

The Historical Novel

John Bowen

By rights, the historical novel should be one of the glories of the Victorian age. Almost every major novelist of the period, with the exception of the Brontës, made at least one attempt on the form: not only Dickens, George Eliot, Gaskell, Thackeray, and Hardy, but also such unlikely candidates as Trollope, Gissing, Wilkie Collins, and Conan Doyle. They were supplemented by a legion of lesser names, often enormously popular in their day, including Edward Bulwer-Lytton, G. P. R. James, and William Harrison Ainsworth, as well as the more surprising figures of Walter Horatio Pater, John Henry Newman, and Cardinal Wiseman. Even the poet Swinburne was tempted to co-author a historical tale for children. No form of novel-writing in the period had more prestige, and of none were hopes higher – hopes of dignity, seriousness, and moral insight; historical novels should have flourished in what was a deeply sympathetic environment. Victorians were acutely aware of the past, and “in almost every area of Victorian intellectual life, one encounters a preoccupation with ancestry and descent, with tracing the genealogy of the present in the past, and with discovering or creating links to a formative history” (Gilmour 1993: 28). But if one important strand in nineteenth-century culture was its historicism, Victorian thought was also drawn to the search for the transcendent and that which could resist the power of time. It was in response to the conflict of those two impulses that the most important Victorian historical fiction was created.

Literature of the nineteenth century had a complex and fruitful relationship to the writing of history, which grew in the course of the century into a professionalized discipline, on the one hand drawn to literary models and forms of writing, on the other seeking to distance itself from the merely “literary.” There were historians, most notably Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Babington Macaulay, who were major literary figures in their own right, and whose works were devoured by a public eager for history. Indeed, “it was to the narrative and descriptive precedents of the novel, and particularly the work of Scott, that he [Macaulay] most turned for examples of what a modern historian might accomplish” (Burrow 1981: 36). Historical novels, however,

were by no means a matter for the elite. Together with the Gothic and the tale of terror, the historical novels of Walter Scott and Ainsworth were major influences on working-class and popular literature in the earlier decades of the century, and sales of historical fiction were very high: nearly 80,000 sets of Scott's *Waverley* novels were bought between 1829 and 1849 and, later in the century, a reprint of Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* sold a remarkable half a million copies (Altick 1957: 383, 385). It is not surprising that the historical novel has recently been described as "the most successful form of the century," its "key genre" (Moretti 1999: 33, 38).

Yet for all that it was produced in such a propitious climate, much historical fiction of the period can only be judged to fail, often quite spectacularly. There are many examples of bad writing in Victorian historical novels, a disease that can affect the greatest writers as well as the least. Here, for example, is the opening to one of the most popular of earlier Victorian historical novels, Ainsworth's *Windsor Castle*:

In the twentieth year of the reign of the right high and puissant King Henry the Eighth, namely, in 1529, on the 21st of April, and on one of the loveliest evenings that ever fell on the loveliest district in England, a fair youth, having somewhat the appearance of a page, was leaning over the terrace wall on the north side of Windsor Castle, and gazing at the magnificent scene before him.

This is by no means the worst opening to a historical novel (that honor probably belongs to Bulwer-Lytton), but in its cliché, hyperbole, and pseudo-grandeur, it epitomizes the problems so many writers experienced of creating a plausible narrative voice able easily to mediate an accurate sense of period to a modern audience. Too often, the narrators of these works lose their narrative dynamic in a stifling scholasticism or romanticization.

A passage from a more ambitious novel by a much greater novelist, George Eliot's *Romola*, shows different difficulties:

"Good-day, Messer Domenico," said Nello to the foremost of the two visitors who entered the shop, while he nodded silently to the other. "You come as opportunely as cheese on macaroni. Ah! You are in haste – wish to be shaved without delay – *ecco!* And this is a morning when every one has grave matter on his mind. Florence orphaned – the very pivot of Italy snatched away – heaven itself at a loss what to do next. *Oimè!* Well, well; the sun is nevertheless travelling on towards dinner-time again; and, as I was saying, you come like cheese ready grated."

Eliot's attempt to create a viable, idiomatic speech for a fifteenth-century Florentine results in a radically implausible mix of Italian exclamations and stagy English. Freightened with learning, Eliot's novel is constantly undercut by its repeated failures to create credible, vivid dialogue. This problem was not Eliot's alone; indeed, the greatest difficulty of writing historical fiction is that of creating a flexible yet authentic historical idiom for periods and countries that have to be imagined, not seen or heard.

