

# ENGLISH HISTORY IN ENGLISH FICTION

BY

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BLACKIE & SON LIMITED  
LONDON AND GLASGOW

## PREFACE

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**T**HIS book is confessedly an adventure. If it be objected that adventure is the exclusive privilege, the peculiar province of youth, the obvious retort is that adventure is the best specific against the insidious infection of old age, and offers the liveliest hope of preserving in some measure the dew of one's youth. "We cannot," as a distinguished historian<sup>1</sup> has truly said, "escape the fact that all real life is a great adventure; we are all either adventurers or sluggards." Refusing to be numbered among the sluggards, I offer this book as a justification of my claim to be included in the former category. But the prosecution of my adventure has proved much more laborious than was anticipated. In particular it has tempted a cautious historian down many a by-path, up many creeks and backwaters he had not previously explored. Perhaps such deviations are a wholesome corrective of the tendency to keep too strictly to the highroad and the main stream of history.

The method pursued in this book has never, so far as I am aware, been adopted before, and can best be made clear by what is known in Parliament as a "personal explanation". Immersed for long years in the study of the past, and in politics which is history in the making, I found a frequent diversion in novel reading. But regarding fiction as merely a recreation I tended to avoid historical novels, strictly so called. Reaction did not, indeed, go so far as to confine me, as it did my dear master and friend Bishop Stubbs, to detective stories. In fact, the only book that learned prelate

<sup>1</sup> Dr. G. G. Coulton,

ever lent me was, characteristically, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab!*

With greater, though far from complete, leisure in later life my practice has altered. I have read widely in historical fiction, and have come to doubt the wisdom of my former prejudice against it.

In this book my later practice is put to the test. History and fiction are brought into line, and an attempt is made to show how historical fiction can help in the elucidation of each successive period of English History. The epithet must be emphasized. I have rarely strayed across the Scottish border or St. George's Channel except where Scottish or Irish history is closely intermingled with that of England. If, in view of this limitation, it seems illogical to devote chapters to the "British" Empire I plead guilty, though I offer no apology for including among "English" novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne (than whom no one has written purer English) in order to illustrate the Puritan temper of New England, and, for similar reasons, a few other American writers. Into foreign history I do not stray at all: such excursions would have rendered the book impossibly ponderous. Further to reduce the bulk of the volume more references are made (especially in the appendix) to previous works of my own than innate modesty approves.

The present work though not repellent, I hope, to the "general reader" is intended primarily for learners of all ages, though they will find in the historical sections no more than a summary. Not an "educational" book in the narrow sense of a book intended exclusively for class work in schools, it will, nevertheless, I hope, find a place in every school library, as well as in most Free Libraries. My work, outside Oxford, has indeed brought me into contact not only with many schools of every degree, but with the Free Library Movement, whose ever widening and deepening influence upon adult education is one of the most encouraging developments of our time. Many people are, perhaps, unaware of the admirable system by which in

London (and perhaps elsewhere) the resources of one library are made available to readers in others. I owe, in this matter, a heavy debt to the Librarian of the Hampstead Public Library, who has procured me the loan of novels and other works which are out of print or accessible (but not loanable) only at a few great libraries such as the Bodleian and the British Museum. I am grateful also to the Librarian of the Flintshire County Library for temporary assistance courteously rendered.

I trust that teachers of history of all grades, above the elementary, will appreciate the effort here made to bring History and Fiction into fruitful association, and that readers of all ages may be encouraged to use historical novels as complementary to their study of history.

It is perhaps superfluous to say that the list of novels is strictly selective, not exhaustive; but it is proper to add that while I have, of course, read and in many cases re-read again and again all the novels of which more than a bare mention is made, I have, in the few cases where mention is merely catalogic, relied on the usual sources of information. In this connexion I wish to acknowledge a special debt to two indispensable works: Dr. E. A. Baker's *A Guide to Historical Fiction* and Mr. J. Nield's *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels*.

