



THE BATTLE OF  
WATLING  
STREET

Margaret  
McGovern

# **THE BATTLE OF WATLING STREET**

Margaret McGoverne

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For my boy, remembering our drives along the  
Icknield Way

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## Principal Characters

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| Dedo       | A young attendant of Queen Boudicca                |
| Boudicca   | Queen of the Iceni tribe, widow of King Prasutagus |
| Brigomall  | A noble of the Iceni tribe, advisor to the queen   |
| Cata       | A young maiden in Boudicca's travelling bodyguard  |
| Dias       | An elder of the village of Puddlehill              |
| Nemeta     | Younger daughter of Boudicca and Prasutagus        |
| Prasutagus | King of the Iceni tribe, lately deceased           |
| Rigan      | Elder daughter of Boudicca and Prasutagus          |
| Vassinus   | A young serving lad and friend of Dedo             |
| Mallo      | A mule owned by Dedo                               |

# Place Names in Roman Britain

|                           |                                   |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Albion                    | England                           |
| Cambria                   | Wales                             |
| Camulodunum               | Colchester                        |
| Durocbrivis               | Dunstable                         |
| Hibernia                  | Ireland                           |
| Lactodurum                | Towcester                         |
| Londinium                 | London                            |
| Magiovinium               | Fenny Stratford                   |
| Venta<br>Icenorum         | Caistor St Edmund, Suffolk        |
| Verlamion                 | The Catuvellauni capital          |
| Verulamium                | Saint Albans (formerly Verlamion) |
| Viroconium<br>Cornoviorum | Wroxeter                          |

# Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of people, although this list is by no means exhaustive. To my long-suffering husband and son, who both encouraged my Roman Britain/ Sci-Fi hybrid world building and patiently accompanied me on several journeys of discovery along Watling Street and the Icknield Way.

The kind and perceptive souls amongst my friends, family, and colleagues who provided insightful feedback, wonderful suggestions and unpaid beta reading for this, my first published work of fiction.

The Celtic Personal Names of Roman Britain (CPNRB) project, a University of Cambridge database of personal names from Roman Britain that are thought to contain Celtic elements, was invaluable in providing authentic character names. Created by Professors Paul

Russell and Alex Mullen, this was my go-to reference for naming everyone in my story from Boudicca's daughters (lost from history) to Dedo's mule.

The BBC production of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* was instrumental in my fascination with all things Roman, from an inappropriately early age.

# Background

The Battle of Watling Street took place in Roman-occupied Britain in AD 60 or 61 between an alliance of British tribes led by the Iceni Queen Boudicca and legionary forces led by the Roman General Gaius Suetonius Paulinus. The battle followed Boudicca's failed uprising against the Romans after her husband, King Prasutagus, died. Prasutagus divided his kingdom in his will between his two daughters and the Emperor Nero. The will was ignored by the Roman procurator Decianus Catus, and the Iceni kingdom was annexed.

According to the Roman chronicler Tacitus, when Boudicca objected, she was flogged and her daughters raped; all outstanding loans made to Britons were also called in by the Romans, leading many Britons to financial ruin. When Suetonius led an assault against the island of Anglesey, a refuge for British fugitives and a stronghold of the Druids, Boudicca roused the Iceni and

their neighbouring tribe, the Trinovantes, leading 100,000 rebels who marched on and destroyed Camulodunum, Londinium, and Verulamium (modern-day Colchester, London and St Albans).

Suetonius, meanwhile, regrouped his legionary forces in the Midlands. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Roman forces met with and defeated the allied tribes in the Battle of Watling Street, inflicting ruinous losses on them. The battle marked the end of resistance to Roman rule in the southern half of Britain until the 5th century AD.

Historians are dependent on Roman sources for accounts of the battle. The precise location is unknown, but most historians place it between Londinium and Viroconium (Wroxeter), close to the Roman Road now known as Watling Street. Recent theories suggest a site close to modern Dunstable in Bedfordshire; the A5 Watling Street runs through the town, linking

Verulamium, Magiovinium (Fenny Stratford, south of Milton Keynes) and Lactodurum (Towcester).

Following the annihilation of her forces, Boudicca either committed suicide to avoid capture by the Romans, or died of illness or injuries. Contemporary sources differ on the place and manner of her death. The fate of the remaining Iceni is also disputed. The site of Boudicca's grave, and the gold looted from the three destroyed Roman cities, has never been discovered.

Source: Tacitus, *The Annals* (Book XIV)

## Author's Note

The units of currency and measurement referred to are mostly Roman, as was common throughout the occupied empire; the *denarii* (singular: *denarius*) was a small silver coin in circulation between the 2nd century BC and the 3rd century AD. The denarius has a link from the Roman times to the British penny.

A *league* was defined as 1.5 Roman miles; the word derives from the Gallic *leuga*. The *stade* was an Anglicized version of the Latin *Stadia*, an ancient Greek unit of length measuring 1/8 of a Roman mile. A *cubit* from the Roman *cubitus* was 1 ½ Roman feet, or *pedes*.

The *pilum* (plural: *pila*) was a javelin commonly used by the Roman army; generally about 2 metres long overall headed with an iron shank with a pyramidal head.

*Brachae* was the Roman term for the woollen or

linen trousers worn by the natives of 1<sup>st</sup> century AD  
Britain.

**WATLING STREET,  
BETWEEN  
DUROCOBRIVIS  
AND MAGIOVINIUM**

Late spring, AD 61

# Part I

Forty leagues from Londinium and ten from Verulamium, the small ragged band of horsemen, chariots and wagons pulled up at a rough crossroads. The horses were steaming and spent, chests heaving, and their riders urged them onto the rutted drover's road that ran eastward. Moving with care now they were off the paved stones of Watling Street, they picked their way along for half a league before turning onto a muddy cart-way. At the end of the track, a low-lying encampment of flimsy huts and barns squatted at the base of a scrub-covered chalk ridge, behind which the sun was fast sinking.

