



NEIL McEWAN

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PERSPECTIVE IN  
BRITISH HISTORICAL  
FICTION TODAY

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BURGESS FARRELL FOWLES  
GOLDING NYE RENAULT

# PERSPECTIVE IN BRITISH HISTORICAL FICTION TODAY

Neil McEwan

*Lecturer in English  
University of Qatar*

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*To my parents*

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# 1 Introduction

Perspective in historical fiction is taken here to mean a view of the past adjusted to present interests. It is always difficult to be fair to both. Present interests are never quite those of the past and are liable to distort the view. An historical novelist is constantly involved in compromise. One way of looking at the hybrid nature of the genre is to see it as a mixture, of verifiable history, and of fiction – which need be true only to the reader's experience of life; but all other realistic fiction claims to be true at least to the social history of the present or the recent past. My argument is that the best contemporary authors of historical fiction in Britain have been honest and creative in their compromises between the conflicting claims of past and present, achieving a useful perspective on various periods of history. The results are especially heartening because the last thirty years have seen widespread, radical questioning of both narrative history and realistic fiction. Given that this species of literature has always been unsure of itself, even at the time when novelists and historians wrote with greatest confidence, this current vitality is not only pleasing in itself: it is evidence of a division which now exists, at least in Britain, between avant-garde critical theory and the most original creative practice.

My starting point is the conclusion to Avrom Fleishman's *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (1971),<sup>1</sup> a survey which includes some novels of the 1950s but which sees Virginia Woolf as the end of a tradition.

Despite the considerable learning of many recent historical novelists, their lack of methodological self-consciousness leaves them among the conventions of the realist novel, and the critical reader will persist in seeing their best efforts as costume flummery. The historical novel of our time will probably join the experimental movement of the modern novel or retire from the province of serious literature.<sup>2</sup>

Fourteen years later, the situation today seems more complex and interesting than that. Anthony Burgess and Robert Nye display 'methodological self-consciousness'. Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964), reissued in 1982, and *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), and Nye's *Falstaff* (1976), are works conspicuously influenced by modern experiment, and so is John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). William Golding, whose *Rites of Passage* (1980) is set in the early nineteenth century, has always merged the traditional and the experimental, in technique and effect. Mary Renault, who completed her trilogy of novels about Alexander the Great (and her eighth historical novel) with *Funeral Games* in 1981, might be thought to have 'left' her work 'among the conventions of the realist novel'; but many readers (including, in 1971, Avrom Fleishman) find her, none the less, to have been far above 'flummery'. Gore Vidal, for example, has claimed (in the publisher's advertisement to the Penguin edition of *Funeral Games*) 'it is plain that her Alexandriad is one of this century's most unexpectedly original works of art'. His tribute is healthy in attitude, at least, because it is free from the now rather old fashioned assumption that originality means Joycean experiment with technique. Joyce represents one line of twentieth-century development; Mary Renault belongs to another. When J. G. Farrell died in 1979 he was midway through *The Hill Station*, an addition to *Troubles* (1970), *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and *The Singapore Grip* (1978). These are not books which fall on one or other side of a line separating experimental from realist fiction. Renault, Burgess, Nye, Farrell, Fowles and Golding are traditional in one essential respect which links them with the best novelists from Scott onwards who are considered in Fleishman's book. They are committed to the permanent problem of perspective, of how to be true to the time in which the story is set and to the time in which they write, of how to see the past fairly from a contemporary vantage-point.