Historical novels thus often suffer by comparison with those set in a contemporary, or near-contemporary, setting; and critics of almost all persuasions and theoretical views agree that Victorian attempts at the genre are, for the most part, inert, implausible, and dull. For Raymond Williams, for example, it is in their novels of contemporary life, “rather than in the fanciful exercise of a *Romola* or *A Tale of Two Cities*, that . . . novelists learned to look, historically, at the crises of their own time” (Williams 1984: 14). More brutally, an employee of his publishers asked Anthony Trollope as he delivered the manuscript of *The Three Clerks* (1857): “I hope it’s not historical, Mr Trollope? Whatever you do, don’t be historical; your historical novel is not worth a damn.” Only Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* (1886) have lived on in popular appreciation and culture. Unlike its continental rivals, the English novel boasts no unquestioned masterpiece of historical fiction – no *War and Peace* (1869) or *Charterhouse of Parma* (1832); the writing that sought to master history has often been buried by it.

Two names dominate the story of the historical novel, both enabling and disabling their successors: Walter Scott and György [George] Lukács. At the beginning of the Victorian period, the novel was dominated, overawed almost, by the achievement of Scott, who had been, by some distance, the most successful of all novelists writing in English and had raised the novel to a new seriousness and dignity. Although Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) has claims to be the first historical novel in English, it was Scott’s *Waverley; Or ‘Tis Sixty Years Since* (1815) and its many successors that formed the model for his Victorian rivals. So influential was his work that one can find the influence of no fewer than five Scott novels in Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (Schlicke 1999: 508), for example. The sequence of “Waverley” novels – *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering* (1816), *The Antiquary* (1816), *Old Mortality* (1816), and *Rob Roy* (1817) – formed a model of a national epic, in which the fates of Scott’s often strangely passive heroes become entangled in the civil wars and conflicts of eighteenth-century Scotland, and created the seminal conjunction of “the historical fiction of the modern imperial nation-state in relation to the sentimental formation of the private individual” (Duncan 1992: 5). Scott’s reputation, which remained high until the 1880s, has suffered since, and the Victorians’ frequent pairing of him with Shakespeare now seems hard to understand. However, the sheer range and generic inventiveness of Scott’s work ensured that his influence was omnipresent, both in the depiction of recent national history and, through *Ivanhoe* (1819), on the many varieties of Victorian medievalism. His is a definitive role: the span of two generations and of events passing beyond living memory marked in the “sixty years since” of *Waverley*’s title have almost universally been taken as the necessary aesthetic and political distance that a truly historical novel requires.

Lukács’ 1955 masterpiece *The Historical Novel* performs a similar role for modern critics of the form. Historical fiction is a problematic genre without clear boundaries or identity, so that many influential accounts of the novel, such as those of Mikhail Bakhtin and Raymond Williams, almost entirely neglect it. Lukács, by contrast,

argues that the ability of the novel to comprehend the scope and possibilities of human lives within their historical context is its greatest achievement, and this argument creates a powerful and strikingly coherent history of the depiction of class struggle and national self-formation in fiction through the clash of representative individuals and social forces. For Lukács, the historical novel is an essentially secular form, in which the masses play a significant role; its task is to reveal the essential and causal links between the historical setting of the novel and the events and characters depicted in it. What makes a novel historical is the “derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical particularity of their age,” so that the precursors of Scott “are historical only as regards the purely external choice of theme and costume” (Lukács 1969: 15) – that is to say, not historical at all – and his successors, for the most part, purveyors of mere historical spectacle. For all its philosophical ambition and authority, then, *The Historical Novel* provides a very odd map of the historical novel in Britain. After Scott, only Thackeray is treated at any length; Dickens’s historical fiction is dismissed, and Stevenson, Gaskell, and George Eliot are not even mentioned. For Lukács, the English historical novel is Scott alone, and he is not English; the rest, with the exception of Thackeray, embody a merely external use of history. Among English Victorian novels it is hard to find one that conforms to his criteria; indeed, in many cases they explicitly and self-consciously question or subvert the Hegelian assumptions that underpin Lukács’s model. They are often concerned not with the secular but with the force of the transcendent in history; they establish relationships that are not dialectical or even causal; they emplot their narratives not as epic but as satire, Gothic, or romance.

Lukács, like almost all critics of the genre, composes the canon of the historical novel through a number of exclusions, of which the most important is that of the large number of novels that are set some twenty or thirty years earlier than the date at which they are written: George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872) centers on the events leading up to the Reform Bill of 1832; Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) is concerned with the Luddite agitation of 1811–12; Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860) takes place between 1807 and 1826. These works, set a generation or so earlier than the time of their writing, are not usually treated as historical novels, even though they are saturated in historical understanding and sense of period. It may be that the barrier between them and historical fiction “proper” is an unnecessarily restricting one. It is certainly the case that many of the Victorians’ most successful enquiries into the nature of lives lived within history take place outside historical fiction strictly defined: it seems misleading too strongly to separate off, for example, Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), set at the turn of the century, or Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848), which finds its protagonists on the skirts (and at times in the thick) of the battle of Waterloo, from their respective authors’ more properly historical *Romola* (1863) and *Henry Esmond* (1852). Indeed, the ways in which the Victorians thought of their relationship to the past are remarkably various. John Burrow has described some of the ways in which time was figured in the period as:

bounded and catastrophic or endless; and, in its most profound and least perceptible ways moving at a pace too gradual for the eye to measure directly. Also history as reassuring, as judgmental and punitive; as directional or as repetitive; as drama, plotted and portentous, or as indifferent; as governed by the same rhythms as the natural world, or as crucially distinct from it; ending with a bang; ending with a whimper; not ending. (Burrow 2000: 198)

