

ART. VII.—*The death of Christie Armstrong, a Border reiver.* By W. A. J. PREVOST.

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BORDER papers and Border histories contain many references to the family name of Armstrong. In the 16th century the Armstrongs were scattered in houses of strength in the west border of Scotland, and Scott of Satchells writes that they were "able men, somewhat unruly and very ill to tame". They were freebooters with many a foray and exploit to their credit, and Sir Walter Scott has much to say about them in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. The *Minstrelsy* includes the three well-known ballads of "Johnie Armstrong", "Christie's Will", and "Kinmont Willie".

The chief seat of the family was at Mangerton near Newcastleton in Roxburghshire, and in the 15th century Thomas Armstrong, fifth of Mangerton, represented the main stem of the family. From him were directly descended Johnie Armstrong of Gilnockie and Christie's Will,¹ the heroes of two of the above-mentioned ballads, and their descent is shown on the pedigree on page 64, together with that of the Armstrongs of Barngleish.² The chart also shows the intermarriage of certain of the clan with Grahams of the Netherby stock, thus forming an alliance with a family south of the Border.³

Barngleish was a ten pound land with a tower, situated on the Pringle Burn in the northern half of the Debateable Land which now corresponds to the parish of Canonbie. These lands, in exchange for a bond of manrent, were granted in 1525 to Johnie of Gilnockie.⁴ The story goes that Gilnockie was the chief

summoned to pay homage to James V in 1529, and when he appeared with a retinue of his followers to meet the King during his passage to Dumfriesshire was taken and hanged, a treacherous act which is recorded with much detail in the ballad. Before his execution, we are told, Johnie bade Godspeed to "Kirsty, my brother", and Godspeed to "Kirsty, my son, where thou sits on thy nurse's knee", evidence which is not altogether convincing as this last-named Kirsty had a son, "Young Christie", who is included in a "List of Scottishmen in the debatable land and of all places within the rule of Bewcastle" compiled on 20 September 1561.⁵ However, it is a fact that Gilnockie's lands relapsed to Robert Lord Maxwell on his escheat in 1530, and that in 1557 his son Christie granted a bond of manrent to John Lord Maxwell and received as a recompense a land in Eskdale, the lands of Barnagleish.⁶

It was this Christie of Barnagleish, sometimes called John's Christie, to whom the Maxwells entrusted the house and place of Langholm in 1562.⁷ Mr T. J. Carlyle was of the opinion that Christie remained at Barnagleish and that he delegated Langholm to his sons.⁸ This is partly confirmed by Dr R. C. Reid who writes that in 1575/6 "Cristell" had acted for 20 years without impediment as a bailie of the Warden in the Langholm and was a Crown tacksman of Barnagleish.⁹

There were many "impediments" in the next decade which troubled Christie Armstrong and in 1579 he was even summoned to "his Hienes awn presence" to prove his claim to his "landis and rowmes".¹⁰ Moreover, in that period of time there were at least eight changes in the Wardenship. Maxwell, who was strongly supported by the Armstrongs, was deprived of the Wardenship in January of that same year and the tower of Langholm may have been neglected for a time, but Johnstone of that ilk, who had been

appointed Warden in August, laid claim to it. He was in office during 1580 when Maxwell approached the Council for the delivery of the castle into his hands and the Council ordered Johnstone to surrender it to Maxwell before the 20 September. In this very month the Armstrongs attacked the Tower and destroyed the barns, corn and doing much damage.¹¹ Among others named to have been implicated in the "burning of the House of Langholm", are John Armstrong in the Hoilhouse and Christie Armstrong, son to the Guidman of Langholm.¹² One can only guess at what actually happened but it is a fact that Johnstone, who had been reappointed Warden in November 1582, and Christie Armstrong were charged by the Privy Council on 16 September 1583 to render Langholm to John, Earl of Morton,¹³ then regent, though the Council could hardly have expected this order to be obeyed. Only the year before, letters of horning had been directed against a number of Armstrongs and others who had carried out a successful raid into Lanarkshire. Included among this "great number of common theiuis, Brokin men and out Lawis" were three sons of Will of Kinmont, John Armstrong of Hollows and [young] Christie Armstrong of Barngleish, his brother.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in 1585, Scrope wrote to Walsingham telling him that he had been informed that Lord Maxwell had taken the house of Langholm, which was in the keeping of John's Christie, but of Lord Maxwell's own inheritance, and had placed therein gunners and men of his own.¹⁵

Between 1585 and 1606 there are many references to Christie Armstrong of Barngleish and to Young Christie. It is suggested that the older man may have died in the early 1590's when he was well on in years, and that his son, Young Christie, succeeded his father and automatically became Christie of Barngleish. The

following brief extracts from various sources are informative.

