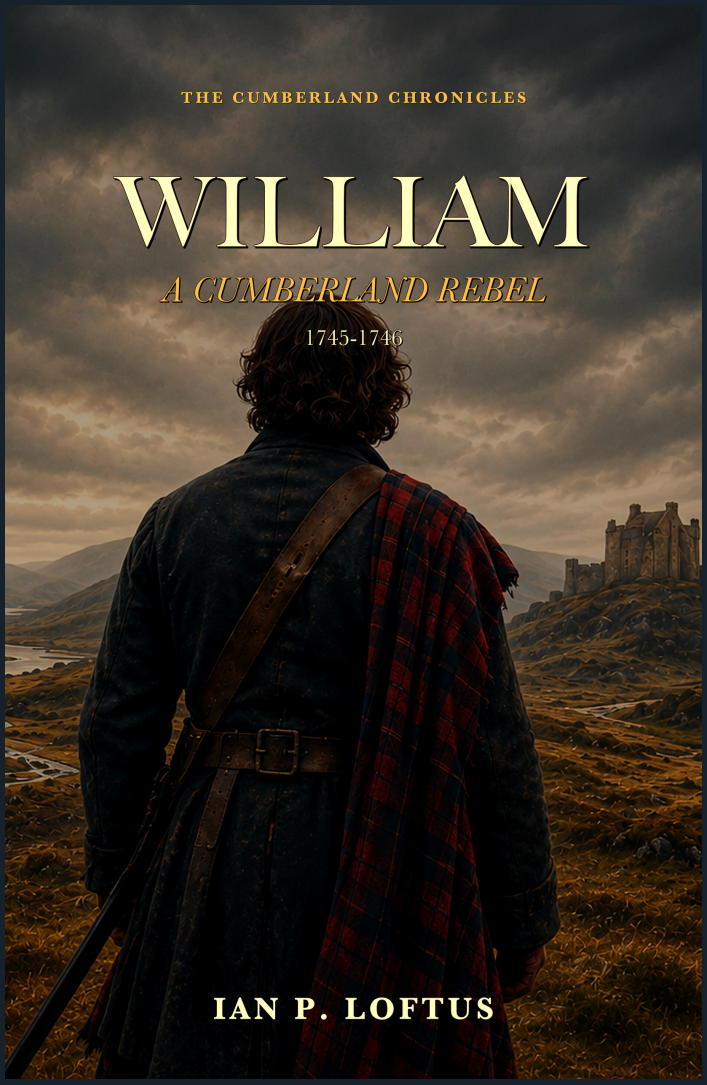
A COMPLIMENTARY OPENING EXTRACT



STONECURRENT PRESS

History remembers princes and battles.

This is the story of the ordinary people who lived with the consequences.

Cumberland, 1745. William Birkett knows sheep, stone walls and the value of a day's work. When the Jacobite rising reaches his valley, a chain of small choices carries him towards rebellion, imprisonment and transportation - while Catherine must preserve the life left behind.

The opening nine scenes begin on the next page.

Cumberland: Caldbeck Common, 1 August 1745

At first light, William walked the line above the intake wall and counted the flock in his head without speaking, as he always did when the ground was quiet.

"Yan, tan tethera…"

The dog worked close, a brown shadow in the heather, pausing when the ground dipped or the wind came in from the east. Low cloud sat on High Pike so that the ridge looked cut short. The air held last night's rain and the iron smell from the beck.

Below, a loose gate bar knocked at intervals.

He fixed it as he passed, setting the wood back into its notch and testing it once with his hand. The sound stopped.

The talk had reached Caldbeck in parts, never whole. Travellers brought it in pieces and left it the same way. A tinker swore he had seen men drilling on open ground under a white flag marked with a red cross. A packman said it was church linen hung out to dry and laughed as he said it. A drover spoke of soldiers buying oats with clipped coin and asking which lanes ran quickest south.

None of it proven but all of it stayed.

William moved the ewes across a shallow section and watched their heads turn as one. It was good work when the ground was firm and the sheep did not push back or scatter. He had known days when both were otherwise. Today the stones held and the turf took the weight. He worked without hurry.

He was twenty-one and had the look of a man comfortable in his place: tending sheep, mending walls, taking wages when there were any, and his

share of the peat cut when there were not. It was enough when the seasons kept their order.

He stood where the fell dropped clean to the south and looked along the line the road would take to Penrith.

Seventeen miles.