Despite the imminent dusk, the sky was still light; several stars, as bright as a young summer moon, had lit the daytime heavens for several weeks, and were most clearly seen at sundown, but the weary riders had long since ceased to marvel at the strange phenomenon.. A rough palisade enclosed the settlement, probably hewn from the thin perimeter of woodland that fringed the base of the ridge. The scent of wood smoke and the steady cries of contented cattle came to the travellers along the breeze; soon enough the peace of this obscure village would be shattered, as it had been already for many.

The Spring Festival had just passed, but the riders had not attended to their spring planting, away home in the east; their harvest this day had been bitter and blood soaked. The groans from the wounded, crammed cheek by jowl in the wagons were already heralding their arrival; ears pricked and heads turned in the direction of the gore-spattered riders who now approached the compound, whose defences would bar only the most casual stranger from entrance.

“Why turn off here, d’you suppose? The Romans, devils take them, expect us to run this way, back to our own lands. And isn’t the going better on the main road, since Old Claudius laid down the hard stones? Naught but mud and holes along the Icene Way.”

The speaker’s name was Addedomaros, Dedo to his friends and family. He was a tall lad, thin and wiry; a handsome well-made stripling but for an ankle that turned out from his left leg at an ugly angle. Reason enough for his riding a mule; he would be unable to limp as much as a league unless riding or carried. But the break was an old one, sustained half a score of years ago when learning to ride. Lucky for him that his father had influence with the King; there was scant room for cripples in the court of the Warrior King and Queen of the Icene.

His companion, walking at the side of the mule shrugged in reply. He was slumped in misery and barely raised his head to look over the landscape. The

stink of fear and death hung over him like a pall, and no wonder; unlike Dedo, young Vassinus had been closer to the battle, and had seen the bloody devastation wrought by the merciless Roman cavalry and infantry, sparing neither wench, beasts or even children.

Up ahead the lead riders had halted by the gated entrance to the compound. A command to open up was shouted, the voice unfamiliar to Dedo; it was likely to be one of the few remaining Trinovantes warriors, their neighbouring tribe back home in the east that had joined their doomed cause. Had it come to this then, that so few of the Iceni were left standing that they could not hail a muddy hamlet for aid?

Dedo turned again to Vassinus, but seeing his friend's chin sunk into his chest he said nothing, and instead patted his mule, Mallo, who stood stolid, reliable, indifferent to either kindness or hard use. *Mallo*: slow, that he was, yet not lazy.

“You shall have some grass when we stop boy, and aye, an apple if I can find one.” Mallo accepted the offer as he would the food, unmoved.

The last chariot had now caught up with the advance riders; grand though it was, decked in cow hide and pranked with bronze linchpins, mouldings and terret rings, it was an uncomfortable enough ride for three people, Dedo guessed,

even though all three were slender women. As the rear of the company - a meagre group of foot soldiers, laden wagons and Dedo - came up to the stockade fence, the gates were pulled inwards, with much scuffing and jerking; clearly they were closed most of the time. The villagers and their livestock would come and go by the narrow shutter built into the fence, not more than four cubits high and three wide.

Beyond the roughly circular palisade lay a small, raw group of daub-and-wattle roundhouses arranged in a rough courtyard, no more than two score; their timbers not yet blackened by age and the smoke that seeped through the thatched roofs, weather-and watertight yet. This was a recent settlement then, and a modest one; there were barely a dozen cattle corralled in a small birch-fence pen, and double that number of tawny-woolled sheep. No doubt the beasts were herded inside for fear of losing them to rustlers, either Roman or Briton. A flock of geese scabbled self-importantly from between the huts and surged towards the gates, secure in their status as sacred pets. Stacked against the back of the fence were logs and small boughs of trees, harvested from the thicket beyond the compound.

Mallo trotted without prompting towards the front of his band of fellow travellers, now clustered by the front gate of the compound. Dedo allowed it; he was keen to hear what was said, and keener still for a chance to dismount, find a

corner to rest in and maybe enjoy a bite of food and a sup of beer. A cordon of grim bodies, both men and maids, all dressed in the dark flowing robes of Icene warriors took position between the compound and the chariot.

Towering above all was the tall, erect figure of a woman, older than her two companions in the chariot, yet more striking than either, and standing straight as the spears strapped to her bodyguards' shoulders. The family resemblance of the chariot trio was plain; this was a mother and her two daughters. Her dress, well made and of many shades of russet brown, dull damson and leaf green was in stark contrast to the dark, drab tunics of her guard, and the great fibula brooch fastening her plaid cloak was weighty, ornate and of gold.

Fitting close around her neck, a large neckband of heavy twisted cables, also gold, the opening finials framing her long, determined face. Rare too, to see such a magnificent torque, and on a woman. Grim and decisive of mien, the wild, long mass of tawny hair that tumbled in curling snakes to her waist accentuated, rather than softened her piercing gaze and fell expression.

A single figure emerged from the compound; a man of middle height and age, sombre but respectable in his belted tunic, cloak and dun woollen *bracae*. He approached the nearest of the travelling party, unhurried yet not hesitating. From among the body of guards circling the chariot, a figure stepped forward, and hailed the villager.

“You are Catuvellauni here?”

The man nodded, acknowledging his clan. “We are Catuvellauni. My name is Dias; I am one of the elders of this village.”

His tribe was as plain as his plaid, but the civilities must be observed. The villager was respectably garbed; no doubt he had been selected to parley for his clan. The farmer, no less than the chieftain or the Druid, was respected in Brittonic society, and all civility would be paid to this representative of his village, despite their desperate plight and immediate need of aid.

