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Introduction by Alfred Duggan

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The Novel is a comparatively new form of art, and the historical novel quite a recent development. In the Middle Ages, and even more during the Renaissance, some writers placed their stories of high life in remote countries or distant epochs; but they made no attempt to depict the appropriate manners and customs—the court of King Lear is like any Tudor court, and *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, discusses in his happy valley the behaviour of eighteenth-century St. James's. The advantage gained by an unfamiliar setting was that the reader could not anticipate the outcome of the plot, and that melodramatic changes of fortune seemed less implausible.

By the middle of the eighteenth century writers were beginning to be interested in the queer goings-on of their ancestors. This was especially true of Britain, where the Reformation had brought great changes in everyday life, so that every shire was littered with the remains of mighty buildings now become superfluous. It was the strangeness of the age of chivalry which first attracted the interest of the polite. In Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* anything might happen, and nearly everything did. Monks, nuns, knights and magicians are seen as equally strange, each moved by motives equally incomprehensible to a civilised man. Walpole's imitators, writing in the particular genre of the Gothick Tale, were out to shock, not to convince.

But in one corner of Britain the age of chivalry lingered on until 1746. Walter Scott might talk to old men who had seen Rob Roy; *The Heart of Midlothian* and *The Antiquary* depict a world which had only recently passed over the horizon. In his Scottish stories, therefore, Sir Walter set himself to recount the remarkable adventures of ordinary

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[More information](#)

men, men like his fellow-citizens in the Edinburgh of 1800, who happened to live in a different kind of civilisation.

Thus early were formed the two main branches of the historical novel. Horace Walpole, and his imitators in their Gothick Tales, delighted in the absurd inconsequence of knight-errantry and necromancy. Scott understood that to a burgher of Glasgow a Highland paladin might be merely a tiresome obstacle to commerce. From the *Castle of Otranto* descend all the wild tales of desperate deeds which go so well into Cinemascope, the Ruritanian adventures in which every actor is of royal blood, and, at a greater remove from the original source, the White Queens reigning in Central Africa and the ingenuities of space-fiction. All these depend for their charm (and the best of them possess great charm) on the postulate that our ancestors, or races living at a great distance from this country, are not a bit like us.

From the second source we get, at the end of a long descent, the stories of Robert Graves and Naomi Mitchison. These make their effect (to me one of the strongest effects in modern letters) by assuming that men and women fundamentally like us once conducted their lives under very different conditions. This second stream seems to me the more worthy of notice. Let us try to map its course.

At the beginning we note that Walter Scott composed his novels within two different frameworks. When he was writing the Civil Wars and their Jacobite epilogue were almost contemporary politics—as they are still contemporary politics in Belfast. By taking pains he could reconstruct his setting with perfect accuracy, and he took the pains. The dialect is correct, so are the details of daily life, money, eating and drinking, and especially religion. The reader is placed in a concrete and convincing environment.

Scott's tales of the Middle Ages breathe a different atmosphere. For one thing, though he could see the good in both

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[More information](#)

Covenanters and Cavaliers, to him the idea of a grown man dedicating his life to prayer and self-denial was so absurd that he made no effort to understand a monk. He neglected not only the technicalities of Popery, bringing a friar into *Ivanhoe* fifty years before St. Francis and, of course, walling up an erring nun in *The Abbot*, but also the influence of religion on the ordinary layman. If he had stopped to think he must have seen that a Scotsman would not ride all the way to Palestine unless he felt pretty strongly about the fate of the Holy Places; but his Crusaders in *The Talisman* feel no more hatred of the infidel than if they were engaged on opposite sides in a Test Match.

This misconception of the mind of the Middle Ages seems to me much more important than any number of mistakes about the date of the first stone castle or the rules of the twelfth-century tournament. But Sir Walter wrote for a public that knew nothing of the Middle Ages.

