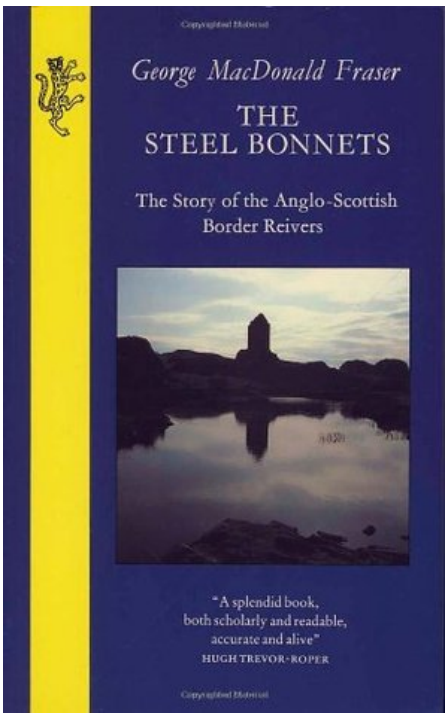

The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers

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"If Jesus Christ were amongst them, they would deceive him," it was said of the plunders, raiders, and outlaws who terrorized the Anglo-Scottish Border for over 300 years. Theirs is an almost forgotten chapter of British history, preserved largely in folktales and ballads. It is the story of the notorious raiding families - Armstrongs, Elliots, Grahams, Johnstones, Maxwells, Scotts, Kerrs, Nixons, and others--of the outlaw bands and broken men, and the fierce battles of English and Scottish armies across the Marches. *The Steel Bonnets* tells their true story in its historical context - how the reivers ran their raids and operated their system of blackmail and terrorism, and how the March Wardens, enforcing the unique Border law, fought the great lawless community. A superb work of scholarship and a spellbinding narrative. George MacDonald Fraser is the celebrated author of the *Flashman* novels, *The Candlemass Road*, *The Pyrates*, and the *Private McAuslan* stories.

The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers Details

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From Reader Review The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers for online ebook

Tim Pendry says

This nearly fifty year old account of the Anglo-Scottish borderlands in the sixteenth century is still frequently reprinted for good reason and deserves re-reading today by anyone with an interest in organised crime and what we now call 'homeland security'.

The author, a journalist, creator of the 'Flashman' series of popular novels, film script writer, former soldier and part-Anglo-Scot borderer himself, writes well and has an eye for a story so the book is generally a good read - although Fraser does not sacrifice fact to fiction.

It tells the tale of the background to and the history of just over a century of state-sanctioned organised crime on the borderlands of two early modern states with a troubled history, a culture only brought to heel through the use of state terror when the two states were unified.

Fraser is not averse to occasional contemporary and wider historical references to the late 1960s and early 1970s, likening the Anglo-Scottish border to the Afghan frontier and the mythologisation of brutality to the legend of the West in America.

He holds no truck with the Scottish nationalist romanticisation of the border reivers (riders). The border ballads are often little more than the same sort of voyeuristic fascination of a laddish audience with tales ('ghosted autobiographies') of major criminals today.

However, he is no moraliser while retaining his framework of values. He goes back to the roots of local organised crime, centred on criminal family networks, and finds them in the devastation to the economy left by brutal inter-state war and the inherent administrative incapacity of states.

The century of criminality was not the normal state of the borders but was the result of borders being contested by only partially centralised polities. Men sent, or employed from within the borders, to manage affairs were frequently corrupted and part of the system themselves.

Fifty years on, the book seems more pertinent than ever in understanding why the fringes of globalisation have resulted in blow-back in a world of improved communications. The borders rarely affected the core of England, sometimes Scotland, only because of weak communications.

There are many case studies like this of what happens when emergent border areas are disrupted by war and the incapacity of states - Afghanistan frequently, Sicily, the Balkans and many others. The recent use of war as an instrument of policy by the West now appears all the more negligent.

There is much factual meat in this case study to suggest that, while no historical situation ever precisely is reproduced elsewhere, themes and clues are ever-present in history. Destroy the capacity to rule in an area and it can only be restored through terror is one lesson.

The point here is that, once a non-criminal economy is destroyed, a new economy based on illegality takes its place, whether raiding and brigandage, heroin production and distribution or trafficking in oil and

antiquities, to displace farming and trade in goods and services.

