

Jinking the Gauger

The Union is on full alert! The year is 1792 and revolution is brewing in France. There are new ideas on the wind and the debates in the coffee houses are about rebels and leadership and what to do were the dangerous foreign contagion to enter our coasts and waters and if democracy spread inland.

One Exciseman is being led a merry dance down the banks of the Solway Firth. He is looking for a boat to float but there are none that are seaworthy, he finds a fine wooden skiff only to find a hole in its side, it has been 'caved' by the locals. Why scupper a good skiff? Well ever since the Union of 1707 locals on both sides of the Scottish border have made it their patriotic duty to 'jouk' or 'jink the gauger' by smuggling tea, tobacco, brandy, gin, coal, Rumbo-bumbo and French-gloves. Aided and abetted by rich Manx merchants with Jacobite leanings, these waters are awash with pirates and tax avoidance has become a team sport.

*The Deil' cam fiddlin' through the town
And danced away with the Exiseman
And ilka wife cried 'Auld mahoun'
I wish you luck o' the prize man!*

Locals believe that on this misty February morning our Exciseman is composing this song as he paces the reeds by the shore. He is certainly kicking his heels waiting for reinforcements from Ecclefechan and Dumfries. He looks out across the Firth and admires his prize, and Rosamund is quite a catch, she is 'schooner-rigged' in the new American way, ideal for working her way through the Solway's shallow waters. Her square topsails and stun 'sails are crossed so she can run with the wind but she is not going anywhere fast, she is stranded, listing on a sandbank and only a full moon and a high tide will set her free. Until then the only thing that lies between her crew and the gallows are the shifting sands and the swift running Annan Water. The Rosamund's crew is armed however and they are watching the Excisemen through a spyglass, ready and willing to defend their livelihoods.

*The Deil's awa, the Deil's awa,
The Deil's awa with the Exiseman
He's danced awa, he's danced awa
He's danced awa with the Exiseman.*

Eventually, the tide turns, the Dragoons arrive led by 4 officers on horseback and they plan their attack. The Solway Firth is a perilous place for a paddle and the horses take fright at the quicksand. The troops are split into three parties to wade out through shifting silt and raging currents to take on the smugglers, one party will attack the prow another the stern and the third will attack the ship broadsides.

Out in front our Exciseman is undaunted his auburn hair is flying in the wind, his wet shirt clings to his swarthy chest, holding his sword arm aloft. He's keen to clamber aboard first, he's a family man with a fair few of hungry mouths to feed so determined the Rosamund and the bonus will be his.

Meanwhile, as he and his brave band wade chest-deep into treacherous waters, four of Falkirk's finest four-pounder cannons appear on her broadside. Orders are to get within 8 yards of the ship, to first fire a volley with muskets before boarding with pistols and swords. However Rosamund is not giving up her treasures without a fight.

A cannon roars! Dragoons duck, some nearly drown, there is chaos and confusion as shrapnel splashes into the sea and grapeshot fills the air! On our Exciseman man wades, sword held between his teeth he clambers up the anchor chain onto the curves of her stricken hull.

*We'll mak our mault; we'll brew our drink,
We'll laugh, sing and rejoice man,
And mony brow thanks to the meikle black dei'l
That danced awa with the Exiseman*

He is surprised to find himself on an empty ship, the crew have escaped over the other side of the ship and he can see them carrying their contraband heading the 2 miles over the sands to the English side of the Solway. The Dragoons pump and bail as the tide rises and our Exciseman takes an inventory, the 4 canons are the only items left of value, apart from the ship herself but as the water swirls around his feet he discovers a much larger hole to fill. The canon-fire in the heat of the attack was to stave the ship and now he faces losing everything.

The Rosamund was hard-won, a month later at the auction in a Dumfries coffee house the 4 canons are sold for £4, 4 shillings and 2d. Bought by Mr. Robert Burns, the very Exciseman who'd bravely faced the same canons the month before. Then Burns did a strange thing (for a government employee) he sent them to the French, to aid the Revolution together with a polite note expressing his admiration for the cause.

The cannon are impounded at Dover, the incriminating note seized and Burns' card is well and truly marked. The authorities watch him and his friends closely for the signs of social contagion but unfortunately there are few tests available.

Are we surprised that our National Poet was a gunrunner? Had he lost his mind? Maybe Rabbie had found a bottle of Rumbo-bumbo down below in Rosamund's hold or perhaps was he simply showing the courage of his convictions? Why was Burns under secret surveillance? Well who could be better to lead a democratic revolution along these coasts and waters?