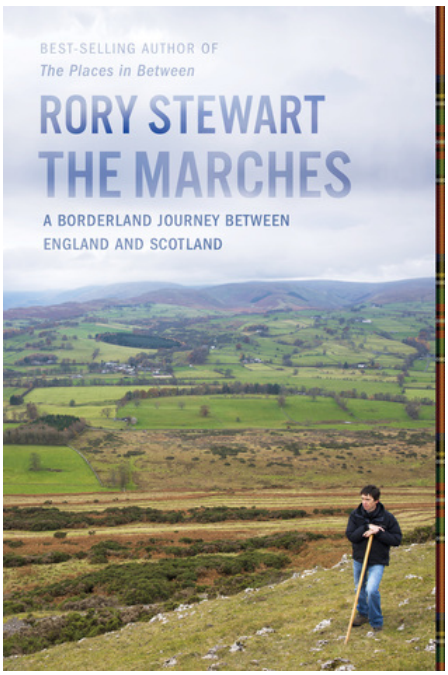

The Marches: A Borderland Journey Between England and Scotland

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From a member of Parliament and best-selling author of *The Places in Between*, an exploration of the Marches--the borderland between England and Scotland--and the political turmoil and vivid lives that created it

The Marches: A Borderland Journey Between England and Scotland Details

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From Reader Review The Marches: A Borderland Journey Between England and Scotland for online ebook

Toto says

This is not a wholly successful book, thought it could have been. It could have used better editing as it does not cohere very well. The first part is about Stewart's walk by Hadrian's Wall, which is interspersed with his thoughts on the Roman presence in England and dominated by thoughts on and presence of his father. The second part, in which he walks "the Debatable Lands" between that wall and the Scottish border without his father, (perhaps because of it) sags and is thoroughly without focus. Some conversations with the locals, reflections on the flora of the land, musings about the state of farming in the Middlelands, all add up to, well, not very good reading. The last part, which is about the passing of his father, is the strongest and most vivid. Missing from the narrative, which was very jarring to me, is his mother, and "Shoshana" whom I take to be his wife. (At some point he refers to her as his best walking partner. Was she there with him, then?) It's clear that he wanted to write about his father, but perhaps he should have waited a while after his death to clear his head and collect his thoughts. This book is, as interesting as it is, a bit of a jumble, wanting to be a travelogue but ending up being reflections on a colorful but infuriating, "not so sweet" a man as his mother says who dominates everyone and everything around him, including this very book that he witnessed being written.

Anneliese Tirry says

Meer dan een verhaal over 2 lange wandeltochten, 1 langs Hadrian's Wall, 1 van aan het huis van de auteur in Cumbria tot het huis van zijn vader in Schotland, is dit boek een ode. Een ode aan de hoogbejaarde vader van de auteur (flink in de 90), een ode aan Schotland en meer nog aan The Marches, een gebied tussen Engeland en Schotland dat eerder in de geschiedenis als een aparte regio werd gezien. De auteur gaat ook op zoek naar de geschiedenis van dit gebied, de herkomst van de plaatsnamen, wat de Romeinen, de Vikingen, de Northumbrians, de Kelten, ... er deden en hoe dit alles verder leeft in de overlevering en de tradities. Hij ontdekt echter dat geschiedenis evolueert, dat niets blijft zoals het is en dat de mooiste tradities zijn die je zelf maakt.
Ik weet niet of ik auteur of zijn vader in de dagelijkse omgang sympathiek zou gevonden hebben, maar dat doet er niet toe. Uit elke zin blijkt de liefde en de eerbied die zij voor elkaar voelen en dit wordt zéér goed overgebracht en mooi verwoord. Wat een rijkdom om zo een relatie met een ouder te mogen hebben. Ik was, toen het onvermijdelijke gebeurde, ook echt ontroerd.
Aanrader dus, zeker als je geïnteresseerd bent in de geschiedenis van dit gebied in the UK.

Crazytourists_books says

Reading this book was a real struggle. I found it boring, incoherent, a mess really. Three different parts, none of which deliver what's promised by the title. It makes me wonder why the author didn't adapt his writing when he found out that his original idea wasn't working.
If the whole book was like the third part, the last 50 pages that is, it would have been great (the third part explains the two stars).
If the title and the description of the book were different it might have had a better review. But unfortunately

nothing works as is. At least for me.

