Borders in borderland: Scottish frontiers as makers and markers of national and urban identity

Frontiers divide, acknowledging existing differences or creating them anew. They isolate one party from another, recognising, reinforcing, or even establishing accidental or intentional discrepancies from the accepted norm and confining them to a separate, distant, relatively harmless ‘elsewhere’. Frontiers mark the edge of the known from the unknown, or the known from the as yet unknown; they can move, contracting and expanding, acting as defensive lines against the challenge presented by alternative narratives or as spearheads establishing the safe physical environment for a dominant viewpoint to thrive in new territory. Frontiers unite, as porous borders permitting differences to confront each other in apparent safety; they are the line being toed while considering the establishment of contact. It is the significance attributed to frontiers that makes the crossing of border a meaningful, deliberate act, defining one’s worldview in relation to their spatial trajectory, and its relative position.

While laws of nature and the structure of the world were investigated in the logically minded early modern period, Scotland was frequently seen as a land of frontier, a far away and faraway location distant and different from the conventions of everyday life. Scotland was something ‘else’, a place full of lore and oddities. Divided by the rest of Britain by the Hadrian – then, briefly, the Antonine – Wall, Scotland itself was markedly separated from the rest of Europe, a land that even the ambitious Romans had decided to leave alone. Based on a perceived cultural and geographical separation, Scotland’s individuality was rarely questioned. Visitors and chroniclers from the European mainland reported back that the country was distant and isolated. Its landscape was presented as singularly unwelcoming and harsh: describing Scotland following a visit to Britain in 1551-52, French ecclesiast Estienne Perlin described the greatest majority of Scotland as ‘a desert’, with much unhospitable and uncultivated land, little arable land, and its cities and villages few, small, and far apart. The portrayal of Scottish landscape on an arch built for Charles I arrival in Edinburgh in 1633 is described by a chronicler as a rough, mountainous country, covered in forests inhabited by wild animals, and even equipped with a ‘flaming mountaine’ – that is, an active volcano. In the depiction, a shamble of frantic Picts and Romans appeared to be fleeing such a dangerous and inhospitable country. The Romans had indeed built physical barriers to mark this northern, harsh landscape as ‘different’ – fortifying the landscape with walls, forts, and defensive structures. The Antonine Wall was begun on the order of Emperor Antoninus Pius around 142AD, stretching for 39 miles from the Clyde in the west to the Forth to the east. Shorter and more temporary in character than Hadrian’s Wall to the south, it represented an ambitious attempt by the Romans to extend their influence into Caledonia. The Antonine Wall was progressively abandoned in the 160sAD until troops finally withdrew back to Hadrian’s Wall in 165AD, the Roman occupation of Britain coming officially to an end around 411AD. The frontier might have been abandoned, but the memory of it remained. Both structures are still clearly visible in Matthew Paris’ map of Great Britain from the middle thirteenth century, and the Antonine Wall retained a role as acknowledged frontier for the kingdom of Alba and of Scotia – a lasting remark of the presence of an established, defendable, fortified border.

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/matthew-paris-map-of-britain>

The map also underlines how still, at this age, little was known of the shape and topography of the country. The less well-known areas particularly to the West, and north of the Forth were particularly unrealistic; the strategic importance of Stirling as the one element the cartographer remarked upon. This changed relatively little over time; the opportunities for accessing, exploring, and reporting back information – let alone engage sympathetically with the culture – were limited. The frontier to overcome to enter Scotland was physical, the difficulty of getting into the country was real – particularly from the sea. Margaret of Norway (1283-1290) embarked from her home country to claim the Scottish crown she had inherited the rights to, but the ship was thrown off course by a storm during the difficult voyage: the young queen died in the Orkney Islands of complications from sea-sickness, leaving the country without a clear successor. In 1537, following the arduous journey from France with her new husband James V, the health of delicate sixteen-years-old Madeleine of Valois seriously deteriorated, and the queen died at Holyrood Palace. Madeleine’s father Francis I, who had been concerned about the effect the difficult journey and Scotland’s harsh climate and living conditions would have had on his daughter’s health, staunchly refused James’ suggestion to send Francis’s other daughter Margaret to Scotland as a replacement. At the end of August 1589, Anna of Denmark’s attempts to sail to Scotland to join her new husband James VI were equally defeated by bad weather, the queen’s fleet being in serious danger during the aborted crossing. The seas were so impassable that treasonous witchcraft was offered as explanation: a group of women and few men deemed responsible for raising the storms and contrary winds appeared at the North Berwick witch trials in 1590, where they were imprisoned, tortured, and in some cases executed. James did manage to reach his bride and her party, who had been forced to take shelter on the Norwegian coast near Oslo to wait for Spring. The fleet did not reattempt the journey to Scotland until April, arriving at the Port of Leith on May 1st.