Near enough to walk. Far enough to matter.

It was a distance people spoke of as if it were a crossing. On a good horse it was nothing. On foot, with a sack, in rain, it was work that tested a man's reason for going.

He took bread from his pocket and ate it standing. The dog watched without asking.

Below him, the fields lay in small squares that only looked neat from height. Up close, the walls were always a stone short, the gates a hinge from failing, and the barns cracked where the roof had lifted.

The bell at Caldbeck began to sound for prayers, flattened by the cloud. William counted the strokes.

He had heard enough talk over the past week to expect something might be waiting on the church door.

He whistled the dog down and turned for the stile.

The Howk near Caldbeck, 1 August 1745

Catherine carried the wicker creel on her arm, its lid already holding the green scent of ramsons. The wild garlic grew thick along the damp edge where the wood dropped towards the beck, white star-blossoms lifting above broad leaves. She cut only what she needed, working the stems free with the small knife William had sharpened for her the winter before.

The ground was soft underfoot. Water moved close, out of sight but never out of hearing.

Beyond the ramsons, the nettles stood higher now, coarse with summer, though she found a patch in the shade where the tops were still tender. They would go in the pot with barley and a bone kept back from the last broth. Nothing was taken without being counted against something else.

Further along, elder leaned into a strip of light. She reached for the flower heads, leaving enough for berries later in the year. A sudden croak cut across the bees.

Catherine turned as a grey heron lifted from the far bank, slow-winged and deliberate, rising above the alders and away towards the marsh. The smaller birds broke after it, calling in short bursts that did not settle.

She watched until it disappeared beyond the trees. She moved on.

Under the hazels the ground cooled and softened. She found the first wild strawberries, small and dark against the leaves. She ate one and set the rest aside in a folded leaf for the children in the village. Work first. Then what could be spared.

She stepped into a clearing where an old oak rose above the rest. In the fork of two limbs, a broad platform of sticks held firm—a bussart's nest. One bird circled high, calling. The other stood at the edge, watching.

Inside, three young birds shifted, nearly grown. Catherine stood a moment. The parent bird fixed her with a dark eye and did not move.

“Soon enough,” she said.

When she turned back towards the path, she saw William coming across the rise.

They fell into step without greeting, as they often did. He took the creel from her without asking.

The wind had lifted over the common, bringing the smell of peat and warm bracken. Catherine shaded her eyes.

“Look yonder,” she said.

A dark shape rose from the rough grass, beating hard before flattening into a glide. It wavered, lost height, and recovered awkwardly.

“That’ll be one of this year’s,” William said. “Not long out.”

“Aye,” Catherine said. “All wing and no wit.”

High above, the parent bird circled once more, calling. The young one answered thinly, then settled on a fence post, unsteady but holding. For a moment it faced them.

Then it turned and followed the older bird towards the far rise of the fell. Catherine watched until both were gone.

The Yard and the Broadside

“Since we are gathered,” Barton, the steward, said, “rents will be called in hand this week at the hall. Men who serve the King’s interest will find the estate considerate. Those that do not must be punctual. Bring your receipts.” He looked at nobody and everybody, which came to the same thing. One of his men held a tally-stick and a board and seemed ready to write a name the moment one was offered.

A boy sounded out the first lines of the broadside to his mother and stumbled at ill-affected. She told him to hush. Two lads sniggered and stopped when the vicar turned his head.

Catherine kept her voice level. “Words on a door like that turn neighbours into witnesses.”

“They were always witnesses,” William said.

“Now they are paid for it,” said Catherine.

A post-boy trotted through the yard, sat well forward to keep his mount off the wet. “Make way. Carlisle wants letters,” he said, and the horse’s shoes clicked hard on the stone where the church porch gave onto the path.

“Any news?” the vicar called.

“Plenty,” the boy said, and did not slow.

Barton moved on to the parish hall to prepare for Lammas week. Once he had gone, people started talking again. The clerk stepped aside. People began to break into small streams for the stile and the lane. William waited until the worst of the knot had thinned. He looked at the nail in the top left corner of the broadside. It was hammered in straight. The paper would not lift.

The vicar came down a step and spoke low enough that it was meant for them and not for the yard. “Keep your paper straight,” he said. “If a

man gives you a receipt, keep it. If a man asks your name, speak it plain. Whispers turn into witnesses when men are frightened. I will not put anything of yours into the register unless I must."

"Thank you," Catherine said.