The present period is more sceptical about the possibility of doing so than any earlier generation. There are advantages in scepticism about how well we can know the past, and there are limits to the advantages. J. R. Seeley wrote in *The Expansion of England* (1883) that 'if [facts] lead to no great truths having at the same time scientific generality and momentous practical bearings then history is but an amusement and will scarcely

hold its own in the conflict of studies'.<sup>3</sup> The title of his book is one clue to his meaning. Few British historians or novelists would put the alternatives in such extreme terms. Some would say that no historiography is more than an amusement since no truths can be found. But without even wanting the scientific assurance or the momentous bearings of Seeley's condition, we can still hope for more than simple amusement in historical novels. This chapter first considers the background and implications of contemporary scepticism, and then outlines the positions of the novelists, Mary Renault, Anthony Burgess and Robert Nye, and J. G. Farrell, who are studied in the chapters which follow. I propose that there are three kinds of approach among these writers which illustrate the diversity and the basic common purpose of historical novelists today – to be found in others, including Fowles and Golding who are discussed in the last chapter before the 'Conclusion'.

The most obvious advantage for a contemporary writer is freedom from Victorian self-censorship. Here is Thackeray, opening his essay on Steele in *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (1853):

We can't tell – you would not bear to be told the whole truth regarding those men and manners. You could no more suffer in a British drawing-room under the reign of Queen Victoria, a fine gentleman or fine lady of Queen Anne's time, or hear what they heard and said, than you would receive an ancient Briton.<sup>4</sup>

Fashions change; the rake and the ancient Briton would be gladly received today; some of our historical fiction might shock them both. In so far as Thackeray was thinking of sexual mores, modern licence has reached a far extreme from his prudishness. The present fascination with sexual behaviour in rakes and savages will probably come to seem as far-fetched as the Victorian's reticence.

Other forms of censorship and prejudice hampered historical imagination in the nineteenth century. British self-confidence made modern attitudes seem natural, and therefore present although submerged in 'ordinary people' of all ages as they struggled against unnatural conditions – slavery, feudalism, medieval Catholicism – in their slow but sure



progress towards Victorian England. This is the 'Whig' view of history which makes the past a prologue to the present and distorts it by hindsight. J. W. Burrow's *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (1981) is a recent study of how political opinions shaped the work of historians. Recent studies of historical fiction have been very conscious of the influence of the 'Whig' view (also present in Tories) that the past is no more than its contribution to the present. Andrew Sanders's *The Victorian Historical Novel: 1840-1880* (1978) argues that a simply conceived idea of progress dominates the fiction of his period: 'history offered proof that men were moving inexorably onwards. . .'.<sup>5</sup> The first chapter of Peacock's *Headlong Hall* of 1837 is a reminder that not everyone was convinced; of the three 'philosophers and men of taste' who argue their way to Wales, one is a 'perfectibilian' but another a 'deteriorationist' ('the whole species must at length be exterminated by its own imbecility and vileness') and the third believes, as a 'statu-quo-ite', that all progress entails an equal measure of retrogression. Nostalgia for pre-industrial England could interfere as badly as naive belief in progress with attempts to imagine the past. Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* (1852) mingles self-satisfaction with regret over the century of changes which separated Esmond's lifetime from his own. But Sanders is of course right. There was an overwhelming tendency to see earlier times as unevolved versions of the nineteenth century.

The past is still put entirely at the disposal of present interests in committed literature, but the relatively weak influence of Marxism in the British literary world can be seen in the general rejection of Georg Lukacs's vision of the Waverley novels in *The Historical Novel*, as the first appearance of the 'modern historical consciousness' in so far as 'modern' is synonymous with 'Marxist'. David Brown, for example, follows many nineteenth-century critics in seeing Scott as a Tory.<sup>6</sup> James Anderson wrongly says that history was nothing to Scott but 'a storehouse of material for fiction'.<sup>7</sup> J. H. Raleigh's *Time, Place and Idea* (1968) shows again the originality of Scott's insights into history and his involvement in his era: 'for the first time in literature, Scott had dramatised the basic processes of modern history . . . he also saw the inevitability and necessity of progressing away from it'.<sup>8</sup> From this double-vision, Scott

created, in the novels of recent Scottish history, work of a Shakespearean richness. Later nineteenth-century writers were always under his influence but scarcely ever rivalled him.