The Catuvellauni had not joined their neighbouring Icenic tribe in rebellion against the cruel Roman oppressors; since the capture of their chieftain Caratacus they had submitted to the Roman yoke. The two tribes had clashed in the past, but this settlement was too modest to oppose even a small band of hardened Icenic warriors.

“We are in need of a place to stop, away from the main byways, and from Durocobrivis; we are twenty horse, assorted wagons and those you see on foot and mule. We ask not for what we could take by force, but what help you can give freely by way of cover, and food and drink.”

Dias gazed at the company, calculating their numbers against the meagre resources of the village.

“Shelter for all we ask for not, except that you allow us to camp men and beasts yonder”, the Iceni spokesman motioned to the small, enclosed fields beside the encampment; they had not yet been planted, and only the stumps of the winter root crops remained.

“We have grazing, and some cover in the paddocks; there is also a stream for water”, Dias replied, pointing to the roughly fenced in meads that were edged by the rough track that snaked upwards, to the summit of the hill.

The Iceni nodded. “But yet we need at least one hall, and all the hospitality you can spare for one as noble and in want as our embattled leader.”

Dias bowed assent and called to one of the women clustered immediately behind the palisade, no doubt listening to all that passed.

“Wife, purify with prayers and prepare our hearth for an esteemed guest; draw water, and bring out beer and bread to feed this company. The freshly slaughtered mutton too.” The woman nodded and disappeared back into the compound.

The easing of tension among the Iceni was palpable; hoods were thrown back, and the spear-carriers dropped their weapons and shields at their feet, swinging their tired arms and shoulders, glad to be free, for a while, from the heavy armour they had carried and put to heavy use but a few hours before.

“I will open the gate to the meadows; your mounts can graze, if you will?”

Dias seemed keen to appease the company, as well he might; tired and small in numbers though they were, they could take what he offered, with little enough fight. But as two young women emerged from the gates bearing flagons of beer and baskets of bread, he went before the chariot to address the tall woman who had not spoken. She was clearly the illustrious guest the village must entertain.

“Lady, you are injured I think”, he respectfully pointed to the bloodstain over her breast, “and the maidens with you are weary and droop - what would you have us bring you?”

The two young village women had laid the food and drink in front of the chariot on a rude trestle table, like an offering. Many hungry eyes fixed on the baskets and jugs, yet none moved; food and drink could only be taken when the necessary prayers were uttered.

Bracing herself, the woman in the chariot lowered her head graciously in acknowledgement to the elder and then raised it, as one comfortable with addressing an audience. A crowd of villagers now clustered, afraid yet curious, by the rarely-opened gates. Her voice, like her appearance, was imperious, aristocratic, yet harsh and stern. She was hoarse; cracked and smoky were the words she uttered, her voice strained to breaking yet commanding, for all its croaking quality.

“I thank you, and the Gods thank you, for your help; it is meet that you should give us aid, when your King did not. But we thank you right well, and what can be done to defray your bounty with coin, we will do.”

She grimaced in pain, her face pinched and pallid. Dedo noticed the furtive movement of her hand beneath her cloak; withdrawing it from under her breast, she wiped her fingers on her tunic. She was clearly blooded. Moving with ill-concealed care she descended from the chariot, followed by the two younger women, who held back respectfully.

“We have travelled hard, from our capital at Venta Icenorum, from Londinium, and Verulamium. The Imperial despots have put us to the sword and *pila*, and many, too many of our tribe fell. We few who are left have sore need of rest and of food before we continue on our way. So now, at sunset, at the start of the day, we will give thanks to our gods, and give them their due. To you, O Sucellos, let fall your hammer and rain down a storm of destruction on our cursed traitorous oppressors! We will never bow to the Roman yoke!” she screamed. Her throat was taut, her voice so hoarse it failed her, and her words became a gasp of pain.

Her defiance was shocking, profane, following as it did a blessing and a prayer. She beat her breast in fury, oblivious in her spiritual agony to her body’s obvious hurt. “We will never lower our necks before any corrupt Roman

paterfamilias! Warriors are we, Iceni, and we will avenge our fallen brothers and sisters, or die in the attempt!” Falling forward from exhaustion, loss of blood and passion, Queen Boudicca, widow of King Prasutagus and the last survivor of the Iceni warrior chieftains swooned at the feet of the astonished villagers.

## Part II

Prayers and cleansing rituals observed, the queen's retinue gathered inside the village compound to eat at the trestles hastily brought forth by the dumbfounded villagers. More baskets of bread were produced for the travellers; despite all they had lost this day, could still muster heroic appetites and most fell to the beer, porridge, and mutton stew with famished determination.

For Dedo and the other attendants, their animals must be seen to first; the beasts would be led to pasture, fed and fenced in for the evening, before Dedo could taste a morsel. As he rode Mallo back up the track towards the paddocks, following a wide eyed village lad, Dedo mouthed a silent prayer to the nearest nature deity that there would be enough bread left for mopping up the stew.

“What call you this place?” he asked the urchin, whose sandals were missing their thongs, and so worn they were almost translucent. It would be a hard enough life in such a small settlement, although it lay between two Roman

outposts along Watling Street. They turned into a trampled muddy field enclosed by rude birch fencing.

“Puddlehill”, replied the boy, keen to show respect to the stranger, yet more eager still to admire the visitors’ horses that had been turned to pasture here. Rarely would he see such fine steeds! Mallo was almost the last of the livestock to reach the meadow, and the boy had instructions to feed and tend the Icenic animals, a task much more to his liking than minding the phlegmatic cows and sheep of his own people.

