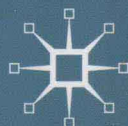




British Historical Fiction before Scott

Anne H. Stevens

Palimpsests in the Long Nineteenth Century, Romanticism and Cultures of Print
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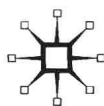


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1

The Formation of a Genre

History and fiction in the late eighteenth century

David Hume had sound reason to assert, as he wrote in 1770, that he lived in 'the historical age.' In Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century some of the most celebrated historiographic works of all time appeared: Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the works of William Robertson, and of course Hume's own *History of Great Britain*. British historiography was moving beyond the Whig and Tory partisanship that had plagued it earlier in the century, and new areas of historical investigation were opening up, reflected in such achievements as Thomas Warton's groundbreaking literary history, William Blackstone's investigations into law, and the works of the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, to name just a few. New institutions related to the study of history proliferated: antiquarian societies began in London and Edinburgh and the British Museum was founded in 1753. In the realm of popular culture history was all the rage: David Garrick helped to popularize more historically accurate costumes on the stage, Horace Walpole's gothic revival home at Strawberry Hill became a tourist attraction, and 'modern antique' poets like James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton inspired controversy.¹

This 'historical age' was simultaneously the novelistic age. Ian Watt used the phrase 'the rise of the novel' to talk about a century-long process from Defoe to Austen, but this process accelerated in the second half of the century.² After the world-changing success of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in 1740, demand for and production of novels increased dramatically, with even more pronounced increases in the 1770s and 1780s following a change in copyright law in 1774. Works by Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne brought new levels of sophistication and complexity to

the once-lowly genre. With increased production came new subgenres such as the gothic and sentimental novel. During this time, prices of new novels fell, and the circulating library system expanded across Britain, Ireland, and the colonies, making more books available to more readers than ever before. Readers also had new means of navigating the novelistic world, through the reviews of new publications in the periodicals that sprang up in the second half of the eighteenth century, and the popularizing and canonizing functions of collections such as the *Novelists' Magazine*.

Naturally one would expect two such important trends to intersect, and scholars such as Everett Zimmerman and Robert Mayer have done important work in tracing the interrelations of history and fiction in the eighteenth century. While much has been said, by these scholars and others, about the influence of historiography upon major figures such as Defoe and Fielding, comparatively little has been written about the intersection of history and fiction in the historical novels of this period, even though it was one of the most popular novelistic subgenres of the late eighteenth century. One reason for this neglect is that Walter Scott casts a long shadow over the period.³ Although literary historians sometimes credit Walter Scott with single-handedly inventing the genre in 1814 with *Waverley*, a myth that Scott helped to promote, it is simply not true. In this book my focus will be not on Scott's achievement but on the works of the dozens of popular novelists who produced historical fictions of varying sorts for the circulating libraries in the half century before *Waverley*. Some of these writers – Sophia Lee, Horace Walpole, William Godwin, Maria Edgeworth – are well known to students of the period, but the majority of the novels I discuss are by forgotten or even anonymous writers. In addition to the novelists themselves, the story of the historical novel also involves literary reviewers, publishers, circulating libraries, and readers. Taken together, these various actors, institutions, and texts helped to codify the genre of the historical novel by the first decades of the nineteenth century. In this chapter I introduce the materials and methods of my study. I begin by talking about the historical novel as a novelistic subgenre and how my book relates to previous work on the topic. Then I outline the theoretical foundations of my approach to this topic, using the works of sociologists of literature and of film theorists as a way to think about genre. Finally, I introduce the process by which I assembled the corpus of historical novels I use in this study and explain the scope of the rest of the book.

Studies of the historical novel

The historical novel is one of the most important of novelistic subgenres because of its longevity and its centrality to both high and low culture. In the nineteenth century, historical novels were a mainstay of popular fiction while including some of the greatest literary achievements of the century, such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. In the contemporary context, likewise, historical novels can be found both on the bestseller lists (in the cases of the novels of James Michener and Patrick O'Brian, for instance) and critics' lists. Critically acclaimed contemporary authors from Toni Morrison to Thomas Pynchon have tried their hand at historical fiction. Many other novelistic subgenres, such as crime fiction or science fiction, have stronger associations with popular or 'genre' fiction and are often relegated to separate genre-based sections at the local bookstore. Frequently when a 'literary' author uses the conventions of one of these other popular genres, such as Margaret Atwood's use of science fiction in *The Handmaid's Tale* or Paul Auster's use of crime writing in *The New York Trilogy*, critics consider these works as postmodern acts of generic appropriation rather than genuine examples of the genre. Historical fiction, by contrast, has avoided this sort of ghettoization; identifying a work as a historical novel tells you something about its setting but little about its artistic aspirations – it is a fictional genre that does not suffer the stigmatizing label of 'genre fiction.'

