

## **Walking Hadrian's Wall: Learning, Teaching, and Pounding the Pavement**

**E. L. Ridsen**

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Wallsend, the nominal end of Hadrian's Wall in Northumbria, England, with its accompanying headquarters just above the Tyne, currently under excavation by watchful archeology professors and student laborers trying dutifully to look interested, marks the beginning of the "great wall of England," Hadrian's Wall, among the wonders of the ancient world and a testament to the persistence of Roman engineering and manual labor.

The Romans, among many invaders who have desired this "precious stone set in a silver sea," though certainly not for its weather, spent several centuries attempting to acquire it. Julius Caesar first invaded Britain in 55 B.C., then renewed his quest a year later, but when events in Gaul turned his attention to political alliances, and civil war returned his ambitions to Rome, he gave up the military glory of extending the empire in favor of the grandeur of ruling—briefly—Rome itself. Claudius, made emperor in A.D. 41, needed the bulkhead of conquest to shore up his ship of state, and so he renewed the invasions, which Nero also continued in his typical, brutish style.

During subsequent years, the so-called Celts of Britain sometimes capitulated to, sometimes resisted, the Romans, among them the heroic warrior queen Boudica, who after terrorizing London and other Roman settlements suffered one of the worst military disasters (*defeat* just doesn't get the job done here) of all time as, according to Tacitus, nearly a hundred thousand of her undisciplined, undertrained, and technologically vastly inferior forces were obliterated by a couple of Roman legions in the year 61. Roman advances, punctuated by battles with Caledones and other tribes, proceeded by fits and starts, and in the second

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century, “[t]he invaders [Romans] retreated to the Forth-Clyde isthmus and from thence south to the Cheviots” (Sutherland, 36). In 122, the emperor Hadrian began constructing a wall to run the breadth of Britain from what is now Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the east to Bowness-on-Solway in the west, about seventy-four modern miles, with small forts or “milecastles” and several larger military facilities spaced regularly along the way, over stark, steep hills and hogbacks, dales and marshes, brooks and grassy leas. Hadrian’s successor, Antoninus Pius, built another wall from the Forth to the Clyde isthmus in 142, but this second wall, formed mostly of turf, lacked the magnitude and persistence of Hadrian’s.

Probably ten to fifteen feet high and about eight feet wide, built mostly of sandstone, with occasional sections of turf, plus a ditch directly north twenty-five to forty feet wide and about ten feet deep, and a *vallum*, or second, flat-bottomed ditch well inside (to the south of) it, Hadrian’s Wall clearly served an important purpose—but what? Some have suggested it kept out marauding Celts from the north, but though the “borderlands” saw constant squabbling, the strongest of such tribes, Scots and Picts, may not have threatened that area in significant numbers until later.<sup>1</sup> One of Hadrian’s Roman biographers suggested that the wall separated the civilized world of Rome from the barbarians beyond—that is, it served as a clear marker for the end of the empire and therefore of what the Romans considered civilization. Yet the Romans began a second construction, the Antonine Wall, north of there in the 140s under Antoninus Pius, between the Forth and the Clyde, though they never finished it—apparently they were unable to spread and maintain “civilization” that far north, probably because golf had yet to be invented to keep the locals busy. Too early to constitute another attempt to honor his beloved Antinoüs, the wall may have risen as a result of Hadrian’s desire to prove his expertise in any field he confronted (my own hypothesis), or as a friend has suggested to me, it may have served to keep people and cattle *in* rather than to keep them out: to deter raids or people who wanted to collect some property, legally or otherwise, and depart civilization with it. “I could see myself as seconding the

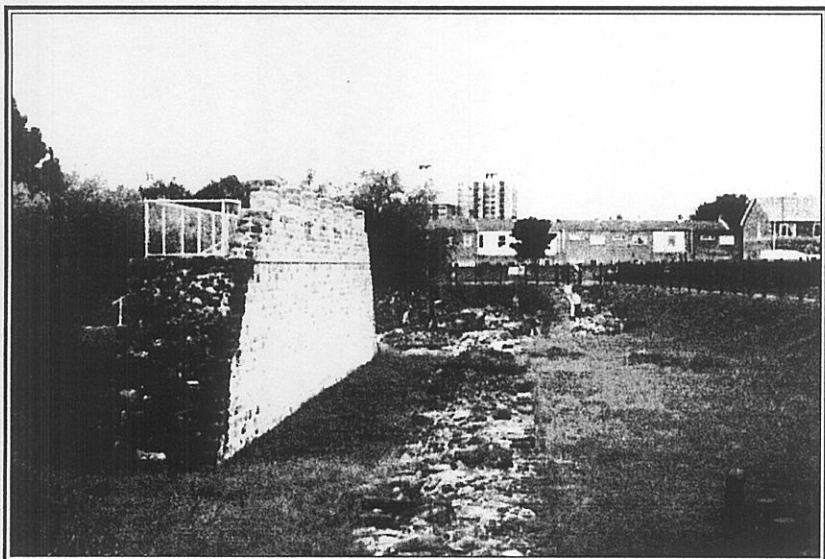
deity in his effort to give form and order to a world, to develop and multiply its convolutions, extensions, and complexities,” observes Marguerite Yourcenar’s logical, methodical Hadrian about his own character (144). In her *Memoirs of Hadrian*, she has him explain the wall as not only a response to Caledonian uprising, but also as a cultural experiment:

... the erection of a wall cutting the island in two in its narrowest part served to protect the fertile, guarded areas of the south from the attacks of northern tribes. I myself inspected a substantial part of those constructions begun everywhere at the same time along an earthwork eighty miles in length: it was my chance to try out, on that carefully defined space running from coast to coast, a system of defense which could afterward be applied anywhere else. But already that purely military project was proving an aid to peace and to development of prosperity in that part of Britain; villages sprang up, and there was a general movement of settlers toward our frontiers . . . the first irrefutable proof of the protective power of Rome. . . . (137).

Whatever its purpose, in its day the wall must have established one impressive barrier and seemed, as in the phrase we often hear in Medieval literature, “the work of giants.”<sup>2</sup> It may well have attracted “followers” and spurred offshoot technology much as do modern wonders.

A couple summers ago I walked Hadrian’s Wall, or nearly all of it, backpacking, partly I suppose out of stubbornness, unsatisfied by what I’d read about its magnificence, wanting to experience it as artifact, an aspect of a landscape, and as a Wonder, a work of giants, and partly to get a sense of boundaries and what they meant in the ancient world and to the Medieval world that followed. Also, as a student and teacher of the

literatures of the early periods, I wanted to get a better feel for and visual notion of what life must have been like for the frontier Romans who lived there and the British peoples, Norse, and Anglo-Saxons who scattered in, out, and about after the Romans left, and I wanted to get a sense of the physical span of the wall, from sea to sea.



The Wallsend site may yield much data yet, and it should reward the visits of both professional and amateur Indiana Joneses when it's complete, but west of there, the path of the wall quickly disappears into the sprawling city of Newcastle: neighborhoods, businesses, and factories, some of it typical Big City, nearly all of it uninformative for the would-be wall walker—though I had a very helpful conversation with a woman working in a deli where I bought a tuna sandwich and tea (she suggested some useful stops along my way)—except for some small remnants at Benwell and Denton Hall, which I omitted for the sake of time, since I had less than a week to complete my trek. I later met a retired man in Carlisle who said he had just completed the *entire* wall walk

aided by a detailed map provided by his local librarian, but he confirmed that other than knowing one has traced the route of the wall, the walk becomes much more productive west of Newcastle, where I took it up again, near Heddon-on-the-Wall, where another clear, substantial section of the wall becomes visible.



Past Heddon the main road, the B6318, turns directly *overtop* the wall itself: One drives or walks directly on the Roman marvel, now paved and stretching in ribbon-like undulation into the distant west, complete with cars and lorries hurtling by at seventy-plus miles per hour. Walking in the rain is difficult, with (over)confident and usually unsympathetic drivers whizzing by, but the ditch and vallum appear clearly through much of this stretch, and the level to which the road rises above them gives a sense of the height of the wall and its likely effectiveness at doing whatever it was doing there.

Yes, did I say rain? One can hardly avoid it, except early in a journey, when one is yet flushed with the silly notion that sunshine must at least occasionally grace one with good fortune,



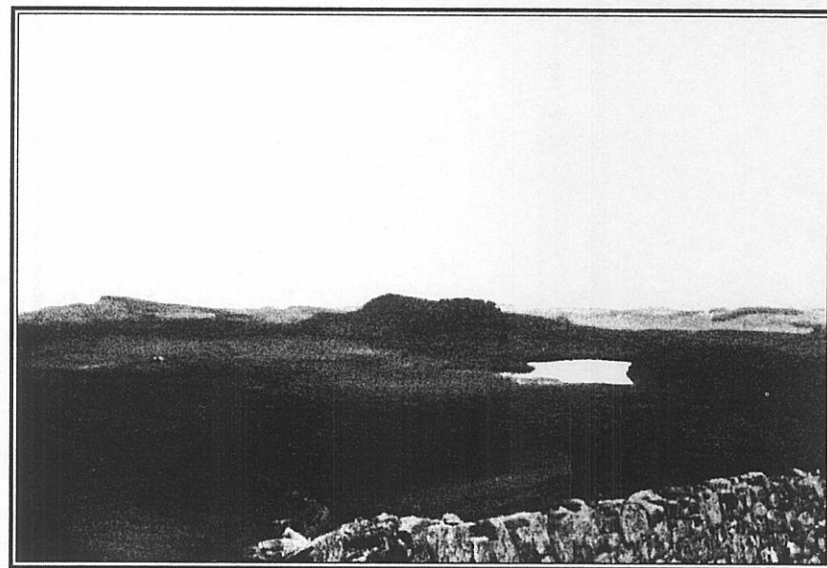
or late in a journey, when one is too tired to worry about being sogged one more time. From the gray, dripping skies of industrial Newcastle, Professor Tom Shippey and I walked west of Heddon in, for an hour or more, pleasant, golden sunshine. I kept unwillingly recalling a line from a 50's song, "Raindrops, so many raindrops," and laughing, doubting the wisdom of packing the extra weight and bulk of Gortex rain gear. My friend, the great Medievalist, the Walter Ong Chair at Saint Louis University, and I, afoot and light hearted, strode along the Wall road, comfortable with our backpacks and high-tech walking sticks, pleased with ourselves at finding such opportune weather.