One or two of Dedo’s own party were also in the paddock, ensuring their mounts were comfortable; of all the Brittonic tribes, the Icenic loved and respected their horses and ponies as equals and colleagues, honouring them so far as to feature a horse on the coins they minted. His young guide was itching to inspect the horseflesh at his disposal, so, dismounting, Dedo thanked him and sent him on his way; he would not be surprised if that young sprig waited until the field cleared to try out the mettlesome steeds in his temporary care.

Hungry though he was, and keen to return to the warmth of a fire pit and a bowl of stew, Dedo paused to take in the fast approaching evening; the pasture was on the lower tier of a gently sloping hill that ended in a high ridge, stretching out of sight to north and south. The air was still and cold, and the sunlight had fled the eastern sky; low orange clouds wavered and died against the western

dusk, pricked by the new stars that were already present before their more usual companions appeared.

The soft champing and nickering of the horses, and the muted conversation of the few Icenii lingering in this unfamiliar field made Dedo feel the distance from his home. Too many miles, and too many dead lay between this modest camp and his life at Venta Icenorum. He shivered, pulling his cloak more closely round his shoulders. Why had they stopped for the night, so close to the site of the devastating defeat they had suffered - was the queen more gravely wounded than they realised? She would be reluctant to reveal the extent of her hurt, lest it be judged weakness, and an inability to lead her tribe.

Dedo turned from his contemplation when a light hand fell on his shoulder. Standing before him was Cata, one of the queen's young warrior maids; her natural pallor was heightened by her dark hair and her newly adopted tunic and cloak of black wool, the traditional garb of the wild women.

She was but lately recruited into the ranks of the highly trained female guards in whom the safety of the Druid's sacred oak groves was entrusted. Cata had plaited her hair into two neat braids, held in place by fine bone combs that shone against the darkening evening light. Dedo knew, although he had not seen her on the battlefield at Watling Street, that she would have worn her hair loose and streaming behind her, wild and fey, as she defended her queen.

“I missed speaking to you until now Dedo; I did not know if you had taken hurt?”

“Aye, I’m well enough Cata, better than many. And you? I’m glad to see you.”

He kept his voice light as he took her hand from his shoulder and held it briefly in his own. The horror of the battle this day hung between them, ghastly and blood-soaked; their future was as uncertain and dark as this evening, but they were both here, alive and as far as he could judge, unharmed.

Dedo could thank his infirmity for his life. He had taken his place with the women and children and other sundry non-combatants in the wagons placed around the battle site; lucky for him, he had been too slow to secure a front row seat, and was instead relegated to the rear of the wagon train. When it was clear that the battle was lost, it had been relatively easy for him to slip away unscathed, unlike the poor souls who had a ringside seat to their own massacre. Maybe the gods had a reason for sparing them both.

Cata was an orphan like Dedo. Her mother had died at her birth, a sad but common enough plight, but she was fortunate that, like Dedo, her father had influence in the Icenic court. He had stood loyal with Boudicca after the revolt twelve years ago, when the faithless Brigantes tribe had joined the Romans in

imposing illegal land theft against Iceni, and ruinous new loans were forced on them at exorbitant interest rates. For Briton to fight Briton in defence of the Imperial oppressors! The treachery was unthinkable. Yet they had lived through the aftermath and thrived, for a while, under the Roman occupiers.

A new, more amenable client king was installed as King of the Iceni, their late King Prasutagus. But Boudicca had been queen in her own right; demotion to consort was a bitter pill for her to swallow, no doubt of that. But the birth of two daughters to the royal couple had cemented their alliance, and all had gone well until the death of Prasutagus.

During these events of high state, both Cata and Dedo had been entrusted to the king and queen to provide for them, and the young pair had grown up together among the tumble and clamour of the royal household at Venta Icenorum on the east coast. Cata was orphaned when her father was among those killed after the breakdown of the court following Prasutagus's death, and Boudicca had enlisted her into her order of female warriors.

This was not the fate Cata had dreamed of, but she was friendless in a world of hostile Romans and warring tribes, and she was luckier than most, who could not claim a queen's patronage. The calling of warrior maid was both noble and sacred, and Cata knew better than to complain, or to refuse the signal offer of becoming a wild woman, even though all she craved was to be a wife and

mother. She had seen enough bloodshed and treachery to quench any romantic ideals of a life as an Icene war maid.

But there was more to mourn than a conscription that was likely to be bloody and short lived; for all that they grew up together, Cata would not be permitted to wed an attendant, no matter how close to the queen. Neither one had spoken of their future, but Dedo knew that Cata felt the same way as he did, and for him there was no other girl. The truth of their situation hovered in the cold air between them, but Dedo could find nothing to say. Cata broke the silence.

“We’d better go back or I’ll be missed.”

They turned to descend the hillock back to the settlement, where thin columns of smoke marked the meal they were missing. Somehow, he was holding her hand again, and he was in no rush to disengage their fingers.

“Will we move on at daybreak, think you?”

“What say the queen?”

“She says nothing - nothing! I fear her mind is lost, and the ladies Rigan and Nemeta are like stone! What will happen to us?” Dry eyed, straight backed and outwardly calm as she appeared, Dedo knew that only the shame of giving way to her fears, as one of the queen’s bodyguard, prevented Cata from breaking down and crying to the gods to save her.

And what of Rigan and Nemeta? The queen's daughters accompanied their mother, spared as yet, but it was clear to all that these two young maids were stupefied by the battle they had witnessed, and their fate, should their mother fall, would be grim. Yet, what could be done? Despite the queen's bravado, and the many favourable portents, the rebellion had ended in a complete rout for the Icenii. Surely, the Romans would hunt down the remaining rebels, to make an example for any other tribes and to remove, finally, any figurehead around which discontent could once more rally. The governor would not downplay the risk of native rebellion a second time, after skirting so close to losing the province. Rigan and Nemeta were spared thus far, but the gods alone knew what the end would be for the remaining Icenii.