November 1586. Christie Armstrong of Barngleish included in a list of "the principallis of the brokin men of the West Marche . . .".¹⁶

March 1587/88. Christie Armstrong of Barngleish, younger, pledge for his father, himself and the "rest of thair branche . . .".¹⁷

October 1588. Caution for John Carmichael of that ilk for Christie Armstrong, called Young Christie of Barngleish, now in ward in Edinburgh tolbooth for "attemptatis committit aganis England".¹⁸

January 1589. Complaint by Wille Grame of Selandes in Leaven against Young Christie Armstrong of Barngleish and others for cattle and "insicht taken of Geordie Hetherton and my Lordes Scropes slowthounde . . .".¹⁹

August 1590. Cristell Armstrong of Barngleish, called Johnne's Christie, the present possessor of the said lands. This is a reference to an Act anent the titles of ownership to the Debateable lands.²⁰

November 1592. Complaint that William Armstrong called Kynmontes Willie, Christie Armstrong, called Young Christie of Barngleish, and others had mutilated Roger Bulman of Scaleby and had taken away cattle and horses.²¹

It is possible, though unlikely, that it was old Christie who was named as being one of the eight score men implicated in the slaughter of Lord Maxwell, Warden of the west march, in December 1593.²² It is certain that he was not one of the 33 specially selected assailants chosen by Buccleuch out of 500 volunteers for the rescue of Kinmont Willie from Carlisle Castle in April 1596. This is made quite clear in a detailed account of those who took part, given in a secret letter to Scrope, written by Ritchie's Will, a traitor.²³

"Thur is the Scotsmen that was there, Bucklelughe with 24 Scottes and Ellottes quha lay that night in the Lange holm with him, younge John and Kirste his brother, Kirste of Barngleis and Rob his brother, with foure of the Kanges and Will Kang met them on the night, four sonnes of Kinmontes and 4 of his men . . ."

It was only natural that a Barngleish Armstrong should rally to the assistance of an Armstrong of Kinmont. The two families were literally as thick as thieves and it is said that in 1598 Kinmont and Christie Armstrong headed a band of marauders called "Sandie's Bairns", and made divers raids into England and Scotland.²⁴ There was one raid in particular which the Carlisle authorities would never forget and which must have influenced them for years to come in their dealings with the Scots north of the Border. On 20 March 1600/1, 300 Scotsmen made a day foray into Cumberland, attacking the townships of Newtown of Irthington belonging to the Crown which were leased to Lord Scrope. They laid waste the countryside and seized horses, cattle and sheep, besides taking prisoners and mutilating others. That night of the same day Christie Armstrong and Kinmont Willie, with seven score Scotsmen, attacked Scotby township, burning, thieving and taking prisoners, and then next assaulted the inhabitants of the "Ricardgate" of the suburbs of Carlisle. "They brack and cutt upp the postes that conteyned the yron cheyns (made for the keepinge and streingth by night) and cutt upp their doores, toke prisoners, &c., and some of them came to the city walls near the Castle, crying, 'upon them, upon them, a Daker, a Daker, a read bull, a read bull', with the naming of Johnston, Armstrong, Bell and Carlyll, forcing the citizens in their defencyve arrayes, for to repayre to the walls, and the beacon to be set in fyre, for the warning of the wardenry."²⁵

It may have been for this very illegal action or for some other offence that a year later "one principal man", Christie Armstrong of Barngleish, was delivered to Scrope's deputy as a pledge for redress in accordance with Border laws. This information was passed to Scrope, in a letter dated 8 May 1602, by John Musgrave of Catterlen, Warden depute, in Carlisle,²⁶

