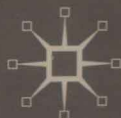


The Contemporary British Historical Novel

Representation, Nation, Empire

Mariadele Boccardi

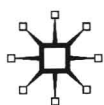


The Contemporary British Historical Novel

Representation, Nation, Empire

Mariadele Boccardi

palgrave
macmillan



© Mariadele Boccardi 2009

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2009 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978-0-230-20007-4 hardback

ISBN-10: 0-230-20007-9 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Boccardi, Mariadele, 1972-

The contemporary British historical novel : representation,
nation, empire / Mariadele Boccardi.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-230-20007-4 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-230-20007-9 (alk. paper)

1. Historical fiction, English – History and criticism. 2. English fiction – 20th century – History and criticism. 3. History in literature. 4. Great Britain – In literature. 5. Literature and history – Great Britain – History – 20th century. I. Title.

PR888.H5B63 2009

823'.081090914—dc22

2009013633

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

To Bob and Nicholas

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Faculty of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences at the University of the West of England for granting me a semester of research leave, during which this project took its final shape, and my colleagues in the Department of English for their willingness to exchange ideas on the subject of historical fiction, even when it did not fall within their research interests. I am also indebted to Professor Berthold Schoene and Dr. Michael Greaney, who read the initial proposal for the project and gave valuable advice on its contents as well as on its publication. Finally, thank you to Bob.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
Introduction: The Novel of History 1969–2005	1
1 Tradition and Renewal	28
1. John Fowles's <i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i>	37
2. J.G. Farrell's <i>The Siege of Krishnapur</i>	44
3. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's <i>Heat and Dust</i>	53
2 The Romance of the Past	61
1. Lindsay Clarke's <i>The Chymical Wedding</i>	69
2. A.S. Byatt's <i>Possession: A Romance</i>	76
3. Graham Swift's <i>Ever After</i>	87
3 Empire and the Politics of Representation	99
1. Ahdaf Soueif's <i>The Map of Love</i>	107
2. Matthew Kneale's <i>English Passengers</i>	116
3. Douglas Galbraith's <i>The Rising Sun</i>	124
4 Political Engagement and the Romance of Withdrawal	132
1. James Robertson's <i>Joseph Knight</i>	141
2. Philip Hensher's <i>The Mulberry Empire</i>	150
3. Ronan Bennett's <i>Havoc in Its Third Year</i> and Gregory Norminton's <i>Ghost Portrait</i>	158
Conclusion: Fictions of the Garden	169
<i>Bibliography</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	185

Introduction: The Novel of History 1969–2005

In *On Histories and Stories* (2000), A.S. Byatt notes 'the sudden flowering of the historical novel in Britain' in the post-war period (9). She sees the newly reacquired seriousness of a genre that in the twentieth century had largely been confined to escapist literature as a sign that 'history' has become 'imaginable and important again' (9). It is a phenomenon that has not escaped the attention of other scholars writing at the turn of the millennium, from a position, that is, of retrospection analogous to that assumed by historical novelists. Thus, Tony E. Jackson (1999) confidently claims that 'the turn to history as a theme may be the definitive element in British fiction in the last three decades' (170), while Del Ivan Janik (1995) relates the 'acute consciousness of history and... sharp focus on its meanings or potential for meaning' (161) in contemporary English novels to a reaction against post-structuralist and postmodern arguments for the end of history.

A visit to any bookshop will ascertain the truth of these claims for the popularity of the historical novel, as fiction concerned with the recuperation and representation of the past forms a significant proportion of the volumes on the shelves and display tables, evidence that the concern with history Byatt, Jackson and Janik identify has persisted even beyond the millennial conditions which initially invited a reflection on the past. Indeed, the genre's reach has expanded further than the experimental, self-referential works that are the subject of these critics' studies: the historical novels one encounters in bookstores can in turn be sub-divided into ever narrower categories among which crime, romance and adventure are

easily detectable. The fact that these reproduce the best-selling genres in fiction more generally is perhaps the most visible evidence of the popularity of the historical novel amongst both authors and readers and, in turn, this provides the clearest indication that there is a need for a scholarly approach to the genre such as this study proposes, and which aims to examine the late twentieth-century re-emergence of the historical novel both contextually and theoretically. My investigation of the contemporary British historical novel seeks to probe the conditions for the initial recuperation and subsequent success of the genre and to rely on the evidence provided by the texts to pursue recurrent elements, from formal strategies to thematic convergences, in novels published between 1969 and 2005. The year that marks the earlier limit of my discussion saw the publication of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. This was the book that heralded the revival of an interest in the Victorian period both for its persisting influence on the present and for its psychological, social and cultural distance from it. The latest novels I discuss, Ronan Bennett's *Havoc in Its Third Year* and Gregory Norminton's *Ghost Portrait*, turn their attention from the social and cultural birth of modernity in the nineteenth century to the political birth of the modern nation with the English Civil War.