“You're not talking to me. What ails you?”

Dedo's ankle ached, but that was his old secret, a part of him now, and he would not burden Cata with his infirmities.

“I don't know what will happen, but you speak true, we are all bound to our queen while she lives.”

He squeezed her hand as they reached the gate, where they would go their separate ways; Cata to the queen's side, and Dedo to find a billet and a bowl of food where he could.

The queen's horses was stabled, and her chariot had been wheeled into the compound, together with the wagon that was laden with the last remnants of her elaborate portable furnishings, trundled doggedly across the country from her royal household. Two of the bodyguard were unpacking the royal furniture from the wagon. A pair of small tables for the queen's food to be served on, together with bronze plate and goblets; a heavy wooden chest with bands of iron was next, likely holding the queen's cloaks and other items of her wardrobe. Three heavy, high backed chairs were next, one each for the queen and her daughters. Weighty wool and fur blankets and throws, and finally a set of copper toilet instruments, a chamber pot and a bronze bowl and pitcher for the royal toilette. The queen could set up a mobile court wherever she travelled, but her retinue was sadly diminished. These few remnants of her status served to emphasise her fall, rather than her elevation, among the humble villagers of Puddlehill.

Dedo set off to claim a bowl of stew and a hunk of bread from the remaining scraps. Securing the last scrapings from the pot, he found himself a place to sit in earshot of the council of war taking place in the large, open roundhouse that lay in the centre of the settlement. He nudged a dog out of the way as he settled down with his back to the wall of a neighbouring roundhouse; the cur thought about showing his teeth, but smelling food, he moved his tail, farted and resettled, hopeful of some scraps from the steaming bowl. Dedo didn't fancy the mutt's chances.

The village elder Dias had just finished talking. He passed a ram's horn to the neighbour sitting to his left, whom Dedo recognised as Brigomall, noble warlord of the Icene court and advisor to the queen, and one of her few remaining chieftains. Brigomall stood to address the gathered family heads of this insignificant Catuvellauni village. They numbered so few that most could sit comfortably within one of the family roundhouses that surrounded the central hall. He gazed around him; at the women clustered in their doorways, their children hiding beneath their plaids; at his queen and the remnants of her guard, at the injured, propped up where they could find space; at the hunted mutineers to which they had been reduced.

“You ask for an account, and it is only fair that we repay your hospitality with frankness. You must also know that if the Romans discover you gave us succour, they will show no mercy.” Mutters rippled around the hall. The ancient respect shown to one who held the horn was in danger of rupturing. Dias held out his hand for the horn, and rose to his feet, unhurried and dignified.

“Catuvellauni we are, not Iceni, yet all of us here are native to this land. We have lived on this site since the forces of the Roman despot Claudius made us cut away the summit of yonder hill”, - he gestured to the chalk ridge - “and lay down a stone road for his soldiers to cross our lands and claim our freedom. Our people are part of this landscape; Verlamion was our capital until the Romans captured

it. We have no part in your present rebellion, yet the Romans shall not learn of you from any of this village. We are obedient to the Romans, aye, but not yet bent to slavery.”

Passing the horn back to Brigomall, Dias sat down to nods and murmured agreement. No wonder, and no blame to them, thought Dedo, wiping his fingers round the bowl once more before giving it up to the dog who warmed his flank. Dias’s words might sound noble, but the villagers had a signal example in front of them this very night, of what happens when you oppose the will of the Roman army!

Brigomall stood again. “How come we to be here? It is a tale to make the gods weep.” He looked round at the assembled villagers; one or two of the women ushered their small children inside their houses, but most remained, silent and attentive.

“Not knowing how much you already know, or have heard, I will start with the death of our king.” The queen’s face betrayed no emotion at the mention of her dead husband. Flinty and remote, she gazed into the middle distance.

“Prasutagus and his queen tried to rule in peace with the Romans, seeing that resistance had called down on the Iceni not only the wrath of the Romans,

but also of other treacherous client tribes.” Again, Brigomall glanced at Boudicca, as though expecting her to interject, but she remained a statue.

“The lowly curs put in place by their Roman overlords to plague us refused to see the wisdom of the will made by Prasutagus, leaving half of his kingdom to Rome, and half to his queen and daughters.”

“I am queen of the Iceni in my own right, no mere consort am I! My daughters are the heirs to my kingdom, independent of any claims of Prasutagus!”

All heads turned to the queen, who had shrieked her claim, the muscles in her neck quivering. She spat out the name of her husband, leaving little doubt in her listeners’ minds that her marriage had been one of political expediency alone. She beckoned to her daughters who obeyed with reluctance, shrinking from their wild-eyed mother and bowing their heads under the gaze of the villagers. She wrapped a long sinewy arm around the shoulder of each one, pulling them to her with an almost predatory movement.

“My daughters are the only true and rightful heirs to the Iceni kingdom. See here, Rigan, and here, Nemeta, princesses both! The death of their father changed nothing, the kingdom passed to me in my own right, but that cowardly Roman cur Decianus Catus arrived at our court with his military guard. He

regarded my estate as Roman property, no doubt waiting to skim a large share for himself, and when I rightfully objected he ordered his lowly Roman swine to detain me, a queen; to be debased, stripped and subjected to the lash by lowly centurions and slaves, and my daughters, oh - my daughters!”

Boudicca raised her arms to the sky, petitioning the gods to judge and avenge the wrongs inflicted on a rightful queen and her people. She still clasped her daughters; Nemeta, the younger by a year or so had bowed her head and was weeping noiselessly, her thin shoulders shaking under the iron grip of her mother, but her sister Rigan, heir to her mother’s kingdom, was dry eyed and unmoving; disconnected from her surroundings, as her mother had been, thought Dedo.