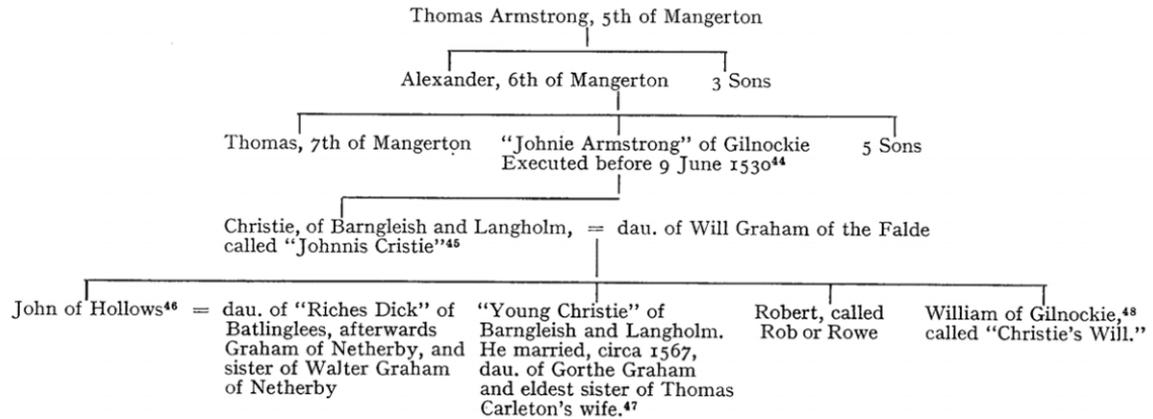
who wrote that the next meeting of the Wardens was to be held at Gretna Kirk on the 10 June when it could be expected that redress would be made and that the offenders' clan would undertake to "keep good rule".²⁷ In due course Christie left Carlisle, but was treacherously slain by John Musgrave of Plumpton at Barngleish, on 22 September 1606. The killer and John of Catterlen were different men.

There is no doubt that Musgrave was responsible for the death of Christie Armstrong, and the question now arises whether Musgrave was guilty of manslaughter, murder, or murder premeditated, but first it is necessary to explain his crossing of the Border into Scotland and his presence at Barngleish.

After the union of the kingdoms in 1603 determined and drastic efforts were made to maintain law and order in the Borders. To do this, five "Commissioners for the late Marches" were appointed by the Crown from Scotland, one of whom was Sir William Seton of Kylesmure, and five from England, one of whom was Sir Wilfrid Lawson. On 8 April 1605 at Carlisle Sir Wilfrid was elected convener or president of the rest of these conjunct commissioners for the next three months. Their duty was to take means for the prevention and punishment of murders, disorders, etc., in Northumberland, Westmorland, Cumberland and part of Durham in England: and Roxburgh, Selkirk, Peebles, Dumfries, and the Stewartries of Kirkcudbright and Annandale in Scotland.²⁸ Musgrave at Carlisle was put in command of 15 horsemen²⁹ and was authorized to pursue and bring fugitives from the law to justice and for trial. Concerning the death of Barngleish, Musgrave told Sir Wilfrid Lawson "tho he had warrant at his first entrie to apprehend and bringe to the handes of justice fugitives, the castle-breakers and the Graymes returned, which was ment for the furtherance of his majesties service, he

(Musgrave) sayth he knoweth right well that therbie he might not justifie the killinge of any man of that sort that would willinglie yeeld himself to be tryed by his majesties lawes, neither would he have had any thinge otherwise to do with Barnegleesse if he could have been freed from him without danger of his owne lyfe.''³⁰

When Musgrave crossed the border into Scotland with his horsemen in pursuit of fugitives in September 1606 it is inconceivable that he could have expected any serious trouble at Barnegleish, for Christie was now an old man and was not living in his tower surrounded by a garrison of armed men. Sir William Seton was convinced that Christie was a reformed character after 1603 and he wrote to Lawson on 4 October 1606 as follows: "This Christie hath bene heretofore, the countries beinge opposite, I will not say likelie but with indifferent qualities, but since his majesties happie entrie a man alwaies answerable and of whom I have never hard any complaint, neither on your side nor on ours, yea so settled in his dois that he was in suite of law with my lord Maxwell in Edenbrugh for the defence of his owne possessions.'"³¹ On the other hand Christie may not have been a staunch supporter of the law and the Bishop of Carlisle wrote to Lawson on 19 October and quoted Musgrave who "will tell yow what danger the souldiers were in, that were last sent with the prisoners into Scotland, by some of Barnegleesses frindes who laye in wayt for them at their returne. I doubt not of your wise provision for preventinge the danger of those savadge creatures.'"³² Musgrave's statements can be distrusted. "The true narracion of the searchinge of the house of Christie Armestronge at Barnegleesse in Scotland . . ." was his official report and tells his alleged true version of the affair, subscribed by himself and twenty of his followers.³³



