

John H. Reid, *The Eagle and the Bear: A New History of Roman Scotland*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2023. ISBN 9781780278148. Paperback, 233 pp incl. index, 19 plates, and 112 figures. £17.99 stg.

It has been a pleasure to read this lavishly illustrated and handsome book which manages to be simultaneously both scholarly and easily accessible for all readers. As one can expect from Birlinn, it is well presented and apparently free from errors of the sort which are too often the result of poor (or AI reliant) proof reading. The author is the chair of the Trimontium Trust in Melrose, Scotland's only museum dedicated to the period of the Roman invasion. Perhaps unusually, Reid's list of acknowledgements includes mention of Scout, who "provided a decade of canine companionship, irrespective of the weather ... [and] cheerfully accompanied [him] over ditch and rampart" as the author conducted personal and extensive fieldwork; a photo of Scout atop Hadrian's wall is included in the body of the book.

Any understanding of the Roman invasion of Britain has to include an appreciation of Rome's political machinations and infighting, as well as its imperial expansion and invasions elsewhere. This context is provided in both the main narrative text and occasional text boxes, providing explanation of terms such as "Damnatio memoriae" or "Picts", while the division of Britain into Britannia Superior and Britannia Inferior is also explained separately. A concise note summarises the laws relating to metal detecting and the archaeological attitudes to it while recognising how such work provides an ability to sweep large areas of otherwise archaeologically barren ground in a cost effective manner, adding to the detail which broadens our understanding of the Roman presence in Scotland.

Reid writes "Philosophers have asked for centuries if there is such a thing as disinterested enquiry? Regarding those with pro-Roman sympathies, I am inclined to think not, as the hammer tends to regularly seek out the Roman nail. However, the diametrically opposite perspective, where invincible woad-covered fighters engage in guerrilla warfare until the Romans are forcibly expelled at the end of the fourth century, is equally damaging to the integrity of historical understanding. This is particularly true today when xenophobia is again on the rise and where any foreigner is seen as an enemy". It is clear that in his balanced and detailed assessment he has attempted to find the middle ground, injecting a degree of objective common sense to the weighing up of the evidence from archaeology and historical sources, all the contemporary ones of which are Roman. Indeed, Tacitus provides us with the earliest mention of an individual barbarian – Calgacus – who, sadly, has not been commemorated by a statue in his own country, unlike Vercingetorix who is marked at Alesia in modern day France or Arminius at the Teutoburg Forest near Detmold in Germany, or even Boudicca who dominates the Embankment in London where she almost dominated the Roman occupying forces. The early schematic (#9) shows the purported extent of the Roman Conquest of Britain 43-84 CE, starting with Claudius in 43 and finishing with Agricola in 77-84, although archaeological evidence is lacking for some of the most northerly of claimed activity. Reported fleet support is included.

Chapters work logically and mainly chronologically, with the first two setting the stage for a progressive tracking of the Roman incursions, advances and retreats, and constructions, mostly of the two famous walls but also of forts, marching camps and other installations. Reid acknowledges the debate over matters such as whether Ardoch Fort's well preserved ditch

network – in places up to six rows deep – continued to defend it as a major base or whether the extensive outer ditches were retained, even if disproportionate to the fort's later use, simply because of the effort it would have taken to fill them in! The chapter titles are sometimes light hearted but always engaging and encouraging of investigation. "Scotland before the Romans" (#3) provides a good summary of both antiquarian and modern scholarly thinking on the subject while "Smell the smoke: the post-Agricolan black hole" (#7) or "The African emperor and his brats" (#14) are clearly intended to appeal to non-academic but knowledgeable readers.

In the conclusion, the author returns to the debate over the Romano-centric consideration of the invasion rather than the nature and extent of the indigenous resistance to the Roman presence. "What did the Romans ever do for us?" is the occasional ironic catch-cry in the debate. But the most telling fact - incontrovertible – is the extent and nature of the barriers built by the Romans to separate the south from the northern barbarian tribes, barriers not equalled anywhere else in the extensive Roman empire. Had the northern tribes not presented such a major threat to Roman rule then neither the Antonine Wall nor Hadrian's Wall would have been built and garrisoned with such an expenditure of resources and manpower. And as Reid concludes, a "long view of the largely negative impact of Rome on the peoples of northern Britain also introduces the possibility that a sense of 'resistance' – however that concept is characterised – may have become an indelible trait of northerners".

For those encouraged by the discussion in *The Eagle and the Bear*, two densely packed pages at the end list places to visit, ranging from major and lesser museums to over sixty sites for which the Ordnance Survey map coordinates are given including some on Hadrian's Wall. Given how greatly appreciated and enjoyed the book was in this reviewer's household where one has a particular interest in Roman history and the other's interests are Scottish, those lists may well set the scene for many excursions yet to come.

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