Yet some short time ahead, just as we located an aptly placed and reassuring sign touting "Hadrian's Wall Country," the rain came. We could see it nearing us like a large gray sheet, swirling over the distant northern hills and sewing up the welkin with little suggestion of even the smallest seams to let some sunshine through. For two days the rain fell, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn it's falling still. If ever a blink of sun cuts the

clouds, the land shines greenly healthy there, but only until the next sheet of clouds and thunder rumble through. Toward the end of our first day, we even experienced a few minutes of hail, sharp little sub-pea-sized pellets that sent us scrambling for some tree cover we were lucky to find. On the road, I realized the significance of the fact that drivers don't slow down in the rain anymore.

After several road showers we decided to try the ubiquitous sheep fields as possibly better walking, but the old Roman ditch was slippery and deep, and the fields boggy and uneven: a muck-pond sucked the hilt right off my walking stick, and I was wishing we had with us the pig from *Papillon* who could navigate through quicksand. Two or three muddy miles later, we gave up and slipped through a break in the sheep-wall back onto the road, just in time to watch the growing gloom of dusk merge into and replace more emphatically the steady gloom of day.



But even for all that, even through such dark days, the rolling landscape gleams a silvery emerald, and the uninterrupted green quilt of north England, marked only with the delicate lines of spidery-slim roads, stretches beyond the eye far into the imagination, calling to mind Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins and his dwarves and trolls, fleeting, magical Romantic Age encounters in tufted copses tucked among windy moors, and deadly pursuit by Viking ambushes along the flat tracks of moor to the south that dip suddenly into silky streams or dark dales. The rain itself seems almost like a blanket between oneself and the world, allowing the imagination to roam to stories known and unknown. Once one has caught a love of the English landscape, even rain, rain, and more rain won't diminish it. Once one is dry and nursing a hot cup of tea at a pleasant B&B, weather, up to a point, may even enrich the experience.

But oh, I do mean rain, two full days of it, dashing off the gray pavement, pouring from the slate-gray sky, slapping off the gray guard wall shaped from stones off the original Roman wall to line the road with endless green growing gray in the dusk filtering in rapidly from Scotland down to the North Yorkshire Moors.

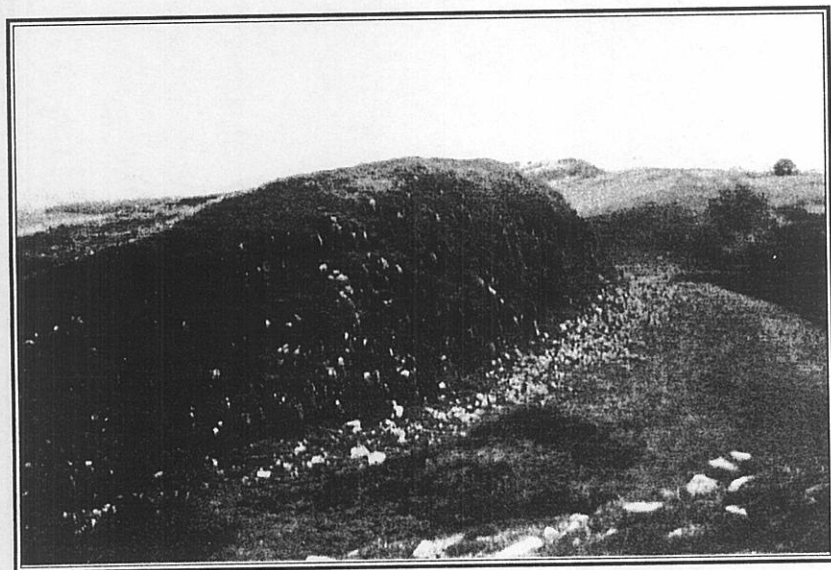
Though sheep (what they leave behind, that's another aspect of what keeps the fields so green) at first made interesting, even fun semi-companions—as one walks nearby they look with what seems real curiosity, perhaps because we were draped in green and yellow rain ponchos that made us look like moving, sickly rhododendrons—they quickly become monotonous, and one hopes to see a goat, a dog, even a dragon, just something different. They peer, bleat, then dash off with absolute consistency, and quickly one realizes that the peering involves no thought whatever, however much it may at first appear so. Once in Ireland my wife and I were walking along a similar road, sheep fence to our right, traffic whirring by, when a sheep saw us, panicked, and instead of running back into its immense grazing field, squeezed through the fence and started to run along the busy road. Several cars squealed to a stop, we hugging each other and

the edge of the road, hoping the poor blighter would avert disaster, which it did, scrambling its fat back-end through another small breach in the fence and disappearing into a field of seemingly infinite look-alikes with another offended bleat. That experience left me with little doubt that if a thought ever crosses a sheep's mind, it does so but briefly and departs with lack of recognition on the part of the animal into the void from which it came.

