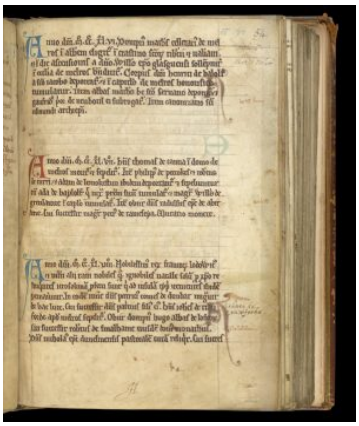
‘England and Scotland here impartially divide’: Contentions at the Anglo-Scottish Border

By Kate Ash-Irisarri

A few years ago, I regularly sat on the train commuting between my home in Lancashire in the northwest of England and my office at the University of Edinburgh. As the train sped through the Lake District, past Carlisle and into Dumfries and Galloway, very occasionally the train manager would announce the point at which we left England and entered Scotland; far more often than not, they didn’t. Similarly, on the regular occasions that I make my way up the M6, the signposts tell me ‘fàilte gu Alba’, welcome to Scotland, as one set of tyres and then the next passes over that invisible line that separates two kingdoms that have been joined in a royal union since 1603 and amalgamated as a united kingdom since 1707. This borderline, which snarls one hundred and twenty-five or so miles west to east from the Solway to the Tweed, is, administratively, now largely unremarkable; the signs at the side of the motorway are an unexceptional reminder of the once divided land which now, for better or worse, shares a constitutional monarch and a Westminster parliament.

In geographical terms, the most visible methods by which a nation’s boundaries are demarcated are the physical divisions of land or the marking of a boundary on a map. While many of us are accustomed to passport control at international borders, no such barrier awaits us between Scotland and England. The line that snakes across the map acts as a way of regulating space, providing an immediate visualisation of the boundary between these two kingdoms that was fixed at the Treaty of York in 1237. For countries with a shared land border, the division becomes a complex point of contact: it seemingly arbitrarily shows where one land ends and another begins. But how and when the boundary is decided and enforced, and by whom, suggest a much less neat segregation. And for two areas of a now single country, the border *should* be immaterial, nothing more than a faint memory of previous division made unnecessary by union.

Yet, the Anglo-Scottish border has exerted an oddly powerful influence over the cultures and literary productions of the English and the Scots for at least seven hundred years, though the debate over its location precedes this. For example, the Battle of Carham (near Coldstream) in 1018 saw the combined forces of Máel-Coluim son of Cinead (Malcolm II) and Owen the Bald (king of Strathclyde) defeat the Northumbrian forces of Uhtred, son of Waltheof of Bamburgh. In doing so, they consolidated the annexation of Lothian which had occurred during the reign of Indulf (954–62) and established the Tweed as a new frontier in the east.



The Chronicle of Melrose Abbey (photo credit: The British Library)

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries there were several attempts to fix a definite boundary between the kingdoms of England and Scotland and the area either side of this line became known as 'the Marches'. The *Chronicle of Melrose* recounts how, in 1190, William 'gave ten thousand marks of gold and silver' to Richard I of England so that he 'might recover his dignities, liberties, and honours'. William also hoped to 'obtain possession of Berwick and Roxburgh, which king Henry' had 'detained from him by violence'.[1] Richard's charter of quitclaim to these lands remarks that:

> *if any one of our subjects has unjustly usurped possession of the marches of the realm of Scotland…we desire that they be restored completely, and brought back to the state in which they were before his capture.*[2]

The charter indicates that the lands of the Anglo-Scottish border were often in a

state of flux, shifting from English to Scottish control (and vice versa), as English and Scottish kings sought to consolidate their power. That the Anglo-Scottish border looms large in the imaginations of accounts of interaction between these two kingdoms is perhaps of little surprise for a period in which sovereignty was at stake. Yet, as Andy King notes those on both sides of the border

> *spoke the same northern dialect of English […] shared the same culture, and indeed, for most of the thirteenth century, the border had been of very little political or cultural significance, and cross-border links had flourished and multiplied […] until 1296, the Englishmen and Scotsmen of the borders comprised – in some respects – a single community.*[3]

The Scottish Wars of Independence cemented difference, reinforcing the border at the same time that they brought the border communities on each side into a closer relationship of conflict. Although the nobility held lands on both sides of the border, by the time of the truce between England and Scotland in 1323, cross-border landholding had all but disappeared as the nobility became more connected in their allegiance to one monarch over another. Raiding parties from both sides of the border frequently plundered and took hostages, generating a distinctly border economy that thrived on tension and conflict rather than peace. Yet, as much as the border might have been a site of contest, it was also a site of negotiation: literal and metaphorical. By the mid-fifteenth century, the chronicler Walter Bower was referring not only to an area called 'the neighbourhood of the borders', but he was also identifying the people who occupied that land as 'Borderers'.[4] This characterisation signifies that the Anglo-Scottish border might be thought about not just in terms of physical divisions of land; it also points to an ideological, cultural and symbolic separation. And this separation is not just about who is English or Scottish but also about who might be both or neither. Did the Borderers occupy a discrete 'third space', as Homi Bhabha calls it, in which colliding cultures 'give rise to something different, something new'.[5] And if the Borderers did, might they still?

