

‘BEWITCHING’
Tristram Hunt, *Sunday Times*

THE MARCHES

RORY STEWART

BORDER WALKS WITH MY FATHER



‘THIS IS TRAVEL WRITING AT ITS BEST’
Guardian

VINTAGE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

LONGLISTED FOR THE ORWELL PRIZE 2017

His father Brian taught Rory Stewart how to walk, and walked with him on journeys from Iran to Malaysia. Now they have chosen to do their final walk together along 'the Marches' - the frontier that divides their two countries, Scotland and England. Brian, a ninety-year-old former colonial official and intelligence officer, arrives in Newcastle from Scotland dressed in tartan and carrying a draft of his new book *You Know More Chinese Than You Think*. Rory comes from his home in the Lake District, carrying a Punjabi fighting stick which he used when walking across Afghanistan.

On their six-hundred-mile, thirty-day journey - with Rory on foot, and his father 'ambushing' him by car - the pair relive Scottish dances, reflect on Burmese honey-bears, and on the loss of human presence in the British landscape. On mountain ridges and in housing estates they uncover a forgotten country crushed between England and Scotland: the Middleland. They cross upland valleys which once held forgotten peoples and languages - still preserved in sixth-century lullabies and sixteenth-century ballads. The surreal tragedy of Hadrian's Wall forces them to re-evaluate their own experiences in the Iraq and Vietnam wars. The wild places of the uplands reveal abandoned monasteries, border castles, secret military test sites and newly created wetlands. They discover unsettling modern lives, lodged in an ancient land. Their odyssey develops into a history of nationhood, an anatomy of the landscape, a chronicle of

contemporary Britain and an exuberant encounter between a father and a son.

And as the journey deepens, and the end approaches, Brian and Rory fight to match, step by step, modern voices, nationalisms and contemporary settlements to the natural beauty of the Marches, and a fierce absorption in tradition in their own unconventional lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rory Stewart was born in Hong Kong, and grew up in Malaysia and Scotland. After a brief period in the British Army, he joined the Foreign Office, serving in Indonesia and the Balkans. His account of the last section of his 6,000 mile walk across Afghanistan with his dog is described in *The Places In Between*; and his time as a deputy-governor of two provinces in the Marsh Arab region of Southern Iraq in *Occupational Hazards*. His books have sold over half a million copies, been translated into nine languages, and been awarded the Radio France award, the Spirit of Scotland award, the Premio de Literatura de Viajes Camino del Cid, and the Ondaatje Prize of the Royal Society of Literature. He is now the Member of Parliament for Penrith and the Border, and has served as Chair of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, and Minister for the Environment, and currently as Minister of State in the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. His television documentary on the Marches was shown on BBC2 under the title *Borderlands*. He lives with his wife and young son in Cumbria and London.

ALSO BY RORY STEWART

Non-fiction

The Places In Between
Occupational Hazards: My Time Governing in Iraq

As co-author

Can Intervention Work? (with Gerald Knaus)

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Chronology

THE MIDDLELAND

The Middleland - a term invented by my father: The geographical centre of the island of Britain. An upland landscape, whose core is the Lake District hills, the Pennines, the Cheviots and the Scottish Borders, but whose fringes extend to the Humber in the south and the firths of Forth and Clyde in the north. A land naturally unified by geography and culture for two thousand years, but repeatedly divided by political frontiers.

ORIGINS (before AD100)

The tribes of the Middleland in the centuries before the Roman invasion form a single cultural zone, stretching across what is now southern Scotland and northern England. Their scattered buildings and largely non-ceramic-using culture distinguish them from the ceramic/stone tower culture of Highland Scotland or the large hill forts and coinage of southern England.

MILITARY FRONTIER (AD100-400) see [map](#)

The Roman wall is laid straight through the tribal territories of the Middleland, dividing them - leaving the shrine of the Carvetii tribe god, Cocidius, north of the wall, while their population centre is south of it, and leaving most of the Votadini tribe north, while their settlement at Corbridge is marooned south of the wall. The entire area, both sides of the wall, becomes a Roman military zone: there are none of the villas found in the civilian south of Roman Britain, instead the area is dominated for three hundred years by

permanent garrisons of 15,000 soldiers, from regiments originally raised elsewhere in the Roman Empire.

