The Great Monition of Cursing by Gavin Dunbar, the Archbishop of Glasgow on the border reivers – 1525
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**Introduction**

Lawlessness had reached an unprecedented state on the Anglo Scottish Borders by the late 16th century, with the culprits paying equally scant attention to the remonstrations of either state or church. Although this state of affairs was prevalent for most of the history of the borders, more or less since Roman times, it would appear that following the reformation, the church grew less influential on the morals of the population there, and provided the condition of inter clan or kinship feud did not escalate too far from the borders region, the monarchs and rulers of both countries did little to resolve it. Often the men put in charge to solve the problem soon became a corrupt part of it.
The following quote is taken from Borland (1898) who also gives the full curse and which is given below:

“It was during this period of weakness, almost of total moral collapse, that the Archbishop of Glasgow took it upon him to excommunicate the Border thieves. Had the same vigorous measure been adopted at an earlier period, the result might have been more favourable. As it was, the launching of this ecclesiastical thunderbolt really created more amusement than consternation. It was regarded simply as the growl of a toothless lion. In no circumstances were the Border reivers easily intimidated. Their calling had made them more or less indifferent to the claims of Church and State. They had never had much affection for the king, and they had, perhaps, still less for the priest. Having shaken themselves free, to a large extent at least, from the control of the State, they were not prepared to put their neck under the yoke of an ecclesiastical authority which even the best men of the age had ceased to venerate. But the Archbishop felt that he had a duty to discharge, and he applied himself to the task with commendable vigour.”

“The curse was ordered to be read from every pulpit in the diocese and be circulated throughout the length and breadth of the Borders.”

(Robert Borland, minister of Yarrow. Border Raids and Reivers. Dalbeattie: Thomas Fraser 1898)
The Great Curse

“Good folks, here at my Lord Archbishop of Glasgow’s letters under his round seal, direct to me or any other chaplain, making mention, with great regret, how heavy he bears the piteous, lamentable, and dolorous complaint that passes all of our realm and comes to his ears, by open voice and fame, how our sovereign lords true lieges, men, wives and children, both and redeemed by the precious blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and living in his laws, are innocently part murdered, part slain, burnt, harried, spoiled and robbed, openly on day light and under silence of the night, and their farms and lands laid waist, and they are self banish therefore, as well church lands as others, by common traitors, reivers, thief’s, dwelling in the south part of this realm, such as Teviotdale, Eskdale, Liddiesdale, Esdaisdale, Nithsdale, and Annandale; which has been diverse ways pursued and punished by the temporal sword and our Sovereign Lords authority, and dreads not the same.

“And therefore my said Lord Archbishop of Glasgow has thought expedient to strike them with the terrible sword of holy church, which they may not long endure and resist; and has charged me, or any other chaplain, to denounce, declare and proclaim them openly and generally cursed, at this market cross, and all other public places.

“Herefore through the authority of Almighty God, the Father of heaven, his Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy ghost; through the authority of the Blessed Virgin Saint Mary, Saint Michael, Saint Gabriel, and all his angels; Saint John the Baptist, and all the holy patriarchs and prophets; Saint Peter, Saint Paul, Saint Andro, and all holy apostilles; Saint Stephin, Saint Laurence, and all holy mertheris; Saint Gile, Saint Martyn, and all holy confessours; Saint Anne, Saint Katherin, and all holy virginis and matronis; and all the sanctis and haly company
of hevin; be the auctorite of our Haly Fader
the Paip and his cardinals, and of my said
Lord Archbischop of Glasgw, be the advise and
assistance of my lordis, archbishop, bishopis,
abbotis, prioris, and utheris prelates and
ministeris of halykirk.

I DENOUNCE, PROCLAIMIS, AND DECLARIS all
and sindry the committaris of the said saikles
murthris, slauchteris, brinying, heirschippes,
reiffis, thiftis, and spulezeis, oppinly apon
day licht and under silence of nicht, alswele
within temporale landis as kirklandis; togher
with their part takaris, assistaris, supplearis,
wittandlie and resattaris of their personis,
the gudes reft and stolen be thaim, art or part
thereof, and their counsalouris and defendouris,
of thair evil dedis generalie cursit, waryit,
aggregeite, and reaggregeite, with the greit
cursing.

