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Hadrian's Wall

William Dietrich

Hadrian's Wall

A Novel of Roman England

William Dietrich

 HarperCollins e-books

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MAP



A.D. 122

The northern wind blew across the ridge *with a howl like an army of barbarians*.

The metaphor pleased the emperor, who considered himself a scholar as well as a soldier. A new balcony jutted from the wooden quarters that had been hastily erected for the emperor's entourage, and Hadrian stood on it now, adding the gale to his mental inventory of the empire. The long green blades of the grassy ridge that rose before him were combed flat by the weather, and sheets of rain lashed his raw fifty-room complex, drumming against timbers still pungent from their cutting and dripping into the rooms below where the braziers were inadequate. The climate clung to one's clothing and drove deep into one's very bones. Rather than dwell on this, it was better to look outward, into the teeth of the wind. A ravine to the right sheltered a stand of trees that crept up the defile like an advancing patrol, and the emperor's tactical eye followed it, noting how bitterly the branches shuddered at the crest. Not a place any man would wish to be stationed, he thought, but then that was true of all borders, wasn't it? By their very nature, borders were where comfort ended. Behind him the corridors of the complex rumbled with the tread of military boots, the sound echoing all the louder for the paucity of furnishings and carpets. Retiring governor Pompeius, Hadrian knew, hadn't had much time to prepare for the imperial arrival. At the emperor's own insistence, the imperial dispatches heralding his approach demanded maps and models, not luxuries. He wouldn't tarry here long.

Yet Hadrian had complimented his host for the ambitious timber construction at lonely Vindolanda. Half his life had been spent under a tent, so this was a relative improvement. "Happiness is tied to expectations, not belongings," he told the officers assembled behind him. "At the empire's edge, we expect less and so take more pleasure in little things."

A legate dutifully wrote the remark down.

"A man of your responsibilities deserves all that we can share," Pompeius replied loyally. The comfort of his own retirement, he knew, depended on the emperor's favor.

"A man of my power could have chosen to stay in Rome, governor. But I didn't, by desire and by necessity. Right, Florus?" The head of his plump poet and jester poked out of an enclosing cloak like an emergent and miserable mole.

"We rejoice to share your burdens, Caesar," Florus said with all the insincerity he could muster. "In fact, a verse about your heroism has just come to me."

The emperor's courtiers smiled in anticipation of some new slyness, and Hadrian's eyebrows mockingly arched. "Really? What a surprise to hear an offer of your wit."

“It comes to me unbidden, sire, a present from the gods. I call my verse ‘The Plea of Hadrian.’”

“Then let’s hear the god’s wisdom, fat Florus.”

The poet stood, dropping his cloak with a dramatic flourish and coming chest-high to the centurion beside him. He recited in a high, piping voice:

I don’t want to be emperor—please!

To tramp around Britannia, muddy to my knees

Or be stuck in stinking Scythia, watching my purple ass freeze!

Florus bowed and plopped down, burrowing again into his cloak. The visitors roared, even as Pompeius flushed with shock at this sally about the imperial color. No one else seemed surprised at the satire. Hadrian’s close companions shared the camaraderie of endless miles, rude quarters, and homesickness. No ruler had ever attempted to tour the entire empire before. A permissible joke kept them all sane.

“Write that down, too,” Hadrian instructed the legate, smiling wryly. Then he looked out again at the sodden slope, suddenly impatient. “So let’s get muddy to our knees, Romans. Let’s see this high ground!”

The ruler was as restless as he was quick. In the last half hour he had dictated three letters, suggested terracing the hills for orchards and pasture to save the commissary money, reviewed and approved the execution of a legionary caught selling a cache of spearheads to the barbarians, and requested for audience that evening a centurion’s concubine who had caught his eye. The officer was not wholly discontented with this demand: the woman would get a bauble for her favor, his own chances for promotion would improve, and the emperor would be warm this night and in a better mood tomorrow. In the meantime, Hadrian wanted to climb the hill.

“We *could* wait on the weather,” Pompeius offered cautiously.

“Wait on the weather in Britannia?” The laugh was a bark. “I’m forty-eight years old, governor. Wait on the weather, and I might as well order my tomb.”

“It changes quickly, Caesar.”

“So does my empire. I’ve traveled from Persian parch to Briton bog. If I’d waited on weather, I’d still be in Syria, sunburned and bored.”