CUMBRIA AND NORTHUMBRIA

THE OLD NORTH (AD400–600) see [map](#)

When the Romans leave, the frontier-line of the wall fades, and Cumbric-speaking groups reassert themselves in kingdoms, which stretch across the wall. The Roman military zone becomes a Welsh-speaking culture known as 'The Old North', remembered for its poetry, such as the *Gododdin*.

GOLDEN AGE OF NORTHUMBRIA (AD600–800)

By 600 almost all of the Middleland from the Humber to Edinburgh has come under the control of the kingdom of Northumbria – a Germanic-speaking culture, which becomes one of the leading civilisations in Christendom, known for its theology, sculpture, astronomy, manuscript illumination – and in particular for its historian, Bede, and its saint, Cuthbert.

NORSE INVASIONS (AD800–900) see [map](#)

The invasions of non-Christian groups by sea from Scandinavia – the 'Vikings' – inflict terrible damage on the Kingdom of Northumbria – and in particular on the monasteries which are the heart of its civilisation.

MIDDLELAND (900–1066) see [map](#)

By the middle of the tenth century, areas such as the Lake District are an ethnic patchwork of Cumbric-Welsh, Northumbrian-Germanic, and Norse-Viking communities. The core of the Middleland is dominated by the Cumbric kingdom of Strathclyde/Cumbria in the west and Northumbria in the east; these territories still stretch deep into modern Scotland and northern England, in defiance of

the Roman wall. But the West Saxon kings of England are beginning to move north, and the Gaelic kings of Scotland are beginning to move south, squeezing the Middleland kingdoms between them.

THE MARCHES

NORMAN BORDERS (1066-1150)

In 1070, the final autonomy of the Middleland is crushed by William the Conqueror, and by the slave-raids of the Scottish king. A new border emerges out of the Roman Wall, and eventually runs diagonally from the wall in the west to Berwick in the east, right through the centre of the old Northumbrian/Cumbrian nations. Much of the land is now designated as 'Royal Forest' on which it is illegal to settle or farm. Vast areas are reduced to depopulated wilderness.

MONASTIC REVIVAL (1150-1300)

Recovery begins with monks, initially attracted to the wilderness as a retreat, but whose energy begins to rebuild the economy. There is now a formal border between England and Scotland. But the monastic orders and the aristocratic families still own vast estates on both sides of the border, and do not clearly define themselves as either English or Scottish - their culture is Latin and Norman-French - and they are closely tied to European Christendom.

THE MARCHES (1300-1600) see [map](#)

The Scottish Wars of Independence led by William Wallace and Robert the Bruce bring a final break between England and Scotland. And the border takes on a brutal reality: cross-border landholdings disappear, it becomes illegal to marry across the border, or travel across it without permission. The core of the Middleland is redesignated as the Marches - a zone of fighting and cross-border raids, financed by the

English and Scottish Crowns. Driven by this proxy war, the region becomes lawless, wild and dangerous. At its heart lies the Debatable Lands.

UNION

THE MIDDLE SHIRES (1600-1750)

The Scottish Stuart King James VI also becomes King of England, and the Union of the Crowns means the disappearance of the border, and with it the rationale for the proxy war and the border raids. Within forty years, this 'cockpit of violence' has become one of the most peaceful areas in the country. But the legal differences between England and Scotland begin to create stark differences in landholding, leading to a pattern of small traditional farms on the English side, and larger 'modern' estates on the Scottish. In 1745, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Stuart claimant to the throne, marches through the Borders with little fighting.

ROMANTICS AND VICTORIANS (1750-1900)

For Walter Scott, the Borders landscape is now defined by its distant past, preserved in ballads and oral history. For William Wordsworth the more southerly hills represent the restorative power of nature and the pastoral world. Together these two writers make the Middleland the central landscape of the European Romantic movement.

MILITARY MARGINS (1900-2000) see [map](#)

The arrival of the First World War brings the War Office's attention to the Middleland. Suddenly its position as a sparsely populated area, far from the capitals, makes it again an ideal location for military projects. Over the following decades, tens of thousands of acres are turned over to munitions depots, airfields, forestry for trench props,

submarine aerals, nuclear material manufacture, and rocket testing.

DARK SKIES (2000-)

By the twenty-first century, many of these industries have vanished or are shrinking. The low population and the marginal land attracts the attention of environmentalists, who see the potential of the uplands and wetlands for rewilding.