He had heard that the centurions had outraged these young maidens in front of their mother; that they had seen the rest of their family carted off to the slave market at Camulodunum, those brothers and sisters of their mother’s parents that might have counselled a different way. All who saw them must quail for their futures. Boudicca stood a supplicant to the gods, unmindful of her suffering children. Seeing this, one of the village women left her doorway and approached the queen, head respectfully bowed.

“Lady, let me take them, the princesses. They grieve to see you this way, and to hear again of the crimes against them. We will make offerings to our gods

and pray for healing, and for vengeance. Come, let me,” she said in coaxing tones to the queen, who assented and allowed the girls to be led away by the humble cottager’s wife.

Brigomall approached the queen and escorted her to her high backed seat in the centre of the gathering. He resumed his narrative to a hushed and shocked audience; their grief and anger were palpable in the night air.

“We saw our chance. The Roman governor Suetonius was leading his forces to Mona, to wage war on all we hold sacred, on our Druids and our way of life. We thought to prevent them, before the spring planting, when they would least expect revolt. We interpreted the many portents and the uncanny lights in the sky, visible yet, as the call to battle. Many of our best fell defending Mona, but to no avail.

Our queen led the Iceni, together with the Trinovantes in an army many scores of thousands strong, in a righteous rebellion. We rose against the oppressors stationed at Camulodunum, debased now into a colony for decrepit and disgraced Roman soldiery, and a temple to the detested Claudius. We slaughtered them all. Quintus Cerialis, commander of the ninth legion, attempted to relieve the besieged colony; we destroyed his legionaries, leaving no Roman standing.

“Tell them that the very statue of victory, erected by the despot Claudius fell prostrate, turning its back to flee our righteous wrath! City of Claudius’ victory? It will henceforth be known as the first city to fall in what shall be our eventual victory – the gods foretell it!”

The Iceni answered the queen’s interruption with cheers, and rattled their shields; some of the villagers also called out their approval, but these were mostly the young mettlesome lads, Dedo noticed, his eyes darting around the compound. Older and wiser heads turned to each other with troubled gazes.

Brigomall waited for the cheers to die down.

“The cowardly Suetonius returned to Londinium but soon retreated again, abandoning it to its fate; such is Roman honour. Londinium will not soon forget Boudicca and the Iceni! We left it torched, the soil to the very banks of the dark river Tamesa charred and a cubit deep in ashes. Aye, our queen speaks right; the omens muttered by Romans and Britons alike came true, and Roman brutality was paid for in kind! Truly was it said that the river Tamesa would flow red to the edge of the sea, and the spirits of the dead were seen lying on the strands.

“We took strength that such premonitions foretold our victory, and our forces pressed on, while the Roman veterans took fright that vengeance was now in our hands. We reached Verulamium unchecked; we wreaked our vengeance

on all who sought to steal from the Icenii their birthright. Many heads we took; we were not merciful.”

Brigomall looked around at the gathered villagers, their wives and children nearby, their animals penned for the night. Their faces betrayed no judgement or horror, only satisfaction at this tale of bloodshed and vengeance against their cruel conquerors.

Dias raised his hand for the horn.

“We lament for the ills done to the queen and her noble kin, and rejoice to hear that you brought the Romans to account, although it grieves me to hear of the destruction of our fair Verlamion. No matter! It is a Roman stronghold now, or was. Tell us, how came you here, and so few? And are the Romans in pursuit?” Dias was shrewd; he had voiced the question that was troubling his village. This was no victory party that had descended on them; too few, and on the run, that was clear.

The queen rose swiftly, before Brigomall could reply. Staring straight ahead, her arms laid along the wooden struts of her throne chair, she had appeared not to hear what was passing, but she answered Dias herself.

“While we were still in Verulamium, finishing what the Romans began, our scouts bought word that the Romans were regrouping. Suetonius amassed his

twin Fourteenth legion, the Gemina, together with the Twentieth Valeria Victrix, and all the auxiliaries he could muster; we had already put paid to the Ninth Hispana legion. We outnumbered the Romans but the place where we clashed suited the cowardly Roman fighting style, more than the Iceni. The gods had favoured us thus far, but no more.”

She sank back into her chair, glaring wildly, recalling perhaps the enormous army she had led to battle, which contrasted so pitifully with her current retinue.

“The Romans were cunning”, continued Brigomall. “They led us away from Verulamium, and engaged us in battle in a long narrow gully, backed by a forest which opened into a wide plain. They barred our access to this plain by placing their own foot soldiers there. We could not attack their flanks within the gorge, and neither could we attempt a rear approach through the forest. Auxiliaries on the flanks and cavalry on the wings covered the legionaries. We were sorely tried by the Roman treachery, yet our queen roused our warriors with her harangue, and we believed even then that we would prevail. I recall her words yet:

‘It is not as a woman descended from noble ancestry, but as one of the people that I am avenging lost freedom, my scourged body, the outraged chastity of my daughters. Roman lust has debased so far that not our very persons, nor

even age or virginity, are left unpolluted. But heaven is on the side of a righteous vengeance; a legion that dared to fight has perished; the rest are hiding themselves in their camp, or are thinking anxiously of flight. They will not sustain even the din and the shout of so many thousands, much less our charge and our blows. If you weigh well the strength of the armies, and the causes of the war, you will see that in this battle you must conquer or die. This is a woman's resolve; as for men, they may live and be slaves!

Brigomall had long since committed the queen's speech to memory, aided by her frequent recitals. Boudicca nodded with great ferocity as he spoke, her lips compressed into a single thin line, reliving the words she had addressed to her huge, doomed forces.

“Yet still, the Romans sought to debase us with words, as well as by arms. Suetonius spurred his troops, named us savages, and jeered at our warrior maids. We rallied with the speech of our queen, and positioned our wagons, with our kin and our steeds, in a ring that surrounded the meadow in which we gathered.

