

# **A Novel Approaches prelude: A Brief History of Historical Fiction**

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The history of historical novels - so where should I begin? Or perhaps where should I not begin. Most historians I expect would start well with a definition. What is historical fiction? At its simplest it is a fictional account about the past. A story or stories told about an event perhaps fictional or real, and about people also fictional or real. Last year Jerome de Groot wrote that ‘the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics’ (Groot, p.2). Indeed Groot lists thirteen genres in which historical fiction can be moulded into: romance, detective, thriller, counterfactual, horror, literary, gothic, postmodern, epic, fantasy, mystery, western, and children’s books.

What else might it be? Well ‘historical fiction is also an introduction to history’. This statement was written by David D. McGarry and Sarah Harriman White in their 1963 guide to historical fiction. It describes something about the ‘profit’ of reading historical fiction – of how it entertains but also instructs. We learn something true about the past even if most of what we read is fiction. For the more curious of us it leads us to historical sources so that we may learn the true facts about the events or people that we have just read about. In essence the historical novel adds flesh to the bare bones that historians are able to uncover and by doing so provides an account that whilst not necessarily true provides a clearer indication of past events, circumstances and cultures.

These definitions of historical fiction are a starting point and an interesting one at that but they are not where I will begin (at least not in any depth). I will leave that to the speakers at our conference who I am sure are more than I well-equipped to discuss such matters. My beginning point will instead focus on the theoretical analysis of historical fiction as laid out in 1955 by the Marxist literary theorist Georg Lukács. Such a focus at once limits my remit to the novel form of historical fiction which is very much my intention. An investigation into historical fiction in all its forms would probably take forever!

## **Theories of historical fiction**

The Marxist literary theorist Georg Lukács is generally regarded as the most influential critic of historical fiction and his work the basis from which later literary theorists begin their theoretical paradigms. His thesis entitled *The Historical Novel* (1955) saw (unsurprisingly) the development of historical novels in the nineteenth century as a product of social forces. Lukács argues that Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was the first to bring the ‘specifically historical’ to the novel format and is therefore to be considered the founder of the historical novel. By this Lukács is referring to Scott’s use of history as a means to understand individuals historically:

“The so-called historical novels of the seventeenth century (Scudéry, Calpranède, etc.) are historical only as regards their purely external choice of theme and costume. Not only the psychology of the characters, but the manners depicted are entirely those of the writer’s own day. And in the most famous ‘historical novel’ of the eighteenth century, Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*, history is likewise treated as mere costumery: it is only the curiosities and oddities of the *milieu* that matter, not an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch.” (Lukács, p. 15)

In other words Lukács argued that ‘historical novels’ before Scott were anacharistic in their depictions of the past. The Marxist agenda that underlies Lukács appraisal of the historical novel focuses very much on how a sense of history emerged out of the Enlightenment, the emergence of a sense of nationalism, and more specifically the French Revolution. Lukács claims that economic and social tumult resulted in, as Groot has recently described, ‘a dynamic sense of progress and, most of all, of history as process’ (Groot, p. 25). In essence Scott’s novel is seen as the result of a new historical consciousness that had emerged in the nineteenth century; it is as much an attempt to connect with the past as it is an account of it. In Lukács words:

“What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.” (Lukács, p. 42)

Lukács believed that the ‘smaller...relationships’ of individuals gave meaning to the ‘great monumental dramas of world history’.

### **Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* - The first historical novel?**

It has been said that the famous nineteenth century German historian Leopold von Ranke first turned to the study of history through reading the novels of Sir Walter Scott (see McGarry, White, 1963, p. 17). Therefore right from the inception of historical fiction in novel format the historian and the novelist have, it seems, found themselves intertwined.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was a Scottish playwright, poet and historical novelist. His first novel *Waverley* (1814) was followed by *Guy Mannering* (1815) and *The Antiquary* (1816) and together formed a trilogy covering Scottish history from the 1740s through to the 1800s. Scott wrote various other novels in his lifetime including *Ivanhoe* (1820). *Ivanhoe* was not only a commercial success but can also be said to have played a major role in reigniting general and scholarly interest in the medieval period. Scott also wrote novels based in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During his lifetime Scott wrote at a feverish pace and in general was popular not just in Britain but across the world. Although his popularity can be said to have dwindled nearer the end of his life (and indeed after it) Scott is nevertheless famed for his role in popularising history through the medium of fiction.

