Notional Boundaries

By The Unreliable Narrator

The Border Reivers [source: Historic UK]

Should you ever find yourself roaming through woodland somewhere between the Rivers Sark and Esk, you might stumble across a long, linear, rather unassuming earthwork. You would be forgiven for carrying on your merry way without so much as a glance down at the unremarkable ditch-flanked bank, but stop! Haste ye back and look upon Scots' Dike, the national boundary between Scotland and England – the only physical marker to signify where each country stops and begins. It was here, almost five hundred years ago, that the two nations finally answered the rallying call to *build that big, beautiful border*.

Well… not quite. Prior to the construction of Scots' Dike in the sixteenth century, its surrounding areas were known as the Debatable Lands: bloody and lawless, where cattle rustling, arson and pillage were all in a day's work and where, as it was infamously decreed, 'All Englishmen and Scottishmen are and shall be free to rob, burn, spoil, slay, murder and destroy'. As the Debatable moniker implies, neither England nor Scotland wanted to take responsibility for the tiny territory nestled between the two countries, pock-marked as it was by blackmail and bloodshed; the Anglo-Scottish border was eventually drawn up by a Frenchman.

Now, half a millennium later, Scots' Dike survives only in traces as if to remind us that borders are not imperishable barricades but elusive, fluid, liminal spaces.

Conceptual or physical, borders exist as the in-between, thresholds that belong to both and neither side they straddle but, in doing so, prove rather fertile ground…

Of course, the brouhaha of the Debatable Lands is unrecognisable in the Borders we know today: the ballad heartlands where fairies dip and dive between realms and beckon us to the Otherworld, the wooded valleys and open moors home to spies and corbies, where fields gang doun and level out along the glimmering Tweed, the watery muse of many a Border poet. But as with any boundary crossing, to move through time and feast your eyes on this rich region and its literature shape-shifting through the centuries is to recognise that things are not always as they first appear – that it is easy to get lost in the landscape.

Which brings us almost *too* neatly onto this Borders special of *The Bottle Imp*. Buckle in and go a-roaming with an ensemble of Adventure Men in 'Lost in the Landscape: From Balfour to Bond', guided by Kirsti Wishart who traces their imperialist conquering of unfamiliar lands back to John Buchan's Richard Hannay. Kate Ash-Irisarri shifts through temporal borders in '"England and Scotland here impartially divide": Contentions at the Anglo-Scottish border', traversing the centuries to explore the influence of the national boundary on cultural and literary identity. Keeping it local in 'D & G Literature', Hugh McMillan probes the relationship between the poetry and marketing of Dumfries & Galloway, while Julia Ditter explores the fruitful territory of Scottish literature through the lenses of border theory and eco-criticism in 'Reading Scotland's Borders through the Environment'. Ending our border crossings with an introduction to a neglected son of Scotland's south is Ian W. Landles with his article 'William H. Ogilvie: From Outback to Border poet'.

Beyond the Borders – though not too far – and Upon Another Point is the late Dorothy McMillan's article 'Rural Realism', which focuses on Ayrshire lad George Douglas Brown and his landmark novel *The House with the Green Shutters.* First given at the 2006 Wigtown Book Festival, this lecture was kindly reproduced by Dorothy especially for *The Bottle Imp*. As always, we have a bundle of book reviews, too.

Shake loose the Border!

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