We can detect versions of all of these very different views of time and temporal change in the novelists of the period, and this should guard us against seeking for some elusive essence or common property or (like Lukács) a “classic form” of the historical novel. On the contrary, it is a hybrid and dynamic form of writing which changes substantially over the course of the century. It borders on, is touched by, and infiltrates many other forms: romance and Gothic in particular, but also melodrama and farce, satire, romance, and tragedy. It can be close to Christian apologetics in Wiseman and Newman, to parody and pastiche in Thackeray, to autobiography in Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), to topographical and tourist literature in Ainsworth, to juvenile fiction, and indeed to historical writing proper.

There was no shortage of candidates to be Scott’s heir after his death in 1832, but three figures in particular – Ainsworth, Bulwer-Lytton, and G. P. R. James – are the most important, all of them well-established and successful writers of historical romance at Victoria’s accession in 1837. Edward Bulwer (later Bulwer-Lytton), already the author of the influential historical novels *Devereux* (1829), *Paul Clifford* (1830), *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), and *Rienzi* (1835), “was generally considered as England’s leading novelist” (Sutherland 1988: 389) when the young queen came to the throne. His two properly Victorian historical novels are *The Last of the Barons* (1843) and *Harold, The Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848), set at major historical turning-points in the fifteenth and eleventh centuries respectively. Bulwer’s reputation has not fared well over the years and he is probably now best known for the much-parodied beginning of *Paul Clifford* (1830), “It was a dark and stormy night . . .,” and the annual Bulwer-Lytton prize for the worst opening sentence to a novel. There is no doubting Bulwer’s ambition to create something more than historical romance, but this often manifests itself in intrusive and pedantic narration, clotted with esoteric knowledge and explanatory footnotes. Although Bulwer saw clearly the formal opportunities and challenges which Scott’s work had thrown up, and worked hard to be both historically accurate and relevant to contemporary life – *Harold* is in a way a “condition of England” novel – his reach almost invariably exceeds his grasp. Fettered by self-consciousness, he “seems to have been incapable . . . of letting his characters move in a world which they at least take for granted” (Sanders 1978: 52).

Bulwer is often paired with Ainsworth; but whereas Bulwer aims at creating a kind of national epic and in consequence binds his novels hand and footnote, Ainsworth is a more fluent, not to say facile, writer, with none of Bulwer’s “philosophical” ambition. He was happy to blend history with Gothic and other elements. In the 1830s,

he was a star of the magnitude of Dickens and in many ways a model for the younger writer, pioneering what Rosemary Mitchell has called the “picturesque history” (Mitchell 2000: 15) which dominated much of the early Victorian perception of the past. Historical fiction then existed within a wider culture in which the visual was as significant as the textual, so that Ainsworth’s novels were often effectively full-scale collaborations with his illustrators, most usually George Cruikshank (1792–1878). Cruikshank, indeed, claimed the credit for the initial idea of Ainsworth’s *The Tower of London* (1840), which centers on the brief reign of Lady Jane Grey, and played a very full role in its conception and execution (Patten 1996: 137–8). A copiously illustrated early edition of Ainsworth with more than a hundred illustrations integrated into the text offers a radically different reading experience from that of a later edition without pictures. At times, indeed, Ainsworth’s novels resemble a hybrid of novel and tourist guide: the entire third book (some forty pages) of *Windsor Castle* is devoted to a history of the castle, without even a gesture to further the story which encloses it, and the novel has several maps, and indeed even an index.

Ainsworth is interested in the historical picturesque, but he is equally drawn to the sublime and moments of surpassing power, grandeur, or horror. Indeed, it is the moment that matters in an Ainsworth novel – a particular effect or sensation – rather than the causal links between such moments, which are often vestigial or non-existent. His are centrifugal texts, whose different elements – topographical, historical, Gothic, supernatural – are constantly threatening to fall apart into their constituent elements, with the consequence that they often fail to provide the bare minimum of coherent characterization and plotting, “at once a triumph for the picturesque historical vision and an indication of its limitations when carried to extremes” (Mitchell 2000: 85).