“We took great heart from the strange stars in the sky overhead. They shone brilliantly in the middle of the day, and little by little, a great many lights were seen, like glow-worms. The strange star that was first seen now appeared like the pommel to a sword, and the smaller lights were as round shields, or so many called out. I myself saw only lights, but they gave great heart to our warriors,

following the portents of doom that fell on Camulodunum. Some called out that the gods were handing down their swords and shields to slay the Romans. I wish that we had not, for our confidence was premature.

“The Roman forces, although frightened by the lights, were more afraid of their centurions. As the queen led our army across the plain, we were channelled into a tightly packed mass. We had no room to employ our horse skills. Our chariots were useless, mere clutter; they impeded us now on foot and there was no space for manoeuvres. What use our horses when crushed together, and their riders rendered useless? Pinched together as we were, the Roman volley of *pila* left many of our warriors with no shield, or one encumbered with a heavy iron spear. Many chose to fight without shield, but a second volley followed the first; the legionaries carried two *pila*, and we were unable to retreat, hemmed in as we were.”

Brigomall fetched a great sigh, and fell silent. Not a body moved, or spoke, within the courtyard; the horror of the trap he had described was vivid to all who heard his words.

“There is little more to tell. Our warriors in disarray, the Romans pressed their advantage; their cavalry forces, lances extended and well defended by armour and auxiliaries, gave us battle in earnest. We tried to retreat, but our own

wagons blocked our flight. It was a bloodbath. Women, children and even our beasts were put to the sword.”

“How many fell?” asked Dias, his face strained and white.

“Scores of thousands. I cannot tell the true figure, but little more than what you see here this evening escaped that hellish gorge.”

“And where did this catastrophe take place; where was this gorge you speak of?” The uncanny stillness that had settled on the listeners was broken; many of the village men were exchanging panicked glances and whispers, and the womenfolk were disappearing into their houses with their children.

“Not three leagues from here. South of Durocibrivis, just off the Roman road.”

# Extract from **The Bondage of The Soil**

*The Bondage of The Soil* is the upcoming sequel to  
*The Battle of Watling Street*

## Chapter One

*It harrows me with fear and wonder.*

*- Shakespeare, Hamlet*

Ancient. Stella Travis was tired and heartsick, and felt older than the stars her mother named her for. Driving home from London on a wet Friday evening, she caught herself sighing with an almost moronic regularity. Her strained eyes were hot, arid hollows, coated with a sticky layer of fatigue that threatened to pull her into a pit of terminal sleep, right here in her car. Her limbs felt nerveless; she was scooped empty of everything except weariness and an urge to scream after 90 minutes of clutch-pumping traffic.

Leaving the M25, her car approached the sluggish slip road for the M1 Northbound; sliding into the new traffic flow, a tiny morsel into the cavernous maw, the motorway swallowed her as she joined the rest of the traffic in its peristaltic wave northbound. Twenty minutes later, the last of her patience digested, she approached her exit, where the terminally impacted road reluctantly clenched, then expelled her.

She rubbed the sore places where her driving glasses pinched her nose, but it didn't ease her headache, or the pain in her eyes; they were more dazzled by the headlights than usual although it wasn't quite dark. The windscreen wipers thwacked their humdrum reminder that the weather was foul, and Stella geared her car down as the road shouldered into a steep bend.

Her evening commute was nearly over; she drove 60 miles from a small Bedfordshire village in the uneventful hinterland between Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard, to the industrial edge of Canary Wharf in London. And back again, Monday to Friday. Her commute home had become progressively later for the last three months: not because she loved her job, but because staying at work was better than coming back to a cold, unwelcoming house.

Sighing again, Stella remembered the dishes awaiting her, frigid and congealed with yesterday's dinner. Now there was no one at home to wake up with, to share a morning coffee, Stella skipped breakfast most days. Lunch was

usually a baguette from the cafe near the office, or a sandwich of dubious vintage from the snack wagon that Facilities had generously arranged, after they had closed down the staff canteen. Dinner was too many takeaways and deliveries that ended up half-eaten; the aroma of past pizzas and kebabs lurked in her waste bin, rising up to haunt her whenever she ventured into the utility room. She couldn't face another sordid meal from a plastic container, and she had no energy to clean the place up when she got home. Stella Travis wasn't herself, and she didn't know how to get back to the person she had been.

She would prefer not to hang around at work. She was dimly aware of her growing lack of productivity and her lack of motivation to do anything about it, but the office, which was a 24-hour operational site, had the constant lure of other people. Colleagues, acquaintances she knew and could talk to, if only to complain about the ridiculous workloads, the staff reductions, and most outrageous of all, the closure of the canteen and the withdrawal of free tea and coffee facilities. There were always a few hangers-on, the late crew; a knot of colleagues huddling more-or-less together, who waved their arms, like survivors of a shipwreck, to make the lights come back on when the energy-saving sensor overlooked their presence. All watching one another, although they pretended not to, all alert to the danger of being snared by that one guy who struggled with social cues, who always wanted someone to talk at; all set for a long and lonely evening, with little to rush home for.

Her journey home this Friday evening had been the usual weekend-flight grind; all routes out of the city were bloated with extra traffic, clogged with the weekday city residents struggling home for two days. Stella muttered her motorway litany whenever the stop-start grated on her nerves, and on her clutch foot: A13, North Circular, M11, M25, M1, A5129, A524, arrive. “You have reached your destination”, as the sultry voice of the car’s Sat Nav would say. Not: “You have reached home”.

