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What Made the Borders?

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Three distinguished academic historians from different disciplines discussed the evolution of the Scottish Borders, through an examination of archaeological remains from the Roman period, and historical documentary evidence relating to the landscape, the local and national politics and governance of the region.

At the end of the 6th Century, estimates suggest that the Justinian Plague killed 50–60% of the British population, on a par with the Black Death of the 14th Century. In the Border region this caused a collapse in population in what, during the Roman and pre-Roman era, had been a relatively densely populated area. The region became thinly populated and large parts of the central Borders reverted to woodland and scrubland. In early 7th Century the population started to increase once more with the Northumbrians, a hybrid people of Anglo Saxon and Brittonic origin, settling in the river valleys. Northumbria, at this time, now covered a huge area extending from the Humber to the Firth of Forth and across to central Ayrshire and the Border region that we recognise today was located centrally in this kingdom. Professor Oram commented, “this area was in no way a peripheral territory, so, how did it become a border”?

Ninth Century Viking attacks hastened the disintegration of the kingdom although they ultimately brought new trade-based prosperity to the York area. Over the following decades, invasions by the Scots, seeking to gain control of the good quality arable and grazing land, continued to reduce the extent of what remained of Northumbria. The Battle of Carham in 1018 finally resulted in the rump of the kingdom being split in to two with the north of the region being placed under the lordship of the King of Scots. Professor Oram noted that for many years this area was regarded as part of England that lay in the kingdom of the Scots. Chroniclers talked of going ‘out of Scotland into Lothian in England’. In the early 1100s, the Principality of Cumbria, which comprised the river valleys of the Clyde, Tweed and Teviot, was given to the youngest member of the Scottish royal family as his appanage. There he learned how to rule, lessons which he put into effect in his later role as King David I of Scotland. David was determined to revolutionise the region by modernising the church, bringing in new government systems and encouraging people to move to the area, bringing with them new ideas, energy and enthusiasm. Professor Oram comments that David’s reign in Cumbria also coincided with a period of improved climate in the region, allowing the growing of crops at higher altitudes and thus encouraging people to move into upland areas. As such, when David became King of Scots in 1124 he already had control of a core territory in the south. His ambitions, however, were wider and through his marriage to Matilda de Senlis, English heiress to Northumbria, he was determined to recover her heritage in Northumberland, Lancashire, the Lake District and Yorkshire. His ambitions were nearly realised. However, in 1149, he failed to take York under his control and withdrew. Professor Oram stated that, “there is a tendency to dismiss these events
as irrelevant but this was the only stable area of the British Isles at the time. David provided stability through strong kingship with a powerful base in Roxburgh”.

The Border Abbeys, built during and representing the transformation of the Border region, are a lasting reminder of David’s achievements and evidence of improved land management, and agricultural techniques are also still to be found in the current Borders landscape. However, this period of relative affluence, development and stability was not destined to last as, following David’s death in 1153, his Empire rapidly fell apart. With his son, Henry, Earl of Northumberland, predeceasing him, David’s twelve-year-old grandson, Malcolm IV, ascended the Scottish throne. Malcolm’s counterpart in England, King Henry II had previously largely accepted David’s ownership of the Earldom of Northumbria, however, he soon reneged on this deal and persuaded Malcolm IV to give up the territory. Malcolm’s younger brother, William, had been promised this territory as his inheritance and these actions left him disinherit. Following the early death of Malcolm, William, as King of Scots, sought to regain the lost territory in the north of England but his attempts were ill fated, leading to his capture at Alnwick. In order to secure his release and regain his Kingdom of Scotland from Henry II, William was forced to rescind his claim to Northumbria and acknowledge Henry as his superior. Professor Oram commented that, “in the later 12th Century, Henry II started to develop English royal authority in the region [between Tyne and Tweed] and people began to see themselves as English rather than Northumbrians. It was at this time that one also began to see a hardening of attitudes towards identity and the development of a ‘line’ that one would recognise today as the border between England and Scotland”.