Paul says

We tend to think of the UK as one complete country, but there are separate countries here that have their own distinct identity and outlook. This loosely defined border between us and the Scottish has existed since Roman times. Their farthest outpost, it suffered from marauding Picts and Celts who took every opportunity to give the Romans a bloody nose, hence why they built Hadrian's Wall. It was this 200 year old monument that Stewart chose to walk as his first journey in this book. Some of the time he walked with his elderly father, though not the whole route, choosing to walk a short way before meeting elsewhere. Sometime he walk with soldiers, not long returned from Afghanistan, a country that he knew from a walk described in The Places in Between.

The second part of the book is a walk that he takes from his home in Cumbria to his father's house in Broich. This 380 mile route takes him through the border country, or has he calls it, the Middleland. Mixing sleeping out on mountains staying in other accommodation, he takes 21 days to complete it, but it is as much a discovery of the landscape, region and the people that inhabit it and learning about its fluid and torrid past. His third journey is a metaphorical one; it is a celebration and tribute to his father, someone who was very dear to him.

It is a difficult book to classify, it is a travel book in parts and a history book in others and a homage to his father at the end. Parts of the book are really well written, my favourite being the Middleland walk where he crosses the political, cultural and geological boundaries of this borderland. It didn't seem quite as focused as it could have been though. It was enjoyable though, and will be reading The Places in Between as I picked up a copy recently.

Don says

(FROM MY BLOG). Hadrian's Wall, constructed by the Romans from A.D. 122 to about 128, crosses northern England from Newcastle, through Carlisle, to Bowness on the Solway Firth. In 2010, I followed the wall its entire length on foot.

In 2011, Rory Stewart walked the same route, together with his 89-year-old father (the father driving far more than walking). The following year, he walked a more rambling, and much longer, route from the Lake District to his father's home at the foot of the Highland Line in Scotland, exploring the puzzling region between the Wall and the Scottish border, the region called "the marches" in medieval times, and which Stewart likes to call "the Middleland."

Mr. Stewart is best known in America as the author of a best-selling book about his 32-day walk across Afghanistan in 2002, The Places in Between. A graduate of Eton and Oxford, he has also served as a member of Britain's foreign service, working on issues in Iraq, Montenegro, and East Timor. At the time of his Hadrian's Wall walk, he had just been elected as a Conservative party Member of Parliament, an office he continues to hold.

He has now published his account of his 2011 and 2012 ramblings, The Marches: A Borderland Journey

Between England and Scotland. But The Marches is far more than a travel document. Stewart is a keen observer of flora, fauna, geology, archeology, history and pre-history. Simply reading his account of the Hadrian's Wall walk made me realize how much I had missed, how unobservant I had been, how superficial my understanding of the history of the area had been.

Moreover, Stewart combines his trekking observations with a tribute to his father -- a man who was an amazing example of a certain vigorous type of polymath and adventurer spawned by the British Empire -- and a deeply moving, bittersweet testimonial to the unusually close relationship between father and son. The book begins with Stewart's memories of his father as a child, and ends with his father's death at 93 in 2015.

The book has a number of themes, including the tribute to his father's remarkable life, and they perhaps do not all mesh easily together in a single volume. But they mesh as well in writing, probably, as they do in Stewart's own mind.

One predominant theme, intended or not, is Stewart's love of Britain's "lived in" rural landscape. The small village, the stone fence enclosures, the sheep and cattle, the neighboring farms and farm houses, where everyone knows everyone. A certain coziness. After the Norman conquest, the Middleland area was cleared of habitation and reserved as royal forest for the king's hunting. Stewart looks on forest as a form of desert.

Modern agriculture, tourism, environmentalism, and reforestation are causing a rapid re-desertification, in Stewart's eyes. Small farms held by families for centuries are being combined into large mechanized agricultural businesses. The government is reforesting other areas, and environmentalists are undoing the farmers' work of centuries, returning the land to "non-invasive" species. Among the many undesirable effects, as Stewart sees it, is a significant depopulation: fewer people now live in the "Middleland" than at any time since the middle ages, and deserted farm houses abound.

Another theme is the unique nature of the Middleland. Stewart had set out on his Hadrian's Wall hike with some thought that the wall marked a separation between Scots and English peoples. His findings confused him, and he now feels that the people of the "Middleland" -- now defined as stretching from the Humber river to the Highland Line -- make up a distinct third culture, one containing a number of sub-cultures.