A few paragraphs in this book have been written from notes made for a course of lectures more than half a century ago. Quotation marks do not reappear in lectures. It is possible, therefore, that there may have clung to the memory other people's words or phrases. I hope not; but for any unacknowledged borrowings, as well as for borrowings from previous works of my own I crave pardon.

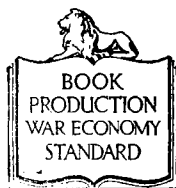
J. A. R. MARRIOTT.

*Easter, 1940.*

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED  
*66 Chandos Place, London*  
*17 Stanhope Street, Glasgow*

BLACKIE & SON (INDIA) LIMITED  
*Warwick House, Fort Street, Bombay*

BLACKIE & SON (CANADA) LIMITED  
*Toronto*



THE PAPER AND BINDING OF THIS BOOK  
CONFORM TO THE AUTHORIZED ECONOMY  
STANDARDS

*First published 1940*  
*Reprinted November 1940, 1941, 1943, 1944, 1946*

*Printed in Great Britain by Blackie & Son, Ltd., Glasgow*

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## CHAPTER I

### Introductory Prelude

**M**ANY people are still apt to look askance at the historical novel. The young suspect that there is a maximum of powder imperfectly concealed in a minimum of jam. More sophisticated critics insist that the historical novel is apt to spoil two things, each good in its own way. Palgrave, the historian, said that "historical novels are mortal enemies to history". Leslie Stephen, a literary critic, contended that an historical theme is inimical to good fiction. Less critical readers complain that their enjoyment of a novel, otherwise good, is marred by the intrusion of historical persons and historical events. Such judgments, whatever their value, impel us to distinguish between history and history, and also to define what is meant by an historical novel.

To the Temple of Clio there are many different avenues. Constitutional and Legal history obviously provides no appropriate material for the historical novelist. Would any novelist dream of making his story revolve round the origins of the English Parliament or the evolution of the Cabinet system? Shakespeare in *King John*, while making much play with the relations of the King and the Pope, never mentions Magna Carta. The complex character of Richard III has attracted many novelists, but none ever discuss the question whether the Lancastrians made a premature attempt to establish "Constitutional" government in England. The historical novel may on the other hand be an invaluable adjunct to the study of political, social, or even economic history. What historian would, for instance,



write the Social History of the nineteenth century without reading Disraeli's *Sybil*, Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, Kingsley's *Yeast*, or even Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, or John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*?

But can the latter be classed as Historical Novels? That question compels us to attempt a definition. Owen Wister says: "Any narrative which presents faithfully a day and a generation is, of necessity, historical." John Buchan's definition runs thus: "An historical novel is simply a novel which attempts to reconstruct the life and recapture the atmosphere of an age *other than those of the writer.*" But is the limitation imposed by the italicized words essential, or even important? If so, we must rule out many of the novels mentioned above and below. Some remarks of Bulwer Lytton prefixed to his *Harold* are, in this connexion, to the point: "There are two ways of employing the materials of History in the service of Romance: the one consists in lending to ideal personages, and to an imaginary fable, the additional interest to be derived from historical groupings: the other, in extracting the main interest of romantic narrative from History itself. Those who adopt the former mode are at liberty to exclude all that does not contribute to theatrical effect or picturesque composition: their fidelity to the period they select is towards the manners and costume, not towards the precise order of events, the moral causes from which the events proceeded, and the physical agencies by which they were influenced and controlled. The plan thus adopted is unquestionably the more popular and attractive; . . . the great author of *Ivanhoe* . . . employed History to aid Romance: I contented myself with the humbler task to employ Romance in the aid of History—to extract from authentic but neglected chronicles and the unfrequented storehouse of Archæology, the incidents and details that enliven the dry narrative of facts to which the general historian is confined—construct my plot from the actual events themselves. . . . I have consulted the original authorities of the time with a care as scrupulous, as if

intending to write, not a fiction but a history. And having formed the best judgment I could of the events and characters of the age, I adhered faithfully to what, as an Historian, I should have held to be the true course and the true causes of the great political events, and the essential attributes of the principal agents. Solely in that inward life which . . . becomes the fair domain of the poet, did I claim the legitimate privileges of fiction; and even here I employed the agency of the passions only so far as they served to illustrate . . . the genuine natures of the beings who had actually lived, and to restore the warmth of the human heart to the images recalled from the grave."