In general *Waverley* can be considered a great success for Scott. Within two days of its publication the first edition had sold out. Critics adored the work, particularly Francis Jeffrey of the Edinburgh Review who viewed its characterisation and vivid descriptions as a means for readers to understand and feel the ‘actual experience’. The now better remembered and regarded Jane Austen wrote somewhat playfully (*I think*) in September 1814 (less than three months after its publication) that:

“Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones – it is not fair – He has fame and profit enough as a poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people’s mouths. I do not like him, and do not mean to like *Waverley* if I can help it – but fear I must.” (reprinted in Lamont, p. vii)

Despite her somewhat annoyance at the competition Austen recognised the importance of Scott’s approach and Scott himself was to become one of her chief supporters. Although a few critics worried and complained about the mixing of history with romance and fiction this stopped few from enjoying the novel. Indeed this was Scott’s very intention.

*Waverley* is not a book ‘merely for amusement’ as Sir Walter Scott himself tells us but one designed to make the story ‘intelligible’, through a knowledge and learning of past events, culture and politics. Thus Scott begs pardon for ‘plaguing them [his readers] so long with old-fashioned politics, and Whig and Tory, and Hanoverians and Jacobites’. Why? Well Scott explains:

“My plan requires that I should explain the motives on which its action proceeded; and these motives necessarily arose from the feelings, prejudices, and parties, of the times. I do not invite my fair readers, whose sex and impatience give them the greatest right to complain of these circumstances, into a flying chariot drawn by hyppogriffs, or moved by enchantment. Mine is a humble English post-chaise, drawn upon four wheels, and keeping his majesty’s highway. Those who dislike the vehicle may leave it at the next halt, and wait for the conveyance of Prince Hussein’s tapestry, or Malek the Weaver’s flying sentry-box.” (Scott, p. 24).

Beyond Scott’s assumptions about the interests of female readers, is a claim by Scott not to be writing for all interests. This is a novel intended to instruct his readers about past politics not a fantasy adventure. The alternative title of *Waverley* is *Tis sixty years since*. It is an apt title in that it explains to the reader that this story is historical and set sixty years before the present (or more precisely sixty years before 1 November 1805). Indeed the narrative often delves into the nuances of the period and at times explains the differences between present and past directly. For instance, at the point when the main protagonist of the novel, Edward Waveley leaves home for the Highlands his aunt ‘gave the young officer, as a pledge of her regard, a valuable diamond ring’ (Scott, p. 30). Scott then explains to the reader that diamond rings were ‘frequently worn by the male sex at that time’ as were ‘a purse of broad gold pieces’. A few pages later Scott provided another example when describing the Scottish village of Tully-Veolan:

‘The village was more than a half a mile long, the cottages being irregularly divided from each other by gardens, or yards, as the inhabitants called them, of different sizes, where (for it is Sixty Years since) the now universal potatoe was unknown, but which were stored with gigantic plants of kale or coleword, encircled with groves of nettles, and here and there a huge hemlock, or the national thistle, overshadowing a quarter of the petty inclosure.’ (Scott, p. 34).

Scott’s novel therefore used his setting of the past as a means to convey change amongst other historical processes.

The Jacobite rising of 1745 was one of the last in a series of rebellions aimed at returning the descendants of the House of Stuart to the throne. Although for a while Charles Edward Stuart, with the aid of various Highland armies and a few others including English and French soldiers, won various victories he was eventually defeated for good at the Battle of Culloden held near Inverness. This battle proved decisive, with around 1,500 to 2,000 Jacobites killed or wounded, and eventually led to the weakening of Gaelic culture and the attack on the Scottish clan system. This, then, is the stage upon which Sir Walter Scott set the first historical novel.