Ainsworth was in many ways the most faithful of Scott’s successors, producing, over a long career, forty or more historical romances long after their peak of popularity in the 1830s and early 1840s had passed; yet even his productivity yields to that of G. P. R. James, the most prolific but also the most derivative of early Victorian historical novelists, the author of countless works from *Richelieu* (1829) onwards. Capable of writing as many as three full-length novels a year, often through heavy borrowing from Scott, he remained popular and successful for several decades: the midcentury cheap reprints of the Parlour and Railway Libraries carried forty-seven different titles by James, whereas his nearest rival, Bulwer-Lytton, was represented by a mere nineteen (Simmons 1973: 9).

The most successful and interesting of the earlier attempts to follow Scott is Charles Dickens’s 1840 *Barnaby Rudge*, his tale of the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, the greatest urban riots in modern British history. Owing a good deal both to Scott and to Ainsworth in its London setting and its use of Gothic and picturesque effects, it is marked by Dickens’s characteristic inventiveness and energy, as well as a more coherent plot than those of Ainsworth. Nevertheless, it was a comparative failure both critically and with the public, and Dickens did not attempt historical fiction again until nearly two decades later, with *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which yoked the

structures of stage melodrama to the events of the French Revolution to provide in the death of the redeemed Sydney Carton the best-known and most often-parodied ending in Victorian fiction. At the heart of *A Tale of Two Cities*, or rather beneath its layers of lost and embedded narratives, are the figure and voice of a nameless woman who has been abducted and, it seems, raped. She has been so traumatized by these terrible experiences, which follow the manslaughter of her husband, that she can speak only three phrases which are hysterically and endlessly repeated. The revelation of this incident, which is the inaugurating moment of the events that the novel narrates, occurs quite late in the book. We learn of the nameless woman neither through her own voice nor through that of the omniscient narrator, but from the written testimony of Dr Manette, set down during his long imprisonment in the Bastille. She dies shortly afterwards, and plays no active or direct part in the events of the book; yet the novel would not exist without her, for if she had not been abducted, then the entire sequence of events that follow would not have taken place and her sister Mme. Defarge, the embodiment of revolutionary terror, would not have been so vengeful, so long have implacably opposed the aristocracy or so long plotted their destruction. Within the terms of the novel, without this near-silent woman's abduction and rape, the French Revolution would not have taken place.

The greatest influence on Dickens's view of the public and political events of revolutionary France was undoubtedly the work of Carlyle, the dominant voice of Victorian history in its early decades. Indeed, Dickens once said that he was reading Carlyle's *The History of the French Revolution* (1837) – a book which Oscar Wilde later called “the greatest novel of the nineteenth century” – “for the 500th time.” Other writers were less sympathetic to Carlyle's convulsive and apocalyptic view of history. Charles Reade, for example, explicitly repudiated Carlyle's emphasis on the importance of the heroic, world-shaking individual in his tale of “men and women of no note [who] do great deeds, speak great words, and suffer noble sorrows,” in the now comparatively neglected *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861), which was for many Victorians one of the century's great fictional achievements and its most important historical novel. It is a lengthy, meandering story of the conflicting claims of domesticity (the hearth) and the religious life (the cloister) in the lives of Gerard Eliassoen and Margaret Brandt, the parents of the great humanist scholar Erasmus (1466?–1536). Like George Eliot's *Romola*, which began publication the following year, Reade's story is concerned with the epochal cultural and social changes in Europe that the later nineteenth century would call the Renaissance; its mixture of sensation and sentimentousness has not worn well, and the novel lacks the conceptual and narrative coherence that its topic deserved. Equally ambitious and unsuccessful was Anthony Trollope's third novel, *La Vendée* (1850), which, like Balzac's earlier *Les Chouans* (1829), concerns the royalist uprising or counter-revolution in western France in 1793. Trollope's most neglected work, it is a belated homage to Scott (who had translated its major source), but, like many novels of the period with foreign or exotic settings, it is overly dependent on its sources and fails to connect in a dynamic way the private fates of the novel with the revolutionary events of its setting.

Like Reade, William Makepeace Thackeray also deeply distrusted Carlyle's emphasis on history as "the biography of great men," but was much more successful in creating a counter-vision of ironic narration. Indeed, Thackeray was in many ways the most profoundly engaged and intelligent of all Victorian writers of historical fiction: *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon* (1844), *The Virginians* (1857–9), *Henry Esmond* (1852), and even *Vanity Fair* (1848) are all in one sense or another historical novels, each of which deeply ironizes both the events it deals with and the motives and actions of its characters. From the beginning of his career, Thackeray marked his distance from many of the dominant Victorian discourses of history. In an early review essay, for example, he wrote with characteristically melancholy insight:

the dignity of history sadly diminishes as we grow better acquainted with the material which composes it. In our orthodox history-books the characters move on as a gaudy playhouse procession, a glittering pageant of kings and warriors and stately ladies . . . Only he who sits very near to the stage can discover of what stuff the spectacle is made. The kings are poor creatures, taken from the dregs of the company; the noble knights are dirty dwarfs in tin-foil; the fair ladies are painted hags with cracked feathers and soiled trains. One wonders how gas and distance could have rendered them so enchanting. (quoted in Mitchell 2000: 202)