However, there was another period, besides the Stuart past, on which the eighteenth-century public was well-informed. Dr. Johnson and his friends knew a great deal more about Roman Emperors than about Plantagenet Kings. The story of the true historical novel is the story of the expansion of these two patches of knowledge; until nowadays, except for a wisp of fog in the Dark Ages, any period of English history, from Julius Caesar to the present day, may be used as a background for a tale of fiction, the author assuming a certain co-operation from the educated reader.

In the nineteenth century this was not so. Bulwer-Lytton provides a good example. *The Last Days of Pompeii* gives an accurate picture of its times, *The Last of the Barons* does not. Lytton wrote for a public who had read Tacitus and Pliny, but who knew no more of the fifteenth century than they could find in Shakespeare and Holinshed.

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[More information](#)

With slightly more knowledge, the mid-Victorians remained quite sure that their own point of view was the point of view of the ordinary man in any age. Kingsley's *Hypatia* is an example of a good story spoiled, at least for some readers, by the intrusion of an historically false outlook. Kingsley had the letters of Synesius to guide him, and all his historical facts are accurate; but his Goths are just nineteenth-century Germans of the progressive kind, instead of the tiresome savages they seemed to the average Roman. In *Westward Ho!* he gave free rein to his hatred of Popery and Spain; this book, which is still sometimes given as a prize to schoolboys, teaches that in dealing with Irishmen and other disgusting foreigners an English hero need consider himself bound neither by the Ten Commandments nor by the ordinary code of honour. Above all, Kingsley missed the important points that Elizabethan England was something new, defiant of the rest of Christendom; he seems to consider that Philip of Spain was an aggressor, attacking harmless innocents who had lived since time immemorial under an Anglican settlement.

By the 1890's the scene is changing. The new history schools at Oxford and Cambridge are diffusing a true picture of the past; the Master of the Rolls is publishing our mediaeval chronicles as they were written; Pepys, the Verneys, the Pastons, are becoming known. Thackeray's *Esmond* and Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* had been projections of current affairs into the past. Thackeray could draw a Jacobite by looking at any old-fashioned Tory who deplored the Reform Bill; Dickens saw the Reign of Terror reflected in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. The landmark is Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*. Using the Paston Letters, Stevenson got right away from the wellknown main stream of history, to write about private individuals of the fifteenth century as they really were. It is not the best of his books, but in some

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[More information](#)

ways it is the most important thing he ever wrote.

Now we come to writers who seem to me contemporary, because their books were still “current fiction” when I read them as a schoolboy. Conan Doyle took more trouble over *Sir Nigel* and *The White Company* than over any of his detective stories, and regarded the writing of them as his most important work. He followed Froissart for public events, and Jusserand’s *Wayfaring Life in Mediaeval England* for local colour, and got all his facts absolutely accurate. The result was two very fine stories, but they are not really placed in the fourteenth century; the hero, and all the other sympathetic characters, talk and feel like progressive late-Victorians; Conan Doyle never tried to think himself into the skin of a fourteenth-century knight.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were plenty of good historical novels. But most of them showed the past as a queer though fascinating peepshow, teaching the moral that in those days people were very odd; all except the hero, who is usually as up-to-date as the *Daily Mail*. Marjorie Bowen, who wrote some of her best work under the pseudonym of George Preedy, sometimes made the past come alive. But when she does this she becomes too excited by the appalling goings-on of the Middle Ages. *The Viper of Milan* and *The Sword Decides* deal with ordinary Italian thuggery, which can be paralleled in more recent times; under Miss Bowen’s treatment the casual murders and treasons seem more terrible than anything that happened to the House of Atreus.

H. C. Bailey, better known as a writer of detective stories, produced in *The Fool* a fine picture of the young Henry II; in *The Sea Captain* he explored the obscure subject of galley-warfare in the Mediterranean, otherwise neglected except by Rafael Sabatini. But though these are exciting tales of adventure, to me they do not ring true as genuine

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[More information](#)

pictures of the past. Any reader must feel that they could only have been written by an Edwardian author who had views on tariff reform and the powers of the House of Lords.

