

CHAPTER TWO

'Fleance is 'Scaped': Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Escapology

I have no claim to literary expertise, but we 'did' *Macbeth* at school when I was 15-16, and that phrase from Act III Scene 4, about young Fleance, a fictional (I think!) ancestor of the Stuarts, has stuck with me over all the years since.¹ A lot of classic seventeenth and eighteenth century escapes are associated with the Stuarts, in that they were connected either to the Civil War(s) or else to the Jacobite risings.

The Stuart family themselves were noted prisoners and escapers. Originally a noble and royal family from Scotland, they had succeeded also to the English throne in 1603 when Elizabeth I died without direct descendants. By this time, the family had several escapes and escape attempts, behind it. Mary Queen of Scots did not manage to escape Elizabeth's executioner in the end, but she had given her own subjects the slip on more than one occasion. Her escape from the island prison of Lochleven in 1568 was a memorable one, with good planning and co-ordination with her supporters, disguise and the physical challenge of a long night ride, without breaks or refreshment. Mary's son, James VI/I had also known imprisonment. In 1582, some of his subjects, eager to ensure that Scotland would be a thoroughly Protestant country, took control of the young king and kept him in Ruthven castle for ten months, until he escaped in 1583. Another relative, and potential contender for the throne of England, Arbella Stuart, had escaped from custody in men's clothing (though she was soon recaptured). Stuarts continued to be escape-relevant over subsequent generations.

Charles I made some notable efforts to escape, such as his flight from Hatfield House in 1647, which started well, but ran into difficulties when it emerged that there was no real plan for what to do next, and he was soon back in chokey.² His family fared better- see Charles II's flight and the young James II's escape from Parliamentary guardians under cover of a game of hide and seek. There was a family talent for the carrying off of disguises (a servant's costume, then a 'country wench' in the case of Charles (II) and women's clothes in the case of James, Duke

¹ (My absolute favourite passage, 'What, you egg! Young fry of treachery!' Act IV Scene 2, is less relevant here).

² M.A. Kishlansky and J. Morrill, ODNB.

of York and Bonnie Prince Charlie). The Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century also saw a great deal of imprisonment of other combatants, and some daring escapes. There are, as ever, ropes, and cunning disguises to be savoured. One particular advantage the Stuarts had in their escapes was that they always seemed to have one or two incredibly loyal helpers. However much they annoyed vast numbers of their subjects, some always remained prepared to do just about anything to help out a runaway Stuart.³

In the civil wars, and when the Jacobite risings were put down, many prisoners were taken. And where there are prisoners, there will be escapes. Some were simple enough, as we can see from the early example of Sir James Montgomery. He supported the exiled James II against replacements William of Orange and Mary, and was imprisoned awaiting trial for treason, in 1694. Not wishing to take the chance of being found guilty, and facing execution by hanging, drawing and quartering, he escaped from the London house in which he was being held, by bribing his two sentries to break open the lock on his door. With the stylish examples from their leaders, however, it is not surprising that some of the Jacobites of 'the Fifteen' and 'the Forty-Five' managed more dashing escapes. We are reminded, though, that they were also good at keeping prisoners themselves, if necessary, and that the wild Scottish islands which they controlled could be very handy for keeping dangerous opponents out of the way.

Strength, agility and a strong stomach

We have already seen some impressive physical break-outs, climbs and scampers. A brace of physical escapes have been attributed to Sir John Winter, a wealthy royalist in the Forest of Dean. He was involved on the losing side in a Civil War battle in 1644. Legend has it that he made an enormous leap, on horseback, down a 200 ft cliff. A year later, he had to swim the river Wye to escape after another defeat. He would seem to have been a good escaper, but a rubbish commander. When banged

³ J. Fox, 'Jane Whorwood (1614/5- 1684)' ODNB.

up in an actual prison, he proved a bit of a disappointment: when he was locked in the Tower of London, he capitulated and renounced his beliefs.⁴