Sheep do provide occasional comic relief, though. Bred to produce twins, the ewe is often besieged by two offspring at once, their heads poked underneath to feed, their butts thrust heavenward with tails wagging rapidly in time like windshield wipers at full throttle. Sometimes the lambs continue to feed so long after they appear to have grown too old for such behavior that the mother, facing ruefully off into the distance, looks to be expressing a resigned but disgusted, "Shouldn't you two have got jobs by now? What are you doing still eating at home?"

After long walking, drenched, tired, hungry, and cold, we stopped at the only lodging we could find, a B&B near a town called, well, Wall. The proprietor claimed she had no rooms and no knowledge of any other lodgings closer than Hexham except one other B&B that would certainly be full and another that was closed. Somewhere between unwilling and unable to walk on to Hexham, we did our best to clarify our plight, and she finally put us up in what she called a "caravan," what we call a trailer. We dined on what we could scrounge from our packs, a small bag of trail mix, a few raw pea pods, and some Earl Grey tea (easily the highlight of the meal—the English can always come through with good tea). As the caravan sported only a rickety gas heater, we laid aside our sodden "waterproof" shoes next to toast them dry for a bit, then turned off the heater and slept in the cold, with a window open: We didn't want to risk a gas leak. The temperature sank, and the wind whistled madly over a Northumbrian landscape rolling like an angry sea. Though I dreamed of what sort of trolls must inhabit such a place, I slept anyway.

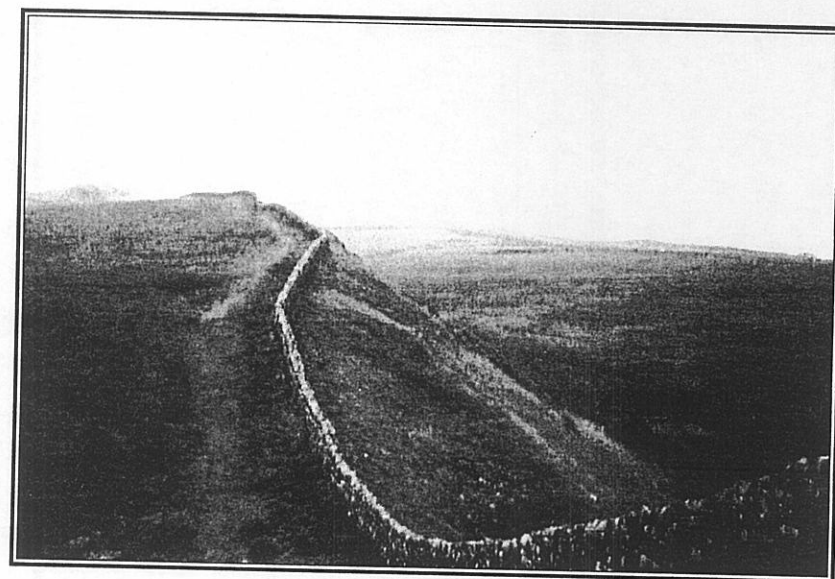




We began the next day with an English breakfast: bacon (what we'd call ham or Canadian bacon), sausage, fried eggs, beans, white toast with orange marmalade, sauteed mushrooms, and a tomato slice. Yes, I do care about cholesterol, and yes, I did eat all my breakfast, lingering over the tomato, and I think my body burned up every evil calorie immediately, worried after the previous day of forced march and few rations that I'd never properly feed it again. In our age of the world, we've accustomed ourselves to overindulgence, where a Roman soldier billeted along the wall might manage quite well on some porridge, a little bread and cheese, perhaps a small, wrinkled apple, and a long draft of ale, with occasional fresh game or a glass of wine from home on holidays.

We got a couple miles into the second day's walk before the rain started again, right after a brief stop at the fairly well-preserved fort at Chesters on a lovely plot above the Tyne, an English Heritage site notable for its underground strongroom, substantial bathhouse, and mythological carvings, including a

goddess standing on a heifer and a spurting phallus, intended, apparently, to ward off the "evil eye."