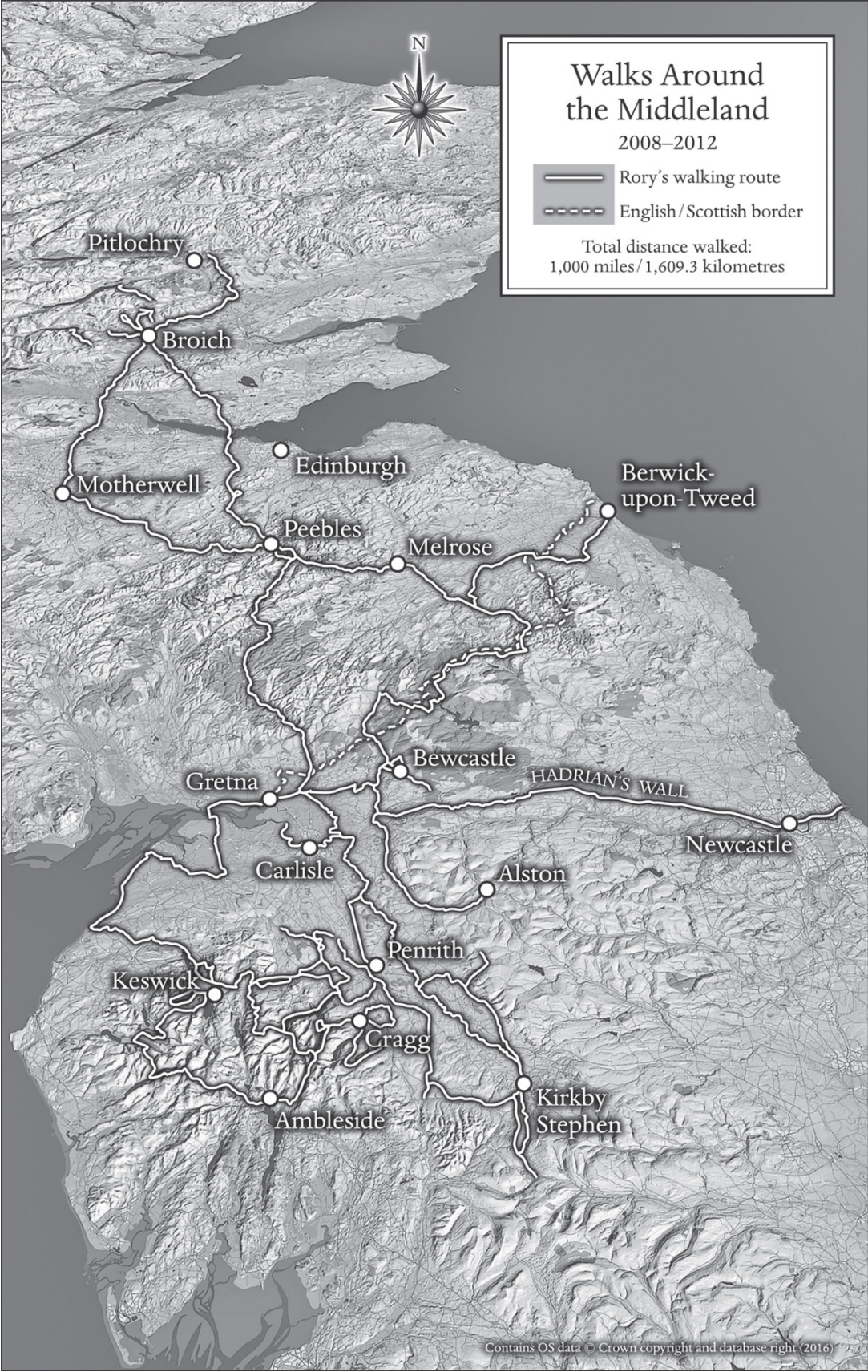
To my mother

RORY STEWART

The Marches

Border Walks with My Father

VINTAGE



BOOK ONE

The wall

Preface

I was five years old and it was just before six in the morning. I walked into my parents' room and poked the shape on the right-hand side of the bed. My father's head emerged. He rolled himself upright, retied his checked sarong, pushed his white hair flat on his head and led me back out of the bedroom. Once we had dressed, we marched to Hyde Park for fencing practice. Then we marched back to the house and laid out toy soldiers on the floor to re-enact the Battle of Waterloo. The front line was the Highland Division. (We had painted the feathers on their bearskins red, and their kilts green and black, to show that they were the Black Watch.) Behind them were the redcoats of the English line. Our Dutch, Hanoverian and Prussian allies were not represented.

