2012

Culture of Violence: Livestock, Honor, and Feuding in the Scottish Borders

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Available at: https://ir.una.edu/nahr/vol2/iss1/2

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A popular bit in blue-collar comedian Jeff Foxworthy’s routine holds that any burglar worth his salt knows best which homes to rob and which to avoid. If a thief, says Foxworthy, is presented with “two houses, and one of them has a manicured lawn with daisies growing in the flowerpot,” the thief will probably consider that house to be “easy pickins.” But if the thief comes to “a house where the grass is...tall and there’s a dog chained to the clothesline and a motor swinging from a tree” he will avoid trying to rob that house because “that’s a house where a gun lives.”

Foxworthy’s humorous observations about the relationship between poverty and violence have entertained audiences for many years. But there is much truth between the laughs. Poverty, perhaps more than any other human condition, has the potential to foster violence, especially where it exists with other external stressors such as instability in the home or political instability in the surrounding area. Teachers have observed this phenomenon among inner-city minority children for years. The *Handbook of Bullying in Schools* notes that “insofar as poverty begets violence... children in poor areas may be more likely to be aggressive as a normative, adaptive response to environmental risks.”

A poverty of natural resources can afflict a region in the same way that monetary poverty can afflict a household. In pre-industrial

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societies which cannot develop economies of crop-growing due to poor land, an economy of herding is often developed as a necessity; and this economy of herding is connected directly to a culture of honor, pride, and—ultimately—violence. A prime example of this chain of events is the border region of Scotland in the late middle ages. This paper will demonstrate that the poverty of resources in that area and the subsequent culture of herding—paired with the volatile political nature of the region between the years of 1296 and 1603—was responsible for the culture of violence which immersed the region at that time.

The story of the Scottish borders is a story of contained chaos. It is one of anarchy surrounded by law, of scarcity bounded by plenty, and of violence encompassed by peace. Like a maelstrom in a pond enclosed by fields of plenty, the Borders were once a region of consummate bloodshed and lawlessness, a place where the art of feuding was perfected and practiced by true masters of calamity.

During the three-century stretch between the first War of Independence and the Union of the Crowns, royal blood and national allegiance meant little to the inhabitants of this dangerous land, who proved time and again that survival was their only watchword. In such an atmosphere, it was natural that the inhabitants relied heavily on family ties for protection. This, coupled with their strong sense of personal honor—a trait derived quite literally and probably quite accidentally from the land, itself—made the medieval border region the world’s most natural laboratory for the practice of feuding.

The land, itself, was the borderers’ first great enemy. Rocky and barren, the medieval borderers could grow few crops, even in times of peace. Agricultural experts and novices alike have long lamented the
poor quality of the border region’s soil. Noted ethnologist John Gray of Adelaide University calls the small neck of the borders a place of “rural river valleys and bleak hills,” of “hardy sheep and...marginal land.”³ That marginality is manifested in hundreds of thousands of acres of steep hills and craggy valleys, everywhere scattered with an abundance of ancient, volcanic rock. A study sponsored by Coventry University in 2006 said that “large parts [of the border region] have poor quality agricultural land and are typified by upland, low-intensity livestock farming, notably beef and lamb.”⁴

Rural by nature, the border cannot produce any cereal crops in great quantity, a reality that—along with the below-average household income of the region—has caused the European Union to designate the borders as an Objective 2 area in the past decade; an area in need of special subsidies to help counteract the lagging local economy.⁵ It was—and remains—useless for growing any staple crops in great proportion. Its greatest asset was an abundance of coal and iron-ore, which was exhausted in the region’s early industrial period but which, to the pre-industrial society of 1296-1603, was virtually useless.

