See Oursels as Ithers See Us

By Manda Scott

The past is another country. You'll be familiar with this idea by now, and given that we're pretty much slap bang in the middle of the technological singularity, we can look back into the past of our own lives and see the distant shores of the pre-Wi-Fi, pre-broadband, pre-dial-up landscape we used to inhabit. Heaven help us, some of us can remember pre-colour TV.

And yet it was not always thus. In my delinquent youth, when I spent weekends playing at battle re-enactment instead of chained to a keyboard, I took to the field as a peasant, in the relatively sure knowledge that the Anachronism Police were not going to catch me out provided I stayed within a five-to-six century bandwidth. I could get away with it for a few hundred years either side even of that, as long as nobody was examining the stitching on my boots, or the style of my belt fasten.

Which is to say, from pre-Roman Iron Age (and yes, I do hate it that we define an entire culture that was the flower of our nation's history by the name of the occupying force that destroyed it) through to the Enlightenment (no comment), peasants wore much the same, ate much the same – and went into battle armed with the broadly the same desperately inadequate weapons.

I cheated on that bit: I had a Romano-Celtic sword made for me by a fantastic Scottish weapons-smith by the name of Bodge, and, when asked by the aforementioned anachro-fascists why I had an out-of-period weapon, I could say it was a family heirloom – as was my helmet with its nasal tang, my trusty spear (known in Viking circles as a spear-trapper) and the round shield that went out of fashion some time after the battle of Hastings. When they weren't looking, I sneaked a hand knife and an axe into my belt for use in emergencies. I was a particularly well-equipped peasant.

It was in the fighting that I came best to understand the vast, vast gulf between now and then. Picture the scene: we're at Caerlaverock Castle at the behest of Historical Scotland, pretty much due south of Dumfries, due west of Annan. The castle has seen better days, but in its youth, it was one of the chain that held

Scotland free of England.

Now, it has some rather lovely battlements and a dry moat that makes a good defense if you're unlucky enough to be on the defending side of a battle. Mostly, though, we stick to the flat land outside, because we're wimpish modern twenty-somethings and we don't like running up hills in shoes that are basically a scrap of leather wrapped round our feet. Roman soldiers had nailed sandals for a reason, but nobody else seemed to think it was a good idea. I can't imagine why. Having worn both, I can attest to the running-up-hills superiority of caligae compared to anything short of a decent set of Nikes.

Anyway, we are sorted into two opposing armies and we self-organise into shield walls. This is something the Romans did exceptionally well and then, like the caligae, people forgot that straight-edged shields make a better wall than round ones. If you're up against Romans who know how to hold a shield wall, the only possible way through is with a berserker, which is to say someone who is psychotic enough to charge a line of warriors armed with pointy weapons, all of whom can see them coming. The neutral pronoun was chosen deliberately, but it has to be said, they are mostly men. I never yet met a woman berserker, though I'm sure they exist.

Even in the twenty first century, charging a shield wall takes serious guts. There's an odd thing that happens when you step onto a battlefield: the present day withers away. More than the nights in a draughty tent, or the breakfasts grabbed from the embers of the campfire, stepping onto the field of battle with a shield in one hand and a spear in the other hits the deep, reptilian parts of our brains.

There is a tiny sliver of cerebral cortex that knows the bloke opposite was singing the Philosopher's Song from Monty Python at two a.m. and if someone doesn't kill him – actually kill him – he'll be doing an encore through the small hours while we're all trying to sleep. But… But. BUT… my amygdala doesn't know this. Every other part of my awareness is focused on staying alive and is one hundred per cent certain that Song-Bloke is, in fact, a rampaging Viking/Norman/Roman and will kill me if I don't kill him first. Forget the hours of mindfulness training. There are few things more guaranteed to pull you into the present moment than the sight of a blade coming in over the top of your shield.

It's also the fastest way I know to build camaraderie. You only have to save someone's life once on the battlefield to find a bond of common friendship. If you die in the process, it can be lifelong. Because, of course, we don't die. We who die, fall down to the wet earth (it's Scotland, of course it's wet) and wait out the rest of the fighting and then are magically resurrected by the shouts of the crowd. I used to have a young lurcher bitch who went berserk on the sidelines if I fell and could be loosed to come and 'revive' me with great enthusiasm, which was always good for a laugh.

And then we can do it again for the afternoon crowd. And then – then we're pretty much knackered, even Song-Bloke, who is never going to make it to two a.m.

Because fighting is the single most exhausting thing I have ever done – and this was at a time when I was a veterinary anaesthetist and spent hours of my nights keeping colicking horses alive while the surgeons tried to ~~kill them~~, sorry, fix them.

But battles are a thing apart. We were well-fed, well-rested, had driven to the battlefield, not walked, and we were going home to warm beds at the end of it – and we were still completely shattered.

My admiration for our forebears exploded into a vast, warm wall of awe by the end of my first weekend. They were hard. They must have been good because they lived long enough to give rise to us. (There may be a minor loophole in the reasoning there, but bear with me). They won battles and sometimes – Harald Godwinson, for instance – they won a battle, then force-marched from Stamford Bridge to Hastings, and fought another. We don't have that stamina. At least, I don't.

But the experience of sliding on thin-leather soles up yet another grassy bank in the driving rain, facing a forest of spear blades and shuddering under a blizzard of arrows built for me a bridge to the foreign country of our past that no amount of research could ever have done.