Once access into the country was gained, travelling by land within Scotland was a slow and inconvenient business complicated by the effect of the bad weather on unpaved roads, and by the shortage and inadequacy of inns and stables to support travellers, until the military campaigns of the eighteenth century promoted extensive improvements and road building in the north. The country lacked the head-start of a network of infrastructure, such as the one set up by the Romans in Continental Europe, or typical of more centrally placed countries, or of those with a network of major pilgrimage sites. Describing the country in 1689, Reverend Thomas Morer notices the roads were not good enough to allow for hackneys outside of well paved main towns, or for the setting up of stage coaches to connect distant cities. The few nobles daring to use a carriage would proceed with great caution and have a footman running on each side, to help the driver avoid the rougher places and keep the vehicle going. The mapping of the country still lacked detail in the early eighteenth century, and Daniel Defoe’s *Tour Thro the Whole Island of Great Britain*, published in 1727, remarked humorously on the largely unknown areas a traveller heading for the west and north of Inverness would find themselves negotiating, comparing them to the expanses of Africa.

The frontier to overcome was also a cultural one, as visitors found themselves puzzled and discouraged by Scotland’s (real or imagined) peculiarities. The country was seen as a place whose remoteness allowed for magic, inexplicable phenomena. In 1435, Italian traveller Aenea Sylvius Piccolomini—later Pope Pius II—visited James I’s court and was thrilled to hear of a kind of local trees which produced fruits in the form of geese, which came alive when dropped into water. Piccolomini remarked with surprised dismay that wherever he travelled, he was never able to see such trees, as he was told the grew just further north of his current location. Other natural wonders attributed to Scotland by early modern travellers, were a breed of dogs able to smell out thieves, magical islands floating with the tide, and a breed of aggressive Scots inhabiting the Highlands, the northern part of the country, who ate the bark of trees and raw meat, and spoke an incomprehensible language. Writing in 1535 while at James V’s court, Danish envoy Peder Swave describes many ‘wild Scots’ living a wandering, rough, austere life (‘in the manner of the Scythians’), who dismissed breadmaking and survived instead on the uncooked meat (‘only squeezing out the blood’, Swave remarked) of stags they hunt by the rudimentary stratagem of outrunning them. The language barrier was still present; Morer notices Scots’ ‘neglect of vowels’ and recognisable ‘unhappy tone’; Thomas Kirke’s Modern Account of Scotland by an English Gentleman, published in 1679 and much critical of the country, lamented the use of the Erse language by the Highlanders, a language intelligible only to themselves. Kirke sneered at Scottish dress sense, particularly the use of a cloak thrown over themselves, or for men of a plaid tied around their wastes and over their shoulders leaving the knees and lower thighs bare.

When talking about themselves, it is significant that Scots willingly embraced the reputation for geographical remoteness and harshness, presenting the advantages of being a frontier country. The arch built for Charles I in 1633 in Edinburgh, and showing the unhospitable Scottish landscape and the fleeing Picts and Romans mentioned earlier, was topped by the caption ‘TIBI SERVIET VLTIMA THULE’ [remotest Thule is subject to you]. This is a (slightly altered) passage from Vergil’s Georgic (Liber I, 30), and parallels Scotland paying homage to Charles to the mythical island of Thule - in Vergil’s narrative, subservient to Caesar Augustus, a flattering comparison for Charles). Thule’s remoteness made it difficult to approach or even to locate, and it had kept it unsullied by the decadence of civilisation, offering the chance of a morally uncorrupted existence. Through the parallel with Thule, Scotland’s geographical isolation and unspoiled wilderness reflected the country’s sound integrity and moral uprightness. The country’s humble remoteness and modest lifestyle was dwelt upon fondly in the Declaration of Arbroath (6 April 1320), presented by the lords of the realm to Pope John XXII to oppose English claims of sovereignty. ‘Us Scots’, the signatories declare, only want to be left in peace ‘in this poor little Scotland, beyond which there is no dwelling-place at all’.

