Scotland Forever

The opposite bank of the Scottish-English border river, covered with stones and boulders, sloped for about forty feet up to the forest-covered hill which turned into a rocky, green cliff. Standing on the English bank, I could imagine tartan-clad clan chieftains with huge swords staring down from the cliff at me, the English peasant whose village was about to be sacked (bagpipes in the background, of course). I knew that the Burns hailed from Scotland, so I naturally envisioned my glorious ancestors as these chieftains, about to fight off the English and win prestige and glory for the family name. As it turns out, the Burns were from the border area, but they were a lesser family in the Campbell clan that was notorious for murder and robbery. Apparently, my most famous Scottish ancestor was Geordie (or something like that) Burn, who killed some people from another clan for their livestock and was hanged.

The rockery stretched on for miles over the rolling hills of the countryside as we walked beside Hadrian’s Wall to the remains of a Roman milecastle. The wall, which was around four feet thick, was half its original height and had uneven bulges of stone, a result of the local population after Roman times taking the stones for their own walls. The milecastle’s foundations showed that it had been a small fort about two-hundred square feet that had a panoramic view of what used to be Roman territory behind it.

"Now imagine you’re a young Roman conscript," my friend’s mother said as we admired the scenery, "looking out on this countryside and feeling homesick for your sunny Italy." The landscape, with storm clouds on the horizon, was dreary when compared to Italy’s, but it was classic English countryside, with huge green fields divided by low stone walls.
"How about imagining you’re a Roman soldier getting ready to fight off the next pict attack," my friend, John, motioned to the other side of the wall. His tone of voice suggested that he did not think very highly of the pict.

"The pict?"

"You know, the native Scots. Druids and kamikaze highlanders, if you will. The whole reason the Romans had to build the wall."

He knew of my ancestry, and I sensed he was trying to degrade it. I did not really mind though: it is impossible to choose one’s ancestors. However, I tried to defend them by remarking that they must have been incredible warriors.

"Incredible? More like crazy. Would you attack this wall with a spear?"

I had to give him that one. For the rest of the morning, we went to the remains of a small Roman city and walked on top of other nearby sections of the wall. The morning concluded with a sighting of a pair of supersonic English fighter jets, and I, recalling the time when a pilot in one had returned my waves by rocking his wings, nearly fell off the wall waving my arms.

I met some real border warriors soon thereafter when we were in Carlisle, which is the main city in the area. Some soldiers from the King’s Own Royal Border Regiment rolled into the town square in an armored personnel carrier and unloaded guns, mortars, and other military apparatus to put on display as part of a recruiting drive. My friend and I were taught the finer skills of cocking a submachine gun, sighting a sniper rifle, and using an infrared scope. It seemed like all the people, especially the old men, in the town square were supportive of the soldiers; I’m not sure if such a demonstration would have met with the same support in the U.S. I didn’t realize it then, but their support might have been a result of the nearness of conflict in England.
For all I know, the guys who were displaying these weapons might have been shipped out the next morning to use them in Bosnia or Ulster, the flashpoint for Irish independence and religious troubles.

Although talking to these soldiers was interesting, the most vivid personality I encountered was of a man to whom I didn’t even speak. On the outskirts of Longtown, a mid-sized town for the area, the roads are mostly flanked by hedgerows. One morning, as we passed through on our way to Carlisle, we spotted a lone walker strolling slowly along next to the foliage. Upon closer inspection the walker turned out to be an old man with a tweed suit, a tweed cap, and a walking stick—Dr. Watson in traveling garb. As we came even closer, he suddenly stopped, turned toward the hedgerow, and after a brief inspection began to chop at it with his staff for no apparent reason. He was actually winding up and smashing the hedge with alternating backhand and forehand sweeps. To me, this country gentleman embodied the idea of an English eccentric who does his own thing regardless of what others think.

The car trip across the Salisbury Plain to the Solway Firth was almost as scenic as the destination. The small settlements of houses we drove through gave the impression that beneath them were the foundations of shelters stretching back to the middle ages. Down the road from John’s grandmother’s house, situated on a quiet country lane surrounded by farm-land, stood enclosed by trees a war-like medieval abbey next to a modern day church. The abbey looked more like a miniature castle than a holy place, especially since it had turrets on top and a single, tall, thin doorway through which horsemen had galloped after pillaging the countryside. The Salisbury Plain was a wet and marshy area on the overcast day we traveled to it, especially as we neared the Firth. The plain was a huge, sprawling expanse of grass, interrupted occasionally by
shrubbery, barbed wire fences, and remnants of the British military, such as an abandoned airfield and small huts made out of crumbling bricks, long ago used as backdrops to rifle practice. The area itself looked like a good place for military exercises, mainly because there was nothing there to be harmed. John’s mother said that when she was a little girl living in the area, the Army and the Navy would have exercises against each other, and she would always help out the Navy men.

The Solway Firth is the body of water that juts into the English coast from the west and points to approximately the Scottish border. The water looked as though it came all the way up to the grass on the shore, but when I stepped in, it was actually silt. It was low-tide and the silt on the shore was still wet, rippled, and shiny, looking very much like water. The wind from the Irish Sea blew in unobstructed across the water and tossed the occasional raindrop against me. The overcast sky continued to darken, and it became harder and harder to distinguish the water line from the silt.

This landscape was what I had always expected of the British Isles: dark, wet, and windswept. I was very fortunate to have experienced this stereotype and the other aspects of British life. I also learned a little about myself in the process. I am not by any measure the wild, murderous Scotsman of my ancestry, but by experiencing his native country, I learned that he lives on in me somewhere.