Just as in the twentieth century historical fiction has remained part of the fictional mainstream, in the eighteenth century the history of the historical novel parallels and illuminates the story of the rise of the novel more generally.⁴ Literary historians have identified a range of features associated with this 'rise': the move from romance's retelling of legendary stories to novels whose plots are drawn from journalism and other types of more contemporary source materials; the development of a range of techniques of 'formal realism,' depicting social and cultural milieus in greater and more accurate detail; the depiction of more realistic and more historically and sociologically based character types; the elevation of novel-writing from a degraded, anonymous pursuit to the work of esteemed, brand-name authors; and an increased seriousness of purpose for the novel not just as a form of popular entertainment but as a vehicle of moral, social, historical, and philosophical instruction. All of these features that we associate with the rise of the

novel are present in the development of the historical novel over the course of the eighteenth century, as I argue in subsequent chapters. Because of the nature of the historical novel, some of these features take on a genre-specific cast: for the shift in the types of source materials, for example, we see a movement from the use of legendary tales in the historical romance to a dependence on more scholarly historical and antiquarian works, and the strategies of formal realism in the historical novel involve more detailed portrayals of historical milieus, including authenticating features such as footnotes and learned prefaces.

I have chosen to tell the story of the development of the historical novel in this book both because of the genre's persistence and centrality to contemporary literature both high and low and because its history parallels and illuminates the larger story of the rise of novel. Additionally, the genre is ripe for study because a relatively finite set of texts within a manageable timeframe is available. Within the tradition of British literature, Thomas Leland's novel *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762) marks a fairly clear starting-point, as I argue in Chapter 2. Although historical settings can be found in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century fictions, Leland's text inaugurates a new and markedly different wave of historical fiction influenced by the increased interest in the medieval romance in these years. Likewise, 1813 is a logical ending point for my study, on the eve of *Waverley*'s publication. Because *Waverley* is so commonly identified as the point of origin for this genre, earlier historical fiction has largely been neglected, particularly in comparison with other fictional genres such as science fiction and detective fiction, whose origins have been much more thoroughly explored. By examining the dozens of historical novels in the decades before Scott and by leaving his works to one side, we can get a clearer sense of the generic tradition as it stood before his novels began to reshape it.

British historical fiction of the years 1762–1813 has received surprisingly little critical attention in the last century or so. Instead, the prevailing current in both historically and structurally oriented studies of the genre is to focus on Scott, whose commercial and critical dominance in the early nineteenth century eclipsed his generic predecessors. One of the earliest sustained examinations of the genre, George Saintsbury's *The Historical Novel* (1895), for example, takes the unique approach of simultaneously suggesting that the historical novel had always existed and that Scott invented it. Saintsbury describes 'the singular and miraculous fashion in which Sir Walter, taking a kind of writing which had, as we have seen, been tried, or at least tried *at*, for more than two thousand years, and which had never yet been got to run

smoothly on its own lines to its own end, by one stroke effected what the efforts of those two millennia had been bungling and baulking themselves over' (26). Saintsbury begins his work with a brief consideration of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, the romances of antiquity, and the eighteenth-century novels that form the subject-matter of my book as examples of this 'bungling and baulking,' while insisting that with 'one stroke' Scott perfected the genre.⁵

The standard generic studies of the historical novel, affording Scott pride of place as they do, define the genre by the features of Scott's novels, only briefly mentioning his predecessors to contrast their methods to his. Avrom Fleishman's *The English Historical Novel* (1971), for example, defines the genre thus:

Most novels set in the past – beyond an arbitrary number of years, say 40–60 (two generations) – are liable to be considered historical, while those of the present and preceding generations (of which the reader is more likely to have personal experience) have been called 'novels of the recent past.' Regarding substance, there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of 'historical' events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters. (3)

Although phrases like 'unspoken assumption' and 'arbitrary number of years' suggest a very loose definition of the historical novel, Fleishman does offer some litmus tests for identifying members of the genre: 'It is necessary to include at least one... [historical] figure in a novel if it is to qualify as historical' (3). The generic features Fleishman identifies – a setting 40–60 years in the past, the inclusion of public historical events like war, and the inclusion of real historical characters – precisely correspond to the features of *Waverley*; Or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since, Scott's first novel.⁶

