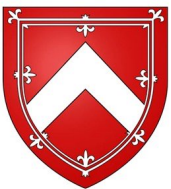


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THE DEED



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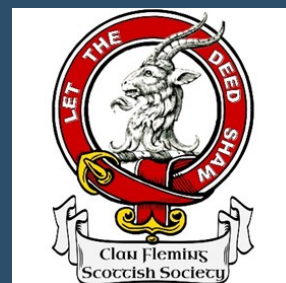


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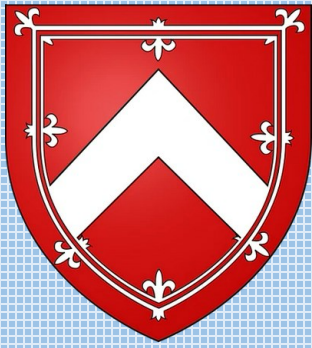
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Wigton Revisited

By James Michael Fleming



Some historians have portrayed the Fleming clan's third chief, Thomas Fleming of Fulwood, as a weak and ineffectual leader because he sold off the earldom of Wigton and most of the estates that his

admired grandfather, Malcolm Fleming, had acquired. But closer analysis of the circumstances of his life suggests that this depiction may be unfair.

Historian J Arnold Fleming wrote in *Flemish Influence in Britain* that Thomas had "weakly ... disposed of the whole rights of his earldom for 500 pounds" and concluded that he had "squandered the family estates as fast as his grandfather had diligently and skilfully acquired them".

Professor Richard Oram suggested in his article *The Making and Breaking of a Comital Family* that Thomas may have had some form of disability that prevented him from providing the active personal leadership required to maintain the family's fortunes. He infers that Thomas "appears as a powerless, hapless cipher" of more politically astute rivals and concludes that while "Malcolm had made his career ... as a loyal agent and administrator, ... Thomas had been destroyed by his inability to serve in either capacity".

There are, however, several mitigating factors which suggest that Thomas may have defended the family's fortune reasonably well in the circumstances, given the many challenges that he faced. These included the premature death of his father; the cost burden of wars and the resultant huge ransoms; economic devastation caused by epidemics of plague; and navigating Scotland's tricky politics. In fact,

his grandfather Malcolm was also set back by these challenges in his later years.

Malcolm Fleming inexorably expanded his landholdings and power throughout his adult life, but everything changed after the Battle of Neville's Cross on 17 October 1346 when Scotland's forces were routed. He was captured by the English enemy along with his nephew (Malcolm Fleming of Biggar) and King David II. Malcolm, possibly injured in the battle, managed to return to Scotland within months by arranging his own ransom (and perhaps that of his nephew). He later granted an estate at Kilsyth and Dalzell to his former gaoler, Robert de la Vale, presumably honouring the arrangement that had secured his freedom. Thereafter Malcolm's political influence waned because the King remained a prisoner for a further eleven years, during which his rival and nephew Robert Stewart functioned as Scotland's Guardian.

In 1351 Thomas Fleming served as one of the hostages who secured the king's temporary release to present his ransom proposal to the Scottish Parliament. His late father John may have been a victim of the recent plague epidemic that had killed a third of Scotland's population and triggered an economic crisis. Malcolm Fleming was among a minority of this Parliament who supported the king's proposal to oust Robert Stewart as his heir, so he lost favour with Stewart.

Six years later, Thomas was again one of twenty hostages who went to England as security for the king's ransom, which Scotland's Parliament had agreed to pay in ten annual instalments of 10,000 merks. At this time, his grandfather, Malcolm suffered the indignity of being replaced as governor of Dumbarton Castle by Sir John

Danielston (his son-in-law and staunch supporter of Robert Stewart) to whom he also transferred his estates at Kilmaronock and Inchaillock.

It may have been the loss of his considerable income from the Dumbarton Castle governorship that prompted Malcolm to sell to his nephew Malcolm Fleming of Biggar a 200-pound mortgage. Oram speculates that he may have initiated this sale to raise the money required to finance Thomas' residence in England as hostage. Malcolm Fleming died in about 1362, around the time that Scotland suffered another bout of the black death plague.