The main protagonist of the novel, Edward Waverley, was presumptive heir to the estate of his elderly uncle Sir Everard. The tale follows Edward as he joins the regiment of dragoons and finds himself embroiled in the Jacobite rising of 1745. At first he supports the Hanoverian army but, after falling in love with Flora Mac-Ivor, a Highlands woman dedicated to the Jacobite cause, transfers his allegiance to Prince Charles.

In the novel Edward Waverley himself is described by Scott as ‘warm in his feelings, wild and romantic in his ideas and in his taste of reading, with a strong disposition towards poetry’ (Scott, p. 56). With just a little knowledge of Walter Scott, one gets the feeling that in Waverley, Scott is basing the persona on his own predispositions. Indeed, we view the Highlands through Edward’s eyes, and, at first, as a visitor and via a lens of youthful romance and daydreams. Scott introduces us to his knowledge and learning of this period in Scottish history through Edward’s character. We gain a clear picture of both Highlands and old Lowland cultures of Scotland as well as contemporary political debates and the fortunes of all involved parties. Through Edward’s changing allegiances, Scott is able to critique the conflict between Jacobite and Hanoverian from both sides.

So this is where our history of the historical novel begins, with a tale of the Jacobite risings of the eighteenth century. Or does it? It is both interesting and telling that Richard Maxwell’s *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650-1950*, published in 2009, takes as its title and content the chronological range of historical novels back to the seventeenth century. Maxwell categorically states his belief that ‘there is no necessity to follow Georg Lukács in this *preference*’ (Maxwell, p. 2). ‘Preference’ is a revealing word to use here; Maxwell believes that literary scholarship in the twentieth century has been somewhat blinded by Lukács’ preferences and his desire not to look too far behind Walter Scott. It would also seem that the breaking apart of literary scholarship in terms of periodisation (as indeed has often been the case in History also) has made it difficult for scholars to note the restrictions in their own research.

Of course, I'm far from claiming to be an expert in literary theory (or of its own history) but from the arguments I have read this realisation seems to be a relatively new and profitable one.

If, then, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* is not the origin of the historical fiction "genre" as has often been claimed then where should a history of historical fiction begin?

### **Early French historical novelists**

Richard Maxwell, author of the 2009 study *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650-1950*, argues that Madame de Lafayette, author of *Princess of Montpensier* (1662) and *Princess of Cleves* (1678) can be accredited as the beginning point in a line of works that led to Scott. Although some have argued that there were limited connection between Lafayette and Scott in terms of their methodology, Maxwell claims that the key 'signature device' claimed by literary scholars as Scott's was actually borrowed from the former; that is, the embedding of a historical protagonist into a fictive story whilst insisting on the moral and ontological distance between these two takes.

The state of French historiography in the seventeenth century helps to explain the emergence of historical fiction. 'French history and French fiction' Maxwell tells us, 'were hard to tell apart' (Maxwell, p. 11). By the end of that century intellectual circles began to distinguish between the real and the fictional: 'history was about what happened, fiction about what should have happened' and 'history gave priority to the demands of knowledge, fiction to the demands of narrative'. There was nonetheless a concern that fictive and factual mixtures created an undesired discord when it came to writing about past events. Or so the discussions ran and, by the very existence of the IHR's conference, appear still to run.

Men such as the French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) and later the Italian poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873) and American literary critic and author Henry James (1843-1916) viewed historical fiction as somewhat useless as it was by nature unable to separate the real from the mythical or fictional. Historical fiction failed as a written form because of its hybridity 'lost between literature and history'. Nonetheless it proved relatively popular and its relationship to History proper formed the core from which Lafayette, Antoine Prévost, César de Saint-Réal and other writers of historical fiction forged their tales.