The 13th Century was, despite some incidents of tension in determining where exactly the border should lie, largely a period of stability for the Border region. Indeed, it was during this time that the region experienced real economic development and affluence. The Borders, with its quality grasslands and sheep farming, were in an ideal position to supply the huge international demand for wool, needed to clothe increasing populations. Roxburgh and Berwick became major market and export centres, driving the economy of Scotland. Unfortunately, the latter half of the 13th Century experienced a downturn in climatic conditions resulting in harvest failures and the shortening of the growing season, impacting upon the number of animals that could be grazed. Wetter weather also resulted in sheep diseases infecting the national flock and spoiling the wool, making it unsellable. Furthermore, the authorities, in an attempt to stop the spread of this disease, ordered entire flocks to be killed and restricted the movement of livestock. This significant downturn in the wool industry ended the economic boom before the end of the 13th Century.

During the 13th Century, the Borders was the most important region of the Scottish realm. Christian people speaking the same language, sharing interests, saints and cults co-existed either side of the border, forming part of the great economic zone that centred on Roxburgh. Landownership in the region often involved cross border holdings and the incorporation of lordships along the border in wider collections of territories. The death of Alexander III at the end of the century, however, signalled the start of a new world order and a period of dynastic struggle which eventually broadened out into war between Scotland and England. These struggles had long-term effects including the displacement of the Scottish royal government from the Tweed, the breaking of cross border landholding and the rise of border Lordships in both the south of Scotland and north of England, chiefly the Douglas family and the Percy Earls of Northumberland. Furthermore, the Scottish nobility also became a smaller, more coherent group with fewer family ties across the British Isles. The English and Scots realms of the 14th Century were regarded by each other and outsiders as natural political enemies and this culture of animosity was further promoted through literary works. Dr Boardman considers that, a new form of Border
society developed within this environment; narratives and documents produced in other parts of the kingdom, increasingly identified the Borders as a region that whilst still Scottish, was distinctive. The Douglas Earls came to dominate much of the area formerly regarded as part of royal heartland. They imposed their Lordship across much of the Borders through military intimidation and presented themselves to others as the foremost defenders of Scotland, taking over this role from the Scottish Kings. Border warfare became the domain of the Douglasses with the family representing the war wall of Scotland. The family also promoted themselves as custodians of Robert the Bruce’s legacy, defenders of his heart and the best knights in the realm. The Douglas Earls were also literary and architectural patrons on a scale that rivalled and surpassed the royal house in the late 14th Century, being involved in the production of Barbour’s Bruce and Thomas Barry’s Otterburn poem and building significant fortifications including Tantallon Castle, Threave Castle and Sweetheart Abbey. The resource, ambition and conceit of the Douglas family, however, were problematic for the Scottish Crown who wanted to expand their power in the region. The Douglasses, whilst not disloyal to the Crown, occupied a space in the Scottish realm that the King considered important to his ambitions. Indeed, the authority of the Douglas family did not resonate well with King James II, with existing elements of contention culminating in James killing William, 8th Earl of Douglas during dinner at Stirling Castle in 1452. Following this significant event, relations between the Crown and the Douglasses became further strained and the royal establishment mobilised to move the family out of the political scene. Following the demise of the Douglas family in 1455, the Borders region began to experience a different form of government. The Douglasses, however, had been integral in creating the character of the Border region in this period.