This use of a theatrical metaphor to undermine the picturesque and heroic in history was followed by his very funny parodies in *Punch* of Scott, Bulwer ("Sawedwadgeorgeearlittnbulwig"), and G. P. R. James, which marked Thackeray's distance from their grandiloquence and pretension. His own fiction is saturated with an irony that both reflects and anticipates a wider cultural change as the century progressed, from "the representation of history in terms of eventfulness, even of a catastrophic, apocalyptic kind, to the subtler representation of it as a kind of sedimentary process, whose longer-term significance . . . could only be perceived retrospectively and therefore necessarily ironically" (Burrow 2000: 198). *Barry Lyndon*, for example, is cast in the form of the autobiography of an eighteenth-century Irish scapegrace and bully narrating, as he dies in the Fleet Prison, his adventures in the Seven Years War. He is a gambler, deserter, and spy who nevertheless insists throughout his deeply unreliable and darkly ironic narration on his heroism, nobility and valor.

It is another fictional self-portrait, though, that of *Henry Esmond* (1852), which is Thackeray's historical masterpiece. Set in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, from the time of the Glorious Revolution to that of the Young Pretender, it subverts many of the conventions of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fiction: significantly, there are no illustrations to the book, but its material form is that of an authentic eighteenth-century memoir, complete with period typeface and spelling. Its opening pages set a tone of sophisticated anti-heroism:

I have seen in his very old age and decrepitude the old French King Lewis the Fourteenth, the type and model of king-hood – who never moved but to measure, who lived and died according to the rules of his Court-marshal, persisting in acting through life

the part of Hero; and, divested of poetry, this was but a little wrinkled old man, pock-marked, and with a great periwig and red heels to make him look tall – a hero for a book if you like . . . but what more than a man for Madame Maintenon, or the barber who shaved him, or Monsieur Fagon, his surgeon?

Thackeray, unlike almost all his contemporaries, did not try to reinforce the authority of fiction with that of history, but to subvert and relativize the reliability of both, the effect being not to give the novel greater reality and truthfulness but, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, “to make historical narrative seem phantasmal, fictional” (Miller 1982: 108). Playing off the very different truths and deceptions of history and of memory, both in Esmond’s strangely Oedipally inflected romance and the political vicissitudes of England, this work has strong claims to be the most successful of all Victorian historical novels.

Henry Esmond’s successor *The Virginians* (1859) continued the story of the Esmond family in the American revolutionary wars, but has found far fewer admirers. Indeed, Britain’s imperial history figures more rarely in fiction than might be expected, although there are a number of interesting Irish historical novels, including several “National Tales” published in the early decades of the century, some works set in the Cromwellian period, and a spate of writing later in the century commemorating the 1798 rebellion. The most important group of novels, however, concerned with the history of territory then under British sovereignty are those of Philip Meadows Taylor, best known for his *Confessions of a Thug* (1839). His historical novels set in India deal with major military turning-points in the history of India: *Tippoo Sultaun* (1840) with the late eighteenth-century Mysore wars; *Tara, A Mahratta Tale* (1863) with the imposition of Mahratta rule in the mid-seventeenth century; *Ralph Darnell* (1865) with the conquests of Clive of India in the 1750s; and the posthumous *A Noble Queen* (1878) with the late-seventeenth-century siege of Ahmednagar. More typical of historical fiction concerned with the Empire, however, is Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* (1855) which, in its tale of Elizabethan brutality and derring-do, as Patrick Brantlinger observes, “offers as its central themes the racist and sexist tautology that informs much writing about the Empire throughout the nineteenth century: the English are on top of the world because they are English” (Brantlinger 1988: 44).

National identity in Britain, as Linda Colley has argued, is profoundly linked to religious identity (Colley 1996). The re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England in 1850 occasioned a spate of public controversy which was in part played out in historical fiction. The most important of this group of novels are Kingsley’s *Hypatia, Or New Foes with an Old Face* (1853), set in early fifth-century Alexandria; John Henry Newman’s *Callista, A Sketch of the Third Century* (1856); and Nicholas Wiseman’s best-selling *Fabiola, or The Church of the Catacombs* (1854), set in fourth-century Rome. Kingsley’s *Hypatia* brings together four important strands of historical fiction of this period: Romans, religion, race, and sex. There had been many novels set in ancient times since Bulwer’s success with *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1834, and both Wilkie Collins and George Gissing, for example, were tempted to write