French historiography in seventeenth and early eighteenth century discourse focused on two competing strands other than the well-established universal history; *Particular* history and *Secret* history. *Particular* history, as Maxwell describes traced 'the life of a town, a country, or especially a renowned figure, often reproducing original documents too specialised for the purposes of general or universal history' (Maxwell, p. 13). In short it used the *particular* or smaller focus to understand the process of large scale events. *Secret* history, meanwhile, focused on the 'use of hidden personal motives or characteristics to clarify the meaning of conspiracies or other struggles for political and military power' (Maxwell, p. 14). *Secret* history therefore relied on understanding the psychology of individuals and gave emphasis to individual action and peculiarities as having a significant and instrumental influence on historical

events and occurrences. *Secret* history gave power to the individual to enact on historical causality.

The prevalence then of debates and interest by historians in the concepts of *Particular* and *Secret* history in seventeenth century France gave form to the emerging *nouvelle historique*. Although Lafayette's second historical fiction, *The Princess of Cleves*, was the most esteemed and best-remembered historical novel of its generation it was not the first to be given that sub-title. That accolade went to César de Saint-Réal author of *Don Carlos* (1672).

In 1671 Saint-Réal published a treatise on secret history entitled *Traité historique de l'usage de l'histoire*. The treatise proposed that individual psychology and human motives causes historical processes to take on their form. One year later he published his semi-fictional story *Don Carlos* in part as demonstration of his take on *Secret* history. Saint-Réal (1639-1692) rose through the court of Louis XIV during the 1660s in the role of historian and book cataloguer and became a relatively popular writer. *Don Carlos* was a novel about the heir to the Spanish throne who fell in love with his father's bride, Elisabeth of France. This flirtation soon turns into plot as the lovers become instruments in a game of power that hinges on their own actions. Indeed, a key plot point revolves around a few unthinking remarks on behalf of the protagonists – an indication of *Secret* history as the primary causation of historical occurrence.

Madame de Lafayette's novels provide more of a mixture of *Secret* and *Particular* history. In *The Princess of Cleves* we are brought to the court of Henri II through the tale of Cleves, a naïve heiress who is married off to the prince of Cleves. However, Cleves soon finds herself at the attention of the Duc de Nemours and a love triangle quickly ensues. In her first novel, *Montpensier*, Lafayette treats us to a relatively similar story. This time we follow the Count of Chabannes at the time of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572. The story begins a little before the massacre. Chabannes is friends with the prince-dauphin de Montpensier who has just got married. When Montpensier goes to war, Chabannes and Montpensier's newlywed wife begin an affair which is, of course, eventually discovered.

All of the characters in *Montpensier* are in one way or another connected to the wider historical setting of Catholics versus Protestants. Chabannes himself is a former Huguenot who has converted to Catholicism to be near to his friend Montpensier. When discovered by Montpensier in his wife's apartment, Chabannes goes into hiding and, as an ex-Huguenot is slaughtered during the massacre. However, the real purpose of setting the story during this turbulent time in French history was to explore the exploits of court intrigue during the time of the infamous Catherine de' Medici.

This 'first phase' then of historical novelisation came out of French historiography prevalent at the time. When the genre came over to England it was largely in the form of English translations of Lafayette and other French novelists. Sir Walter Scott was one of the first, in England, to adapt the genre to his own uses but he did this in a way that brought the genre up-to-date and in the process, reformed the entire genre into a new, more popular form. The question still remains however; in what way is Scott's *Waverley* and other nineteenth century historical fiction distinctly different to what

had come before? How could Georg Lukács claim the origins of this genre lay over a century after Lafayette and her contemporaries?

### **The Nineteenth Century Historical Novel – An educative genre**

In the eighteenth century historical fiction was a familiar genre predominantly in France but soon to move over to England as well in the form of translations. It was, however, often considered a slightly disreputable form of reading. As I have discussed previously, it was Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels that helped transform the beleaguered genre into something more respectable and interesting. Scott may not have been the first by any means to write historical fiction, but he was nonetheless the one who gave it credence and popularity.

Jerome de Groot and other literary theorists view the nineteenth century as bringing with it a second wave of historical fiction that held a distinctive voice. What was that voice? And what made it distinctive from what had come before?