The new governor, Platorius Nepos, had accompanied Hadrian from Germania after being picked as Pompeius’s successor and had quickly learned his master’s impatience. “I’ll order the horses,” he said.

“No. We walk.” The emperor addressed the assembled officers. “We walk like the barbarians walk, to feel the lay of the land as they do and try to imagine what this proposed line of ours will look

like, to them and to us.”

The emperor set a brisk pace. He was tall, his face bearded to hide the pits and scars left by the acne that had plagued him as a youth, and he habitually went bareheaded, his dark Iberian hair curling in the rain. His fur-trimmed cloak flapped behind him like a bird's tail as he strode, his hounds dashing excitedly ahead after nothing. Generals, engineers, logisticians, architects, and centurions followed him up the muddy incline like a procession of ants. A few Praetorian cavalry rode ahead in protective screen, but otherwise there was no formality to this survey, and no pomp. Gray clouds scudded across the broad valley to the south, soaking it, while the ridge crest still hid the country to the north.

Pompeius was panting. “I'd expected to show the scale models first.”

Nepos grinned. “Those he'll want at midnight. In daylight, he moves. When he ordered a palisade in Germania and Flavius balked at the cost in labor, Hadrian grabbed a spade and ax himself. The legion almost stampeded to get ahead of him. By the time he left, the first mile of log wall was already in place.”

“His pace is quick.”

“And his mind quicker. He wants to settle the world.”

The Praetorians reined in abruptly at the crest. Hadrian paused below it, waiting in the lee of the hill to catch his breath and let the others gather around him. The rain was slackening to a blowing mist. The emperor squinted against it, seemingly immune to the cold. “Our empire stops at the dreariest places,” he remarked to the huddled men.

There was dutiful laughter, but some looked uneasy at this confirmation of the rumored halt. “Not under Trajan, it didn't,” one centurion muttered. Hadrian's predecessor had been a ceaseless expansionist. Trajan never stopped.

The new emperor, pretending not to hear this remark, turned and led the men up the hillside. At the summit the earth dropped away, and the wind struck them like a slap.

What had been a grassy hill on the south slope ended in an abrupt cliff of dark and rugged volcanic rock on the north. There was a sheer plunge of two hundred feet and then a wasteland of moor and lead-colored pond, undulating northward toward the smoky mists of distant Caledonia. In the pale light it was difficult to tell what was cloud and what was mountain. No matter. The view was magnificent, the rain stung, and the position was unassailable. The soldiers murmured their approval.

“This is the high point of a ridge that extends across much of the waist of Britannia,” Pompeius explained. “You can see, Caesar, what a natural boundary it is. Inlets allow a port on both coasts. Flatter ground allows deployment of cavalry to the east and west. A road already runs in the valley behind us. Some forts and watchtowers—”

“A wall.”

“Yes, walls, ditches—”

“A wall, governor, across the entire island.”

~~Pompeius blinked. “The entire island?” There’d been no warning of this.~~

“A single wall to settle the governance of Britannia once and for all. Rome on one side, the barbarians on the other. This province has the most tiresome rebels since the Jews were scattered from Judea. A wall, Pompeius, to control trade, migration, smuggling, alliance, and civilization. A wall eighty miles long, built by Britannia’s three legions.”

“Even up here?” The governor looked warily over the edge of a precipice no army could climb.

“Even up here.” The party’s cloaks fluttered in the bitter wind, but the rain was thinning to spatters, and the panorama was sharpening. “I want the tribes to see a wall unbroken, filling ravines, crowning cliffs, and bridging rivers.” Hadrian turned to Pompeius’s successor. “Can you do it, Nepos?”

“The engineers have made some preliminary calculations,” the new governor said, having had more knowledge than Pompeius of this idea. “The volume of stone is prodigious. Imagine a legionary carrying his own weight in rock. He would have to do so at least fifty million times. I estimate thirty million facing stones alone, Caesar, with rubble, clay, and lime mortar filling the thickness between. Such a project will require many quarries, timber for scaffolding, and a squadron of cobblers just to replace worn boots—not to mention tanners to supply the cobblers! The water alone to mix the mortar will require five hundred jars a day, and at least double that to slake the thirst of the soldiers. Most of it will have to be hauled up hills like the one we just climbed. That means oxen, donkeys, and horses, and fodder for the herd. It will cost—”

“It will cost little.” Hadrian was looking not at his governors but out across the northern landscape again. “It will be built by soldiers who have grown restless and need a project to organize their minds. And it *will* be done. Augustus said he found Rome in brick and left it in marble. I intend to defend that marble with stone.”