“First haveinge a warrant from his Highnes Comissioners of the Midleshyres of Great Brittain to search aswell within Scotland and England, within the lymittes of there comission for any fugitives, outlawes, or any the persons who brake his Majesties gaole at Carleill, I knowinge the said Christopher [of] Barnegleesse was and had bene a notable and great theefe a longe tyme and murderer within the kingdome of England, and for some of his offences condemned to die and reprived, and that Sandie Grayme alias Geordies Sandie, a fugitive, who fledd for his offences from the said comissioners, and that George Armstronge alias George of Kinmonth, one condemned to death (who brake his Highnes gaole) with Wm Grayme alias Cockplay, and with divers others fugitives usuallie recett by the said Christopher Armestronge alias Barnegleese at his howse, and haveinge intelligence that upon that Sunday at night, beinge the 21th of September last, the said Geordies Sandie, and Geordie of Kinmont with divers others were there and might have bene apprehended by me the leader, I with the souldiers repaired by night to Barnegleese his howse and there laye close till the doores were opened, and so with much adoe gott in, and searched the howse and found none, yet findinge in the same howse the gunn of the said Geordies Sandie, and for that I could and can duellie prove that the said Barnegleese did usuallie recett the said outlawes and fugitives. I did command the said Barngleesse to make him readie to go to Carliell with me to answeere his faultes and offences before his Majesties Comissioners, who seeminge willinge so to do, I did send the souldiers to search some other howses thereaboutes, retayninge onelie 2 of them to assist me, for the conductinge of the said Barngleesse, and the said Barngleesse haveinge secretlie admonished and conveyed into his howse 12 women of his neighbours thereaboutes, did go downe

the staires with me as though he had ment to have gone accordinge to promysse and words as a true prisoner to Carliell. But at the foot of the staires the said Barnegleesse and 2 women did violentlie thurst me with the help of one man there with him, beinge his brothers soone, into a vault at the foote of the said staires, and got the utter doore bolted, and the rest of the women were in hand with the other 2 souldiers, and the said Barneglees cryinge still 'Kill them'. Whereupon and being sore assaulted by the said Barnegleesse and his brothers soone, with the help of the foresaid women, I was forced in safeguard of my owne life and the other 2 of the souldiers to give a blow to the said Barnegleese into his body with my dagger wherebie he fell downe, and then presentlie I, the said John Musgrave, opened the doore, and so more help of the souldiers came in, who discontented with their accions and seeinge me bleedinge did give the said Barnegleesse moe wounds, whereupon with the first strooke he died, and I saved myself with the rest of my companie."

Musgrave gave Sir William Hutton a more detailed description of his struggle with Christie, "that he was forced with his breast (both he and Barnegleesse haveinge hould of his dagger and seeinge the point towards Barnegleesse) to thrust with his whole bodie upon the pomell of the said dagger to help his hands withall, and so did thrust him into his bodie."³⁴

This report had been made out by Musgrave at the request of Sir Wilfrid Lawson, Commissioner of the Middle Shires, who wrote to the Earl of Salisbury, Secretary of State in London, on 5 October,³⁵ "marvellinge" that they had not been informed sooner about "the truth of that accident", and that only the day before he had met with John Musgrave in Carlisle when he asked for a report and told him that "he had wronged himself and us that he had not made us sooner

acquainted therewith . . .” A postscript at the end of the letter noted that “Barneglesse hath been an evill doer long and of late thought to be a great recetter of fugitives”. However, Salisbury was already in possession of certain information from an unknown source and among his papers there is one, dated 25 September, and endorsed by him “The Slaughter of Christopher Armstrong”.³⁶

Upon 22 September John Musgrave, of Plumpton, now commander of the English garrison at Carlisle, “came to Christopher Armstrong’s house at Barnegleich by the break of day in search as was alleged of some outlaws, especially of one Sandie Graham called Georgdies Sandie; and entering with open doors, after search finding no faultier nor fugitive, they took Christopher himself, being a responsible man, and had laid in sufficient caution for his good behaviour. After his rendering, thinking to be carried to some of his Majesty’s wards, they in most cruel form murdered him upon their own particular and old quarrels, to the great occasion of breaking of the Borders and special contempt of his Majesty’s officers, and to their own great slander, who under pretence of his Majesty’s service seek nothing but to revenge their own grudges.”