They moved off with the rest, the dog close. At the corner of the yard William felt the first spit of rain from a sun shower under the low cloud and thought of the road to Penrith.

William said goodbye to Catherine and headed down the lonning with his stick across his shoulders, jacket open. The smell of malt drifted from the Oddfellows' door. Matthew Rigg was there, boot heels hooked on the wall, cup in hand.

"Off to change the world, Birkett?" Rigg said, raising his tankard.

William slowed but didn't stop. "Off to change my boots. Wet through."

"That all?" Rigg grinned in a way that wasn't friendly. "Heard you've been in the snug with Henry and them. Talking crowns, are you? Which one? The one pays in English coin or the one that drinks French wine?"

William let the stick drop from his shoulders. "We were talking prices. Sheep and barley."

"Aye," Rigg said, "and how best to sell them to strangers who'll march you off for their own quarrels."

St Mungo's bell tolled the half-hour, thin in the wind. William stepped past him.

"Mind yourself, Birkett," Rigg called after him. "You start waving a flag for foreigners, you'll find no ale or bread waiting when you're back."

Later that day the pump handle squeaked each time Catherine lowered it, water slopping into the wooden pail with a hollow splash. Across the lane, Rigg leaned on the low fence, working his knife into the rail, shaving off curls of wood that fell in pale spirals to the ground.

“Been hearing talk,” he said. “William’s been keeping company in the snug of an evening. Listening to certain folk.”

Catherine said nothing.

“Head’s been turned, if you ask me. All that fancy talk about kings and causes. No good comes from backing the wrong one.” He flicked another curl of wood into the mud.

“And no good comes from standing too close to those who do.”

She straightened and met his gaze.

“Water’s not going to carry itself,” she said evenly, lifting the bucket.

Rigg gave a crooked smile. “Aye. Just keep your feet dry. Roads can get dangerous when men start choosing sides.”

Rent at the Hall – Lammas Week

The hall opened its doors early and kept them wide. Damp came in with the tenants and lay in the stone. A trestle table had been set under the mullioned window. On it: a ledger, a sand shaker, a quill, a strongbox, and a set of weights for anything brought in kind. A small fire had been laid but not lit. Smoke cost money.

Barton stood behind the table with his clerk to the right and a yardman to the left to keep the queue in order. He wore no sword and needed none. His coat was clean; the cuffs turned back from the ink.

The room moved by twitches; nobody spoke more than they had to.

William took his place and watched the entries rise up the ledger page, neat as fencing. Catherine slipped into the hall quietly and joined the line.

A tenant two ahead of William laid a small sack on the table. “Oats,” he said. The yardman put it to the scale; the clerk set a round weight in the other pan and watched the beam settle.

“Hall price,” Barton said. “Credit three shillings.” He pushed the coin shortfall back with two fingers. “Balance in lawful money by Tuesday.”

“My boy is set to the turnpike gang,” the man said. “You spoke of consideration.”

“Bring me a note from the overseer,” Barton said. “I will consider it.”

The man nodded and stepped aside. When William reached the table the clerk had the quill half raised already. “Name,” he said.

“William Birkett,” William said.

The quill scratched the Berket the clerk had in his head. William saw it. “Two t’s,” he said.

The clerk paused, held the quill in the air, then added a second ‘t’ on the end. The drop of ink hung, then settled.

“Hamlet?” he said.

“Nether Row,” William said.

“Rent due,” Barton said. “And arrears if any.”

“Twelve shillings due. No arrears,” William said. He put his coins on the board in stacks that made the counting clean: two half-crowns, seven shillings, and a groat. “One fleece to follow when the weighing man is free.”

The clerk looked at the coins without touching them. “You are one shilling and eightpence short of the twelve if you mean to credit the fleece at Hall price.”

“I mean to pay the twelve,” William said. “The fleece weighs three and a half by my hand.”

“By your hand is not by the beam,” Barton said. “We will weigh it.”

The yardman took the fleece to the scale and set the weights. The beam came up slow and a little mean. The clerk wrote 3 lb. 2 oz. and set the credit at two shillings and sevenpence. He said nothing about the difference.

Barton pushed the shortfall back across the board. It was exact and small.

Catherine came up from behind and put a purse down and took one shilling and eightpence from it. “I will make it square,” she said.

Barton did not look at her hand; he looked at William. “Men who take service for the King will find the estate remits a quarter of Michaelmas,” he said. “Men who act as waggoners for stores to Penrith may have the same at my discretion.”