Then we had a shower. I admired the gash on the outside of his right thigh. It had once been almost six inches long and an inch deep, cut open by shrapnel from a German shell. He thought it was a mortar shell. An expert on the Black Watch's role in the Battle of Rauray in 1944 thought it was more likely to have been a shell fired by an MK IV or a StuG III assault gun. Thirty-four years after the battle, it was just the right size into which to fit my index finger.

Best was the sound when he held me against his chest and sang. He had what he called 'a British baritone'. In the shower, we sang, 'With cat-like tread, upon the prey we steal. No sound at all. We never speak a word. A fly's footfall would be distinctly heard.' Or arpeggios and scales.

With my ears to his chest, I could hear his voice and a slight vibrato echoing through his broad ribcage. His accent was stronger when he sang, as though his training in music as a seventeen-year-old had trapped for posterity the Scottish accent of his youth.

Ho rrrro the nut-brrrown maiden
Ho rrrro the nut-brrrown maiden
Ho rrrro, rrrro, maiden
Forrr she's the girrrl forrr me.

That evening, he was home early, and had gone to the drawing room to have a drink with my mother. This meant I could show him my plane. I had folded a piece of A4 paper in half, turned the corners in to make an arrowhead, flattened the edges for wings, and placed it for the first time on a landing strip - two felt-tip lines on a cardboard box. I did not normally spend much time in the drawing room. As my father said, 'Not fun for the adults, not fun for the children. Not the right room.' So I entered politely.

My father, who was talking to my mother, smiled, put down his whisky carefully to avoid marking the table, and received the plane. 'How's the little flower?' he asked, kissing me on the head. But when he dropped the plane back into the cardboard box, it was clear from the position into which it fell that he had ignored my new runway. I was frustrated.

Leaving again, I drew red, white and blue RAF badges on the wings, twisted up the flaps, drew circles down the centre of the box to re-emphasise the runway and returned to the drawing room. My father looked briefly at the plane again, smiled and gave it back.

This time, I left the drawing room, closed the door and wrote a note which said, 'Because you would not look at my plane and runway, I am running away.' I placed the note outside the door, with the plane neatly on its track, and went downstairs. When I heard my parents' footsteps on the landing, I hid behind the curtains in the dining room.

Through a gap, I saw them coming down, heading for the front door. In my father's right hand was the note and the cardboard box. He held my mother's hand with his left. He was not paying attention to my creation - in fact he had

tipped the box, so that the plane had slid sideways once more.

I saw from his face how frightened he was. I realised how easily I could hurt him. I never wanted to see him like that again.

1

Thirty-three years later, in 2011, my father and I decided to march the length of Hadrian's Wall together. I thought this walk would allow us to explore and answer questions about Scottish nationalism, Rome, frontiers and empires. He probably thought it was a good opportunity to spend some time with his son. My father, who was eighty-nine, travelled down from our house in Scotland. I came across from my cottage in English Cumbria.

We were to meet in a B&B at Newcastle: the east end of the wall. He was out when I arrived. I found his Black Watch tie - its knot left intact 'to save time' - on the back of a chair. On the desk was a vigorously underlined guidebook to the wall. One saucer on the bedside table contained two used teabags; the other had been turned into a palette. Thick whorls of black and red paint lay around the rim. He had put his brushes in glasses lifted from the bathroom. Each was now stained by an inch of purple water.

On a bath towel, he had laid a roundel of Boursin cheese. The blade of his wooden-handled penknife was buried in the cheese. And beside it on the bed lay a sheet of A4 printer paper, crinkled with wet paint. The image he had painted on the paper was presumably supposed to be his lurcher Torquil. The door opened slowly behind me. A deep bass-baritone voice said, 'Hello, darling.' He hugged me, and because this man, once six foot tall, was now only five foot six, I kissed him on the forehead. Pointing to the dog in the picture, he added, 'The only thing I've got right about him is that he's black.'

We had spent much time together in hotel bedrooms. In a hotel in Austria, when I was six, he had tried to teach me three proofs of the existence of God, which he had just read in a paperback introduction to philosophy: he favoured Aquinas. I went to boarding school when I was eight and then we often met at weekends in the bedroom of his B&B in Oxford. Our diet by then had ceased to be chocolate milk and became instead tropical fruit juice, oatcakes, pâté and Boursin.

