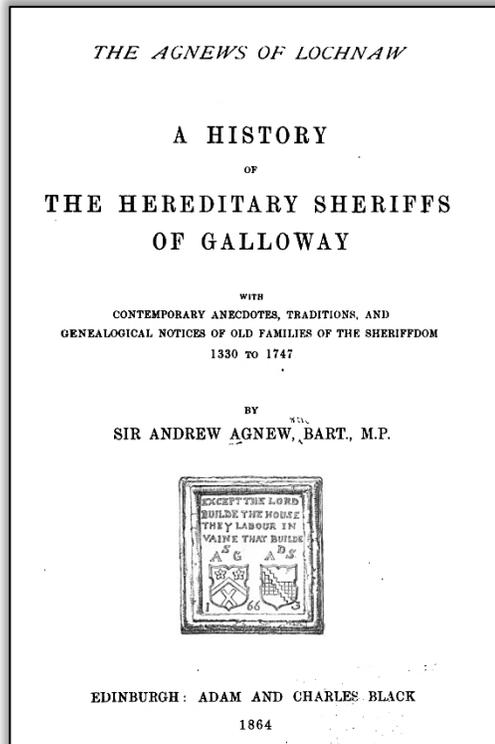


## Bride Kidnapping in Scotland in the Middle Ages

**From Rachael McDouall:** As always, I get distracted and found an exciting account from Sir Andrew Agnew's book about the attempted kidnapping in 1738 of a daughter of Patrick Vans and Barbara McDouall<sup>1</sup>, which mentions that Miss Elizabeth McDouall (Lady Betty), Barbara's sister, was also present at Barnbarroch when the attempted abduction occurred. Another kidnapping of a girl by the Gordon's, involved a Logan McDouall who was murdered, as a result of which the famed "Murder Stone" was created, and has captivated passers-by ever since.



The kidnapping of a beautiful woman of fortune to be your wife, aka 'bride kidnapping', was not that uncommon in these unruly times of the medieval period. Two other Helens of Scottish folklore died tragically under similar circumstances, and another, Helen Vans of Cascrew, had been abducted a century earlier. In bulletin No.5 the story was told of the "Murder Stone", yet another tale in which a young woman was carried off by a rival suitor, her beloved being subsequently murdered – see the appendix.

Abducted women were often taken to a house or castle in another parish, where 'a popish priest or a person pretending to be a popish priest' was procured to marry the unhappy bride.

The presence of a priest was a common feature of abductions, with these figures usually referred to as 'couple beggars', clergymen who had once been ordained by a bishop, but had fallen away from their church and now performed marriages for money, usually in instances where the legality of the marriage was questionable.



**Bride Kidnapping**

In this instance, Patrick and Barbara had two surviving daughters, Barbara and Anne, but we do not know which of them was the target of the abduction.

### **Attempted Abduction** (pages 535 - 538)

Book link: [The Agnews of Lochnaw - Sir Andrew Agnew](#)

In the year 1738 a daring attempt was made to carry off Miss Vaus (*Vans*) of Barnbarroch, by a worthless fellow of the name of M'Clery. It was fortunately unsuccessful, unlike the abduction of the fair "Helen of Cascrew"<sup>2</sup> in the sixteenth century – see appendix. The information, as sworn to in the Sheriff's Court, is so extraordinary, that we shall give it as it was taken down by Thomas Kennedy, Sheriff substitute, at Wigtown, the 29th of November 1738.

John Stewart of Phisgill, aged about 33 years, and married, declares as follows - He came to the House of Barnbarroch upon a Sabbath day the 13th of August last, and stayed all that Sabbath night in Barnbarroch House. About two hours after daylight was gone, he was sitting in a chamber with Lady Barnbarroch and John Dunn, the tutor on the estate, when a noise was heard in the laigh stories, and presently a servant came into the chamber, and told that a great

<sup>1</sup> From the McDouall family tree: Barbara MCDOUALL d.4 Apr 1744, m.24 Feb 1715 Patrick VANS, MP, Colonel of Barnbarroch d.27 Jan 1733; Issue 5 children. And Elizabeth 'Aunt Betty' MCDOUALL d.24 Jan 1781. Of Freugh and later Stranraer. Unmarried.