Summarising Georg Lukács who, in 1955 wrote his detailed appraisal of historical fiction, de Groot brings us closer to understanding the specifics of the second wave of historical fiction:

“It represents historical process, and in doing so gestures towards actual historical progress. The realism of the novel allows the reader to engage with and empathise with historical individuals and thence gain a sense of their own historical specificity. It is able to communicate to people a sense of their own historicity, and the ways that they might be able to construct historically inflected identities for themselves. The historical novel has a humanist impulse to teach and educate, and this pedagogical element is crucial for Lukács; it is the movement to historicised revelation and understanding which is the point of the exercise.” (de Groot, p. 29).

So historical fiction was to, in part, educate; to help readers better understand past events, societies and customs. This element of nineteenth century historical fiction is perhaps best known today through the works of Charles Dickens. The detailed, often horrific and darkly violent stories that make up the Dickens collection is testament to his work to reveal and make known the social abuses and prejudices of his own times and, at the same time, act as a warning of how governments should not act.

In his first historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens intertwines the private (generally fictive elements of his story) with the public (historical fact) to tell a story about the anti-Catholic Gordon riots of 1780. The attack on Newgate prison and the various narratives of mob violence warns of the consequences for society of intolerance and becoming caught up in the mob mentality. *Oliver Twist* (1837) whilst focused on a contemporary tale of poverty and workhouse treatment is perhaps one of Dickens most successful stories for causing social outrage and eliciting social reform. The historically based *A Tale of Two Cities* tells a story at the time of the French Revolution with a particular focus on the plight faced by the ordinary peasantry.

## Nationalism and Desire

I began my previous section with a quote summarising Georg Lukács claim to the distinctiveness of nineteenth century historical fiction and to how he argued for the role of academic and popular history in its creation: ‘It represents historical process, and in doing so gestures towards actual historical progress’. I have looked at the educative qualities stressed by nineteenth century writers and highlighted by Lukács and others. In this section I will focus on its relationship to academic history.

If seventeenth century historical fiction related to French historiographical interest in *Particular* and *Secret* history then nineteenth century historical fiction related to the rise of nationalism, the professionalization of History, and the growing sense of historical change and *otherness* to the past.

One element in this re-invigorated genre during the following one hundred years was, then, its predisposition to look at nationhood through the eyes of an outsider. In 1997 Ian Dennis set out a thesis looking at the role of nationalism in nineteenth-century historical fiction. Dennis wanted to look at how novelists ‘were shaped by, or resisted, the power of nationalism’ (Dennis, p. 1).

Of course *Waverley* is a prime example. Walter Scott focused on an Englishman as ‘the other’ finding himself embroiled in the Jacobite rebellion and in Highland and Lowland Scottish culture. As narrator Scott himself made several off-the-cuff notes as to not only the difference of time (i.e. that the culture he described was sixty years past) but also to the character of Scottish society as another world.

Dennis argues that nineteenth-century novelists employed a specific narrative pattern in regards to how they approached a sense of national identity. In the case of Ireland, Scotland or the United States that identity was often viewed through the lens of a foreigner, often English and often male. As a traveller to a foreign place the Englishman acted as the readers guide to a strange *other* place both in terms of location and time. In general the author who wrote about this Englishman was themselves from the country that the Englishman visited. Thus, a sense of nationhood was performed via the medium of an outsider, particularly that of ‘the overpowering national example of England’.

Dennis recounts various other novels as evidence of *the other* being used as a way to understand and examine a nation at any given time. Irish novelist Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) for example, begins with a descriptive image of the Irish from an English viewpoint:

“I remember, when I was a boy, meeting somewhere with the quaintly written travels of *Moryson* through Ireland, and being particularly struck with his assertion, that so late as the days of Elizabeth, an Irish chieftain and his family were frequently seen seated round their domestic fire in a state of perfect nudity. This singular anecdote (so illustrative of the barbarity of the Irish at a period when civilization had made such a wonderful progress even in its sister countries), fastened so strongly on

my boyish imagination, that whenever the *Irish* were mentioned in my presence, an *Esquimaux* group circling round the fire which was to dress a dinner, or broil an enemy, was the image which presented itself to my mind; and in this trivial source, I believe, originated that early formed opinion of Irish ferocity, which has since been nurtured into a *confirmed prejudice*.” (Owenson, vol. 1, Letter 1).