Gilbert Parker and Mary Johnstone had founded the tradition of the American historical romance, where accuracy in a setting of the recent past is the factor most sought after. Again, their characters are too modern. As a child I first learned about the inflation of currency from reading one of Mary Johnstone's heroes regret, with marvellous foresight, the consequences of Confederacy's reckless printing of paper dollars. A neglected work in this field is Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, which shows the frontier in all its beastliness, as seen by a civilised American. It is a good corrective to the modern adulation of the gunman.

To me, the real eye-opener, showing what could be done with the historical novel, was Naomi Mitchison's *The Conquered*. Here was a Gallic boy of the first century B.C., thinking and behaving as such; he even works magic, to his own satisfaction, instead of being progressively anticlerical about Druids. But this came after the great watershed of modern times, the War of 1914. Earlier, Stanley Weyman and Maurice Hewlett had written as though they regretted that their contemporaries no longer carried swords; we know, to our loss, what a bore it is to be compelled to carry a tommy-gun.

Before Naomi Mitchison I can think of only one historical novelist who genuinely thought himself into the past—Ford Madox Hueffer in *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes*. Even he cheated a little, by making his hero a modern publisher, miraculously carried back to the fourteenth century; but the people his hero meets are thoroughly convincing.

After Naomi Mitchison the names come thick and fast. Whether it was that she set a fashion, or merely that *The Conquered* was published while others were already at work,

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[More information](#)

since then historical novels have altered completely, and for the better. Robert Graves has made us see the reality behind Roman history and C. S. Forester, writing for a generation that has heard gunfire, makes us smell black powder. (I myself prefer his tales of campaigning on land, *The Gun* and *Death to the French*, to all the seadoggishness of *Hornblower*; but I know myself in a minority).

Evan John is dead, after writing one or two fine crusading stories. But at present Zoé Oldenbourg, H. M. Prescott, Margaret Irwin and Edith Simon are still writing. I recommend their works—and, of course, those of the authors mentioned in the text above. They show us not only how our ancestors fought and made love, but how they thought and what they believed. That seems to me the only justification for the writing of historical novels.

ALFRED DUGGAN

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62213-5 - Reader's Guides: Second Series 11: Historical Fiction

Introduction by Alfred Duggan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MENTIONED IN THE INTRODUCTION

- JOHNSON, SAMUEL. *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759) O.U.P.*
- WALPOLE, HORACE. *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) Grey Walls Press 1950.*
- SCOTT, Sir WALTER. *Rob Roy* (1818); *The Heart of Midlothian* (1886); *The Antiquary* (1816); *Ivanhoe* (1820); *The Abbot* (1820); *The Talisman* (1888); Collins New Classics, 5s. 6d., 5s.
- BULWER-LYTTON, Lord LYTTON. *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) Collins New Classics, 5s. 6d.; *The Last of the Barons* (1843).
- KINGSLEY, CHARLES. *Hypatia* (1853); *Westward Ho!* (1855). Dent (Everyman) 8s. 6d.
- THACKERAY, W. M. *Henry Esmond* (1852). O.U.P. (World's Classics) 6s. Dent (Everyman) 7s. Collins New Classics, 5s. 6d.
- DICKENS, CHARLES. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). O.U.P. (World's Classics) 5s. Dent (Everyman) 6s.
- STEVENSON, R. L. *The Black Arrow* (1888). Collins New Classics, 5s. 6d.
- DOYLE, Sir ARTHUR CONAN. *Sir Nigel* (1906); *The White Company* (1916). Murray, each 8s. 6d.
- BOWEN, MARJORIE. *The Viper of Milan* (1917); *The Sword Decides* (1908).
- BAILEY, H. C. *The Fool*. Methuen, 1921. *The Sea Captain*. Methuen, 1916.
- WISTER, OWEN. *The Virginian*. Macmillan, 1919.
- HUEFFER, FORD MADOX (later Ford Madox Ford). *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes*. Constable, 1920.
- MITCHISON, NAOMI. *The Conquered* (see No. 160 below).
- FORESTER, C. S. *Death to the French*; *The Gun* (see Nos. 73, 75).