Illegality creates its own violent rules and codes of conduct but also its own economic and trading logic. Powerful interests quickly emerge who understand how the new system works, how to corrupt officials, how to use terror and how to create alliances.

The modern West has one thing that Elizabeth I and the Stewarts did not, financial resources. The villains could not be bought off or bribed sufficiently, yet the West is now finding that trying to buy legality simply fuels more corruption and more warlordism. Perhaps only state terror is left.

This is certainly relevant to modern Syria, Iraq and Libya where very weak states are trying to restore order against quasi-criminalised groups creating economies to match those created in Afghanistan or Colombia or Mexico or much of the rest of the emerging world.

Western states want security and human rights but are finding that the purchase of the latter is becoming a bottomless pit just at the time when the homelands are craving some attention and disorder threatens in the cities and townships at the centre of empires.

Having disrupted the world, the current belief is that the problem can be solved with fortress operations combined with overseas safe havens for migrants but this does nothing about the criminalised survival economy in which people are being forced to live.

If the story of the Anglo-Scottish borderlands teaches a lesson, it might be a rather grim one. You either leave the bandits to fight it out and create their own warlord states (which is what IS is doing) or the matter can only be dealt with through full force directly or through proxies.

By full force we may mean the inevitability of reigns of terror like that perpetrated in the first decade or so of the seventeenth century by James I of England and VI of Scotland who finally captured control of both sides of the border and then squeezed it hard.

If he had not done so, one wonders, speculatively, if, having avoided becoming engaged in religious strife within Scotland and England in the previous century, some border political entrepreneurs might have discovered fundamentalist Protestantism or Catholicism as a tool for state creation.

The book needs a bit of attention as it is read because (as Fraser acknowledges) the complexity of clan relationships and even of the system for law enforcement is, given the sources, rife with room for misunderstandings and errors. The same family names prop up time and time again.

This is the story of clans with long histories of feud and violence, with patches or what London gangsters would call 'manors' and with ambiguous relationships to authority much like the sometimes symbiotic relationship in the past between organised crime and the Met.

One major lack in the book is any serious reference to women in the borderlands. This is of its time but it is significant that, in a catalogue of killings (sometimes of women and children), arson and dispossession, there is no mention of rape. This also fits with a cultural model of organised crime.

It is not that we want some feminist bleat about patriarchal society but we want to know more about how male criminality was sustained at home and how women played or failed to play a support function for clan operations.

There are hints that women were important in this capacity as they are no doubt important in all such societies, fiercely loyal to the clan and perhaps a motive force for crime in demanding resources for the households they ran. Was there a culture of 'nagging' men to go and steal?

Certainly marriage alliances between clans seem important although the transfer of a woman from one clan to another meant that her first duty (if I have interpreted the few references in the book correctly) was to her new husband and not to her father.

Women may have been far from passive in this economy. Destroying households seems to have been as important as killing rivals to the clans. The theft of possessions was matched by burnings of houses, often carefully selected, and sometimes whole villages. Rivalries were existential.

All in all, an interesting story closed with two appendices. The most magnificent curse from a Bishop against the reivers - a tirade of learned and vitriolic imprecation - and the misleading ballad of Kinmont Willie that warmed the hearts of border Scots nationalists.

Which brings us to any futile attempt to tell the story of border organised crime as the story of competing nationalisms. It was nothing of the kind. People knew whether they were English and Scots but when it came to business, and this was business, they really did not care.

The point of the border was that two forms of law applied and the Scots and English law enforcement authorities would co-operate only intermittently, warily and half-heartedly, aware that at any time, they might be at war again.

This gave the reivers considerable opportunities for playing off one side against the other. English and Scots reivers raided each others' territories not because they were targeting Scots or English but because the other side was in a law enforcement zone from which they could escape profitably.

In practice, Scots or English gangsters (for that is what they were) would strike up alliances with counterparts over the border to ensure safe passage, share in the spoils and use their influence on corrupt authorities to escape justice and get 'scot free'.

Even when war came between London and Edinburgh, the competing armies could never rely on the borderers ostensibly on their side of the border. The criminal clans would pick and choose sides and alliances and sell their services according to interest and not sentiment.