uncharacteristic works concerned with the fall of the Roman Empire: Collins's laborious *Antonina, or The Fall of Rome* (1850), set in the fifth century as the Gothic hordes descend on Rome, and Gissing's unfinished *Veramilda* (1903), set a century or so later. The growing religious controversy of the 1850s following the "Papal Aggression" scares of that decade gave the history of the early church a particularly controversial significance, in which the nineteenth century could find suggestive analogies for some of its own most pressing spiritual concerns: religious and sectarian difference, celibacy, vocation and conversion, as well as the overarching question of the relation of the historical and the transcendent. Rome also possessed, like Britain, a great and ethnically diverse empire, and Kingsley's *Hypatia*, like Collins's *Antonina*, is centrally concerned with racial difference and the opposing qualities embodied in the conflicts of the Romans, Greeks, Jews, and wandering Goths of the story. More surprisingly today, perhaps, is how bold *Hypatia* is in its willingness to link religious insight and erotic experience, a tendency which becomes, as Stephen Prickett has argued, "one of the most powerful – indeed, potent – images of nineteenth century fiction" (Prickett 1996: 225): Kingsley's violent and sensual story climaxes with Hypatia, a beautiful young neoplatonist philosopher, stripped naked and torn to pieces by monks under an enormous image of Christ.

The immediate response to Kingsley's polemically anti-Catholic novel was the founding by Cardinal Wiseman of the Catholic Popular Library; its first publication was Wiseman's own *Fabiola*, which had great international success. Like Kingsley's, it is a violent book, although with none of his opponent's eroticism. Set at the time of the persecutions of the church before the reign of the Emperor Constantine, it depicts many gruesome martyrdoms, which are described in a simultaneously detached and detailed manner. More important than Wiseman's own rather pedantic novel was his success in persuading Newman, the most important religious thinker of the century, to follow *Fabiola* with his own second novel, *Callista*. It is, like Wiseman's and Kingsley's novels and indeed George Eliot's slightly later *Romola*, a story of the spiritual journey of a beautiful young woman; in *Callista*'s case, the conversion and eventual martyrdom of a Greek maker of pagan images living in the third century. Newman's novel has clear continuities with his theological and other writings, both in its deep knowledge of the life of the early church and in its essentially historicist view of Christian revelation. Austere in its doctrine, but written with a dryly donnish humor, it makes suggestive analogies between the spiritual and public life of ancient north Africa and that of the nineteenth century. At the heart of the story is the essentially solitary tale of Callista's complex and lengthy process of conversion, written with a sympathy inflected throughout by Newman's own long travail of faith.

Steeped in the same questions – of religious faith, vocation, and self-sacrifice – is the most ambitious and challenging of all Victorian historical novels, George Eliot's *Romola*. When it appeared in 1863, Eliot was already the author of three works set in the eighteenth century: *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), *Adam Bede* (1859), and *Silas Marner* (1861); but these, despite their setting, express relatively little sense of

historical change. As John Goode remarks of *Adam Bede*, “there is very little sense of the historical actuality of the vast upheavals in rural life which typify the 1790s. The suggestions of historical change are marginal . . . Time itself, in fact, is primarily a cyclical process” (Goode 1995: 45). Set in late fourteenth-century Florence, *Romola* charts the movement of its eponymous heroine, a young and beautiful Florentine woman, to spiritual enlightenment following her marriage to, and betrayal by, her husband, the selfish and corrupt Tito Melema. Burdened with the results of Eliot’s formidable drive for historical accuracy, the novel has a complex relation to Victorian understandings of historical process and to Eliot’s own social thought. Eliot sees the private life of the book as linked to its public events in an essentially organic way: “as in the tree that bears a myriad of blossoms, each single bud with its fruit is dependent on the primary circulation of the sap, so the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy . . .” By homology, both political and personal, the novel is concerned with the relation between obedience to and rebellion against the culture of the past. Romola’s father Bardo, like the Catholic Church in the book, is blindly buried in the past, whereas her immoral husband Tito breaks free from any historical obligation into a self-asserting egotism, which is paralleled on a public level by the fanatical rebellion of Savonarola against the ecclesiastical hierarchy; these conflicts are explored in Romola’s internal divisions of loyalties and needs. Yet, for all the novel’s ambition and at times power, Eliot seems unable to create a historically grounded and fictionally credible solution to the ethical and historiographical questions the novel sets itself; its later chapters, in which Romola, free finally of the book’s literal and figurative fathers, becomes a “Visible Madonna” to the inhabitants of a plague-stricken village, leave Florence altogether for a dream-like state and place, seemingly outside time.

