



Hadrian's Wall by Adrian Goldsworthy.

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Built in the 120s AD, Hadrian's Wall, a poetic symbol of the failure of Roman imperial expansion, divided Roman Britain from the unconquered northern part of the island. Now a World Heritage Site, the Wall has been the subject of a large, ever-growing literature, but surprisingly few single-volume general studies. In *Hadrian's Wall*, the noted and prolific ancient historian Adrian Goldsworthy¹ has produced a study aimed primarily at general readers or vacation visitors to the site. It is, however, sufficiently authoritative to appeal to undergraduate and specialist readers as well.

The introductory pages concern the history of Roman Britain, the emperor Hadrian and his conception of a fortification line in Britain, and the army that built and manned the Wall. Chronological discussions of the mid- and late-Roman period frame chapters on the construction, materials, and purpose of the Wall, as well as the lives of its military and local civilian populations. The book closes with a (too short) visitor's guide and a brief, up-to-date list of further readings. A helpful chart² shows military units that garrisoned the Wall-forts at various times. The 137-page main narrative (with many poorly reproduced black-and-white illustrations) offers an au courant, highly readable introduction to its subject.

The significance of Hadrian's Wall has been assessed from the perspectives of a diverse range of commentators, including ancient historians, field archaeologists, epigraphers, prosopographers, numismatists, art historians, and both active and retired professional soldiers, among others. Unsurprisingly, Goldsworthy's intimate historical knowledge of the Roman army in peace and war shapes his account of the Wall. Though he does not neglect the far more numerous civilian men, women, and children of the Wall-zone, the Roman soldier is the main character here, not the Wall itself: "My central premise is that Hadrian's Wall and all the installations associated with it were intended to assist the Roman army in performing the tasks assigned to it in northern Britain. Soldiers were not there to serve the Wall, but the Wall was there to serve them" (xix).

The most perceptive and original chapter of the book is entitled "How Hadrian's Wall worked." This is a controversial subject: a century ago, it was realized that "Hadrian's Wall was not designed to withstand attack by a large and determined hostile army, for it was too long for the defenders to be strong at every point" (113). And current thinking has it that the Wall itself—as distinct from its forts and their military units—was designed only to control the flow of trade and illegal immigrants or other infiltrators. To his credit, Goldsworthy paints a convincing picture of the Wall and its forts as an integrated mechanism for delaying and intercepting endemic raids

1. His previous work includes, among many others, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC-AD 200* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1996), a revision of his dissertation (DPhil Oxon, 1994); *The Punic Wars* (London: Cassell, 2000); and *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2009).

2. Borrowed, with acknowledgement, from David J. Breeze and Brian Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (1976; 4th ed., London: Penguin, 2000).

from the unconquered part of Britain. It allowed the army to gather and react in time, especially when troop detachments had been sent on missions away from the Wall.

Refreshingly, Goldsworthy has no illusions about the violence and brutality perpetrated by men on both sides of the barrier, as evidence from other imperial frontiers would lead us to expect. This is something downplayed by those who see the Wall as a customs barrier. He is clear about “Roman reprisals, effectively raids of their own, reaching north from the military zone and striking with dreadful force against the communities held responsible for attacks” (117–18). In short, this is a realistic portrayal of the Wall’s function by a military historian with an expertise extending even beyond Roman antiquity.³

The author is less interested in archaeology. Anecdotes from imperial biography loom large, and endnote references adduce mostly ancient literary and epigraphic sources. Nevertheless, he is conversant enough with recent archaeological ideas (of varying plausibility) to summarize them succinctly and, for the most part, accurately. One serious error, however, appears in his description of a major recent discovery⁴ on the Wall that has changed our understanding of Roman military bases in the western empire. In standard cavalry barracks, messing units of three troopers lived, we now know, together with their horses in a *contubernium* (accommodation unit), some ten of which made up a barrack block for one *turma* (troop) of around thirty horsemen. The long-imagined stable blocks of Roman forts are now known to be a myth: the horses *were in the barracks* with the men. Yet Goldsworthy states that “The rooms for the men and the boxes for the horses on either side of the building do not connect, each one having to be entered from the outside” (82). In fact, men and horses used the same entrance, and barrack room and stall did interconnect.⁵ Thus, Goldsworthy misses the point that the building plans suggest the close bond between the three troopers and their precious mounts.

This rare lapse in a generally reliable work aside, the book is to be recommended for concisely explaining the military purpose of the Wall and making a complicated subject clear to readers with no prior knowledge of it. *Hadrian’s Wall* can be read in a couple hours: too short for the transatlantic flight, but an ideal briefing for the three-hour train ride from London to Newcastle, where many visitors will eagerly embark on their tour of the Wall.

3. Goldsworthy is the author of a “Napoleonic War Series” of six historical novels published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (2011–15).

4. See Nick Hodgson and W.B. Griffiths, “Wallsend: Where Did They Keep the Horses in Roman Forts?” *Current Archaeology* 164 (1999) 284–89, and Nick Hodgson and P. Bidwell, “Auxiliary Barracks in a New Light: Recent Discoveries on Hadrian’s Wall,” *Britannia* 35 (2004) 121–157.

5. Goldsworthy is apparently relying on his memory of an early reconstruction drawing of such stable-barracks in Peter Connolly, *The Cavalryman* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1988) 16–17.