If the resulting analysis is to have any value in the light of the sheer number of novels concerned with the representation of past events, it is essential to establish some principles of selection and, with them, a working definition of the contemporary historical novel and a tentative theory of the genre. Selection, definition and theoretical framework have proved the prime concern and the ultimate downfall for scholars of the post-war historical novel. In *Shadows of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (1984), David Leon Higdon was among the first to remark on the attention to the past in post-war fiction. Working within a framework that combines contextual and literary-historical elements, he suggests that the difference between modernist and post-war fiction rests on their respective attitudes towards the past: where, for the former, history was 'a nightmare to be fled, ... an irrelevancy to be ignored' (3), the latter aims to engage with the 'three major manifestations' of the past, 'memory, tradition, and history' (6). Higdon observes that what accompanies and partly explains the contemporary British novel's interest in the

past is a 'new sensibility', whose defining trait is an emphasis on continuity (in contrast with modernist exhortations to break with what preceded it) and a 'recognition that the future is vitally related to the past' (7). This reference to a new sensibility is perceptive and, while Higdon does not attempt to give it a name, later critics have had no qualms, rightly or wrongly, in identifying it with postmodernism. More problematic is his reliance on notions of continuity and discontinuity. While it may be true that modernist authors keenly felt their programmatic break with the Victorian past, what contemporary novelists long for is to re-establish the interrupted line with the narrative forms of the nineteenth century bypassing their immediate predecessors, the modernists. They therefore create another line interrupted at an alternative point and for aesthetically different reasons. Questions of continuity and discontinuity are ultimately contingent on the choice of which literary past it may be worth claiming allegiance to, and which pronouncing the rejection of. Higdon's difficulties are largely a consequence of his desire for comprehensiveness, whose corollary is the conflation of the literary past (implied in his mention of tradition) and the historical past, which, in turn, he considers the prerogative of memory and the historical record equally. As a result, his study comprises a large range of works broadly concerned with the retrieval of, and engagement with, the past, but it does not consistently explore the substantial differences in the process of retrieval and in the nature of the engagement inherent in whether the past is the site of direct or mediated experience, of memory or of history.

While these two forms of evocation of the past share the essential quality of the retrospective articulation of events, only the latter properly discloses the difficulties of gaining access to a reality that is available only in textual form and always in part. One of the defining characteristics of the historical novel as a recognisable genre is precisely its complex relationship to the existing textual records of the past, on the one hand, and to the competing representation of that past in the discipline of historiography, on the other. In more recent studies, David Cowart and Margaret Scanlan draw attention to the textual and imaginative dimension of the historical novel's narrative recreation of the past. In *History and the Contemporary Novel* (1989), Cowart relates the 'technical innovations in the novel'

in the late twentieth century (1) to the historical novelists' awareness that 'the past can only be known imaginatively' (28), because its accessible remains are fragmented, incomplete and contradictory. Similarly, Scanlan's *Traces of Another Time* (1990) is constructed on the premise that '[t]he contemporary English novel often emphasizes the difficulties of knowing the truth about the past' because the epistemological enterprise is limited in its scope and findings by the inescapable 'reliance on narratives' (12). Her examination of the persistence of the past into contemporary fiction concentrates on what she calls 'the contemporary skeptical historical novel' (3). The genre is defined by its awareness of the constructed and falsifying nature of any comprehensive and coherent account of the past, while its aim is precisely to reopen the gap that exists between the event and its articulation in textual form. The result is a combination of estrangement from the actuality of the historical event and narrative self-referentiality that is crucial to understanding the relationship between the contemporary historical novel and postmodernism, even if the latter is not mentioned explicitly in either study.