Arriving at her destination took even longer tonight; turning on her radio to catch the evening traffic update, she realised she had missed the bulletin. The phone-in hour was under way; this evening’s subject was London traffic congestion. Stella felt her life shrinking to a ludicrous meta-backlog. The radio host was always ready to goad and enrage his audience:

“Drivers now spend FOUR DAYS A YEAR stuck in jams in London, the worst city in the UK for traffic gridlock, ahead of Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds!” He provoked his listeners about the 96 hours of their lives that London motorists lost in gridlock annually before Stella jabbed the button to change the station; Otis Redding suggested soulfully that she try a little tenderness, but Stella snapped the radio off, saddened by the recollection of Redding’s untimely death, and her own history with the song.

By the time she was flashing her indicator to leave the M1, Stella's mood was low and subdued, like the last embers of red that flickered on the western horizon over Oxfordshire. A fleeting, troubling thought flecked across her eyes as they took in the dying sunset; who would care or mourn if she drove straight into the central reservation or the pillar of the next bridge across the road? She blinked the idea away, but it lurked, ready to glide out when she was tired, or emotional, which was all the time at this point in her life.

Blinking seemed to bring spots before her eyes, and the road in front of the car seemed to shimmer momentarily, as though she could see heat radiating from the tarmac. That was impossible; the evening sky was darkening to a deep blue, and the road surface was a uniform black, lit only by the central strip of cat's eyes. She rubbed at her eye sockets with her knuckles. This seemed to clear the visual oddities, but left her eyes itchy and strained. I am like this road, she thought, lonely, uneven, and remote from humanity. Could a road feel self-pity?

It was less than fifteen minutes' drive from the motorway to Stella's house. She had passed the last house in Whungrave half a mile back, and was driving through empty farmland. As her car climbed the hill that levelled out to a lonely chalk ridge, Stella was gripped mid-yawn by a terrible, irrational fear that eclipsed her previous thoughts of suicide. She wrenched the car into a rough gravelled lay-by at the top of the hill, anti-lock brakes bringing the car to a

lumpy, juddering halt. Her heart was thumping in her throat; in her panic, her lungs forgot how to inhale, and she had no breath spare to cry out. Was she having a medical crisis or finally, the mental collapse she had anticipated for months?

Don't let it be a stroke, she thought frantically, forgetting in her terror that her mobile phone was connected to the car's Bluetooth. Raking huge gulps of air into her lungs, she struggled to regain control. Her hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles would ache for days. Heart still hammering, she forced herself to breathe, and to look again at the movement that her caught her eye.

The surrounding landscape was dark and featureless. The evening light had dwindled to a bar of deepest umber at the lowest point of the horizon; there were no street lamps along this road, and only the ticking of the car's cooling engine punctured the silence. Stella knew she was completely alone, but despite the strength of her reasoning, she could see, superimposed over vacant fields, a procession of ragged, bloody figures. Dark they were, scorched with age, shrivelled and adust, yet they were lit from the front, as though by an insensitive shaft of moonlight. They floated a foot or two above the ground. The red and white of their naked sinews and bones was hideously clear, highlighted against

their mummified skin, and they wailed and chanted as they moved, shrieked and lamented with tongueless voices, in an unknown language.

Stella saw with mounting horror that many of the bodies ended with gaping stumps; their feet were missing, hewn from their legs, leaving ragged tatters of flesh that fluttered as they jerked across the black grass. The sound of their mournful cries came from inside Stella's head, as though she was wearing headphones or sitting in between speakers - it was all around her, yet came from within.

As the figures passed through the uncanny luminescence, Stella could make out distinguishing details on each one; although all were rent and torn, bones and ribs peeping with a coquettish obscenity through swathes of hanging skin, the rags that clung to their bodies marked them as individuals, from very different walks of life.

*Or walks of death!* The thought bubbled madly into Stella's mind and she clapped a hand to her mouth, to stifle a laugh or a scream, whichever won the battle to climb out of her mouth first. A corpse clothed in the rich purples and furs of a king or a chief, a bright open-ended necklet of twisted gold around a misshapen, twisted neck; a small androgynous figure in a nondescript cotton shift, torn open at the front with the sunken, ruptured belly of death clearly visible. A grinning skeleton, in sturdy fustian tunic and leather belt, hanging in

redundant folds over its bony frame. A flapping thing with long red hair, a gaping green gown with a chequered cloak, and an armlet that floated implausibly on an arm denuded of flesh. Acting on its own volition and without conscious thought, Stella's hand moved to snick the car's central locking to the closed position.

Following close behind the dark-stealing figures, as though in their thrall, were a scattering of goats and sheep; they walked on soundless cloven hooves, and their eyes glinted a baleful yellow in the unnatural light. All of them wore a crude bib of bright blood, where their throats had been slashed; the hot coppery stench of slaughter filled the car for a rank moment, although all the windows were closed. As Stella fully took in each figure, it would disappear into the earth itself, as though sinking finally into its overdue grave.

*“Danse Macabre, Danse Macabre”*, she muttered repeatedly, unaware she had spoken. The Dance of Death. The plangent dirge of cries, a flapping as of monstrous wings, and the plucking of a single stringed, unseen instrument drifted across the fields before dying out, as each nightmare figure was swallowed once more by the merciful soil.

## About The Author

Margaret McGoverne is fascinated with the rich historical tapestry of her native Great Britain and enjoys weaving historical facts and fiction with speculative Sci-Fi in her writing. She is a descendant of many generations of Northern Irish family, mostly from counties Antrim and Down, with a strong storytelling and oral history tradition.

Margaret enjoys travelling to regions and countries rich in history, both ancient and modern, and infusing her love for historical turbulence, mysteries, and science fiction into her writing. Margaret lives with her family and several cats not far from London.

A full-length sequel to the Battle of Watling Street titled *The Bondage of The Soil* is scheduled for publication during autumn 2017.

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