Local Scottish and English nationalism are later arrivals and probably derive precisely from the settlement of the border and its final demarcation as a division between nation states. The border ballads seem to be more examples of clan pride at doing over the English *authorities* than anything else.

This is not to say that there was not anti-English or anti-Scottish sentiment but that this was probably to be found more clearly amongst the settled farmers most threatened by war perpetrated by the other side or by the criminal rackets and wanting central authority to be more active.

The overwhelming impression given by this book is of a period of cynical lawlessness based on the profit motive and a dog-eat-dog world where the weak would soon go under, far from romantic and certainly terrible for the vast majority of ordinary people.

When James I and VI comes into the region with the techniques of Mussolini, one finds oneself

uncomfortably realising that the temporary tyranny and injustice was probably in the best interests of the majority of the people. The reivers did not use their freedoms kindly.

Stuart Smith says

This is just a rollicking good time of a book! An in-depth, funny, history and study of a little corner of the world.

Kim Zinkowski says

An interesting look at political conditions and people of this region in what is now Great Britain in (mostly) the 16th century.

John says

When reading a novel titled "A Famine of Horses" this book was recommended background reading. The sixteenth century on the English - Scottish border was characterized by unending violence, with raids and counter raids, stealing and murder. The Border Reiver is defined as robber, raider, marauder, plunderer. The term is obsolete but lives on in words like bereave. Clans were organized to protect themselves and to take revenge as appropriate. As history, the book does a great job of highlighting the period and explaining the continuing animosity between the Scots and English.

David says

To: kindle-feedback@amazon.com

Subject: digitization of The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers by George MacDonald Fraser

I'd like to suggest some improvements to the Kindle edition of this excellent but obscure book, which I was pleasantly surprised to see available in this format.

I believe that this is this book was digitized from a paper version. Converting a book in this manner is probably a time-consuming labor of love, and those converting can be excused if they missed a few details. In an ideal world, readers could fix these problems themselves, for the general benefit of other readers, using a Wikipedia-style process, but I'm sure that electronic publishers are very reasonably afraid of vandalism, both deliberate and accidental, to their product. So I'd like you to pass on these notes to the publisher of this e-book as you feel appropriate, in hopes that this publisher will make the necessary revisions.

1) Although virtually all footnotes are connected to the appropriate text by links, occasionally a footnote is overlooked. For example, at Kindle location 77, footnote number 3 is unlinked.

2) The map of the Border region of Britain at the beginning of the book is unreadable without a magnifying glass. The Kindle's zoom function does not enlarge the map enough to provide any additional useful information. The reader should be allowed to zoom further, and then scroll horizontally or vertically if the resulting image is too big for the screen.

3) Throughout the book, the author includes remarks like, for example, “(see Chapter XIV)” or “(see pp. 151-4)”. These asides should be linked to the appropriate part of the book, as the footnotes are. Otherwise, it is virtually impossible to find the reference. For example, in the case of “(see Chapter XIV)”, the reader can manually go to the table of contents and find the appropriate chapter. The reader must then laboriously make his/her way to the beginning of the referenced chapter by trial and error, because the chapters are not linked at the table of contents. This gets you to your destination eventually, but it's a cumbersome process. In the case of “(see pp. 151-4)”, it is completely impossible to find the spot that the author is referring to, because (as you know) old-fashioned printed page numbers have been replaced with Kindle location numbers. Below is a list of occasions like this that could be fixed. I tried to keep track of every occasion, but I can't guarantee that this list is comprehensive.

Text:(see also Chapter XII)
Kindle location: 512

{22 further examples omitted.}

4) Since this is, after all, a history book, years appear frequently. Sometime they appear correctly, for example, like this:

1590

but at other times the year is written with spaces in random places, like these:

1 590, or

1 5 9 0, or

159 0.

This is evidence, to me, that the book was released in this form without a human being looking at it first.

5) At location 2822, suddenly and inexplicably, the text clings to the right-hand half of the screen for several pages, and then returns to normal, as if the author had suddenly been possessed of the ghost of ee cummings.

I am posting this email on the readers' social networking site “Goodreads” as a review of this book.

Best regards.

Mysti Berry says

Fraser's writing is a treat. He helps even a daft American like me feel like I understand the Border Wars and the terrible events that created modern-day Scotland.