And you can tell, I think, when you read the plethora of Roman, or Viking, or Anglo-Saxon novels, who has lived through something like this, and who has sat at home watching *Vikings* (or worse, *Britannia*) and making it up. There's nothing wrong with a bit of fantasy, but the inside of my mind is not nearly such a far

away country as the cold, hard stone of our past.The past is another country. You'll be familiar with this idea by now, and given that we're pretty much slap bang in the middle of the technological singularity, we can look back into the past of our own lives and see the distant shores of the pre-Wi-Fi, pre-broadband, pre-dial-up landscape we used to inhabit. Heaven help us, some of us can remember pre-colour TV.

And yet it was not always thus. In my delinquent youth, when I spent weekends playing at battle re-enactment instead of chained to a keyboard, I took to the field as a peasant, in the relatively sure knowledge that the Anachronism Police were not going to catch me out provided I stayed within a five-to-six century bandwidth. I could get away with it for a few hundred years either side even of that, as long as nobody was examining the stitching on my boots, or the style of my belt fasten.

Which is to say, from pre-Roman Iron Age (and yes, I do hate it that we define an entire culture that was the flower of our nation's history by the name of the occupying force that destroyed it) through to the Enlightenment (no comment), peasants wore much the same, ate much the same – and went into battle armed with the broadly the same desperately inadequate weapons.

I cheated on that bit: I had a Romano-Celtic sword made for me by a fantastic Scottish weapons-smith by the name of Bodge, and, when asked by the aforementioned anachro-fascists why I had an out-of-period weapon, I could say it was a family heirloom – as was my helmet with its nasal tang, my trusty spear (known in Viking circles as a spear-trapper) and the round shield that went out of fashion some time after the battle of Hastings. When they weren't looking, I sneaked a hand knife and an axe into my belt for use in emergencies. I was a particularly well-equipped peasant.

It was in the fighting that I came best to understand the vast, vast gulf between now and then. Picture the scene: we're at Caerlaverock Castle at the behest of Historical Scotland, pretty much due south of Dumfries, due west of Annan. The castle has seen better days, but in its youth, it was one of the chain that held Scotland free of England.

Now, it has some rather lovely battlements and a dry moat that makes a good defense if you're unlucky enough to be on the defending side of a battle. Mostly,

though, we stick to the flat land outside, because we're wimpish modern twenty-somethings and we don't like running up hills in shoes that are basically a scrap of leather wrapped round our feet. Roman soldiers had nailed sandals for a reason, but nobody else seemed to think it was a good idea. I can't imagine why. Having worn both, I can attest to the running-up-hills superiority of caligae compared to anything short of a decent set of Nikes.

Anyway, we are sorted into two opposing armies and we self-organise into shield walls. This is something the Romans did exceptionally well and then, like the caligae, people forgot that straight-edged shields make a better wall than round ones. If you're up against Romans who know how to hold a shield wall, the only possible way through is with a berserker, which is to say someone who is psychotic enough to charge a line of warriors armed with pointy weapons, all of whom can see them coming. The neutral pronoun was chosen deliberately, but it has to be said, they are mostly men. I never yet met a woman berserker, though I'm sure they exist.

Even in the twenty first century, charging a shield wall takes serious guts. There's an odd thing that happens when you step onto a battlefield: the present day withers away. More than the nights in a draughty tent, or the breakfasts grabbed from the embers of the campfire, stepping onto the field of battle with a shield in one hand and a spear in the other hits the deep, reptilian parts of our brains.

There is a tiny sliver of cerebral cortex that knows the bloke opposite was singing the Philosopher's Song from Monty Python at two a.m. and if someone doesn't kill him – actually kill him – he'll be doing an encore through the small hours while we're all trying to sleep. But… But. BUT… my amygdala doesn't know this. Every other part of my awareness is focused on staying alive and is one hundred per cent certain that Song-Bloke is, in fact, a rampaging Viking/Norman/Roman and will kill me if I don't kill him first. Forget the hours of mindfulness training. There are few things more guaranteed to pull you into the present moment than the sight of a blade coming in over the top of your shield.

It's also the fastest way I know to build camaraderie. You only have to save someone's life once on the battlefield to find a bond of common friendship. If you die in the process, it can be lifelong. Because, of course, we don't die. We who die, fall down to the wet earth (it's Scotland, of course it's wet) and wait out the

rest of the fighting and then are magically resurrected by the shouts of the crowd. I used to have a young lurcher bitch who went berserk on the sidelines if I fell and could be loosed to come and 'revive' me with great enthusiasm, which was always good for a laugh.

And then we can do it again for the afternoon crowd. And then – then we're pretty much knackered, even Song-Bloke, who is never going to make it to two a.m.

Because fighting is the single most exhausting thing I have ever done – and this was at a time when I was a veterinary anaesthetist and spent hours of my nights keeping colicking horses alive while the surgeons tried to ~~kill them~~, sorry, fix them.

But battles are a thing apart. We were well-fed, well-rested, had driven to the battlefield, not walked, and we were going home to warm beds at the end of it – and we were still completely shattered.

My admiration for our forebears exploded into a vast, warm wall of awe by the end of my first weekend. They were hard. They must have been good because they lived long enough to give rise to us. (There may be a minor loophole in the reasoning there, but bear with me). They won battles and sometimes – Harald Godwinson, for instance – they won a battle, then force-marched from Stamford Bridge to Hastings, and fought another. We don't have that stamina. At least, I don't.

But the experience of sliding on thin-leather soles up yet another grassy bank in the driving rain, facing a forest of spear blades and shuddering under a blizzard of arrows built for me a bridge to the foreign country of our past that no amount of research could ever have done.

And you can tell, I think, when you read the plethora of Roman, or Viking, or Anglo-Saxon novels, who has lived through something like this, and who has sat at home watching *Vikings* (or worse, *Britannia*) and making it up. There's nothing wrong with a bit of fantasy, but the inside of my mind is not nearly such a far away country as the cold, hard stone of our past.

(c) The Bottle Imp