It was for this reason that, in a nation of growers, the borderers early developed an economy of herding. Livestock was the bread and butter of the borders. John Lesley, Bishop of Ross from 1567 to 1592, observed the link between the violence of the border region and the lack of agriculture, noting that the borderers as a people were more turbulent and lawless than any of the other natives of Scotland—in times of peace despising husbandry; in times of

⁵ Ilbry and Maye, 354.
war reduced to great poverty by daily incursions of the enemy. Living on flesh, milk and curds, boiled barley, they have little acquaintance with bread, or with good beer or wine; neither do they take much pleasure in them when they get them.\(^6\)

This carnivorous lifestyle owes as much to the impoverished land on which the borderers lived as it did to the frequent warfare of either side. Lesley notes that grain products were scarce on the border, as well as products grown from the vine. Instead, the region was one of prolific livestock ownership. The people of the border invested heavily in their livestock, particularly the patriarch of a border clan, whose “superior wealth,” Sir Walter Scott said, “consisted in his extensive herds and flocks” of cattle and sheep, respectively.\(^7\) The reason for this, Scott goes on to explain, is that “however extensive his territories were, he could use no part of them for his own peculiar profit, excepting just so much as he was able...to stock with sheep and black cattle.”\(^8\)

The net result of this culture of prolific livestock ownership was a society where a great deal of the wealth was portable, and therefore could be easily stolen; a problem made worse in the borders by the incessant armed incursions of hungry soldiers from both sides during times of war. In the legal vacuum produced by three centuries of warfare, the only recourse for recovery of stolen property was often for an individual to personally recover that stolen property. This combination of portable wealth and weak central authority produced a breed of people whose natural inclination was toward both punitive and preemptive violence.

This culture of violence demanded that the men be able to defend their own property and, consequently, prove their worth and ability to hold and keep wealth to the community. This consciousness of

\(^6\) Gilbert J. Minto, *Border Sketches* (1870), 22-23.
\(^7\) Walter Scott, *The Border Antiquities of England and Scotland*, vol. 1 (1814), xlvi.
\(^8\) Scott, xlv.
community standing, self-worth and pride in being able to defend ones possessions constitutes a most basic definition of personal honor. The implications of an entire population endowed with this heightened sense of personal honor are that violence on the border was not simply brutal, but also frequent and commonplace. Clashes between individuals often revolved around livestock, and those clashes often sparked small-scale ‘private wars’ to defend the honor of the offended person.

For the border reivers—men of the warrior-class who specialized in the stealing of livestock—the concept of personal honor extended beyond the ability just to defend their own holdings and included taking pride in their ability to steal the livestock of another without being caught. In the sixteenth century, Lesley says that as soon as the reivers have seized upon the booty, they, in like manner, return home in the night through blind ways, and fetching many a compass. The more skilful any captain is to pass through those wild deserts, crooked turnings, and deep precipices, in the thickest mists and darkness, his reputation is the greater, and he is looked upon as a man of an excellent head.9

A sense of one’s standing in his community was a vital part of border life. Lesley implies that the reivers saw livestock theft not only as a means of livelihood and of improving their standing in the community, but as great sport. Like a star high school quarterback, reivers were local celebrities. They practiced their technique and refined their accoutrements to give them the greatest advantages for their illicit game, even going so far as to teach their horses to crawl through swamps on their knees to keep from being caught if they were chased.10

Horses were a precious commodity in all of Scotland, but nowhere were they so prevalent—or so desired—as in the border region, where

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9 Minto, 24.
10 Minto, 23.
infantry units were scarce during times of war and every man, from the highest nobleman to the lowest peasant, rode into battle. English embargoes on transporting horses to Scotland did little but whet the borderers’ appetites and increase the profitability of cross-border equine theft.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps more than in any other part of Scotland, honor and livestock were inherently intertwined in the border region.

But in the tinderbox that was the border region, honor was not just a personal priority. It also acted as an umbrella-institution wherein many individuals of the same clan had a shared sense of family honor. This shared sense of honor probably originated as a defensive technique. As is seen in many developing nations where central authority is either weak or nonexistent, the first line of defense is often the family unit. In the borders, family was often the only line of defense. Border clans of this period were typically organized around the edicts of a strong paternal figure, whose power was upheld by an intricate network of extended family members and feudal dependents.

