

Introduction

When I was eleven or twelve years old, I was taken on a school trip to Hadrian's Wall. It was a long, tedious drive to Northumberland from north Staffordshire. We visited Housesteads, one of the best-preserved forts on the line of the wall (which was built in the AD 120s, spanning England's waist between the Solway Firth and the Tyne). There was a light drizzle. It was very cold. I have no sense now of having been moved by, or even particularly interested in, the low, rubble remains. All I can remember clearly from that trip are the well-preserved toilets, precisely the detail that a twelve-year-old would pick out: a line of stone ledges above a drain, with an English Heritage signboard showing a row of Roman squaddies relieving themselves. After looking at them, we got back into the coach and drove south again.

This was emphatically not one of the formative experiences that ignited in me an unquenchable fascination with the classical world. That such a thing did happen, I put down to two, entirely different, childhood events: a family holiday to Crete and the ancient palace of Knossos, where I got caught up in the mystery of labyrinths, princesses, minotaurs and magicians; and reading a 1950s book of stories from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* belonging to one of my elder brothers, the beautiful pictures in which, even more than the text, conjured fantastic visions of gods and goddesses, heroes and monsters. As time went by, the tone was set by these early encounters, fuelled by an inspiring teacher who drummed into me, slowly and painfully, the rudiments of Latin and Greek. Little by little I opened a portal on to a world of poems and stories: the thrilling ambiguities of Virgil, the passions of Catullus and Sappho, the Wildean wit of Ovid. And later, the humane expanses of Herodotus; the spiked cynicism of Tacitus.

I studied classics at university, then became a journalist. In my

thirties I wrote books about Latin love poetry and Greek literature, but I still wasn't very interested in Roman Britain, except by way of an abiding love of Rosemary Sutcliff's classic children's story *The Eagle of the Ninth*, in which the young centurion Marcus Aquila ventures to the badlands north of Hadrian's Wall. Roman Britain still struck me as an unglamorous outpost on the fringes of empire, lacking any really 'good' remains to compare with those of Rome, or Africa, or even France. Nor did it seem to have produced any really interesting Romans: Spain had its Martial, Syria its Lucian, Africa its Terence, but there is no record of any literary genius sprung from Roman Britain, nor any British-born emperor, nor even a single British senator.

Something happened, though, when I visited Hadrian's Wall for the second time, in 2008. Here was Housesteads again, but I began to see how it stood in its landscape, the wall marching away on the edge of a spectacular volcanic ridge. Inside the little museum attached to the fort I saw stone carvings of curious deities, not at all part of the Olympian canon: the trio of Celtic goddesses known as the Matres, 'mothers', with fruit and bread in their laps; and a sculpture of three enigmatic cloaked figures, the Genii Cucullati, the 'hooded deities'. Housesteads also had a Mithraeum – a temple devoted to the cult of Mithras, with its perfume of Persian mysticism. Roman soldiers sprung from Germany and the Low Countries had worshipped these strange gods. This was not the Rome I thought I knew.



There were other things that caught my attention: in the guidebook was a reproduction of a drawing of the fort by the antiquary William Stukeley, dating from 1725. He showed the fields below the fort strewn with Roman gravestones and altars – not tidied away into a museum collection, just lying exposed to the weather. There was material about John Clayton, the wealthy antiquary and Newcastle upon Tyne town clerk who had bought the fort in the mid nineteenth century; and there were photographs of it being restored – or rather, from the look of it, rebuilt. It seemed to me that there were some interesting questions about how these remains had been thought about in the past, before they ended up as a neat English Heritage site.

And so I set out to discover Roman Britain in earnest, a copy of Roger Wilson's superb *A Guide to the Roman Remains in Britain* in my hand – a work, inexplicably out of print, that is the nearest equivalent, for enthusiasts of Roman Britain, to Pevsner's architectural guides. In 2009 I went to Hadrian's Wall again, walking along it from Carlisle to Newcastle. Over the next two summers, my boyfriend Matthew and I travelled in search of Roman remains in his delightful, though not particularly trusty, 1974 VW camper van, taking two journeys – a western route, from London to the Cotswolds to Wales and north to Cumbria; and an eastern one, from Edinburgh through Yorkshire and Lincolnshire to Norfolk. On the second trip, the van lasted only until York before collapsing from one of its many and varied complaints.



