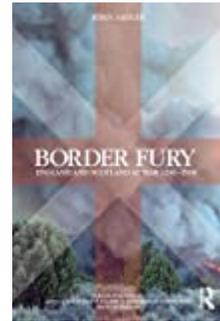




John Sadler. *Border Fury: England and Scotland at War 1296-1568.* Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006. xvi + 617 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4058-4022-4.



Reviewed by Cynthia Neville (Department of History, Dalhousie University)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2008)

Blood and War on the Anglo-Scottish Borders

No region of medieval Britain has attracted greater attention from historians than the Anglo-Scottish borderlands, especially in the heyday of the infamous border reivers. In the last two decades, in particular, the history of the area has experienced something of an efflorescence, with scholars carving out a well-established niche for the Anglo-Scottish marches within a broader range of studies that portrays frontier societies throughout Europe as regions both distinct and problematic. John Sadler's work, then, is but the last in a long line of histories of the most turbulent of insular English frontiers. It is, moreover, a work written by a self-confessed romantic and an "anorak," "whose concept of leisure is to dress in period costume" and to fight afresh the great battles of the early modern British past (p. 4). The author's enthusiasm lends this sturdy, if unimaginative, book a perspective that sets it apart from other, more focused examinations of the unique conditions that characterized the late medieval and early modern Anglo-Scottish marches.

The book is divided into twenty-one brief chapters. Each examines the circumstances that led to the eruption of political or diplomatic crises in a specific period,

and each offers an exhaustive account of the battles that periodically and, it seems, inevitably, brought the forces of the two realms together in open conflict. All the usual suspects are here: the doughty Guardians, who sought to defend Scotland from a wrathful Edward I in the decade after 1296; the Disinherited who, in the 1330s, tried to reclaim the Scottish lands that they had won during the first war of independence; the Percy and Douglas lords who fought valiantly, and bloodily, at Otterburn; the Neville earls of Westmorland who, for most of the fifteenth century, dominated the political and military forces of northern England; and the Dacre family, whose members became famous as the Tudor monarchy's chief agents in the marches. The sheer number of set battles that occurred between Falkirk in 1298 and Pinkie in 1547 allows Sadler plenty of scope within which to discuss in great detail developments in weaponry, military strategy, and castle architecture, all of which profoundly affected the conditions under which one side carried war to the other. Herein lies the real appeal of the book, as well as its most thoughtfully considered sections. Sadler demonstrates convincingly that the military commanders who fought at sites as diverse as Bannockburn, Dupplin Moor, Hali-

don Hill, and Flodden Field were no mere adventurers. They were capable war captains, adept at making sound decisions about the deployment of troops across uncertain terrain, and equally skilled at using to good advantage (and, on some occasions, testing for the first time) the technology that was so rapidly changing the face of battle in contemporary Europe. Those who, like the author, revel in the opportunity to get a soldier's eye view by tramping the actual battlefields will find in Sadler's text a helpful site guide and a series of detailed descriptions of the movements of mounted squadrons and infantry units.

Curiously absent from Sadler's study is any reference to the balladry that was so rich a feature of Anglo-Scottish life. This is, perhaps, a reflection of the author's respect for the achievement of the late George MacDonald Fraser, whose monumental work, *The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers* (1971), he aptly acknowledges as "the best single-volume history of

the subject" (p. 3). More surprising still, however, is the absence from Sadler's bibliography of most of the vast secondary literature on Anglo-Scottish society that the scholarship on medieval and early modern frontiers has produced in the last twenty years or so. Fraser's famous study of the marches was itself based on the work of the late Ian Rae, *The Administration of the Scottish Frontier, 1513-1603* (1966). Rae's work, in turn, inspired historians to look beyond the romance of the reivers' balladry to explore and appreciate the myriad ways in which the existence of an "international" boundary line at the Solway-Tweed line shaped the social, economic, cultural, and legal conditions of the region. Sadler's book betrays little familiarity with this rich, abundant, and compelling history. This is a pity. His claim that a generation and more after the publication of *The Steel Bonnets* a thorough and comprehensive study of the Anglo-Scottish border lands is overdue is entirely appropriate. *Border Fury*, however, fails to take up the challenge and falls well short of accomplishing this goal.

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Citation: Cynthia Neville. Review of Sadler, John, *Border Fury: England and Scotland at War 1296-1568*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

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