<sup>2</sup> "Cascrew" (also Caskreuth) refers to an area of land and a family name associated with Galloway in southwestern Scotland, specifically the counties of Wigtown and Kirkcudbright. Historical records mention "Mr Patrick Vaus of Cascrew" and the "lands of Cascrew" in connection with the sheriffdom of Wigtown in the mid-16th century.

number of men with arms had broken into the house, and were then in the kitchen. John Dunn and Lady Barnbarroch on hearing this, ran immediately downstairs into the kitchen, and there he saw Thomas M'Alexander, a soldier, holding out a cocked pistol in his hand, swearing and threatening he would shoot some of the family if they did not show him the way upstairs. He also saw Andrew Mitchell, servant to John M'Clery of Grange (son of John M'Clery, late Baillie of Newton Stewart) holding out a pistol, with a drawn hanger<sup>3</sup> in his other hand, and threatening as above. He moreover saw Robert Dinnan with a pistol in his hand, and one Hannay with a rusty sabre or scimitar in his hand, and several other armed men.

Duncan, M'Alexander, Hannay, and Mitchell came to the back door of the kitchen where he was standing, and on his demanding what they wanted, they answered they wanted Miss Vaus, and on their being told they were not to get her, nor to go upstairs, they swore they would force their way. Upon which they forced by him, and he following they broke open the lady's own chamber door, wherein the children were sitting, and broke it in pieces. Immediately a scuffle ensued, and then I, John Stewart, saw M'Alexander and the lady in grips with one another; the Lady's head clothes were torn off her head, and her hair hanging round her face and shoulders. Then, the witness proceeded, while he (John Dunn) and some of the servants were endeavouring to assist my lady, Duncan and Mitchell seized upon Miss Vaus, who caught hold of him and begged he would protect her. Meanwhile, he saw Hannay seize Miss Elizabeth M'Dowall, the lady's sister, and saw several of the servants beaten and wounded to the effusion of their blood. Also, after M'Alexander was disengaged from the lady, he snapped a loaded pistol twice, which was taken from him, and sometime afterwards a shot was taken out of it (that is to say, was found in it).



**Barnbarroch House today, the former home of the Vans-Agnew family, near Wauphill in the Machars of Galloway. Built in the 1700's and destroyed by fire in 1941.**



**Kidnapper with sword and hanger**

After these armed assailants were forced out of the lady's chamber, M'Alexander further threatened the lady, and swore he would shoot John Dunn, and struck at him with a sabre. On being asked what they meant by such outrageous conduct, they answered that they wanted Miss Vaus for John M'Clery, who was below stairs. The witness thereupon, within the outer gate of the house, found John M'Clery standing with two armed men, and with a pistol in his breast. He then discoursed him, and they both went upstairs together and entered the lady's room. M'Clery told the lady he was sorry so much disturbance was given to the family, and declared all he wanted was to speak to Miss Vaus, and if she was not willing to go with him, he would dismiss his party of men. Before this, Miss Vaus had asked him (Stewart) to lock her into a private cellar, which he did. M'Clery was now told he could not see her that night; upon which he searched the lady's room, and her bed, and the presses<sup>4</sup>, and found one of the wounded servants lying on the lady's bed. He then called up his men, and placed them sentry over the room, and then searched the dining and other rooms of the house.

He (Stewart) at this time saw William M'Beath in Drumbuie standing at the head of the stairs with a sabre in his hand, and also Simon Gulline, apprentice to John M'Carlie, wright<sup>5</sup> in Wigtown. M'Clery now returned to the gallery, after searching the house, and he (Stewart) then

<sup>3</sup> A hanger was a generic term for a short, single-edged sword, sabre or large dagger that hung from the belt, popular in the 18th century and continuing into the early 19th century in Scotland and Britain generally.

