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978-1-108-08064-4 - The Roman Wall: A Historical, Topographical, and Descriptive Account of the Barrier of the Lower Isthmus, Extending from the Tyne to the Solway, Deduced from Numerous Personal Surveys

John Collingwood Bruce

Excerpt

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The Roman Barrier of the Lower Isthmus.

PART I.

AN EPITOME OF THE HISTORY OF ROMAN OCCUPATION IN
BRITAIN.



No country of the world are there such evident traces of the march of Roman legions as in Britain. In the northern parts of England especially, the footprints of the Empire are very distinct. Northumberland, as Wallis long ago remarked, is Roman ground. Every other monument in Britain yields in importance to THE WALL. As this work, in grandeur of conception, is worthy of the Mistress of Nations, so, in durability of structure, is it the becoming offspring of the Eternal City.

A dead wall may seem to most a very unpromising subject. The stones are indeed inanimate, but he who has a head to think, and a heart

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2 EARLIEST NOTICES OF THE BRITISH ISLES.

to feel, will find them suggestive of bright ideas and melting sympathies; though dead themselves, they will be the cause of mental life in him. A large part of the knowledge which we possess of the early history of our country has been dug out of the ground. The spade and the plough of the rustic have often exposed documents, which have revealed the movements, as well as the modes of thought and feeling, of those who have slept in the dust for centuries. The casual wanderer by the relics of the Vallum and the Wall, may not succeed in culling facts that are new to the Historian, but he will probably get those vivid glances into Roman character, and acquire that personal interest in Roman story, which will give to the prosaic records of chroniclers, a reality, and a charm, which they did not before possess.

As a natural introduction to the subject, and as a means of preparing for some discussions which are to follow, it may be well briefly to trace the progress of the Roman arms in Britain, from the arrival of Cæsar on our shores, to the eventual abandonment of the island.

It is curious to observe, that the curtain of British history is raised by some of the earliest and greatest of profane writers. Herodotus, who wrote about the year B.C. 450, mentions the “Cassiterides, from which tin is procured”; Aristotle, about the year B.C. 340, expressly names the islands of Albion and Ierne; and Polybius, about the year B.C. 160, makes a distinct reference to the “Britannic Isles.” To Julius Cæsar, however, we are indebt-

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THE INVASION OF CÆSAR.

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ed, for the first detailed account of Britain and its inhabitants. On 26 Aug. B. C. 55, that renowned conqueror landed in Britain, with a force of about ten thousand men. Both on that occasion, and on a second attempt, which, with a larger force, he made the year following, he met with a warm reception from the savage islanders. Tides and tempests seconded the efforts of the natives, and great Julius bade Britain a final farewell, without erecting any fortress in it, or leaving any troops to secure his conquest. Tacitus says, that he did not conquer Britain, but only shewed it to the Romans. Horace, calling upon Augustus to achieve the conquest, denominates it ‘untouched’—

Intactus aut Britannus ut descenderet
Sacra catenatus via.

and Propertius, in the same spirit, describes it as ‘unconquered,’ *invictus*. There is, therefore, little exaggeration in the lines of Shakspeare—

. A kind of conquest
Cæsar made here ; but made not here his brag
Of, came, and saw, and overcame : with shame
(The first that ever touched him) he was carried
From off our coast, twice beaten ; and his shipping
(Poor ignorant baubles !) on our terrible seas,
Like egg-shells moved upon their surges, cracked
As easily ’gainst our rocks.

During the reigns of Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula, Britain was unmolested by foreign invasion.

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4 PLAUTIUS AND CLAUDIUS VISIT BRITAIN.

At the invitation of a discontented Briton, Claudius resolved to attempt the reduction of the island. In the year of our Lord 43, he sent Aulus Plautius, with four legions and their auxiliaries, amounting in all to about fifty thousand men, into Britain. It was with difficulty that the troops could be induced to engage in the undertaking. They were unwilling, as Dion Cassius informs us, “to engage in a war, as it were, *out of the world*.” The fears of the soldiery were not without foundation. The Britons, though their inferiors in discipline and arms, were not behind them in valour and spirit, whilst, in a knowledge of the country they had an important advantage.

The year following, Claudius personally engaged in the war. He advanced into the country, as far as Camelodunum (Colchester), and after some sanguinary contests, received the submission of the natives in that vicinity. The estimation in which Britain, even at this time, was held, was such, that the Senate, on learning what he had achieved, surnamed him **BRITANNICUS**, granted him a triumph, and voted him annual games. The event was of sufficient importance, to be celebrated on the current coin of the day. Several gold and silver pieces have come down to our times, bearing on the reverse, a triumphal arch, on which is inscribed the words **DE BRITANNIS** — Over the Britons. This is the first occasion on which allusion is made to Britain, on the coinage of Rome.