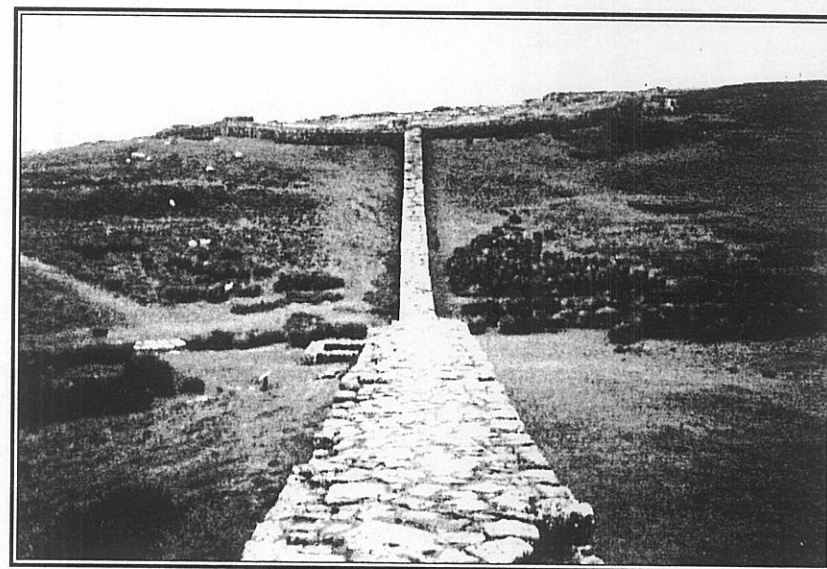


After a number of miles uphill and down, again under a curtain of rain, we stopped just off the B6318 at Carrawburgh, the Roman Brocolitia, not "broccoli spot," but "rocky spot." There we navigated some boggy ground to find the famous Mithraeum, a small temple to the god Mithras, imported from the Middle East, a favorite among the Roman soldiers (his cult was male only) as the divine defender of light against darkness and the slayer of the cosmic bull, by means of which exploit he gained creative power for humanity. Difficult to eradicate, his cult drew the special wrath of Christians bent on exclusive conversion (see Breeze and Dobson, 265-66). That's the advantage that may have sustained many of the Roman cults after Christianity had already begun to make inroads: They were not exclusive, and many of the soldiers adopted the worship of native gods as well as their own, which derived from those of Greece and the Middle East. The Roman notion of piety, with its distrustful but passionate

devotion to an ever-widening array of gods, seems strange and distant to us today.



From Carrawburgh we were able to slip off-road for a bit to climb the steep, soggy crags for a breath of brisk wind dashing over abrupt, dramatic central Northumbrian hills. We came down onto the huge fort at Housesteads from a point where the wall looks like an airport runway dropping from a craggy hilltop down to the remains of the massive stone walls of the fort. Another English Heritage site, Housesteads retains clearly delineated foundations of nearly all its original buildings, including a twenty-four seat latrine where the soldiers apparently met to sit, look out over the lovely landscape, chat, and discuss the day's duties in a way that would have even less-than-fastidious folk from our own age cringing.



After a good look about and some hot tea, we turned west again toward the ridge, following the line of the wall partly over sharply serrated hills and partly along the road, trying before nightfall to reach a tiny place with the remarkable name of Twice Brewed (there's also an East Twice Brewed) for a much needed pleasant, warm, friendly B&B, a pub supper, a couple bitter shandies (if you don't know this refreshing drink, try one: a half-pint of frothed lemonade mixed with a half-pint of bitter ale), and a good night's sleep.

The next day my walking companion, eager to reach the Carvoran Roman Army Museum, went ahead, while I undertook a brief detour back to Vindolanda, a Roman fort just south of the wall and also currently under excavation. Well off the main road, Vindolanda ("shining lands") rewards the visitor with more than a pastoral stroll: the road to the fort follows the Stanegate, the ancient Roman east-west road; the fort itself sports the



foundations of many Roman buildings, for example a substantial bathhouse and headquarters; the enclosure includes an excellent museum with tools, reproductions of wooden writing tablets (originals in the British Museum in London), sometimes with personal notes, one of which is an invitation to a birthday party, and a collection of leather shoes (I have often wondered how the ancients got along without Nike footwear—even the best supported sandal-like shoes must have offered little warmth or protection against cold and stony ground). Several gardens, a chapel with wall paintings dedicated to nymphs, and an altar to Jupiter (labelled with the ubiquitous *IOM*, *Iupiter Optimus Maximus*, looking rather unnervingly like a modern advertising logo), line a rippling brook—a lovely site more suitable to an estate than a military fortification, which made me wonder if the Roman assigned there would have had gentler duty than most of his fellows at other sites.

From Vindolanda I hurried to catch up, dashing up the ridge and along high ground, finally enjoying the sunshine that “shining lands” promises. What was all that business I mentioned about rain? That day, though cool and breezy, grew bright and pleasant, and I walked in shorts despite the irritation of midges munching at any inch of available skin. At Cawfields remains a substantial fragment of Milecastle, and I made the obligatory mistake of climbing the dead-end path up the hill, then back down and through the gate, past the quarry, through some boggy light woods, across a farm to Greatchesters, through some lovely parkland below Walltown Crag, then along some more lightly wooded land to the Roman Army Museum, where I met my friend among military artifacts. From there we trudged on a bit, then, to be sure we could complete our travels in time to reach the next B&B, we hopped a bus the last two miles or so to Birdoswald.



A stunning site, Birdoswald stands just north atop a steep bank above the river Irthing. The name derives from *buirc Oswald*, “Oswald’s enclosure,” but the Romans called it *Banna*, a term for a promontory, appropriate to its location. With Hadrian’s Wall and a sloping valley to the north and gates facing east and west, the fort would have been subject to attack from only one direction at the time, depending on time of day, that is, from which side the sun was shining: attackers would want the sun at their backs. Within the enclosure one can find the outline of a remarkable meeting hall, marked by thick tree stumps—one gets the sense that this place had particular importance for the Romans and the those who occupied it afterward. In *Hadrian’s Wall: History and Guide*, Guy de la Bedoyere suggests:

[i]t’s quite possible that the fort was occupied by the descendants of the [Roman] soldiers, using what they could of the old fortifications and buildings to create a secure home for themselves and their families. They may have had a leader,



Archeological evidence leads to the conclusion that "occupation here had continued long after the Roman period, well into the fifth century" (105)—more on this point later.