Stewart loves seeking out the etymology of place names, and notes frequently which areas of the Middleland have names deriving from Northumbrian (Germanic) roots, which from Norse roots, and which from Cumbric-Welsh roots. He points out that what he now calls the Middleland was, before and for some time after the Conquest, shared by a number of kings representing different language and cultural regions. Some of these distinctions still exist in local language and customs.

The book has an underlying mood of melancholy. Just as his father -- a fascinating, accomplished, and eccentric gentleman, who still liked to dress up in Black Watch tartans until his death -- gradually weakens and fades throughout the book, so the Middleland is losing its cultural distinctiveness. Stewart repeatedly finds that residents today -- even in small, isolated communities -- have little real organic connection to their history and traditions. Local festivals tend to be promoted by community leaders for the enticement of tourists. Matching the cultural loss, the scenic values of the area are dying, as land use changes force a return to a dreary, pre-agricultural uniformity.

"Two states now predominated -- suburban and abandoned -- increasingly at the expense of the alternative, a living countryside."

Stewart frequently contrasts this dying of customary Britain with the vibrant survival of local village customs

he encountered during his walk through Afghanistan. I easily understand how Stewart has chosen the Conservative party. And yet, his observations and conclusions are never doctrinaire, never set in stone. He continually observes facts that mitigate against his conclusions. He continually modifies his conclusions. The Marches is a travel book and an academic study, never a political tract.

Stewart sums up his father's life, shortly after the old man's death:

"It was an attitude to his life, then, and a resilience. I was only half-conscious of the many ways in which he had modestly concealed how he was better than me -- in singing, in his languages, in his sense of engineering or art, and in his promptitude and energy in work. In the end, I felt, his legacy was not some grand philosophical or political vision, but playfulness, and a delight in action."

Playful, indeed.

""I prefer," commented my father when I shared this [a Scot's verse, written contemporaneously, about Robert Bruce's battles with Edward I] with him, "Edward's comment on toppling Balliol -- 'bon bosoigne fai qy de merde se deliver' -- isn't it great to push out a turd.""

Stewart's evaluation of his father feels entirely justified, but his self-deprecation not so much. I suspect his father -- who continued to call his son "darling" right up to the end -- was immensely proud of his son's accomplishments, and felt he was leaving his world in good hands.

I doubt if any American Congressman, of either party, displays the same sensitivity, the same curiosity, the same scholarship, the same sense of history. The same love of lengthy, solitary walking. Or indeed, the same playfulness.

Charles says

Oh, Rory. Growing up in the north-east of England I really wanted to enjoy this book, and although there are some fascinating insights I found it lacking purpose and direction. Continual references to his walk across Afghanistan and stretched attempts at drawing comparisons left my head rather scattered.

John Thomas says

The book has been criticized as having difficulty in coming to a conclusion about these borderlands between England and Scotland. I found it very interesting to understand that there were many cultures, kingdoms, and people who had lived in this area for thousands of years -including the Romans for over 300 years. Rory tried to find someone who could talk about their villages and ways but most of rhw villagers and farmesr he met were newcomers and had little or no knowledge of local history. He contrasted it with his earlier walk through Afghanistan ("The Places In Between" -highly recommend by the way) where each village had a rich history and culture with locals who could knew about it.

In many ways the books glue is Rory's relationship with his father, his many travels and walks with him, their deep and respectful caring for each other. It turns out the book is an elegy to him.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I think sometimes interweaving seemingly disparate threads can work well in non-fiction, unfortunately in this book I think it muddied the waters. Rory Stewart once did a walk across Afghanistan, which you can read about in his book, The Places in Between, which got a lot of acclaim. Much to my chagrin, he continuously references this journey and book throughout The Marches. At times he seems to be trying to find connections between Afghanistan and the borderlands between historical Scotland and England, but failing, in my opinion. He also seems to have written this book not long after the death of his father, and underlying everything is a clear desire to somehow pay tribute to his father. So also entwined in this narrative are reflections on his father's work in Asia. Too many ingredients, leading to very little clarity.

The only reason I actually read the entire thing is that this land is my land, as much as it is his land. A healthy quarter of my ancestry comes from the MacGregor lineage, a clan which lived in and/or bordered the land he is discussing, for centuries! Until the great migratory period between 1831 and 1931, where many people moved away (but not his family, except for working extensively overseas. This is when my Scottish ancestors came to the United States as well, to a very similar landscape.) So I found myself combing the text for more information on the history of the actual land, which is what I was hoping for from the book's description. From a few conversations he references with his Dad, I think that what Rory Stewart was assuming he would find was not as extensive as to fill a book, and as padding he has put everything else in. I would have preferred a shorter book with more focus.