DIY ropes continued to feature throughout this period, and not all by those on the Royalist/Jacobite side. John Home, a minister in the (severely Protestant) Church of Scotland fought against the Jacobites in 1745-6. Taken prisoner at one point and locked up in Doune Castle, he did the blanket-rope thing and escaped.⁵

A combination of rope trick and disguise was used by royalist officer and plotter Daniel O'Neill. He was jailed by Parliament in 1641, and awaiting his trial for treason, but managed to escape in 1642, using a rope made from sheets and tablecloths, and got down the outside wall of the jail. He then disguised himself as a woman and got away.⁶ English Jacobite of the '45 John Holker bribed a jailer in Newgate to let in tools and a rope, and escaped, despite being a rather large man.⁷

Ropes could be tricky things, however. The Parliamentarian David Bandinel, dean of Jersey, (d. 1645) was arrested for treason and held in prisons for a year, with his son Jacques. Behind bars in Mont Orgueil, father and son came up with a plan: they would squeeze through a grating, then lower themselves down the wall using the inevitable bed-linen rope. The squeezing part of the plan worked, but the rope aspect went a bit wrong. The first problem was that they had underestimated the drop. This became apparent to Jacques when he got to the end of the rope, and had to let go, injuring himself in the subsequent fall. Worse followed: David's weight was too much for the rope (it's poor old Gruffudd from the medieval chapter all over again). He fell further than Jacques had done, onto some rocks, and consequently was more hurt. He was alive, if unconscious when discovered by a guard, but died within a few hours. Jacques was on the run for a while, but was retaken, imprisoned once more, and died without getting out again.⁸

⁴ A. Warmington, ODNB.

⁵ K. Simpson ODNB.

⁶ J.I. Casway, ODNB.

⁷ J.R. Harris, ODNB.

⁸ H.M.E. Evans ODNB

A degree of agility and a willingness to get smelly can be seen in the escape of the aptly named royalist captain, Sir Lewis Dyve (1599-1669). He was in the Tower of London from 1645, accused of high treason. He was later in the King's Bench prison for debt, and escaped. Later recaptured, in 1648, and held by the army at Whitehall, he escaped by leaping – or *dyving* - through a privy and into the Thames.

There were some physical break-outs by later Stuart-fans too. For example, in May 1716, there was an escape from Newgate by 'Old Borlum' Mackintosh and eight of his men,⁹ who rushed the guards in the exercise yard and poured out into streets. Some were a bit clueless as to what to do next, and were quickly recaptured, but Borlum himself got away, and was only recaptured after making a rather rash return to Scotland from the Continent. He spent the rest of his life in prison in Edinburgh Castle, writing about farming, before his death in 1743.

With hundreds of Jacobites taken prisoner after the '45, it was hard to find secure places for them all. One of the ways out of the overcrowding problem, was the use of prison ships for lower-ranking Jacobites. These ships were foul and disease-ridden, and hard to escape. Stewart Carmichael of Bonnyhaugh seems to have been the only one who managed it. He was locked up for months in the *Pamela*, in horrible conditions. The ship was moored between Gravesend and Tilbury, where the Thames is wide and treacherous. He eventually escaped by squeezing through a cabin window, jumping over the side of the ship into the River Thames, and swimming off. He obviously thought he needed some help with his swimming, since he had made some floats or 'bladders' to support his body in the water. He swam to shore on the southern side of the river, and stayed at large in London until in 1747, the government decided to give up pursuing Jacobites like him. Others consigned to the ships had to wait the help of outsiders. On the principle 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', the French could be quite useful to the Jacobites. In 1747, the transport ship *Veteran* was taking 150 Jacobite prisoners to the West Indian colony of Antigua, to be put to work in the plantations. Before it could get there, though, it was attacked by the *Diamond*, a ship based on the French colony of Martinique. The *Diamond* was victorious in the encounter and the prisoners were taken to Martinique, where the

⁹D. Horsburgh, 'Mackintosh, William, of Borlum (c. 1657–1743)' ODNB.

French governor of the island set them free, no doubt delighted to annoy the traditional enemies of his country.