The description is an attempt by Owenson to depict the English prejudice and perception that the Irish are a barbarous people. But it is also intended, through the narrative of the novel itself, as a mask that is shown to be false. The novel then, is to be seen as educative in that it reveals to the reader their own prejudices and shows them a glimpse of the truth about Elizabethan and indeed contemporary Ireland.

The interest in examining nationalism through historical fiction was equally as present in academic history and indeed in mainstream politics, society and culture. At the same time academic history was increasingly being codified, organised and moulded into a scientifically based discipline. No longer was *History* to be the preserve of amateur enthusiasts and antiquarians.

### **Historical Fiction in the Twentieth century**

In *The Historical Novel* (2010) Jerome De Groot argues that during the twentieth century the historical novel had become more prevalent but also increasingly marginal. Not until after the Second World War and the rise of postmodernism did historical novels take on more interest by writers and theorists. The First World War seems to have given pause to authors and acted as a fragmentary influence as best described by Virginia Woolf. In 1925 Woolf argued that the genre needed ‘shacking up’. It lacked innovation and focused on the trivial and insubstantial when it should focus on the complexity of human experience, feeling, and knowledge. In short (as de Groot summarises):

‘Woolf argues for an interest in interiority, rather than the “alien and external”, a return to the individuation of experience. She criticises convention and urges novelists to remember that “everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss”. This desire to adumbrate the detailed complications of life, allied to a clear interest in representing the psychological and in breaking formal conventions, forms the outline of what is often defined as literary modernism.’ (de Groot, p. 42).

Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) does just this by fracturing historicity and doing all it can to upset the rationalism and realism of historical fiction: ‘the dullness of convention’. The novel follows a man who does not die from the Tudor period through to the twentieth century. Orlando even changes gender at one point threatening the integrity of identity and order. Why is Woolf doing this? Well, she wanted to show that historical fiction need not always attempt true depictions of historical events but instead to find a greater truth about what it means to be human. H. G. Wells *Time*

*Machine* (1895) had done something similar by undermining history: rather than time being inescapable the protagonist finds that it is actually traversable.

### **The gendering of historical fiction**

In the twentieth century the historical novel tended to split its readership between male and female readers. The gendering of historical fiction came before the rise of gender history and although there is a risk here of stereotyping reader's, in general early modern high society belong to women whilst adventure and warfare belong to men; with murder mysteries somewhere in-between.

Woman's historical fiction ranges from the light romantic fiction of Mills & Boon promising 'chivalrous knights, roguish rakes and rugged cattlemen' to serious studies of the female role in past societies. Catherine Cookson for example writes novels that are 'idealistic about relationships but clear-sighted about history'. Cookson's 1950 *Kate Hannigan* focuses on a cross-class romance between a girl in the slums and a doctor set in the Edwardian period.

In his 2010 *The Historical Novel*, Jerome de Groot explains that historical fiction written by women for women offer 'places of feminine solidarity' and provide a relationship for women with the past that is often limited in schools to Whiggish 'male' history. The example of Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife illustrates this form of historical fiction: 'it has sex, adultery, pregnancy, scandal, divorce, royalty, glitterati, religious quarrels, and larger than-life personalities' (de Groot, p. 70). There have been various takes on Boleyn over the years including Jean Plaidy's *Murder Most Royal* (1949); Margaret Campbell Barne's *Brief Gaudy Hour* (1949); Evelyn Anthony's *Anne Boleyn* (1957); Jane Lane's *Sow the Tempest* (1960); Norah Loft's *The Concubine* (1963); and most recently Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001) – there are many more!

In a way Anne Boleyn is an odd topic for historical romance as it ends, inevitably, with Boleyn's execution. However, the interest in her character – at once represented as beautiful, fearless and intelligent whilst at the same time ambitious, vengeful and 'a sexual predator' – is not only in the romance, but in the bringing into light a strong female character from a time when women were largely hidden in the historical records. Anne Boleyn allows us then to explore female agency where history rarely gives us a similar opportunity.