Thanks to the publisher for giving me an early review copy through NetGalley.

Althea Ann says

I've previously read both Stewart's "The Places In Between" and "Prince of the Marshes." I found both books to be illuminating and informational, as well as engaging. I felt that they really gave me an insight into the situations and cultures of Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively.

However I have to say that I don't feel that Stewart's change of focus in 'The Marches' works as well. Unfortunately, it also lessened, to a degree, my personal respect for the author.

The first problem, perhaps, is that this is very clearly the product of: "I'm setting out to write another book," rather than, "These experiences and thoughts I've had demand the writing of a book." It is admitted, several times in the text, that the author is having trouble getting that book together, and it shows.

The concept is: Since Stewart's "walks" across the Middle East were so productive, why not apply that modus operandi to his home, and walk across the border of England and Scotland, meeting people along the way and getting a sense of the people and culture(s)? The initial idea is to walk along Hadrian's Wall with his father, gleaning oral history from the older gentleman. Unfortunately, his dad was too elderly for the endeavor, and passed away before the book was completed. This means that the book ends up being sort of part memorial elegy to his dad, part musing on the history of the Border counties, and a large part complaining and disdainful jabs with a political edge regarding most of the people encountered along the journey.

The memorial part is nicely done, but honestly probably not of that much interest to most people who did not know the man (who does not come off as a particularly admirable person, though the familial love clearly shines through.)

I very much liked the idea of discovering 'hidden' bits of history in each town and obscure archaeological site. That aspect is the best of the book. There are many tidbits of information here which, for me, made the piece worth reading.

However, the third part - the attitude - was a huge disappointment to me. In Stewart's previous writing, he seemed very sympathetic yet fair-mindedly critical regarding all the people he came across. Here, his attitude reflects that of the book project itself: he had a preconceived notion of what he wanted to find and do, and is resistant and frustrated when the reality doesn't match those preconceived notions. Stewart has a ridiculously romanticized notion of rural British life, and is practically angry when he discovers that rural English folks and Scots are, well, modern people, concerned with their daily lives without secretly harboring old tales and traditions. Those who do love the old tales and traditions repeatedly come under fire from him for being inauthentic and inaccurate (this may be true, but one would think we could appreciate the passion and love these people have, regardless.)
A bizarre and insistent love of the quaint picture-postcard idea of British life repeatedly crops up, along with an adulation of sheep-farming. Farms and agriculture are regarded as a pinnacle of civilization, and the fight of Man against Nature in order to farm is granted a heroic stature. Environmentalists' effort to create nature preserves and let areas revert to a wild state repeatedly come under fire, because this would be at the expense of FARMS! Can't have that! These bits - and others - show a shocking inability for the author to be willing to listen, learn, or admit that anyone might know more about an issue than he does. After all, his ANCESTRAL ESTATE is here! This attitude is disturbing, considering that Stewart is currently Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (which shows why people keep insistently trying to explain things to him.) Overdevelopment of rural areas is certainly a valid concern, but when a major part of the ending of the book is a plaintive lament that a housing development will leave the aforementioned ancestral estate with ONLY a SQUARE MILE of property around it, and he just won't be able to remain on the family lands because that will just be so *dreadfully crowded*, he comes off as simply the worst sort of blindly, selfishly entitled aristocrat, genuinely out of touch with the concerns of the average citizen. Which is genuinely disappointing.

Many thanks to HMH and NetGalley for the opportunity to read. As always, my opinions are solely my own.

Jo Walton says

This was a very strange book. I started off loving it, and then it curdled on me.

The trouble with a travel book is that you have to like the narrator. I liked Rory Stewart's father Brian, and this is largely a book about Brian. I started off liking Rory too, but the more time I spent with him the more the very high opinion he had of himself started to grate. There are some wonderful bits in this book, and I'm not at all sorry I've read it, but there's also a narrowness of perspective, a smug pettiness, that emerges slowly. I love the landscape he's writing about, I'm not at all averse to his thesis, but as time went on I felt more and more patronized.

