakness of the government of King James VI. The Maxwells, whose leader lived in Caerlaverock Castle, were more powerful than the Johnstones, whose chief was usually based at Lochwood Tower, near what is now Johnstonebridge. The fortunes of the families depended partly on the machinations and changing alliances at the Court of King James. For a time Lord Maxwell was abroad trying to arrange a Spanish invasion of Scotland in conjunction with the Spanish Armada, in an attempt to restore Roman Catholicism in Scotland. This did not bring about the retribution that might have been expected, partly because the King liked to keep his options open. Among the many events of the feud before Dryfe Sands were the burning of Lochwood Tower by the Maxwells, in 1585 (“We shall give Dame Johnstone light to set her hood by”), the partial burning of Lockerbie later in the year and then the capture of Sir John Johnstone and his imprisonment in Caerlaverock Castle. The hardness of this imprisonment probably hastened Sir John’s death in 1587, although he had resumed the feud after his release in the last year of his life.

Now his son, James Johnstone, soon to be knighted as Sir James Johnstone of Dunskeillie (a tower in Kirkpatrick Fleming parish), became the chief of the Johnstones. After the Armada failure Lord Maxwell was able not only to escape punishment but also in due course to become Warden of the West Marches again in 1592. In the same year Sir James Johnstone made an agreement with Lord Maxwell with the intention of ending the feud. In the following year William Johnstone of Wamphray, known as the “Galliard” led a raid on the Crichtons of Upper Nithsdale. Johnstone was captured and hanged. The Wamphray Johnstones, now led by William Johnstone of Kirkhill, launched a revenge raid on the Crichtons, during which at least 15 Crichtons were killed. Their widows carried their bloody shirts to Edinburgh, and these were paraded through the streets to shame the King into taking action.

Lord Maxwell as Warden now made an agreement with other leading Nithsdale families to deal with the Johnstones. In December 1593, Maxwell led an army of perhaps 2000 men out of Dumfries. As well as Maxwells, it included Robert Crichton, Lord Sanquhar, and his followers, and contingents led by Douglas of Drumlanrig, Kirkpatrick of Closeburn, Grierson of Lag, Charteris of Amisfield and various others. Meanwhile Sir James Johnstone had been warned by Johnstone of Cummertrees of Maxwell’s intentions, and he gathered a remarkable army, perhaps up to half the size of Maxwell’s. As well as many Johnstones, it included Scoffs from Teviotdale, Elliots from Liddersdale, Irvines, Murray’s, Carruthers, Grahams, and even “divers Englishmen”.

An advance party of Maxwell's army, led by a Captain Oliphant, was beaten near Lochmaben by a Johnstone force led by James Johnstone of Kirkton. Oliphant was killed, along with some of his men. The rest sought refuge in Lochmaben Kirk, but the Johnstones set fire to the building and forced its occupants to surrender. That night Maxwell's main army may have camped on the hill near Skipmyre. Next day he took up a position on the left bank of the River Dryfe near the present day farm of Dryfesdalegate. Some accounts suggest that part of the Maxwell's army moved into Lockerbie and set fire to the Johnstone Tower at Netherplace, before returning to the main army at Dryfe Sands. Meanwhile Sir James Johnstone had placed his men on higher ground overlooking Maxwell's army. Johnstone's horsemen provoked some of Maxwell's men into pursuing them into an ambush, as a result of which the main Johnstone army was able to fall upon the advancing Nithsdale force and throw it into confusion. This confusion quickly spread to the whole of Maxwell's army, where movements were restricted by their confined position. The Lairds of Drumlanrig, Closeburn and Lag rode hastily from the battlefield, doubtless followed by many of their men. Maxwell, his army in ruins, was killed on the battlefield, either by William Johnstone of Kirkhill, or by Sir James Johnstone himself, or even, if tradition is to be believed, by the wife of Johnstone of Kirkton Tower. The lady is said to have struck Lord Maxwell repeatedly on the head with the massive key of Kirkton Tower.

Maxwell's head is said to have been carried on the point of a spear by William Johnstone who claimed the reward of a "five pound land" offered by Sir James Johnstone. Some of the escaping Nithsdale men were drowned trying to cross Annan at Gotterbie, while others seem to have been killed while trying to escape through Lockerbie. Some who escaped are said to have had "Lockerbie licks" on their faces, caused by being slashed by the swords of pursuing horsemen. The numbers killed in Lord Maxwell's army have been variously estimated between 20 and 700, the truth no doubt lying somewhere in between.

Nearly two years after Dryfe Sands, Lord Herries led a Maxwell army to Lockerbie to subdue the Johnstones, and several leaders of the family were captured, only to be rescued when a Johnstone force drove the Maxwells out of Annandale. The weakness of the King's position was again revealed when Sir James Johnstone, far from being punished for Dryfe Sands, was made Warden of the West Marches in 1596. Various events followed which showed that the new Lord Maxwell had not forgiven his father's death. For a time Lord Maxwell was detained in Edinburgh Castle, but he was able to escape. Eventually a meeting was arranged between Lord Maxwell and Sir James Johnstone, each to have only one companion, in April 1608, probably near Shieldhill. A quarrel began during which Lord Maxwell shot Sir James Johnstone who died soon afterwards. Times had changed and Lord Maxwell had to escape abroad, being sentenced to death in his absence.

He finally returned to Scotland in 1612 and, while hiding in Castle Sinclair, he was handed over to the authorities by the Earl of Caithness. He was executed in 1613 after a brazen attempt to suggest marriage alliances between the two families. Some years later the old feud came to an end, and it is now no more than a very distant memory.

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