

December 2023

Petticoat Tales

Performed by the Borders Trio

At our Christmas meeting, GLHS welcomed the Borders Trio of Roddy Johnson (small pipes), Nancy Marshall (raconteur/story teller) and Seonaid Lynn (vocals) who performed 'Petticoat Tales', a story of Border folk with a strong emphasis on the women. The performance was enhanced by a generous supply of cake, mulled wine, and Rosemary Bell's delicious shortbread. I assumed that Roddy's pipes were a version of the Northumbrian pipes, as like the Northumbrian version, the piper uses bellows under the elbow to provide the 'wind', but they were indeed Scottish pipes, albeit Scottish Small Pipes which are a little larger than ours.

Interspersed with Seonad's haunting songs in a strong Borders accent and Roddy's tunes, Nancy told tales of some Borders women. The most remarkable was Winifred, Countess of Nithsdale who, with two women servants, secured the escape from the Tower of London of her husband, William Maxwell, the 5th Earl, after he had been sentenced to death for fighting for the Jacobite cause of 1715. First getting the guards drunk and then helping the Earl change into female servant's clothes, they were able to make their way to Rome via Scotland and France.

We were told of the actions of Edward 1 and his efforts to subjugate Scotland, and the later 'rough wooing' in the reigns of Henry VIII and his son Edward VI, when the English tried to persuade the Scots to allow Mary Queen of Scots to marry Edward. Of course it all came to nothing, and it was Mary's son who eventually acceded to the English throne as James 1.

We also learnt of Carolina Oliphant, Lady Nairn, who was a contemporary of Rabbie Burns and composer of songs such as 'Will ye no come home again?', and of Lavinia Derwent, the pen name of Elizabeth Dodd.

The most interesting element of the stories was the description of the farming practice whereby the contract of a male farm labourer – a 'hind' – included providing a female worker. If his wife were unavailable owing to pregnancy, illness or childcare, he would take on a 'bondager', a female to work the land (including physically demanding work such as the breaking of stones) and also in the house. It was astonishing to learn that the practice only died out in the late 19th Century.

Altogether, it was as different from a normal GLHS meeting as it was enjoyable.

Peter W. Davies