Disguise

This, arguably, is the great era of the disguise-escape. We have had mention of one of these already (O'Neill). Highlights include the escape of strapping royalist earl Richard Talbot. Talbot (1630-91) was captured by Parliamentarians, and, despite being a tall, hefty young man, he got away – or was allowed to get away - dressed as a girl in 1649. He was captured again when he was sent by Charles (II) to London, during the 'Interregnum'. This time, no disguise, but a multi-stage escape involving getting his guards drunk, escaped from captivity using a cord, and being shut up in a boat which sailed to Calais (1655).¹⁰

Not everyone could pull it off, however. Women's clothes could be quite concealing, so they seem to have been a good way of disguising escapers, but they could not be used in all situations. A later Stuart supporter, Sir Edmund Andros (1637-1714), governor of New England, was imprisoned in Boston in 1689. Local militia had locked him up, because the American settlers and residents were enraged at his attempts to implement his orders and bring in stricter rule from Britain, and force the settlers to allow other forms of worship than their own brand of Protestantism. He tried to escape dressed as a woman, but was rumbled when a guard spotted the size of his shoes poking out from under his female disguise.¹¹

Disguises did not always follow the standard 'man dresses up as woman' pattern. 'Dressing down' was also a known strategy. Thus, Robert Montgomerie, a royalist army officer, escaped Edinburgh Castle in the clothes of a coalman.¹² Charles II disguised himself as a servant to his helper, Jane Lane, when escaping after a royalist defeat.¹³ Randal MacDonnell, marquess of Antrim (1609-83), escaped Dunloe Castle in 1641, disguised as 'an invalid'.¹⁴ Special recognition goes to

¹⁰ P. Wauchope, ODNB.

¹¹ R.R. Johnson, ODNB.

¹² T.F. Henderson rev. E.M. Furgol, ODNB.

¹³ J. Sutton, ODNB.

¹⁴ J. Ohlmeyer, ODNB.

Marmaduke Langdale, whose escape from Nottingham castle (with help) involved using different disguises, including that of milkmaid.¹⁵ The 'Old Pretender' had to creep around France dressed as a sailor after a change of heart in the French government meant his invasion of Britain in 1715 was put on ice.

The most famous getaway of 'the Forty-Five' was that of Bonnie Prince Charlie himself. This was not strictly a prison break, more of an evasion of capture. After the final defeat of his army at Culloden in 1746, he fled through the wild Western parts of Scotland, hotly pursued by government troops. With the aid of a young woman, Flora MacDonald, he got away from South Uist to Skye, a safer haven, from which he could take ship for France. He did this in the traditional Stuart fashion, by dressing up as a woman, in this case, as Flora's Irish maid, Betty Burke. Charlie seems to have been rather keen on his female clothes, laughing and joking around with them. We know that his dress was a fetching stamped linen with a purple sprig of flowers, which became all the rage for Jacobite women.

Flora Macdonald, who helped disguise the Prince, was arrested and taken to London, though she was released soon afterwards, to become a romantic heroine. It seemed a simple story: the loyal Scots lassie willingly risking herself for the handsome Prince, the man she believed had been 'born to be King'. It was not, though, quite like that. Flora does not seem to have been a real Jacobite, but a Presbyterian (a Scottish Protestant) who was not involved in politics. If anything, her natural support would probably have been for the other side. She and her husband would later support the Hanoverian government against the American colonists who rebelled against their rule in the American War of Independence. Her stepfather, however, was a Jacobite, and probably gave her little choice as to whether she would help the 'Bonnie Prince'. Her own explanation of why she did what she did suggests that she acted through general kindness, and pity for a hunted man, rather than support for the Jacobite cause.¹⁶

His mother, Clementina Sobieska, a Polish princess, showed that she was a good future Stuart by making her own escape in 1718-19. When it was planned that she should marry the OP, Britain objected, and got the Holy Roman Emperor to detain

¹⁵ A.J. Hopper, ODNB.

¹⁶ H. Douglas, 'Flora MacDonald 1722-1790 Jacobite heroine', ODNB.

her in an Austrian castle. She escaped with James's envoy, Charles Wogan, Clementina being dressed as a maid, and made a daring flight to Italy across the snowbound Brenner pass. She married James, and later escaped that unhappy union by entering a convent.