<sup>4</sup> Box or cupboard beds

<sup>5</sup> A wright was a skilled craftsman or builder who worked primarily with wood. The term was a general occupational name for a maker of machinery or objects, often serving as the equivalent of "carpenter" in modern English.

proposed that M'Clery should dismiss his men, and that he should see Miss Vaus at eight o'clock the next morning, in the presence of the lady, her mother and himself, to which proposal, with much difficulty, he agreed; and calling his men down the close, after some communing, M'Alexander fired a pistol, and they all went off.

About an hour after, being informed that the party were lurking about the house, he went out, and there found them, and told them their stay was not agreeable to concert; and they being about a musket shot from the house, answered that they would not go till M'Clery had seen Miss Vaus; that they would go no nearer, nor offer further violence, and would dismiss at eight o'clock, after M'Clery had seen Miss Vaus.

A short time after assistance arrived – which had been sent for – and on this they all sallied out to apprehend the party, but they now ran off, and they could take none of them but M'Clery, whom three men of the lady's party apprehended, and brought to the House of Barnbarroch, from whence he was, by a warrant of Mr. Heron of that ilk, sent to the Tolbooth<sup>6</sup> of Wigtown.

---

## **Appendix: Abductions of Three Fair Helens**

### **1. The Abduction of the Fair Helen of Cascrew**

From the correspondence of Sir Patrick Waus 1540-1597

(Link: <https://deriv.nls.uk/dcn23/9530/95302706.23.pdf> - pages xxx – xxxi)

We next find Sir Patrick purchasing the lands of Artfield from his kinsman Lord Cassillis in 1562, and then he is designated as of Cascrew (*Cascreugh*), which was his residence until, by his elder brother's death in 1568 without male heirs, he succeeded to the estate of Barnbarroch. This elder brother had been twice married—first, to Lady Janet, daughter of Gilbert, second Earl of Cassillis, and widow of the Laird of Freugh, who died on the 8th June 1556, and by whom he left an only daughter Helen; and secondly, in 1566, to Euphemia, daughter of Sir John Dunbar of Mochrum.

This Helen, after the death of her father, to whose personal property she was heir, was living with her uncle at his house of Cascrew, which, with a considerable district of adjoining land, he rented from the Earl of Cassillis. The gift of her marriage had been granted by the Regent in the King's name to Sir John Bellenden of Auchnoll, the Justice-Clerk, and this was probably a family arrangement, because he, having married another daughter of Sir Hew Kennedy, was brother-in-law to her uncle and guardian. Still, on 7th September 1568, when she was only eleven years of age, Sir John formally and in legal form desired her to marry one of four eldest sons of gentlemen in the county, her equals in "leving and bluyd." "The quhilk personis the said Helene refusit to tak ony of thaym in mariage".

Upon which Sir John's agent protested and claimed in his name the double and triple of her marriage. It was no wonder that the poor child refused to be so much married, for before this time, viz., on the 31st July 1568, in the absence of her uncle and protector, this house of Cascrew had been attacked and stormed by Sir Archibald M'Kie of Myretoun, and others of his family and servants. Helen was forcibly carried off and married to Sir Archibald's son Alexander, for which the whole parties were denounced as rebels and put to the horn<sup>7</sup>. It is, however, satisfactory to find from the correspondence that she seems to have been well taken care of by her husband, who made his apologies to her uncle, and that all was amicably settled. She received her fortune in due time, and her husband writes to her uncle as his father, which seems to indicate that there was a complete reconciliation. She was still living in 1597, but is named in 1601 as having died before that date. The M'Kies, however, must have been a turbulent family, for they were all put to the horn for deforcing an officer in 1576.