Dave/Maggie Bean says

Had it not been for fantasy artist Frank Frazetta, I'd never have discovered Fraser. During the dreary winter of 1981, I found myself imprisoned in the Bachelor Officers' Quarters in Patrick Henry Village (Oftersheim, Federal Republic of Germany), with no friends and f**k-all to do. Fortunately, there was a Stars and Stripes bookstore ten minutes' walk from the glorified tenement we called "home."

I suppose my parents felt sorry for me (and reckoned that if I had spending money, I'd go somewhere else – anywhere else – and spend it), as they doubled my allowance a few days after we took up residence in that wretched, Dickensian sh**hole. (And I do mean "sh88hole": When first I saw it, I was seized by a near-irresistible urge to paint a crescent moon and stars on every door in sight…)

In retrospect, I don't fault my folks for wanting me to f*** off now and again. Spending two months in a two-room apartment with a manic-depressive thirteen-year-old; an eleven-year-old with ADD; a huge, very opinionated tabby cat (he thanked us for his eight-hour flight in the luxurious cargo-hold of a 727 by pissing in my suitcase), and a dog couldn't have been very enjoyable for either of them.

To what I imagine was their immeasurable relief, I did clear off whenever the mood struck me. From a realistic point of view, I suppose they were simply glad to be rid of me for a few hours. To reiterate: I don't blame them. At thirteen, I was moody, sarcastic, irritable, and above all – irritating. (And up yours, John. I can actually hear you snickering: "Yeah, so what's changed?")

When I wasn't staring out the window and longing to be back in Georgia with J.R., Sandra, "Fleabag," Andy, Jeff, and my other buddies, I was committing the "solitary vice" to mental images of Lynda Carter, Barbi Benton and a chick from my eighth-grade Spanish class. The few times I actually did anything constructive and exchanged p****r for pen, I wrote awful, quasi-Lovecraftian drivel that delighted my little brother, but probably left Ma and Da doubting my sanity as much as I doubted theirs. No wonder they were so eager to have me out of the apartment…

PHV, putting it bluntly but honestly, was a human landfill. Like most military housing, then and now (from what I saw at Ft. Benning in '08 year, "supporting the troops," still doesn't include providing them with habitable quarters), PHV's sheer squalor left many of us envying our countrymen on the other side of "the pond," -- those who were fortunate enough to live in trailer parks and housing projects.

If this collection of three-story outhouses had a saving grace, though, it was the proximity of the library and the Stars and Stripes bookstore to the BOQs.

I spent many hours in both, but it was in the latter that I found three collections of Frank Frazetta's paintings. Like most males, I'm visually oriented, and Frazetta knew how to appeal to that orientation. (Why do you

think his book covers were so popular?) The figures in his paintings seemed alive – as if they's spring off the page at any moment; and his use of color was simply amazing – bold, bloody reds and yellows against murky, sepia backgrounds, for example. Then there was his subject matter. Frazetta was an incredibly versatile illustrator, but he was best known for his fantasy art. If, by chance, you grew up during the '70s and 80's, and read Robert E. Howard's "Conan" series, you're familiar with Frazetta's work: his paintings grace the covers of all the 70's collections.

I seldom read "Sword and Sorcery" these days, as I find the genre juvenile, reductionist, and much less interesting than the "real" world of crystal-strokers, bigfoot stalkers and UFO weenies. But then again, I have a life nowadays, and have for some years. When I was a pimply-faced, "p***y challenged" teenager, though, I didn't have one; and I suppose that's why I found fantasy so appealing. I read everything from Dunsany (whose work I still enjoy, incidentally) to Vardemann and Milan – for all that the pornographic nature of their offerings earns them a sub-genre of their own -- "Pork Sword and Sorcery."

I also played Dungeons and Dragons, Gamma World, Dragonquest, Traveler -- the whole nine yards. And since it's bound to be the first question the reader asks…No, I didn't have a real girlfriend until my senior year.