*Included in *Shorter Novels of the Eighteenth Century*. Dent (Everyman) 6s.

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[More information](#)

READING LIST

Taking the 'watershed' of the First World War as a starting point, this list includes only novels published between 1923 and the end of 1956. Historical accuracy has been a criterion for inclusion. All publishers are London firms except where otherwise stated. Prices (net and subject to alteration) are those prevailing in January, 1957, and are given only where a book is known to be available new as this list goes to press. Many of the books out of print can still be obtained secondhand and from public libraries.

1. ALLEN, HERVEY. *Action at Aquila*. Gollancz, 1938.

The American Civil War is dealt with here in rather less space than the author needed for the Napoleonic era, in his first novel; but the stage is equally crowded and the book never lacks lively incident.

2. ——— *Anthony Adverse*. Gollancz, 1934; now Heinemann. 25s.

A remarkable achievement, covering the entire Napoleonic era through the life and death of the hero, who gives his name to the book. There are many good things in the twelve hundred pages, but only those readers with uncommon stamina will refrain from a little judicious skipping.

3. ——— *The Forest and the Fort*. Heinemann, 1943.

4. ——— *Bedford Village*. Heinemann, 1945.

These two novels, set in the forests and mountains of Pennsylvania at the time of the Seven Years' War, show once again the author's fondness for a large canvas, a profusion of incident and a multiplicity of characters. The central figure is Salathiel Albine, who as a child was kidnapped by an Indian Chief.

5. ALMEDINGEN, E. M. *Fair Haven*. Hutchinson, 1956.

An English name on a tombstone in a neglected cemetery in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) inspired this story of the craftsmen and labourers who came from all the countries of Western Europe to create Peter the Great's 'city built on bones'.

6. ——— *The Lion of the North*. Constable, 1938.

Imagination is stronger than history in this fictional account of that enigmatic monarch, Charles XII of Sweden. But the background is accurate and there is a vivid picture of the march into Russia in the depths of winter, from which Hitler might have derived a lesson or two.

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Introduction by Alfred Duggan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

7. ——— *Stephen's Light*. Hutchinson, 1956. 12s. 6d.

This novel of fifteenth-century Germany takes its title from the house of a rich merchant, whose daughter is the heroine. A simple plot enables the author to concentrate on the everyday life of the time—the gossip of the market place and tavern.

8. ——— *Young Catherine*. Constable, 1937.

The life of Catherine the Great, from childhood to her proclamation as Empress, portrayed in a thoroughly successful novel.

9. ASCH, SOHEM. *The Apostle*. Macdonald, 1949. 17s. 6d.

The Apostle is, of course, Paul; and the author is entirely at home in the period.

10. ——— *Mary*. Macdonald, 1950. 15s.

This is, in effect, a re-writing of the Four Gospels as a life of the Virgin Mary.

11. ——— *The Nazarene*. Routledge, 1939. 15s.

The most difficult of all subjects for the historical novelist, handled with great artistry through the medium of three eye-witnesses.

12. ——— *The Prophet*. Macdonald, 1956. 16s.

The hero of this powerful novel is Isaiah, the prophet, at the end of the Babylonian captivity, and the author paints a vivid picture of the Jewish nation in exile.

13. ASHTON, HELEN. *William and Dorothy*. Collins, 1938. 7s. 6d.

William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and Coleridge—'three people with one soul'—are brought to life in this successful piece of fictional biography, carefully concocted from Dorothy's journals and letters, and other documentary evidence.

14. AUSTIN, F. BRITTEN. *The Road to Glory*. Thornton Butterworth, 1935.

15. ——— *Forty Centuries Look Down*. Thornton Butterworth, 1936.

Two connected works which between them give an account of the early career of Napoleon—the young General Bonaparte's Italian and Egyptian campaigns, 1796–8.

16. BACCHELLI, RICCARDO. *The Mill on the Po*. Hutchinson, 1952. 15s.

This famous Italian novel of the Risorgimento has been beautifully