William heard a chair scrape somewhere behind him.

“I have work on the fell,” he said.

“So has every man,” Barton said. “The King has work first.”

The clerk drew the receipt neat across the page: Received of William Berket— He stopped, crossed the last letter, carefully added the second t to match the earlier correction. —the sum of twelve shillings, in part by coin, in part by fleece at Hall price. He sanded the ink, shook the grains, folded the paper, and pressed a small wafer to shut it. The wafer took the impress of a plain stamp: HALL.

“Sign or mark,” the clerk said, turning the book and pushing the quill.

William took the quill and wrote his name slow and even: William Birkett. He set the quill down with care.

The clerk blew lightly on the line. “Two t’s,” he said, as if the thought had been his from the start.

Behind them a woman spoke up to Barton in a voice that had been practised not to tremble. “My man is out with the militia to Whitehaven,” she said. “We had word. The fishing has stopped. I have rent.”

“Then pay it,” Barton said.

“I ask for time,” she said. “He will bring his note when he comes back.”

Barton looked at the queue and then at her. “Wednesday,” he said. “Not Thursday.”

She curtsied quick as a nod and went to fetch her purse.

William put the receipt into his coat. Catherine watched Barton tick the ledger and add a clean figure in the right-hand column.

Barton spoke again, not raising his tone. “I remind all here that service will be noted. Men who take the shilling and show colours will make a smaller mark at Michaelmas. Men who refuse both and fall short will find the bailiff knows his road.”

A man further back said, “What of men who give horse to the constable when he is called for?”

“Bring the constable’s paper,” Barton said. “Not a word—a paper.”

The yardman moved them on. The room swallowed the next name and set of coins.

In the yard, William breathed as if out from under a roof too low. The light was grey and flat. A boy led two pack ponies across the cobbles; their shoes struck sparks on the odd high stone. A woman in a blue shawl was dividing a loaf at the gate with a knife you could have used for anything.

Catherine touched the coat where the receipt lay. “Keep it dry,” she said. “If a man asks, you have paper.”

William looked back at the door. Barton had not moved.

“Paper keeps other men’s memory,” William said. “It does not keep a house.”

“It may keep it a little,” she said. “A little will do for now.”

They walked off the gravel. The dog came from under the hedge and fell in at William’s heel. The bell at the little chapel by the river marked noon. In the far lane a post-boy was already a small figure under the low cloud, riding south.

The Oddfellows snug, 21 September 1745

Tom Fletcher had a place at the end of the settle. William took the stool by the door where his back felt the draught. Henry brought a jug of small beer and three chipped beakers and set them down without words. He looked once at the door, once at the window, then went back behind the bar and wiped it though it was already dry.

The man they were waiting for came in without being announced. Not a soldier. A wool-factor by his dress: decent coat, hands clean, the ring on the smallest finger showing he counted for others. He kept his hat in his hand to show he was no constable. He looked at the room as if weighing it and then came straight to them.

“Evening,” he said. He set a folded paper on the bar with his palm over it. “A jug for the room,” he added to Henry. “And a loaf if you have it.”

The landlord did not reach for the paper. “Coin,” he said.

The factor slid the paper an inch. “His Royal Highness’s receipt,” he said—quiet, as if describing a measure of yarn. “For oats and bread taken on account. To be made good when all is settled.”

“Paper burns,” Henry said. “Coin keeps.”

The factor took a small purse from his coat and tipped out sixpence. “Coin for the ale,” he said. “Receipt for the rest.” He waited. Henry weighed it in his head and took both.

The jug went the round of the room. Men drank and looked at the factor without staring. He did not call for a chair. He stood where he could see the door. Tom said, “You carry news.”

“I carry work,” the factor said. He put the folded paper aside and took from his pocket a strip of white linen. He tore it once so that the edge was clean. “Men are wanted to lead, to lift, to carry. Some will go as far as

Penrith when called. Some no further than Inglewood. Not all work has a musket in it."

Tom glanced at William. "Work is work," he said. "What stands for pay?"

The factor set another paper on the board. It had three lines at the top and then space. The hand was tidy and unhurried.

"This is an Association," he said. "First names only. No place, no trade. You put your hand to it if you will. Work given will be plain; coin when there is coin; receipt when there is not. Official papers travel. This one won't. If a man pulls out, his name stops here." He folded the sheet, slid it under the settle board, and pressed the edge flat with his thumb. "First names only. No place. No trade. If you leave off later, it stays under this board."