I'm not too proud to admit it: I was a geek with a capital "G". I briefly drifted away from the gaming scene during twelfth grade ("Lessee… I can finish module FU-4: 'Search for the Sacred Skinflute of Shere Khan' with my a**hole of a brother and the other douche-bags whose company I keep; or I can invite my girlfriend over and get the ol' knob polished. Faith an' begorrah! Whatever to do? Curse Dame Fortuna and my despicable friends for foisting so cruel a choice upon me… "), but for most of my teens, I was hopeless. At thirteen, I was especially hopeless, so I bought two of the three Frazetta books from Stars and Stripes on that cold, pissy afternoon in 1981, and went my merry, geeky way.

Now I've mentioned that Frazetta was a master of exploiting the visually oriented, male half of our diseased, evolutionary dead-end of a species. Beyond this, he was a grandmaster of exploiting visually oriented male geeks; easily the most diseased evolutionary dead-ends of all. When viewing his work, the typical, underweight (or tubby – it was always yin or yang, with no middle ground), socially inept gamer/nerd wanted to be one of the sword-swinging, muscle-bound barbarians Frazetta painted – and wanted to boink the brains out of the voluptuous pieces o' tail his hyper-Nietzscehan supermen were invariably shown rescuing or abducting.

And with the possible exception of Boris Vallejo, nobody – but nobody – painted more voluptuous pieces o' tail than Frank Frazetta.

I'm not sure when the sickening "waif" look became popular, although I believe Twiggy got the "Buchenwald chic" ball rolling in the '60s. If this is the case, she should be tried under the Napoleonic/Hitlerian "patriot act" (and why, incidentally, has no ostensibly "conservative" Republican ever accepted my challenge to discuss that statist abomination article-by-article?) and summarily executed for crimes against inherent, male, sexual proclivities -- but that's neither here nor there.

I am, however, absolutely certain that I despise that androgynous, pigeon-titted look with a passion. Anorexics are eminently unattractive, and that's that. Like most healthy, heterosexual males who've made Christy Canyon, Kayla Kleevage, Donita Dunes, Ebony Ayes and Minka wealthier than any human should be, I prefer women with big "tracts o' land," wide hips, butts that don't form a perfect 90-degree angle with the floor (I don't share the "brothas'" obsession with "junk in da trunk," but a shapely derrierre is a definite plus), and appreciable calf- and thigh-muscles.

On the world-famous, highly respected "Bean ‘E-richter’ Scale," Raquel Welch, Adrienne Barbeau, and Cassandra "Elvira" Peterson all rate a leg-wettin’ "10," while Parker Posey, McKenzie Philips and Callista (the etymology of her given name still leads me to laugh my rear off: Καλλιστα? I don’t think so, Bubba-Jack…) Flockhart rate a schwanz-shriveling “0.”

Admittedly, I wouldn’t be in any great hurry to shag the real-life counterpart of the so-called "Willendorf Venus" (she works at a Waffle House in Bessemer, Alabama, incidentally), but with women -- as with food – I’ll take a modest surplus over a deficit any day.

Frank Frazetta, bless his horny li’l heart, painted women who were completely off the world famous, highly respected B.E.S. They were too female to be real; Jungian archetypes rendered on canvas. Every one of ‘em, it seemed, had "a little too much" -- but in all the right places. Leafing through the books as I pogo-sticked past the NCO Club on my own tallywhacker, I suddenly realized that art wasn’t the exclusive preserve of martini-swilling butthounds and palette-wielding panhandlers.

Friendless, nerdy, horny teenagers could appreciate it, too…

As I’ve said, most of Frazetta’s work was fantasy-oriented. There were exceptions to the rule, though, and one, in particular, caught my eye. It was a painting of a charging British lancer with a naked and quintessentially Frazetta-esque woman slung inexplicably (and uncomfortably, one imagines) across his horse’s withers. As it happened, the painting was entitled "Flashman at the Charge." I found it both memorable and humorous, but thought nothing more of it.

Several years later, whilst ferreting out bargains in a used bookstore in Atlanta, I spotted the same painting – on the cover of an identically titled book. My curiosity piqued, I bought it, tucked into it – and found that it was one of the funniest books I’d ever read.

George MacDonald Fraser’s "Flashman" is actually Thomas Hughes’ character of the same name -- stolen directly from Tom Brown’s School Days and "projected" into the future. He’s no less despicable in Fraser’s series than he was in Hughes’ novel, but Fraser eschews Hughes’ third person narrative and lets "Flashy" tell his own story -- with hilarious results.