It was on that bed in his Oxford B&B that he encouraged me to paint a heroic picture of Magellan being clubbed by a giant Polynesian on a beach. It was there that he encouraged me to sing Gilbert and Sullivan until I was polished enough to get the part of Koko in the school *Mikado*. And it was there that we worked on an essay on the Battle of Culloden; and there too that he listened while I played the bagpipe chanter.

In a hotel bedroom in Taiwan, when I was fifteen, he watched me study Chinese *qigong*. He preferred more direct self-defence, usually beginning with a knee to the groin, and another knee to the chin, but he patiently admired my attempts at breathing exercises.

Now, though, I had to write an article for my local newspaper about the community hospital. I perched on my bed, grimacing and tapping at the keyboard, and he politely returned to his painting. After an hour or so, he looked up and, seeing me still at work, said he was going to bed. I could see he would have liked to chat. As I continued to work, I was vaguely aware of his familiar movements in and out of the bathroom.

The checked Malay sarong he wore to sleep looked like a cotton tartan kilt, reaching to his ankles. He got into bed, propped up three pillows behind his head, picked up his book on Hadrian's Wall and was snoring within three minutes. I finished work at two in the morning. I woke late, long after he had breakfasted, and spent twenty minutes

removing the paint from the landlady's saucers and mugs. Deep purple streams ran down the sink, staining the enamel. I used half a loo roll mopping it up.

Before we left, I found a frayed Black Watch tartan scarf, wrapped it round his neck and tucked it into the front of his olive-green cashmere greatcoat. His pale skin - which he called 'my Highland skin' - was almost translucent beneath his soft white hair.

Finally, I handed him some black ski mittens. He rejected them in favour of a pair of fingerless gloves which he had bought in China. They were almost certainly lined with cat fur.

2

My father generally referred to himself as a Highlander. He often talked about his 'thin Highland blood' and his 'Highland skin' which burned easily. He also said he was as 'sensitive as a Highland shepherd'. As a child, reflecting on this phrase, I imagined him and other shepherds weeping over their flocks.

Being a literal-minded person, I tried to investigate my father's identity as a Highlander in blood and soil: I made him take a DNA test. He obligingly spat into a test tube and I sent it to a laboratory - an act of curiosity costing an expensive £200. Six weeks later, we were informed that the trunk of our paternal ancestor was called R-P312-4, L21, M529 or S145.

This DNA strand had apparently emerged in Western Europe during the Old Stone Age, 7,000 years ago. In May 2012, the same strand was found in two Bronze Age skeletons in Germany. But his particular variant of the

strand was concentrated in Scotland, and to a lesser extent Ireland. The genetic testing company therefore argued that it was an old Scottish strain: that my father's ancient paternal ancestor had lived in what is now Scotland for at least 3,000 years. (The company was Scottish.) For reasons less obvious to me, they said this meant he was a 'Pict'. But because the strand also existed in Ireland, my father said it showed that he was 'really Irish'.

Of course, it didn't mean very much. His patrilineal DNA was only a sliver of his total genetic make-up. All that this showed was that his - my - father's father's father's line, the line that had called themselves, at least for the last few hundred years, 'Stewart', had probably been in Scotland a few thousand years ago. They may well have left the country and returned again (some 'Stewarts' were certainly in Brittany a thousand years ago). And it didn't say anything about the millions of his other ancestors who were alive at that time.

Next, I turned to ancestry.com, a genealogy site with the addictive tricks of a video game. Whenever I refreshed the page, the crisp boxes of our family tree sprouted delicate green leaves, trembling seductively. The program had created a hyperlink between each leaf, and a database of census records, certificates and family trees. I clicked for hours on one after another, without ever beginning to exhaust the leaves, amassing fifth cousins and maternal great-great-uncles, each with their own hyperlinks to further trees. I collected 5,735 of these people. My father was little help in filling in this family tree. Although he liked to talk to me about 'taking pride in the past', this did not extend to his own ancestry. He could not remember his great-grandparents' names. He had once suggested our family were Stewarts of Appin, who left the West Highlands 'after the disaster of Culloden'. But despite staying up, night after night, till three in the morning, clicking on leaf after leaf and

peering at hundreds of separate parish records, I never found a link to Culloden.