Eliot’s great admirer, Elizabeth Gaskell, whose *Sylvia’s Lovers* was published in the same year as *Romola* (1863), was also deeply concerned with the relationship between the demands of personal desire and those of public duty. This tale of the impact of the press-gang on a remote North Yorkshire fishing town and the conflicting claims of the two lovers of the title for the hand of the novel’s heroine takes great care with its provincial location and the creation of a historically and linguistically accurate world within which its characters can live. It anticipates Hardy’s *The Trumpet Major* in its use of a regional setting to focus a wider history; but whereas Hardy finds comedy and even farce in his tale of the Napoleonic Wars, Gaskell’s is a much bleaker novel, which she called “the saddest story I ever wrote.” Gaskell is concerned not with the grand historical and political events of the period but with their impact on provincial, lower-class lives; Sylvia is the daughter of a small farmer, her lovers a “specksioneer” or harpooner on a whaling ship and an assistant in a drapery shop. Public events impinge only as loss and suffering: Charley the specksioneer is press-ganged, Philip the draper volunteers for war and is wounded to the point of being unrecognizable by his wife, and Sylvia’s father is hanged for his attack on the press-gang. The most important scene of public military history is set at the siege of Acre, at which,

as in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, one lover heroically saves the life of his rival. This chapter is written in a style that contrasts sharply with the detailed realism of the bulk of the book, drawing on melodrama and exoticism in its characterization of the essentially male romance of war. Although the chapter is often thought to be an artistic failure, Gaskell may be here attempting an unsettling of public history through a consciously artificial and distancing style which punctures the narrative conventions of the novel, just as the violence of war has ruptured the continuities of its characters' lives.

Sylvia's Lovers appeared at the peak of the production of historical fiction in the 1850s and 1860s, decades which also saw the appearance of *Henry Esmond*, *The Virginians*, *Callista*, *Romola*, *Antonina*, *Fabiola*, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, *La Vendée*, *Westward Ho!*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and a host of lesser works. This spate came to an end with the publication of Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* in 1865, after which, with the exception of R. D. Blackmore's Exmoor romance *Lorna Doone* (1869), no significant historical novels appeared until the 1880s, when they were revived in a very different form, as "philosophical romance." The first of these came from the most surprising of sources: the invalid son of a Birmingham chemical manufacturer, J. H. Shorthouse (1834–1903), who in 1880 privately published his *John Inglesant* after its rejection by a number of publishing houses. This quietly authoritative study of a secular saint caught in the religious and military conflicts of the English Civil Wars avoids many of the faults of its precursors by focusing much of the novel through Inglesant's consciousness. Despite the risky strategy of including cameo appearances by John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, Charles I, and a host of lesser seventeenth-century luminaries, Shorthouse nevertheless creates a plausible sense of period and character, achieved at least in part through the incorporation (or plagiarism) of authentic seventeenth-century sources. Together with Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*, it is the most successful of Victorian novels set in the key decades of national self-formation of the seventeenth century, registering with a deep inwardness the claims of religious conscience in an era of bloody civil and military conflict.

The most significant philosophical romance of the period was Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), which resembles the novels of Newman and Wiseman in its concern with spiritual life at the time of transition between epochs of faith, yet differs strikingly from them. Although Marius, a second-century Roman torn between Christianity and the pagan belief of his forebears, is treated after his death as a Christian and a martyr, the novel is studiously unclear as to whether either status is deserved. It is, by any standards, a very strange historical novel with little interest in plot, dialogue, or, outside of Marius himself, characterization. Formally and generically hybrid, its narration is punctuated by explanations, historical glosses and "anachronistic" references to later events and knowledge. Yet such interruptions are integral to Pater's historical vision, for his stories are always "the narration of an interruption, a destructive interpolation in a closed society . . . when something ancient comes back, repeats itself, is reborn out of its time" (Miller 1998: 183). *Marius* multiplies the temporal layers and perspectives of its story in a consciously antidialectical view of history,

which constantly reveals the labor of scholarship on which its narrative rests. Depicting as it does the contemplative life of a passive hero in an undramatic history, it disturbingly enacts a point-by-point reversal of what had been the distinguishing marks of earlier Victorian historical novels.

In contrast to these more hieratic works is William Hale White's ("Mark Rutherford" 's) *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* (1887), the story of the involvement of a Nonconformist printer, Zachariah Coleman, in the radical politics of the early nineteenth century through his friendship with the French revolutionary exiles Jean Caillaud and his daughter Pauline. Following the assassination (possibly by Pauline) of a government spy, the first part of the novel culminates in the Manchester "Blanketeers" march of 1817 and the subsequent hanging of Caillaud and imprisonment of Coleman. The novel then suddenly shifts to the 1840s and the story of Coleman's and his daughter's involvement in a "revolution" in the provincial Dissenting chapel of Tanner's Lane. In a limpid and understated manner, eschewing metaphor and figurative language, White writes a kind of "history from below," sympathetically focusing on the struggles of radical Dissenters and republicans in order to understand why there was no revolutionary upheaval in Britain in the earlier nineteenth century. Formally innovative, the novel creates a complex set of analogies between the two seemingly unconnected parts of the book as White, anticipating later historians, explores the relation between English Dissenting radicalism and the political inheritance of the French Revolution. It is probably the most underestimated of all Victorian historical novels.