It’s also worth mentioning (however loath I am to admit it, given my preference for nineteenth century literature) that Fraser was a better writer than Hughes. What impressed me the most, though –aside from the quality of Fraser’s writing – was his grasp of history. In my forty-three misspent years of life, I’ve read far too many historical novels, the authors of which obviously knew not whereof they wrote. Fraser’s meticulously researched book was a ray of sunshine piercing the stygian gloom of a (generally) dismal, anachronism-plagued genre. Shortly after reading Flashman at the Charge, I hunted down every title in the series, and have yet to read one I’ve disliked.

It’s a long way (both geographically and chronologically) from Balaclava to the Borders, from the Crimea to Cumberland. Fraser, however, successfully made the trip, departing from the historical fiction at which he so excelled to pen The Steel Bonnets.

Researched as thoroughly as his novels, The Steel Bonnets is possibly Fraser’s magnum opus. Providentially able to adopt and employ both the etic and emic perspectives (he was of Highland Scottish parentage, but born and raised in Carlisle, and writing about Lowlanders and Sassenach), Fraser was an anthropologist’s dream, an "outsider" and an "insider," simultaneously -- and paradoxically. As a Highland Scot climbing the English socioeconomic ladder (in a "bass-ackwards" part of the UK, no less), Fraser combined the

dispassionate objectivity of an "outsider" with the intimate, intuitive understanding of one's neighbors that the "insider" alone enjoys.

In short, like John Sadler, George M. Fraser knew his subject front-to-back. The subject in question is one that's always fascinated me: the "golden" age of the reiver clans who, during their heyday, made the English/Scottish frontier a very "interesting" place in which to live.

"Not so the Borderer: bred to war,
He knew the battle's din afar,
And joy'd to hear it swell.

His peaceful day was slothful ease;
Nor harp, nor pipe his ear could please
Like the loud slogan's yell.

On active steed, with lance and blade,
The light-arm'd pricker plied his trade,--
Let nobles fight for fame;

Let vassals follow where they lead,
Burghers to guard their townships bleed,
But war's the Borderer's game.

Their gain, their glory, their delight,
To sleep the day, maraud the night,
O'er mountain, moss and moor;

Joyful to the fight they took their way,
Scarce caring who might win the day,
Their booty was secure.

-- Sir Walter Scott, "Marmion"

I grew up reading this romanticized horses**t, and I admit that I still love it – for all that it cavalierly ignores reality. I gather that Fraser loved it, too, as he never disparages Scott, even when taking a far more sanguinary (i.e. realistic) view of the subject. This is another of the book's "selling points": without denigrating the chief dramatis personae on the Borders' bloody stage, Fraser takes a hard, cold look at them as human beings. Perhaps ironically, he renders them all worthier of our respect in the process. ("…for the moment it is enough to say that the constant strife, or the threat of it, bred up a race of hard people along the Border line. They lived in a jungle, and they had to live by jungle rules. This is not to excuse them, if that were necessary, but to explain. If a man cannot live, and ensure that his family lives, within the law, he has no alternative but to step outside it.")

Despite the modern tendency to whitewash or mudsling; apotheosize or demonize historical figures (depending upon whether or not one approves of their causes); we "moderns" actually degrade our heroes and our villains by robbing them of their humanity in so doing.

If Kinmont Willie, for example, was (as the balladeers stopped just shy of maintaining) ten feet tall, and made of stainless steel and equally stainless integrity; why should posterity care about his adventures? Could

any reasonable man expect less of such a demigod? In my not-so-humble opinion, the question answers itself.

Fraser deftly avoids this pitfall from the beginning. Better yet, he avoids it consistently, through his even-handed treatment of his subject matter. Unlike many works on Scottish history, The Steel Bonnets owes nothing to the "Blind Harry" school of anti-English polemics. In a work chronicling the rough-and-tumble, anarchic history of the Anglo-Caledonian border, this is not only sound policy: it gives Fraser's work the authority born solely of dispassionate honesty. Without condemning or condoning either "side" (although in this context, the notion of "sides" is misleading at best and inapplicable at worst: in a microcosm characterized by endemic conflict and governed only by the lex talionis; ties of friendship, kinship and – at times – pure pragmatism often rendered nationality meaningless), Fraser examines both.