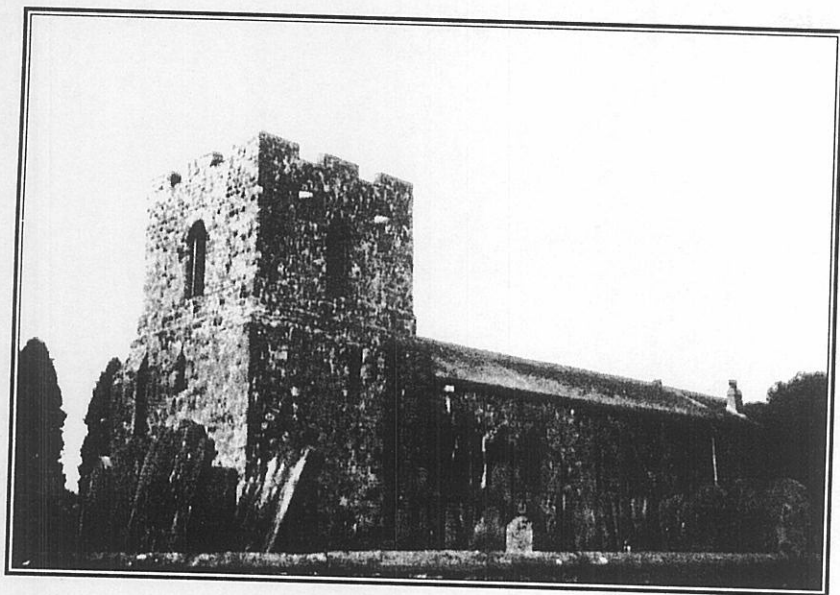
Walking east from Birdoswald along the Cumbrian Cycle Way, one follows the wall, indeed again walks upon it for much of the way to Brampton, the site of our next night's stop. Unlike a similar stretch around Heddon, the automobile traffic here, while not entirely benign, is calmer and far less frequent, and the wall walk follows gently rolling country through tiny hamlets, past Lanercost Priory, and past the road that leads to the Bewcastle, site of a beautiful, carved ninth-century stone cross (afoot and facing imminent darkness, I settled this time for a viewing of the reproduction in Tullie House Museum in Carlisle). Ditch and/or vallum are often visible also along this stretch, along with a turret or two, but perhaps what makes the memory of this part of the walk most pleasant is the fact that I had left the heavy rain miles behind, and only a few brief, musical showers pattered the road, trees, and hikers.

A couple miles outside of Brampton lies Castlesteads, probably the site the Romans called Camboglanna; though archeologists know the site, nothing is left to view there, the remnants of wall and castle having been built into the estate house built there in the eighteenth century. After a night at a Brampton B&B we poked about in the woods a bit the next day, trying to get a sense of how the area might have been defended: The woods sit at a slightly higher point barely above the surrounding lands, so the position does not seem an obvious one for military fortification, but perhaps it simply fell at the correct interval along the Wall for the next placement of fort and garrison. The name, however, suggests something more important than a mere arbitrary site—more on that later, also.

The road from Brampton to Carlisle offers few points of interest for wall walkers, so we walked part of it, and then, where traffic gets fast, we caught a bus into the outskirts of Carlisle. The Romans had a fort at Stanwix, just north of Carlisle, from which the wall bends just south to Carlisle, then west to Burgh-by-Sands. Another fairly large city, Carlisle, with its Information Centre, makes a useful stop on a wall trek, plus it has a castle, a cathedral, and a train station with good connections north, south, and east.

Having stayed a night at Carlisle, and with tired legs beginning to numb, I completed my walk alone the next day (my friend needing to move on to other business), going west to Burgh (pronounced "Bruff"), where the Edward I monument looks out over the quicksands of the Solway Firth, and where the last of the significant Wall monuments, the Church of St. Michael's, built from stones from the Wall, highlights the town. West of Burgh, the Wall followed the south coast of the Solway to Bowness-on-Solway and around the corner south, down the Cumbrian coast, but aside from small sections of ditch, vallum, and turf wall, and of course the length of road that once again covers what was once the wall, the Wall-traveler can see little. I walked out to the monument and the banks, then through town about a mile west of Burgh, and finally reversed course. I stopped back in town for a

pint of ale, then turned back to Carlisle, my wall walk, at least in the physical sense, concluded.



I missed, perhaps, some sense of completeness by not having followed the path at least as far as Bowness, but with limited time for my stay and other projects to complete, plus the recognition that for full closure I should walk not all the way to Barrow-in-Furness in south Cumbria, but probably at least twenty-five miles down the coast, I deferred to Falstaff's wisdom, that the better part of valor is sometimes discretion.

