



## The Debatable Land

by **Graham Robb**

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Historian and biographer Graham Robb finds himself in a place lost in legend. Moving from Oxford to ‘a lonely house on the very edge of England,’ Robb embarks on a journey of discovery through *The Debatable Land*. Divided into four parts, his account is supported by a series of 25 colour illustrations and a pronunciation guide. Like any good historian or biographer, he also includes an extensive index and appendix with references, chronology, maps, footnotes and cited works.

Part One of the book is part biography/part travel guide as the author ambles his way from Carlisle to his new house on the Liddel river, which forms part of the border between Scotland and England. Robb reveals snippets of his family history as he looks to reconcile his own struggle between Scottish and English identity, weaving his own story into that of the ‘debatable’ national border where he now resides.

Part Two investigates the history of the surrounding area and the ‘debatable land’ itself as Robb delves into local records and other historical works referencing the area. Curiously, he determines that the name ‘debatable land,’ used by the novelist Walter Scott, was an etymological misinterpretation of ‘batable’ land. From the obsolete verb ‘batten’, batable land was the rich fertile land on which livestock were pastured and fattened up (battened). Over time and through reference to its borderland location, the name of the area evolved to ‘debatable,’ outlasting its use for animal grazing practices.

Continuing with the historical investigation in Part Three, Robb recounts some of the known history

of ‘those fifty square miles.’ It was notorious during Tudor times a notorious and bloody place where ‘all Englishmen and Scottishmen are and shall be free to rob, burn, spoil, slay, murder and destroy, all and every such person and persons, their bodies, property, goods, and livestock ... without any redress to be made for the same.’ Appealing to prospective historians, this part covers much of the politics and key events that define the last part of the country to be brought under state control following the Union of the Crowns in 1603.

Coming full circle, in Part Four, Robb weaves the history he has uncovered back into the legends, from Ptolemy’s map of Albion and Hibernia from the Great Library of Alexandria to the *Historia Brittonum*, constructing a plausible hypothesis for an historical King Arthur. Framed within the context of the vote for Scottish independence (2014) and then Brexit (2016), Robb’s story ends with a poignant lament that after centuries of transcending national divisions and improving cross-border community relations, modern political campaigns have created a border no longer debatable, where ‘the two sides faced in opposite directions.’

Overall, *The Debatable Land* is an interesting blend of history and legend, written in a narrative style that is reflective of a biography. Its informal tone, filled with personal anecdotes and excerpts from literary treasures, compels the reader to ride along with Graham Robb to see where the road leads. Fluidity of reading can be broken by visiting the appendices to follow the evidence, but like any stops on a journey, each reference revitalises the reader to take another step forward.