Scotland’s remoteness and unappealing wilderness that had dissuaded the Romans and hindered their permanent occupation (but not, it must be remarked, occasional inhabitation and commercial exchanges), was embraced by Scottish sovereigns in the early modern period. They embraced the impassability of their frontier country embedded in antique history, by constructing a narrative that made the most of such remoteness. Being a country at the very margins of the Roman empire – if not entirely excluded from it – was framed as a positive trait. The Stewarts took pride in being descendent of an uninterrupted line of monarchs descending from those heroic leaders who had defeated the Romans. While other nations had been subjugated by the Romans, the Scottish kings alone could confidently – if rather speculatively – present a sequence of undefeated ancestors. In 1633, the processional welcome organised for Charles I into Edinburgh, included a pageant showing the one hundred and seven Scottish kings the current monarch descended from. The series of one hundred and eleven portraits painted by Dutch artist Jacob de Wet II in 1684-1686 for Charles II, and still hanging in the gallery at Holyrood Palace, was inspired by the 1633 series, and includes (amongst others) legendary chief leader Caratacus, who led the military resistance against the advancing Romans. Caratacus is shown holding onto the shield he conquered from a defeated enemy, inscribed with SPQR; in the distance, Roman soldiers are seen fleeing, in a mountainous, oppressive landscape, defeated by the combined strength of human courage and the country’s toughness. Kings like James III, James IV, and James V capitalised on this tradition by claiming imperial dignity for Scotland, based amongst other considerations on its – to historians at the time, well-proven - unconquered status and antique lineage. Besides being politically useful, Scotland’s highlanders’ reputation for steadfast isolationism and cultural remoteness was also considered with tolerant pride by monarchs, embracing the country’s different traditions rather than imposing a blanket uniformity. Just as Thule’s isolation and wilderness stood for the chance to lead an unspoiled, morally sound life close to nature, so highlanders could be seen within the *bon savage* narrative, daring and honourable if uncultivated characters defending their right to autonomy and seclusion. In 1529, to explain to a visiting Papal ambassador the inexplicable setting on fire of the beautiful country pavilion built by the Earl of Athol to entertain his guests, James V remarked indulgently and not without pride that it was the custom of ‘our highlanders’ to burn their lodgings on departure. Much later, in the mid-nineteenth century, the craze for highland culture – or rather, for the safer reinterpretation and reinvention of it popularised by Sir Walter Scott and endorsed by Queen Victoria in the early- and mid- nineteenth century – kept Scotland’s reputation as a rough but charming frontier country alive, bringing it to the front of popular culture.

Scotland identified itself for a long time as a frontier country, finding its identity in being ‘other than’ and ‘separated from’, emphasising cultural differences when convenient to signal and embrace its distinctive identity. Frontiers were essential to the creation of Scotland as we know it in another sense, that is in giving physical form to Scotland’s key urban entities, the burghs. Under the reign of David I (1084-1153) royal burghs such as Edinburgh, Stirling, Perth, Montrose, and Jedburgh were established, under the protection of the crown; many others followed, including some established as ecclesiastical or baronial settlements. David I encouraged skilled locals and Norman, Flemish, and English immigrants to found and inhabit burghs by granting the budding community a list of rights – to host a market, to trade internationally, to self-administer – in exchange for loyalty to the crown and providing revenue. Part of a local, national, and international trade network, burghs became seeds of change within the country, bringing in new tools and skills, but also offering access to new ideas. Mercantile bases were established in the Low Countries, France, and England, and exchanges were frequent with the ports of the North Sea. Acting as trade and cultural links, Scottish burghs contributed to overcome the geographical isolation of the country; making Scotland and its products visible and appreciated abroad, the burghs and their merchants helped dispel foreign uncertainties about Scotland’s actual relevance. As places likely to be visited by customers, merchants, travellers, guests, and ambassadors, burghs would act as bridges to foreign ways of thinking, bringing innovation into the country and introducing a forward-looking mindset that would soon become mainstream. When discussing his upcoming (later cancelled) visit in 1608, King James VI/I requested that (female) burgesses wore ‘decent’, modern clothes and headwear, and behave with sobriety and restraint, lest strangers (that is, the King’s own retinue and his guests coming with the monarch from London) mocked local people’s old-fashioned attire and their uncivil, lax habits. The legislator confidently stated how changes in habit brought over in the city will naturally set the standard for the rest of the country, and will soon become widespread.