Lytton was in fact like Charles Kingsley, primarily an historian, who chose to put his historical knowledge into the form of prose fiction.

About such novels as *Harold* or *Westward Ho!* there can obviously be no dispute. More disputable are the novels where the background is true to history, but the characters are purely fictitious. In other novels, as in Disraeli's, the characters are avowedly fictitious but can easily be identified. There are other novels again which though not strictly historical contain historical episodes. Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*, for instance, contains a vivid description of the Lord George Gordon Riots. Equally historical is the chapter in *Vanity Fair* describing the famous ball given by the Duchess of Richmond on the eve of Quatre Bras. A more subtle question at this point obtrudes itself. Are there not many novels which, at the time when they were written, could not be regarded as historical, but become historical by the mere lapse of time? Is it certain that in time to come *Felix Holt* will be regarded as a more valuable historical authority than *Middlemarch*? Or *Esmond* than *Vanity Fair*? Such questions will frequently recur. Meanwhile, we must observe that it is precisely in regard to strictly historical novels that the question of their value as adjuncts to history obtrudes itself most acutely. Why did not Bulwer Lytton, having spent laborious days in consulting the original

authorities for the eleventh century, write the history of the House of Godwin? If, however, Lytton had preferred history to fiction it is doubtful whether we should ever have had the wonderful analysis of Harold's character, its innate purity and beauty, or the subtle development of his political ambition which Lytton has revealed to us in the novel. The point is well brought out by Mr. H. Butterfield in his suggestive *Essay on the Historical Novel*.

“Given the facts of the past, the historian shapes them in one way, squeezes something out of them, hunts out a set of implications in them; the novelist uses them to a different purpose, organizes them differently, and turns them over in his thinking with a different kind of logic. Given an event the historian will seek to estimate its ultimate significance and to trace out its influence, the novelist will seek merely to recapture the fleeting moment, to see the thing happening, to turn it into a picture or a ‘situation’. With a set of facts about the social conditions of England in the Middle Ages the historian will seek to make a generalization, to find a formula; the novelist will seek a different kind of synthesis and will try to reconstruct a world, to particularize, to catch a glimpse of human nature. Each will notice different things, follow different clues; for to the historian the past is the whole process of development that leads up to the present; to the novelist it is a strange world to tell tales about.”

That is true; but it follows that some historians approximate more closely than others to the art of the novelist. It is more true of the narrative than of the “philosophical” historian—more true of Macaulay, for example, than of Lecky. But though Macaulay tries as hard as the novelist to see the thing happening, his vision is obscured by the fact that he sees it through spectacles, and that his spectacles are yellow-tinted. Always at the back of his mind is the desire to justify the ways of Whigs to men. Cromwell's sword may be of the same steel and temper as Prince Rupert's, but we know that Macaulay will convince himself that

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Cromwell's was forged to defend the right, while Rupert's was destructive of liberty.

Another question obtrudes itself. Granted that the novel may be of real assistance to the student of history, how shall we measure the excellence of any particular historical novel in this regard? The following simple test is provisionally suggested: does the reading of a particular novel irresistibly impel the reader to the study of the period as presented by the avowed historian? Does the reading, for example, of Collingwood's *The Likeness of King Elfwald* send the reader back to the *Ecclesiastical History* of the Venerable Bede, or even to such a book as Bishop Lightfoot's *Leaders of the Northern Church*? If not, it is arguable that the novel fails in its proper job: it is not doing what Sir Walter Scott himself, with characteristic modesty but with accuracy, defined as its appropriate function. In the introduction to *Peveril of the Peak* he writes: "The reader having been interested in fictitious adventures ascribed to historical periods and characters, begins next to be anxious to learn what the facts really were and how far the novelist has justly represented them." Precisely: the novelist's business is not to satisfy but to stimulate historical curiosity.