Jerome de Groot's analysis also picks up on a rather ahistorical approach to historical fiction written by women for women. This form of historical fiction is not really based upon academic history but on the semi-fantasy world of Jane Austen. Continuations of *Pride and Prejudice* fit more into that fictional world than any historical analysis; for example Linda Berdoll's *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife: Pride and Prejudice Continues* (2004) which looks at the married life of Darcy and Elizabeth.

Male historical fiction takes a very different form than that intended for a female audience: adventure, warfare, murder mysteries. For the most part this form of historical fiction repeatedly tests the protagonist (usually male) before he is awarded with some form of marital or political success. Unlike women's historical fiction

which desires to bring out of the darkness strong female characters from history, male fiction has no such need – generally re-enforcing and articulating male self-expression, masculinity, and power structures. A good example is Alexandre Dumas' Musketeer novels and Bernard Cornwell's Sharpe series. The key to these novels is companionship and team adventure as virtuous soldiers faced with highly politicised and dangerous situations work together to save themselves and those otherwise unable to protect themselves.

The Shardlake series by C.J. Sansom offers a good example of murder mystery again during the reign of Henry VIII. Matthew Shardlake, a hunchback lawyer who continually ends up involved in the high politics of his day much against his own desires, provides an intelligent but handicapped hero that allows Sansom to explore an alternative element of male masculinity. Although Shardlake does get involved in scrapes he is, for the most part, reliant on his servant to act as the self-expression of masculinity found in other novels. In this way Sansom has created a character much like Sherlock Holmes who thinks his way through situations and thus by doing so examines male intelligence over brute force as a way of understanding the multiplicity of malehood.

What seems interesting about the division between male and female historical fiction is how it is transferred to television screens. For the most part, female fiction remains largely for a female only audience, whilst male fiction often crosses between the sexes. The Musketeers and Sharpe are enjoyed by a mixed audience whilst *Pride and Prejudice* and adaptations about Anne Boleyn are by a much greater degree read and watched only by women.

### **Postmodernism and historical fiction**

‘At the core of culture is a continuous dialogue between myth and history, “plain invention” and the “core of historical fact”’ (Slotkin, 229).

This quote from Richard Slotkin's 2005 article 'Fiction for the purpose of History' explores the borderlines between academic history and historical fiction to show that if properly understood, historical fiction can be equally as 'true' as its academic counterpart. Slotkin argues that the act of historical fiction can provide the landscape to explore alternative theoretical approaches to a period or historical person. From that basis Slotkin suggests that myth-making, for that is what historical fiction is at heart, is the process by which societies maintain their cultural cohesion through time:

‘History is what it is, but it is also what we make of it. What we call “history” is not a thing, an object of study, but a story we choose to tell about things. Events undoubtedly occur: the Declaration of Independence was signed on 4 July 1776, yesterday it rained, Napoleon was short, I had a nice lunch. But to be construed as “history” such facts must be selected and arranged on some sort of plan, made to resolve some sort of question which can only be asked subjectively and from a position of hindsight. Thus all history writing requires a fictive or imaginary representation of the past. There is no reason why, in principle, a novel may not have a research basis as good or better than that of a scholarly history; and no

reason why, in principle, a novelist's portrayal of a past may not be truer and more accurate than that produced by a scholarly historian.' (Slotkin, p. 222).

The development of postmodernism, structuralism and their related theories in philosophy subjects from the 1960s and 1970s has politicised even further the debate and rivalry between academic history and historical fiction. Jerome de Groot has argued that this view of history sees the discipline as simply the 'interpretation of a tissue of quotations and texts' (de Groot, p. 112). Hayden White meanwhile has suggested that if all historians 'play with rhetoric and metaphor in constructing their narratives, then all historical fiction is predicated upon fictionalised 'versions' of the past. The ideas of postmodernism have had an influence on both forms of looking at the past and, as Slotkin demonstrates, can be a useful scholarly tool to produce both types of history.