G. P. R. James and W. Harrison Ainsworth are dull, after Scott, when they try to recreate the past, and even more dull, as contemporaries of Dickens, in what they have to say to their own time. In this they are distinct from many mid-Victorian novelists whose history is strongly affected by current affairs. Because there was a sense that the past was the childhood of the present (a favourite metaphor of Marx), novelists sought analogies. James C. Simmons has studied these in *The Novelist as Historian*; Robert Lee Wolff, reviewing him in the *Times Literary Supplement*, attacked many of Simmons's judgements, deriding him for having said that Newman's *Callista* (1856) 'used' historical fiction to purvey Catholic doctrine; it is hard not to see *Callista* and Kingsley's torrid *Hypatia* of 1853 (which is now unintentionally very funny, in many parts) as works of religious polemic more than imaginative explorations of life in antiquity. Wolff rightly points out that Bulwer Lytton used medieval stories for modern propaganda; *The Last of the Barons* (1843) and *Harold: the Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848) are stories of how medieval affairs foreshadowed political tensions among mercantile, aristocratic, and radical interests of the 1840s; 'to read any of these novels in any other way is to miss their chief interest', Wolff concludes.

The best Victorian historical novels were not, it is clear, written by Mr Simmons's 'novelist as historian'. The novels that were so written no longer teach history, and seldom retain much interest as fiction.<sup>9</sup>

'Their chief, if not their sole, claim to be read today' is that they treat Victorian issues in the disguise of the past. Wolff's 'seldom' and 'much' allow some room for disagreement. But Scott apart, *Esmond*, and Dickens's two novels set in the recent past, are probably the only works of historical fiction before Kipling which are now willingly read except by specialists in some Victorian field; *Romola* (1863) is read dutifully only by those who enjoy George Eliot's other novels. Even if one takes the more generous view of Avrom Fleishman who finds historical imagination in Kingsley and Charles Reade, it must

be admitted that this was a most difficult genre in the great age of the novel, and that the claims of the present most often overcame those of the past.

It would be wrong to claim that any later writers have achieved an objectivity transcending the preoccupations of their culture, and equally wrong to require that novelists try to achieve it. Perspective means that the past is viewed through present consciousness. But when Flaubert said that 'history is only the reflection of the present on the past and that is why it is forever to be rewritten', he implied such an appropriation as can be found in *Salammbô* where conditions in France in 1862 are 'reflected on' ancient Carthage.<sup>10</sup> That is to deny integrity to the past. It can be claimed that a better compromise has been reached today. Just how difficult it is to avoid seeing history as a 'prelude to the present' was recognised by Lord Raglan on the first page of *The Hero* (1936).

Only the smallest fraction of the human race has ever acquired the habit of taking an objective view of the past. For most people, even educated people, the past is merely a prologue to the present, not merely without interest in so far as it is independent of the present, but simply inconceivable except in terms of the present.

We all suffer, he rightly says next, from 'this lack of mental perspective': 'the events of our own past life are remembered, not as they seemed to us at the time, but merely as incidents leading up to our present situation'; this leads to 'a false perspective' in which we impose the present on our readings of the past, by natural inclination. Raglan's impatience is a sign of willingness, in the post-Victorian period, to try. His generation was disposed to patronise the nineteenth century, to distort its view of eminent Victorians by judging them through the consciousness of modern emancipation, and this tendency shows another weakness in our objectivity – we define our own period in relation to the past.

