

Who were the Wigtown Martyrs of 1685?

There was a dispute in the 17th century between the Church and the Monarchy. Both England and Scotland had joined the Reformation a century earlier. England's church was Episcopalian, with the King as its head and his appointed Bishops responsible for each diocese. Scotland's church was Presbyterian, under the leadership of men like John Knox, with no head of the church but Christ, and the people appointing their own parish ministers. The King, now ruling over both countries, forced Episcopalianism on Scotland; the people who refused this imposition, having signed a Covenant together to do so, became known as Covenanters. Over decades, successive kings escalated their campaign against the Covenanters, with rulings, legislation, and sanctions such as fines and banishment. In the late 1680s, the Killing Times began with many covenanting "rebels" hunted down and executed.



Wigtown was the scene of five such executions, and those who died in 1685 became known as "The Wigtown Martyrs." Stones were erected beside the Parish Church to commemorate their deaths.

There are three stones to the Wigtown Martyrs in the kirkyard: one commemorates Margaret Wilson (Willson, as it appears on the stone); another, Margaret McLachlan (Lachlane). These two women were drowned in the tidal Bladnoch river that ran below the church. A third stone commemorates William Johnstone, John Milroy and George Walker who were hanged in Wigtown the same year. A wooden stake representing the women's place of death stood on the shore until 1937 when what remained of it was removed, and an inscribed stone was placed on the site. The river channel and the shoreline have altered significantly over the past 300 years. The town harbour was resited to the south (its current location) in about 1825.

In 1858 a large monument was erected on the town's Windy Hill in memory of all the martyrs, and their names are inscribed upon it.

The three men were from Penninghame Parish: Johnstone was a gardener, Milroy a hawker at Fyntalloch House, and Walker a farm servant at Kirkcalla. These men and their plight were known by Alexander Peden, a famous Covenanter preacher who prophesied their death.

Margaret Wilson was the daughter of Gilbert Wilson, a prosperous farmer at Glenvernoch, not far from Bargrennan. Gilbert and his wife conformed, and attended Episcopalian services in the parish church. Their

children, though, refused. Elder sons had fled to Ireland. Daughters, Margaret and Agnes, and younger son Thomas, knowing they were being watched, were living in the hills, attending conventicles,¹ and sheltering in the homes of Presbyterian sympathisers. Gilbert Wilson was held responsible for his children's non-attendance, heavily fined by the Courts, and had soldiers billeted upon him, who stole stock and possessions from him. He was all but ruined.

With the death of Charles II in February 1685, there was hope for a lull in persecution. The young Wilson girls came down from the hills and may have sheltered at the home of Margaret McLachlan, a 63 year old widow who lived at Drumjargan in Kirkinner Parish. A local man betrayed them when they came into Wigtown, and the two girls were taken prisoner. At the same time, Margaret McLachlan was seized while at prayer in her own home, and held in custody with them. Another young woman Margaret Maxwell, a servant of the household of one of the sons of the Earl of Galloway, was also in jail, under suspicion of being a covenanter. The women were required to take the Oath of Abjuration which had earlier been administered to everyone in the County over the age of 13 years. This had been introduced on 25 November 1684 by the Privy Council, in order to catch sympathisers of Richard Cameron. In a public declaration at Sanquhar Cross, Cameron had denounced the King as a tyrant and declared war on him.

The anti-Cameronian Oath of Abjuration required swearing allegiance to the Crown, and would have been difficult for any Presbyterian to agree with, whether sharing the extreme views of Richard Cameron and his followers or not. Refusal to swear the Oath allowed execution without trial; men could be hanged or shot; a new sentence had been introduced for women: death by drowning. The Wigtownshire women refused the Oath and were brought before the Commission. The Commissioners, Grierson of Lagg, Sheriff David Graham (Claverhouse's brother), Major Windram, Captain Strachan and Provost Coltrane of Wigtown, have been described as "five of the most vicious scoundrels in Scotland."² The women were charged with attending conventicles held in fields and houses, and also with being present at the battles of Bothwell Brig and Airds Moss.³ The latter charge was ludicrous, considering the young women would have been children at the time, and the widow was hardly likely to have been active in armed battle against Government troops.