Often ancestry.com led me to images of birth and death certificates. His great-great-grandfather's death certificate had a crossed-out scrawl by the coroner: 'suicide by hanging' had been replaced with 'suicide by cutting his throat with a razor in the street, 11 a.m., aged 71'. I could only guess at how the coroner could make such a mistake. Mostly the activity was sterile because all I was doing was establishing a name, a date and a kinship tie. And although my father sat patiently looking at the computer screen while I clicked on sprouting leaves, occasionally throwing out a comment ('That is Aunt Petruchia I think'; 'Ah yes, Grandfather Cuba'), he had very little to say about any of these people.

My research confirmed, however, that my father Brian was the son of Redvers son of George son of Alexander son of Alexander son of Charles son of David son of David son of David. And that all these men, my Stewart ancestors, were in the same town doing the same things in the same square mile, right from their first appearance on the first charred half-page of the earliest parish records. And all his father's father's ancestors, his father's mother's ancestors and his mother's father's ancestors were born, lived and had died, for at least two centuries, in one tiny geographical area - limited to just three parishes of the ancient county of Forfarshire in Scotland.

This is where my father and his brother - a year apart in age - were brought up. Neither boy crossed the border into England until they were seventeen. And when the war came, they both, like their father and grandfather before them, joined their local regiment, the Royal Highland Regiment, the Black Watch. There was no record of a single one of his ancestors on any side coming from England.

Nineteenth-century Scotland was one of the most mobile societies on earth. By the beginning of the nineteenth

century the majority of the people in the central belt of Scotland did not live in the place where they had been born. Between 1831 and 1931, 2 million Scots moved abroad - equal to the total population of Scotland at the start of that period. My father's ancestors were the exceptions in staying so resolutely still. Which may be why my father said ancestry was 'pretty boring stuff'.

As Stewarts, they defined themselves as Highlanders. But they had all lived - as he continued to live - right on the Highland Line, on the border between Highland and Lowland Scotland.

3

The front of my father's house looked over a flat ten-acre field. To the right stood a cedar of Lebanon and a copper beech, the latter twice the height of the house. When my grandfather first came here, there had been another half-mile of fields, mostly belonging to the house, and then the Highlands. Now to the north was a skateboard park, to our north-east was a landfill site, while to our north-west, beyond the gasworks, the old gathering ground for the Crieff Highland Games was designated for a future Tesco's supermarket. Only to our west was the view still unbroken, rising past the woods to the 3,000-foot heather-topped mountains above Loch Turret.

We kept a Highland cow in the field. The calf feed was stored in a large metal dustbin. Whenever we went to see the cow, my father passed me a plastic cup; I tipped the feed into my hand. Mairi shoved her wet pink freckled nose against my forearm. Her long tongue twisted into my palm. I then pushed her huge horns out of the way, and wiped the

spittle off onto her matted ginger hair. By 2011, she was fourteen. Her calves had been taken to market in 2000. It took her nearly ten minutes to walk the length of the field. Every summer she was joined by forty Aberdeen Angus bullocks. Every autumn they left, and she stayed. I could feel her horns splintering with age when I stroked them. No real farmer would keep an animal even half so long.

Just beyond my father's fences, and the suburbs of Crieff, lay the starkest geological division in Britain. Four hundred million years ago, two continents – once 4,500 miles apart – had collided. A little later, two further plates had struck, slipped and sheared, driving tight ripples diagonally across Scotland. The older schists and slates of rock to the north-west rose to form the Grampian Mountains. This chain, 200 million years older than anything in southern Scotland or England, was the beginning of the Highlands. At its foot to the south was the rift valley of red sandstone, once an ocean, in which our fields stood – a separate geology that stretched a hundred miles long and fifty miles south, forming a separate culture.

This lowland soil was rich: seven feet of loam on a free-draining sandstone base. Our land could grow barley and potatoes and some of the tallest evergreens in Britain. On the Highland hills above, there were neither crops nor trees. Bare rock jutted above patches of thin acidic soil. Deep peat, supporting anaemic shoots of sphagnum moss, lay among cold streams, inedible rushes and long heather. Mairi could be supported on a single acre in front of our house. Two miles away, in the Highlands, she would need ten acres, and even she, a tough native cow, would struggle to survive.

The different geologies, altitudes, climates and soils had once fostered quite different human societies. It was not simply a division between Lowland agriculturalists who planted crops, and Highlanders herding animals and hunting deer. Every aspect of daily subsistence differed. To survive