A stirring and celebrated escape, with disguise elements, but much more, was that of William Maxwell, fifth earl of Nithsdale.¹⁷ He had taken part in the fairly disastrous rising of 1715. He had been captured and sentenced to death for his actions. His wife Winifred Maxwell, however, was not going to let him die. First of all, she tried legal means, travelling down to London and begging the king, George I, to pardon him. When George was unmoved by her pleas, she set to work to organise the earl's escape from the Tower of London. In 1716, she got together a team of women: herself, her maid Cecilia Evans, and two others, 'Mrs Morgan and Mrs Mills'. She bribed the guards to allow them to visit her husband, and proceeded to be very busy visiting, in various combinations, until the day before Lord Nithsdale's scheduled execution, Feb 1716. By that time, the guards were apparently rather confused with all the comings and goings. On her last visit, Lady Nithsdale sneaked in a disguise for her husband. He was dressed in a woman's cloak, and his face was made up to look more feminine. It was a hooded cape.

Keeping a cool head, the countess guided him outside with her, acting as if he was her maid. Even more impressively, she knew she needed to give him as much time as possible to get away. She returned to his cell, and pretended to be talking to him for some time. Eventually she left, but discouraged his guards from going in to check on him by saying that he was at prayer, in preparation for his execution. They got out of the Tower, and, with the help of Mrs Evans, Lord Nithsdale lay low in London for a week, then, with the help of the Venetian embassy, Lord Nithsdale got to Dover, and, in a small boat, made his escape to the Jacobite court in exile in France. On the trip, the captain of the small boat, who didn't know remarked that the wind could not have served better if his passengers had been flying for their lives.

Lady Nithsdale's risky adventures were still not over, however. Once it was clear that her husband had got away, she made a risky journey home to Scotland to get family papers, and sort out their property, before going into exile. Finally, she too sailed for

¹⁷ J. Callow, ODNB.

France and reached the Jacobite court. Despite the glamour and fame of their escape, however, and despite an initially good reception in the Jacobite court, there was no happy end for the Nithsdales. They got heavily indebted, and when Lord Nithsdale died in Rome in 1744, he was buried in an unmarked grave. His wife survived him until 1749.

Lady Margaret Ogilvy of Airlie had actively helped and encouraged her husband in the 1745 campaign, riding around with the army, and waving a sword at market crosses to encourage people to join them.¹⁸ She was captured and put in Edinburgh Castle, but escaped in November 1746. The trick was simple enough: she dressed herself as her own faithful maid, who was allowed in and out, and walked right past the guards. In such cases it is always best to get a head start, and she and her 'team' in this case her brother and sister, managed to keep from her captors the fact of her escape for twenty four hours. She got away from the castle and lay low in Edinburgh. She was free from jail, but getting out of the country proved more difficult. First, there was a plan to go by sea from the east coast of Scotland, with a group of Jacobites. She travelled to North Berwick and met the men. They waited in a fisherman's hut for two days, looking for the promised Dutch ship, but it did not come. She had to go back to Edinburgh and hide until she came up with a new scheme. Falling back on the favourite device of the Stuarts and their supporters, she dressed up as a member of the opposite sex. She pretended to be a noble but sick man, travelling the country in a light coach or 'chaise', in the hope of improving his health, and made for a more southerly port. Sometimes, the problem with this sort of disguise is that it is not convincing. In Lady Ogilvy's case, though, it seems to have been almost too convincing. She was stopped by a government official who believed that she was a man, and in fact thought that she was Bonnie Prince Charlie himself, still on the run. She and her companion had to think quickly. They revealed part of the truth – that she was in fact a woman – but came up with a new cover story, convincing the official that she was travelling in disguise because she had serious money problems. She had to get away from the people to whom she owed money, she said, or they would have her put in jail (as they could in those days). This seems to have fooled the inspector, and aroused his sympathy, and he let them go on, once

¹⁸ M. Pittock, 'David Ogilvy, (1725–1803)', ODNB.

some women had inspected Lady Ogilvy to confirm that she really was not a man. She sailed to the Continent, and joined her husband, who had made his own journey through a number of European countries, to safety.