As was the case with Higdon's 'new sensibility', Cowart and Scanlan usefully point to a change in attitude towards the past since World War II that sees a heightened interest in the events that shaped the present and a concomitant resistance to accepting the version of that past transmitted by official, already encoded history. However, again like Higdon, the framework they establish for their discussion in fact serves to widen rather than restrict the applicability of the term 'historical novel'. Thus, alongside his analysis of the nuances of the contemporary novel's engagement with the past, Cowart includes a section concerned with the representation of the future. While this may illustrate the inherently historicising operation of narrative, it also diverts the focus of his study from what is recognisable as a historical novel, whether intuitively understood or rigorously theorised, namely an imaginative representation of a period (and in some instances a sequence of events) whose reality is confirmed by other sources even if its experiential dimension is irretrievable and has to be approximated by an act of the imagination. In other words, if it is in the nature of the historical novel, like all fiction, to rely on invention, that process is always embarked on in relation to contiguous textual engagements, academic as much as fictional, with the same

historical setting. As Ann Rigney points out,

what defines the historical novel as a genre is precisely the interplay between invented story elements and historical ones. As novels, they are written under the aegis of the fictionality convention whereby the individual writer enjoys the freedom to invent...a world “uncommitted to reality.” As *historical* novels, however, they also link up with the ongoing collective attempts to represent the past and invite comparison with what is already known about the historical world from other sources. [...] They are not “free-standing fictions” ..., they also call upon prior historical knowledge, echoing and/or disputing other discourses about the past. (2001: 19)

Scanlan is certainly aware of this productive interaction between history and fiction, so that the novels she examines perform the role of commentaries on historical situations at the same time as reimagining them. However, her emphasis on the novel's function as a self-conscious contribution to the historical record leads Scanlan to extend the definition of historical novel to works whose setting is the very recent past and which indeed depict events whose outcome and consequences are still indecipherable (most notably, in her case, the fate of Northern Ireland in relation to the Union and the Republic). This approach deprives the historical novel of its key formal feature, retrospection, and with it of the dual temporal dimension in which the genre operates, the time of the writing (the present) and the time of the setting (the past). It is precisely this double frame of reference that permits the historical novel its claim to be ‘both an entry into the past... and a coherent interpretation of that past from a particular standpoint in the present’ (Fleishman 24). This is an aspect hinted at in the subtitle of what is, by general consensus, the first example of the genre, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley, or 'tis sixty years since* (1813).

The gap of 60 years has particular relevance for the period of Scottish history that forms the subject of Scott's novel. However, it can also be taken to signify a temporal distance beyond the reach of the personal memory of the writer, and therefore requiring an engagement with the sources that mediate the reality of the past for consumption in the present, and yet it refers to a time not so distant

as to have acquired romantic or legendary status. The retrospective view to a time beyond direct experience forces the historical novelist to confront the textual nature of the material at his or her disposal, with the corollary lack of a comprehensive and unified image of the past, and to acknowledge the imaginative leap from the fragmented evidence to the finished representation of the period or events that are the setting and subject of his or her work. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, the elapsed time between the past of the events and the present of their writing situates the author in a position of privileged knowledge, in that he or she is aware of the outcome of events and their effect on those events' future, which is the writer's present. As a result, purely by virtue of its being written retrospectively, a historical novel either contains in inchoate form or outlines explicitly the workings of the historical process. What these two aspects of retrospection reveal is the dual, or even paradoxical, nature of historical fiction, tending towards a self-referential limitation of its access to the object of representation, on the one hand, and benefiting from the formal trappings of omniscience, on the other. As I will argue in the following pages, this makes the historical novel inherently metafictional and as such not only ideally receptive to postmodernism's positions on narrative, representation and knowledge but also supremely equipped to probe their validity. Indeed, it is my contention that the historical novel is, at once, the genre where postmodernism manifests itself most clearly and that where it proves theoretically inadequate.

Cowart and Scanlan, then, dilute or obscure the salient features that distinguish the historical novel and consciously neglect to examine the genre's relationship, in its contemporary incarnation, with postmodernism. This is in spite of the fact that their work, introducing such concepts as the 'open, skeptical form' of historical representation (Scanlan 7) or 'the technical license or opportunities' afforded to it (Cowart 28), is clearly indebted to ideas on narrative, representation and knowledge articulated by Hayden White in the discipline of historiography, and Linda Hutcheon in literary theory and criticism. White's and Hutcheon's theories are closely related not only in their approach to their respective fields of enquiry but also in the effects of their conclusions. White's premise in *Metahistory* (1973) is that the historical work is 'most manifestly ... a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a