“With all respect, Caesar, it has never been done,” Pompeius had the courage to caution. “Not of stone, for so long a distance. Not in all the empire.”

Their commander turned. “Not in our empire. But when fighting the Parthians, governor, I heard stories of a wall far to the east, far beyond India, in the land where silk originates. The caravans say that wall separates barbarism from civilization, leaving both sides happier for it. I want that here.”

The soldiers looked uncertain. Rome’s army did not defend, it attacked. So the emperor caught the eye of the centurion who had muttered about Trajan, addressing the man as an equal. “Listen to me, centurion. Listen all of you, and listen well. Rome has been advancing outward for five hundred years, and all of us benefit from her glories. Yet conquest is losing its profit. I followed Trajan on his adventures in the East, and I know well how his battles were celebrated in every Roman city, from Alexandria to Londinium. What those who glorify my late cousin and guardian don’t understand is that we conquered valleys but not the mountains above, nor the armies that still lurked there. We could not be defeated, but neither could we defeat. Is that not the case here in Britannia?”

There was no answer but the wind.

“I well know of the glorious victory two generations ago at Mount Graupius in distant Caledonia far to the north,” Hadrian continued. “I well know the courage of the Britannic legions that have never been defeated in standing battle. I know we’ve manned temporary turf and timber walls far into barbarian lands, ultimately beating every sally against them. But I also know that these barbarians don’t submit like Carthage or Corinth or Judea. As they have nothing to lose, a loss means nothing to them. Having no honor, they run instead of die. Having no true nation, they have none to surrender. They hide behind rocks. They haunt the mountains. They charge on horse or foot, hurl a javelin or fire an arrow, and then flee before the issue is decided. They are as weak as fog, and just as hard to bag. And most important, they inhabit lands we have no interest in! Here in Britannia it is cold highlands and peat bogs. In Germania it is swamps and trackless forest. In Scythia it is a desert of grass, in Parthia a kingdom of stones, and in Africa a wilderness of sand. Every mile our empire stretches into such waste means costly transport and vulnerable garrisons. I’ll tell you what I learned from the great Trajan, centurion: that senseless conquest is meaningless conquest, because it costs more than it gains. Did you know that I inherited not just an empire, but a debt of seven hundred million sesterces? We have marched to the edges of the world, and it is time to defend what we have. Do you agree, centurion? Answer truthfully, because pleasing lies are as useless as costly victories.”

The man swallowed. It was not easy to talk to an emperor, and yet this one, his hair wet and bright eyes glistening with intensity, seemed genuinely to welcome it. “A wall doesn’t just keep the barbarians out, Caesar. It keeps us in.”

“Ah.” Hadrian nodded. “You’re a strategist too. And you have more courage than many of my courtiers, centurion, to offer such opinion, and I congratulate you for it. So I tell you this: Rome has never waited for her enemies, or when she did—when Hannibal came down out of his mountains—the result was terrible. So this wall will have gates, and Rome’s soldiers will march northward from them. Or rather ride—we need more cavalry, my generals tell me, to run the cowards down!” The assembly laughed. “The chiefs will never be allowed to forget our power, or to stop fearing our revenge. But at the same time, every barbarian will know that their own territory stops here, where civilization begins. Every chief will know it is easier to make peace with Rome than make war.”

The racing cloud was fragmenting in the wind, and sunlight began to pick out parts of the ridge, lighting it with shafts of gold. The party stirred. The shift in weather seemed an auspicious omen. They tried to picture a wall snaking along the ridge, dotted with towers, buttressed by forts. They tried to imagine their long and bloody march finally coming to an end.

“We’ve conquered that which is worth conquering,” Hadrian said. “In Germania the wall will be of wood, because our boundary is in a forest, and construction clears lines of sight. Here in Britannia where it’s too miserable for even trees to grow, we’ll build of rock. Or turf, where there’s no rock. We’ll build and build, a manifestation of Roman power, and when it’s done…” He looked past them to the south, slowly being settled. “When it’s done, there’ll be no more battle, and the world will have entered a new age. Let the barbarians have their bogs. We will have what’s worth having.” He turned to his governors. “Pompeius, your ideas have gotten us started. Nepos, finishing will be your monument.”