According to Sir Walter Scott, whose early interest in border history fueled his literary career and left us with many primary accounts which have otherwise been lost to time, the absolute power of a border chieftain was never questioned by his family. Due to the martial nature of their existence, border clans often had no choice but to submit unswervingly to the dominant male member of the clan. The survival of the clan and its honor depended on this devotion to such a degree that as soldiers, they felt the necessity of submitting absolutely to their leader, while he exerted his authority with tolerable moderation; and, as commanding soldiers, the chief must have felt the hazard of pushing discipline into tyranny... He was not only the legislator and captain and

\textsuperscript{11} George M. Fraser, \textit{The Steel Bonnets}, 5th ed. (Trowbridge, Wiltshire, United Kingdom: Redwood Books, 1995), 85.
father of his tribe, but it was to him that each individual of the name looked up for advice, subsistence, protection, and revenge.\textsuperscript{12}

The Scottish clan, contrary to popular belief, was not composed completely of blood relatives. Instead, each clan contained a network of relatives at its nucleus, who operated with the support of non-family dependents, who did agricultural work and provided military service to the dominant family in exchange for protection and sustenance. These dependents frequently took on the surname of the family they served. Scotland was riddled with a patchwork of these local fiefdoms. As with everything else in the Borders during the medieval period, the protective nature of clan society was magnified due to the constant threat of invasion.

An important aspect of border honor was faithfulness to the clan to which one had sworn allegiance. Borderers time and again proved that they held their chiefs in higher esteem than the kings of Scotland, even going so far as to engage royal soldiers in direct combat if the chief or the honor of the clan was threatened by the king. In fact, loyalty to the head of border clans was so fierce among the inhabitants of the region that James I of England (James VI of Scotland) focused on “justlie punisheing the maist perversed and rebellious ring leaderis (whais amendement wes disperate) and transporting otheris of them furth of this isle” in his 1609 campaign to bring stability to the border.\textsuperscript{13}

This strong sense of honor was not isolated to the border region. During this time, armed struggle to defend individual and corporate honor was not uncommon. What was exemplary about the sense of honor displayed on the border was the rapidness with which confrontations over offended honor ballooned into fierce private wars.

\textsuperscript{12} Scott, xlv.
\textsuperscript{13} University of St Andrews, Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707, 12 April 1609.
One such example of a “private war” in the border region began in 1526. The clans of Kerr and Scott were two of the most powerful families on the border, and they often contested each other for the office of Warden of the Middle March—a coveted position for reiver families because it guaranteed virtual immunity to punishment for the warden’s family during his term in office. The contest for the office of warden, however, was a sideshow to the true rivalry between the two clans. This rivalry began with the desires of a fourteen-year-old king.\(^\text{14}\)

The adolescent James V of Scotland despised the oppressive regency of his stepfather, Archibald Douglas, the 6th Earl of Angus. After a year of virtual imprisonment by Angus, the young king secretly enlisted the aid of Sir Walter Scott, 3rd Knight of Buccleuch to help him escape—an arrangement which no doubt was made based on Scott’s lifelong devotion to James IV, the young king’s late father, who had knighted Scott on the field after his service in the Battle of Flodden. On 25 July, with six-hundred lances at his command, Scott waylaid the king’s retinue at the town of Melrose. The retinue, composed primarily of Kerrs under Andrew Kerr, Lord Cessford (the chief of one half of the Kerr clan), repulsed the attack, inflicting some 16% fatalities on the Scotts in the process. The Kerrs, led by their chief, gave chase to the retreating Scotts. At a crucial point in the engagement, one of the riders under Scott turned (at a place in the road still known as “Turn Again”) and lanced Cessford to death before continuing his flight.\(^\text{15}\)

The battle was described to parliament by seventeen men on 21 November 1526 and recorded in a “Declaration of Innocence.” According to the seventeen (consisting of Angus and several Kerrs, among others)

\(^{14}\) Fraser, 182.
\(^{15}\) Fraser, 183.
Scott attacked the party with “ane greite multitude of brokin men” on the road to Edinburgh in order to draw the young king “to thar inutile [guidance] and evill wais.”

This incident touched off a brutal feud between the two clans—two of the most powerful families in the border region—which lasted for almost three decades and resulted in the deaths of numerous hundreds of people on both sides. Scott was found guilty of treason by Angus’ government and forced into exile after paying a fine of £10,000. However, two years later, when James V was finally free of Angus’ power, Parliament—at the king’s behest—acquitted Scott, declaring him “innocent of all crymes imputt to him therthrow, and of the summondis of tresoune aganis him rasit and all punctis contenit tharintill.”