“I CURSE thair heid and all the haris of thair
heid; I CURSE thair face, thair ene, thair mouth,
thair neise, thair toung, thair teith, thair crag,
thair schulerdis, thair breast, thait hert, thair
stomok, thair bak, thair wame, thair armes, thair
leggis, thair handis, thair feit, and everilk part
of thair body, frae the top of thair heid to the
soill of thair feit, befoir and behind, within and
without. I CURSE thaim gangu and, I CURSE
thaim ryand; I CURSE thaim stantand, and I
CURSE thaim sittand; I CURSE thaim etand, I
CURSE thaim drinkand; I CURSE thaim walkand,
I CURSE thaim sleepeand; I CURSE thaim rysand,
I CURSE thaim lyand; I CURSE thaim at hame,
I CURSE thaim fra hame; I CURSE thaim within
the house, I CURSE thaim without the house;
I CURSE thair wiffs, thair banris, and thair
servandis participand with thaim in thair
deides.

I WARY thair cornys, thair catales, thair woll,
thair scheip, thair horse, thair swine, thair geise,
thair hennys, and all thair quyk gude. I WARY
thair hallis, thair chalmeris, thair kechingis,
that stabillis, thair barnys, thair biris, thair
matrons; and all the saints and holy company
of heaven; by the authority of our Holy Father
the Pope and his cardinals, and of my said Lord
Archbishop of Glasgow, with the advice and
assistance of my lords, archbishop, bishops,
abbotis, prioris, and other prelates and ministers
of the holy church,

I DENOUNCE, PROCLAIMS, AND DECLARES
all and sundry the commmitters of the said
of innocents murders, slaughters, burning,
inheritances, robbery, thefts, and spoilings,
only upon day light and under silence of
night, as well as within temporal lands as
church lands; together with their part takers,
assisters, suppliers, knowingly and of their
persons, the goods snatched and stolen by
them, art or part thereof, and their counsellors
and defenders, of their evil deeds generally
cursed, waking, aggravated, and re-aggravated,
with the great cursing.

“I CURSE their head and all the hairs of their
head; I CURSE their face, their eyes, their
mouth, their nose, their tongue, their teeth,
their skull, their shoulder’s, their breast, their
heart, their stomach, their back, their womb,
their arms, their legs, their hands, their feet,
and every part of their body, from the top of
their head to the sole of their feet, before and
behind, within and without. I CURSE them
going, and I CURSE them riding; I CURSE them
standing, and I CURSE them sitting; I CURSE
them eating, I CURSE them drinking; I CURSE
them walking, I CURSE them sleeping; I CURSE
them rising, I CURSE them lying; I CURSE them
at home, I CURSE them from home; I CURSE
them within the house, I CURSE them without
the house; I CURSE their wives, their children
and their servants (who) participate with them
in their deeds.

I Worry their corn, their cattle, their wool, their
sheep, their horse, their swine, their geese,
their hens, and all their live goods (animals).
I Worry their houses, their rooms, their
kitchens, their stables, their barns, their byres,
bernyardis, thair cailyardis, thair plewis, thair harrowis, and the guidis and houses that is necessair for thair sustenatioun and weillfair. All the malesouns and waresouns that ever gat wardlie creatur sen the beginnyng of the warlde to this hour mot licht apon thaim. The maledictioun of God, that lichtit apon Lucifer and all his fallowis, that strak thain frae the hie hevin to the deip hell, mot licht apon thaim.