The new governor nodded solemnly. “It will take a generation—”

“It will take three years.”

The assembly gasped.

“Three years, legion matched against legion to measure speed, and at its end we’ll have our barrier.” Hadrian smiled. “Improvements will follow, of course.”

“Three years?” Nepos nodded uncertainly. “As you command, Caesar. But I need the legions as committed to this project as if on campaign.”

“This *is* their campaign, Nepos.”

“Three years.” The new governor nodded, and swallowed. “And how long is this line to last, emperor?”

“How long?” Now Hadrian looked impatient—much more so than he had with the impudent centurion. “How long, governor? As long as all my projects and monuments are to last: as long as the rock they are built on. This wall, Aulus Platorius Nepos, is to be built to last forever.”

The Dusk of the Roman Empire

PART ONE

No one knows better than I just how big our empire is.

My bones ache from its immensity.

I, Draco, am frontiersman and bureaucrat, inspector and scribe. Men fear me for what I represent, the long reach of Rome. I have the ear of emperors. I make and break careers. I wear this power like armor because it's the only protection I have when making my unloved appearances and blunt reports. I carry no weapon but authority.

The cost of this power is exhaustion. When I was young, traveling Rome's borders to recommend a strengthened garrison here, a tax office there, my job seemed glamorous. It showed me the world. But I've walked, ridden, barged, and sailed for twenty thousand miles, and now I am old and weary, sent finally to this farthest place, my joints sore from its chill.

I have been ordered to northern Britannia to answer a mystery. A report on revolt and invasion, yes, but that is not all of it. I read again the dispatch ordering my mission, sensing the bafflement behind it. A senator's daughter, lost to the wilderness. Valeria, her name is, beautiful by all accounts willful, adventuresome, discontented, the spark that ignited blood and fire.

Why?

The northern skies outside my window in the grim legionary fortress of Eburacum are gray and blank, offering nothing. I snap at my slave to add more charcoal to the brazier. How I miss the sun!

The tone of the plea I've received from the patrician Valens has more of the petulance and self-pity of the endangered politician than it does the heartbreak and guilt of the bereaved father. He is one of the two thousand senators who burden today's Rome, clinging to an office that provides more opportunities for greed than power. Still, a senator cannot be ignored. I read again.

I wish for a public report on the recent barbarian invasion and a confidential addendum on the disappearance of my daughter. Rumors of her choice have strained relations with my Flavian in-laws and interrupted the financial partnership necessary to sustain my office. It is important that Valeria's reputation be restored so that her family can make claim to rightful estate. I trust you understand the delicacy of your mission and the need for discretion.

Retirement should have come long ago, but I am a useful kind of man, loyal not to a ruler so much as the idea of Rule. Loyal to stability. Longevity. That means I persist through each change of emperor, each switch of state religion, each reorganization of the provinces. I'm also kept as far away

as possible, out on the borders. An idealist can be usefully employed but never completely trusted.

I am here to interrogate survivors, which means I try to find some truth in the web of lies, self-deception, and wishful thinking that makes up human memory. Many of the best witnesses are dead, and the rest are divided and confused by what happened. They carry in their mood the stink of Hadrian's Wall, the smell of burned timbers, unburied flesh, and abandoned food pots that churn with squirming maggots. The flies come by day and the wild dogs by night, driven off by the desultory crew of sullen slaves, crippled soldiers, and pressed Briton laborers working to repair the damage. It is the stink of victory that in truth is a kind of defeat, of stability replaced by uncertainty.

How soon before the barbarians come back again, perhaps for good?

That too, the emperor and Senate want to know.

I have made a list of informants to interview. The handmaiden. The cook. The villa owner. The captured druid. But I start with a soldier, direct and blunt.

The centurion on the field litter before me is named Longinus: a good record, his foot crushed by a battle-ax in the desperate fighting, his eyes dark with sleepless pain and the knowledge he will never walk again. Still, he has glory I can only envy. I question him.

"Do you know who I am?"

"An imperial inspector."

"You understand my purpose?"

"To do the bidding of emperor and Senate."

"Yes. And yours?"

"I'm a man of duty. It's all I've ever been."

"So you will answer any question?"