The hallmark of his genius, though, lies in his ability to remain dispassionate, while never waxing disinterested or uninterested -- he cares so deeply; he refuses to settle for anything less than the unvarnished truth, which he unearths and presents to the best of his ability.

From the first chapter onward, he paints a stark, brutal, and yet irresistibly fascinating triptych: Scotland, England, and the de facto no-man's-land that lay between them, which, to reiterate, was a microcosm: a broad swath of ground, the residents of which -- although divided by a man-made line -- had more in common with each other than with their nominal countrymen. ("The important point is that it was not a one-way traffic, or even a two-way one. Scot pillages Scot and Englishman robbed Englishman just as readily as they both raided across the frontier; feuds were just as deadly between families on the same side of the Border as they were when the frontier lay between them; Scots helped English raiders to harry north of the line, and Englishmen aided and abetted Scottish inroads. The families themselves often belonged to both sides—there were English and Scottish Grahams, for example (and no family ever made better use of dual nationality). Add to this the fairly obvious fact that sex attraction is immeasurably stronger than national policy, and the picture becomes more complex still.")

Divided into five parts and forty-seven chapters, The Steel Bonnets leaves no stone unturned in its three-hundred and seventy-nine pages. Beginning with the construction of Hadrian's Wall and Ending with James VI & I's final pacification of the Borders (and the expulsion of various troublesome clans to the Ulster Plantation, where they became the ancestors of the so-called "Scots-Irish," Fraser explores every aspect of Border life and culture, and still devotes considerable space to the major "players" who worked so hard at "shaking loose the Borders."

Although the book stands on its own merits, it's a perfect companion volume to John Sadler's Border Fury, James Leyburn's The Scotch-Irish: A Social History, David Hackett Fischer's Albion's Seed, and even James Webb's Born Fighting and Jim Goad's The Redneck Manifesto.

Pat Carroll says

Very good overview, oddly organized but imbued with Fraser's fighting man's insight. Good stuff for Brits et al.

Bud says

Fascinating history during the 15th and 16th century of people living near the English/Scottish border and how a big part of their lives was involved with family raiding across the border - that means stealing livestock, murder, theft, and vandalism. This could happen with very large groups of horseback raiders, 400 plus, and involved certain specific families on both sides of the border.

J.M. Hushour says

I have a lot of books. I can't remember where most of them came from or what drove me to bring them home. They sit around for years and then, every so often, my eye drawn to one in particular that I've always meant to "get around to", I'll snag it up and read the damn thing.
I don't remember why I picked up "The Steel Bonnets". Maybe it was the awesome phrase "border reivers" right there on the cover. Maybe it was its lawless color scheme? Whatever the case, it's a damn fine read. It is exactly what it says about, the old Scottish-English border that ran in a bow-shaped arc from Carlisle to Berwick. It was a rough-and-ready zone of virtual gangsterism, robbery, and raiding. It was probably the most fun place on the island.
The Border was and is inspiring. All manners of hoods, cutthroats, gallants, gallant cutthroats and throatcutters roam its history. There are Wardens, kings, queens, and other scions of political assholery who all dealt with the "Border issue" in different ways. There are numerous tales here of reivers and their ilk, Armstrongs, Grahams, Kerrs, Nixons, and the lot. Have a surname of the Border folk? Your ancestors were probably marauding shit-kickers!
The bulk of the book covers the century from 1503-1603 and how Henry VIII and later Elizabeth tried to do with this wretched hive of scum and villainy, but my favorite part was the first sections which talked about the people, their ways, their morals (sic!), their customs, and details some of the more famous raids.
Fraser, famous as a writer of fictions, is the best sort of person to write a history like this. Born and raised in Carlisle, he appreciates the peculiar character of the land and its time.