The fire and the sword that stoppit Adam fra the yettis of Paradise. Mot stop thaim frae the gloir of Hevin, quill thai forbere and mak amendis. The malesoun that lichtit on cursit Cayein, quhen he slew his bruther just Abell saiklessly, mot licht on thaim for the saikles slauchter that thai commit dailie. The maledictioun that lichtit apon all the warlde, man and beast, and all that ever tuk life, quen all wes drownit be the flude of Noye, except Noye and his ark, mot licht apon thame and drounne thame, man and beast, and mak this realm cummirles of thame for thair wicket synnys. The thunnour and fireflauchtis that set doun as rane apon the cities of Zodoma and Gomora, with all the landis about, and brynt thame for thair vile synnys, mot rane apon thame, and birne thaim for oppin synnys. The malesoun and confusion that lichtit on the Gigantis for thair oppressioun and pride, biggand the tour of Babiloun, mot confound thaim and all thair werkis, for thair oppin reiffs and oppressioun. All the plagis that fell apon Pharao and his pepill of Egypt, their landsis, corne and cattail, mot fall apon thaim, thair takkis, rowmys and stedingis, cornys and beistis. The watter of Tweid and utheris watteris quair thai ride mot droun thaim, as the Ried Sey drownit King Pharao and his pepil of Egypt, persewing Godis pepil of Israel. The erd mot oppin, riffe and cleffe and swelly thaim quyk to hell, as it swellyit cursit Dathan and Abiron, that ganestude Moeses and command of God. The wyld fyre that byrnt Thore and his fallowis to the nowmer of twa hundreeth and fifty, and utheris 14,000 and 700 at anys, usurpand aganis Moyses and Araon, servantis of God, mot suddanely birne and consume thaim dailie ganestandand and commandis of God and halykirk. The maledictioun that lichtit their barnyards, their cabbage patches, their ploughs, their harrows, and the possessions and houses that are necessary for their sustentation and welfare. All the bad wishes and curses that ever got worldly creature since the beginning of the world to this hour might light upon them. The malediction of God, that lighted upon Lucifer and all his fellows, that struck them from the high heaven to the deep hell, might light upon them. The fire and the sword that stopped Adam from the gates of Paradise might stop them from the glory of Heaven, until they forbear and make amends. The bad wishes that lighted on cursed Cain, when he slew his brother just Abel guiltless, might light on them for the innocent slaughter that they commit daily. The malediction that lighted upon all the world, man and beast, and all that ever took life, when all were drowned by the flood of Noah, except Noah and his ark, might light upon them and drown them, man and beast, and make this realm free of them for their wicked sins. The thunder and lightning that set down as rain upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, with all the lands about, and burnt them for their vile sins, might rain upon them, and burn them for open sins. The bad wishes and confusion that lighted on the Gigantis for their oppression and pride, building the tour of Babylon, might confound them and all their works, for their open disregard and oppression. All the plagues that fell upon Pharaoh and his people of Egypt, their lands, corn and cattle, might fall upon them, their leases (of land), rooms and buildings, corn and animals. The river of Tweed and other rivers where they ride might drown them, as the Red Sea drowned King Pharaoh and his people of Egypt, pursuing Gods people of Israel. The earth might open, split and cleave and swallow them alive to hell, as it swallowed cursed Dathan and Abiron, that disobeyed Moses and command of God. The wild fire that burnt Thore and his fellows to the number of two hundredth and fifty, and others 14,000 and 700 at anys, usurping against Moses and Aaron, servants of God, might suddenly burn and consume them daily disobeyed and commands of God and holy church.
suddanely upon fair Absolon, rydand contrair his fader, King David, servand of God, throw the wod, quen the branchis of ane tre fred him of his horse and hangit him be the hair, mot licht apon thaim, rydand agane trewe Scottis men, and hang thaim siclike that all the warld may se.

The maledictioun that lichtit apon Olifenus, lieutenant to Nabogodonosor, makand wier and heirschippis apon trew cristin men; the maledictioun that lichtit apon Judas, Pylot, Herod and the Jowis that crucifyit Our Lord, and all the plagis and trublis that lichtit on the citte of Jerusalem thairfor, and upon Symon Magus for his symony, bludy Nero, cursed Ditius Makcensius, Olibruis, Julianus, Apostita and the laiff of the cruel tirrannis that slew and murthirit Cristis haly servandis, mot licht apon thame for thair cruell tyranny and murthirdome of cristin pepill. And all the vengeance that ever wes taken sen the warlde began for oppin synnys, and all the plagis and pestilence that ever fell on man or beist, mot fall on thaim for thair oppin reiff, saiklesse slauchter and schedding of innocent blude. I DISSEVER and PARTIS thaim fra the kirk of God, and deliveris thaim quyk to the devil of hell, as the Apostill Sanct Paull deliverit Corinthion. I INTERDITE the places thay cum in fra divine service, ministracioun of the sacramentis of halykirk, except the sacrament of baptising allanerllie; and forbiddis all kirkmen to schritte or absolve thaim of thaire synnys, quill they be first absolyeit of this cursing.

I FORBID all cristin man or woman till have ony company with thaim, etand, drynkand, spekand, prayand, lyand, standand, or in any other deid doand, under the paine of deadly syn.

I DISCHARGE all bandis, actis, contractis, athis and obligatiounis made to thaim be ony persounis, outhier of lawte, kyndenes or manrent, salang as thay susteine this cursing; sua that na man be bundin ti thaim, and that thai be bundin till all men. I TAK frae thame and cryis doune all the gude dedis that ever thai did

The malediction that lights suddenly upon fair Absolom, riding contrary to his father, King David, servant of God, through the wood, when the branches of a tree knocked him off his horse and hanged him by the hair, might light upon them, untrue Scots men, and hang them suchlike that all the world may see.

The malediction that lighted upon Olifernus, lieutenant to Nebuchadnezzar’s, making war and hardships upon true Christian men; the malediction that lighted upon Judas, Pilot, Herod and the Jews that crucified Our Lord, and all the plagues and troubles that lighted on the city of Jerusalem therefore, and upon Simon Magus for his treachery, bloody Nero, cursed Ditius Magcensius, Olibrius, Julianus, Apostita and the rest of the cruel tyrants that slew and murdered Christ’s holy servants, might light upon them for their cruel tyranny and martyrdom of Christian people. And all the vengeance that ever was taken since the world began for open sins, and all the plagues and pestilence that ever fell on man or beast, might fall on them for their open evil, slaughter of guiltless and shedding of innocent blood. I SEVER and PARTS them from the kirk of God, and deliver them alive to the devil of hell, as the Apostill Saint Paul delivered Corinth. I exclude the places they come in for divine service, ministration of the sacraments of holy church, except the sacrament of baptising only; and forbid all churchmen to take confession or absolve them of their sins, which they be first absolved of this cursing.