Professor Brown commented that the removal of the Douglas family transformed the nature of Border society and politics and also how the Borders connected to the rest of the Scottish kingdom. “The Scottish Borders represented the gateway to the kingdom and compared to England which, in the north, had a centre of government 300 miles away, the Scottish Marches were less than 50 miles from the centre of government and monarchy in Scotland. For all its characteristics as a border, the region could never be peripheral to interest of Scottish Kings”. In territorial terms, the fall of the Douglasses achieved the reinstatement of the Crown as the major landowner in the south and returned the region to the status of royal heartland. By 1455, lands previously held by the Border Earls were royal property with representatives of the Crown installed as the Lords of Galloway, Annandale, Ettrick and Selkirk Forest and Lauderdale. Whilst this was a return to the earlier model of landownership, the region remained a military frontier with no reversion to the largely peaceful relations of the 12th and 13th centuries. James II was determined to make the Crown responsible for the defence of the border and as such, took over the leadership of the sporadic war against England in 15th Century. A series of Statutes enacted in parliament in 1455 ordered patrols between Roxburgh and Berwick and beacons to be prepared as a defence warning system alerting the authorities should the English approach across the river. Further laws were also enacted relating to the discipline, leadership and behaviour of the Borderers and the defence of the Marches, covering aspects including what they were required to do in times of conflict, when they were required to muster, when they should abide by the command of the King’s representatives and what they should do with captives. Contrastingly, seven years previously, the 8th Earl of Douglas had met with the Border elders to discuss similar aspects of governance that had become matters of self-regulation. James II, rather than consulting the local community through its leaders, imposed the new laws from a central position of power. James II actively sought war with England and in the late 1450s waged a more intensive series of campaigns, regularly leading armies against the English held parts of southern Scotland. Following James II’s death as the result of an exploding canon in 1460, Berwick was surrendered to the Scots in 1461 and the Scottish Government
recovered the last remaining English held parts of the Scottish Borders. James III recognised that such a sensitive frontier required permanent management and facing war against the English in 1482, ordered a string of garrisons held by small forces to be maintained in the Borders as a national defence against invasion.

The 15th Century Kings relied on March wardens, special official representatives that provided local military leadership. The March warden was also responsible for dealing with issues of cross border crime and maintaining periods of truce, thus also occupying a judicial and peacekeeping role across the border. In earlier decades the role of the March warden had been the hereditary right of members of the Douglas and Dunbar families. Unsurprisingly, James II had not considered this acceptable and passed a law reversing this. The late 15th Century Kings often selected the March wardens from central areas of power; people they knew and trusted with very few connections to the Border region. Professor Brown suggested, however, that the image of the Borders coming under total royal control in terms of justice and defence is misleading. “The removal of the Douglases did not mean the end of the great Border magnates”. James II endowed his second son Alexander, Duke of Albany with lands in the Borders, making him Lord of Annandale and Earl of March. Furthermore, although the Black Douglas branch of the family had been removed, the Red Douglases remained, holding Tantallon and Hermitage Castles and in the position of Lords of Jedburgh Forest. The King was not able to simply insert himself as a replacement for the Douglas family; he was forced to work with the Douglas legend and did this through the leader of the Red Douglases, George, Earl of Angus who created alliances between the King and former supporters of the exiled Black Douglases. Relations, however, were often uncomfortable.

Professor Brown considered that “perhaps the most important consequence of the fall of the Douglas family in terms of Border society was the emergence and rise of a group of lesser noble families who had deep roots in the Borders”; for example the Humes, Kerrs, Rutherfords, Turnbulls, Pringles, Scotts, Maxwells and Johnstones; all families that flourished and emerged to dominate Border society in the later 15th and 16th centuries. The removal of the Douglas family allowed them to develop from minor tenants of great magnates to tenants of the Crown, often given Baronial rights. They signalled their new status through the building of tower houses, representing their strength and status in local society. Most importantly these Borderers were the representatives of their extended families, often standing surety and acting as guarantors for the behaviour of their kinsmen. Professor Brown commented that royal judicial records are replete with mention of these surnames, recording members of the extended family committing crimes such as robbery, manslaughter and homicide, all of which were commonplace in late medieval Scotland. However, the mention of crimes such as communicating with the exiled Douglases and dealing with and receiving notorious English Reivers such as the Men of Leven from Cumbria, all indicate a group of people living on the fringes of society and involved in cross border crime. It was these family and cross border connections that gave the Borders its character in the 16th Century. Professor Brown concluded by stating that the great houses of the 17th and 18th centuries belonged to the families that rose to prominence because of the fall of the Douglases. In considering the making of the Borders it was these families and their histories that in many ways shaped the region through the late medieval and early modern period.

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