I believe I accomplished what I set out to do. First, I got a clear sense of the what the Romans sought to distinguish as the northern border of their world, of their Civilization. The Wall tends to follow natural boundaries and make use of natural shields: rivers, escarpments, hogbacks, and firths. And yet the accomplishment of connecting coast to coast with a unified and unifying work of human labor staggers the imagination. Perhaps more surprising yet: Later generations, lacking wealth and raw material, dismantled the wall for stone to build according to their

own needs, showing little sentimental attachment to the grandeur that proceeded them—we humans are, after all, more practical than poetical creatures in a pinch.

Second, I acquired a feeling for what life must have been like for the people who lived "on the edge." The soldiers who garrisoned forts in the central lands would have drawn tough assignments, not because they would have met more military engagements necessarily, but because for them weather and supplies would have arisen as greater issues, and farther from shipping lanes, they would have felt even farther from home than they already were—legions along the Wall came from all ends of the Roman Empire, from Eastern Europe to North Africa. Perhaps that accounts for why we find Mithras there: the need to believe in a god of light who defeats darkness, subdues the cosmic bull, and brings strength and creative capacity to humanity, someone who could connect them to the south and the east.

Third, I have seen Rome—the Coliseum, Constantine's Arch, the Palatine Hill, the Appian Way, so much more—so I had a sense of the glories of the seat of the Empire, but seeing that Rome's power extended to this distant place of mist and gale gave me further appreciation for the degree to which Roman duty, tenacity, and acquisitiveness shaped the ancient world and has continued to direct the course of the world centuries after.

Fourth, I came to see that, following the Pennines, perhaps in some way like the Apennines, Medieval north England was divided distinctly into quadrants: below the wall in the east, the Anglo-Danes; above in the east, Picts and Scots; in the southwest, the lingering British influence, and in the northwest (and pushing south), Hiberno-Vikings. The bleak center, up from the moors, stretching north and west into west-central Northumbria, was (and in some places still is) no one's land, or perhaps anyone's land: Anyone hardy enough to try to manage it could scramble to try to keep it. Fewer people live there yet, and though more folk than I would have suspected walk the wall, one finds few opportunities for food and lodging along the north end of England's spine.



One of the great pleasures of walking, of course, is good talk. Tom and I talked about the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, who he was and why he wrote; about the real meaning of the Middle English *Patience* and *Purity*; about Edward I's proper place in English history. More exactly, I asked questions and listened—how often does one have the opportunity for a one-on-one brush-up finisher course with one of the finest scholars in the world? Among the most interesting discussions we had along the way, Tom had hypothesized a historical King Arthur, but not the one of Geoffrey Ashe and those scholars of the southern contingent who put him in south Wales or Cornwall, but rather, as some nearly forgotten earlier scholars had suggested, a northerner, a Romano-Celt who fought in civil wars along Hadrian's Wall after the Roman legions pulled out to defend their own City.<sup>3</sup> Tom's wall walk had a different purpose than mine: to check place names against those from the Arthurian tradition. Carlisle, for instance, appears in many Medieval stories (such as the *Alliterative Morte Darthur*, Marie de France, and much of the Gawain material) as Arthur's court. Here are some other connections we found.

First, Roman "Camboglanna" appears as Celtic "Camlann," the cite of Arthur's legendary final battle, probably at Castlesteads.

Second, Brough-by-Sands the Romans called "Aballava" or "Avalana," "shining lands," where in Arthuriana the king was taken by the queens or sorceresses or the Lady of the Lake to be healed of his wounds (the quicksands of Solway Firth might offer the perfect place to deposit Excalibur)—I would also like to suggest that Vindolanda (same meaning, "shining lands") could also be Avalon, with its hidden brook and temple to the Nymphs a perfect hideout for a "Lady of the Lake."

Third, Birdoswald, well-defended and with its dramatic cliff and substantial meeting hall, would make a perfect cite for "Camelot." I propose this point for consideration rather than insist upon it as fact, particularly when one can find such enticing

(and similarly dubious) sites as the so-called "King Arthur's Round Table" monument outside Penrith, south of Carlisle.

Fourth, Alnwick Castle and Bamburgh Castle have been proposed by scholars as possible sites for Lancelot's Joyous Garde. Because the bad weather and near impossibility of mounting a siege leave Bamburgh a more likely candidate for "Gloomy Garde," Alnwick seems a more likely site for Lancelot's last stand. The two castles stand well north of the Wall in northern Northumbria and about fifteen miles apart, settings that would require effort and time to reach, but would not be impossible for armies to besiege, then abandon to return for a final battle in the west, Arthur's against Mordred, as Malory describes in the *Morte D'arthur*.

Fifth, because the Romans took the trouble to fortify these northern sites, they seem a likely system for the remaining Celts and Romano-Celts to fight over in what must have been a kind of civil war for power and control following the departure of the legions and commanders for falling Rome. Wouldn't local warlords want to make use of whatever defenses they could? And where could they find better ones than along the Wall? A northern locale for Arthur offers a contiguity with Scotland and closer connection to Ireland (through Galloway) than would a southern.

Sixth, seemingly gratuitous Arthurian names appear here and there, such as the "King Arthur's Round Table" stone monument outside Penrith.