That is what Sir Walter himself did. But an eminent historian has ascribed to Scott an even higher achievement than that. Professor Trevelyan while emphasizing the value of the historical novel in an historical curriculum lays down the qualities required in an historical novelist. They are: "an historical mind apt to study the records of a period and a power of creative imagination able to reproduce the perceptions so acquired in a picture that has all the colours of life." Scott, in an eminent degree, possessed those qualifications; but in his fine tribute to the great "Wizard of the North" Mr. Trevelyan goes far beyond that. In his judgment, Scott "by his lays and novels revolutionized history"; he "altered our whole conception of the past". The older form of the historical art, "with its sound antiquarianism

and its superficial analysis " had reached its zenith in Gibbon who in his way was perfect, uniting profound research with consummate power of presentation. But Gibbon had his limitations. He " conceived mankind to be essentially the same in all ages and in all countries. . . . He did not perceive that the thoughts of men as well as the framework of society differ from age to age. The long centuries of diverse human experience, which he chronicled with such passionless equanimity, look all much the same in the cold classical light of his reason." Hardly was Gibbon in his grave, proceeds Mr. Trevelyan, " when a genius arose in Scotland who once, and probably for ever, transformed mankind's conception of itself from the classic to the romantic, from the uniform to the variegated. Gibbon's cold classical light was replaced by the rich mediæval hues of Walter Scott's stained glass. To Scott, each age, each profession, each country, each province, had its own manners, its own dress, its own way of thinking, talking and fighting". Thus Scott " did more than any professional historian to make mankind advance towards a true conception of history, for it was he who first perceived that the history of mankind is not simple but complex, that history never repeats itself, but ever creates new forms differing according to time and place. The great antiquarian and novelist showed historians that history must be living, many coloured and romantic if it is to be a true mirror of the past". Macaulay, adds his great-nephew, " was not slow to learn this lesson".

This is confirmed by Macaulay's own *Essay on History* written while the *Waverleys*, which one by one he devoured as they issued from the Press in rapid succession, were still appearing. After criticizing every historian from Herodotus to Lingard, Macaulay proceeds to sketch the attributes and set out the methods of the ideal Historian. He will not omit any circumstances " because, as we are told, they are too trivial for the majesty of history. The Majesty of History seems to resemble the Majesty of the poor King of Spain who died a martyr to ceremony because the proper

dignitaries were not at hand to bring him his medicine. History," thinks Macaulay, "is in a similar plight. Scott has come to the rescue; he is like the famous apprentice who constructed the most beautiful window in Lincoln Cathedral out of fragments of glass rejected by his master. Sir Walter Scott in the same manner has used those fragments of truth which historians have scornfully thrown behind them in a manner which may well excite their envy. He has constructed out of their gleanings works which, even considered as history, are scarcely less valuable than theirs. But a truly great historian would reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated. . . . We should not then have to look for the wars and the votes of the Puritans in Clarendon, and for their phraseology in *Old Mortality*; for one half of King James in Hume, and for the other half in the *Fortunes of Nigel*. The perfect historian . . . by judicious selection, rejection and arrangement, gives to truth those attractions which have been usurped by fiction. . . . He would assuredly not omit the battles, the sieges, the negotiations, the seditions, the ministerial changes. But with these he would intersperse the details which are the charm of historical romance. . . . He shows us the court, the camp, and the senate. But he shows us also the nation. He considers no anecdote, no peculiarity of manner, no familiar saying, as too insignificant for his notice which is not too insignificant to illustrate the operation of laws, of religion, and of education, and to mark the progress of the human mind. Men will not merely be *described* but will be made intimately known to us. The changes of manners will be indicated not merely by a few general phrases or a few extracts from statistical documents, but by appropriate images presented in every line."<sup>1</sup> So Macaulay at eight-and-twenty described the method which eleven years later he began to apply in his own history.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Miscellaneous Writings*: pp. 133-155, but abridged and summarized.