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ITS PARTIAL SUBJUGATION. BOADICEA. 5

On the return of Claudius, the supreme command again devolved upon his lieutenant, Aulus Plautius, who succeeded in bringing into complete subjection, the tribes occupying the southern portion of the island. In this expedition, Vespasian, afterwards emperor, acted as second in command to Plautius. Titus, the son of Vespasian, accompanied his father. Thus was it, in Britain, that the destroyers of Jerusalem were unconsciously trained for inflicting upon God's chosen, but sinful people, the chastisements of His displeasure.

Ostorius Scapula, A.D. 50, succeeded to the command in Britain. The brave Silures, headed by Caractacus, rendered his progress slow and bloody. Ostorius at length sank under the harassing nature of his duties.

In the reign of Nero, Roman affairs in Britain received a severe check. The Iceni, led on by their enraged queen Boadicea, threw off the yoke and attacked the principal stations of the enemy. London, which was then an important commercial city, fell, upon the first assault, and Verulam (near the modern St. Albans) shared the same fate. The British warrior-queen sullied the splendour of her exploits by her cruelty; seventy thousand Romans, or adherents of the government of Rome, fell under her hands. Suetonius, the Roman governor, collecting his forces, gave battle to the queen and routed her. A frightful carnage ensued; of the amazing number of two hundred and thirty thousand men of which the British forces are said to have consisted, not less than eighty thousand fell.

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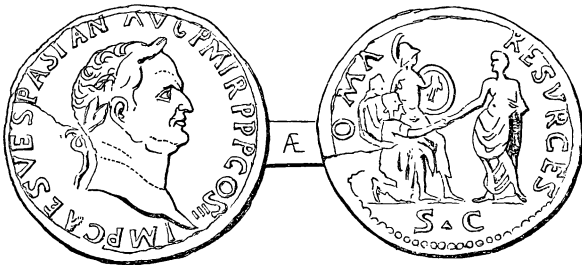
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VESPASIAN ASSUMES THE PURPLE.

During the remainder of the reign of Nero, and the short rule of his three successors, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, no advance was made in the conquest of Britain. In the strifes of the rival emperors, it was however destined to bear its part. Eight thousand soldiers were drafted from it to fight under the banners of Vitellius. Thus early, as Dr. Giles well observes, was this island, whose position in the bosom of the ocean indicates a peaceful policy, induced to bear the brunt of continental quarrels.

When Vespasian assumed the purple, a new era dawned upon the empire. This fact is well indicated upon a coin struck at this period. In the engrav-



ing, taken from a specimen found on the Wall, the emperor is observed raising a prostrate female from the ground (doubtless Rome), whilst Mars looks approvingly on; the inspiring motto "*ROMA RESVRGET*"—*Rome thou shalt rise again*,—encircles the group.^(a) Vespasian appointed Petilius Cerealis his proprætor in Britain, who in five years succeeded

^(a)This coin is in the possession of Mr. Bell, of the Nook, Irthington, to whose cabinet of coins, chiefly procured from the line of the wall, the author has kindly been allowed free access.

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HIS PROPRAETORS SUBJUGATE THE ISLAND. 7

in adding the Brigantes, a powerful tribe, to the subjects of the empire. Julius Frontinus was his successor, who, in the three years of his government, nearly subdued the warlike nation of the Silures.

One hundred and thirty-three years had now elapsed since the first descent of Cæsar, and thirty-five years, since Claudius had claimed the honour of conquering Britain, and yet but a fraction of the island was in subjection to Roman power. Nothing, as Dr. Giles well remarks, can more strongly shew the stubborn spirit of the natives, than their protracted resistance to the invaders. Battle after battle had been lost; but many of these tribes were still unsubdued, and several even undiscovered.

But the reputation of all preceding governors, was obscured by a greater man than they. Cnæus Julius Agricola had served in Britain under some preceding commanders; so that when he landed as governor in the year 78 he was prepared to act with all the promptitude which a knowledge of the country and the people could give him. During the eight years of his rule, he subjugated the remaining tribes of southern Britain, carried his arms into the northern section of the island, and drove, in successive campaigns, the natives before him, until at length, in the battle of the Grampians, he paralyzed their strength for a while. He circumnavigated the whole island, and planted the Roman standard upon the Orkneys. He built walls and fortresses in all places where they were required, and softened the fierceness of the barbarians, by fostering a taste for letters

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and the luxuries of the Eternal City. But it is necessary to trace the movements of Agricola, with some of the detail with which they are given in the pages of Tacitus.