The most celebrated author on the historical novel, Georg Lukács, like Saintsbury before him, affords Scott a privileged and quasi-mystical place in literary history. In *The Historical Novel* Lukács attributes the appearance of the genre to the new understanding of history as a mass experience that emerged after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars (23). To be a true historical novel, a book must exhibit a sense of history as a process and depict a social totality: 'By representing a limited section of reality, however richly portrayed, it aims to evoke the totality of the process of social development' (139). Because of

his emphasis on class struggle, Lukács is less interested in the temporal setting of a historical novel than its depiction of social totalities. The *historical* aspect of the historical novel is merely a means by which to understand social processes, and thus his discussion of the historical fictions of Scott, Manzoni, and company quickly makes way for an analysis of his favorite realist writers, especially Balzac, who writes a 'history of the present' in his *Comédie Humaine*. In essence, the historical novel of Scott is merely a bridge between the realist social novels of the eighteenth century, such as Fielding's and Smollett's works, and the great nineteenth-century realists to whom Lukács's writings of this period constantly return.⁷

In a sense, Lukács's study, despite its title, is less a history of the genre than a selective history of a specific type of class-conscious historical novel. Later commentators on the historical novel have often overlooked Lukács's caveat: 'This monograph does not claim to give a detailed and complete history of the historical novel' (17). He explains in the first pages of the work: 'Only those writers are dealt with whose works are in some respect representative, marking typical nodal points in the development of the historical novel' (17). Lukács's method recapitulates the type of historical inquiry he finds notable in the historical novels he describes. Using the Hegelian idea of typicality, he selects a few authors, such as Scott and Balzac, whose novels embody the historical processes he wants to trace. These 'world-historical individuals' may not even be aware of their achievements, unwittingly advancing the course of literary history. The first sentence of the study captures his method in miniature: 'The historical novel arose at the beginning of the nineteenth century at about the time of Napoleon's collapse (Scott's *Waverley* appeared in 1814)' (19). Here the historical novel is the subject of the sentence, and the author who produced it is reduced to parenthetical status. The historical convergence of *Waverley* and Napoleon's collapse is what makes the historical novel interesting to Lukács, rather than any specific characteristics of Scott's work.⁸ Because his argument requires this historical synchronicity, Lukács dismisses the historical novels that predate *Waverley*: 'With Scott, in particular, it was the fashion to quote a long list of second and third-rate writers (Radcliffe, etc.), who were supposed to be important literary forerunners of his. All of which brings us not a jot nearer to understanding what was *new* in Scott's art, that is in his historical novel' (30). Like Saintsbury, Lukács both acknowledges that Scott had predecessors and summarily dismisses them as not worth his attention (though 'second and third-rate' is perhaps a step up from 'bungling and baulking').⁹

As a part of the expansion of the canon and the increased interest in lesser known and particularly women writers, in recent years scholars have begun to reappraise these third-rate bunglers. For the most part, however, the novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that feature historical settings have been placed into one of three limiting (although not entirely inaccurate) categories: gothic novels, 'national tales,' or inferior forerunners to Scott. The first of these three approaches, treating these novels as gothic, is probably the most common way in which these works are analyzed. This labeling makes a fair amount of sense: many Romantic-era gothic fictions are set in a time period different from the author's own, usually the Middle Ages or Renaissance. In the next chapter I explore the relationship of gothic and historical fiction in much more detail, but to briefly anticipate my argument there, I would contend that these two types of popular fiction have a common origin, and that it is only towards the end of the eighteenth century that they begin to diverge into separate fictional traditions, one emphasizing historical settings and featuring real historical events and figures and the other emphasizing effects of terror and horror. To place all late eighteenth-century novels with historical settings into the category of gothic fiction is to miss an important element of generic separation that is occurring at this time.

Sophia Lee's novel *The Recess; or, a Tale of Other Times* (1783–85) provides a clear illustration of the common origins of gothic and historical fiction and the dangers of too-easy labeling. Critics continually face difficulties in labeling her remarkable novel: it seems to be a gothic fiction because of its use of conventions such as secret passages and persecuted maidens and its atmosphere of gloom and terror, yet it lacks what has come to be seen as *the* defining feature of the gothic, the supernatural. Lee does employ many of the features of the historical novel as outlined by scholars such as Fleishman and Lukács: the story takes place at a particular historical moment (the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries), depicts real historical figures (Mary, Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I, the Earl of Essex, James I, and many others), and features major historical events such as Essex's campaigns in Ireland and Mary's execution. A few scholars have employed the label 'historical gothic' to try to capture the hybrid nature of works such as *The Recess*.¹⁰ In such discussions, however, the 'historical' is always subordinated to the 'gothic,' so that the historical elements of works of this type are viewed as merely the backdrop for gothic melodrama.