One July I walked along the Antonine Wall – the barrier built in the AD 140s from the Firth of Forth to the Firth of Clyde, which, briefly, marked the northernmost frontier of the empire. There were also many short forays, day trips and detours to see Roman remains, in which I would entice patient friends and members of my family to visit forts, or bath houses, or museums. One May morning I even dragged a bewildered string quintet to inspect a battered, illegible Roman inscription in a Cornish church.

This book is very far from a comprehensive account of Britain's Roman remains. Instead, I wanted to see what I could learn from an encounter with them. Not to discover what being in Roman Britain was like – for I was convinced of the irrecoverability of the lives of people from the deep past, except as manifestations of the historical imaginations of those who described them. Rather, I wanted to think about what this period means, and has meant, to a British sense of history and identity. I wanted to discover the ways in which the idea of Roman Britain has resonated in British culture and still forms part of the texture of its landscape – not just through the sublime contours of the Northumberland hills, but in humbler urban and suburban tracts of territory.

My search brought me into the company of many fascinating minds from the past, from the great sixteenth-century humanist William Camden, author of *Britannia*, a masterly topographical and antiquarian survey of Britain, to the shadowy figure of Charles Bertram, who fooled luminaries such as Stukeley with one of British historiography's most successful hoaxes. Through all this, it became clear how richly generative Roman Britain had been, how productive artistically and intellectually for those who had encountered it. There were stories by Thomas Hardy, poems by W. H. Auden and Wilfred Owen, music by Britten and Elgar, Joseph Conrad's black musings on the Romans in Britain in *Heart of Darkness*, Howard Brenton's even blacker play *The Romans in Britain*. Ideas about Roman Britain had been manipulated and metamorphosed into architecture, into song. It had changed people.

Troubling questions crowded in. How do we relate to Roman Britain now? How did this great span of time – the equivalent of the interval between Shakespeare's lifetime and our own – affect Britain's later history? Did the Romans in Britain mark the arrival of civilisation and

a sophisticated culture, or was it rather about violence visited on a host population by an exploitative imperial power? Is 'Roman Britain' essentially a kind of historical throat-clearing, before the real substance of 'our island story' sets in with the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons? Different eras and different people adumbrated, I discovered, very different answers to these questions; and there is an urgency in the way people are tackling them now. The study of Roman Britain is today intensely political, coloured by contemporary concerns about modern imperialism and warfare. On the other hand, with its cosmopolitan, Mediterranean-facing outlook, Roman Britain is also being claimed in some quarters as a kind of foundation myth for modern multiculturalism.

What makes Roman Britain, to me, such a rich place is that it was literate. People in Britain – certainly not a vast proportion of the population, but clearly plenty of them – read poems, and wrote letters, and recorded on stone their devotion to their gods, and their loved ones' deaths. Because of the splendid preservative powers of the damp British sod, hundreds of letters, documents and memoranda written by perfectly ordinary Romans survive. We are lucky in our literary sources on Roman Britain: we have a first-hand account of two military expeditions by its would-be conqueror, Julius Caesar; and a biography of one of its most significant governors, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, written by his son-in-law Tacitus, perhaps the greatest of Roman historians. The writers of the classical world were the first to give Britain a literary existence. After the end of the empire in Britain, it would have no significant life in writing again until Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, over 300 years later. The Romans – for whom Britain was frequently a poetic metaphor for insular isolation and exciting, dangerous primitivism – transformed Britain into an idea: an idea that may not have reflected the reality of life there, but that was remarkably pervasive.

Some make the argument that the classical texts about Britain are severely limited in value, giving us only the conquerors' view. That, of course, is true: no words written by Britons remain to tell us how they perceived themselves, or their place in the world, or their relationship with the invaders. The story must be completed by the evidence on the ground, the detritus of life, the objects that remain. These shards of life cannot lie in themselves, though in their

interpretations of objects and places, archaeologists are indelibly marked by the prejudices of their own times, just as are historians.

The history of Roman Britain is, like one of its shattered mosaics, reconstructed from its pieces by each successive generation; each generation makes a slightly different pattern from the fragments. 'Britain' was an idea for the Romans. For us, 'Roman Britain' is also an idea, as well as a time and a place. Because it has always been, from the first classical accounts, so slippery, open to so many contradictory interpretations, 'Roman Britain' has become an imaginative space in which some of our darkest anxieties and fantasies have been rehearsed. Fifteen centuries on, it is printed on our landscape, physical and imaginative. As Elizabeth Bowen wrote of Rome: 'What has accumulated in this place acts on everyone, day and night, like an extra climate.'