It was firmly believed in Scotland that revenge was the motive which brought about Christie’s death. Sir William Seton³⁷ in Dumfries had read the report which he considered “one of the slightest purgations³⁸ that ever I heard in such a case”. He had heard that Musgrave had boasted of what he had done and, “chopenge on his sword gairdes, sayes stoutlie heare is the sword and there is the hand hath done the turne . . .”. He wrote to Sir Wilfrid Lawson on 4 October complaining that the country was scandalized at what had happened, and he asserted that the killing was premeditated and inspired by Sir William

Hutton³⁹ who had "some particular grudge and malice" against Barnleish who had been warded at Carlisle when Sir William maintained that Christie had broken trust.⁴⁰ This was relatively unimportant, but the killing of Barnleish was not and Seton asked Lawson "how you take the matter, it beinge verie farr different fra the custome and authoritie of your lawes, not beinge lawfull to slea a verie criminall person, your garison men haveinge force sufficient and abilitie to take him and present him to justice . . ." ⁴¹

Musgrave, as was to be expected, denied the words imputed to him and adhered to his previous story.⁴² In so far as Christie's death was concerned this was the end and there was no question of Musgrave being charged with murder. There was difficulty then, as now, of discovering the truth and this is well expressed by Sir Wilfrid Lawson who wrote "and where yow feare in thend it will try an unanswerable worke, God and his owne conscience knoweth best, for as *Vim vi pellere licet*, so voluntarilie to kill where a man might save is not good." ⁴³

Note.

The genealogical chart of the Armstrongs does not pretend to be infallible. There are so many references to 16th-century Armstrongs of the same name which are most difficult to disentangle. However, it can be assumed with some certainty that the Armstrongs shown on the chart are all related. It is said that Kinmont Willie was also descended from Johnie Armstrong of Gilnockie but this relationship has so far not been proved.

Acknowledgements.

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References.

- 1 Ewart Library, Dumfries, R. C. Reid's "Armstrong Notes" ex Terwinney Records, Reid Bequest 6/63, 26.
- 2 *Chronicles of the Armstrongs*, ed. J. L. Armstrong, 203; *Calendar of Boyder Papers (CBP)*, i, 122; National Library of Scotland, Armstrong MSS., MS. 6117, f. 326, table vii.
- 3 Armstrong MSS., MS. 6117, f. 358; and in MS. 6114B, f. 562, see "Cristell Armstrong, son of John of Gilnockie".
- 4 R. B. Armstrong, *The History of Liddesdale and the Debateable Land*, 228-229, and Appendix xiv. The 1525 grant was of the lands of Dalbetht, Scheild, Dalblane, Stapilgorton, Langholme and Cowsnowt in the lordship of Eskdale. Barngleish is not mentioned by name. The bond of manrent given by Christie in 1557 was in respect of all the lands which had formerly been granted to John his father.
- 5 Armstrong MSS., MS. 6114A, f. 316; and in MS. 6117, f. 40, Christie Armstrong made a raid into Annandale, 2 May 1543.
- 6 T. J. Carlisle, 40.
- 7 William Fraser, *The Scotts of Buccleuch*, lxi.
- 8 T. J. Carlyle, *loc. cit.*, 40. See also D. J. Beattie, *Lang Syne in Eskdalemuir*, 51.
- 9 R. C. Reid, *The Border Grahams*, D. & G. Trans., 3rd Series (1959-60), 107.
- 10 *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland (RPC)*, iii, 134.
- 11 Fraser, *op. cit.*, lxi.
- 12 *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland*, ed. R. Pitcairn (Bannatyne Club, 1829-33), ii, 450.
- 13 *RPC*, iii, 598.
- 14 Frank Miller, *The Ballad of Kinmont Willie*, D. & G. Trans., N.S. xxiii (1911), 299-300.
- 15 *CBP*, i, 184.
- 16 William Fraser, *The Douglas Book*, iii, 285.
- 17 *RPC*, iv, 258.
- 18 *RPC*, iv, 325.
- 19 *CBP*, i, 420-21.
- 20 *RPC*, iv, 799.
- 21 *CBP*, i, 558.
- 22 William Fraser, *The Book of Caerlaverock*, ii, 497-8.
- 23 John Kennedy, *Kinmont Willie*, Trans. Hawick Archaeological Society, Session 1910, 66.
- 24 T. J. Carlyle, *loc. cit.*, 44.
- 25 *CBP*, ii, 736.
- 26 *CBP*, ii, 785.
- 27 T. I. Rae, *The Administration of the Scottish Frontier*, 50, 51, 119.
- 28 *RPC*, vii, lxxx, 706 *et seq.*
- 29 Lord Muncaster MSS., f. 120. Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), Report X, iv (1885), 257.
- 30 Record Office, Carlisle, Muncaster MSS., f. 148.