The most that can be claimed for contemporary novelists is a relative degree of balance, a willingness to acknowledge the human interest of attitudes which are unlike ours, and to grant the difference in similarities. The expansion of literature in the English language has been a healthy influence. To compare

Joyce Cary's picture of the British in Africa in *Mister Johnson* (1939) with Chinua Achebe's version in *Arrow of God* (1964) can be enlightening. The forms of 'emancipation' from Victorian disciplines of mind which were achieved in the modernist period can now be seen as a loss as well as a gain. It is easy to ridicule George Grote, the historian of Greece, who (perhaps wisely) never visited Greece for fear of bandits; a contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* remarked some years ago that Grote 'went to his grave unaware that Demosthenes was the kind of man who would have been an embarrassment at the Liberal Club'.<sup>11</sup> The Demosthenes portrayed in Mary Renault's *Fire from Heaven* would never have been admitted. Miss Renault is justified in complaining that Grote:

had the fatal commitment which vitiates conscientious fact with anachronistic morality. His whole capital of belief being invested in the Athenian democracy, he was resolute in attributing its fall to external villainy rather than internal collapse. Demosthenes could do no wrong . . .<sup>12</sup>

Mary Renault's belief in democracy is plain from her novels. It does not interfere with her determination to occupy a Macedonian viewpoint in *Fire from Heaven*. It may be that her power to live her Macedonia was helped by twenty years in Africa. The strength of Grote's 'commitment' is lacking today, although not entirely absent. A sceptical but firm sense of values, such as that of Mary Renault or J. G. Farrell, is a good basis for looking at the past.

Praising Kipling in a lecture, 'The Sense of the Past', given in 1972, Sir Richard Southern talked about 'the pleasure of sharing the thoughts of people of the past' which he found highly developed at the end of the nineteenth century.

It was the returned exile Kipling – in my view the most gifted historical genius this country has ever produced – who created the most vivid imaginative pictures of the successive phases of life in England going back to remote antiquity. But it was Henry James – who first used the phrase 'the sense of the past' to denote the impact of an immensely complicated and varied scene on an historically sensitive mind . . .<sup>13</sup>

The Jamesian sense of the past pervades Victorian fiction set in Victorian England, and much of the best fiction written today. Kipling's gift for imaginative pictures was original and exceptional. It promised well as an example for twentieth-century prospects in historical fiction.

The same could be said of the advancement of novels for children – apart from Kipling's – in the same period. A. J. P. Taylor has recently described the scorn which he felt as a child for Stanley J. Weyman, but there are scenes in Weyman which give a sense of the past – the Cardinal and his cat in *Under the Red Robe* (1894).<sup>14</sup> Before coming to Stevenson and Conan Doyle, one could read Edith Nesbit, at the turn of the century, who treated history as an imaginative back-garden game. Between the wars there were John Buchan's *The Path of the King* (1921) and *The Blanket of the Dark* (1931), and, later, Rosemary Sutcliffe, Cynthia Harnett, Walter Hodges and Leon Garfield. The last half-century has produced a large body of exciting, imaginative and well-researched historical fiction for the young, gradually helping to create a more demanding adult readership.

Naomi Mitchison catered for such critical tastes, preparing a way for Mary Renault. Peter Green argued in a 1958 lecture, 'Aspects of the Historical Novel', that the genre was 'undergoing a renaissance' and he saw its origin in Naomi Mitchison's *The Conquered* (1923), where the Gallic wars are seen from the Gauls' point of view. Concern to recreate an alien civilisation on its own terms, he says, is the dominant feature of subsequent work, and he praises Rex Warner, Zoe Oldenbourg (in France), Robert Graves, H. F. M. Prescott, and Alfred Duggan, among others. Accuracy and imagination are present in these novelists [as in John Cowper Powys] but their essential difference from earlier work is the power of 'empathy', Green concludes.<sup>15</sup> Avrom Fleishman is, none the less, justified in saying that writers between the 1920s and the 1950s were outside what was then felt to be the main stream of English fiction, and right to point to Conrad and Virginia Woolf to explain why this was felt. Fleishman quotes *The Inheritors* (1901) which Conrad wrote in collaboration with Ford Madox Ford.

Our Cromwell! There was no Cromwell; he had lived, he had worked for the future – and now he had ceased to exist. His future – our past, had come to an end.

