

# Wall Blues



"The Roofs of Barcelona," Pablo Picasso, 1902

by [Ralph Berry](#) (January 2022)

'Something there is that doesn't love a wall' wrote Robert Frost, in a prescient scanning of the future. Frost cued into a trope that is favoured today by the European Union, 'Walls bad, bridges good.' That trope is visible in the euro bank notes, which feature vistas chosen by each country and celebrate the masonry of their domestic buildings. No wall

between the euro countries is admitted. And yet a bridge was the first sign of the deepening rift between nations.

The Oresund Bridge extends for 16 kilometres, and connects Denmark and Sweden. It was held to be an icon of internationalism, linking two countries with no border. Specifically, the bridge linked Malmo (Sweden) and Copenhagen (Denmark). Many Swedes lived in Malmo, crossing the bridge to work in the big city, and came back home at day's end. A happier, more progressive arrangement cannot be conceived. But in the course of 2016 the Danish and Swedish authorities subjected the bridge to ever more stringent border controls. They are 'temporary', but always renewed. Their purpose is to restrict the flow of migrants from Germany—which endured a huge surge in 2015-16—to Denmark, and thence to Sweden, which has an even more generous benefit system. Malmo was claimed by Nigel Farage to be 'the rape capital of Europe', and the official statistics bear him out. Sweden has a migrant problem and the Oresund Bridge is its symbol.

Walls, then. They are springing up everywhere in Europe. Estonia plans to erect a fence along the Russian border, 294 metres long. The stated purpose is to defend the E.U. perimeter against Russian 'trespassers'. Lithuania is building a fence against Belarus. Hungary has built a 175m border fence along the whole of its southern border with Serbia (which is not in the E.U.). The purpose is to keep out illegal migrants, and to keep Hungary Christian. In this they have succeeded as Tucker Carlson reported for Fox News (August 2021). 'Why can't we have this in America?' he asked. Macedonia, an E.U. state, has erected a razor-wire topped fence, 10 feet in height, against its border with Greece—another E.U. state—again, to keep out migrants. Austria has razor-wire fences against Slovenia and Serbia. Poland is now planning a high-tech wall with motion detectors to stem a huge increase in migration via the Byelorussian border (*Daily Telegraph*, 14 October). Byelorussia's President

Lukashenko is seen as a threat to the EU's eastern countries, a leader who 'weaponizes migration'. The EU is now called upon to construct a wall on the Belarus border, for which they are to pay. Britain sent its Army engineers to support the Poles. In all these cases the distinction between fence and wall is purely semantic; the purpose is the same. The walls are going up all over Europe. We shall not see them coming down in our lifetime.

For the greatest of European walls, look no further than England. The Emperor Hadrian ordered the wall marking the North-West frontier of the Roman Empire to be built from the east, now Wallsend (Segedunum) to the Solway Firth in the west. Hadrian had surveyed the line of the Wall in person. Its purpose was primarily military and defensive—to keep out the Picts—but also financial, since traffic passed between the province and the territory outside it and paid customs duty.

That wall, extending 73 miles, is a UNESCO World Heritage site. You can see what a stretch of it looked like in the Kevin Costner film, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, and the National Trust offers a deal of information. It was built in 122-130 A.D., 'a monument of Roman purposiveness than which none more impressive exists in any country.' (R.G. Collingwood, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p.135) Guarding the Roman Britain frontier was a bleak affair, as W.H. Auden realized:

'Over the heather the wet wind blows,  
I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.  
The rain comes pattering out of the sky,  
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.'  
(*'Wall Blues'*)

I've been on the Wall, and spent some time taking refuge in my car. Auden has not been misinformed on the climatic realities.

But Rudyard Kipling saw things very differently, in three marvellous stories

in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). They tell of Parnesius, the centurion of the XXX Legion, who is posted north by Maximus to defend the Wall against the Winged Hats, the Norsemen, who attack from the sea at each end. Maximus has stripped the Wall of its best soldiers for his campaigns in Gaul, so the defence becomes desperate until the victorious Theodosius sends in three legions to relieve the defenders. The mission statement of Parnesius is: 'It concerns us to defend the Wall, no matter what Emperor dies, or makes die.' For Kipling, the Roman Wall evoked the North West Frontier of India, and its ever-present threat of barbarian inroads. That order of threat never goes away, as Kipling understood, and implicitly made clear in the date he assigns to 'A British-Roman Song', (A.D. 406). In that or the following year they gave Parnesius a Triumph. In A.D. 410 the Emperor Honorius sent word to England that thenceforward they would have to make their own arrangements for their defence. That date is traditionally taken as the beginning of the end of Roman rule in Britain.

Walls matter. And there is an ongoing debate on their uses, illustrated by the two voices in Frost's 'Mending Walls'. The poet is clearly a progressive, and his neighbour a traditionalist, and Frost admits full weight to both voices—while leaving the last word with the traditionalist. Here is the progressive:

'Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence,  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down.'

And here the traditionalist:

'He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees  
He will not go beyond his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

An American friend liked to point out that mending the wall is what brings the two together. 'I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;/And on a day we meet to walk the line/And set the wall between us once again.' They don't have too much in common, but the business of maintaining the wall creates neighbourliness.

Beyond the functions of domestic construction and territories, walls mark the boundaries between us and them, a purpose rooted in humanity itself. The voice of the traditionalist is now heard more clearly in Europe, and is amplified in the Great Wall part erected on the Southern border of the United States. If completed it would match Hadrian's Wall and send a larger message to the world, repeating Kipling's sense of the outlanders' threat to civilization. Andrew Marvell, writing in around 1650, prophetically hinted at the voice's future:

'Which thence (perhaps) rebounding, may  
Eccho beyond the *Mexique Bay*.'  
(*Bermudas*)

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Ralph Berry has spent his career in Canadian universities, ending with the University of Ottawa. After that, he took a Visiting Professorship in Kuwait University, followed by the University of Malaya. In recent years he has written for *Chronicles* magazine. His hinterland is Shakespeare, but

not as a figure of Tudor history. Shakespeare's works are a mirror to today's issues and themes, through which we can better understand today's politics.

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