Stevie says

I have always had an interest in the Border Reivers as my family, the Trotters, were a reiving clan in the Eastern March. The Steel Bonnets by George MacDonald Fraser is now in my top five history books of all time. A fascinating read which really dissects the subject at hand. Fraser was a Scottish Borderer who lived in Carlisle and it really comes across he has a real sense of the people, place and culture on both sides of the Border. I am from Dumfries and was totally engrossed in the Maxwell-Johnstone feud which ravaged my hometown for several decades in the 16th century and which the book goes into in some detail. There is some great and shocking stories of characters and events from the period such as Kinmont Wullie Armstrong, Geordie Burn and the various family feuds which tore the borders apart. The book is also well-balanced, understanding why the Reivers blackmailed, stole, extorted and murdered but never glorifying their activities. The Warden's good and bad who tried to hold in check the reivers also makes for interesting reading, from the talented and determined Robert Carey to the old mafia boss John Forster. The last chapter on the destruction of the Graham clan by the Scottish and English governments makes the blood run cold. It reads like the ethnic cleansing of a lost tribe of the amazon and despite the Graham clan being notorious reivers I felt deeply angry at their treatment by the central authorities.
I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the subject it is by far most detailed, well-written and

expert account of the Border Reivers.

Sarah says

Very interesting book about the Border reivers in reality , popular memory and literature.

Peter Ellwood says

An excellent account of an almost completely unknown and extraordinary phenomenon (there's no other word for it) that occurred on the England-Scotland border over some 300 years, from around 1300.

Be prepared for tales of a wild and unexpected race of people who burned and plundered, blackmailed and killed, without compunction, for generation after generation, on either side of the border. This isn't the occasional, romanticised violence of *Braveheart*, it's an ethics-free culture that really existed, over centuries, in that odd, lawless no man's land between the two countries.

Hats off to George MacDonald Fraser for his calm objectivity in telling the tale. All too many of the accounts involving old Scotland tend to get wrapped in tartan and one-sided fantasising about what an idealised 'Scotland' might have done. But not this book. With one irritating exception (to this reader at least), he tells it like it is/was, with glorious clarity. For example, our collective British consciousness sometimes tends to assume that most cross-border raiding was done by the Scots in ancient times; he makes the point this was not actually so: both sides were as bad/active as each other.

A key point to make too is that these people barely saw themselves as 'English' or 'Scottish' in the first place. They were *reivers*, and their prime loyalty lay with their family (I'm deliberately avoiding the word 'clan' to keep that swirling tartan at bay!). If it suited them to intermarry across the so-called border for example, then they did it; if it felt right to attack and even kill their own fellow countrymen, then they did so quite happily – over centuries. Fascinating stuff.

It is already quoted as the authoritative book on this subject, and I'm sure it earns that description too. I have a modest personal misgiving, which is not enough to drag my rating down to three stars; but which would certainly beef up any second edition, should he choose to write it one day!

It is for the most part the story of the *reivers* in the sixteenth century. None the worse for that, but almost all the exciting detail comes from that period. It's a shame he says so little about the first 200 years of reiving. Naturally it becomes exponentially harder to locate actual records of that earlier period, I know. But if you're setting out to write the definitive guide to the *Reivers*, then that's what you need to do.

And finally, as one might guess from my own family name, it was frustrating to see the endless references to *reivers* called "Elliot" throughout the book. They may have intermixed and intermingled with "Elwolds", but they came from different roots and the Border Papers he quotes often spoke, specifically, of Elwold and not Elliot. I know, I know, it's a pretty parochial matter. But you try reading about how Neil Armitage landed on the moon when you KNOW that his name was Armstrong!

Liz says

Fraser does an amazing job of with this forgotten (but fascinating) episode in British history involving explosive family feuds and international intrigue. He tells the story largely through the first-hand accounts left by Wardens (who were charged with the almost-impossible task of bringing order to the English-Scottish border in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). To this he adds informed guesswork of his own, based on his deep familiarity of the personalities involved. The larger-than-life figures who feature in this book are compelling enough on their own, but Fraser's droll take on their schemes and double-crossings really brings the story to life. Still, he makes a point not to romanticize the subject, and definitely acknowledges the violence and brutality of Border raiding, especially on the non-raiders caught in the middle. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in Scottish/British history, or fans of Dorothy Dunnett's Lymond Chronicles (since this fills in some of the background for the turbulence/family feuds in Scotland).

Rich Carney says

Game of Thrones makes a lot more sense after readings this, as silly as that sounds. A lot of interesting stories that I've never read elsewhere, to the extent that the scottish-english border seems very much like the old west.

I did feel that parts of the story were told out of order which left me having to flip between sections a few times.