Margaret McLachlan with Margaret and Agnes Wilson were found guilty on all charges and they were sentenced "to be tyed to palisadoes and fixed in the sand, within the flood mark, at the mouth of the Blednoch stream, and there to stand till the flood over flowed them, and [they] drowned." Agnes

Wilson (aged only thirteen at the time) was reprieved, when her father promised to pay a bond of £100, a fortune in that day.

Margaret Maxwell was found partially guilty, and sentenced to be flogged by the public hangman. On the day of her flogging, all the citizens of Wigtown retreated indoors and shut up their houses, rather than watch. With such obvious public disgust, the hangman was as lenient as he could be.

A pardon was issued in Edinburgh, dated 30 April 1685, for Margaret Wilson (aged 18) and Margaret McLachlan (aged 63). It remains a mystery what happened to it, since no record of it remains beyond the Council Chamber. They were taken out and tied to stakes in the waters of the Bladnoch on 11 May 1685. The older woman was tied deeper in the river channel forcing young Margaret to witness her death, in the hope that she would relent. Instead, she seemed to take strength from the older woman's fate, saying "it is Christ wrestling there" and singing from Psalm 25 "To Thee I lift my soul, O Lord; I trust in Thee, my God; let me not be ashamed, nor foes triumph over me." She also recited from the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 8, most poignantly verses 35-37: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written, for Thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us."

Accounts of this awful day differ on some details. Astonishingly, some, like deniers of the holocaust, claimed the women were released, and the covenanters only said the executions went ahead in order to show how cruel their persecutors were! The events are recorded in the Kirk Session records of both Penninghame and Kirkiner parishes, vouched for by elders and ministers who were present on the day, and the records confirmed by the Presbytery of Wigtown. The Penninghame records say that Margaret Wilson's head was held up from the water, in order to ask her if she would pray for the King. She answered that she wished the salvation of all men, but the damnation of none. When her watching relatives cried out that this proved she was willing to conform, Major Windram offered her the Oath of Abjuration again, but she refused, saying "I am one of Christ's children; let me go."

The Kirkiner records state that Margaret McLachlan's head had been "held down within the water by one of the town officers by his halberd at her throat, til she died." A popular account adds that the officer said "then tak' another drink o't my hearty." Legend has it that for the rest of his life the man had an unquenchable thirst, and had to stop and drink from every ditch, stream, or tap he passed, and he was deserted by his friends.

Likewise the constable named Bell, who had carried out his duties with a notable lack of feeling, allegedly said, when asked how the women had behaved, “O, they just clepped roun the stobs, like partans and prayed.” Clepped means web-footed, partans are crabs. Bell’s wife bore three children all with “clepped” fingers, and the family was referred to as “the Cleppie Bells” which was believed to be the sins of the father being visited on the children.

What these stories add to official accounts is understanding of the extent of distaste ordinary folk had for these brutal killings. This leaflet is dedicated to the memory of the brave men and women who would not submit to the cruelty and tyranny of that age, who would not compromise their belief in Jesus Christ as the only head of the church, and who were determined to preserve the Presbyterian form of church government.



1. Conventicles were “illegal” meetings where Presbyterian ministers conducted religious services, often held outside in remote places.
2. From an old magazine “All about Galloway and Dumfriesshire.”
3. Bothwell Brig was a full scale battle between the Covenanters and Government Forces. Airds Moss was a fight to the death between Richard Cameron and his followers, and a troop of Government soldiers.

Other sources used were “Tales of Galloway” by Alan Temperley, and “The Covenanter Encyclopaedia” by Dane Love. The painting is John Everett Millais’ depiction of Margaret Wilson “The Martyr of the Solway.”

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