One writer who possibly suggests an emergent Border identity is Sir Thomas Gray, a Northumbrian knight who was constable of Norham Castle and who was made Warden of the East Marches in October 1367. Captured by the Scots in 1355 and imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle, Gray wrote an Anglo-Norman chronicle

in which much of the material from his own time captures the lived experiences of those such as himself. In the section of his chronicle which deals with the reign of Edward III, Gray's own attitudes to the English king's Scottish policies intimate an identity that is specifically associated with the Marches and concerned with Anglo-Scottish relations. While the southern English might see the northern region of the kingdom as on the periphery, for Gray the Marches are central to his thinking about identity. This leads him increasingly to critique the English approach to the Scottish 'problem', not least when Edward III's attention is diverted to Anglo-French relations in the 1340s. While the Treaty of Northampton (1328) had supposedly settled the Scottish War, Marcher hostility was quickly renewed and Gray recounts how the Marches are continually left to defend themselves and the English garrisons in the north while Edward pursues his continental interests. While Edward was camped at Antwerp 'leading a high life', Gray laments that the 'English Marchers were defeated at Pressen' (*Scal.* 127) and while Edward was engaged at the siege of Tourney in 1340, the 'Scottish earls of March and Sutherland came to take plunder in the Marches'.[6] The March might have been an independent region with its own laws and customs, but for Gray the English Marchers had been instrumental in safeguarding England's northern border. It was, therefore, the duty of the English king to protect them. Gray's ambivalence about the border, his treatment of it as a space with both negative and positive potential, is tinged with anxieties of abandonment and isolation.

Regular, though not always peaceful, contact between the two sides of the Border was established in the fourteenth century through March Days, when members of the Marcher gentry met to settle cross-border disputes. One such account shows how fragile the peace was at the border in the later Middle Ages. In the *Scotichronicon*, Bower narrates that a fourteen-year truce was arranged in August 1369, which stated that 'certain days were laid down for the return of goods stolen on both sides'.[7] This administration of Border law was the responsibility of the wardens of the Marches, such as Gray. However, before the end of the truce, the earl of March's chamberlain was killed by the English at Roxburgh fair, the town being under English administration at this point. In response to the English refusal to punish or hand over the culprits, the earl of March surrounded Roxburgh in August 1377 and then 'entered the town unexpectedly with murderous swords, and killed all the English men from highest

to lowest'. The repercussions were significant according to the chronicler:

> *From then the truce was broken, and in every part of the Borders killings, robberies, plunderings, burnings and arrests took place, going beyond any kind of restoration or respite, for the [quarrelling] Borderers were so bitterly inflamed with anger that one side did not allow even one day to pass without harming their opponents.*[8]

Accounts such as these point to the complex nature of identity at the border where, for as much as there might have been a shared language, law and custom, the sense of a shared identity different to that of English or Scot was true perhaps primarily in the sense of a shared culture of violence.

As the fifteenth century gave way to the sixteenth, the Borders saw the rise of the Border Reivers, raiding the border region with little regard for the 'nationality' or allegiances of those they affected. In turn these have been immortalised (and, one might argue, romanticised) by writers such as Sir Walter Scott and TV series such as *The Borderers* (1968–70). In many ways, through the cultural productions of the last seven hundred years, the Anglo-Scottish border has become performative, almost ritualised in events such as the common ridings in towns such as Hawick. What are the moments of collision and rupture in the Marcher identity versus the English or the Scottish identity, if those can even be determined at this point in time? At what point – and in what contexts – is the Anglo-Scottish border both necessary and redundant? In 2014, the Scottish Borders overwhelmingly rejected Scottish independence in the referendum vote; a fact of economics, most likely, but perhaps an indication of this area's feeling of difference from the rest of Scotland too. In similar fashion, as political events increasingly take on a south-east focus, the (half) joking suggestion that the border might be shifted south at least to Hadrian's Wall (if not as far as Sheffield) indicates that many in the north of England feel similarly dissociated from Westminster politics and more aligned with the outlook of their northern neighbours.[9]

The question of what the border signifies now is no more (or less) complicated than what it signified then. Aside from a sign at the side of the road, a tourist trail in the making, or a continued insistence on riding the boundaries in the border towns, the Anglo-Scottish Border creates – and is created by – psychological, cultural and ideological perimeters that are powerful and affect deeply the lives of

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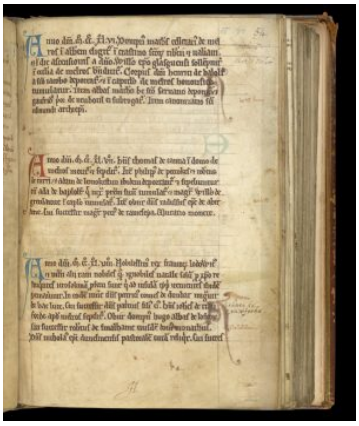

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(c) The Bottle Imp