However, the Cessford Kerrs’ honor had been insulted, and their chief had been slain. The incident was enough to draw the two wings of the Kerr clan—themselves prone to frequent feuding between each other—together to avenge the disgrace to their family name. Despite an attempt to end the feud by the intermarriage of Scott to Janet Kerr, the daughter of Andrew Kerr of Ferniehurst, the fighting continued sporadically and viciously wherever members of the opposing factions happened to meet—in open fields, forests, marketplaces, side streets, and hundreds of other places that have no doubt been lost to history.

The Kerrs finally got their revenge on Scott, himself, in October 1552, twenty-six years after the battle at Melrose. While strolling on High Street in Edinburgh one evening, Scott was ambushed by a party of Kerrs—possibly including some of the sons of Andrew Kerr of Cessford—lead by John Hume of Coldenknowes, who made the first strike at Scott,

16 Records of the Parliament of Scotland, 21 Nov 1526.
17 Records of the Parliament of Scotland, 5 Sep 1528.
18 Scott’s own mother had been a Kerr, as well—of the Cessford branch.
shouting to the Kerrs, “Stike! Ane straik for thy father’s sake!”

Scott’s death was the culmination of the feud between Kerrs and Scotts. The gang responsible for his murder was outlawed, and official treaties of reconciliation were drawn up between the two sides, followed by further intermarriages. But this episode in border history was indicative of many aspects of border culture. Central authority was weak, which is evident given the uncertain situation of the young king’s custody (a problem which was unfortunately frequent in Scottish history, and probably added greatly to the lawless character of the border). That authority was considered subjective and was often ignored, as when Scott attacked the forces of the regent because the king had schemed with him to do so; and Scott no doubt felt that he, himself, would be a better regent than Angus.

The role of honor in the Kerr-Scott feud was almost as central as that of family connections. Wounded family honor escalated the conflict exponentially. But this bent toward rapid escalation also owes much to the deteriorated political climate of the border region during these three key centuries, when the border region was one of the most dangerous places in Europe. Three hundred years of frequent warfare between the kings of England and the kings of Scotland meant that the border region changed hands often. The border, itself, was—and remains—a narrow one. Bounded on two sides by ocean, the narrow neck of land that makes up the Scottish Borders is just a scant few miles longer than the length of Rhode Island’s western border. These close quarters amplified and intensified the culture of violence practiced by the inhabitants.

In addition to the geography of the border region, the politics of

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19 Fraser, 183.
20 Ibid., 184.
living on the front lines of a centuries-old struggle played a vital role in shaping the culture of the people who dwelt in the Scottish Borders. With armed incursions frequent and invasion a constant threat, the borderers were often left in a political vacuum. In this state of limbo, the borderers acted not only as the chief protectors of their own families and possessions but also as Scotland’s first responders. Part warning whistle, part guard dog, the borderers were the first to know when an invasion had been launched from the south.

It is perhaps for this reason that royal forces made only weak efforts to curb the lawlessness of the border people until the Union of the Crowns. In extant records of the Scottish parliaments between the First War for Independence and the Union of the Crowns, a dirth of knowledge of the border’s culture of violence is available. In fact, almost every parliamentary record which mentions the word “border” in these early days also contains a combination of the words “lawlessness,” “death,” “plunder,” “rob,” “fugitive,” “rebellious,” “theft,” “slaughter,” “hostility,” “offence,” “disobedience,” “murder,” “outlaw,” “notorious,” and “fugitive.” The lawless acts of the borderers were well-known, but these records also display that very little effort was made on the part of any king’s government to curb the chaos on the border—even in those rare instances when the monarchy was strong enough to offer aid.

To the same degree that it is advantageous for a family living in a bad neighborhood to keep a vicious dog chained near the front door, it was greatly advantageous for the king of Scotland to have such rough and violent people living at the hostile southern border of his kingdom. Indeed, the method of combat practiced and passed down through generations of borderers was more successful at slowing and eluding an
enemy than in defeating him in open combat.

For a Scottish king to gather his forces and prepare for war in central and highland Scotland, he would need the precious time that could be bought by allowing the borderers to do to his enemies what they did best: engage them in guerilla warfare, disrupt their supply lines, and damage enemy morale—actions they would perform for the sake of protecting their own property and families, whether they held any loyalty to the king or not. In effect, it can be said that, by allowing the lawlessness of the reivers to continue virtually unchecked, the kings of Scotland held the borderers hostage to their own depravations, perhaps with the hope of creating an immense minefield of guerilla fighters which would, in return, play a great part in deterring an enemy invasion.