He took a pin from the edge of his cuff and pushed the strip of linen onto the board, fastening it with the pin and a thorn the landlord had left from the morning sweep.

"This is a token," he said. "If you go where you are told and you see white, you will be known. If you see red with it, the man is reckless. Keep off him."

The door opened and the riding-officer looked in, wet on the shoulders. He saw a room of men, a jug, the landlord behind his board, and nothing that needed a note. He closed the door and his horse stamped on the cobbles and went away. Talk started again two tones lower.

The factor put a small Bible on the board. Not a new one. The cover had the faint polish of use.

"If a man will give word," he said, "he will give it on this, in God's hearing and his own. No man is pressed. No names will be spoken in the open. If you will not, drink and go in peace."

He looked at William. "What can your hands do?"

“Lift, mend, walk and guide,” William said. “I know a rope and a strap. I can keep a line when the ground is bad. I have a true aim.”

“Good,” the factor said. “Not every man needs a pike.”

Tom set his hand on the Bible and spoke plain.

“I will lift what I’m told and carry what I can. I will keep counsel and not bring harm to men who trust me.”

He took the quill and wrote Tom in a slow hand that looked taught rather than learned.

The factor dusted the line with a pinch from the sand shaker, blew the grains off, and did not read the name aloud. He looked to William.

William set his hand on the Bible. The leather felt warm from other palms.

“I will go when I am sent for,” he said. “I will not use another man’s name, and I will not sell talk for beer.”

He took the quill and wrote William Birkett. He made the two t’s square and even. The factor watched the letters take.

“Good,” the factor said. He folded the paper once and slid it under the board where the settle met the wall. “What is spoken you will have. What is written I will keep.”

He lifted the linen token and tucked it into William’s coat with the thorn to hold it.

“Do not wear it,” he said. “Carry it.”

William did not drink at once. The edge of the linen pressed through the coat. The small thorn held it.

“Wednesday,” Tom said.

“Wednesday,” William said.

Michaelmas Quarter, late September 1745

William lay awake long after the house had settled, the memory of the square returning in pieces rather than in order.

Lonsdale's agents had come into Caldbeck a week earlier, when the weather was still mild enough for stalls to stand open and ale barrels to be rolled into the light. The drummer had been heard first — a steady tattoo that did not belong to any feast day or fair.

By the time William reached the green, the table was already set outside St Kentigern's. Two bailiffs stood beside it with a purse laid plain on the boards to make the point before a word was spoken. A red-coated serjeant stood behind them, boots clean, voice carrying without strain.

"King's shilling!" the serjeant cried.

"Fine bounty for stout lads. Fight for George and Hanover and see the French off our shores!"

The drummer beat louder. A few boys lingered at the edge, drawn by the coin more than the cause. Farmers stood further back, hands resting on the shoulders of sons who pretended not to notice.

One of the bailiffs unrolled a paper and began calling names — tenants in arrears, men behind on tithes, holdings noted in a clerk's careful hand. Each name was spoken as if it were already half a judgement.

When a man shook his head, the tone shifted.

"You'll serve the King," the bailiff said, tapping the paper, "or you'll answer to Lord Lonsdale."

No shout. No threat raised. Only the quiet reminder of rent, land, and consequence.

A youth from the far edge of the crowd stepped forward first. He took the shilling and turned it over in his palm as if weighing more than its metal. The drummer gave an approving beat and the serjeant nodded once.

Another lad tried to slip away before his name was called. He did not get far.

The press-man caught his sleeve and brought him back without striking him. The boy protested, voice rising, until his mother pushed through the onlookers and clutched at him, pleading. Neighbours held her back, not unkindly, but firmly. No one wanted to be seen interfering.

The purse of coin clinked again as the serjeant lifted it and let the sound travel.

“Volunteers first,” he said.

“Pressed that refuse.”

By late afternoon the square had thinned. Men vanished into the fells on errands that did not exist. Others stayed indoors and barred their doors.

The few who had taken coin were marched off under watch, their bounty clutched tight as if it were proof rather than payment.

By evening the green was empty again, the stalls and table gone, the drum silent.

In the dark of the loft, William turned onto his back and stared into the black above the rafters.

He remembered the way the bailiff had spoken names without anger, as if the list itself were enough. He remembered the purse of coin set where all could see it. He remembered the mother’s voice and how quickly it had been swallowed by the crowd’s silence.