Such speculation of course would require a lifetime of research, and even then one might fall short of substantiation, but some such effort rewards in a different way: At the very least it fires the imagination to reconsider Arthurian texts and contexts, to reread them with the possibility of a different locale and a different generation in mind. And Arthur and his colleagues seem fit inheritors of the Roman's enterprise. As scholars, we must remain careful to separate what we can of the tendrils of history and fiction, realizing that as time removes us further from the originals, we will have a harder and harder time recognizing the



difference. As students of literature, we gain some latitude of interpretation with more experience of the *places* in which our texts were composed, and that latitude allows, as the postmoderns point out, for “play,” which can bring considerable pleasure, as we continue to find in the still-burgeoning world of Arthurian fantasy, though good fiction can lead us to accept and sometimes even to teach as fact what has hardly yet risen to the level of hypothesis.

As for me, no study in the secondary literature replaces what we learn from the sites themselves, any more than knowledge of the sites replaces enjoying the texts or gleaning their scholarship; such visits bolster a teacher’s confidence in his or her material and enhance our imaginative sense of the settings of our favorite tales, as well as our visceral appreciation for the joys and suffering of the ancients whose lives and struggles generated our myths and legends and urged us to comprehend what we could locate of them in our histories. Literature always arises from a context, and that context includes landscape with all its beauty, weather, history, and legend.

My wife, with whom I’ve traveled to England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Switzerland, and Italy, once made this point: Someone can take our car, our house, all our assets, but no one can take away the memories of our travels, and as teachers, our memories, particularly those that assist our teaching and scholarship, constitute some of our greatest assets. While walking the Wall, I absorbed vistas of landscapes and forts, sensations of places with stark steeps or decorative herbage, and conversations about connections, as well as having the time to integrate all those impressions with my understanding of favorite stories; I had opportunity to take notes and pictures, to imagine, to listen and breathe, to experience ever-so-briefly, feeling the cold wind pour over the steep hills, as A. E. Housman writes in “Wenlock Edge,” “Then ‘twas the Roman, Now ‘tis I.” Each of those memories, I believe, makes me a better scholar, writer, and teacher, and I can confidently assert for my students what I already believed, but what I now *know*, that the literature comes

from its place as well as its people and that it remains tied to place and time, for only such places and times can produce the people who create such characters. The act of teaching is the act of traveling, and the act of traveling is the act of learning; the soles of my feet know as well as my mind knows, and I can better encourage my students to seek out with minds and feet their own memories, the places that made their literatures, the places where their imaginations will breathe, where the land and its histories can teach them more than I ever can.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Sutherland notes that “by about AD 155 the great wall system, which must have seemed impregnable when first built, was in trouble. Forts were abandoned and burned (perhaps by the proto-Picts, perhaps by the retreating Romans themselves). . . . By 180, the enemy were virtually out of Scotland” (36). Historian Ammianus Marcellinus mentions a Pictish attack on the Hadrian’s Wall in 367 (Sutherland, 41). From Cassius Dio and Herodian, we receive accounts of Emperor Septimus Severus and his sons traveling to Britain and “to repair and maintain the frontier at Hadrian’s Wall” (Sutherland, 37).

<sup>2</sup>According to historians, Hadrian, in many ways a successful and even gracious governor who “disliked pomp, luxury, and extravagance,” but “insisted on etiquette and formality . . . culture and courtesy” (Lissner, 183), liked to consider himself more capable and knowledgeable than anyone in any field he undertook to study, and ordered the execution of the architect Apollodorus, who dared criticize (rightfully) the plan for the temple of Venus and Roma that the emperor sent him. That story appears in the *Roman History* of Dio Cassius along with the observation that Hadrian’s “nature was such that he was jealous not only of the living, but also of the dead; at any rate he abolished Homer and introduced in his stead Antimachus [a minor epic poet], whose very name had previously been unknown to many” (433). Perhaps the Romano-British wall is Hadrian’s

way of saying to other architects, "Now, *there's* a wall." Martin Nilsson observes that "Trajan had directed the energy of the Empire outwards, but all Hadrian's activity was devoted to conserving and organizing it internally. He never waged war except in cases of absolute necessity" (52)—suggesting that the wall may have served as a (temporary) promise of the end of expansion or as a way to encircle that territory he intended yet to organize.

<sup>3</sup>Ashe mentions, "A topic for debate which had arisen was Arthur's home territory and whether or not his real career was confined to it. The northern school had a long spell of influence, but it finally waned. . . . All it proved was an early poetic fame in that part of the country which was not surprising, because the North happened to be the home of the first important poets in the Welsh language. Another claim by this party was that the Camlann, where Arthur fell, was a fort on Hadrian's Wall northeast of Carlisle, called Camboglanna. This idea failed, in the end, to stand up convincingly" (76-77). Arguments and data for a southern Arthur rest on similarly dubious evidence, "prevailing" probably more because of authors' preferences and the belief that Arthur must have lived in the south to fight the incoming Angles and Saxons. Ashe's "Camallate" (Camelot) of South Cadbury derives from a sixteenth-century reference; one could as easily point to "Camelon," a fort along the Antonine Wall in Scotland. Will we ever have an Arthur assembled from more than tradition? I suspect not, but collecting place names as well as local traditions gives us data for speculation and pleasure for the imagination.

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