However, if this was, indeed, the tactic of the Scottish kings during this three hundred year period, it must be noted that it backfired on numerous occasions. A lack of royal authority preceded a lack of respect for royal power. The borderers often held their own chiefs in higher esteem than the kings of Scotland, and one cannot blame them. From the chiefs they received protection, stability, and sustenance. From the king they received very little. Even in times of impending war, when the king knew that the English would likely invade, the borderers received little more than promises. One such example is seen in a parliamentary record of 19 October 1456, which says

Item as to the secunde artikill tuichande the supple of the bordouris, the provisione of the defence of the realme agane the summyr sesone etc., the thre estatis thinkis at the bordouraris mysteris nocht sa mekill supple as thai dyde in the tyme that this matir was lade to the king, and at thai may this yere, Gode be lowyt, defende thame self better than fernyear be cause first thai ar bettir cornyt than thai war fernyere and thar innemys war cornyt,
secundly thai haif specialte at the lest at the twa bordouris quhill candilmess. On the west bordoure the wyntir dois sindry skaithe, ande the clergy presumys thar may be specialte gottin to thame and it be desiryt, and thai throw the Inglismen will alsueill consent till a specialte fra candilmess to weddirdais as thai dide now to candilmess. Considerande alse that the Inglismen has hade this somir bygane and traistis to haif this somir to this surfet, cost and travell ande thai be nocht suppleit be the wyntir weire and be redy to the soumir weire. And all thing considerit thai haif maide mekill mair travell and chargis of the weyr in this somir bigane than our bordouraris hade, tharfor thai think the bordouraris sulde be content at this tyme. And quhen ony gret ourset is lik to cum on the bordouraris we think the inlandis men sulde be redy in thar supple.

The Scots had good reason to busy themselves with the “defence of the realme” in the fall of 1456. Earlier that year, the young James II of Scotland had ordered an ill-fated invasion of the Isle of Man to press his questionable rights to that territory, which, at the time, was controlled by the English crown. Fears of English retribution drove the Scots to make preparations for war; preparations which, curiously, included denying essential supplies of grain (“cornyt”) to the borderers.

The Scots parliament (“the thre estatis”) denied the borderers’ request for supplies and reinforcements in the face of imminent invasion on the grounds that the borderers not only had more grain at that time compared to the amount they had had during a previous invasion, but also that due to a “specialty” or agreement with the English, the borderers had had all summer to lay up a larger store of grain to prepare for the coming invasion, but had squandered it, unlike their English counterparts, who had grown enough grain to last until the following winter. In short,

parliament told the borderers that, due to their own idleness, they would

just have to “make do” with what they had in the face of invasion, with a passing promise that the “inlandis men” would be ready to help the borderers if they were overcome.

This act of parliament gives a salient glance into the political and economic situation of the borders during the High Middle Ages. The lack of grain grown by the borderers is not surprising given the poor condition of border soil. And parliament’s ambivalent attitude toward the borderers’ hunger in time of war is telling of their overall attitude toward the border region, itself. The preservation of law and order in the borders during this period was clearly not a priority for the king or for parliament. According to further legislation, the position of “warden of the west border” was not created until 1484, many years after the creation of similar positions in other parts of Scotland.22

But this ambivalence ran both ways. The borderers, perhaps because of their hung-out-to-dry treatment by the central authorities, rarely heeded royal writ or authority. Lesley states that “the approach of royal forces, if sent against them, seems to them a game; for they are so protected by the nature of the country, that if driven from the woods they take refuge in the mountains, and if disturbed there, they retreat to the mosses and morasses, where scarcely men on foot can follow them, and no horses save their own, trained to go through the bogs on their knees.”23 Lesley also records that there was no more-lawless part of the nation in his time than the border region.

No king’s government did more to quiet the borders than that of James VI of Scotland (James I of England). Starting with a flurry of parliamentary activity in the late 1590s, James sought to end the

22 Records of the Parliament of Scotland, 24 Feb 1484.
23 Minto, 23.
“barbarous crueltie, wickednes and incivilitie” that reigned on the border. Part of the reason for this lies in James’s personality. Perhaps more than any king before him, James put teeth to his belief that God had ordained him to personally rule as king. His philosophy toward monarchy held that a king’s kingdom was his own personal property, and that dissension of any type was not to be tolerated.