A cool spur-of-the-moment escape was managed by convicted Jacobite George Mills. Imprisoned in York castle, in 1747, he got out by climbing into a coach which he saw driving out of the prison yard, and, since he had put on a new coat, the guards seem not to have recognised him.

A combination of disguise (or at least misdirection using clothes), key-snatching, disguise, and a toilet excuse featured in the escape of a veteran of 'the fifteen', Thomas Forster. A bit of a useless soldier, he had to steady his nerves with a hot spiced milk and wine drink. He was imprisoned in Newgate prison in London, awaiting trial and almost certain conviction for high treason, but he escaped before he could be tried. On the night in question, in 1716, he was visited by the governor of the prison, Mr Pitt, and the men had a drink together, then Forster claimed that nature called and went out, ostensibly to the lavatory. When Pitt became suspicious and went to see why Forster was taking so long at the 'necessary house', he found only a nightgown on the stairs. The prisoner had been wearing it over his outdoor clothes. He had the help of a servant, and, together, they took a small boat from the Essex coast, and escaped to France. His escape was celebrated by ordinary people. Again, however, the rest of his life failed to live up to the dash of the escape, and he came to a rather disappointing ending on the continent.¹⁹

And afterwards ...

Some of these Jacobite escapes were very dashing and brave. After they had escaped, though, many of our heroes and heroines did not enjoy a particularly happy life. Their cause failed: the Jacobite Stuarts never regained the throne. Many of them spent the years after their escape in rather aimless style. They often struggled for money, since their land and goods in Britain would have been seized by the government. Many made for the Stuart court-in-exile, which was, at first, in France, later in Italy. There, they would find gratitude and titles, but rarely much money. The

¹⁹ L. Gooch, ODNB.

Nithsdales, for example, were in constant financial trouble, and when Lord Nithsdale died in Rome in 1744, there was so little money available that he was buried in an unmarked grave. His wife survived him until 1749, supported by her son. Thomas Forster seems to have been more comfortably off, but rather faded into the background of Jacobite politics, spending his time visiting spas and hunting. Perhaps this general failure was due not just to the ultimate failure of the Jacobite cause, but also to the sort of characters attracted to the uprisings. Lord Nithsdale, after all, was in a financial mess before 'the Fifteen', so it may not be surprising that he had money troubles afterwards. Those who were prepared to make their way as a soldier, or who brought some valuable experience, might do well in exile. More successful than many was John Holker, who, once he had escaped, joined a Jacobite regiment in the pay of France. He worked closely with Bonnie Prince Charlie, before using his expertise in cloth manufacture to become extremely influential in the French cotton industry, and making a successful new life for himself in France, outside Jacobite politics.

Best known for escapes when they were imprisoned, Royalists and Jacobites could dish it out too. They took prisoners from amongst government sympathisers, while their rebellions were going on, and, sometimes, their prisoners escaped, as we have seen with John Home. More spectacularly, the Scottish Jacobite nobleman, Lord Grange, shut up his wife Rachel Erskine, Lady Grange, on the remote island of St Kilda. Their marriage was very unhappy. Lord Grange had form, having already taken part in the abduction of the unfortunate and insane Lady Mar, in 1728, for money. Grange and his Jacobite friends abducted Rachel, who had threatened to betray his support for the Jacobite cause. She was shut up in serious isolation in St Kilda, amongst people who spoke only Scots Gaelic, in very bad conditions. Back in 'civilisation', her husband was pretending she was dead, even going through with a fake funeral for her. Somehow, with the help of the St Kilda minister's daughter, Rachel eventually managed to get a message out, putting a scrap of paper into a ball of wool which was taken by sea off the island to the mainland. When it reached her cousin, who held the important post of Lord Advocate, he sent a gunboat to recover her. The Jacobites, however, managed to move her, and she taken to live in a cave on the island of Skye, on which island she died in 1745.