The king's ransom payments placed great strain on all Scottish taxpayers and by 1363 there were insufficient funds to pay the annual instalment. Nevertheless, King David secured the hostages' release by offering to bequeath the Scottish crown to the English King Edward III or one of his sons. It is very unlikely that David or his Parliament had any intention of honouring this offer, but it served its purpose.

On his return to Scotland, Thomas Fleming (as heir to his late grandfather) was confirmed as 2nd Earl of Wigtown, a legacy that was already under great political and financial strain. Due to his long absence, he had gained neither military experience nor his grandfather's nous as an administrative leader in Wigtownshire. He therefore lacked the skills and status required to gain local support for his position as earl.

Another challenge that he faced was the pressing need to invest in maintaining and enhancing his estates. For example, the old Comyn castle at Cumbernauld was now decrepit, so there was an urgent need to build its replacement. In these circumstances it would make sense to sell some assets in order to retain and secure the core estates.

The 1367 charter confirming Thomas as Earl of Wigtown relied on the terms of the original grant of the earldom to his grandfather – *“as formerly Malcolm Fleming, Earl of Wigtown, grandfather of the aforesaid Thomas, held or possessed”*. This meant that it would pass on his death to *“the heirs-male of his body”*. Since he had produced no children, it was inevitable that the earldom's estates and title would revert to the king upon Thomas' death. While his non-Wigtown estates would be transferred to an heir, the earldom was a dead asset. In these circumstances, his 1371 decision to sell it for 500 pounds looks more like a sound business decision than a failure of leadership. By this master stroke he had transformed an asset that was practically worthless to him into a considerable sum of useful money. During the following year he leased properties in the Barony of Lenzie to Sir Robert Erskine and also mortgaged them to William Boyd in order to raise 80 pounds. Boyd immediately sold this mortgage to Thomas' wealthy and influential cousin and heir, Malcolm Fleming of Biggar, who was Sheriff of Edinburgh, Governor of Edinburgh Castle and Chamberlain of Scotland.

It was no doubt clear to both childless Thomas and his powerful cousin that Malcolm's family would eventually inherit Thomas' remaining estates. The Lenzie lease and mortgage arrangements hint that they were already cooperating on a plan for a smooth handover; and to enhance the estates in the meantime. It seems likely that Malcolm's 80 pounds and the 500 pounds raised through the sale of the earldom and its estates were invested in the construction of Cumbernauld Castle, which commenced at about this time.

Ten years later the handover plan was largely completed when, on 13 September 1382, Thomas resigned his interest in the Baronies of Lenzie and Cumbernauld (along with other estates) in favour of his cousin and heir, Malcolm. Thomas retained only his home at Fulwood, but this would eventually be sold into the Sempill (Semple) family (probably by his executor soon after Thomas' death).

Unlike his forebears and close relatives, Thomas Fleming never held high office; apparently never went into battle; and did not grow his family's wealth. While he was not the family's greatest leader, he dutifully represented it as a volunteer hostage for the king and competently consolidated and maintained the family's portfolio in exceedingly difficult circumstances. In cooperation with his heir, he managed to smoothly transfer his inheritance within the extended family, thus providing a sound foundation for the clan's future.



James Michael Fleming is a retired Customs Manager and lives on Sydney's lower north shore. He began researching his family history in 1983 and has been a member of the Society of Australian Genealogists since then. Aside from genealogy he enjoys travelling and singing baritone in two choirs. He is the Historian of the Clan Fleming Scottish Society.

Suggested Videos & Podcasts

Clan Fleming <https://youtu.be/g9T5rhWuKSc?si=DArqzBlBJOXQ3sZd>

Fleming Coat of Arms & Family Crest - Symbols, Bearers, History https://youtu.be/cy8gB-l5Lrg?si=IJeyRh8pvpqGxQh_

These Four Scottish Clans Were From Flanders! <https://youtu.be/ednCtmg6bwE?si=3hVkxpxl7W7B-R1f>

Tweedie Clan vs. Clan Fleming Scottish Clan Feud https://youtu.be/II7JjyGIHoM?si=6_sdzdmwMQJVFtxG



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