---

<sup>6</sup> A tolbooth was the central civic building in a burgh (town), serving as the town hall, courthouse, jail, and customs house, where tolls (taxes) were collected from merchants, hence the name. These multi-functional structures housed council meetings, held trials, imprisoned criminals, and often featured distinctive towers, becoming vital symbols of local governance and justice.

<sup>7</sup> In 16th-century Scotland, being "put to the horn" was a severe legal process of outlawry, declaring someone a rebel for failing to appear in court (often for debt or crime), which stripped them of legal rights, made them fair game for anyone, and resulted in their property being forfeited, all proclaimed publicly with three horn blasts at Edinburgh's Cross.

## 2. The Legend of Fair Helen of Kirconnell

This 16th-century Scottish legend, recorded later by Sir Walter Scott, tells a tragic tale of love, jealousy, and murder. The story involves Helen Irving, her lover Adam Fleming, and a rival suitor named Robert Bell of Kirconnell.



Memorial plaque to Helen of Kirkconnell

In the village of Eaglesfield in the Scottish Borders, stands the ancient church of Kirkconnell, where a 16<sup>th</sup> century tragedy is said to have taken place. Helen Irving lived in Bell Tower, a Pele Tower on the Scottish border which served as a refuge from the Scots Rapiers who raided the cattle and sheep of the border farms. Helen was reputed to be a beautiful girl with many suitors, including Robert Bell of Blacket House. Her family approved of Robert, who was from an important and financially secure family. Helen, however loved a young man named Adam Fleming of Kirkpatrick.

Torn between her parents' wishes, and her love for Adam, she would meet him at twilight on Kirkconnell Lea, or in the churchyard, a romantic spot, surrounded by the River Kirtle. Robert Bell, insane with jealousy and determined to win Helen's hand, followed her when she met Adam, armed with a carbine with the intent of confronting his rival. Seeing them together, his jealousy overcame his reason and he fired across the stream at Adam. At the last second, Helen threw herself in front of her lover and was shot in the chest, dying in Adam's arms.



Helen dying in Adam's arms as he spies Richard with his gun on the far bank of Kirtle Water

In a fury of grief, Adam launched himself down the banks of the Kirtle Water where Bell was frantically trying to reload his gun. Raging, he hacked Bell to death with his sword, then returned to Helen's body and cradled her in his arms throughout the night. In the morning, knowing he would hang for Bell's murder, Adam fled the country for Spain where he spent some years serving in their army. Indeed, when Helen's body, and Robert's mutilated one were found, Adam was initially accused in his absence of a double murder. The truth finally came out when friends of Helen vouchsafed for the integrity of Adam, his love for Helen, the meetings in the churchyard and Bell's jealousy.

Some years later Adam returned secretly to England to be once more united with his Helen. In the morning a servant of the Bell Tower, found the prostrate body of a dead man lying atop Helen's grave. He recognised the still handsome features of Adam Fleming, who had died of a broken heart. The servant ran to inform Helen's family, and it was decided to bury Adam next to Helen, a sign that her parents had forgiven their daughter and her lover. Their graves lie in the churchyard of Kirconnell, the tombstone into which is sculpted the inscription: 'Hic jacet Adamus Fleming' (Here lies Adam Fleming).



The Graves of Helen and Adam

### 3. The Legend of Helen, the Beauty of Braemore

The legend of the kidnapping of fair Helen in Scotland often refers to the tragic tale of Helen Gunn, known as the "Beauty of Braemore", an event tied to the 15th-century Ackergill Tower in Caithness.

Around 1400, Dugald Keith, the son of the laird of Ackergill Tower, and a member of the powerful Keith clan, became infatuated with the beautiful Helen Gunn. When his advances were rejected, he took the matter into his own hands and responded violently. On Helen's wedding night to Alexander Gunn, her cousin, Dugald Keith and his men attacked her father's home, killing many of the unsuspecting Gunn family members and abducting Helen. Keith imprisoned Helen in Ackergill Tower.



