

Press release:

‘Scotland’s first poem’ inspires book on border landscapes

Outdoor writer Andrew Bibby admits that his new book on Scottish and English border landscapes, **The Borders: The Lands We Share**, was indirectly inspired by what has been described by Celtic scholar Kenneth Jackson as Scotland’s earliest poem.

The poem, called Y Gododdin and taking its name from the tribe living in the sixth century in what is now Edinburgh and the Lothians, tells of a band of warriors who left Edinburgh around the year 580 to do battle in a place the poet describes as Catraeth – somewhere most commentators take to be the town of Catterick in North Yorkshire.

Andrew Bibby says: “I was planning a walk through the borderlands, and on something of a whim I decided to recreate the route which the Gododdin army may well have followed almost a millennium and a half before me.” He started at Edinburgh Castle, headed initially cross-country for Peebles, Selkirk and Melrose and then took the atmospheric old Roman road Dere Street, now an almost deserted footpath, down to the English border. “And having reached England, I then carried on through Northumberland and Co Durham until eventually after thirteen days and two hundred miles or so I reached Catterick and the river Swale,” he adds.

Andrew Bibby explains that, perhaps surprisingly for a poem almost certainly originating in what is today Scotland, Y Gododdin was composed in early Welsh, the language spoken at the time in the Lothians and much of the Border lands. The battle at Catraeth, previously assumed to be fought between Celts and Anglo-Saxons, has more recently been seen as a dispute between mixed-ethnic tribes from north and south of Hadrian’s Wall. It was not a success for the Gododdin, ending badly for most of the warriors commemorated in the verses. “Fortunately, my journey ended rather more positively than it did for them – I avoided any fighting and came away from Catterick alive,” Andrew Bibby says.

From this initial walk has emerged an extremely well-researched book celebrating the beauty of the borders countryside, one which seeks to interpret why the landscape looks the way it does. "It's always struck me as surprising that many people who enjoy walking in our beautiful countryside don't take more of an interest in the way that the land is being used economically. My aim is to try to dig beneath the superficial to reveal all the various factors which are influencing the way our countryside looks," Andrew Bibby says. There are chapters, for example, dedicated to exploring what's happening with upland farming, with woodlands and commercial forestry, with peatland degradation and restoration, and with nature conservation and the loss of biodiversity.

Andrew Bibby argues that any exploration of landscape also has to look at questions of land ownership, since land owners ultimately determine how land is used. He takes stock of the efforts towards land reform being taken in Scotland. He also visits an historic woodland beside the Tweed near Peebles which has now been taken into community ownership through a successful asset transfer.

Running through the book is an analysis of the effects that climate change is already having on our landscapes. "The last few years have seen a massive growth in the market for carbon offsetting by companies who are buying future credits in the carbon which – it is hoped - will be captured in due course in newly planted forests. This is having the effect of driving up land values and changing the use of our land," Andrew Bibby says. "We certainly need to need to get carbon out of the atmosphere, but many people argue that companies are taking an easy way out by buying carbon credits when first they should be focusing on reducing their emissions."

From his walk south on the track of the Gododdin warrior band has emerged, therefore, something rather more than just a walking book. "Walking has its own rhythm, a slow rhythm, one which allows you the time you need to absorb what you see. Although this isn't intended simply a book about my walk, I don't think I'd have been able to write it if I hadn't first explored the land on foot," he says. "Mind you, it was once I'd safely got home that the period of research really got started."

So why has the book been given the title 'The Lands We Share'? Andrew Bibby says that he is not trying to gainsay the significance which the Scottish/English border plays both economically and politically. What he does claim, however, is that the responsibility of tackling the two great global challenges we currently face – that of combating global warming and reversing the decline in biodiversity – is one that we all share, whichever side of the border we live on.

He argues too that our landscapes are something shared through time. "We share this countryside with all those past generations who also made their mark on the land, back to the days of the Gododdin, the Romans and even earlier times. They changed the look of the land in their efforts to survive and prosper. We need to cherish the landscapes we have inherited from them, and pass them on to future generations in as healthy a state as possible," he says.

The book **The Borders: The Lands We Share** is published on March 1st by Gritstone Publishing and will be available from bookshops and other outlets (£15). Andrew Bibby's previous books on landscape issues include the very well-reviewed **The Backbone of England: Landscape and Life on the Pennine Watershed** and **Back Roads through Middle England**, winner of the Outdoor Book of the Year for 2018.

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Editor's notes:

Review copies can be requested at gritstonecoop@gmail.com. Images and other material (including a PDF of the book) are available from www.gritstonecoop.co.uk/media-resources/ using the password 'media'. Andrew Bibby can be contacted on 07989 965315, andrew@andrewbibby.com.