- ³¹ Muncaster MSS., f. 148.
³² *Ibid.*, f. 151.
³³ *Ibid.*, f. 147.
³⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 154v.
³⁵ Marquess of Salisbury's MSS., HMC, xviii, 315.
³⁶ *Ibid.*, 301-2.
³⁷ Sir William Seton of Kylesmure, knight. He was Provost and Sheriff of Haddington which he demitted in 1613 after eighteen years in that office.
³⁸ Purgation, the act of clearing from suspicion or imputation of guilt.
³⁹ Sir William Hutton, knight, of Hutton Hall, Penrith, and Shank Castle. He was not one of the five English "Commissioners for the late Marches" appointed in 1605 but in 1616 both he and Sir Wilfrid Lawson were "Commissioners of the Middle Shires". Sir William had been a Commissioner "for many years" and three years later this lucrative office was abolished mainly through the efforts of Lord William Howard who criticized Hutton very strongly upon the manner in which he had discharged his duties. Sir William took vengeance on Lord William by making an unfounded accusation against his wife which led to Hutton being called to the Court of the Star Chamber to answer certain charges. It is noteworthy that Hutton was accused of "unchristian and malicious courses" and of "false and malicious information" in a statement drawn up by Lord William. Selections from the Household Books of the Lord William Howard. *Surtees Society*, Vol. 68, xxix and 109, 111, 112, 452, 458.
⁴⁰ Letter, 9 Oct. 1606. Hutton to Lawson, which refers to Christie having broken gaol. "He haveinge libertie of the castle and the towne for his meat, upon the lard Johnstons assurance upon his letter (which I have) and by my lord of Cumberlands privitie, he 2 or 3 dayes before Sir John Dalston should have taken deliverie of the gaole and in my absence did slipp away, and so upon the matter did breake the gaole." Cumberland was Lord Lieutenant, Hutton was the retiring Sheriff and Dalston was his successor. Muncaster MSS., f. 154v.
⁴¹ *Ibid.*, f. 148. Letter, 4 Oct. 1606.
⁴² *Ibid.*, f. 148v. Letter, 5 Oct. 1606.
⁴³ *Ibid.*, f. 148. Letter, 8 Oct. 1606. Lawson to Sir William Seton.

References on Chart.

- ⁴⁴ Pitcairn, *Trials*, i, 245.
⁴⁵ *RPC*, iii, 134. "Cristell Armstrong of Barngleish, called Johnnis Cristie."
⁴⁶ *RPC*, iii, 535. 8 Dec. 1582. John Armstrong in the Hohlhous, eldest son to Johnnis Cristie, Cristie Armstrong called Young Christie, his brother.
⁴⁷ *CBP*, ii, 476.
⁴⁸ R. C. Reid, *Gillesbie Tower*, D. & G. Trans., 3rd Series, xviii, 378. Christies Will, grandson of Johnie Armstrang of Gilnockie.

APPENDIX.

John Musgrave of Plumpton.* By J. V. HARRISON.

John Musgrave who was appointed land sergeant of Gilsland in 1598 was descended from the Musgraves of Hayton, Aspatria,

* Based on Cal. Border Papers II, 570/1, Cal. of State Papers, Domestic, 1603-1610, p. 319, Surtees Society lxviii 418, his will, and information from Mr C. Roy Hudleston of Durham City.

his paternal grandparents being Thomas Musgrave (d. 1532) and Elizabeth, illegitimate daughter of Thomas lord Dacre. At the time of his appointment, his eldest child Bridget had just been born, her mother being a daughter of Edmond Dudley of Yanwath. Musgrave was trained in service upon the Border under his uncle Humphrey Musgrave, deputy warden to Henry lord Scrope, and on taking office he was quickly in action.

In June 1606, he took over Sir Henry Leigh's troop of horse-men on the nomination of the Earl of Cumberland, and was designated provost marshal. Three months later the events related by Mr Prevost took place. John Musgrave died in May 1618, and his will (proved at Carlisle 16 June 1618) mentions his sons Edmond, John and William and his son-in-law William Orfeur, husband of Bridget. He had lands at Plumpton and Solport, and a place called Hiberries is mentioned. His inventory totalled £319. os. 4d.

Lord William Howard, unlike Lord Scrope, had a poor opinion of him.