I FORBID all Christian man or woman to have any company with them, eating, drinking, speaking, praying, lying, standing, or in any other deed doing, under the pain of deadly sin.

I DISCHARGE all bonds, acts, contracts, oaths and obligations made to them by any persons, other of law, kindness or duty, so long as they sustain this cursing; so that no man be bound to them, and that they be bound to all men. I Take from them and cry down all the good deeds that
ever they did or shall do, which they rise from this cursing. I DECLARE them excluded of all matins, masses, evensongs, mourning or other prayers, on book or bead; of all pilgrimages and poorhouse deeds done or to be done in holy church or by Christian people, enduring this cursing.

“And, finally, I CONDEMN them perpetually to the deep pit of hell, to remain with Lucifer and all his fellows, and their bodies to the gallows of the Burrow Muir, first to be hanged, then torn apart with dogs, swine, and other wild beasts, abominable to all the world. And their life gone from your sight, as might their souls go from the sight of God, and their good fame from the world, which they forbear their open sins aforesaid and rise from this terrible cursing, and make satisfaction and penance”.

So it was that seldom was there such a more comprehensive excommunication of people from the grace of God. Evidently the Curse had little effect on the problem of border reiving and it was not until the unification of the Crowns of Scotland and England after the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, that the final solution was enacted. The new King of the unified country; James I of England and VI of Scotland, took up residence in London. He resolved to manage the country as one, and it was no longer acceptable to allow the reivers free reign of the borders with near impunity. The so called ‘pacification of the borders’ was simply resolved by the summary execution or deportation of the offenders en masse. By about 1610, the ‘broken men of the borders’ were finally broken themselves. Although occasional feuds and acts of criminality continued to occur, the business was less endemic and the law became more effective in dealing with perpetrators.

However, no one could be confidant that this would become the case; and it would appear that the need for a defensive house was still required by some relatively wealthy people. These were tenant farmers who had managed to acquire wealth by rearing cattle and sheep in the uplands of southern Scotland, and also managed to survive the depravations which existed a decade either side of 1600.
The defensive houses were of course the bastle houses which appear to be largely ignored by both historians and architectural writers.

Such houses in England continued to be used and indeed some are still occupied today, while many other examples are in a reasonable state of preservation. In Scotland the picture is less well understood and certainly poorly researched. In Clydesdale in particular, where a 'pocket' of bastle houses has been discovered and in some cases excavated (Ward, 1998), the evidence is clear for occupation beginning around 1600 and ending in the mid 18th century. It may well be that the occupiers of these bastle houses, which appear to have been built c. 1600, were hedging their bets as to whether they would require the defensive capabilities of such strong houses. There was a major raid in 1600 in Clydesdale (Reg Privy Council Scot), where the bastle farm of Glenochar was relieved of some 200 cattle, it is possible that the bastle house there was not yet built, and this particular incident may have been the stimulus for building it and several other bastle houses in Clydesdale.

References

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www.biggararchaeologygroup.org.uk
In 1525, the Archbishop of Glasgow took it upon himself to excommunicate the Border thieves. It is doubtful if the riding surnames were very impressed having long since given up on both church and state but the curse was ordered to be read from every pulpit in the diocese and be circulated throughout the length and breadth of the Borders. I DENOUNCE, PROCLAIMS, AND DECLARES all and sundry the committers of the said of innocents murders, slaughters, burning, inheritances, robbery, thefts, and spoilings, openly upon day light and under silence of night, as well as within temporal lands as church The prologue was almost five centuries ago, when, in 1525, the Archbishop of Glasgow, Gavin Dunbar wrought a whopping 1,069-word curse on the Reiver people, who were pillaging the district. "I curse their head and all the hairs of their head," said the archbishop. "I curse their face, their brain, their mouth, their nose, their tongue, their teeth." The Archbishop of Glasgow died." He stares around his pristine living room. "We were just a sleepy little city on the border lands but look what has happened in the last five years. Lives have been lost, destroyed and put in turmoil. Dunbar had no right to curse the Reiver. He should have evangelised, like St Cuthbert did." Irving shows me letters from his acquaintance and fellow stone-fearer, Kevin Davies, the Vicar of Scotby.