

The Countess of Selkirk to the Earl of Selkirk

St. Mary's Isle, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1778

The history of the invasion of the Americans not being very clearly specified perhaps in yesterday's letters, I propose to give you a better account today, and by a letter I expect to-night shall judge where to send it. My dear Love I cannot tell if you have heard of this matter or not, but you may read on without allarm as you might judge by the beginning we are all well and at ease. On Wednesday morning Mr. Wood and her Daughters came here. On Thursday just after breakfast Daniel told me a press gang was in the Isle, and several of the gardeners had run from their work. I could not help it, a few minutes after they surrounded the house, the Commanding Officer desired to speak to me. I went down to the Parlour, Miss Eliot asked to go with me. I began to say something to him in the light I looked upon him, "Madam", said he, "we meant so to deceive you, but it is needless any longer, we belong to a frigate belonging to the states of America, our business was with the Lord of the House, to take him on board our Prisoner, as he is absent our next orders are to demand all your plate, produce it directly, we are masters of this house and everything in it, it is needless to resist". "I am very sensible of that", said I, called Daniel, told him what was wanted, ordered him to get it, and followed him to the pantry. Whether what I did after was right or wrong you must determine, I found Daniel filling one of the maid's aprons with whatever he could lift first to hide it. I made him lay it down again, resolving not to dispute or deny it to them, by which means they very deliberately called for sacks, put every thing up, they now called, "Then where is the tea pot and coffee pot?" I made them also be produced, they still insisted there was more, I assured them there was no more to the best of my knowledge, so they took up their booty, he next said he had orders to walk through the house, he did so, but took nothing. Upon the whole, I must say they behaved civilly, the men on the outside of the house were each armed with a musket and bayonet, two large pistols and a hanger, the doors were open, none of them offered to come in, nor asked for anything, every body were out and asking; questions, they said the

orders given were to behave civilly, and take nothing but plate, of the two officers, one was a civil young man, in a green uniform an anchor on his buttons, which were white, he came to the house in a blue greatboat, he was but second, the principal one was in blue, no uniform, and seemed by nature a very disagreeable, and one may say a bad man, had a vile blackguard look, still kept civil, as well he might, but I should suspect might have been rough enough had he met with provocation, and that was one reason why I never left him, for the anger every one was in might have led them to say what was at all their tongue's end's. But if no accident had ensued, I now see some plate might have been saved, by leaving him to the servants, for they went nowhere below but the pantry, did not look sharp about there, and looked alarmed when they saw the bewildered crowd at the door of it. At going off they said they belonged to the Ranger frigate, captain Paul Johns, Esquire, Commander. While they were about the house Jon Archer made his escape, undeceived those he not concerning their being a press gang, alarmed the town, too which indeed, as they thought they had fired the house, very soon a great multitude were in the Isle, and some few arms, but of no use to prevent their getting off, which I could not regret as bloodshed might have followed, and probably no good could have been done. We have seen no more of them. It was immediately known that this Paul Johns is one John Paul, born at Arbigland, who once commanded a Kirkcubright vessel belonging to Mr. Muir and others, a great villain as ever was born, guilty of many crimes and several murders by ill usage, was tried and condemned for one, escaped, and followed a piratical life, till he engaged with the Americans, he seems to delight in that still, as robbing a house was below the dignity of the States of America. The sailors at the door told, their Captain was born at Herrick, know my Lord, (whose name and the name of the place these in the house pretended ignorance of,) had a great opinion of him, and for that reason had given orders that no more should be done, some said they came upon the duty with very ill will, being pressed men from the English service not ten days ago, this we think not very likely that they would have been put on such duty. Some called themselves Americans, said they had been treated in another manner by the British, houses burnt and family carried