Ackergill Tower in Caithness in 1822

To escape his intended sexual abuse, Helen tragically threw herself from the tower battlements and plunged to her death. Her act of defiance intensified the long-standing and bloody feud between the Gunn and the Keith clans, leading to continuous conflict and a massacre of the Gunns at the Chapel of St. Tears around 1464 or 1478. The Chapel of Tears (also known as St. Tear's Chapel or St. Tayre's Chapel) was located on the coast of Caithness in northern Scotland between Castle Sinclair Girnigoe and Ackergill Tower.

Helen's ghost, often described as a figure in a flowing white or red gown, is said to haunt Ackergill Tower, sometimes seen looking mournfully out of the windows, and has even been spotted as the "Mermaid of the North" in the nearby sea.

### The Chapel of Tears

The dedication of the Chapel, long since in ruins, comes from the tears shed by the mothers at Bethlehem over their children that were slain by King Herod, referenced in the Gospel of Matthew. Traditionally it was customary for people to visit the chapel on the morning of the Feast of the Holy Innocents Day, the 28th of December. They would say prayers and leave bread and cheese in the chapel as an offering to the souls of the children slain by Herod.

However, it is infamous locally, not for its religious qualities, but for a much more devious act. Following the long and violent feud between the Keith and the Gunn clans, their chiefs decided to meet once and for all, most likely in 1464, to settle their scores at St. Tears Chapel. Each clan agreed to 12 armed men on horseback for a battle of supremacy.

The Gunns were the first to arrive and the 12 men took up their positions. Shortly after, the Keiths arrived but they had treacherously mounted a hidden second man on each horse, greatly outnumbering the Gunns. A fierce and bloody struggle ensued but even with astonishing courage, the sheer numbers against the Gunns led to their bitter defeat with only one of them surviving. It was said that the blood of the combatants could be seen on the walls of the Chapel 150 years on.

Only in 1978, after more than 500 years, did the clans finally sign a treaty of friendship, officially ending the feud!



The site marker of St. Tear's Chapel

## The Murder Stone

There are two works of detective fiction entitled "The Murder Stone", but a real one is hard to find. However, Stuart McDouall, being a former detective himself, discovered one not far from our ancestral home while on his recce of Logan House in 2018.

His account for that day reads as follows:

"One of the ladies on the counter told me her Grandpa was a McDouall of Logan and, in the ensuing conversation, she asked if I had seen 'The Murder Stone'?"

Straight away I remembered the story I read in an old book\* on D&G (*Dumfries & Galloway*) about the Murder of a McDouall by a Gordon from a nearby (*Clanyard*) castle. The tale goes that, in about 1550, there was a delightful maiden, McKinna, for whose hand-in-marriage all the eligible bachelors of the surrounding parishes were vying. The most handsome suitor was a John McDouall and he won her heart. The news reached the ear of a jealous Gordon who had her kidnapped from her home and removed to his castle some 5 miles southwards.

John McDouall discovered the treachery and galloped after him. He couldn't get into the castle and was reduced

to shouting threats at Gordon from outside its walls.

Eventually, he had to give up and rode home. Gordon and some of his henchmen followed him and, at night, on the shore road near Ardwell Church, ambushed the lone rider and stabbed him to death. At that place was a large oblong stone, possibly used as a seat for weary travellers. John McDouall's kinsmen, not having the wherewithal to take on the Gordons, carved the word 'Murder' in very large letters on the flat surface of the said stone.

So, to cut a long story short, the lady at the counter, who was born and bred at Ardwell, told me where to find it and off I went. And there it was behind the garden to a private house not far from Ardwell Church, lying in the grass and clearly not much visited."

*\*The Tales of Galloway by Alan Temperley, 1979*



The ruins of Clanyard castle today



The Murder Stone