Another reason for this sudden crack-down on border violence in the late 1590s was James’s impending inheritance. With the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, James inherited the throne of England, uniting the two nations in the Union of the Crowns. As the sovereign of both nations, a savage border became a liability for James. Also, with authority on both sides of the border, James became the first king with the power necessary to subdue the border from England and Scotland.

These acts of parliament were aimed directly at snuffing out the favorite activities of the border reivers. In 1599, the Scottish Parliament issued an “Act regarding border thefts,” which allowed for execution of thieves on the spot, repealing an earlier legal tradition which held that the goods of captured thieves were merely to be remitted to their victims and little else done to the thieves. Furthermore, the Act punished those who harbored thieves almost as harshly, declaring that the king’s wardens had the authority to burn their homes and publicly humiliate their wives and children at the “cross market of the shire.” Indeed, the act said specifically that the wives and children of those who harbored thieves were to be considered just as guilty of the crime as the homeowner.

But the coup de gras of the border reivers and their way of life came in 1609. The “Act regarding fugitive persons of the borders to the inland”

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24 Records of the Parliament of Scotland, 31 July 1599.
25 Ibid.
forced law and order down the throats of the borderers in a way that no previous act or royal edict had dared. It went beyond the border region to every corner of the kingdom. Salient parts of the act read:

Forsamekle as the kingis majestie is resolved to purge the mydele schyres of this isle, heirtofoir callit the bordouris of Scotland and England, of that barbarous crueltie, wickednes and incivilitie whilk be inveterat custome almaist wes become naturall to mony of the inhabitantis thairof, and to reduce thame to the knawlege, love and fear of God, reverence of his majesteis authoritie, obedience of his lawes and duetie to thair neighbouris, for accomplisheing of that maist royall designde maid chouse [of ane] to be commissionar in these boundis whome by mony assurede prouffis, former imploymentis of greatest consequence, his majestie knew [to] be indewit with all qualiteis necessair for sa weichtie a charge, wha following preciselie the rules of his majesties maist prudent directionis and useing all possibill diligence and dexteritie in prosecutioun thairof, maid sa happie progress in that good course as justlie punisheing the maist perversed and rebellious ring leaderis (whais amendement wes disperate) and transporting otheris of them furth of this isle, the rest wer brocht to verie setled quietnes and obedience of his majesteis lawes, a verie few number of outlawes onlie exceptit, wha being sa earnestlie searched and perseivit in these boundis as all hope of escaping and langer impunitie wes takin frome them, they have by maist subtile and craftie meanis by changeing thair names and dissembling the place of their nativitie convoyed thame selffis in the incountries of this realme and insinuated them selffis in service with noble men and others of good qualitie, not onlie theirby eschewing thair deserved punishement, bot also abuseing and harmeing his majesteis good subjectis by thair darnit stouthes in the incountrie, transported, ressait and quietlie sold in the boundis of the laite bordouris, and agane steilling geir furth thairof and out of the boundis of these middle shyres and outting and selling the same in the incountries, besyd that otheres of the saidis outlawis had bene allured and had ressait and oversicht in the incountries by some men of rank and pouer, to be instrumentis and executouris of sic revenge and mischeif aganis these to quhome they beir malice,
grudge or querrell, whilk for fear of his majesteis lawes and authoritie they durst not attempt by them selffis; for remede whereof, his majestie, with advys and consent of the estaittis of parliament, statutis and ordanis that na man shall heireftir either ressave or retene ony man borne or lang habituat in the lait bordouris in his service or company or upoun his landis unless he have certane knowledge or a trew and authentik testimoniall of his majesteis great commissionar of the late bordouris or his deputtis of the said bordour mannis trew name and surname, place of his nativitie and reporte of his treuth and lautie, and that he is na knawin malefactour bot repute a duetefull and obedient subject, under the paine to incur the danger and to be maid answerable, civilie and criminalie, to his majestie and all his lauchfull subjectis for all actionis and crymes whilk might be onywayes layed to the charge of the saidis broken men for ony cause or occasioun either preceding or during the tyme of thair ressaweing or retening thame in thair service, company or upoun thair landis as gif the ressaitter had committit the saidis faultis thame selffis.  