<sup>2</sup> The *History* was begun in 1839; the first two volumes were published in 1848. Needless to add that it was never finished.

The appropriate function of a Prelude is to suggest, in fugitive fashion, the themes that subsequent numbers will elaborate. That has been done. It remains to define the exact scope of this book, and to explain the method by which alone it would seem possible to achieve the object in view. This book is not an Outline History of England, nor does it attempt to sketch the development of the Historical Novel as a form of literary art, or to analyse the methods of the historical novelist. That is the proper function of the literary critic. The purpose of this book is primarily historical; not to discuss the place of history in fiction but the part that historical fiction can play as an adjunct to the study of history.

The method of the book is dictated by its purpose. The novels selected as illustrative must be considered not in their literary order—the order of composition—but according to the historical periods with which they respectively deal. Thus of Scott's novels we deal first not with *Waverley*, the first in order of publication (1814), but with *The Betrothed* (1825) which deals with the Welsh wars of Henry II. *Waverley* will find its appropriate place only when we come to the eighteenth century. The literary critic may be aghast at this procedure, but only thus can this book fulfil its purpose, and prove of any value to the student of British history.

## CHAPTER II

# Origins and Development of the English Novel

WITH rare unanimity critics have attributed the paternity of Historical Fiction to Sir Walter Scott. "After a few abortive efforts and fantastic experiments, the Historical Novel came suddenly into being with the publication of *Waverley*." Whether all the experiments were merely "fantastic", whether the new apparition was quite so sudden as Sir Charles Firth thinks, are matters to be considered presently. Dr. G. P. Gooch is in substantial agreement with Sir Charles Firth. "More than fifty historical novels," he writes, "made their appearance in England alone while the Wizard of the North was growing to manhood. But for practical purposes we may say that he was the first as well as the greatest of the tribe, and that *Waverley* burst upon the world like Minerva from the brain of Zeus." Whether the historians are quite fair or not to Scott's predecessors, Scott's position is, like Shakespeare's, undeniably central. The historical novels written before 1814 may be regarded as preparing the way for the advent of Scott. Those that have been written since look back to him with filial piety. But whether the verdict on Scott is to be confirmed or reversed evidently depends on the definition of an historical novel. On the narrower definition the verdict must be confirmed. On the wider definition the origins of Historical Fiction must be pushed back at least a century. Scott himself, with characteristic modesty, attributed his first attempt at historical fiction to "the extended and well-merited fame of Miss Edgeworth, whose



Irish characters have gone so far to make the English familiar with the character of their gay and kind-hearted neighbours of Ireland, that she may be truly said to have done more towards completing the Union than perhaps all the legislative enactments by which it has been followed up. Without," he proceeds, "being so presumptuous as to hope to emulate the rich humour, pathetic tenderness and admirable tact which pervade the works of my accomplished friend, I felt that something might be attempted for my own country of the same kind. . . ."

Apart, however, from Miss Edgeworth's Irish tales, Scott would probably never have written the *Waverleys* but for two favouring circumstances. On the one hand there had been fashioned by the prose writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a literary instrument which was apt for the purpose. Bunyan and Dryden, not to mention any lesser craftsmen, had given to English prose an elasticity and a simplicity which contrast with the stiffness and pomposity of the preceding century. The instrument fashioned by them, and sharpened by Defoe and other writers of the Augustan Age, was of incomparable utility to the writers of prose fiction. The other favourable circumstance was the wider diffusion of interest in the past generated by the historical work of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. This revived interest was largely responsible not only for the rise of the Historical Novel, but for the whole of the Romantic Movement in literature and art. Thus, the novel, in the sense in which Dr. Johnson understood it as a "smooth tale generally of love", is the legitimate child of the eighteenth century; Defoe is generally regarded as its father.

But even for Defoe, strikingly original as he was, the way had been gradually prepared. The origins of the English novel must be sought in the Romances in verse and prose which were so popular in the Middle Ages. In those tales history and myth were inextricably blended. Thus there arose in England the Arthurian Cycle, the heroes of which have been made to live again in the immortal verse of a