Laura says

This is the "walking" book I've longed for. Mr. Stewart's walk combines history (Hadrian's Wall, the Romans, Picts, ancient Britons, barbarians), his relationship (and it's a sweet and loving one) with his father, and a really nice set of walks across what his father called The Middleland, defined as "the upland landscape that forms the geographical center of the island of Britain. At its core lie the Lake District hills, the Pennines, the Cheviots, and the Scottish Borders... ."

The descriptions of people he meets, land he sees, and what happened there before and what is there now make for interesting reading. And the story of his father and him from his childhood through adulthood is moving.

Jim says

I was a Goodreads winner of this book. I liked this book, but didn't love it. The history of Scotland and England was great, I enjoyed reading the historical tidbits thrown in the book but this book was not about the history but about a walk along Hadrian's Wall. The book is divided into 3 parts, the walk with his 89 year old father which is very interesting and what a wonderful person to be with. The second part is about a self journey which I found to be more difficult to read and the third is about his father again. Only a small part of this book is about the walk along the wall. There are some parts about Iraq, Afghanistan and the Vietnam War and some political ideas that get bantered back and forth with his father that leave the book disjointed and I found myself agreeing with the father. Overall it was an enjoyable read, the book had some random thoughts that appeared throughout the book when it may have been better to stick with the journey itself.

Barbara says

Rory Stewart walks the border between Scotland and England, much of it along Hadrian's Wall. This is a fairly long book that contains a lot of historical detail about the region. The author's father figures in much of the book and is a very colorful character. A survivor of D-Day he served with Scottish brigades as well as having a career in the Intelligence Service all over the world.

Stewart discovers that most people living along the border are ignorant of its history or indifferent. Occasionally he meets some who know local history. But he realizes that this area has been in flux since Roman times. Now many residents are people who have relocated from other parts of England or Scotland. The book is a fascinating study of nationalism and made me realize how many of our ideas about nations and nationality are recent inventions, and more invention than anything else.

I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in the north of England and Scotland's border region. I am likely to read more of Stewart's books on Iraq and Afghanistan. He is thorough, and has a sense of humor even when the topic is dead serious.

Maxwell says

Maybe this was too ambitious for me considering I don't read a lot of non-fiction that isn't memoir or essays. I thought this would be an interesting read about a man's life in conjunction with his findings on a long walk across the U.K. but it turned out to be a bit too tedious for me. The information is dense and the narrative is uneventful, so it was hard for me to feel motivated to read it. It took me over a week to read 50 pages because I didn't want to pick it up. It wasn't poorly written, just not for me. Honestly I think this kind of non-fiction works better for me in podcast or audiobook form.

Amy Durreson says

This is a fascinating and complicated book. I picked it up because I'm currently fascinated by the borders. I'm not close enough to go and walk the ground myself (always the best way to learn a place), but I was hoping that reading the account of someone who had might give me a sense of the land. It did, but it also offered me far more than that. The book is split into three stages: an attempt the author made to walk Hadrian's wall with his father (who, being then in his late eighties, met him at key points along the way), a later solo trek from his home to in Cumbria to the Solway Firth and then up the border, and finally a trip from Berwick to his father's home on the edge of the Highlands which leads into an account of his father's final days. Although his account of his walks explore the land he crosses and the people who live there, that knowledge is then used as a launching board to explore the experiences of the Romans who built the wall, the history of the borders, his own experiences in Afghanistan and elsewhere, his father's long career in the army and British intelligence all over the world and, of course, the relationship between himself and his father.

Stewart is a Tory MP, and it shows occasionally, in the occasional sideswipe at well-meaning conservationists making life hard for farmers and his preoccupation with the Scottish Independence vote. He eschews political soundbites, though, and one of the great strengths of the book is the way in which he interrogates his own assumptions about nationhood and identity. He sets out with a determination to find evidence of a Borders identity which transcends the differences between English and Scottish. What he finds instead is a lack of any coherent identity at all--the individuals he meets and describes so vividly defy this sort of simple categorisation, and you leave the book with a sense that he is profoundly troubled by this lack of connection to place or history. By the end of the book, he comes full circle, back to the individual and personal, to his own family and their loss, and to the invention of new tradition rather than the upkeep of the old.

I've seen reviews saying the book itself doesn't cohere well. Perhaps not, but I'm tempted to think that's rather the point. In that sense, in the lack of a single forward momentum, perhaps you could call it flawed. Personally, I liked it more for that lack.