"When there's an answer I can give." Crisp, unhesitating, to the point. A Roman.

"Good. Now, you knew the senior tribune Galba Brassidias?"

"Of course."

"When he was promoted?"

"I brought the news to him."

"And when was that?"

"The autumn of two years ago."

“You were a courier?”

Longinus is no simple soldier. He understands I'm surprised that a ranking centurion had been assigned the mission of riding the post. “The news was delicate. Duke Fullofaudes, the commander of northern Britannia, sent me because I'd campaigned with Galba and knew him as well as any man could know him. A hard man, but a good soldier. Galba, I mean.”

“What do you mean, ‘a hard man’?”

“Cavalry. Not the kind to have at banquet. Not a conversationalist. He was a provincial from Thrace who lacked refinement, a superb horseman but never schooled. Solid but grim. The best kind to have on your right side in battle.”

“Of course.” As if I truly know. “And he took the news well?”

Longinus gave a pained smile, remembering.

“Poorly?”

“None of this will make sense to you unless you've served on the Wall.”

It is a careful insult, an attempt to pretend at a vast difference between civilian and soldier. As if a breastplate changes the human heart!

“I have spent my whole life on the Wall,” I growl, giving him a sense of the power behind me. “Rome's wall, from Arabia Petraea to your dunghill here. I have traded insults with the arrogant warriors of Sarmatia and sifted rumors of the distant hun. I have smelled the stink of Berber camels and eaten with sentries on the cold palisades of the Rhine, counting the fires of the Germans across the river. Do not think you have to tell me about the Wall.”

“It's just that it was...complicated.”

“You said you would answer any question.”

He shifts, grimacing. “I'll answer it. To be honest isn't simple, however.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Life at the border is complex. Sometimes you're a sentry, sometimes an ambassador. Sometimes a wall, sometimes a gate. Sometimes we fight the barbarians, sometimes we enlist them. For outsiders like the woman to come in—”

“Now you are getting ahead of my questions. I asked for Galba's reaction to his superior's appointment, not his justification.”

Longinus hesitates, appraising me. He doesn't seek to know if I can be trusted. How can you ever be sure of that? Rather, whether I can understand. The hardest thing in life, after all, is to be understood. “You've been to the breach where the barbarians broke through?”

“It is the first place I went to.”

“What did you see there?”

The interrogation has been turned around. Longinus wants proof I can comprehend what he tells me. I think before I speak.

“A thin garrison. Sulking craftsmen. A cold pyre, nothing but bones.”

He nods, waiting.

“The Wall is being repaired,” I go on, betraying some of what will be in my report, “but not with the same care as before. I measured the lime, and the mix is weak. The contractor is corrupt and the imperial foreman untrained. His superior died in the fighting. The mortar will dry to little better than hard sand and will have to be redone.”

“Will it?”

I know what he means. General Theodosius has restored rough order, but the treasury has been drained and authority is dissipating. The best builders are moving south. “It should be redone. How well depends on good Romans such as yourself.”

He nods. “You’re observant, Inspector Draco. Realistic. Smart, perhaps. Smart to have gone to so many places and lived as long as you have.” The centurion has approved of me, I realize, and I’m secretly flattered by his approval. A man of action seeing value in me, a man of words! “Maybe even honest, which is rare these days. So I’ll tell you about Galba and the lady Valeria and the last good days of the Petriana cavalry. The patricians will blame him, but I don’t. Do you?”

I think again. “Loyalty is the first virtue.”

“Which Rome did not repay in kind.”

That is the question, isn’t it? Everyone knows what soldiers owe the state—death, if necessary. But what does the state owe its soldiers?

“Galba dedicated his life to Rome, and then the influence of this woman took his command away,” Longinus goes on. “She pretended to innocence, but...”

“You do not concede that?”

“My experience is that no one is innocent. Not in Rome. Not here, either.”

Innocence is what I’ve come to decide, of course. Treason. Jealousy. Incompetence. Heroism. I pass judgment like a god.

Certainly Longinus is right about having to understand Hadrian’s Wall. In all the empire no place is more remote than this one, none farther north, none farther west. Nowhere are the barbarians more intractable, the weather gloomier, the hills more windswept, the poverty more abject. I listen, my questions sharp but infrequent, letting him not just answer but explain. I absorb, imagine, and clarify.

summarizing in my own mind his story. It must have been like this.

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