He comments that Conrad thought 'recent developments [had] made so sharp a break with the political values of the past that history may be said to have ended and an era of anarchy to have been ushered in'.<sup>16</sup> So thought Lawrence's Birkin, and W. B. Yeats, in the decades to come. Fleishman proceeds to discuss Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941).

The idea of history presented on and off the stage in *Between the Acts* is more subtle than any of the philosophical theories of history taken up in previous historical novels. It might be called a post-theoretical idea, for it is in tune with the attitudes towards the past that dominate the modern historian's craft . . . no longer broad causal relationships of events derived from prophetic visions of the shape of history. Neither the liberal view of progress, which was part of Woolf's intellectual heritage, nor the cyclical views of eternal return, which so many of her contemporaries embraced, is identifiable in the novel's world.<sup>17</sup>

Instead, *Between the Acts* is 'not a novel about history but a novel about consciousness of history which includes historiography and historical fiction itself'.<sup>18</sup> 'Therefore the most learned historical novelists – Prescott, Warner, Mitchison – are left by their lack of methodological self-consciousness' outside the species of fiction a modern critical reader expects: 'like history itself, the historical novel must be more than its past, passing freely into new possibilities, or remain a sterile repetition of the forms doled out to it from tradition'.<sup>19</sup>

One purpose of this argument is to show that conspicuous formal novelty and stale repetition are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Criticism of modern British fiction in general has moved on from Rubin Rabinovitz's *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950–1960* (1967), a work sadly trapped inside that assumption. Iris Murdoch, Kingsley Amis, Anthony Powell, William Golding, and Angus Wilson have exploited a wide range of the resources available from tradition, including those explored by Virginia Woolf but not limited to them. L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* is a subtly-told story of 1900, filled with a 1950s consciousness. Powell had published *A Question of Upbringing*, the first volume of his 'Music of Time' sequence, in 1951; Wilson's *Hemlock and After* came out in 1952. First novels by Murdoch (*Under the Net*), Amis

(*Lucky Jim*) and Golding (*Lord of the Flies*) followed in 1954. Mary Renault's first historical novel *The Last of the Wine* appeared in 1956 and *The King Must Die*, which made her name, in 1958. Golding published *The Inheritors* in 1955 and *The Spire* in 1964. Historical novelists, when Fleishman was writing, need no longer feel excluded from new possibilities if they wrote about history rather than consciousness of history. They might be as methodologically self-conscious as Anthony Burgess, but even then they need not regard realism or tradition as 'doles' to turn to when invention flagged. Realism was clearly one mode available to the most ambitious of contemporary novelists.

A revival of confidence, then, distinguishes the practice of historical novelists from the 1950s onwards. Sensing it, Peter Green said in 1958 that writers were beginning to treat the 'bastard genre' as 'a serious and legitimate medium'.<sup>20</sup> So they were. The following two chapters are written in the belief that Mary Renault was a better novelist than her immediate predecessors and contemporaries who treated life in antiquity: Naomi Mitchison, 'Bryher', Robert Graves, Arthur Koestler, Rex Warner, Alfred Duggan;<sup>21</sup> and that her novels bring a stronger talent to the same effort of showing an alien culture on its own terms. Avrom Fleishman thinks so too.

One has only to compare her use of her scholarship with that of Mitchison, Graves, or lesser writers on classical themes (e.g., Alfred Duggan or Bryher) to sense the difference between a genuine artist and a learned entertainer. For Renault, modern knowledge is not an instrument for exposing the anthropological imperatives or political motivations of the men of the past. For the very reason that she treats Theseus as myth as well as man, she is able to rewrite his legendary exploits as history – speculative history, to be sure, but more readily approachable than the politically reduced or anthropologically expanded visions of man we are given by Graves and Mitchison, respectively.<sup>22</sup>

Having quoted Professor Fleishman on a general tendency in order to disagree, it is pleasing to quote his book on a particular author's talent (always more interesting than general tendencies) to agree, before parting company.

