

# DAVID BARCLAY

## THE CANNIBAL LAIRD AND THE SHERIFF OF THE MEARNS

The Kaim of Mathers is a curious ruin sitting atop treacherous cliffs on the Kincardineshire coast within sight of St Cyrus to the south and Johnshaven to the north. This fortress was reputedly built by David Barclay, the Laird of Mathers to escape the wrath of James II (or some versions say James I) after Barclay's involvement in the murder of Sheriff John Melville. The nature of the killing led to Barclay's gruesome soubriquet, The Cannibal Laird.

Let us go back to James's court and witness a tense scene between him and his noblemen, Barclay of Mathers, Arbuthnott, Pitarrow and Halkerton. The lairds were lamenting the heavy-handed conduct of Melville, Sheriff of the Mearns, accusing him of impropriety with their womenfolk, interfering in their business and generally causing a nuisance.

The king despaired of hearing this chatter, and suddenly exclaimed: "No sorrow gin the sheriff wis sodden and supped in broo!" "As ye command, sire," Barclay grinned. James had given him carte blanche to do away with their unpleasant sheriff. The others looked at him, wondering what nefarious plan was hatching in Barclay's mind.

Days later, Sheriff John Melville was invited by the lairds to a hunting party on the hill of Gavrock, which lay within his jurisdiction, just north of Morpie. "After our hunt, my servants have prepared a cauldron for our... prey," Barclay smiled wickedly. "It's in a fine sheltered howe, do join us, dear Melville!"



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There was not a single deer to be found; Melville declared he had to go home before dark as his wife was expecting him. "Let us go to sup, do stay!" Barclay declared. With the horses tethered after they reached the little glen, the lairds seemed to hang back as Melville walked towards a huge iron cooking cauldron full of boiling water, under which a fire was merrily blazing, attended by a servant. Melville locked gazes with the boy, wondering what they would have to eat since they had caught no meat.



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Suddenly, the sheriff felt a massive blow to the back of the head. Barclay had struck him with the hilt of his sword. They then stripped his unconscious body, bound his wrists and ankles and dropped him into the cauldron, the heat waking him up instantly. He screamed in terror, as the lairds watched, fascinated. The servant had been paid handsomely to keep his mouth shut and stoke the fire. The boiling water slowly turned Melville's skin lobster red, searing the breath from his lungs. "We are doing the king's bidding, Sheriff, he said himself, no sorrow gin the sheriff were sodden and supped in broo!" Melville swore and cursed with his dying breath that Barclay would never be at peace for his foul act of murder.



Now entirely suffocated, Melville boiled alive in the cauldron. The servant boy averted his eyes, trying to suppress the urge to retch at the smell of boiling flesh. Barclay's friends and kinsmen realised the enormity of their actions when he produced a horn spoon for each of them. "Now, we must carry out our royal master's command to the letter, we will sup the broo of our sheriff!" he instructed with a malevolent smirk.

They reluctantly took the spoons, unwilling to be the first to partake of this human soup. Barclay was angry with them: "Come, cousins, you all agreed to this!" He held his spoon aloft and dipped it into the bubbling cauldron which was now filled with a dubious brown brew composed of Melville's melting flesh. He supped with relish, much to the distaste of his kinsmen. "Exquisite, never did I think that the flesh of man could make such... meaty broo!" he laughed.

Barclay drew his sword and motioned the men to follow suit, which they did, Arbuthnott particularly screwing up his eyes as the liquid slid down his throat. He threw down the spoon. "Barclay, I was willing to join a murder plot, Melville deserved no less, but this? This is monstrous! I will not stay another minute!" He fled, Barclay shouting that he was a coward.

Once word got to King James, most of the conspirators had gone into hiding. Only Arbuthnott answered the royal summons. "My lord, I will own that we disposed of Sheriff Melville, but I claim sanctuary from punishment through my kinship with Lord Macduff, the Earl of Fife. There is a family agreement that anyone, within nine degrees of the earl can be pardoned of murder once they reach the earl's cross at Lindores. I am going there now, and I will pay a fine to my kinsman, the earl, who will, I'm sure, pass on the funds to the Sheriff's family," he explained.



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James knew of the agreement and bid Arbuthnott leave at once. Barclay was the chief amongst the killers, but James understood it had been foolish of him to make the comment that they had deliberately interpreted as a command to take justice into their own hands. "Barclay shall ne'er have peace on land nor sea, woe betide he ever appears in my presence again!"

It is not recorded what happened to the other lairds, but Barclay is said to have had the Kaim constructed so he could dwell in a no-man's-land between land and sea.

The Sheriff's Cauldron or Kettle still exists today near Garvock Hill. The minister of Garvock parish, Rev John Charles, recorded the story as fact in the New Statistical Account of Scotland in 1836. He even claims that the Clan Arbuthnott retains the laird's document of pardon from the time, giving further credence to the gruesome tale. There is no mention in the previous account of 1792. David Barclay was a real person, in fact the first of the family to change the spelling of his name from that of his ancestor, Hugh de Berkeley. The latter had been granted the Mearns as his property by William the Lion, King of Scots (1165-1214). The land of Mathers came into the family in 1351 through marriage. The Kaim dates from that period, but historians speculate that it was merely a hunting lodge, ironic, considering hunting was the excuse to get Melville to Garvock!

Though care is advised, visitors can walk from the St Cyrus School carpark along a cliff path, part of the local nature reserve, to view the Kaim of Mathers, which continues to crumble into the sea from its precarious rocky stack.