While themselves overcoming borders and defying physical and cultural distances, the burgh’s very existence was based on the concept of urban frontier. The construction of a perimeter – anything from solid walls to a simple palisade – was one of the burgh’s most coveted right, and it was essential to mark the presence of an ‘inside’ space, the inhabitants of which were granted privileges and opportunities. Outside of the acknowledged perimeter, such privileges did not apply – hence the marked preference, or even the obligation, for burgesses to live within a burgh’s boundary, and which created the dense, built-up urban fabric of burghs such as Edinburgh. This is shown for example in the map of Edinburgh by James Gordon of Rothiemay (c. 1647), showing Edinburgh to the left of the map.

<https://maps.nls.uk/view/74475427>

To the right is the airier and more verdant burgh of Canongate, its lower houses crowding the high street frontage but leaving space for ample, manicured gardens in the back. Canongate had been established by King David I as a service community for the Abbey of Holyrood, founded in 1128; it would maintain its support role to the royal palace, eventually supplanting the Abbey at the end of the fifteenth century. As the burgh of higher status and offering significant privileges to those dwelling within its ‘Royalty’, Edinburgh was surrounded by civic walls, carefully enlarged from time to time to acknowledge the increase in population. The King’s Wall (1450-1472) was superseded by the Flodden Wall (1514-1560) including recent suburban growth, and again enlarged by the addition of the Telfer Wall (1628-1636). If civic walls represented essential markers of the privileges granted to those within, ports made such frontiers porous and permeable, controlling, forbidding, but also granting and facilitating access. In Edinburgh, access to the burgh was possible via Bristo Port or Greyfriars Port, West Port, Potterrow Port, Cowgate Port, College Kirk Port in Leith Wynd, and Halkerson’s Wynd port, and the Netherbow. This latter was a unique sort of gate, in that it did not divide an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’, but rather two different ‘insides’, as it separated the burgh of Edinburgh from that of Netherbow. Of imposing size and decorated in a castellated, martial style, the Netherbow offered some military protection, but was often stormed or blown open by assailants. More often, the Netherbow controlled access to and from the two communities, acting as a hinge; it underlined their differences and defended the status and privileges allocated to their different spaces, at the same time acting as a throughfare making the exchange of people, ideas, and goods possible.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Netherbow started being considered an obstacle and a nuisance rather than an important spatial marker. With the acquisition of the burgh of Canongate by Edinburgh in 1636, and the expansion of the Royalty with the construction of the New Town, civic frontiers and gates lost their role as sentinels and guarantors. Considered ‘exceedingly incommodious’, the Netherbow was demolished in 1764, soon followed by large sections of the civic walls and most other gates. Its previous position is currently signalled by brass markers inserted on the pavement, and the names of the nearby pub and close - ‘The World’s End’ - recalls the role of a now inconspicuous section of urban fabric as guardian of different worlds.

Frontiers were instrumental in making Scotland the country we know today, being acknowledged, embraced, challenged, or overcome in turn. They offered seclusion – the sense of being unique and proudly different – but threatened isolation and rejection. They needed to be both impenetrable and porous, selectively offering access to a precious few while maintaining one’s identity intact. While Scotland’s position on a map of the world has not physically changed, the way Scottish people saw themselves – and were seen, and wanted to be seen – from visitors, travellers, and immigrants did require constant readjustments, a process that is still going on in our times.