The crux of this act states that, due to the harsh punishments meted out by the 1599 “Border thefts” act, many of the most dangerous “ringleaders” of the reivers had changed their surnames and fled inland to be employed (presumably as “strong-men”) by the inland nobility. The 1609 act rooted out these fugitive reivers by threatening inlanders that, if they hired a borderer of ill repute, they themselves would “be maid answerable, civilie and criminalie...for all actionis and crymes whilk might be onywayes layed to the charge of the saidis broken men for ony cause or occasioun either preceding or during the tyme of thair ressaweing or retening thame in thair service.” By this act, Parliament made the hiring of border reivers just as much a crime as the act of reiving, itself.

No doubt the resulting prejudice against hiring anyone who spoke with a border accent or carried a border surname created great economic

26 Records of the Parliament of Scotland, 12 April 1609.
27 Ibid.
strain on law-abiding border citizens, economic strain which served in large part to make the practice of reiving, once and for all, fall from favor at home.

Whatever the king’s motives, the acts of 1599 and 1609 finally subdued the border. The king destroyed the culture of violence in the borders by virtually declaring war on the families of the reivers. By a combination of chance (James gaining control of both sides of the border, eliminating the necessity of a vicious, “advanced-guard” border society) and force, (deporting, executing, and publicly humiliating the most violent elements of border society), James created a tipping point in the borders.

Deportation (most often to Ulster, where James was also asserting his royal authority at this time) played an especially important role in cleansing the border of its violent heritage. Since the borderers’ honor—and thus their violent nature—was entwined with their family identity, James’s forces very keenly broke apart and humiliated the families of the most active reivers, and by extending punishment to those who gave them any type of comfort or support within the entire realm, he gave the reivers nowhere to turn. Everything about the “cleansing” of the border region had to do with the forced separation of the family unit; be it by deportation, execution, or the act of fugitives changing their surnames and vacating the region.

With the destruction of the most violent border families as an example, the delicate system of honor that had reigned for many years in the borders was forever unbalanced, and the culture of violence that had torn through the region unwound in the borders, even while it was being transplanted to other regions. As Scott said, “protection was the most
sacred duty of a chief to his followers, and this he was expected to extend in all forms and under almost all circumstances. If one of the clan chanced either to slay a man, or commit any similar aggression, the chief was expected to defend him by all means, legal or illegal.”

When the border chieftains could no longer resist royal authority and provide protection to their own outlawed kin, the balance of power effectively shifted in the region, and within a generation, the borders were no longer the no-man’s-land of lawlessness that they had been for the previous three centuries.

However, the culture of violence begotten from the herding economy, tribal mentality, and universal sense of honor in the Scottish borders did not die completely with the edicts of James I. The borderers’ bent toward herding, intense pride, family loyalty and honor continued to remain a strong force in the societal structure of their descendants. Wherever border culture was transplanted, sporadic feuding and violence was still prone to break out in times of great civil strife for generations after the Ulster Plantation.

In Ulster, the descendants of the most volatile reiver families continued to work masterpieces of lawlessness against both the native Irish and their counterpart English transplants. It is a cultural pattern that remained homogenous and potent when many of their descendants quit Ulster a century later for the rugged southern Appalachian Mountains of the New World. The Appalachians continue to provide a fascinating laboratory for sociologists. The isolation of the mountains has not only preserved some border dialects, surnames, and folk culture, but the rocky soil has also preserved the border tradition of herding, and the accompanying cultural emphasis on family honor and distrust of central authority in many mountain communities. And, especially in periods

28 Scott, xlvi.
when central authority has been weak or nonexistent, violent feuds have rocked mountain communities sporadically over the past four centuries.

Understanding the border of Scotland during the High Middle Ages is to understand the connection between a people and their geography, their politics, and their collective sense of morality. The connection between the culture of violence and livestock in the medieval border region is undeniable. Had the border between England and Scotland been a place suitable for growing large quantities of cereal crops, the violence and instability which plagued the area during Scotland’s precarious centuries would probably not have existed. Likewise, if there had been stronger central authority in the region—as there was in the years after the Union of the Crowns—there would have been little reason for the herding borderers to develop such strong and sensitive customs of pride and honor. As it was, all of these things combined like a perfect storm at one place and point in time to create a distinctive culture of violence.