There is another feature of Mary Renault which her work

shares with that of all the novelists considered below, and that is a determination to engage the attention of readers who are not normally drawn to the history of her period, or to history at all. Graves does so in the 'Claudius' books and, perhaps, in *Wife to Mr Milton* (1942), but not in *Count Belisarius* (1938). The other novelists Fleishman names, and H. F. M. Prescott, are primarily novelists to attract historians.<sup>23</sup> Rex Warner and Miss Prescott could be called history-teachers' novelists – certainly they (unlike Graves) are novelists history-teachers recommend. They are both prim. Mary Renault was a best-seller; Burgess, Nye, Farrell, Fowles and Golding have enjoyed large sales. There is in all of them an element of vulgarity, in the best sense, which takes various forms. Mary Renault was a romantic and a hero-worshipper as well as a scholar and an artist. Burgess and Nye are scurrilous as well as learned and ingenious. Farrell is both very earnest and very flippant about history. Fowles's work is marked by his experience of film-making, and journalism; his style of theorising in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is closer to journalism than to a university seminar. In Golding there are romantic and sensationalist tendencies which escape his normal austerity. It is refreshing and unusual to be able to say of a group of contemporary novelists, as we can here, that not one of them is a professional university teacher; they have made livings as writers.<sup>24</sup> Their 'vulgarity' is not proposed, in later chapters, as a literary merit in itself. The erotic passages in Burgess and Nye, being a-historical, have been mostly disregarded in the discussions of their work. But it is a sign of their confidence that the most ambitious kind of historical fiction can be, not only 'serious and legitimate', as Peter Green says, but lightly entertaining too. Their work is more entertaining, in the popular meaning, in excitement, wit and 'colour', than the thousands of historical adventures and romances which are aimed only at the most common tastes of the common reader. That promises well for the future of a genre which Fleishman thought should join the modern experimental movement in the direction shown by Virginia Woolf (who would probably have disapproved of most of these novelists).

The contemporary author of historical fiction works with these advantages. He is less likely than nineteenth-century writers to distort the past from an undue belief in progress, or



to use it, reflecting present concerns on the past. There is a public, although not large enough, which has been accustomed, even from childhood, to accurate and imaginative work. There is no reason to believe that novels about history are old-fashioned, or a sub-genre only for specialists. There is scope to treat a past-period with regard for the integrity of surviving evidence and to address the – in all senses – ‘critical reader’. There are enough talented failures among previous works to make it clear that perfection is not to be achieved in this kind of writing, that compromises have to be accepted. Given that some modern novelists complain of the paralysing effect of the great Victorian and Modernist works, the existence of *Romola* might act as a spur. Another advantage might be seen in our more relaxed attitude to levels and varieties of language, so closely tied to social class even in 1940s. English dialects need not automatically be the mark of an inferior social class, as they came to be in the nineteenth century. Spoken English can appear fluent and literate without sounding genteel-British, not at least to a British ear. The court-eunuch who narrates Mary Renault’s *The Persian Boy* sounds the hellenised Persian courtier he is meant to be, not at all an English gentleman. We do not suppose there is any equivalence between the English prose he is given and whatever Greek style such a person might have used in Ptolemy’s Alexandria. He would have been polished and assured, as he is in the novel. Language and style in this genre involve obvious compromises. In thirty years time the Alexander novels will be strikingly ‘1970s’, and properly so; but they will also have a note which can be heard in ancient writing.

The argument so far has depended on the traditional assumption that perspective is possible because the past is independent of our reconstructions of it. Most of the past is lost, but more survives than we know, and we can never predict exactly how newly discovered evidence may compel us to change our ideas of it. All historical interest, including that of the historical imagination, lies in recognition of the varying degrees of what can be known and imagined. To believe all is as naive as to believe nothing. Certain facts, such as those of geography, are constant in historical times, and cannot be ignored. Between