away. The upper officer took care several times to say, "This house is no longer that Ladies, it, and everything in it, is mine, and at my command", he did it to over awe no doubt, and had a very impudent manner, tho' still civil enough. He told us very coolly they had burnt the shipping at Whitehaven last night, and spiked their cannon, the other said, had set fire, but he feared had burnt but a few, this was supposed a lye, as it was known they had been hovering here all the day before, but in the evening a boat got over from Whitehaven, informing it really was true, they had fired several, though only one had burnt, and though the letter acknowledged not the cannon, yet the boat people said it was so, a sad disgrace to poor Whitehaven. After they went off the allarm still continued, for my part I had no apprehension of their return, it appeared too absurd to suppose that they would do, after the country was allarmed. Mrs. Wood seemed to think it extraordinary I should think of remaining, especially with so many young women, but said she would do as I did, it was plain however in the fear she was, she ought not to stay, so I begged of her to go, and let her take the two girls with her to Dumfries, They got on horseback, as she had but a pair to her coach, and she took Sandy in the coach to Carlingwark. Mary and Tommy was there before, as I had sent them in the chaise to meet Miss Dallzell. It happened the chaise came to the door at the time the men were in the house, and as soon as the coast was clear, I sent them off, without reflecting if any one else was to go, thus were all the children away, except Elizabeth, and the horses were to return from the Carlingwark as soon as Mrs. Wood and her suite got there, and were to take her and Jenny, with Miss Elliot and me to sleep there all night, this I proposed to the girls before they went, but was by no means resolved on it, as I saw no reason to apprehend a return. About half an hour after they were set out on their journey, an allarm came that a boat was coming, the whole house were in distress to get me away, being sure that the second visit would be worse than the first, besides they now had the idea, that they had discovered their mistake in not taking me, since they could not get you, so I yielded to their intreaties to set out for Kirkcudbright, the day being cool and the road being dry, it was no hardship, we walked on in leisure, and passed two guns taken out of a ship, and placed at the Great Cross, where in my mind they

could be of little use, but that had occurred while the men were at the Isle, and supposed to mean protection for Kirkcudbright. I sent Elizabeth to Mr. Hunters, and Miss Eliot and I went into Mr. Lawries, from whence I wrote the letter, which went to London to you in the packet sent by express. I was soon informed from the Isle that the return of the boat proved a mistake, and that ship and boat were out of sight, in the evening while yet light, people who had been watching her from the Torrs returned to Kikcudbright, after having seen her sail off to the west, till they lost sight of her beyond the Burrow Head. The town and country had in the meantime collected all the arms they could find and a great many men, and tho the danger seemed over, they judged it best to keep watch all night in the properest places, and I determined to go and sleep in my own bed, but with a view to rise in night if Mr. Jeffrey saw cause, I trusted to him, his head being the only cool one, I alledged except my own, but I did not chuse to risk raising Elizabeth in the night, as she had not been well the night before, really ill most of the day, and had slept some hours in Mr. Hunters in the afternoon, so I thought it best she should remain there all night, and we returned home betwixt seven and eight, not a little fatigued in body and spirits with the uncommon bustle of the day, and got as good a night's rest as if nothing had happened. All but our two selves sat up till the night was well advanced, and there were eight men appointed by Mr. Jeffrey to watch the house, vis: four out and four in by turns. The number at the foot of the isle, were considerable as were the arms, besides three or four ship's guns, they got two alarms, one proved quite a mistake, the other was a boat from a Brig, which they hailed, and hearing no answer fired a good many muskets, and drew their cannon to the place, the people in the boat then took care to be heard, so no more passed. Whether they had answered at first, as they afterwards said they did, or it they chose to be witty, and try our people's courage, I do not know, nor can I say that sort of discipline troops of six or eight hours standing might be under, or what defence they might have made against a landing, but since they kept properly together all night, and fired when it was thought proper, there is no room that I can see to suppose they might not have gone on, had it been required, and I only wish Government would please to put arms in their hands,

now, when the spirit is up. I should not despair of their making good militia, and I must confess it very hard, if we are neither to have ships of war, troops nor militia, yet I can sleep in peace. Our guests withdrew in the morning, and the cannon were withdrawn in the forenoon of Friday, at which time I brought back Elizabeth much better, but still not very well. I sent the chaise for the family from the Carlingwark, and again that length in the evening, on their way to Dumfries for the two girls, who with Miss Dallzell arrived on Saturday evening, so we are now settled all in quietness, joking about our plate in order to make the best of a bad bargain.