By labeling works such as *The Recess* as gothic critics concentrate on their transgressive and supernatural rather than historical, sentimental,

or epistolary elements. In a like manner, the designation 'national tale' when applied to historical fictions of this period has led critics to emphasize themes of nationality and nationalism in these works. The key figure in this type of approach is Katie Trumpener, whose masterful and highly influential *Bardic Nationalism* examines a range of fictional and non-fictional forms, including the historical novels of Lee, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane West, concentrating on a new type of elegiac, nationalist antiquarianism, centered on the figure of the bard, which develops in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland in response to the loss of their political sovereignty. Other scholars, such as Ina Ferris and Peter Garside, have similarly studied the historical novels of this period as national tales.¹¹

Some of the novels that form the core of my study have thus previously been treated in studies of the gothic and the national tale for their deployment of themes of transgression or nationalism. More sustained treatments of many of these novels as historical novels can be found in the works of a small group of German critics: Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock, Frauke Reitemeier, and Rainer Schöwerling.¹² The projects of this group of scholars grow out of the rediscovery of the Corvey Library of popular fiction of the Romantic period, found in the 1980s in a German castle and now available on microfiche in a few libraries in Europe and America.¹³ Of these studies, perhaps the closest in scope to my own is Schöwerling's article 'Sir Walter Scott and the Tradition of the Historical Novel Before 1814 – With a Checklist.' His checklist is much wider in scope than the set of novels I use for this study, listing over twice as many novels with historical settings prior to Scott than my corpus of eighty-five.¹⁴ Ultimately he applies the dismissive label of 'pseudo-historical novels' to these works and sees them as inferior stepping-stones on the way to Scott, much like Lukács had done but in much greater detail (252). Müllenbrock's 'Precursors of Scott' is similarly dismissive of the precursor and laudatory towards the master: 'The gap between Scott's first historical novel and the spate of mediocre works makes the scope available for the great creative genius to emerge all the more strikingly' (222).

Reitemeier, the only one of this group of scholars to author a book-length study of historical fiction, divides the historical novels before Scott into two types: those that show little interest in history and those characterized by a 'greater seriousness concerning facts and events' ("Woefully deficient"). Novels of the second type

usually detail at least some part of the action's framework: clothes, habits, the lifestyle of other people, architecture, or – rarely – geography.

Admittedly, none of the novels manages to paint a round and convincing picture of the protagonists' physical and social surroundings. Yet the details that are given point out the narrator's awareness that a historical novel should also care for the way life was led in the past. The historicity of those 'historical' novels must be seen as predominantly superficial, referring mainly to events or minor characters that are woven into the story; these novels are not 'about history,' but usually only 'set in historical surroundings.' ("Woefully deficient")

Here again even a critic who has taken the time to examine this mass of novels does so merely to condemn them, judging them by generic expectations that were at the time in the process of formation, as I discuss in Chapter 5. The novelists and reviewers I study had no idea that Walter Scott was on the brink of achieving unprecedented sales and influence in the novelistic world, so we should not treat their works merely as 'precursors' to his but instead try to reconstruct their initial publication context as much as possible in order to recapture a sense of literary history as it is being made, watching the literary field unfold rather than making sense of it retrospectively.

In the introduction to *The English Novel 1770–1829*, an invaluable bibliography compiled by Garside, Raven, and Schöwerling, Garside describes the deficiencies of the historical fiction before Scott in a manner similar to Reitemeier:

Many of the earlier of these novels on examination prove to be little more than sentimental fictions in period costume, or are closer generically by modern standards to Gothic rather than standard historical fiction. Some evidently use an historical setting as a thin disguise for retailing current scandalous matter. A number of others, however, quite clearly involve more genuine attempts to recreate the 'manners' of an earlier period, even when driven by a larger moralistic or patriotic purpose. (60)

Garside taxonomizes the novels with historical settings of this period into (1) sentimental novels in period costume, (2) gothic novels, (3) *romans à clef*, and (4) 'genuine' historical novels. But even the novels of the fourth category are hampered by 'moralistic or patriotic' agendas. It is hard to argue with his assessments – by later standards many of these works should be judged as anachronistic, narrowly didactic, mere costume dramas, or allegories of the present. However, many