Slotkin goes on to state that his own historical research begins with the finding of a story within the evidence that embodies what he is trying to find out but cannot be used by the historian for lack of evidence or certainty. Slotkin then writes that novel – bringing in other historical/physiological knowledge on how people dressed, how they spoke, what their surroundings were like, what were their daily habits – before embarking on the academic history. The novel helps Slotkin to imagine his subject in a different way – it is a mental exercise – the academic history then removes those fictional expressions whilst also taking account of the sense of his subject matter.

It would seem that the ideas of postmodernism fit the historical fiction model well and has helped to reinvigorate it as a genre and as a place where some historians feel comfortable (to an extent) exploring. In a rather interesting experiment at combining the two, the well-known historian Simon Schama wrote in 1991 *Dead Certainties*. This work explored two widely reported deaths with a 100 year gap between them. The first was that of General James Wolfe (a military officer involved in battles over the Scottish highlands and the Seven Year War) and the second was George Packman (a Boston man of high class). In this work Schama assessed the complex relationship between history and fiction noting that the historian can never entirely reconstruct a dead world in its completeness. The narrative of *Dead Certainties* muddles the factual evidence were numerous pieces of conjecture and fictionalisation which lead some reviewers to see it as 'subversive of the integrity of history as a discipline'. Writing a year later (May 1992) Cushing Strout noted that the result was 'problematic for both literary and historical reasons' (Strout, p. 157).

Elsewhere in the world postmodernism has helped to breathe fresh light on historiographical and novelistic practices. In the case of South Africa, Michael Green has argued that a similar correlation between nationalism and the rise of historical fiction occurred there in the early twentieth century as it did in Britain in the nineteenth. Early black South African novelists related their works to moments of nationalism in South Africa: Sol Plaaje's *Mhudi* (1930); Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1910); and Peter Abraham's *Wild Conquest* (1950) focus on interpretations of national fever and understanding of what that means. Green takes a postmodernist viewpoint of South African historiography and fictional writing. He sees a problem in the predominantly social history writing for South Africa and argues for a fix through viewing the past as historicization: 'Fiction, no less than the writing of history, or, for

that matter, the constructing of nations, becomes a historicizing form when it so operates upon its material – no longer bound to a particular temporal location, but open to the past, present, and future’ (Green, p. 130).

### **Histories of Historical Fiction**

I began my history of historical fiction with a question: where should such a history begin? I thought perhaps a definition of the term historical fiction? While useful such definitions could only get me so far. Then I thought that such a study should begin at the beginning with the first historical novel written. However, it soon proved that the first was not necessarily the first at all. What about the varying genres in which historical fiction can be formed? Everything from gothic horror to romance could be accepted as historical fiction but that route would have taken me in many directions, few of which were helpful in writing a ‘concise’ account.

It has proved that the beginning point for historical fiction is actually a study in the origins of academic history. At every step in the story of historical fiction I have found that relationship at its heart. In seventeenth century France the *Particular* and *Secret* history prevalent in historiographical discussions gave form to Madame de Lafayette’s *Princess of Montpensier* and *Princess of Cleves* amongst others. Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* derived out of growing discussions and belief in nationalism prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the growing recognition of causality and the past as a ‘foreign country’. In the twentieth century the rising importance of gender equality and female independence gave rise to the division of historical fiction between the genders. The success of Mills & Boons historical romances have, for example, and as Jerome de Groot has stressed, yet to receive the attention that they deserve as a form of popular female entertainment. Gender and domestic history as an important part of the historian’s discipline have given way to a new form of historical fiction, one not only focused on national and international events but on the individual and their ordinary life. The complications of postmodernism and structuralism have blurred somewhat the distinction between academic and fictional histories and has posed the question (explored in both forms of writing) of whether one is very different from the other.

Historical fiction and its relationship to academic history has been the focus of the Novel Approaches conference and it is now clear to me how connected through time these two actually are. Both forms of writing about the past have relied upon and continue to rely upon each other even if at times they look at each other with suspicion.

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