model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*' (2, emphasis in the original). By providing what is essentially a literary discussion of notable examples of historiography, White seeks to draw the attention of the historian from the content of his or her work to its form, challenging the purported objectivity and neutrality of narrative as merely a carrier of prior and external meaning and instead foregrounding its role as a defining contributor to the generation of historical meaning. This analysis, which relies on such literary-critical interpretive strategies as discourse, form, representational modes and figurative meaning, tends to narrow the substantive distance between historical and fictional representation, to the extent that it underlines the difference between events and their articulation in narrative, between the knowledge acquired through scholarly research and the presentation of that knowledge in persuasive, authoritative and seemingly objective form. Although White in no way denies the existence or even the accessibility of the past, his approach points to the doubly mediated relationship between the historian and his or her subject: not only are the events only available in textual form, they are in turn conveyed to readers by means of another text, the historian's own. The encoding thus taking place (what White calls *emplotment*) employs techniques analogous to those of fiction, in so far as

[t]he historian arranges the events...into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end. (7)

By foregrounding the artificial and inescapably ideological nature of historical narrative, White deprives history of its self-constituted distinction with respect to fiction (and it is worth noting that the formulation of this distinction coincided with the emergence of the figure of the professional historian at a time, the early nineteenth century, that also marked the first recognisable examples of historical fiction), namely its claim to truthfulness. In this climate, contemporary historical fiction can ambitiously aspire to granting imaginative apprehension of the past just as effectively as historiography.

The questioning of the very notion of historical truth, the insistence that historical knowledge is always textually mediated, and the recognition of the ideological component of all narratives are precisely the elements that Hutcheon identifies in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) as characteristic of the postmodern attitude towards representation and narrative generally, and historical representation and narrative particularly. Indeed, her claim that postmodernism disrupts such 'cultural and social assumptions' as 'origins and ends, unity, totalization, logic and reason, consciousness and human nature, progress and fate, representation and truth, ...causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity, and continuity' (86) confronts the enduring legacy of the Enlightenment and of nineteenth century historicism. It is no coincidence that these are the very systems of thought that provided the philosophical underpinning for the historical novel at the time of its first emergence as an identifiable genre. It is therefore not surprising that Hutcheon should trace the literary manifestation of these postmodern concerns to what is, for her, a new kind of historical novel, for which she coins the term 'historiographic metafiction' (5). The label denotes 'novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages' (5). Historiographic metafiction preserves its generic roots in the work of Scott and other nineteenth-century practitioners, but precisely because of this clear genealogical connection it can operate a more thorough disruption of the genre's representational assumptions. In other words, the genre that most directly owed the underlying principles of its practice to the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century historicism is used effectively to undermine their epistemological assumptions and ontological certainties in the late twentieth-century postmodern context. Hutcheon hails the new form as having restored history to its rightful place at the core of novelistic practice, but of a novel which, by the constant attention it pays to its own ontological and epistemological status, calls into question the very possibility of knowing the past in any reliable way and of representing it as a coherent narrative.

I welcome the challenge, implicit in Hutcheon's approach to her subject, to the widespread and reductive description of postmodernism as a phenomenon whose defining feature is an a-historical consumption of all representations, all placed equally on a plane that has only surfaces and no depths, only presents and no diachronic

perceptions, only prices and no values. If, as even its critics recognise, postmodernism deals in narratives (whether we call them fabulation or metafiction), then it also deals with time, since any narrative encompasses a process of temporal unfolding purely by virtue of its congenital structure of beginning, middle and end. And time, in relation to the unfolding of events, is also the subject of historiography and historical fiction. However, in her eagerness to emphasise the novelty of historiographic metafiction Hutcheon ignores the fact that a self-referential dimension can be detected in the earliest examples of the historical novel and, in so far as she does not insist on the significance of the recuperation of the conventions of a Victorian genre for contemporary purposes, she misses an opportunity to further confirm the interest in the literary past of postmodern fiction. Similarly, by discussing side by side and with few concessions to their individuality novels that align themselves with very different national literary traditions, her work risks replicating the assumptions of the primacy of surface connections and presentness she seeks to refute, at the expense of a historically informed examination of contemporary historical fiction. These unexplored paths, if followed, lead to an examination of the specific literary and cultural conditions for the recuperation of the historical novel in Britain within a nationally inflected appropriation of postmodernism.