The summer of A.D. 78 was far spent when he arrived ; yet before going into winter quarters, he attacked and subdued the Ordovices, and brought the sacred isle of Anglesea a second time to obedience. The respite from arms which the following winter afforded, was employed by the general in the most useful and necessary purposes. Being well acquainted with the temper of the inhabitants of the province, and having learnt from the conduct and experience of others, that what is gained by force avails little, where oppressions and grievances follow, he determined to put an immediate end to all the causes of the war. He began by checking and regulating the affairs of his own household, correcting the abuses that had crept into the army, promoting impartially those who deserved it ; while at the same time he redressed the grievances of the inhabitants, made an equitable distribution of the public burthens, and abolished all hurtful monopolies. By the prosecution of measures so salutary as these, six months had scarcely elapsed, when affairs in Britain were entirely changed, and assumed a bright and settled aspect.

His second campaign, that of the year 79, was probably occupied in subduing the ancient tenants of the LOWER ISTHMUS of the island.

On the approach of summer, he re-assembled his army, and in advancing, failed not to excite a proper spirit of emulation among the troops, praising those who best observed their several duties, and checking such as were remiss. He himself chose the ground for encamping ; the marshes, friths, and difficult places, he always examined first ; and, allowing the enemy no respite, he continually harassed them with sudden

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THE OPERATIONS OF AGRICOLA.

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incursions and ravages. Having alarmed and terrified them sufficiently, he next tried the effect of good usage and the allurements of peace. By this wise and prudent conduct, several communities, which till then had maintained their independence, submitted to the Romans, gave hostages, and suffered garrisons and fortresses to be placed among them. These strongholds he established with such judgment, as effectually secured all those parts of Britain which had then been visited by the Romans.

The following winter was employed in civilizing and polishing the rude inhabitants, who, living wild and dispersed over the country, were thence ever restless and easily instigated to war. At first, they were prevailed upon to associate more together, and for this end were instructed in the art of building houses, temples, and places of public resort. The sons of their chiefs were taught the liberal sciences; hence it was no unusual thing to see those who lately scorned the Roman language, become admirers of its eloquence. By degrees, the customs, manners, and dress of their conquerors, became familiar to them, they acquired a taste for a life of inactivity and ease, and at length were caught by the charms and incitements of luxury and vice. By such as judged of things from their external appearance only, all this was styled politeness and humanity, while, in reality, Agricola was effectually enslaving them, and imperceptibly rivetting their chains.

During the third year of his command, he pushed his conquests northwards, and carried his devastations as far as the mouth of the Tay (*Taus.*) Here, the enemy were struck with so much terror, that they durst not attack the Roman army, though it was greatly distressed by the severities of the climate. Agricola, in order to secure possession of these advanced conquests, again erected forts in the most commodious situations; and so judiciously was this done, that none of them were ever taken by force, abandoned through fear, or given up on terms of capitulation. Each fort defended itself, and, against any long siege, was constantly supplied with provisions for a year. Thus the seve-

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AGRICOLA IS RECALLED.

ral garrisons not only passed the winter in perfect security, but were likewise enabled, from these strongholds, to make frequent excursions against the enemy, who could not, as heretofore, repair the losses they had sustained in summer, by the successes usually attending their winter expeditions.

The forts here referred to, are probably those, which were drawn along the UPPER ISTHMUS of the island, extending from the Firth of Forth to the Firth of Clyde, and which were afterwards connected by the wall of Antoninus Pius.

This is rendered apparent from what follows :—

Agricola employed the fourth summer (A.D. 81) in settling and further securing the country he had subdued. Here, had it been compatible with the bravery of the army, or if the glory of the Roman name would have permitted it, there had been found a boundary to their conquests in Britain; for the tide entering from opposite seas, and flowing far into the country by the rivers Glotta and Bodotria, their heads are only separated by a narrow neck of land, which was occupied by garrisons. Of all on this side, the Romans were already masters, the enemy being driven, as it were, into another island.

It is not necessary to pursue the operations of Agricola further. In the seventh summer he defeated Galgacus on the flanks of the Grampians. The Roman power was now at its height. Agricola, probably from motives of jealousy, was recalled by the emperor Domitian, and as his successors were not men of the same vigour as himself, the barbarians were in a condition, at least to dispute the pretensions of their conquerors.