Following the lead of Gaskell and of Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*, the 1880s also saw the rise of the provincial historical novel, of which the most important example is Thomas Hardy's *The Trumpet Major and Robert his Brother* (1880). It is that most unusual of things, a funny Hardy novel, in which the forces that in his work are usually destructive of human life and happiness, in particular sexual fickleness and unfaithfulness, have an essentially comic resolution. There is little attempt to establish causal links between the historical events and the lives of the characters, for historical process is here seen as a mass of contingencies and chances. History in the shape of the press-gang may come knocking on the door, but Bob (the Trumpet Major's brother) promptly escapes through the window, although he then immediately volunteers for what he has just been trying to evade. The novel shows little interest in the grand narratives of political history, creating a world of inconsistency and chance, in which all erotic and affective relationships are unstable and shifting. There could not be a less Lukácsian or Hegelian view of history, for Hardy will not allow any historicism, any sense of development or pattern of change, to shape his story: "History," he wrote in a notebook, "is rather a stream than a tree. There is nothing organic in its shape, nothing systematic in its development." *The Trumpet Major* is a quietly moving tale, with a subdued pathos as we are periodically reminded of the deaths that await these characters seemingly so vividly alive. History figures as oblivion, the dark ground against which the comedy of the story is played out. For all its charm and humor, it is an essentially elegiac novel, with one of Hardy's most poignant endings

in which the Trumpet Major leaves the story “with a farewell smile on the doorstone, backed by the black night . . . and went off to blow his trumpet till silenced for ever upon one of the bloody battlefields of Spain.”

It is Robert Louis Stevenson, however, who is the most important writer of historical fiction of the eighties and nineties. We see in Stevenson’s work a reprise of many of the central concerns and tropes of his forerunners in its interest in the force of the transcendent and spiritual within the material world, in Scottish history and its relationship to the dispersed and unstable national identity that is “Britishness,” in historical conflict as familial rivalry, in the eruption of Gothic material within the essentially realist claims of history, in empire and the creation of adventure stories for boys and young men. The unfinished *Weir of Hermiston* (1888) is the most directly Scott-like in its opening evocation of the Scottish Covenanters, its late eighteenth-century Edinburgh and provincial Scottish settings, and its mediocre hero, Archie Weir, trapped under the crushing weight of his father’s legal and paternal authority. But it is *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter’s Tale* (1889) that is Stevenson’s great achievement in this field. Set in the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, the novel begins with an aristocratic Scottish family fatefully deciding to divide its political loyalty to safeguard the future of the house: the Master of Ballantrae, James Durie, is sent to support the Stuart pretender while his brother Henry stays at home professing loyalty to the Hanoverian crown. James is thought to have been killed, but, as in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, the supposedly dead man returns, bringing into being a set of conflicts – erotic, fraternal, political, and ultimately metaphysical – resolvable only by death. Revitalizing historical fiction with the Gothic elements it had increasingly tried to eschew, *The Master of Ballantrae* plays out its manichean conflicts on a progressively widening stage, from Scotland via India and Rome to the wilderness of North America. It is a fitting end to the Victorian historical novel, at once a summary of much that precedes it and an extension into new and dangerous ground.

The 1890s also saw the growth of future-oriented fiction, such as William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1891) and H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), which explored in a different temporal dimension many of the same questions of historical change and development that were at the heart of historical fiction (see chapter 21 by Patrick Brantlinger in this volume). The first decade of the twentieth century saw the appearance of Rudyard Kipling’s remarkable *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910), which shaped in important ways many twentieth-century acts of historical imagining. But it is worth pausing to register the sheer scale of Victorian achievement in this area. Jonathan Nield’s still useful 1902 *Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales*, for example, lists over a thousand Victorian historical novels, set in every century from the first to the nineteenth, and ranging in subject-matter from seventeenth-century Dutch colonists in America to the persecution of the Albigenes – and this is a mere selection from a much vaster body of work. Nield’s list displays in graphic form the sheer energy and variety of Victorian interest in the past, including the Victorians’ determination to find in history analogies and significance for their own time. It is true, of course, that since Nield’s work the historical

novel has suffered: first by being overpraised and overvalued, through what John Sutherland calls its “pernicious respectability . . . for school study and examination” (Thackeray 1970: 514), and then from a later condescension. It is also undoubtedly true that there is a great deal of bad historical fiction. But we should not be too hasty to condemn writing that does not yield readily to us, for its resistance offers a salutary reminder of the Victorians’ distance from ourselves. When we read Victorian novels, we are often misled into thinking how close that age is to our own; but when we encounter historical fiction of the period we recognize something equally powerful: the nineteenth century’s strange otherness, the mark of its and our own historicity. The last great Victorian historical novel, Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae*, ends with buried treasure and someone thought to be dead who might in fact be more alive than he seems. It is an appropriate metaphor for the historical novel.

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