A degree of metafictionality is inherent in the historical novel *qua* historical novel. On a purely formal level, in fact, the historical novel makes literal the historicising dimension of narrative. The use of verbs in the past tense as the basic starting point for the temporal architecture of any narrative is, for the majority of novels and certainly for realist ones, a convention and artifice designed to imply the meaningful closure of retrospective (i.e. historical) knowledge by mimicking it formally. Thus, although the action and events the narrative relates may be in the present, their rendition by means of the past tense grants them a degree of fulfilment and inherent significance they would not otherwise possess: 'plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning', so that 'that which was conceived of as simply successive becomes charged with past and future' (Kermode 46). In other words, the organisation of narrative into a beginning, middle and end constructs a textual temporality which imitates the temporality of events in the real world and also complements the actual temporality of the

reading experience. As Peter Brooks (1984) puts it, while it is true that when reading a narrative 'we realize the action progressively, segment by segment, as a kind of present in terms of our experience of it', we do so 'precisely in anticipation of its larger hermeneutic structuring by conclusions' (23). By its very nature, on the other hand, in the historical novel the formal conventions of narrative representation (the grammatical past tense) and the actual position in time of the object of representation (events in the past) coincide. What was a constructed retrospective understanding confined to a narrative domain becomes in the historical novel actual hindsight guaranteed by the passing of real, not just narrative, time beyond the confines of the narrative. In other words, although the form the narrative of a historical novel takes may be identical to that of any novel, the awareness that that form corresponds more closely to the relationship between events and their appearance in the novel alters the perception of that relationship. The result is an attenuated consciousness of the formally codified traits of narrative representation and the greater impact of the impression of reality, even if this is a somewhat paradoxical outcome in view of the inevitably more substantial contribution of the imagination to the recreation of the past rather than to the reproduction of the present.

What emerges from this description is a close formal connection between the historical novel and the realist novel. The addition of a formal link between realism and historical fiction complements the socio-economic points of contact in their genesis, which were first outlined in Georg Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1937). Lukács's analysis, among the earliest attempts to understand the historical novel as a genre within a theoretical framework, is particularly interesting for the approach this study takes to the contemporary British historical novel, because it allows for a national specificity in the experience of history and in the search for a form that can accurately convey that experience. He draws a connection between England's 'post-revolutionary' (21) condition in the early nineteenth century, which he contrasts with that of France and other European countries, and the attention of 'the great social novel[s]' to 'the concrete ... significance of time and place, to social conditions and so on' (21). These, in turn, led the novelists of the time to the moulding of 'the realistic, literary means of expression for portraying this spatio-temporal (i.e. historical) character of people and circumstances' (21).

Initially, however, realist novels envisage history in synchronic terms, that is to say they concentrate on what makes the period in which the action takes place, be it the present or the past, particular to itself. It is only when the novelist is confronted with the visible impact of history on an identifiable mass and tries to understand what is happening by narrating it that the historical novel in its proper sense comes into existence: its subject is the process that causes the transition from one historical period or coherent set of beliefs to another and marks the connection between them. Therefore historical novels are 'an attempt to prove that man and his society develop as part of a process which includes and envelops the present' (Sanders 11). In the case of Scott, whom Lukács heralds as the first author whose novels can properly be called historical, this moment of historicising insight occurred when he witnessed the gradual but inexorable disappearance of the Highlands way of life at the hands of the ever-expanding bourgeois modernity of commerce and money.

Lukács goes on to assert that the example of Scott's fiction gave voice and at the same contributed to the middle classes' understanding of themselves as historical subjects, a trait which is pursued in the realist novels of the mid-Victorian period to the extent that there is no real substantive difference between the two genres:

The ultimate principles are in either case the same. And they flow from a similar aim: the portrayal of a total context of social life, be it present or past, in narrative form. [...] The classical historical novel arose out of the social novel and, having enriched and raised it to a higher level, passed back into it. (Lukács 242)

Shaw specifies what that enrichment consisted of, arguing that it is the example of the historical novel that 'made a sense of history part of the cultural mainstream and hence available to novels in general, not simply to historical novels' (22). Lukács's statement in particular suggests two important observations concerning the recovered academic and popular success of the historical novel in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, one contextual and one literary.

The traditional form of realism as it had evolved from the experiment of historical fiction is no longer a satisfactory means of expression of identity for the middle classes at a historical moment such as