Most of all, he remembered how easily the square had returned to normal the next day.

Carts rolling. Bread baking. Water drawn. As if nothing had happened.

Now, with talk of the prince moving south and Carlisle gates opening without a shot, the memory of the King's men sat differently in his mind.

Below him the house creaked once as the fire settled.

He thought of the steward at the hall, the broadside nailed straight, the clerk correcting his name to two t's, and the factor's linen token pressed into his coat. Paper. Coin. Token. Receipt. Different hands. Different causes.

He closed his eyes, but sleep did not come.

At first light he rose before the others and stepped outside. Damp held along the stone wall and the fell lay quiet under low cloud. The dog watched him but did not follow, sensing no flock work in the hour. He stood a while looking south.

The road to Penrith was still only a road.

He ran the heel of his boot along the scum on the trough's edge and watched the water shiver.

Behind him the door opened and Kitty's voice came low.

"You're up early."

"Aye."

She watched him a moment before speaking again.

"Keep out of it," she said.

"Kings don't know your name. Only the land does."

William did not turn at once.

"I know," he said.

But he did not step back inside straight away.

Supper at the Farm, 29 November 1745

The broth was thin, stretched with onions and a scrap of salted mutton, but the old man tore the bread into even pieces and set them out as if it were a feast. His hands shook when he lifted the knife, though he held it with care, the way he had done all his life. Thomas Birkett was not a man for waste, nor for words.

William sat opposite him, his brother John between them, the glow of the fire throwing shadows up the low-beamed ceiling. Outside, the wind pushed against the shutters, carrying with it the sound of cattle shifting in the byre.

When they had eaten a while in silence, Thomas looked up.

"You'll go to Penrith," he said. It wasn't a question.

William set down his spoon. "Aye." John's jaw tightened.

"You think it's kings that shape the land?" Thomas said. He gestured towards the door, towards the dark fells beyond. "This valley's stood through kings and Reivers raids, through famine and pestilence. The land was here before them and it'll be here after. Your blood carries what came before, whether you like it or not."

William said nothing. Thomas broke the bread with his thumb and handed half to John, half to William.

"Eat and remember. A man may change his king, but he cannot change his father."

The room fell still again, save for the fire.

Later in the byre, the buckets sloshed as the brothers hauled them up from the beck. John's shoulders hunched, his boots sinking into the mud of the yard. William walked quicker, impatient, the cold biting his fingers.

"You don't have to come," William said.

John gave a short laugh. “Don’t I? You think you’ll slip off without me seeing? Mother’s gone, father’s old. If I don’t keep this farm, who will?”

“I didn’t say you had to leave it.”

“No — you just said I was a coward if I stayed.”

“I never called you coward.”

“You didn’t need to,” John said. “You think marching to Penrith makes you braver? It makes you a fool. A Stuart on the throne won’t mend fences, won’t feed cattle, won’t bring a yield. This land doesn’t care who wears a crown.”

William’s hands tightened on the bucket handle.

“I won’t stand idle while others fight,” he said.

“And I won’t throw away what little we’ve got,” John snapped. “We’ve lost kin before to causes not our own. You think this will end different?”

The cattle stirred in the byre. The wind pressed at the door. Neither spoke.

Penrith – 1st December 1745

The road wound between low hedges and open fields, then dipped into the shadow of the southern part of Inglewood Forest. Once this was royal hunting land; now it was a patchwork of moss, oak, and bare-barked birch, the ground thick with leaf litter and the occasional deep rut where a cart had sunk in softer months.

William and Tom passed the walls of the estate that the locals still called Inglewood Castle, though it was more house than fortress now. The talk was that its lord, mindful of his own holdings, would lean towards the government. Others whispered he might wait, taking care not to choose the losing side too early.

They met the first string of cattle before nine, heads low, ropes through the noses, tails flicking at flies that were stubborn in any weather. The drover had two dogs and a tally-stick cut fresh, the notches clean.

“How far?” Tom said.

“Carlisle by night,” the drover said. “If the bridge holds and the clerk holds his temper.” He tapped the stick with his thumb. “Sixteen bought honest last year at Long Marton. Two thin. If the constable wants them for the King, he can pay Hall price, not fancy.”

“You’ve seen soldiers?” William said.

“I’ve seen men who say they have orders,” the drover said. “One had a coat too good for a private and a hat too poor for an officer. They bought oats with clipped coin and talked loud so folk would hear.” He jerked his head south. “If you’re headed to Penrith, the road’s wet under the wood at Castle Sowerby. Keep to the right where the roots lift the ground.”

He eased the lead rope, and the line went by them. The last beast stumbled at a rut and the dog pinched its hock without fuss. The tally-stick notches were plain as fence posts.

A packman came on next with bells muffled and a tarred cloth over his load. He had a trick of telling you what you already knew and selling it back to you wrapped.

“What’s the news?” Tom said.

“There’s always news if a man pays,” the packman said. He lifted the cloth and set out a small looking-glass, three needles and a twist of thread. He had a sheet folded four times as neat as a clerk’s shirt.

“What’s on the paper?” William said.

“A notice out of Carlisle,” the packman said. “Vagrants to be moved on and no credit to be given to strangers.” He held the sheet so they could see the large type and not the small. “If you’ve coin, I’ll sell it you. If you’ve not, I’ll tell you that a man from Brampton swore he’d seen tartan at Longtown, and another swore the tartan was tablecloths and the men were no worse than drovers.”

“We’ve enough of that kind,” Tom said. “Keep your paper.”

The packman shrugged and went on with his bells still quiet under the cloth.

The road narrowed where a hedge had grown fat, and the ditch had been let go for a season. A cart had bitten into the bank and then clawed back out. The mark of the struggle showed where the wheel had spun and thrown mud up the thorns. They stepped around it and a lark went up and vanished into the low cloud.

By the time they reached the old ash at the bend, another post-boy came at a canter, bag high, shoulders flecked with wet.

“Make way,” he said, and took the crown without shame.

“Any word?” Tom called.

“Plenty,” the boy said, already beyond them.

He stood in his stirrups for a breath to lift over a hollow and then sat again. He was young and looked smaller for being out under the grey December weather. He hauled once on the strap of the leather bag to make sure it held, and the flap lifted just enough for William to see red wax with a mitre stamped hard into it.

"Who's that from?" Tom shouted.

The boy did not turn.

"The bishop wants half the world," he said. "I carry the half he's getting."

He was gone in thirty steps, cantering down the straight.

They walked on in the quiet the horse had left.

"He's right," Tom said. "Men want halves. They don't care which."

"If the bishop writes, there's a reason," William said.

"There's always a reason to write," Tom replied. "Men like it. It looks like work."

Three miles north of Penrith they could see the farmsteads of Catterlen to the west. Tom had a cousin there, but they kept walking. By the time the first roofs of Penrith showed, the pale sun was at its highest, and the cold had thinned enough to make the breath less visible.

The market square was restless. Farmers stood in small groups, some with sheep penned to one side, others clutching sacks of oats or barley. At the far end of the square, two horsemen in dark coats dismounted, mud clinging to their boots and the bottom of their coats. They had the look of men who had ridden far and fast — one with a scarf wound high against the wind, the other bareheaded, hair plastered to his scalp.

William and Tom edged closer, joining the small crowd gathering by the well.

“They’re at Plumpton,” the bareheaded man said, voice carrying flat and urgent. “The Highlanders. We saw ’em. A mile or two out. More behind ’em, coming from Carlisle.”

A ripple went through the crowd. Some muttered about old loyalties — Stuart blood, rightful heirs, promises broken in other years. Others spoke more sharply about rebellion, hangings, and ruin to farms whose families could not afford a lost winter.

“They mean to take Penrith by tomorrow,” the second rider said. “Whether you greet them or stand against them is your own affair, but they’ll come all the same.”

William said little. He listened. His father’s words were still with him. So were the stories he had heard in the snug.

A Choice Without Commitment

By late afternoon the talk in the square had thickened into orders. The light was already reducing, and smoke lay low above the chimneys. The market cross stood where it always had, its stone worn smooth by hands that came to it for notices and judgement.

A constable stood on a block by the cross with a staff in hand and a paper raised. He had a voice that carried without seeming to try.

“Billeting order,” he said. “To the constables of Penrith. Provide quarters for fifty men and officers this night. The George takes twelve, the King’s Head ten, Dockray Hall eight, and the rest to lesser houses as named. Beds, diet and small beer as per the Mutiny Act. Doors open at the beat of drum.”

He handed the paper to a second constable, who moved off at a brisk walk, knocking at doors with the staff and reading the names of houses as if he were counting a flock.

Two drummers came into the square, boys hardly older than lads in a weaving shed, and set a steady tap that was neither urgent nor slow. Men with firelocks and half pikes followed them in a file that instinctively found its own shape. The square made a space for them without being asked.

William stood by the edge of the market cross and watched.

A serjeant walked the line with a small book and a pencil shaved thin. His coat had seen better brushing and the lace at the cuff had been mended by a hand that cared for neatness. He counted heads, looked up at the constable, and nodded once. Work began.

“Meal to the bakehouse,” the constable called. “And flour to the George. The King’s Head wants wood cut to a measure. Any man with a back and two hands—step out.”

A few stepped; most did not. Nobody wanted to be marked by stepping first. William took a pace forward.

The serjeant looked him over as if weighing what a man could lift just by how he carried his head.

“What can you carry, what can you mend, what can you run?” the serjeant said.

“Carry meal, mend straps, run if it’s on shoes and not in a bog,” William said.

“Good,” the serjeant said. “Name.”

“William Birkett.”

The serjeant wrote Birket, then added a second t when William’s face didn’t change.

“Two t’s,” he said.

“Take two sacks to the bakehouse there by St Andrew’s,” he said, pointing to the church with his pencil. “Then report to Dockray for wood. Ask for watch-bill and you’ll be sent on.”

He did not ask where William came from or why he was here. He had what he needed: a name and a back.

William took one sack to his shoulder and another on his hip and felt the grain settle. The drummer kept the time, and he walked to it.

By dusk the drums had stopped. The company peeled off to their billets as if poured into moulds. A file vanished in at the George, another at the King’s Head.

The serjeant came into the yard later and turned one page of his small book back and then forward.

“Birkett,” he said.

William stood.

“Good work,” the serjeant said. “You carry straight. If you mean to hire as a waggoner, there’s a riding-officer from Carlisle who will mark names at sun-up by the cross. If you do not mean to, go home and let men who do mean it stand.”

“I’ll see,” William said.

“See quick,” the serjeant said. “The road does not wait.”

That evening, William and Tom walked up out of the square and back to Dockray Hall. The coaching inn stood square to the street, its sandstone darkened by years of weather, the date ‘1580’ carved over the low-arched door. The ground-floor windows were narrow and deep-set, more for keeping out the wind than for looking down on the street.

Inside, the taproom was warm, flagged underfoot, the air thick with smoke from the wide hearth. The ceiling beams were low enough that William had to duck as he crossed to the settle, the chatter of travellers mixing with the clink of mugs in the buttery beyond.

They drank there for a few hours. The talk swung between fear and excitement, between those who spoke of the Highlanders as liberators and those who saw only pillage and ruin. William said little. He listened.

The next morning, they headed back to the square in Penrith. It smelt of damp ash and warm bread. At sun-up the riding-officer stood by the market cross with a muster roll and a bit of chalk. A constable read the names of inns taking carts; a serjeant marked men who had backs for traces and hands for knots.

“Waggoners for the King’s service—day money at the King’s rate, carts and beasts to be valued if taken or broken,” the constable called. “Give name, hamlet, and where you’ll turn back.”

William waited to one side. The serjeant from last night saw him and lifted the thin pencil.

“You carry straight,” the serjeant said. “Name and where you’ll turn.”

William looked at the roll, then at the lane out towards the fells.

“William Birkett, Nether Row,” he said. “I’ll see the road as far as the turnpike.”

“Seeing is not serving,” the riding-officer said, not unkindly. “If you mean to stand, stand now.”

“How many days?” William said.

“As many as it takes to move meal and powder,” the officer said. “You can mark Penrith to Shap and no further if that suits. No oath, only your name and the rate.”

The pencil waited. William set his palm on the cool stone of the cross.

“Not today,” he said.

The serjeant nodded once, no offence taken.

“Then keep your feet,” he said. “This town fills and empties on paper.”

A post-boy went through at a trot, calling Appleby and Kirkby Stephen again. The riding-officer turned another page and took another name. William nodded to Tom and they stepped back from the roll and let the chalk move on without them.

William has stepped back from the roll - for now.

The army will reach Cumberland. Neutrality will become impossible. And the road William chooses will carry him far beyond the fells he knows.

Continue reading - choose paperback or ebook

William: A Cumberland Rebel is the first novel in The Cumberland Chronicles, a sequence following generations of one ordinary Cumbrian family through periods of upheaval. Each novel stands alone.

Ian P. Loftus | Stonecurrent Press | Cumbria
stonecurrentpress.co.uk